Notes

Chapter 1: Falling Away
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"The Threshold is everywhere," the pompous priest whispered. "I can show you the way there, the first time. But only the Lord Marshal can cross it alive."

"If the threshold is everywhere, how come I gotta keep feedin' a garrison guarding a rift out in the middle of nowhere?" Riddick snapped back.

The Priest smiled, condescendingly. "That is the greater passage, for all those who have not truly transcended. But for you, my lord, the true path calls. The threshold is everywhere. Otherwise how could the holy dead find their way?"

Riddick snorted. Transcendence. Right. Like I believe you guys are really closet Buddhists. "Only the Lord Marshal can pass it alive. How do I come back?"

The man shook his head. "The Threshold is everywhere. Just . . . do. If you cannot, you are no Lord Marshal."

"I killed Zhylaw. Why didn't he come back?"

"Once you killed him, he was no longer the Lord Marshal."

Riddick's eyes narrowed. "Damned convenient faith you've got there." A flash of horror passed the priest's face, quickly stilled. "What if I wanna bring someone back with me?"

The priest – the Propolos, Riddick remembered at last, damn the Necros and their titles - shook his head. "It's not -" He broke off. "Traditionally, Lord Marshals have not taken the holy dead from the bliss of the Underverse. It has been done, to punish. Few are eager to leave the bliss of the other world. Whom do you hate so much, my lord, that you would deny them eternal bliss?"

Who do I hate so much? The question actually stopped him. He had flashes of hate. Abu. Zhylaw. Even her, when he'd found out she'd thrown five years of his life away, sitting in an ice cave for nothing at all. But he never hated her for long. Silly to hate a little kid. He shrugged the question off. "What if I want to?"

The Propolos nodded, eyes hooded. "Blood. You will be walking flesh in a different world. Give the one you want to take your blood to drink. Blood is life. Sharing it will create a bond that will let you take him to the next world. Keep hold of him. When you pass the threshold, he will pass in you, sheltered. When you're ready, the Quasi-Dead will build a body, reincorporate the soul."

Great, now I gotta wade through hungry ghosts to get the kid back. "How do I find her?"

The man's elderly eyes narrowed. "That, I do not know," he whispered, suddenly disapproving. 'Cause bringing a man back to torture is just fine, but bring a girl back 'cause I love her is right out. Fuckers. "Come back to the Hierothesion when you are ready for your apotheosis. I will show you the way."

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No one knew more than that. They said lots. The Lord Marshals loved to talk, and if there was no one around to talk at, they talked to their diaries. On and on. Bliss of the other world, boundless
compassion and all that shit. Nothing useful. Except Covu said that the Underverse was a land of will. One of his old soldier buddies nicknamed him the unconquerable will, once upon a time.

The priests said he had to go to be the Lord Marshal. *Fuck the priests.* The army was happy with him, as long as he did his job. That's where the power was. The dark rumors that time traveled differently there also made him hesitate. Gone too long, and someone else would make that army happy, he had no doubt of that.

Lots of opportunity to make the army happy. There was always a battle to be fought, always a victory to solidify, always something to fuck up, always something to kill. That was enough, during the day. But his nights were full of Jack, dying, Jack, underneath some merc, some soldier, some prisoner, some monster, screaming, bleeding. The little girl he loved. The little girl who died for him. The little girl he missed so much he ached.

The little girl who might at last be happy. Everyone swore that the Underverse was full of happy puppies and rainbows and shit. How could he fuck that up for her? He went, he'd find her. Once upon a time, he'd walked away from her on a happy world. He didn't think he could do that again.

*And why should I?* Once upon a time, he had answers for that.

He'd even found a girl. Daughter of a queen, barely too young and far too scrawny for conversion. The queen had begged for her daughter's life, and the girl looked so much like Jack had, the day he left her on New Mecca, he'd agreed. Took her to his rooms, not intending to do anything but keep her safe until she was old enough and big enough for a conversion chamber.

That had lasted a day. She was beautiful and grateful and alive and willing and sinking himself into her made that Jack shaped ache fade. That lasted exactly three weeks more. The day he finished destroying her world he came back to find her corpse, swinging from the ceiling. He cut her down gently, hid the rope, let everyone believe he'd strangled her during sex. Everyone was ready to believe that.

That night, he dreamed of a grave yard. He'd been there before, many times. A woman walked through the graves and smiled at him, sadly.

"Shirah," he said, remembering her name. "Did I make you happy? You told me to speak for the dead. How'm I doin'?" He was venomously angry with her.

"My dear boy. Though much is taken, much abides." She stroked a tombstone. He stared at it. The name was writhing in the rock like snakes mating. He couldn't read it.

"You didn't answer my question."

"The one you didn't ask? She's just a girl. She's not for you."

"Why the fuck not?"

Shirah didn't answer. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and spun in time to see a pack of wolves run down a deer. He watched them sink their teeth into her heaving sides, he was one of them sinking himself into the trembling flesh. A big wolf bitch, her teats engorged, snarled a challenge in his face. The message was clear. *Not for you.* He woke drenched in sweat, alone. After that, the Jack shaped ache was back with a vengeance and the reasons for not dragging her out of paradise stopped being persuasive.

The Propolos showed him the way, the truth, the light, the threshold. It was there, always already at his feet, a shining veil lighting a dark place. All he had to do was step, and he'd be in the Underverse.
The Necromonger paradise. The fuckers.

He took the step.

There was nothing under his feet. He was falling, falling, falling, fuck it. I'm done. I am the unconquerable will. Let there be ground. And ground was.

He seemed to be standing in a desert. The lone and level sands stretched far away everywhere.

He started walking toward the horizon. After nine steps through the shifting sands, he thought, fuck this. I'm done bein' tested. He fixed her image in his mind. I want her. Everything shifted.

He was standing in front of military fort on a grassy plain. Sentries stiffened at his approach. No one opposed him as he shoved the archaic doors open, walked down a narrow hallway into a courtyard.

Zhylaw was waiting. Bowed deeply, ironically. "Welcome at last to the Underverse, Lord Marshal Riddick."

Riddick, of course, did not bow. "I want Kyra," he said, flatly.


"Didn't I kill him?"

"Yes. Your first Necromonger?" Riddick shrugged, not remembering. "Would you like something to eat, my Lord Marshal?"

"No. Just the girl. Then I'll be out of your hair."

"Oh, you can't leave so soon! I have so much to share with you."

"Not used to talking to people I've killed."

"A thing to get used to it, if you're taking her back with you."

Riddick shook his head slowly. "No. You killed her. Not me."

Zhylaw laughed. "Keep telling yourself that, son." Irgun returned with a shapeless armload, wrapped carelessly in a blanket. He dumped it on the table. It fell with a thud and a clank of chains.

"Jack. Shit. Riddick moved close, unwrapped the blanket. She was bruised, hands chained behind her. When she saw him, her green eyes filled with bitter tears, but she said nothing. Not Jack. Kyra. Right.

"She lights my days and warms my nights. And you want to take my sunshine away," Zhylaw said easily. "Interesting."

Riddick's stomach hurt. They were lying. She's not happy here. Bliss and boundless compassion my ass. "What the fuck have you been doing to her?"

"Oh . . . we've had a lovely time. She's really helped me to come to terms with my death at your hands," Zhylaw said mildly. "Are you sure you want to take her back? Let me tell you what will happen, my son." Riddick glowered. Zhylaw continued on, unperturbed. "You'll bring her back.
inside you like a pregnant woman. You'll take her to the Hierothesion. The Quasies will build a body for her – any body you want. Well. Almost. Whatever you want, she'll be perfectly, completely new, virginal, unscarred – and weak. A body that has never bled, never taken a breath, never taken a step, never taken a blow.

"The Necromongers do not respect weakness, my son. At best, she'll still be a plaything for the strongest. At worst, she'll miss being dead with me."

"I'm the strongest. And I still got her real body."

Zhylaw drummed his fingers on his throne. "Well, that's never been tried." Then he nodded. "And when she dies, she comes back to me. Oh, yes. This is delicious. The woman who helped kill me. In my city. Completely helpless."

Riddick started to growl. Zhylaw made an amused gesture.

"Take her. With my blessing. This will be very entertaining. Send her back when you're done with her. And come back any time."

Riddick didn't bother to ask for the keys to the manacles. Cut his own arm, pressed her lips to the blood like a mother would press a newborn to her breast. After a moment, he could feel her begin to suck, cautiously, her bitter eyes flickering up to him. After he tired of the sensation, he picked her up, blood running down his arm, dripping onto the stone floor. Remembered Propolos's words. The threshold is everywhere. Reached into himself, stepped backwards, and was back in the world.

There was a dead body in the room. The Propolos was dead. Only then did Riddick understand, dimly. Only the Lord Marshal can cross it alive. Only me.

His arm was still dripping blood on the floor and something was burning inside of him. Only me. And what I bring back. The two junior purifiers playing sacred witnesses fell to their knees in front of him, awed. Today was not the day to finish bringing her back, not with prying eyes. He pulled his sleeve over his bleeding arm, stepped over the body and out of the Hierothesion to confront a silent mass of Necromongers. Vaako and Toal at the front. Toal looked pinched. Vaako awed. He could feel the purifiers behind him, signaling something. The crowd fell to its knees too. I could get used to this.

"My lord?" Vaako whispered.

Riddick let his eyes play over the masses. Waiting. Waiting for him to utter the ritual phrases. As he gazed at them, they seemed to change; not men and women – mostly men – anymore, not bags of flesh but shells for swirling lights. Their souls, he realized. What Zhylaw could see. What Zhylaw could take. What I can take.

Souls waiting for him to utter ritual phrases. He snorted. Fuck that. "I crossed. I crossed back. Anyone want a guided tour, you just lemme know." He stomped off, leaving Vaako, all gold and royal purple, to say the words for him. He could feel the man rising behind him.

"It is accomplished," he heard as he left the atrium. Accomplished. Oh, you ain't seen nothin' yet.

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A disembodied voice. "Why have you brought these here, Lord Marshal, Destroyer of Worlds?"
"I want her back." Riddick stared hard at the corpse he smuggled from a status tube to a temple. Stared hard. "I went to the Underverse and I brought her soul back. Now I want the rest of her. Put her back in her body. Don't tell anyone."

There were ghostly fingers in his brain.

"What you want . . ." it eased through is brain. "We will give you . . . what you want. As much . . . as we can. . ." Whatever it was speaking to him, deep down, sniggered. "The body . . . is broken. But the substance will be useful." Kyra's body flashed bright enough to send Riddick staggering back, blinded. A wind started to blow through the Hierothesion. The wind was thick, damp, whirling, full of blood and pulverized bone. The wind was ripping him apart.

No, ripping him open.

Then he was open. Something stepped out.

And fell bonelessly to the ground. The whirlwind fell with her. He was whole and the air was still. Jack – Kyra – who ever the fuck she is - was at his feet, again, only naked, bloody, sobbing, laying face down on the hard floor of the Hierothesion. The body he'd brought was gone, only a slick of blood bearing witness. Not even the clothes left. The room stank of blood, her blood, the very first thing he noticed about her. It stank like his nightmares. It was absolutely intoxicating. What the fuck just happened?

*Figure it out later.* He crouched next to her. "Welcome back," he said, low. Touched her shoulder. She tried to pull herself away but her muscles weren't working. Her hands slipped on her own blood on the hard floor. She gulped air convulsively between sobs. He rolled her over, and she curled into fetal position, not looking at him.

"Hey kid," he tried again. She curled tighter, crying like her world had ended. *This is not what I want.* He rolled her onto her back. This got her to look at him, at last. The sight of him stopped her tears the way an eclipse stops the light. Tears still leaked around the edges, but her eyes were as wide as the dark side of a moon.

"Riddick?" she managed. Her voice was rough and sticky. No bitterness. Childlike. Hopeful. He smiled at her.

"Yeah, kid."

"Hurts."

"I'll take care of it. Can you walk?"

She looked at him mystified. She tried to wipe her face, missed, saw her own bloody hands, and started to cry again. He pulled her up, ignoring, for now, how his own body was reacting to this naked, bloody, sobbing girl. Ignoring the unexpected urge to undo his pants, thrust deep into her. She looked at him wonderingly, face streaked white where the tears had washed away the blood. He touched her cheek gently. Stroked the short dark curls plastered to her head by blood. She pressed into his hand, then buried her face in his chest, her own damp breasts hard against him, oblivious to what it was doing to him. He stroked her hair, blinking back his own tears.

Something hit him. *This ain't Kyra.*

*At least not right now.*

*This is Jack.*
Give me what I want. Oh, shit. Not the warrior. Not the embittered merc. The little girl I left on New Mecca, all grown up. He felt a surge of warmth towards the Quasi-Dead. Shit. They knew me better than I thought.

The tears were beginning to stop again. She was gazing at him with the same rapt adoration she had, once upon a time, when she really was a little girl. Zhylaw was right. She's totally helpless. As helpless as the girl I left on New Mecca. More.

"This is not what I want," he said loudly, suddenly furious at the dead for doing this. For doing what he wanted, not what he should want. She melted back into tears. Jesus, Jack, that's not what I meant.

The voices were back. "Our mistake," they was on his feet, fists clenched.

"Keep your fucking mouths shut about this," he snapped back.

He had dumped her on back on the hard floor without thinking. She gave him a horrified, heartbroken look, tried to crawl away.

"We will keep your secrets, Lord Marshal," the voices responded, almost respectfully.

This isn't what I want.

He looked down at her. He could feel his face softening.

Really.


"You don't want me?" she whispered.

He frowned down at her.

"Jesus, kid, I stormed the fucking gates of hell for you. Three times. Fought scary monsters and everything. Of course I want you. You're the only thing in this universe that's ever loved me. You're the only thing in this universe I've ever loved. Every good thing I've done since I met you was for you, and most of the bad.

She stared at him, her eyes painfully innocent. "I died," she whispered. "I died for you. I remember the spike sliding in. I remember realizing it was your special sweet spot. Fucking ironic. I remember it hurt. I remember bleeding . . . " her face twisted, and she looked like she was going to start the waterworks again.

They think being brought back is a punishment.

Maybe it is.

I can use this to protect her. People see me dragging a bloody, hysterical girl to the infirmary, they ain't gonna think she's the one who stabbed Zhylaw in the back. Since she's got about a zero chance of protecting herself right now, that's useful.

He stood, abruptly, pulling her up with him. Her legs didn't seem to be working and she scrambled, trying to keep her feet under her. "Come on," he snapped, pulling her along. She took one step and fell to her knees. With a muttered oath, he swung her up in his arms. She shuddered and buried her face in his chest.
She weighed nothing. More proof this wasn't Kyra. He'd had Kyra in his arms three times. Once to shove her against a wall, once to save her, once to use her as a weapon. She'd been solid, muscled. Four times. To carry her dead body to the stasis pod. This body was similar, but softer, shorter, unmuscled, delicate, almost blindingly white where the tears had washed away the blood. From what he could tell, unscarred. From what he could tell, drop dead gorgeous.

It's new. Really new. They used the body as raw material; they didn't put her back. Zhylaw was right. This body's never seen the sun. It's never been struck or stabbed or slashed –

- or kissed or fucked. Hell, it's only taken two steps and fell both times. Give me what I want. The girl I left, the girl I love, all grown up and dead and mine. He tightened his grip.

Vaako was waiting gave him a nod. Closest thing to a friend I've got. The only person he'd told what he was going to do. Vaako fell into step beside him. His eyes widened at the naked girl. "Success, my lord?"

"Not sure yet," Riddick answered, slightly too loud, slightly too bitterly. "She's not what I expected. I'm taking her to the med deck on three." The girl stared at Vaako and buried her head back in his chest, making a soft keening noise. He resisted the urge to comfort her.

"This changes things," Vaako muttered, his eyes averted.

"What?"

He pitched his voice very low. "I thought she'd be strong. Like she was. All three of us had a hand in killing Zhylaw. There's a . . . place in our beliefs for men like you and me doing that. We could accommodate a warrior woman doing that, at least one presented as the Lord Marshal's consort."

Jack's head jerked up, her eyes wide. He locked eyes with her for an instant. Looked away. "But not someone weak." Jack closed her eyes.

Vaako nodded briefly. "Especially now. There are those who would never take their shot at us who would at her. Once they figure out who she is."

Riddick nodded. Good. Me and the Purple Prince, thinking on parallel lines. Let's see where he takes it. "Whatdya think?"

"We should keep her identity to ourselves as long as we can. And she should never be alone. Heavily armed guards, all the time. Especially after - " he broke off as Jack made another keening noise. Riddick frowned down at her.

"Yeah," he said, heavily. "Take care of the guards?"

Vaako nodded. "Of course."

"Anything else?"

"Just know, there are those who think less of me for loving my wife."

Yeah, well, I'm one of them bud, Riddick thought. He said nothing as Vaako wheeled away to do whatever the fuck he was going to do. Carried Jack the rest of the way to the infirmary. Enjoyed the covertly aghast looks of hardened warriors he passed, wondering what the hell he'd done to the little girl.
Riddick carried her into something that might have been a medical clinic. All activity stopped and every eye turned to him as they entered. He dropped her on a cold table. Whispered into her ear, "Keep your mouth shut for once." She blinked up at him, heartsick, disoriented. He backed up, stared down at her. Addressed some random person.

"It was rougher than I meant. Clean her up, have someone fix anything broken. Vaako will send some men to collect her." He'd gone cold.

"Yes, sire," a man said. Riddick gave him a nod, turned back to her, and for the first time, she was intensely aware that she was naked under all that blood. Naked and afraid.

"Please," she whispered.

He stared down at her expressionless. Then he kissed her savagely hard, one hand on her neck hard, the other scraping down her back. She was so shocked she tried to struggle away. After too many heartbeats, he let her. Licked blood off of his lips, smiling slightly.

"Remember what I said," he said, all expressionless again, a smear of her blood on his right cheek. "We'll finish this later. I got a war to win." Then he was gone.

What did he say?

We'll finish what later?

What war?

The room was utterly still, everyone staring at her. Finally, a man stepped up. "Well, this is new," he said pulling her off the table. She fell, hard. The man made a disgusted noise, yanked her to her feet. She gasped at the bruising pain.

"Fuck you," she managed.

"Lord Marshal said to clean you up." He dragged her. She struggled for an instant, then relaxed, let him do it.


The man shoved her into a shower enclosure, slammed the door shut. Ice cold water hit her, and she screamed and tried to scramble away. But there was no place to go.

"Keep your mouth shut for once," his voice growled through her mind.
Keep my mouth shut. Why?

I helped kill Zhylaw. His city. Right. It seemed like another life. Took a deep breath. Then another. Watched the reddened water swirl away down the drain.

I can't believe I stabbed him.

"Stand up," the man said. She glared at him.

What else?

"I stormed the fucking gates of hell for you."

"Stand up, breeder," the man ordered, louder.

Riddick brought me back. Then the man was in the shower enclosure with her, pulling her hard to her feet, hard enough to bruise. "The Lord Marshal wants you clean."

Fuck you, she started to say. But he made the water warmer, and she relaxed into his arms, letting him do whatever he wanted. He was harsh but quick, clearly not wanting to stay in the waters.

Once upon a time I could kill him, she thought, distantly. Use the wall as a weapon. Once upon a time, I was always armed. And never, ever, naked. That once upon a time seemed a very long time ago. It was hard to believe she'd survived it.

You didn't survive. He stormed the gates of hell and brought you back.

That's a good thing, isn't it?

The man toweled her off quickly, then dumped her on a different exam table than the one Riddick had dropped her onto. She stared after the towel longingly. Started at the bloody imprint of her buttocks across the aisle. Riddick's covered in my blood. She shuddered. He probably likes it. He always liked my blood. Almost from the beginning.

He always liked my blood. Almost from the beginning.

He kissed me. She started to shake again.

Why the fuck did he bring me back?

Why the fuck now? I've been gone months. Maybe years. She tried to stop shaking. Failed miserably.

A new man came up to her. "What seems to be the problem?" he asked nicely enough. What's the problem? I was dead. Before that, I was stronger, taller and able to walk. I had clothes and hair and knives and people didn't drag me into cold showers. I think my breasts were smaller. I wanna be that girl again.

"Keep your mouth shut for once," Riddick's voice growled in her head again. She gave the man one anguished look, then stared down.

"The Lord Marshal dumped her here, doctor," her self-appointed bath attendant leered self-importantly. He'd changed clothes quickly enough, come back to watch the show. "All covered in blood. Told us to clean her, fix her up, wait for Vaako's men to collect her." She gave him A Look. Remembered she was naked. Flushed.

The doctor looked at her with something like compassion. She could feel her eyes prickling. "Oh.
Yes." He tilted her neck, looked at the spot where the spikes had slammed in when she was converted. The doctor's lips pursed. "Right."

A moment of panic. *I converted. I don't feel converted. All that . . . certainty. All gone. Can you apostate from the necros?*

Zhylaw. The memory of a thrusting, tearing agony. She hiccupped in fear, in remembered pain. For an instant, the doctor's face softened.

"You were with the Lord Marshal?" he said.

She nodded. Blushed. *At least, I think that was me.*

"Hm." He ran a hand held scanner over her slowly. "No broken bones." Pulled out a different piece of equipment, peered into her ears, her eyes, her mouth. Listened to her heart. Felt her lymph nodes. His hands were gentle. *Okay. I can deal with this.*

"Lay back."

*Lay back. That, I can do.* She tried, but nonetheless, the doctor moved her around. Picked up one foot, then the other, fitted them into stirrups. She dimly remembered a medical exam that involved stirrups.

He stepped in between her legs. "Let's see how badly he ripped you up," the doctor said, kindly. A hard, cold, pain, in a place Zhylaw liked to hurt. Not just him. She tried to jerk away. "No," she managed.

"Alright," he said. Backed away. Came back with a needle. She tried move away. "Hold her," the doctor ordered mildly. Hard hands were on her. "I'm just going give you a sedative." The needle went in smoothly. Almost immediately, she could feel the world spinning away and the shuddering ease.


"Stop." A voice called out. Everyone froze. The man with the spiky hair was marching over, surrounded by heavily armed men. He looked angry. *Vaako. Right. Riddick's friend. I knew him before.* "What are you doing?"

"The Lord Marshal brought her here for treatment."

Vaako's eyes skated over her naked body. *Naked. I really don't want to be naked any more.* She swallowed.

"She's bruised," Vaako said, coldly. "Who bruised her?"

The doctor looked surprised. "Sir?"

"She's the Lord Marshal's."

The doctor blinked. "I presume he did."

Vaako stared down at her. "I know what he did to her." *That makes one of us.* She met his eyes. "Who bruised her?"

Her eyes slotted to the man who had dragged her into the shower. Vaako followed her gaze, pointed.
The man stepped up, reluctantly. Vaako took him aside. The four men he'd brought with him closed around her, their eight eyes on her, and for a moment, panic shoved the sedative away. Then they all turned around, looking outward. A guard, she realized. Heavily armed guards. Right. They were talking about that. They're here to protect me.

She tried to pull her legs out of the stirrups, got tangled, whimpered. One of the guards looked back, his eyes widening against his dark skin. Their eyes met. He turned away abruptly. She tried again, managed, this time, to pull her legs out of the stirrups. Curled up. Tried to cover herself inadequately with her arms.

She couldn't hear what Vaako was saying to the man, but the emotion, that came through clear. Vaako was furious. Furious she'd been hurt. She couldn't remember the last time someone had been mad she'd been hurt. Her eyes pricked.

Yes you do, something whispered. Riddick. When he figured out those prison guards had raped you.

Fucker. Leaves me for five fucking years, shows up, gets me killed. The prickle in her eyes came back with friends.

"Can I have a blanket?" She called softly. "Please?"

Four men were around her bed. None moved. She tried again. "Please?" Her voice cracked.

The one who had looked at her before twitched. "Blanket," he ordered in a low grumbling voice.

She lifted her head, watched as someone scurried over, handed the man a square of cloth. He laid it next to her head. She reached for it slowly, tried to unfold it. Failed. Tried again. Succeeded slightly. Pulled it up over herself. Partially folded up, it covered her inadequately.

The man looked back at her again. Looked around. Stepped back, and quickly unfolded the blanket, dropped it on her without touching. She blinked back tears. "Thank you," she whispered. He flashed a smile, quickly stilled.

She closed her eyes. The room was too bright. None of this makes any fucking sense. If Riddick really had to storm the gates of hell me back, why dump me off with these people? She could hear Vaako's urgent voice, talking to someone else now. It was strangely comforting, even if she couldn't understand what he was saying.

Riddick kissed me. Like he was planning to fuck me. Consort means wife, doesn't it? Did he bring me back to fuck me?

Ninevah, she thought, abruptly. The Choming. All those times when he pretended to be fucking me, to keep other guys off me.

Ninevah. Her eyes pricked. Oh god, it was beautiful. I want to be there. I want solid ground under my feet. I want sunlight. I want trees.

I want Riddick.

I want to be a long way away from Riddick.

She was shuddering again.

After an eternity, Vaako came back. He lifted her off the table, blanket and all, and carried her in his arms to a small room. Didn't I used to be heavier? A woman trailed them. She closed the door on their guard.
Oh, goody, another cold exam table. Vaako set her down gently. Gave her a distracted smile. Pointed a piece of equipment at a camera in the wall. There was a click and the small light went out. Oh, shit, probably everything that just happened is on tape.

Vaako looked at the woman. "Doctor. Review her medical records, finish the exam."

There was a silence as the doctor focused on a small computer. Then she took blood with gentle hands, manipulated her hands and feet, took some blood, dropped it into a piece of equipment, ran a small scanner over her carefully. Sat back. Reviewed the readings from several pieces of equipment. Gave Vaako a shocked look. "The Lord Marshal brought her back from the Underverse?"

"Yes," Vaako said, flatly. "Make sure the records are sealed and no one else can figure out what you just did. And I will kill you slowly if you tell anyone."

He loves Riddick. She closed her eyes. Riddick's an idiot. He probably has no fucking clue.

The doctor swallowed, hard. "Oh, the poor girl. Where did he get the body?"

"I think the Quasi-Dead built it."

"Oh. Oh dear."

"What?"

"There's a reason we don't use the Quasis for health care," the doctor said, somewhat archly. "Their abilities are prodigious, but they have . . . views. They believe birth should hurt. And be bloody. That explains a great deal. Give me a moment." There was a pause.

"She's fine," the doctor said, finally. "Perfect health. I think the Quasis deliberately brought her back weak and, uh, virginal, but other than that, she's fine."

"I want to be strong," she said, unsteadily. Fuck what Riddick wants.

Vaako stared at her hard. Nodded, approvingly. "She was a warrior once. How do we make her strong again?"

"Get her moving. Her muscles will develop, but she has to use them."

"Keep moving. And, I'm sorry, but the first time you do anything will probably hurt. Just try to relax, let it happen."

She nodded. The woman smiled at her. Looked back at Vaako. "I'd like to see her tomorrow. If he does this again, try to get him to bring some medical staff in on it. She was given a sedative that easily could have killed her, given her condition."

Vaako sighed noisily. "He does what he wants." He stared at Jack for a long moment. "I'll talk to him. She needs clothes."

"I have an initiate's robe," the doctor said. "As suitable as anything today. Plus, I need to give her something." She opened the door, pushed through a mass of soldiers. The door closed.

Jack looked at Vaako. "Thank you," she said, softly.

"You're Riddick's," he said, simply. Am I? What if I don't want to be? I think I'm done with Lord Marshals for a while. She shivered, cold. The doctor came back with a short white robe and something in a cup.
"Drink this. Your digestive system isn't ready for food. I've inoculated this with healthy bacteria. Eat lightly the next few days. Be careful not to bite your tongue – your teeth are going to be really sharp for a while." She took a drink with the doctor's help. It tasted of mint and grain. It tasted better than anything she'd ever drunk in her life.

When she finished, Vaako offered her a hand, helped her up. He belted the white robe around her. *I could love him,* she thought. *Damn, the sedative must be getting to me.* They walked slowly out of the office. Walked slowly, barefoot, surrounded by heavily armed men until her new legs gave out. Then Vaako picked her up and carried her to a completely new place. Left her in the charge of armed strangers.
Chapter 3. Holdfast

Busy day. The war against the Prytania was going well, but they were clever foes. Riddick kept half an eye on the rumors that swirled through the Necropolis about Jack. Most asserted she'd caught his eye on the last battle. That he'd brought her back, unconverted, as a plaything. That pleased him. The pleasure lasted until repeated hushed references to "baptism" finally drove him to the archives and an image of Lord Marshal Baylock standing under a platform in the Hierotheisen he himself had walked under a dozen times. It was topped with spikes and an intricate metal mesh. Heavily armed soldiers tossed naked and boys and girls – mostly girls—on the top of spikes. Their blood gushed down over the man's body. One child looked so much like Jack had, once upon a time, that it sickened him. Baylock was grinning obscenely through it all. Boundless compassion my ass.

They think I did that to her. Probably all figurin' I killed her family right in front –on top – of her. Shit.

I gotta figure out how to hurt these guys, he thought, then snorted. Great. I want to hurt the dead. Dead Lord Marshals.

Clearly, you could hurt the dead, based on whatever Zhylaw had been doing to Kyra. Jack. He rubbed his eyes with hands still flecked with her blood. Touched the front of his shirt, where her blood had dried. At first, it had amused him to go from war counsel to war counsel wearing that little bit of Jack. As the day wore on, the smell was driving him crazy. He missed her so much he ached. He wanted her so much he ached. Surprising.

Of course, you didn't know what she was going to look like.

It was increasingly hard to concentrate on all the killing to be done. Fuck. I'm the Lord Marshal. I'm done. Cancelled the last round of meetings, headed back to his rooms.

Vaako had stationed two heavily armed guards at his doors. Inside were two more; one sitting, the other one looming alert behind Jack as she took painfully careful steps across the room in bare feet and a short white initiate’s robe. Both men came to attention and Jack's face lit up when she saw him. Shit, did any of them see that smile? She's gorgeous when she smiles. He kept his face blank. The joy drained from her face and she swayed like she was going to fall. No, she's just gorgeous. The shadowing guard – Ninshubar, he remembered - caught her around the waist with a massive arm. Dark brown skin against the white cloth. "Thank you," she said up to him, her voice soft and warm and sweet. Riddick could feel his eyes narrowing.

"Thanks, men. You can go now." The other man saluted and was out the door fast, clearly uncomfortable. Ninshubar took a step to follow, but as he let her go, Jack started to fall again, unbalanced. He caught her easily again. They've been doing this for a while. She falls, he catches her. That's my job. Irritated, Riddick stepped close and hooked a rough arm around her. Ninshubar let go, turned towards the door a little slower than Riddick liked. Still, he was making his escape.
"Maybe not." Ninshubar, Riddick called out. The man paused.

He looked back, face carefully blank. "Sir?" Riddick looked him up and down, considering. He fought next to me at Nineveh. I saw him break a man's neck with those black hands.

I saw him pick a little girl up by the feet and dash her brains out against the rocks.

I saw him shoot a concussion grenade into a shelter. Musta killed thousands with one pull of a trigger. He's one of Vaako's favorite killers. On babysitting duty.

The door was still open. Riddick looked down the hall. The other three soldiers had stopped and were watching silently. They all are. Vaako put his best killers on this. Even though we're at a turning point in a war. What's he telling me?

The silence went on uncomfortably long. Jack was beginning to test his grip, trying to twist herself free. He ignored her. He didn't want her to fall. He's doing a job, and doing it right. Riddick finally relaxed. "Good call. Don't want her damaged."

"Thank you sire." At Riddick's dismissing nod, Ninshubar left quietly, the door closing behind him.

Riddick stared down at Jack, who was blinking up at him, still his mystified little girl. Looking at him much more cautiously than when he'd come through the door.

They'd washed her. She was clean. More than clean; her skin was as soft and new as a baby's. Untouched by the sun. Untouched. Almost. There were sharp bruises on her arms, disappearing into the ridiculous short white initiation robe someone must have put on her. Fuck. That was fast. Maybe he had a reason to protect her.

He picked her up. She gasped in a girlish way that tickled. He carried her a few feet, set her on a chair, crouched in front of her. Made his voice as gentle as he could. "How you doin'?"

"I don't know. I feel like I'm waking up from a six year nightmare." She hesitated, searching his face. "Except I keep expecting the lights to go out and the monsters to come back."

His lips quirked, involuntarily. "Could happen. You're bruised."

"How?"

She looked away from him. "There seemed to be some . . . uncertainty about your intentions. Some of your staff got a little . . . rough. Your boy Vaako made them knock it off. He loves you."

Vaako loves me? Decided to ignore that for now. "They're dead."

She shook her head. "They thought they were following orders. Your orders." There was a hint of an accusation lurking there. After he didn't respond, she rushed on. "And Vaako already yelled at them."

The Prince Purple yelled at them? I was gonna kill them.

He blinked a few times himself at that. Right. And if I want people to believe I'm not sweet on her, I shouldn't make a big deal of it. Let 'em think it's Vaako that's gone all soft. I'm the one who dropped her in a hospital hysterical, bloody, and naked. Makes sense they'd think they should be rough. Maybe he does love me. Enough to think a few moves ahead.
"You and Ninshubar seemed chummy." He was surprised at the edge in his voice.

She blinked up at him innocently. "The one who caught me? Is that his name? Vaako's doctor told me I needed to move to get strong. After I fell a few times that guy took pity on me. None of them really want to touch me." She sounded so woeful about that he smiled. *This really isn't Kyra. Kyra didn't want to be touched, even by me. Kyra would have wanted anyone who bruised her dead.*

**Kyra would be yellin' at me.** His lips twitched. "Yeah. Don't think they're sure of my intentions either."

Her eyes were suddenly, utterly, focused. "Are you?" He shrugged. Kept quiet.

Just like the little girl she once was, she couldn't let the silence linger. "What happened? The things I remember . . . they don't all make a lot of sense." He scrutinized her. No bitterness, only woe and wonder and heartbreaking hopefulness. *Not the voice of the woman who fought beside me in Crematoria. Not the woman who died for me in throne room.*

*But she remembers being that person.*

*She sure remembers dying as that person. Spike sliding in the sweet spot.* . . . He closed his eyes for several heartbeats. Opened them. She seemed to be glowing. A luxurious living green and threaded with glorious red, shot through with something olive and military. He blinked again, and she was just a girl staring at him hopefully. For an instant, his heart was breaking.

"You died for me. I brought you back. That's all you need to know right now, Jack."

"Kyra," she responded, like she was trying the name out.


She looked confused, bit her lip with her new sharp teeth. Nodded uncertainly. *Kyra might be in there, but they didn't put her in charge.*

*She died for me. For me.* He leaned forward and kissed her again, as gently as he could this time, barely letting his tongue slip past those sharp teeth. She didn't resist. But he could smell her sudden fear. He groaned, pulled back, nuzzled her impossibly soft neck. *Newborn. She'll never be this soft again.*

He let her pull away. "What day is it?"

"March 22nd."

"I was gone three months?"

"'bout that, yeah."

She nodded, looked disoriented. "Seems . . . longer. Were we lovers? Zhylaw thought we were. You seem to think -" she broke off.

He snorted. "No. We weren't. You were too young and then you died too fast."

She closed her eyes. "I died for you. I died for you. Did you bring me back just to fuck me?"

*Did I? *"No. Didn't want you dead." Because it fucking broke my heart. You died for me.*
"Zhylaw fucked me," she said. It was almost a non sequitur.

He pulled back. "Yeah. I figured."

"It hurt." She looked away. "Are we okay?"

He smiled. "Yeah, kid. We're okay."

She didn't seem convinced. "You seemed like you're really mad at me. Are you mad at me?" Her voice was childish again.

He sighed. "Maybe a little. Pissed at you for dying. Pissed at you for leaving New Mecca. Pissed at you - for becoming Kyra. He broke off. "I'll get over it. Mostly I'm playing for the crowd."

"What crowd?"

"The Necromongers. Don't want them to figure out who you are. Or that I like you."

She blinked rapidly. Shook her head like she wasn't ready to think about that yet. Her voice went very quiet. "You said – I thought you said I wasn't what you want. Do you want me?"

"More than anything." He kissed her again, a little less gently. She responded this time, her tongue slipping cautiously past her own sharp teeth.

Too soon she pulled back. "Vaako said you had a body built for me." She swallowed. "This body. Why is it like this?"

"Like what?"

"Weaker. Shorter. Virgin, um, er."

*And drop dead gorgeous. They brought you back looking like a goddess. Or a porn star. Yeah. What the fuck do I say to that? It's not what I want. It's exactly what I want.* He stared at her. Once again, she seemed to be glowing sweet green, something wonderfully alive, threaded through with olive and red so dark it was almost brown now. *Her soul,* he realized abruptly. *I'm seeing her soul. I'm seeing detail.* *Am I seeing Jack and Kyra fight for her?* He chewed this over. There was a long silence.

She broke it again. "Riddick?" Her voice was all Jack's voice again. The colors of her soul churned, the red and olive threads withdrawing from the heartbreakingly sweet green. He blinked, and she was just a girl again.

"Yeah, kid?"

"I have to go to the bathroom."

*Not what I was expecting.* "Do you know where one is?"

She shook her head, her eyes wide. "I'm a little scared."

"Why? I don't think there are any toilet monsters in the Necropolis."

She blushed, looked down. "This will be the first time. The doctors said it might hurt."
"First time. Poor kid. He sighed, picked her up. She squealed in an appealingly girlish fashion. "You know, I gotta walk if I'm ever going to get strong again."

"Walk all you want," he said agreeably. "But I like carrying you. And I'm a busy man."

"Yeah," she said, and she sounded more scared. "About that. What the hell is going on? Zhylaw-" she broke off with a hiccup, and her soul was, for an instant, almost entirely olive and reddish brown, "he told me you were the new Lord Marshal. Everyone keeps calling you that. And Zhylaw kept calling you his son. I don't get it."

"You keep what you kill. I killed Zhylaw. I got his job. Guess he was something of a father to me after all."

"Oh, shit," she said. "And you're doing it?"

He laughed. "Thing to do. Nice perks." The olive was fading back to the soft, living green. He blinked hard, forced her image to look like a girl. Kicked the door to the master bathroom open. It was palatial and warm, and he liked the way she gasped. He set her down in front of the toilet and stepped back.

She swayed slightly. "Riddick."

"What?"

"Go away."

He laughed again. Decided to indulge her, stepped back out the door with an exaggerated bow. Took up station outside, listened.

"Oh shit," she whispered. He almost came back in. But there was the sound of piss, the sounds of someone finishing, standing, padding over to the sink, gasping – and falling. He was back in immediately. Jack was on the floor in front of the high counter, blinking back tears. He sat down beside her, put an arm around her. She laid her head on his chest. He was perversely pleased that she'd fallen without his help. He kept it out of his voice. "You okay, kid?"

"Yeah. Just – just saw myself in the mirror. I didn't – I didn't know I looked like that. Shit, Riddick, I haven't been that pretty since I was a little girl." She shuddered slightly. "Before I chopped off my hair so I wouldn't look like that anymore." He tightened his arms around her. "This bathroom is amazing," she said, inanely.

"Yeah. Wanna take a bath?"

She looked over at the tub, big enough for six. Strangely, she shuddered. "Maybe later. At this point, I'm a little afraid I'll drown. Plus, your guy scrubbed me pretty hard, so I'm pretty sure I'm as clean as I'll ever be."

It was like a kick in the stomach. 'My guy' scrubbed you?

Right. I told them to clean her up. How did I think they were going to do that? He closed his eyes. The image of Baylock, smirking, standing under the bodies of children bleeding to death rose in his head. He pulled her closer.

"Riddick?" she said, uncertainly.
"I won't let you drown." His voice was rougher than he intended. He lifted her off the floor and held her as she washed her hands carefully, awkwardly. She kept giving her own image in the mirror scared looks. That image was uncannily beautiful in a way Jack might have been, if she'd had the right surgeons. If her uncle hadn't sold her to some old freak. If she'd never been on the Hunter-Grazner. If she'd never been Kyra. If she'd never met me. Clean. Fine boned. Fragile. Fragile. Especially with him hulking over her.

_I'm going to hurt her when I fuck her._

_She knows that._

He nuzzled her cheek with his own. Then he helped her dry her hands. Picked her up and carried her through the bathroom's other door into the master bedroom. Set her on the bed. Opened a well stocked liquor cabinet "Wanna drink?"

She eyed the bottles dubiously. "Aren't newborns supposed to start with milk? I'm not sure my system can handle anything stronger."

He laughed, strangely delighted. _No, not strange at all. I always wanted give her her first drink. I get to now._ "Not a lot of milk in the Necropolis. I can send some guys on a raiding mission if you want. Later. You still got a sweet tooth?"

She blinked. "I – I don't know."

He found a bottle of port and poured three fingers into a glass. Brought that back and a bottle of whisky. Wrapped her fingers around the glass, lifted it to her lips. She let only a tiny amount into her mouth, enough to redden her lips and tongue. He helped her put the glass down.

"Wow," she said. "That was intense."

He took a long drag of the whiskey. "Just the beginning." He put the bottle down, kissed her again. Her mouth was sweet from the port. After a few seconds, she started to respond hesitantly. Not exactly afraid, but very cautious. He had one hand on her neck, gently insinuatingly. He let his other hand wander lower, through the loose folds of her robe. Her skin was addictive; smooth; soft; untouched. When he reached her breasts, she put her hands on his chest, whether to fend him off or not, he wasn't sure.

Then she frowned. "Is that my blood on your shirt?"

"Yeah."

She shuddered. "You've been walking around all day with my blood on your clothes?"

"Got it under my fingernails too," he wriggled his fingers in front of her. Her eyes went big.

"God Riddick, that's . . . awfully uncivilized."

He laughed. Took off his shirt and gave it a theatrical sniff before tossing it aside. "Been smelling you all day, Sunshine. I liked that. I've missed the way you smell."

Hesitantly, she touched his chest, running her fingers over a spot where her blood had soaked through and dried. He pressed her fingers to it tightly. "Does my blood smell special?"

"Yeah. Smells like you." Her eyes flickered to the port. He offered her the glass, helped hold it to her lips. She wetted her lips, then actually swallowed half a mouthful. He set the glass down.
"Does it still smell like me? I sure don't look like me."

"Yeah. It smells exactly like you. And you look like you" He caressed her cheek softly. "I've really missed you."

"I missed you too," she pressed into his hand, hard. Pulled back, blinked back tears, took a deep breath. "I need to know something. I'm not saying I want this, but - can I go?"

"Go where? Sightseeing?"

"Go wherever. Not be here. Or am I still the Lord Marshal's extra-special prisoner?" She smiled, but her voice was woeful.

He considered this. Decided to tell her the truth, or something like it. "You're not a prisoner. Necromongers don't have prisons. But you gave yourself to the Lord Marshal when you got on that transport on Crematoria. You keep what you kill. I killed him. I got you."

He knew his smile was malicious. She searched his face for a long time before closing her eyes. "Bloody tyrant."

He laughed, delighted with her all over. He'd forgotten that she was smart. Took another long drink of whiskey. It was making him feel expansive. "Yeah. That's me. Destroyer of Worlds." Put the bottle down. Kissed her harder. She made a small noise in the back of her throat and tried to pull away. He let her.

Took her small face in his hands. "Jack. Relax. We're going to do this. It's been driving me crazy all day."

She flashed a quick smile, but shook her head. "Do I get a say?"

He made his voice teasing. "Sure. As long as you say yes."

She flinched. "I'm not saying no, but-" she broke off. "Shouldn't we wait until I'm less . . . newborn-y?"

He nuzzled her with his cheek. Untied her robe, pulled her arms gently out of the short sleeves, hands particularly gently around the bruises. Arranged her on the bed like a body on a funeral pyre. Her eyes were big.

"I waited in Crematoria. You died. For me."

Not for me.

Fuck that.

"I'm not waiting any longer."

For an instant, she was all Kyra, all olive and brown and furious. Then she took two deep ragged breaths, and the innocent sweet green of Jack flowed back. He could feel his eyes softening. "I guess I've always kinda wanted to . . . carpe diem, huh?"

"Good girl," he whispered. "Relax. I'll take care of everything."
Chapter 4, In Between the Pillars

He started kissing down her neck, down her chest, soft kisses but inexorable. She tried to force herself to do what he said, relax, but something was raging at her. You can't let him do this. He's got no fucking right. And if he does it today, he'll think he can do it any time.

She concentrated on breathing.

Riddick was kissing her breasts tenderly, one hand on her belly, pinning her. Can't he? He can do anything he wants to just about anyone. At least he's being nice about it.

You're a stupid little girl, the other voice raged back. He's a monster.

She put her hands on his bare head, stroked it as well as she could. He groaned and started suckling on her left breast hard, sending dark cramps through her.

He saved me.

He's a sociopath. A psychopath. A narcissist. He's fixated on you, but he doesn't care about what you want. He's just locked you up in a nicer prison. With a nicer rapist.

He switched breasts, and the pinning hand started to slide down. She gasped as his fingers reached her pelvis, curved down to stroke between her thighs. He lifted his head up and smiled at her, his eyes burning. "Lights out," he whispered. They were plunged into darkness.

"No," she whispered.

He groaned. The hand between her legs withdrew, and she was pinned by his weight. He kissed her neck lingeringly, lips against her jugular hard enough to make her gasp. He smiled against her and dragged those lips up to her ear.

"Since when are you afraid of the dark?"

"I just want to see you," she whispered. "In my fantasies, I get to see how beautiful you are."

"Maybe next time." The weight withdrew, and there was a metallic sound.

See? The raging whisper was back. He doesn't care what you want. He's taking off his pants and he's going to thrust into you before you're anywhere near ready even if you weren't in this stupid new body and it's going to hurt. Today you get to be raped by two Lord Marshals.

Shut up, Kyra.

She could hear him moving but couldn't tell what he was doing. Then suddenly his hands were on
her thighs, pulling her legs off the edge of the bed. She gasped and tried to sit up. A massive hand between her breasts pushed her down.

"Relax," he purred. He seemed to be kneeling on the floor between her legs. He kissed slowly up the inside of her thigh, breathed over her labia. Kissed the surface for a long moment while the hand between her breasts slid down again, coming to rest on her hip. With the other hand, he rubbed in between her legs, just the surface at first, before parting her gently. She gasped, tried to sit up again. The hand on her hip gripped warningly hard, then eased off.

He raised his head. Mercury eyes glinted in the darkness. "Trust me. You'll like this," he rumbled, amused. He lowered his head.

Her world shrank to his lips and tongue until he added fingers curling up inside her. Her body felt hot and strange and weak and glorious. She tried to pull away. She tried to thrust closer. He took his time, but he was still as inexorable as death. After an eternity, something happened, and she was convulsing, helplessly, wordlessly, wonderfully, under his lips and fingers.

After a long time, he stood up. His hands were on her shoulders, pulling her all the way back on the bed, lifting her head, putting it on a soft pillow. "You like?" His eyes glinted above her, unreadable moons in a pitch black sky.

"I like," she whispered.

"My turn." His knees were in between hers. She reached forward, stroked his chest softly. She could feel her own dried blood there and shuddered. He groaned, held her hand tightly to him for an instant before moving it away from his body. He kissed her lips, hard. His fingers were between her legs again, this time exploratory. The fingers withdrew. He positioned himself.

"This might hurt." His voice was rough. Then he thrust in hard. Told you so, that other voice inside her raged. Something tore. She screamed.

Once upon a time, Riddick would have stopped when she screamed and found something to kill. But she felt so good, and her blood smelled so good, the universe where he stopped wouldn't exist, couldn't exist. He kissed her savagely. She fought, panicking. He caught her hands and she was all olive green and brown and furious.

Kyra. He groaned. Let her hands go. Forced himself to slow down. Caressed the side of her face. "Sorry, kid," he whispered, tenderly. "It gets better. I promise."

She blinked back tears and the raging olive subsided slightly. He kissed her gently, still thrusting into her, but not as deep.

"Hurts," she gasped.

He knew he was grinning foolishly. He nuzzled her. He didn't mind hurting her, much, but he wanted the sweet green back. I've got a theory. "I love you," he whispered.

It was revelatory. All the fight drained out of her, taking with it the olive and brown. The sweet green and delicate red opened to him like a flower to the sun. "I love you too," she whispered. "Oh god, I love you."

Oh, this is too good. Tell her I love her, and Kyra just melts away into Jack. I gotta remember that.
He thrust in harder. She gasped in pain with each thrust but didn't try to fight him anymore. *Oh, I love this.* After that, it didn't take long before something dark and wonderful rose up and overwhelmed him. He collapsed on her, hips still thrusting in and out, a little slower and shallower each time.

Finally, he nuzzled her. Her cheeks were wet from tears he hadn't noticed her crying. With a groan he pulled out of her, rolled off. Arranged her so they were spooning, flipped the other side of the bed spread over them both. Laid like that until both of their heart beats started to slow down. Then very slowly, he put a hand between her thighs. He pressed his fingers into her, made a pleased sound at the warm wetness. She flinched, but had nowhere to go. "It's okay, Jack. Just relax." He moved his hand, brought it up to her lips. "Taste this."

Obediently, she took his fingers into her mouth. He could feel her grimace. "Ugh."


"You eat it then."

He laughed. Nuzzled the back of her neck. Made a point of sucking his fingers noisily. "You bet. You up to that right now?"

Her breath caught. "Maybe not. But since when do you care what I'm up to?" Some of Kyra's bitterness was back.

He propped himself up on an elbow, looked down at her. "I've cared about almost nothing else since I met you."

She looked up at him blindly through the darkness, blinking back tears. "I wish I'd known that," she whispered. "When you left me on New Mecca. I missed you so god damn much, it twisted me up inside."

Twisted you into Kyra. He sighed. "I wish it hadn't."

"Well, I wish you hadn't dumped me, so there you go."

He laid beside her quietly for long enough that her breathing slowed and she started to drift to sleep. "I thought about coming back for you," he said, softly. "I thought about it so many times. Following you home from your little school some day. Waiting until you were alone. Hand over your mouth, arm around your neck, take you into the darkness with me. Take you..." He caressed her neck with a slow hand. She shivered. It felt good. He cast around for some story to tell that would make her shiver more.

"Or sliding through your bedroom window some night. Pinning you down, sliding into you..." he let his hand drift down back between her legs. Inserted one curling finger into the muck. She gasped. He grinned.

"I planned it out a dozen ways. More. Knocking on the door and asking nicely. Knocking you out and taking you. I even thought of tipping the mercs off that they could get to me through you, just so they would take you and I could rescue you. Be your hero again." At this, she shuddered. Tried to move away. He wouldn't let her.

Her voice was artificially light, given the fear rolling off of her. "You're not very nice, Riddick."

"No. I'm not. But I tried, Sunshine. I tried *real hard.*"
"Thank you for letting me know that," she said, dryly. "I might have missed it otherwise." It pissed him off just a little.

"I stayed away from New Mecca to protect you. I thought you'd be happy there. That's why I left you there. Everyone here tells me the Undervese is a paradise. That's why I stayed away. I knew I couldn't bear to leave you in fucking paradise twice." She shuddered. He smiled. "Staying away didn't work. I'm trying something else now."

Her voice was a little less light. "You became the God Emperor of the most destructive force in the galaxy just because of me? Riddick you sure know how to make a girl feel . . . bone deep terrified."

He chuckled darkly. Rolled her on to her back, pinned her down roughly. Whispered into her ear, "don't tempt me. Fear smells good." Then he started to kiss her again. _Fuck whether she's up to it._

---

_Fear._

Jack's fear. The scent of it woke him out of a dead sleep. She was terrified. But it was only the two of them. Nothing to be afraid of.

_Maybe not nothing . . ._

He extended his senses. There was nothing alive in the room except for her and him. The loudest sound was her heart beat, hard and fast. Too hard and fast for a sleeping girl. _Unless . . ._

_Scary nightmares?_ He stroked her hair. It did not wake her.

_Wake her?_ He lifted his head, gazed down at her considering. He could see her eyes moving fast under the closed eyelids, but otherwise, she was utterly still. He blinked, and her body dissolved into swirling greens and reds.

His hand was still on her scalp. The colors seemed to flow over his fingers, and the sense of her fear intensified. Not just fear. Fury. Despair.

_Huh._ As gently as he could, he pressed his fingers against her skull. The emotions intensified. There almost seemed to be shapes underneath them. He pressed one finger harder and it seemed to sink in.

It was overwhelming. Images, sounds, pain, pain in places he didn't have. He jerked back. _Fuck._

Now his own heart was beating hard and his stomach hurt. Worst, a sense of abject weakness. And his own cold fear. _Did I just stick a finger in her brain? Is she dead again already?_ He blinked, and the colors faded away and it was just a girl, sleeping, with his hand resting on her scalp. No blood, no wound. She was very much alive. If he couldn't smell the sweet scent of fear, he'd think she was sleeping peacefully.

He forced himself to calm down. Pressed his hand gently against her head. Nothing happened. Concentrated, and she was all light again, now much more the bitter olive than the sweet green. It buzzed unpleasantly under his fingers, like he was touching a live electrical wire. Pushed, and his hand slid into the colors. Into her head.

At first, nothing but the emotion made sense. Fear. Rage. A sense of bitter disappointment. Then the sensations. Pain. Hunger. Thirst. Then something snapped into place. He was riding her dream, feeling what she was feeling. Being tied down, he knew that feeling. Someone over him/her, whispering. That wasn't so familiar. People stayed away from him, even when he was all tied up.
Especially when he was all tied up. In case he got loose.

"Tell me where he is, and it all stops. I promise."

"Fuck you."

"Oh, you will. If you're lucky, we'll take turns. Unless you tell us where Riddick is. Then you go home. We'll even give you a lollipop."

"Wouldn't tell you if I knew."

"I'm sorry to hear that." There were sounds, then a ripping tearing pain. He almost pulled away, but the dream dissolved to the Necropolis and his own face.

"Keep your mouth shut for once."

At that, he did jerk away from the images, head pounding and a sick weight in his stomach. I said that to her. She kept her mouth shut even when she got tortured for me, and I said that to her. What kind of monster am I?

Something very cold answered him. The type that rapes the only person he's ever loved while she sobs underneath him? The type that gets off on smelling her fear? He swallowed. Laid a hand on her shoulder. Whispered, "hey, Sunshine."

She jerked awake. Stared at him blindly. "Ri-Riddick?"

"Yeah. You're having a nightmare."

"Sorry."

He laughed, softly, regretfully. "Dead certain it's my fault, not yours."

There was a sharp intake of breath. No denial. But maybe something better. "Sometimes, in my dreams, you save me." She pressed back into him. "Sometimes in real life..."

In your dreams... He nuzzled her. "Go to sleep. Big day tomorrow."

Riddick woke up happy for one of the first times in years. Cuddled Jack closer. The poor kid jerked awake, her heart hammering, disoriented. He tightened his arms around her. She ran a soft hand along his forearm, relaxed slightly. "Riddick?"

"Who were you expecting?"

"I gotta pee."

He chuckled. "Just like old times."

She tried to pull away from him. He was reluctant to let her go, but didn't make it impossible for her. "Lights, dim?" she called. Nothing happened.

"Afraid of the dark, Sunshine?"

"When I'm trying to find the bathroom, yeah."
"Let there be lights. Dim ones." Light was. She glared at him. "How come it doesn't do that for me?"

"Because you're not the Lord Marshal."

She got out of bed carefully. "You keep what you kill. That can't be all of it. It took three of us to kill Zhylaw. Why are you the Lord Marshal and not a committee? A Lord Marshal trinity? I could be the holy ghost." Without waiting for an answer she padded slowly and carefully to the bathroom where she'd fallen the night before. She left the door open. After a thoughtful silence, he followed her.

"You're walking better."

She was already on the toilet. "Could you not watch me pee?"

He laughed, made a production of turning his back. Checked the chrono; had almost an hour before he had to be anywhere.

"Shit."

He snaked his head around. She was staring at the toilet paper. It was stained red. She was still bleeding. Bleeding from what he'd done to her. She looked up at him with a frozen expression.

"Sorry," he said softly.

She thawed immediately. "Whatever. Better you than anyone else, I guess." She stood up walked carefully to the high counter to wash her hands. Her movements were awkward, but she didn't have any trouble keeping her feet under her this time. Stronger already. Huh. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. She splashed water on her face. He decided to use the toilet himself. She gave him a wary look, edged around towards the door.

"Wait up." It was an order.

She hesitated. "What?"

"We gotta talk about a few things."

"Do we have to do it while you're pissing?"

He laughed. Finished. Didn't wash his hands. Picked her up and set her on the high counter. Pushed in between her legs, effectively trapping her. Kept his hands on her waist. Her eyes went big.

"First thing. I brought you back from the Underverse."

She nodded. "Yeah. That was... heroic." She smiled at him, leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. He kissed her hungrily. Pulled back.

"Second thing. There are a lot of people in the Necropolis who would send you right back if they knew. I will come after you, but it might not be so easy the second time. You know, I know, and Vaako knows. No one else. It stays that way."

She looked down. Blushed at what she saw there. Looked over his shoulder. "Ah."

"What?"

She kept looking over his shoulder. "Nothing."

He moved closer, pushing her knees further apart, picking up her face in one hand and forcing her to
look at him. "Spit it out."

"I don't want to."

He grunted. Blinked and she was still that soft green, and he could feel her emotions, a roiling mass of hope, disappointment and fear, but not sense her thoughts. *Something about being asleep?* He pushed. Her skin seemed to buzz under his fingers and she flinched. He shook his head. "Jack, this is the third time you've tried to protect my men from me. Don't."

She glared at him, Kyra upwelling coldly within her. A fascinating thing to watch, this core of bitter olive shoving aside the living green. "It's not like that."

He ran his other hand up the outside of her naked thigh. "Tell me," he said softly. He let go of her face, put that arm around her. "Please."

She thawed again instantly, the bitter olive withdrawing. But voice went small. "Promise not to kill her?"

*Her?* "I'll try to find a way around it, kid."

She blinked, took a deep breath. "A doctor figured it out. Just–just that you brought me back, not who I am. Vaako told her to keep it quiet. Or he'd kill her."

"Good girl," he said. Kissed her lovingly. She relaxed against him slightly.

Riddick pulled back. Kept hold. "Third thing. You stay in my rooms. None of your little escaping tricks. I don't mind if you talk to your guards, but nothing serious. I don't want them to figure out who you are or that you matter to me. Nothing about your past. As far as they're concerned, you're just someone I don't want getting away." He ran his hands back down the outside of her thighs, started back up on the inside.

She looked wary. "Guards?"

"Yeah. At least for now." She looked unhappy. "They won't touch you. Them, I'd kill, no matter what you want." He laid a possessive hand directly on her naked pelvis.

She looked away from him again. He kept going. "Fourth. I love you." The soft green of her soul seemed to flower. It was heartbreakingly beautiful. He made his voice sweet. "But I'm not going to be particularly nice to you around other people."

The colors flattened. It was almost heart breaking too. "I noticed." Her voice was arch.

His went flat. "Live with it. Far as this place is concerned, you're just my latest fuck toy. Last thing I want; you getting' hurt for me." She snorted, dismissively. He caught her face in a hand again. "You're not the only one who has nightmares, little girl. That was my nightmare for five fucking years. It came true. I'm not going through that again."

She looked down, blinking back tears. But the words just kept coming out of his mouth. "And you do know what happens when you die. You don't just die. You go back to being tortured by Zhylaw."

She closed her eyes. "Yeah. About that. You got a special Necromonger cheat code library or something I can start exploring?"

"I'll think about it."
She wasn't happy with that answer. "Don't fight me Jack. Giving my new fuck toy high level computer access would be damn suspicious." She flinched.

"Do you have a better idea?"

*The blond guy. The guy who died on Crematoria. He might know something.* "I might."

"What?"

He kissed her again. "Trust me."

"Because it looks clear?" Her voice was arch again.

"Because there's nothing you can do right now." He kissed her again, deeply. "And I gotta go to work. But I wanna fuck you first." Her eyes widened. He grinned at her, lifted her off the counter and carried her back to the bed. She was bleeding, but the gray bedding was dappled with her blood already.

He laid her down. "Lights-"

She put her fingers on his lips gently. "Please. Leave them on." He sighed, looked down at her. "Please?"

He smiled. "Okay. This time." Kissed her fingers gently, moved them away from his face, put her hand up above her head.

"You don't like me touching you?" she said, softly.

He grunted. "Habit. Don't usually let people touch me."

"Even me?"

He gave her a piercing look. "No. You can touch me."

"Not like I can hurt you," she said, a little bitterly.

"No one's ever hurt me more, kid." He smiled at her to take the sting out of it, kissed her armpit, reveling at the scent. Kissed up the underside of her arm up towards her fingers. Her other hand moved to his back, stroking it gently. He groaned. Worked his way back down to her lips, her neck, her breasts. Her breath caught at last and the scent of her reluctant arousal drove all thought away.
Chapter 5: Apples

The door chime rang. He pulled himself out of bed reluctantly, pulled on some pants. Jack sat up, watching him cautiously. He gave her a grin. "Wait here. Might wanna put on some clothes." He loped through the maze of his rooms, turning the lights up as he went, and opened the door. Four soldiers were waiting. Including Ninshubar again, Riddick wasn't sure how he felt about that. "Door crew and room crew?"

"Yes sir," they chorused. They all seemed unnerved by his state of undress. "You guys who'll be sittin' with the girl, come with me." Somewhat warily, two men took up station outside his doors. Ninshubar and Kelmis, a man Riddick knew vaguely, followed him back.

He'd forgotten she had only the ridiculous initiate's robe to wear. She was struggling with it when they entered the room. She took several steps backwards, trying to hold the robe closed. Her legs gave way and she collapsed to the ground, wide eyed. Riddick went to his closet, pulled out a shirt.

"Are you leaving?" she asked, her voice high and childish.

"Yeah. I'll be back. You guys know your assignment?"

"Yes, sir," Ninshubar answered tonelessly. Riddick glanced at him. He was staring fixedly at the bloodstains on the gray bed spread. Jack was still on the floor, looking unhappy and struggling with the robe. Riddick winked at her.

The other man was also clearly not happy. "Sir. I am not sure I understand our purpose here. Lord Vaako did not offer many details."

Riddick looked between the two men. Forced perspectives. Ninshubar was a faded gold, threaded with a faded green. Defender, something whispered. Once upon a time.

Kelmis was a jagged pattern of bruised gray and bleeding crimson. Killer. Looked down at his own hand. It was black and silver. Set, something whispered. The Enemy of the Sun. He looked back over at Jack, brilliant green and red threads, swirling with olive and brown. The same voice whispered, life, waxing and waning.

"Great, this new superpower comes with weird voices using words I don't know. He shook himself, turned back to the jagged man. Blinkled, and it was just a young soldier. "Kelmis, is it?" He pulled on the shirt, found shoes and socks, sat down on the bed next to one of the big red splotches of Jack's blood that golden Ninshubar had fixated upon.

"Yes, sir."

"You take care of the little girl. Make sure she doesn't get hurt. Make sure she doesn't get out. Too big of a job for you?" Jack made a small hiccupsing sound, stared at him with wide eyed misery.
What's gotten in to her? She was happy a minute ago. I made sure of it. He smiled, darkly, remembering her helpless, wordless cry when he brought her over the edge; the way her body had clamped down -

Kelmis interrupted his reverie. "No sir."

Riddick turned to his socks. "You sure about that? She got first blood on me when we tussled."
Kelmis's eyes snapped to her. She flinched back, stopped trying to tie her robe and crossed her arms across her body protectively.

"I live to serve, sir," Kelmis said. There was finally a bit of interest in his voice. Interested malice. His eyes on Jack were very interested. "I live to serve."

_Huh. I bet you do, Crimson Boy._ "Do you like girls, son?" Got one shoe on.

"Sir?"

"I said," Riddick's voice was velvet over steel. "Do you like girls. Talking with them. Fucking them. Hanging out with them."

Kelmis shook his head, slowly. "Sire. I am a man of faith. I do not seek to contaminate myself with the company of women."

"Ever fuck one?" Got the other shoe on. Jack made that same little hiccupping sound of fear again. He glanced at her. She was still Jack. Whatever triggered Kyra, Crimson Boy guy wasn't getting it done. That made him smile.

Kelmis shifted uncomfortably. "Only on missions." Ninshubar stiffened, shifted his gaze between the other soldier and Jack, started to ease in between them.

_What's up the gold guy's butt?_ It took Riddick a moment to work it through. Turned back to Kelmis. "You rape breeders. You kill 'em afterwards?"

"Always, sir," Kelmis replied earnestly, as if that made it better. "Useless mouths. They should be grateful."

_But they're not, are they? And that pisses Crimson Boy off._ Jack made a really scared sound. Stood unsteadily at last, back towards the wall. Ninshubar had gotten himself within arm's reach, if she reached. Riddick gave her a smile, patted the bed next to him. Somewhat reluctantly, she moved to his side. Riddick straightened her robe, tied it for her. She was trembling against his fingers. He turned back to Kelmis. "What were you before you converted?"

True belief shone from the boy's eyes. "I was nothing."

_Huh._ Riddick turned to the other one. "Ninshubar, what were you, before?"

"Bodyguard."

_Ah. Why Vaako wants Mr. Goldy here._ "Your charges survive?"

"Survived to surrender."

"Do you think you could handle this job by yourself today?"

"Yes, sir." There was a hint of relief in his voice. _You really think Kelmis is a threat to the kid. Huh. It was your job, once upon a time._
"Kelmis, I don't wanna lead you into temptation. Report to Vaako for reassignment."

The man seemed honestly shocked. "Sir, my honor is my loyalty - I would never-"

"There's no shame in this. Not everyone's cut out for babysittin'." Kelmis straightened, saluted smartly, turned on his heel and left. Ninshubar relaxed. Jack was still trembling, smelling of anger and fear, though nothing like she had last night. He put an arm around her. "You'll be fine, Sunshine. I think this guy likes you." Kissed her on the cheek. Got up and went back to the closet. Found another piece of his uniform, a black shell like thing that fit over him more like armor than clothing. Added a gun belt and several shivs.

She took several deep breaths and glared up at him. "Your men rape?" There was something dangerously close to disgust in her voice. He frowned at her. Jesus. Not like I ask them to do.

"Guess so."

"Not all," Ninshubar murmured, almost too quiet to be heard.

She shot the soldier a quick look, deflated slightly. "Can I go see that doctor again?"

Riddick shook his head. You're trying to keep me from killing her. And you're trying to get out of my rooms. Fuck that. "I didn't hurt you that bad." Ninshubar shifted uncomfortably.

She flushed. "Please? She said she wanted to before you -" She broke off, flushed. "Plus, I need to talk to her about-" Again unable to finish, she looked down, shook her head.

He stared at her heavily. "I'll think about it." Finished secreting the weapons. Turned to the mirror, made sure everything was in place. Very aware that she was watching him intently.

"Riddick?"

"What?"

She picked at the edge of the short robe. Once again, the fight seemed to have drained out of her. "Can I have some real clothes?"

"Yeah." He gave her a quick smile. "Green ones. I'll take care of it." He met Ninshubar's eyes. They were simmering slightly, like the anger had left her and taken up with him. "You take care of her. And make sure they change the bedding."

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He kissed her before he left and slipped his hand up the robe she was sick of wearing. Pressed his fingers intrusively against her pelvis. "I'll be back," he whispered, and was gone. She sat there silent, staring after him. After an embarrassingly long time she realized that tears were running down her face. Ninshubar stood against the wall not quite looking at her.

"Can I do anything for you, mum?" he said finally, softly.

She wiped her face with her hands, feeling childish. "Jack. Just Jack."

A small smile flickered. "I wouldn't want to be familiar."

"Christ, you saw me naked."

He shrugged dismissively.
"Plus, you can do all these things I can't. Walk without falling. Dress yourself. Walk out the door."

"Some of those things are overrated." She laughed and was rewarded by a beautiful smile.

Ninshubbar looked back at the bed. "He raped you." It wasn't a question.

Bile boiled up in her stomach. "Jesus. Lord Marshals can't rape. You can't rape something you fucking own."

"Sorry," he said, tonelessly.

Oh shit. I'm being bitchy at the one guy who actually seems to care what's happening to me.

She blinked back tears. "Christ. I'm sorry. None of this is your fault. You've been really kind. I didn't mean to snap at you."

He gave her a nod, face closed.

"He's-" She broke off. What the fuck do I tell him? I don't want to lie. I don't want to tell him anything that will let him figure out that I'm Kyra. Inasmuch as I am Kyra . . . She rubbed her face with her hands, overwhelmed. The soldier's eyes softened.

"I don't think he meant to make me bleed so much," she finished, inanely. "Don't tell anyone, but I think he kinda likes me." Whoever he thinks I am.

His eyes were intense on her. She decided to change the subject.

"You were a bodyguard. I'm a lucky girl," she said, softly. "Who for?"

"Omphalos."

"The terraformers?" She smiled. "Man. That must have given you whiplash. World creator to world destroyer. You said they survived to surrender?"

"My charges. Yes." He hesitated. "But it was a trick. My lady surrendered the terraforming fleet. Zhylaw wanted it badly, made many concessions for it. But it was a Trojan horse. Once it was integrated into the Necromonger fleet, the ships all deployed their genesis waves. All but one. Destroyed hundreds of ships; crippled thousands. The black fleet has never fully recovered."

It was the most words he'd ever said. He seemed to be trying to tell her something more. She blinked at him, wrestling with the implications.

"You survived."

"Yes. My lady told me to."

"Your lady. She was in charge?"

He smiled, briefly, wistfully. "Yes."

"Wow. What was her name?"

"Kore Arkhipov." He said the name like it should mean something. It didn't.

She closed her eyes for a long moment. "Did many of your friends make it?"

"Some." He hesitated, watching her closely. Then he looked up like he scented something on the
wind. "Shh." He got up, moved quickly to the door, closed it softly behind him.

Okay, that was weird. She hesitated. Heard voices. Ninshubar's soft and intense. Then more strident. Two other voices, flatter, disinterested, then respectful. Damn. His senses must be as good as Riddick's. She stood, uncertainly. Ninshubar opened the door, gave her a smile. "Just the cleaning crew, mum." Three steps and he'd crossed the room, took her arm, guided her away. Kept himself in between them and her, easily. Two men came in. Eyed her, and then the bed, with great interest.

Fuck. How many people are going to know what he did to me? She took a step towards the door. Ninshubar followed. Took another. He let her set the pace easily. They walked down the hall carefully.

"I need to talk to the door guards," he said, softly. "But I can't leave you."

"Why?"

"They should have told me they were letting the cleaning crew in."

"No, why can't you leave me long enough to talk to them?"

He gave her a strange look. "Because keeping you safe is my job."

"So what, we have to go to the bathroom together?"

He laughed, softly. "Yes."

She rolled her eyes. "Everyone here wants to see me pee. Fine. So – what do you want to do?"

"Come with me." He led her back through the maze of Riddick's rooms back to the sitting room they'd started in. Sat her on a couch that would not – quite – be visible from the door. "Stay here, mum. Please."

He opened the door, left it open while he had a quiet and intense conversation with two other men. She leaned back and closed her eyes, only half listening. Thinking about what he said about the terraformers. Finally, it hit her. You can hurt the Necromongers.

That's what he was telling me. The door closed. He came back. She grinned at him. He smiled back. Her stomach growled.

He heard. "You're hungry?"

She laughed. "All I've eaten since I came ba—since I got here is some drink Vaako's doctor brewed up and three fingers of port. I'm starving."

His eyes were intense again. She shook her head. "Do me a favor. Don't try to figure it out. He won't be happy if you succeed."

He put a finger on his lips. "Wait." The cleaning crew trundled up, bearing the bloody blankets.

"We'll be back," one offered with a smirk. Jack nodded, keeping her face closed.

Do Necromongers gossip? If they gossip, they're gonna be gossiping about this.

The door slid shut. Ninshubar smiled at her. "What would you like to eat?"

"I don't know. The doctor told me to eat lightly for a few days. Said my system might not be up to
much."

He nodded thoughtfully, spoke briefly into his wrist unit. Smiled at her again.

She took it as an invitation to keep talking. "Why did Zhylaw want a terraforming fleet? I didn't have the feeling Necromongers were much for settling down."

Ninshubar's lips twisted into something that was not quite a smile. "Very high technology. Transformative technology. We could reconstitute atmospheres. We could seed mutating viruses that could completely transform a biosphere. We could bioengineer a population to survive anything from five times earth normal gravity to high methane environments. We had sunseeders. The destructive potential was enormous."

"Sunseeder? I've never heard of that."

He smiled, wistfully. "It was new."

"What did it do?"

"Made stars. Next step in terraforming. Solarforming."

Wow. "The Necros didn't get their hands on any of it?"

"Some. One ship . . . survived. They scavenged what they could, but they don't understand what they have. Everyone who did is dead."

"They." You don't think of yourself as a Necromonger? "You don't?"

"I was just a guard."

Just a guard who guarded the woman in charge. Huh. Wonder if he was genetically engineered for the job? Would explain the hearing. And how freakin' big he is.

He was watching her carefully. "Do you know where you are?"

It was her turn to shrug. "The Necropolis? That's a ship, right?"

"Yes – yes. The Necropolis is a city on a ship, the Basilica. The flagship of the Necromonger fleet."

Flagship. Fleet. I know this. Why can't I remember this? "Riddick said something about a war?"

"Yes. We are currently at war with the Prytania."

She shivered. "Why? They seem like good folks. Not the United Federation of Planets, but it seems like everyone gets fed."

"It's what we do." His voice was heavy. He checked his wrist unit. Smiled at her. His voice was lighter again. "Food's here." He crossed quickly to the door, opened it, accepted a tray.

"You heard them through the door?"

"Yes."

"Wow."

"Let's find a better place to eat." He carried the tray, peering into the various rooms. She followed
slowly. He found one he liked, ushered her in. It was some sort of conference room, with a large
table and chairs. He helped her sit at the head of the table, with a flourish, set the tray down. "Hm.
We've got standard rations, hospital rations, and fresh fruit. They don't know what to make of you."
He crossed the room, came back with two glasses of water.

She eyed the tray dubiously. "What do you mean?"

"If they'd just sent standard rations, that'd mean they thought you were part of the crew. Hospital
rations – that's pretty much what I asked for. But fresh fruit? Someone's trying to make an impression
on one of us, and I don't think it's me."

She blushed. "It's just an apple." She picked up uncertainly.

"Hard to come by apples in the black fleet." He smiled sadly. "It's not kind to living things."

"Guess I'm still not getting that puppy then." She took a small bite. It was pure bliss. Took another.
"Man, this is good. Try it." She held it out to him.

"No, mum. It's for you."

"Please?"

He laughed, took a small bite from the other side of the apple. "That is good." Handed it back to her.

She took one more bite, set it down. "This is surreal."

"How so?"

"This time yesterday I was de– I was in a very bad place. But I had hair. Now, I'm eating an apple
and no one's trying to hurt me. But almost no hair. It's just . . . surreal."

His eyes went intense again. She shook her head. "Sorry. Just – it's just weird."

"You and the Lord Marshal have a history."

_Crap._ "Riddick doesn't want anyone to know that."

He shrugged. "Mum – Jack – no one could watch the two of you together and not know."

She rubbed her eyes again. "Fuck. Yes. We have a history. Not one I understand. One he thinks
gives him the right to-" she swallowed at the intense look in his eyes "to snatch me out of my old life
and lock me up in his bedroom. Don't tell anyone."

Ninshubar nodded. Pitched his voice soft. "If you are going to be here, this is the best place. The
Necropolis is not safe for the living."

"You're alive."

He grimaced slightly. "The unconverted."

Automatically, she touched her neck. _Am I unconverted? If I die, do I have to go back to the
Underverse? Or is it just that the skin healed? _"Ah. So you think he's right to keep me locked up." Her
voice was arch.

He made a conciliatory gesture. "Kelmis isn't the only one who would find you . . . tempting."
She blushed. Finished the apple. Drank some water. Was almost grateful when his communicator chirped. He listened for a moment with an abstracted look.

"The Lord Marshal has sent you tailors."

"And the surrealism just keeps on coming."

"They want to measure you."

"Oh goody. More people I don't know touching me."

He smiled at her, and there was an edge to it. "Not if you don't want them too. Them, I can protect you from."

His words were pregnant with unwanted meanings. She swallowed. "Lay on, MacDuff. Let's see how it goes. And – thank you."

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It was lunch. He usually ate at his desk while working. But today . . . today, he decided to head back to his rooms.

The door guards came painfully alert when he approached. "At ease, men," he said, easily. "Anything to report?"

"No sir." The higher ranked man hesitated. "May we announce you?"

He frowned. "Why?"

The guard hesitated again. "Nin reamed us out for letting the cleaning crew in without telling him."

Riddick found himself grinning. "Good man. And no." He entered his rooms quietly. Moved silently through them, hunting.

They were in his private gym. Ninshubar was helping Jack fight invisible foes. Blows that might have killed, once upon a time, would feel like butterflies today. He watched silently for longer than he intended.

Is Mr. Goldy falling for her? Ninshubar's head snapped around. His eyes locked on him. "Sire."

"At ease, soldier. Take a break." He moved into the room in full predator mode. Jack stood her own as he stalked in. Ninshubar moved back, watching, on edge.

The tailors had done what he wanted. She was dressed like a New Meccan school girl, a full green skirt and a ridiculous white blouse with ridiculously cheerful green stitching. Like nothing a Necromonger woman would ever wear. They all went for these stupid tight spine-enhancing outfits. Like he needed help figuring out where their spines were. She smiled at him, hesitantly. He circled her.

"Lookin' good, doll." He allowed, slightly grudgingly. This time she smiled delightedly. God, she's gorgeous when she smiles like that. He moved in fast, scooped her up, threw her over a shoulder. She shrieked girlishly. Ninshubar had the temerity to take a step towards them. He scowled at the man and he fell back.

He laid her, gently, on the bed, pleased that there was a new clean bedspread already there, just waiting. Sat next to her. "Hey."

"Hey," she echoed. She gave him another heartbreakingly sweet smile. "You came back."

"Just for a little bit. But I wanted to see you."

"I'm glad."

He couldn't resist. Had no reason to resist. He started kissing her again. She kissed him back, gently, almost wistfully. "You sure you didn't bring me back just to fuck me?" She said, softly. "That does seem to be all you wanna do with me."

He groaned and nuzzled her. Sat back up, leaving a hand on her stomach. "What, you wanna play Jenga?"

She laughed. "The thing with the building blocks? Did we ever play Jenga?"

"Yeah, couple times. I beat you."

"That's right. You cheated. Waited until it was my turn and blew the towers down, like a big bad wolf."

"All your pretty towers crumbled." He grinned. "All's fair, babe."

"You think so?"

He let his hand slide down her body, then up the outside of her thigh, inside the ridiculous New Meccan school girl skirt. "No underwear, Jack?"

She stiffened and actually looked away from him. "I don't have any. You know that. Your guys told me you'd left very particular instructions. Underwear, shoes, socks and jeans weren't on the list. I asked. Repeatedly."

He laughed, softly. Yeah. Told 'em to dress you like you're from worlds we conquered, heavy on the Helios system. Make you pretty. Make your clothes easy to get off. Oh . . . right. "Sorry, kid. I forget how literal these guys can be. I'll get you some panties."

"And shoes?" She smiled, impishly.

He snorted. "You don't need shoes."

Her face fell and she looked away again. "Yes, my Lord Marshal."

"Hey." He caught her face with one hand, turned it to him. "Hey. It's still me. It's okay."

She smiled at him, cautiously. "You've got a plan?"

"Yeah. I'll tell you about it some time." He started kissing her again. She wasn't enthusiastic, but she was soft and yielding and his own clothes were getting uncomfortable. He stood up, unbuckled his belt. She watched it uneasily and visibly relaxed when he dropped it on the floor. Someone beat you with a belt, didn't they? He was a little ashamed that the thought made him harder. He glanced at the chrono. Shit. I've gotta get outta here. The second wave will be launching soon. Settled for shoving his pants down though not off. Sat back down, kissed her harder, pressing his fingers between her legs. She was nearly dry and made a small noise in the back of her throat. To his surprise, she reached for the naked skin of his upper thigh and touched it gently, carefully, avoiding the part he
really wanted her to touch. *Fuck that.* He moved her hand to his cock and she flinched again.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I spent years dreaming of doing this with you. I don't know why it's freaking me out so much now."

"You've been through a lot, kid," he said, indulgently, using her hand to stroke himself.

She laughed, clearly unsettled. "You have no idea."

*No, I just wish I didn't.* He pushed her down and kissed her deeply. "All over. You're with me. I'll take care of you."

Something dark passed over her impossibly smooth face. Then she blinked up at him, painfully innocent. "Promise?"

"Yeah," he whispered. "'till the Underverse comes." Her eyes went wide at the phrase. *Oh, that's right, that's not long enough. Figure that out later.* "I love you. Roll over. I'll make this up to you later."

She blinked at him, but otherwise didn't move. He didn't care. It was trivially easy to roll her over, pull her up onto her knees, thrust into her deeply. She was a long way from ready and made a strangled, hurt, sound, but didn't resist. As long as he told her he loved her, she seemed willing to let him do anything at all. And once he smelled her blood and all it promised he couldn't have stopped if she'd begged.
Riddick woke slowly. Jack was curled into his arms. She was twitching ever so slightly, as if she was dancing or fighting in her sleep. *Dreaming . . .* He pressed his forehead to the back of her skull, took a deep breath, and pushed ever so slightly.

She was Kyra, fighting, killing. Mercs, soldiers, monsters, they were all falling before her. She was magnificence on bloody sands. Then it was just her, standing over the bodies of the slain.

*I did this to her. I took a sweet girl and turned her into a killer.* The thought was unsettling.

There was a sound. Kyra spun around, vaulted over corpses, bloody knife at ready. She shoved aside something that looked like a giant lizard. A young girl was crouched, crying almost silently, terrified. Kyra stared down at her, breathing hard. The girl tried to scramble away.

"Don't hurt me," the girl pleaded.

"Just go," Kyra said, her voice cracking. "Get away from here. Get away from me." The girl got to her feet, backed away, and ran. Kyra stared down at the knife, shuddering.

The slow sound of one man clapping. Kyra's head snapped up. He watched himself – or someone who looked like him – walk into the arena, stepping over the bodies with exaggerated care. "Nicely done, Sunshine!"

She wiped her eyes. "I learned from the best." She hesitated. "Or the worst, I can't quite decide."

His double shrugged. "Hard to tell sometimes."

"Yeah." She glared at the bodies as if irritated they were still there. "So now what?"

His double grinned. "I guess that depends on me, doesn't it?" He watched himself stalk forward, barely human.

She backed up. "Why do I think I shouldn't depend on you?"

He laughed. "Who says you have a choice?" He kept coming towards her, and suddenly she was awkward, clumsy, stumbling over the bodies. He grinned at her again and moved impossibly fast. She tried to dodge, tried to get the knife up, but her body was unresponsive and he saw himself take her knife away, smile, eyes gleaming, saw himself get intrusively close, get intrusively closer, felt her fear, felt her heartbreak -

*I don't like where this is going*, Riddick thought, jerking back. Nuzzled her. "Hey, Sunshine."

She woke with a gasp, tried to pull away.
"It's okay," he whispered. "I got you."

She shuddered. Stopped struggling. "You scared me."

"Sorry." He nuzzled her again. "We gotta get up. Big day today."

"Okay," she said. Started to sit up, but his heavy arm around her waist stopped her. She laid quietly for several heartbeats. Finally, "you have to let me go if we're gonna get out of bed."

He laughed softly. "You're right. But I don't wanna." He nuzzled her again. *Be nicer to her. She was about to dream about being raped by you. That can't be a good thing.* "This is nice. I missed you."

She laughed, unsteadily. "I missed you too, big guy. That's why I died for you."

He could feel his muscles stiffen. "I'm sorry," he said again, voice sounding low and rough even to himself.

"It's okay. I seem to have gotten over it." She laid there quietly for a few more heartbeats. "I can't figure it out."

"What's to figure out?"

"I can't tell if I'm the love of your life or some sort of prize for killing Zhylaw."

He considered that solemnly. "Little of both, I think." She sighed. "That a problem, Sunshine?"

"Why do you call me that?"

"Dunno." He nuzzled her again. *Cause Zhylaw called you that and I liked it?* "Maybe that song you used to sing. 'You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.'"

She laughed, unsteadily. "You remember that?"

"Thought about it all the time, Sunshine."

She sighed again, pressed back against him. "I used to sing that just to torture you."

He grinned. "I know. We gotta get up. I gotta go to a meeting."

She laughed. "Richard B. Riddick takes meetings?"

"Yeah. The things I do for you. Come on. Lights, dim."

"The things you do for me," she said softly as they pulled out of bed at last. Shook her head. She seemed to be lost in thought as she dressed, slowly, carefully. "What's the meeting about?"

"Finishing up."

"Finishing up what?"

"The Prytania." She swallowed, headed to the bathroom in her ridiculous school girl clothing. He finished dressing for war. When they'd both finished, he took her to the gym.

She watched him stretch, made a half hearted effort to mimic his efforts. When he started lifting weights, she sat on the floor and watched him childishly, a full green skirt spread over her knees. Finally, she asked in a small voice, "Why are you doing this?"
"To stay strong."

She flushed. "No. Why are you going to war with these people? What did they ever do to you?"

*Oh, Jesus Christ.* "Them specifically? Nothin'."

"So why go to war with them?"

He set the free weight down carefully, shrugged at her. "Thing to do." Picked up the weight again.

"People are going to die today?"

_Not as many as yesterday._ "Yup." Got the weight above his head, held it there for several heartbeats.

"You don't care?"

He set the weight down again, carefully. Smiled at her. "A little. But I know none of them are you. I'm good."

She closed her eyes. "I don't like this."

He shrugged. "Not asking you to. It's sweet that it bugs you. But if it wasn't me, it'd be someone else. These guys are fucking nuts. They really believe their own shit." He picked up the weight again.

"But you know it's wrong."

He snorted. Finished the lift. She leaned back against the wall, watching him intently. He put the weight down, turned his back on her, started running through a martial arts kata he'd taught her, once upon a time. Did it slow, hoping she'd join him, the way she'd sparred with Ninshubar the day before. After a few beats he slotted his eyes over to her. She'd drawn her knees up, wrapped her arms around them, and buried her face. Not watching him. He felt a flash of irritation. Kept moving. Did the kata again, faster. She still wasn't watching.

By the time he'd finished a third run through alone his irritation had ripened into something much darker. He crouched beside her, laid a heavy hand on the curve of her neck, so deliciously exposed by her abject posture and newborn-short hair. "You wanna figure it out? Here's what you need to remember. The only reason I came here, the only reason I challenged Zhylaw, the only fucking reason I'm in charge of this freak show, is you. You don't like it, fine. But don't you fucking dare get all holier than thou with me over what I had to do to get you out of the fucking mess you got yourself in."

She tried to turn her head to look at him. His heavy hand tightened and she froze. He leaned in closer, whispered directly into her soft ear, "never forget, if you'd just stayed on New Mecca like I told you, I would have gotten you and Abu out of there and we'd be playing happy families somewhere far, far away."

She shuddered. It was dangerously delicious. Despite his resolution to be nice, he couldn't help twist the knife just a bit more. "Don't get me wrong. I'm not sorry it worked out this way. If you'd done what I told you, I'd probably still be playing your doting big brother. Goin' crazy trying to figure out how to get in your pants. Tellin' myself you're not for me. Instead of being in charge and all . . . entitled to fuck you. So yeah. You're the love of my life. I stormed the fucking gates of hell for you. And you're my prize for killing Zhylaw." He nuzzled her with a rough cheek. Her shoulders were quivering. The door chime rang and he stood abruptly, barely managing not to pick her up by the neck. Wrapped a hard hand around her upper arm and pulled her up. "Come on. Let's meet your new keepers."
Jack slid into Kyra as he yanked her down the hall and he was glad. Jack shouldn't have to be with him when he was like this. He kept hold of her as he opened the door, ushered the two men in.

They bowed. He nodded briefly. They both gave Jack an appraising look. She flinched back into him, all Jack again, making him smile.

"You know your orders?"

"Yes sire," they chorused, clearly expecting the line. With a sudden burst of generosity, he jerked his shoulder backwards. "Got a private workout room back there. She can show you where it is. Have some fun." Their eyes gleamed. They uttered overlapping "thank you sire"s. He gave them one last grin and left to conquer. Didn't look at Jack.

Once upon a time
this would not have been a problem.

Once upon a time, you were all grown up and a kick ass fighter. He did something to you. You aren't you anymore. She ignored the voice, as much as she could. "I'm Jack," she said, carefully.

"We kinda figured that out," the taller guy said, grinning. They did not seem inclined to introduce themselves.

"Let me show you the gym." She took half a step back, continued somewhat defiantly, "that's what Riddick wanted."

"We know what he wants," the shorter one snickered. She looked down, flushing. The short one continued. "Later. She'll be here soon."

"She?" Is Riddick going to let me see that doctor again? He didn't kill her? Hope rose within her. Only to fall again. "Someone who very much wants to meet you." There was a strange, worshipful, almost malicious look in the man's eyes. She took another half a step back.

Someone I don't know. Someone Riddick doesn't know is coming. Shit. The short one was circling her. "Kel was right. She's an absolute fucking knock out. No wonder he's keeping her for himself."

He reached to touch her face and she jerked back.

Okay. Be smart. I can't fight these guys right now. Better to try to connect, at least a little bit. "Kel? Kelmis? The man who was here yesterday?"

"Yeah," the short man was intrusively close. "Kelmis the Knife. He was a little pissed off that he got sent away like that. He was really looking forward to having a go at you."

Go at me? She swallowed. "Riddick didn't like the way he was looking at me," she said, woefully. Which was pretty much the way you're looking at me. She risked a glance at the tall man, who was standing back, watching. Not the way Ninshubbar had watched, gloweringly ready to step in, just watching with an easy smile. God. Why isn't Nin here? He liked me.

Probably because Riddick doesn't want him here. Because he liked me. Riddick's got a jealous streak. She shuddered. Calm down. They're just trying to fuck with you.

Kyra's voice. Yes, that's the problem. They probably won't kill you. But they might do all sorts of
other things. Riddick told them to play . . . And you're just a fuck toy. God. He's such an ass.

The short man had finished another circuit around. "Ninshubar likes you."

Ninshubar. His name felt like hope. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Nin likes you a lot. Got a soft look on his face when he was talking about you and everything. So did Lord Vaako. And our Lord Marshal went to some trouble to smuggle you up here. No one knows how he did it. They said you fought him and you're not dead. He must like you a lot too."

"Dunno about that," the tall one interjected laconically. "He seemed pissed at her this morning. And I heard some funny stuff from the med staff. And the cleaning staff. Even Nin. Got that look he gets when he thinks somethin' bad's gonna happen to someone else."

"Yeah. That's true. Still, two out of three stone cold killers who've spent time with you like you, and the other one seems to have big plans. What makes you so special, breeder-girl?"

If stone cold killers like me, why are you trying to pick a fight with me? She shrugged, painfully.

"Maybe I remind them of something they've lost." She shrugged, painfully.

"If stone cold killers like me, why are you trying to pick a fight with me? She shrugged, painfully.

"Maybe I remind them of something they've lost."

"Yeah. That's true. Still, two out of three stone cold killers who've spent time with you like you, and the other one seems to have big plans. What makes you so special, breeder-girl?"

If stone cold killers like me, why are you trying to pick a fight with me? She shrugged, painfully.

"Maybe I remind them of something they've lost."

The two men started to snort. Then to laugh. "What, like lost innocence?" howled the tall one. "I love it! You're a very lucky girl."

"Why?"

They both flopped down bonelessly on the couch. "Because she's interested in you, breeder-girl," the short one seemed to be the talker. His voice was worshipful. "She wants to help you."

Riiiiiggghhhhttt. Why don't I believe you? I may have been born the day before yesterday but I'm not an idiot. She sat carefully down on a chair, leaned back and closed her eyes. Someone's coming.

The two of them poked each other and giggled like school girls for a while. They're really young, Jack realized abruptly. Younger than me. They're just huge. She had a strange pang of pity for them. The Necros took their world and converted them and they never had a chance to be anything else. She opened her eyes and smiled at them. They both smiled back automatically. Caught themselves. Sneered at her. She rolled her eyes and they laughed again, a little warmer. Here we are. A bunch of chums. Only they're heavily armed. I wanna be heavily armed. She fought the urge to bury her head in her arms. Didn't go so well last time.

Then the door opened. The two boys jumped to their feet. They bowed deeply, much deeper than they'd bowed to Riddick. Jack stood slowly, a lead weight in her stomach.

The woman who entered the room was vaguely familiar. Small, dark, impeccably made up, impeccably dressed, shadowed by one of the most enormous soldiers she had ever seen. She extended an impeccable hand, palm down. "Jack. Welcome. Thank you for seeing me."

Like I had a choice. Feeling absurd, Jack took a step forward, extended a hand sideways. The woman smirked ever so slightly, turned her hand to shake it. She expected me to kiss her hand, she realized. Flushed.

"I am Dame Vaako." She inclined her head graciously at the two young soldiers. "Peter. Saul."

"Mum!" they chorused, looking delighted. Dame Vaako turned back to Jack, perfectly.
"I'm Jack? Thank you for coming to see me?" God, I feel like a dolt. She's ready for a fancy dress party. I don't even have underwear.

The woman looked at her, fascinated, gracefully extracted her hand. Jack flushed, realizing she hadn't let go of it. "So you're the latest young woman our Lord Marshal . . . collected, are you?"

Latest? "I – I guess." Just like the short soldier, Dame Vaako circled her, slowly. When Jack tried to turn to follow her, she shook her head.

"You are very beautiful. I understand now how you caught our Lord Marshal's eye."

Oh, I seriously doubt that.

"Did you come . . . willingly?" There was something like compassion in the woman's voice.

Fuck. How do I answer that? I'm not even sure I'm the same person I was when he came for me.

Her eyes started to prickle. She blinked furiously, rubbed her face. "I-" she broke off. "I didn't fight him."

Dame Vaako nodded, sagely. "Wise." She started circling again. "Do you know why you're here?"

"Thus far. Why you?"

This, this I can answer honestly. "I have no idea."

"I think I do. You look a great deal like the first dead girl."

First? "Dead girl?"

"The one our new Lord Marshal followed the first to the Necropolis. She helped him and my husband kill the old Lord Marshal. Was she your . . . sister?"

Oh, shit. That dead girl. That me. "I – I don't know." She didn't have to feign fear or woe now. "I don't have a sister. As far as I know. I don't know why – I don't know why Ri – the Lord Marshal – wants me. I don't understand any of this." She swallowed hard.

Dame Vaako finished her circumlocutions, sat beautifully. Her silent guard positioned himself behind her chair. At a gesture from her, Jack's two young guards sat back on the couch alert. Ready. "Where are you from, my dear girl?"

"Riddick told me not to talk about my - myself." She looked down. "I'm sorry. But he's kinda scary."

Dame Vaako nodded, thoughtfully. "Yes. Yes he is. Let me be frank. Please, sit." She made a graceful gesture back at the very chair Jack had been sitting in. Jack flushed, sat awkwardly. How did she do that? This is more my room than hers. And yet it's like she's in charge.

It's like she's in charge. Maybe she is, sort of. "Dame Vaako? As in Lord Vaako?"

"My husband, yes."

Your husband who helped me and Riddick kill Zhylaw. Your husband who seemed to care that I got roughed up. Your husband who knows who I am. As much as anyone does. Huh. "He seems like a good man," she said, cautiously.
Dame Vaako smiled, pityingly. "I'm sure." There was a long silence. "So. Let me be frank. You are . . . you share the bed of the most powerful man in the Necropolis." She stopped, thoughtfully. "Right now. A man who matters an enormous amount to the salvation of the universe. A man who, inexplicably, forwards our mission without himself embracing it. A man who has, again, chosen a . . . " she paused delicately "a bed mate. Who is also not one of us." Just to make sure she understood. "Again."

*She really wants me to know that Riddick fucks other people. She's trying to get under my skin.*

*Don't let it work.* "I'm sorry. I really am."

Dame Vaako made a dismissive gesture. "My dear, you are an innocent in all of this. I want to help you. I am not," again this serpentine woman paused, thoughtfully "without influence. I am the wife of the heir apparent to your Lord Marshal. Who was also the heir to the previous Lord Marshal. I could be a valuable friend to you. Or . . . not."

Jack swallowed, involuntarily. *She thinks Riddick stole her spot. If she figures out who I am, she'll think I stole her spot. Fuck, she thinks I stole her spot anyway.* There was a long silence. Jack finally filled it. "What do you want from me?"

"Just to be your friend. To talk to you. To help you with your ... problems. Be my friend. In return. . . . " She paused, delicately. "In return, I can offer you my protection."

She swallowed. *What the fuck, go for broke.* "Against Riddick?"

Dame Vaako shrugged. Like everything else she did, it was beautiful. "I am a loyal servant of the throne. It would be sad if you came to the same end as your predecessors. But the strong do what they will. The weak suffer what they must." Her eyes were sharp. "If you have friends, he might pause. But I was thinking more about . . . everything else."

Jack swallowed again, looked at the wall. *She wants me to betray him.* "I would love to have friends. But I don't think Riddick wants me to talk about him."

"Isn't that interesting." Dame Vaako leaned forward. "I, of course, am not asking you to betray him. But you have no reason to be loyal to him. He's clearly been brutal with you. The Necropolis is aflame with stories of you, what he must have done to you to leave you in the state you were in yesterday. And now he's dressed you like a trophy from a conquered world and left you in the care of soldiers who conquered that world. But if you're my friend, you'll be treated like a princess. At least, by everyone else . . ."

*A princess. The type who gets married off against her will, the type who gets sacrificed so the sun will rise, or the type who's silly and spoiled and irrelevant?* There was silence. Jack looked at the two young soldiers looking almost painfully alert. "Treated like a princess. Or . . . not?"

Dame Vaako smiled beautifully. "Clever girl. If our time was not so short, I would not be so blunt. But your predecessor was dead within a month. You need friends now."

Jack closed her eyes. *She wants me to ask. Do I make her happy or not?* "Oh, what the hell. "Predecessor?"

The other woman smiled, triumphantly. "I would not bear rumors against the Lord Marshal."

*You really are a bitch, aren't you?* Jack spared a glance for the other woman's bodyguard, standing silently. His face was almost impassive. He reminded her of Ninshubar, staring at her blood on the
bed. Made her feel slightly better. Dame Vaako frowned, slightly. *Heh. Wonder who her bodyguard works for really?* The other woman addressed the short soldier. "What exactly are your instructions, Peter?"

Peter smiled, tapped a few controls on his wrist console. Read aloud: "Protect her from outside threats. Prevent her from hurting herself. Prevent her from leaving." He smiled "And he told us to have fun."

Dame Vaako nodded thoughtfully. "Interesting. Keep her here, keep her from hurting herself or being hurt by," she paused, delicately "by outsiders. And you are, both of you, inside?"

"Yes mum!"

"So. Gentlemen. As a non-outsider, if you were, say, ordered to rape this young lady, would you?"

"Obedience without question! My honor is my loyalty, mum!" Peter was on his feet. Tall Saul nodded, a little less enthused. Dame Vaako's bodyguard's eyes widened.

"Riddick wouldn't like that," Jack whispered, more to the silent man behind her new nemesis than anyone else.

Dame Vaako smiled. "Then it is a good thing no one has left that order, isn't it?"

*This is not going to be a good day. Why didn't Riddick give me a panic button?*

*That's what the guards are here for.*

*Only they work for her, not him. Certainly not for me.*

*Not for me.* Something about the phrase hit her strangely. But before she had time to untangle it, Dame Vaako stood. Smiled beautifully. "Jack, I will see you again. Think about what I said. Gentlemen, I leave you to your duty." She extended a perfect hand. Both solders dropped to their knees, kissed her hand reverently. She wheeled out, her silent bodyguard trailing grimly.

The two guards collapsed back on their couch, smiled at her. "I know what happened to the last girl," the short one said, maliciously.

*Connect.* "Do I want to know?"

He laughed. "So we're purifying this place, Hyperion, and they've got a queen of all things. After we bash through, she wants to negotiate surrender terms." There was a sneer in his voice. "Riddick goes and talks to her. Comes out with this dark haired teenager. Looked a little like you. Not as pretty. Too young and scrawny for conversion. He smiled, licked his lips. "Normally we kill those. After having a little fun. He locks her up in here. We figure he's gonna have a little fun himself."

"Did she have guards too?"

"Nope. But they did have fun. Well, *he* had fun. Then three weeks later, he tells the cleaning crew to dump her body. He'd choked her to death; big bruises around her throat. *Real* clear she died under him."

*Choked to death during sex. He wouldn't do that.*

*He's killing billions. Of course he'd do that.*

*But he doesn't get off on it.*
Yeah, right. Remember having sex with him? Remember crying? Telling him it hurt? Remember him not caring? And in his own crazy way, he loves you. What would he do to someone he didn't?

The two men were watching her like hungry puppies. She rubbed her eyes. "Doesn't sound like Dame Vaako could have protected her."

The short one frowned. "Don't underestimate her."

"There's another rumor," Saul said, conspiratorially.

*Keep talking.* "Yeah?"

"That he didn't kill her. I talked to someone who knew the crew who used to feed her. Guess they used to talk about what was going on with her people. Even used to carry messages back and forth. They said she seemed okay — right up until they told her it was all over; that we'd planted the monument on her world and everyone she knew was dead or converted. Then she got really depressed. Really depressed. Some people think that she hung herself. That Riddick came back to find her kicking." He seemed to find that immensely satisfying.

"I don't believe it," Peter said, dismissively. "But I heard another story."

*You guys sure like your stories.* "Yeah?"

"I heard it was one of the junior purifiers. They're all pissed off at Riddick for not converting and not even anointing a successor to Eris. I know they also hate he that was keeping a breeder. Some say one snuck in here and strung her up."

"I don't believe it," Saul said, just as dismissive of that story as Peter was of his. "Riddick woulda decimated them. Everyone says he hates those guys anyway."

"Not if he thought it was suicide. But you know, I'm thinkin'. Maybe that's why we're here. That he's not sure."

"So you'll protect me from roving bands of purifiers? What are purifiers?"

That was the wrong thing to say, clearly. They both drew up, offended. "Holy men."

*Holy men you think might have killed a girl. Riddick's girl. In Riddick's rooms. The girl he was fucking instead of saving me.*

*God, I want out of here.*

Kyra's bitter voice cut through. *He's never going to let you go. He made sure you're too weak to fight him. He made you into the perfect prize. Not the woman you grew up to be; just the little girl he saved. With bigger tits. So he can feel good about himself while he's destroying the universe. She closed her eyes.*

*God I wish he was here.*

*He's not here. He's off playing Lord of War, killing innocents in the name of a religion he thinks is nuts. For you. He wasn't nice this morning. And you've got no reason to think he'll be nice tonight.*

*Shut up, Kyra.* She stood up. "I'll be back."

"Where are you going?" Peter asked.
"Going to get a drink of water."

"Oh no you're not."

"What?"

"Weren't you paying attention? Our orders say nothing about letting you drink. Or eat. So you don't."

_Oh shit._ "Nin thought I did."

He snorted. "Nin's a softy. He thought he was supposed to take care of you. Lord Marshal didn't tell us to do that, princess."

_Princess. I don't wanna be a princess._ Silence. Her stomach grumbled. "Please?"

"No. Now, if you wanna reconsider her offer . . ."

**Just one day.** She took a step toward the door. No one stopped her. And another. At the third step, Peter leapt into her path. She froze.

Paul reached for her face. "Man, you're soft." She recoiled.

"Don't do that."

"Why? He told us to have fun. You look like a _whole_ lot of fun."

She tried to edge away. "Pretty sure that's not what he meant."

He paced her. "You know him so well after two days?"

_Shit._ "I think he might be the jealous type. Just a feeling."

"I got a different one. If he didn't wanna share, why didn't he tell us that? We usually share people like you. You're spoils of war, princess." He reached for her face again. Stroked it, fascinated. Started unbuttoning her blouse.

She jerked back. "Don't."

"Just relax, princess." His hands were under her clothes, on her skin, almost worshipfully. Without thinking she struck out at him; a blow that should have sent him spinning across the room. Would have, once upon a time. He laughed. Cuffed the side of her head. She dropped like a stone. He dropped after her. Started to stroke her face again. She bit him hard, a little surprised at how easily her teeth sliced through his skin. He yelped, lifted her head up almost gently then smashed it down on the hard floor. Everything went black.
Chapter 7. The Running of the Deer

She was back in the moon of her nightmares watching Carolyn Fry half carrying Riddick through the storm. The pilot was magnificent. Every inch the hero at last. "I said I'd die for them, Riddick. Not for you. Not for you." Riddick looked down at her, his eyes wide, impossibly human. They spun, kissing, ridiculously kissing in a whirlwind of monsters. Until one monster lunged, yanking Fry into the sky, and Jack knew, all the way down, that this happened, this happened. She was frozen behind Riddick, disregarded, unseen as he shouted into the murderous sky, "not for me. Not for me." He stumbled backward and they collided, his body a hard warm mass in the cold wet darkness. She fell into the mud. He spun and glared right into her eyes. "Not for me." His voice was an accusation, a weapon, a thing of hate roiling off of him. She scrambled back in the mud, heartbroken. His eyes softened. He crouched down, his warm hands touching her face, her arms, checking for injuries, checking for imperfections. He smiled tenderly. "For her . . ." He pulled her out of the mud onto his lap. "For me." His arms were around her and they were back on the skiff, curled up in the pilot's chair together. He was keeping her safe and warm and happy. He'd kill for her joyfully, righteously. He loved her. A killer drenched in blood. A man capable of becoming the Destroyer of Worlds. How the hell did that happen?

Revelation was ice. *Transference*. Oh shit. Fry died for him. He's always been in love with death and Fry died for him and I was there and I was why she died and he'd already killed for me and something happened in his head and I finally get it. I finally fucking get it. Oh shit. I love him because he's breathtaking and he saved my life and he kept my secrets and he loves me because I was there at the right time. A memorial to a dead woman. "For her. For me." I slept in his arms every night for a year. He spent five years sitting in an ice cave thinking about me before taking on the biggest baddest killers around. For me. For her. For me. She dared a quick look at his face. Blissful. Serene. A *dark bodhisattva*, something whispered.

*I am so screwed. I'm not just his prize for killing Zhylaw. He's in love with death itself, and I'm a little piece of death to him.*

The moon dissolved into a graveyard. She was laying on soft damp grass. The shadows were long and faint stars and moons hung silent in the sky. Riddick, his back to her, was talking to a dark skinned, dignified woman. She was, softly, telling him something he clearly did not want to hear. He was as furious with this woman as he'd been at the sky when the pilot died. "Fuck you, Shirah. I did every fucking thing you wanted. I got your fucking revenge. For some fuckin' people I've never heard of. I want one fucking thing. One fucking thing. And you're telling me she's not for me. Fuck you. *Fuck you.* I'm finished with you." He turned and started to run. As he ran, he changed into something that looked like one of those flying monsters that killed Fry. He didn't see her, intent on some animal that looked like prey. A *deer*, Jack decided, randomly. She'd never seen one.

The woman turned to Jack, her eyes evaluating. "Hello, Sunshine." She smiled. Jack tried to stand up, but nothing was working. She was paralyzed. The woman crouched beside her.
They both watched. Riddick was a man again, or something like it. He leapt and landed on the back of the deer. They went down in a tangle, twisting obscenely together until Riddick broke the deer's neck with his bare hands, sunk his teeth into the deer's neck. He roared triumph with a bloody mouth. A pack of wolves slunk up behind him. She tried to shout a warning. He couldn't hear her.

As Riddick lost himself in the kill, Shirah reached for Jack's face with both hands. "You're not one of us, child." Her voice was sad. "You are a trap to distract the unconquerable will from his true purpose."

Jack tried to fend her off but major muscle groups were just not interested in getting involved. "What's that?"

She seemed to be reading. "Revenge, immortal hate, and courage never to submit or yield. What is else not to be overcome? You were a means to it. And now you're in the way." Then the woman's hands were covering her mouth and nose, and she was drowning, suffocating, paralyzed, defenseless.

Riddick's head snapped around. He shoved the deer's corpse away and rose, a bloody monster stalking back towards them. Leaving the meat for the wolves. Shirah let her go and backed away slightly as he stalked closer, moving strangely, not quite human. His footprints were bloody. He smiled down at her, rapely, lovingly, a deeply curved knife bloody in one hand. "For me," he whispered. He collapsed to his knees, pulled her into his arms. She could feel the knife hard and cold and wet against her back. "For me," he whispered again. His lips were on her neck, kissing her rapturously. Pressing hard enough into her jugular that she felt her pulse against his lips. His teeth were straining behind them.

"I'm going to die.

Everything dies.

Unless the Necromongers win. Then only almost everything dies. And everything else just stops.

Shirah was gone, replaced by someone infinitely old, infinitely young, wearing a dress of gold and green. Her voice was clear. "Though much is taken, much abides." She touched Jack's face with cool fingers. Riddick was pressing her back into the earth, one hand still on the bloody knife, seemingly unaware - or utterly unconcerned about - this woman, who just kept talking, as if she too was reading from a book Jack could not see. "Mercy matters. Even for them. We are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven. But sometimes, it's all about being at the right place, at the right time. Doing the right thing."

Riddick was kissing her, lovingly. Pressing her deeper into the dirt. She shook her head, gasping. "I don't understand."

Riddick smiled, almost human. "What's to understand? You're with me. You're for me. For me." He kissed her again, and somehow he was already inside of her, thrusting, still clutching the knife. She thought, inanely, "with you, for you"? Got any more prepositions you want to sling at me? Below you, within you, without you, from beneath you, inside of you -

"instead of you?" the old woman asked with a quirk of an eyebrow.

"I don't want to replace him."

"Smart, Sunshine." Riddick growled. He thrust in harder, pressed her still deeper into the dirt.

"What am I supposed to do?"
The woman in gold and green answered sweetly. "What he won't. Bring light to dark places."

Riddick dissolved into Zhylaw. "We all began as something else," he said, ironically. Riddick's knife was still in his hand. "Would you really fight with me, little girl? To save the world from darkness? To stop me from burning all the pretty cities down?" *Fight with him? I already killed him and it didn't help. The cities are still burning.*

The sun rose abruptly, blindingly bright and brutally hot. She jerked awake, sick at heart. *Where the fuck am I?* She seemed to be laying on her back on something resilient. There were rhythmic slaps and grunts coming from not that far away.

*Breathe. Last thing I remember.*

Kyra's voice. *One of Riddick's men trying to rape you. Then he smashed your head into the floor you passed out and had whacky dreams. Who the fuck is Shirah and why is she trying to kill you?*

She concentrated. Her arms were sore. *They musta dragged you,* Kyra offered. She wasn't hungry any more, just thirsty. *Oh holy Balder, I bit him. I can still taste the blood. Why does Riddick like this stuff?* She slowly tensed her muscles up and down. Everything seemed to work. There was a dampness between her legs that scared her. *Did they rape me while I was unconscious?* Kyra seemed to shrug. *Best time for it, in my experience.*

*I'm in the gym. They found it. They're . . . working out?* She listened carefully. *Yeah. Think so.*

They didn't seem to be too close. By her increased thirst she judged she'd been out hours. She risked opening her eyes a tiny bit. They were sparring, shirts off, their muscled bodies gleaming with sweat. *Great. Sexually charged atmosphere. Just what I need.*

Peter looked at her. "Hey, she's awake at last." They both loped over. "How many fingers am I holding up?" He made an obscene gesture.

Kyra's voice came out of her mouth. "Fuck you."

He grinned. "Yeah. That's my plan. Just more fun when you're awake and wriggling." He crouched down, started unbuttoning her blouse. She tried to fend him off. He just ignored her.

"Stop it!" He ignored that too. *Oh good holy Balder you gotta be kidding me.* "I've got a concussion."

"And nice tits." He squeezed one, a shit eating grin on his face.

"Stop it. You're supposed to keep me from getting hurt." She tried to fend him off, pull herself up.

He wouldn't let her, his heavy hands on her chest. He leaned close. "No, that's where you're wrong, princess. Protect you from outside threats and protect you from hurting yourself, that's what the orders say."

"What are you, a lawyer?"

He grinned, stood, and started unbuttoning his pants. "Why do you care who rapes you? You some sort of elitist? Lord Marshals only? I'm not good enough?" She tried to crawl away, but her head hurt so much she collapsed flat on the floor. *Fuck. I can't bear this.* To her shame, she started crying.

Saul intervened at last. "Careful. I think she could cause trouble."
"She won't tell the Lord Marshal. She's *scared* of him."

"She might not tell him, but Nin might find out. And Nin will have kittens. He's sweet on her."

Peter froze. "Fucking hell, you're right. Your lucky day, princess." He leaned close anyway. "For today. Better hope Nin survives the battle. Noticed he was going to be in the thick of it. You might be right that Riddick's the jealous type."

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One total victory later, he came back. His rooms smelled like Jack, smelled like a place Jack had bled, and he found himself grinning almost stupidly. *She's one lucky girl. If I didn't love her so much, I'd be drinking that stuff.* He got control, found them all in the workout room. The two soldiers were sparring, unarmed. They spun to attention when he entered, both filled with a fierce joy that tickled him. Even after sixteen hours locked in his rooms away from the battle, they seemed happy to be there.

Jack, on the other hand, was not happy. She was the corner furthest from the door, almost behind some equipment he'd shoved out of the way. Just like this morning, she was sitting with her knees drawn up protectively, face buried in her arms. When the other two men stopped moving she looked up, afraid. She fixed her eyes on him and for an instant, she was all Kyra, furious and hurt. Then she dropped her head back on her arms listlessly.

*Weird. She can't still be mad at me from this morning, can she? That was hours ago. I've conquered planets for her since then. God she smells good.*

No sense from her guards that there was anything wrong. "Thanks, men. You can go." He waited until he could hear that they had. He crossed the room. Sat down next to her and rubbed the side of her cheek gently before putting an arm around her. She hesitated, then melted into him almost unwillingly.

"Hey, Sunshine. You okay?"

"Are you still mad at me?" Her voice was small and dry, like rats feet over broken glass. He smiled down at her, tenderly.

*I've never really been mad at Jack. Not really. Not for long. Just at Kyra for taking her away from me . . . "No. Sorry I snapped at you this morning. I'll be nicer."*

She blinked a few times, turned her head stiffly around to look at him. "Can I have something to drink?" Her voice was rough and the words were slurred slightly.

"Like port?"

"Like water." She searched his face. "I'm really thirsty."

"Of course you can have water."

"They said I couldn't. They said you didn't want me to have anything."

Riddick closed his eyes against the sudden stab of rage. "Hold on." Loped off, came back with the biggest glass he could find. She drank it down.

"Did they feed you?" She shook her head without looking at him. It made his stomach hurt. "Jesus, kid, I'm sorry. I'll get you something. What would you like?"
She blinked back tears. "I'm not hungry." She stood, unsteadily, clutching the glass. As she stood he could see a bruise swelling on the back of her skull. There was blood on her scalp, roughly cleaned. *Why I smelled blood. Shit.* The rage grew.

"What the fuck happened?"

She walked woozily out of the room. "I don't think they liked me." She gave him an anguished look. "You know about Dame Vaako?"

He followed her. "What? Where did you hear that name?"

"She came to see me today. I don't think she likes you."

*No shit.* "I want you to stay away from her."

Her voice was tinged with hysteria. "How? I can't leave your rooms. Can I kick people out of here?"

"After today, yes. And *she* won't be back." Jack swallowed, looked sick. Kept walking, a hand on the wall like the world was spinning. He caught up. "Let me help you. Where are going?"

"Bathroom." He helped her to the nearest. She poured herself another glass of water from the faucet, drank it down. Put the glass down carefully, looked first at the toilet, then at him. "Go away?"

He shook his head. Repeated. "What happened? What happened to your head?"

She sat on the toilet unsteadily. "One of them-" she stopped, swallowed, looked lost. "I was thirsty. He stopped me from getting water. He-" She broke off, swallowed hard again. Wouldn't look at him. "I forgot that I wasn't me anymore and tried to hit him. Things went downhill from there." Her voice went high and tight. "I wanna be me again."

He stared at her, rage suddenly derailed. *Concussion. Dehydration. Shit, she hasn't had anything to eat or drink since yesterday. What kind of reserves does a two day old body have?* "Kid, you're you. You're all you. You're just . . . disoriented."

She shook her head, winced. "No, I'm not. You brought me back . . . wrong." She looked sick. "Shit. I wasn't going to tell you I knew that."

It was his turn to swallow. "Jack, you're not making sense. I'm going to get a doctor. Then I'm going to kill those guys."

She twitched. "They were following orders. *Your* orders." She looked up at him and there was real anger in her eyes, Jack's anger, full of righteous fury and outraged innocence. "Maybe you should trying giving better ones."
"Maybe you should try giving better ones." It was worse than if she'd spat at him. He rocked back. His fists clenched. Her eyes locked on those fists and her sudden abject despair made the room stink. She thinks I'm going to hit her. He took a deep breath, surprised that it shuddered. She can't really think I'd hit her, can she? Am I fucking this up that bad? Forced his muscles to relax, looked away from her spoke into his wrist unit. "Vaako."

There was a long and breathy pause on the other side of the line. Vaako's voice was slightly strangled. Riddick was pretty sure he had interrupted something good. "Yes, sire?"

"That woman doctor. The one who figured out what was going on with Jack. I want her in my rooms now. With her kit."

Another breathy pause. "Neith. I'll take care of it."

He glanced at Jack. She looked a little less miserable. "Another thing. Did Ninshubar make it?" Jack made a small noise.

There was a longer pause. Vaako was checking. "Yes. I see that he did."

"He sits with her tomorrow. The guys today roughed her up. I'm not happy about that, Vaako."

A pause. "Yes, sire." Quickly. "Anything else?"

"Food. They didn't feed her. I want good food sent to my rooms. Now."

Vaako's response was a little testy. "It shall be done. Anything else?"

"Yeah. That wife of yours came to visit Jack today. I don't want them spending time together. See to it. Or I will."

There was a busy whisper over the line. Dame Vaako was there, had probably been on top of her husband in bed, already spinning the story. Riddick grinned, mirthlessly, cut the connection. He liked Vaako, he really did, which was the only reason the bitch-love of his life hadn't gone out an airlock. But that might change real soon.

Jack stood up, gave him a cautious, formal nod. "Thank you." She stumbled over to the faucet like she was drunk, washed her hands with exaggerated care. He came up behind her.

"I'm gonna carry you to the front room."

"I can walk."
"Indulge me." He picked her up, cuddled her close. She seemed about to fight him, but ended up just laying her head against his chest, limp as he carried her through his rooms. He sat on the couch with her in his lap. Started to stroke her hair, stopped when she flinched away from his fingers. "Dame Vaako came to see you."

"Yeah." She blinked up at him awkwardly. She seemed to be struggling with whether to stay uncharacteristically quiet or tell him everything. Telling won. "She says she wants to be my friend. She wasn't very friendly."

He barked a laugh. She flinched again. "No, she's not."

"What's up with you two?"

"She tried to set Vaako up to kill Zhylaw, become the Lord Marshal. Only I got there first."

Her eyes narrowed. "I got there first. Mine was a lethal blow. Why are you the Lord Marshal and I'm just some fuck toy?"

He pulled her closer. "Kid, you're not. You're really not. It's just a show."

"I don't like my part."

The door chime rang, derailing conversation. The food was there. He brought it in, set it on a low table. She eyed it with suspicion. Looked at him, anguished.

"They said you had a girl here before me."

Oh shit. "Yeah?"

"Peter said she looked like me, and you kept her here until you killed her. Choked her to death during sex."

He closed his eyes. "He's wrong, Jack. I swear."

Her expression was dubious. Shook her head. "Okay." She closed her eyes, leaned back on the couch. Flinched. Leaned forward. She's in a lot of pain. He rummaged around for something to distract her until the doctor got there.

"Her mother was in charge of . . . someplace. Hyperion. Mom was willing to surrender, but she knew her kid was too young and scrawny for conversion. It was a sticking point. I decided to make an exception for her; brought her back here. She kinda reminded me of you." Jack's eyes opened at that, fixed on him. "I just meant to keep her until she was strong enough to survive. Came back one day and she was hanging from the ceiling, dead. I cut her down and let people think whatever the fuck they wanted."

"What was her name?"

He blinked, blanking. Took a stab. "Selene."

She was still staring at him. Licked her lips and reached for a bottle of fruit juice the attendants had brought. He opened it for her. Where's the fucking doctor? "The other soldier said she might have been killed by a purifier? Is that why I have guards?"

He stared at her blankly. I thought the girl offed herself because I destroyed her world. Never thought of it being one of those wussy holy men.
That cold voice again. *Don't underestimate them. One of those wussy holy men set this whole thing up. Saved you. Betrayed Zhylaw.*

*She's got guards to protect her from that sort of thing.*

*And because you don't want her to get away. He shook himself. "They're supposed to protect you. Take care of you. Until you can take care of yourself."*

She laughed. Kyra's laugh. Disbelieving. Then she winced. "Guess no one told them that." Long silence. Her voice went small. "What did she hang herself with, Riddick?"

"Rope."

"Why do you have rope in your bedroom?"

*Fuck me. I never thought of that. Where did she get the rope? Maybe someone did kill her. He closed his eyes. Of course, it's not like I've ever really checked what Zhylaw keeps in his bedroom.*

The door chime chirped, interrupting his dark thoughts of what Zhylaw might have squirreled away for her to find.

The doctor was there. "Took you long enough," he growled.

"I'm sorry sire, I was in surgery."

"This is more important."

Jack snorted. "You've got a screwed up set of priorities, Riddick." He glared at her. *I've killed millions for you, little girl. You think I care about one stupid soldier?*

To his surprise, the doctor simply stepped around him, knelt in front of Jack. "I'm Doctor Neith. Do you remember me?"

Jack smiled at her. "Yes. You gave me something to drink. It was good." Her voice was childish again.

The woman smiled at her. "What happened?"

Jack leaned forward to show the doctor the back of her head, almost fell off the couch. The doctor's eyes widened. "I'd like to take her down to the clinic. This looks bad."

"No. Have them bring up anything you need."

The doctor had the temerity to cluck her tongue. "Has she been moved?"

"She's been walkin' and talkin' since I got here, 'bout 15 minutes ago."

The doctor grimaced. "Okay. Ma'am, lay down on your front. Let me take a closer look."

Jack tried to turn herself around. Almost fell off the couch again. He caught her, positioned her carefully. The doctor's fingers on the back of her head seemed gentle enough, but Jack groaned in pain. The doctor pulled back, used a scanner. Her tongue clucked again. "Skull fracture, concession, dehydration. . . how long ago did this happen?" She looked up at Riddick. He frowned at her.

"I wasn't here. The doctor blinked at him, surprised. *Fuck. She though I did this.*

*Of course she did. I've been struttin' around like I like hurting her.* He closed his eyes. Jack's voice
was muffled by the couch. "I don't know. It knocked me out. Not long after Dame Vaako left. Not long after you left."

"About sixteen hours ago," Riddick growled.

"How long were you unconscious?"

"I don't know."

"Did you vomit?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you know why you're dehydrated?"

Jack's voice was small. "The guards wouldn't let me drink."

The doctor sighed. "Next time, call a doctor sooner."

Jack tried to lift her head to look at him. "I don't have a communicator."

"I'll get you one," he ground out.

The doctor pulled out another piece of equipment. "Ma'am, I'm going to give you a shot that will help the swelling in your brain go down. Then I'm going to seal the fracture. Then I'll clean you up. Grit your teeth. It's going to hurt."

"No." He didn't know the word was going to come out of his mouth until it did.

"What?"

"I don't want her to hurt anymore," Riddick said, flatly. "She's not a Necro. She doesn't need to prove she's got a high pain threshold."

The doctor's mouth gaped open. She shut it abruptly. "Okay. Give me a minute. I wasn't ready . . . ." She dug through her bag until she found something that made her hesitate. "My lord, this is an interrogation drug. A boundary annihilator. It will stop the pain, but her . . . discretion will be compromised. If asked a question, she will most likely answer it."

He stared at the doctor. Why the fuck are you telling me this?

Oh, right, she knows I don't want people to know I brought her back from the dead. He snorted. This is getting way too complicated. Never should have told anyone she's here. Just wrapped her up and kept her in the closet. "Good to know. I'll keep her off the promenade. How long?"

"About six hours."

"Go ahead."

The doctor gave her a shot and Jack's face relaxed. "Oh god. Thank you." The doctor smiled, started working quickly. Jack flinched a few times, but before long, she was breathing easily again.

The doctor stood up. "That's all I can do for her now, here. She needs to keep sipping fluids, and I'd like to see her tomorrow. My lord, she's fragile right now. She needs to be protected."

He rolled his eyes. Jack sat up, already looking much better, though she still sounded drunk. "Thank
"you," she said to the doctor, sounding like she meant it." She looked at him with soft, loving eyes. "Thank you."

*Man, those drugs must be good. She's forgotten she's mad at me. May just have to keep her on them. "You wanted to talk to her about something else, Jack?" he asked softly.*

"Oh, yeah." She swallowed. "He's - fucking me." *Is that how you think of it? "I don't wanna get pregnant."

The doctor's eyes widened. "No. I can sterilize you. You'll have to come to the clinic. Any time you want. Now?"

*Fuck me, I never thought about that. Sterilize her . . . That felt wrong. Why does that feel wrong? Took a stab. "Would that stop her from bleeding?"


Riddick shook his head. "No."

Jack's eyes widened. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. The doctor frowned at him. "My lord?"

"I like it when she bleeds."

Jack's eyes widened again. Then she closed them, disengaging from the conversation. The doctor looked wretched. "My lord. I think that is a mistake. People will know. So many of our people are enhanced—and if she gets pregnant, that could be a catastrophe for you. The Destroyer of Worlds should not father children."

"I don't want her pregnant. Just want her to bleed. Do something less drastic than sterilization."

The doctor swallowed. "I don't – I'll try. I will have to do some research. Women are sterilized when they go through conversion. It's not something I've kept up on." She blinked a few times, seemed to come to terms with it. "Do you want her to bleed all the time?"

"Hm." Jack's eyes opened wide. She shook her head, pleadingly. "Naw. Just when it should. Figure it out, doctor. Anything else you wanna talk to her about, Jack?"

Her voice was childish again. "Can I take a bath?"

The doctor blinked a few more times. Then nodded. "Yes – but you're probably going to fall asleep soon, so someone should stay with you."

*Best idea I've heard all day. "I'm on it. Go away, doctor."

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She didn't talk again while he filled the bathtub, stripped off his clothes, then hers. Despite the fact that this was her idea, she seemed to be a long way away. He turned the lights down low. Only when he lifted her up in his arms did she seem to come back to him, her eyes wide. *What, she thought she was going in by herself?*

He stepped into the tub, sat down in the warm waters. They came halfway up his chest. Higher on hers. She tensed as they submerged. "I won't let you drown, Sunshine," he whispered. "I promise." He laid back down, Jack between his legs, the water coming up over her breasts.
She relaxed against him, her partially healed head against his chest. Her breathing slowed. She really was falling asleep. Naked, in a bath, with him and she was falling asleep. He grinned, pleased at last. He was dead certain there wasn't another person in the galaxy who would do that. He ran a slow, wet hand down her front. She didn't move. He blinked, and she dissolved into that sweet green he was falling in love with, blanketing him.

_Not falling in love with. I love her._

No great surprise there. He'd loved her since she was a little girl.

_She's with me. And as badly as I'm fucking this up, she's not goin' anywhere._

That _was_ new.

He let his fingers slip into the sweet green. Maybe because she was falling asleep, maybe because of the doctor's drugs, he could sink his fingers in deeply. The most amazing sense of contentment swept over him. _You're happy. Here and now, despite the day you've had, despite all the shit I've been putting you through, you're happy. Those are good drugs._ She made a little noise, turned her head. "That feels weird," she said, sleepily. He pulled his fingers out. Blinked, and she was just a girl again.

"Sorry."

"It's okay." She stroked his hand. "Thank you."

"For what?"

She considered that solemnly. "For saving me. For being nice to me right now. I like it when you're nice to me." She hesitated. Added in a childish voice. "For not being mad at me."

He snorted. "Don't worry about it." Started running his hands up and down her front, slowly, coming in and out of the water. Something dark welled up from deep within him. His voice dropped low. "I missed you so fucking much. Don't you fucking dare ever leave me again."

She turned her head to look at him, much more awake, with a much more adult voice. "I never left you."

"You walked away from me on Crematoria. And then you died."

"Oh." She hesitated. "Not planning to do that again."

"Promise me."

"Cross my heart and hope to die."

"I'm gonna hold you to that. And I will storm those gates of hell again if I have to."

"Burn all the pretty cities down," she murmured.

"Yeah. To ash." He cupped her breasts in his hands, maybe a little too roughly. She made a small noise. He began kneading those breasts, gently. "Just relax, Jack."

She did, more slowly this time. He moved one slow hand down her soft belly, in between her legs. Cupped her pelvis briefly, pushed through the protective folds of flesh with warm, slow fingers. She gasped but let him do what he wanted.
He concentrated. She dissolved back into the sweet green, but tinged with olive now. He let his other hand, the one on her breast, sink in slightly. The contentment was fading, turning into something less pleasing. Wistfulness. Regret. A faint bitterness. Resistance.

Maybe because you reminded her that she doesn't have a choice, asshole. Plus that was a little threatening.

Wonder if I could make her happier . . . "I love you," he whispered. The resistance dissolved into something glorious, flooding him. The sweet green was back, and something better than contentment he didn't have a name for.

"God, Riddick. That might make everything else okay." She stroked his hand, the one in between her legs, with gentle fingers. "I love you too."

With that, a tidal wave of joy. Her joy. She wanted desperately to tell him that. He squeezed her breast harder, pressed the fingers between her legs harder. It was surreal. He started fingering her even harder. She whimpered, unready. He eased off.

"Too much?" Picked up his mug of red wine, took a long drink.

"Yeah."

"Sorry," He was rewarded with another pulse of happiness. It felt amazingly good. She's gonna get me trained.

If she had any idea what she was doing, maybe. Somehow, I doubt she knows I can do this. I just figured out I could do this. He started stroking her again, gently. She made a little sound of pleasure deep in her throat. He could feel her arousal growing.

I'm using the dark secrets of the Underverse to get a girl off. Bet Zhylaw never did that. He chuckled. "What?" she asked.

"Just happy," he whispered. "We should do this every night."

"That's a lot of water."

He laughed. "I'm rich." She tensed. He'd said something wrong. Thought about it. "We're rich."

"Liar," she whispered. "I've got nothing but memories that don't make sense and this body I don't recognize. And weird dreams . . . " Despite her arch words, she relaxed again. He concentrated hard on the sensations he was generating, concentrated hard on teasing out what she liked. His own body's responses were complicating things. If he'd been getting himself off, his hand would be stroking something she didn't have hard and fast. The gentle fingers she liked wouldn't do much for him. But what he was doing to her was communicating itself to his cock. Confusing. How do girls masturbate?

Don't they use vibrators? He tried to replicate the move. It worked. She was thrusting against him, thrusting against his cock pressed between them, gasping, closer and closer, until she started to spasm, helplessly, gasping, the water roiling over the side of the tub, splashing hard on the tile floor. He was riding it too, teeth clenched, not wanting her to know for some fucked up reason. He slipped two fingers up inside of her and felt her clamping down, was her clamping down. She thrust one last time against his hand and climaxed, breathing hard, heart pounding. Taking him with her.

After a long time she whispered, shakily, "Damn, Riddick, where did you learn to do that?" He laughed, not able to form words yet. Her orgasm wasn't like his, at least, what he could feel of it. It
was gentler, milder, tinged with a sense of helplessness he didn't like at all. But it was hers and he'd caused it, he'd had it with her, and it was spinning his head around. He let his mind drift, and once again she was just a girl, lying in the warm waters between his legs.

She rolled over, lying on top of him, face to face. "Your turn?" she offered, shyly her lips inches from his own.

Did I cum? He shook his head, confused. "In a minute. I wanna enjoy this." He stroked her short hair.

She lifted her head, looked over the side of the tub. "Man. I made a mess. All that sloshing."

He shrugged. "Just wait until it's me. We should finish the wine, 'cause here comes the flood."

"We say goodbye to flesh and blood."

"Huh?"

"Old song Abu liked." She went quiet, let her cheek rest on his chest. "He's dead, isn't he?"

He sighed. "Yeah. Irgun killed him. Why I killed Irgun."

"Irgun . . ." she shuddered. "We're all one big happy incestuous murdering family, aren't we?"

He snorted. Stroked her back. Did he rape you too? How long does it take girls to get over rape? Wonder if that doctor knows . . . "Abu told me how to find you. I owed him one." Her breath caught and she lifted her head, gazing rapt into his eyes. She wriggled around, ending up straddling him. "Aggressive, Sunshine?" he rumbled.

"You lived with me for a year without noticing?" she teased, smiling at last. "I'm not going to be awake much longer." Her voice was apologetic, but her eyes were shining. She's happy about Abu. Fuck, did she think he'd forgotten her? Did she think I killed him? She reached back and grabbed his cock in her small hand. It got harder and he groaned, almost in pain. She was trying to position herself on it, but whether the drugs or the new body or what, she was having trouble. He gently maneuvered her hips with his hands.

Hesitated. "Ever been on top before?" She bit her lip, shook her head. Did he rape you too? How long does it take girls to get over rape? Wonder if that doctor knows . . . "Abu told me how to find you. I owed him one." Her breath caught and she lifted her head, gazing rapt into his eyes. She wriggled around, ending up straddling him. "Aggressive, Sunshine?" he rumbled.

"You lived with me for a year without noticing?" she teased, smiling at last. "I'm not going to be awake much longer." Her voice was apologetic, but her eyes were shining. She's happy about Abu. Fuck, did she think he'd forgotten her? Did she think I killed him? She reached back and grabbed his cock in her small hand. It got harder and he groaned, almost in pain. She was trying to position herself on it, but whether the drugs or the new body or what, she was having trouble. He gently maneuvered her hips with his hands.

Hesitated. "Ever been on top before?" She bit her lip, shook her head. Have you ever just had sex before? Was it always rape? A sudden sour feeling. A stab of guilt that it wasn't making his erection any less hard. With those drugs in her, she'll answer if I ask. Should I ask?

Maybe later. Always drug her again. He smiled at her. Positioned a hand at the base of her spine, concentrated, and once again, was feeling what she was feeling. He thrust up.

Pain. It came as a shock. To him. Not to her. She knew it was going to hurt. He blinked up at her. Thrust more gingerly. Then again. His own body's sensations were entangled with hers, confusingly. But he knew he was hurting her. If it hurts this much now, in a body full of pain killers, how much did I hurt her the first time? No wonder she screamed. He swallowed. "You do it," he whispered.

Her eyes widened. She put her hands on his chest, slipping through the sloshing waters. Raised herself up slowly. Sunk slowly. The feeling was incredible, the warm waters caressing where her body wasn't. She repeated it, slowly. He thought her pain was decreasing. She changed the angle of her hips, did it again. A bolt of pleasure. She pushed the angle, and the pleasure increased.

He started to stroke her pelvis with his other hand, pressing his fingers in. The sensations immediately skyrocketed. She kept the pace slow, there was still some pain, but everything else was
so overwhelming that he didn't care, couldn't care. He started thrusting up into her hard, started
stroking her faster. It didn't take long before, with that same wordless, helpless cry, she came again,
her muscles spasming hard, shoving him over the edge. He roared, and whatever it was that had
united them fell apart and it was just him, cumming like a supernova. Riddick. Lord Marshal of the
Necromongers. The only thing in the universe that mattered.
Chapter 9: Roving Bands of Purifiers

Abu was there. He opened his arms to her. "My poor Jack. I failed you."

She shook her head. "My fault."

Abu smiled sadly, let his arms drop. "If only. I could then offer you the comfort of forgiveness and the joy of redemption." His eyes moved away to fix on something behind her. "Riddick."

She looked back. Riddick was standing there, a bloody knife in his hands, bloody footprints stretching back behind him in the sands. A liquid move and he was behind her, one hand on her neck with an exaggerated gentleness that was strangely terrifying. She craned her neck to look up at him. "Your footprints are bloody." Her voice sounded as serious as a child's. Riddick grinned at her.

There was blood on his lips and his voice was velvet. He wasn't talking to her. "Wasn't that what you wanted, civilization man?"

Abu answered. "Of course not."

"Fry's footprints weren't so bloody, were they? Oh yeah – they would have been if someone hadn't stopped her. If civilization man hadn't stepped in. He died for it, you know. But still. Better her than me?" Riddick's voice was teasing, but there was something dangerous swirling underneath.

Abu shook his head. "I do not trade in lives, my son."

Riddick threw back his head and laughed and laughed, his hand on her neck tightening. "Just keep telling yourself that, civilization man. Just keep telling yourself that. I traded a whole lot of lives for this one." He kissed the top of her head. "One girl in all the world. All I wanted to keep safe. And you. Get locked up. With monsters." He let her go and stalked towards Abu, bloody knife high. "I have not forgotten that, civilization man. All your pretty cities. I'm gonna burn them all down."

Abu stepped back. And stepped back again. It wasn't just Riddick anymore; the thing loping away from her moved like a man with a bull's head; moved like a wolf; moved like something boneless and ancient. Abu fell. "Jack," he whispered. "Audrey. You have to stop this. You have to-"

Riddick half turned to her. Smiled hungrily. "'The strong do what they will. The weak suffer what they must.' And I am the strongest. Here. Now."

Cavemen and astronauts, Jack thought, irreverently. Then he turned back to Abu. The lights went out. There was a shriek, cut off by a wet flapping noise.

She jerked awake, heart pounding, ravenous. Her head ached duly; clearly the shot, whatever it was, had worn off. For the first time in bed, Riddick wasn't gripping her tightly. She reached out
cautiously and found his broad back. She left her hand there for a moment, feeling his steady breathing. Dead asleep. Poor boy. Hard day of killing plum tired him out.

Feeling greatly daring, she pulled herself out of bed, padded through the darkness to the bathroom. Kyra sneered at her. You killed a man for trying to steal Riddick's boots. You faced down the last Lord Marshal of the Necromongers for him. Now you're feeling brave for getting out of his bed? She ignored her other half. Her clothes were, strangely, hung up and the floor was dry. He really must have cleaned up afterwards. The thought was strangely warming. Dressed as quietly as she could. Riddick still seemed to be dead asleep; at least, he wasn't making any noise. There was a second door out of the bathroom into the rest of the suite. It opened almost silently.

Now what? There had been food. Would Riddick have put it away? It took her a few tries feeling her way down the pitch black halls, but she found what she thought was the front room. She could feel that the food was still there. I wonder . . . "Lights, dim." The lights came on obediently. Heh. Good to know. Entrance hall is neutral territory. Bread, cheese, olives, cherries – all stuff that should be safe. Ate a cherry. Then another. Some cheese. Oh yeah. I could get used to this.

If it wasn't the spoils of genocidal violence, maybe, Kyra's voice snarled back. We're gettin' on with the Stockholm Syndrome in record time, aren't we?

Since when do you care about genocidal violence? You didn't care about that when you converted.

Didn't have much choice.

Still don't. But care. I'm fucked. "There you are," Riddick rumbled from the door, naked and golden and stunningly beautiful. She jumped.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you. Just woke up hungry."

"'Sokay." He collapsed next to her. "How you doin'?"

"My head hurts." She found a bottle of fruit juice, opened it. His eyes were on her face, intensely. She met them for an instant, then looked away, flushing. "But nothing like yesterday."

"Sure you don't want me to kill those guys?" His voice was a little wistful. "Make it all better?"

She laughed, unsteadily. How do I answer that? Shook her head. Had some more cheese.

"Are we okay?" he asked, abruptly.

Your turn to ask that? She met his eyes without flushing. "Yeah. We're okay." She hesitated. What the fuck. "I love you. I'm so happy you came back for me I could wet myself. I'm not – I'm just having trouble with the details."

He rubbed his knuckles down her leg. "Huh?"

"You as some sort of super predator, that I'm okay with. You as a world destroying super tyrant entitled to" – she closed her mouth abruptly. Her voice went quiet. "Entitled to do anything you want. I'm having trouble with that."

He sighed, noisily. "Jack, just try not to think about it. It'll make you crazy. I'll still love you, but you won't like bein' in a straight jacket. Particularly," he eyed her shrewdly "when we're havin' sex."

I am going to pretend he didn't say that for the rest of my life. "I've got too much time on my hands. Promotes dark thoughts."
He laughed, low, seductive. "You want a job?"

"Sure. As long as it's not about destroying all life in the universe, I'd love a job."

He snorted. "That's pretty much all these assholes do. Wait. I think some of them might do opera. How about a hobby?"

"Okay. How about I figure out how to stop them?"

He frowned. "Jack . . ."

"What?"

He ran a slow hand up the inside of her thigh. "This is our life now. Live with it."

"Because you've decided to come out of the cold and be part of something at last? Head of the biggest, baddest killers around?"

His frown deepened. "No, because you did. I just followed your lead. If you hadn't gotten on that fuckin' Necro ship . . ." He started to caress her under her clothes, his intent unmistakable.

She shook her head, trying to ignore how much it hurt. "I made a mistake."

"You made a lot of them." His voice was rough and his fingers were more insistent. He seemed frustrated by her skin. His fingers felt electrified, and not in a good way.

"I don't know what you're doing, but it hurts."

He stopped immediately, but something dark passed over his features. She flinched. His face softened. "I'm sorry, doll. Having you here is doin' something to me."

"Think about what it's doing to me," she said, softly. "You've been the dark and invisible center of my life since I met you. You defined me. You made me strong. I died for you. Now you're right here. And I'm not strong any more, and I'm not dead. I don't even know who I am. It's a little overwhelming."

"You're Jack. And you don't need to be strong."

"Yes I do." She smiled. "Someone's gotta save the universe from the Necromongers."

She was on her back so abruptly it knocked the breath out of her. He was on top, pinning her, glaring down. "I don't wanna hear it, Jack. Give it up. It's not safe for you to even think about."

She turned her head away. He grabbed her face, forced her to look at him. "Don't push me, Sunshine," he growled. "You won't like it if I start pushing back." He kissed her savagely, hand hard on her bruised scalp. Despite her throbbing head, she relaxed and let him do what he wanted. Absolutely clear he was going to anyway.

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After a night full of dreams of dark women trying to kill her, trying to persuade her to do . . . something, Riddick let them sleep in. Kissed her tenderly, ate breakfast with her. It was almost like they were just two people in love.

"I did it again, didn't I?" he said as he was, ever so sweetly, pouring her more fruit juice.
"What?"

"Was snitty at you last night. I didn't mean it."

*Snitty? That's what we're calling it? "Mean what?"

"About pushing. You can push me." He added a slug of champagne to her drink, ran his fingers over her hand gently.

She took a sip. "You push me, I'll go over. Like I did last night."

He looked guilty. "Now. You'll be strong again. Some day." He hesitated. "I'm good with you strong."

Really? *Who are you trying to convince?* She smiled. "That's nice to hear. How about a weapon?"

He sighed, noisily. "Let's get you strong first."

"Why?"

"So no one takes it from you. Until then, rely on your guards."

"Well, that's an incentive." She hesitated. "You know these guys better than me, but I can't help but notice, I had no problem with any of the guys Vaako came up with that first day. But three of the four guys since have been-" she broke off.

"Have been what?"

She sighed, noisily. "They seem to find me . . . tempting."

He grunted. "Understandable. You're really pretty."

"You say the sweetest things," she said, tartly. "They also see me as . . . available."

He grunted again. "You're not."

"Could you tell them that? I think Vaako told them that."

"Yeah. I'll pass that on." He seemed to be struggling with something. "What really happened yesterday? You weren't making a lot of sense last night."

She flushed. *What do I tell him? If I tell him what that guy tried to do, he'll kill him. If I tell him what that lady said, he'll kill her. Do I want those deaths on my conscience?*

You are one fucking stupid girl, the part of her she called Kyra snapped. *Of course you tell him. That guy was going to rape you. That bitch wanted him too. He's sweet enough on you to take care of this. Take advantage of that.*

He's gonna ask why they stopped. *What will he do to Ninshubara when I tell him?*

She was saved from having to figure it out by Riddick's communicator. It chirped. He listened grimly. "Fuck. I have to go. We'll talk about this tonight, okay?"

"Okay." He kissed her, lovingly. She looked longingly at his communicator. "Can I have one of those?"
"Why?"

"So I can communicate. You said I could have one last night." At his blank look, she tried to needle him. "You're not trying to isolate me are you?"

He snorted. "Damn straight." He clearly saw her flinch. It clearly bothered him. **Well, that's something. He might be a rapist control freak, but he wants me to like it.** "Who do you wanna talk to?"

"You and the doctor? Maybe be able to yell for help? At least until I'm strong again?"

He nodded abruptly. "Smart. I'll take care of it. Jesus. I gotta go, doll. You be okay until your guards get here?" He hesitated. "Don't go rummaging around. You made me realize I never really checked out what Zhylaw kept in his rooms. Could be monsters under the bed."

Her eyes widened. "These are Zhylaw's rooms?" At his nod, she shivered. "Yikes." He kissed her one last time, and then he was gone.

**Now what?** She thought, distantly. **First time I've been alone and not chained up in . . . fuck, I don't know how long.** She pushed back from the table, padded back to the bedroom. **Guess I could make the bed . . .**

**He's got people for that, you git.**

**Right. No rummaging. Right.** She snorted, opened a drawer at random. It was full of clothes she couldn't imagine Riddick wearing. Looked around. Noticed a datapad.

I wonder. . . She sat down, turned it on. It booted smoothly. **Heh. No password. Heh.** Typed in "Helion Prime." Promptly wished she hadn't. Death tolls, conversion rates, images of destruction scrolled past the screen. She stared at it unblinking.

Riddick's voice slithered through her head. **"Civilization man. All your pretty cities? I'm gonna burn them all down."**

**Okay, I can't deal with this right now. Where are we? Prytania?** More numbers. Staggering numbers. The number of zeroes at the end of the death tolls made no sense. **Fuck. How many people is Riddick in charge of?** A few more key strokes.

**Millions. He's in charge of millions of killers.**

He thinks this is my fault? I've killed 22 people, total, the vast majority of which were about to rape or kill me. Or kill him. He's killed millions of innocents. Maybe billions. And he thinks he's doing it for me. Destroying the civilized galaxy. And he thinks it's for me.

Riddick's voice, again, a growl ". . . burn them all down."

**Not for me.**

**Jesus. For me in the sense that he'd never have come to conquer if he wasn't trying to save me. Shit shit shit.**

The door chimed. She shut the pad off hurriedly, almost ran away from it. Got to the entrance. Hesitated. **How the fuck do I open the door?**

She hit the thing that looked like a control. Nothing happened. **Can I open the door? How the fuck**
am I supposed to save the universe if I can't even open the door?

Where hell'd that come from?

Should I open the door? Roving bands of purifiers . . .

It chimed again. "Who's there?" she called. Silence.


Of course he did. He doesn't want you to get away. You're still in prison. Just a comfier one. With hot and cold running Riddick. She shuddered. The door opened. No one was there. She took a hesitant step forward. Then another. Quick as Riddick, Ninshubbar slipped in, closed the door behind him. "Mum?"

"Oh god." Without thinking, she took the last step and hugged him hard. He froze. Then very cautiously patted her on the back.

"Mum? Are you alright? Why didn't you open the door?"

"I think he locked me in."


She did. Nothing happened. "Sonofabitch." Nin smiled at her, but didn't respond. "God, I'm glad to see you. Yesterday was - " she broke off. "Not fun."

His eyes were intense. She looked away. He finally dropped his gaze, looked at the food scattered on the low table. "You've eaten?"

"Yeah. Have you?"

"Yes."

"Good." She swallowed. "You know, I'm not entirely sure what we're supposed to do."

"What do you want to do?"

"Get strong." Get strong, save the universe . . . She shook herself.

"You seem stronger. We could work on that."

"The doctor told me to take it easy today." His eyes widened. "I'm really sorry. I'm sure you've got better things to do than sit here with me."

"I'm sure I don't." He hesitated. "Doctor?"

"Yeah." Her turn to hesitate. "The guys yesterday weren't as nice as you."

His eyes widened again. "They hurt you?"

"Yeah."
"I'm sorry. I should have -" He shut his mouth abruptly. "I'm sorry." He looked devastated. Enough that she felt horrible for telling him. Then Kyra's sardonic voice cut through. _He was killing people yesterday. Remember those death tolls? He's part of this freak show. If ordered to, he'd kill you too._

She ignored the voice, sat on the couch. "You saved me," she said softly. His head jerked up. She swallowed again. "One of them – one of them was going to rape me." She couldn't look at him. "He had me down. I was begging him not to. Told him Riddick wouldn't like it. He didn't believe me. Then the other guy said you wouldn't like it. And that stopped him cold, because he believed that. You saved me. Because you let them know you liked me. Thank you."

His voice intense. "Did you tell the Lord Marshal?"

"He noticed the skull fracture," she said dryly. "Why he called the doctor."

"Did you tell him how it happened?"

". . . not really."

"Why?"

"I don't know." She looked away. "Could you sit down? You're making me nervous, hulking over me like this." He did, uncomfortably, on the chair Dame Vaako had appropriated the day before. He was still staring at her. "I wasn't thinking straight last night. What with the concussion and the terror."

He stared at her for an uncomfortably long time. Mercifully, the door chime rang. Nin got up and answered it quietly.

It was the doctor. "Hello, Jack. Soldier. I don't suppose you could both come back to the clinic with me?"

Jack looked at Nin, who shook his head. "I'm sorry, doctor. The Lord Marshal was quite clear that she is to stay here."

She doctor shrugged. "Okay. Let's find a better room."

"Better room for what?"

"To examine her."

"My orders said nothing about that." Nin's voice was flat.

_Oh boy. It's okay. Riddick called her last night._

Nin's eyes widened again, but he yielded with good grace. "Perhaps the conference room."

"Lead on."

The doctor had Nin lift her up onto the conference table and examined her carefully and thoroughly. Nin stayed in the background, watching closely. Finally, the doctor shut off her equipment. "Jack, you will be fine. I still want you to take it easy for the next few days. Here's some pain killers if you need them." She put the bottle down on the table. "Soldier, could you step outside for a moment?"

"No."
There was an awkward silence. Finally, the doctor continued. "Alright. Jack, I've researched your other problem. I wanted to discuss your options with you before taking them to the Lord Marshal. Are you comfortable having this conversation with me right now?"


"I would like simply to sterilize you. Do you know why he doesn't want that?"

She flushed again. "Maybe."

"Can you tell me? It might help me come up with the right solution."

_What the fuck do I say to that? That I think your god-king is sentimental about the fact I got a lot of folks killed because the monsters could smell me bleeding?_ Nin made a small sound, got an awful look on his face. _Oh fuck, what is he thinking? That Riddick likes the taste? Oh god, does he?_ She flushed scarlet, looked down.

Nin's voice was quiet. "Leave it, doctor. Please."

The doctor cleared her throat. "I'm sorry soldier. I'll be blunt. Do you think the Lord Marshal wants you to have a child?"

_Have Riddick's kid..._ She'd never once thought about it. The thought made her feel strangely panicky. _You never seriously thought you'd have sex with him,_ Kyra whispered maliciously. _Let alone that he'd rape you._ Her eyes pricked hot. "I don't get that feeling."

"Good. We do practice infanticide." She hesitated. "Sometimes ritually. But I have the feeling you knew that."

_Why would you think that? Oh god, what do people think happened to me?_ It came out before she could stop it. "I hate this place." She swallowed. "Smell. I bet he likes the smell."

_The smell of menstruation?"

She hesitated. _He used to smell me all the time. Probably still doing it, and I've just been too freaked out to notice._ "The whole cycle. He's... smell oriented," she finished inanely.

The doctor nodded slowly. "Alright. I recommend a three year implant. We'll tweak it so you won't get pregnant. If, Underverse forefend, he changes his mind, we can remove it."

"Why only three years?"

"I've never done this and I don't want to overload your system. Plus, I suspect he will allow you to convert once you're strong enough to survive the process and the... novelty wears off. May I recommend that to the Lord Marshal?"

Jack closed her eyes, feeling sick. "Okay. Whatever he wants... is likely to happen anyway. So yeah, three years sounds fucking great."

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After a few meaningless warnings, the doctor left, leaving an awkward silence behind her. After a very long time, Jack broke it. "You guys practice infanticide?"

"Yes."
"Why did she think I knew that?"

Ninshubar hesitated. "It is widely believed the Lord Marshal resurrected the baptism platform for you." At her blank look, he continued, softly "used it to bathe you in living blood. Young children were used, traditionally. Explained why you were carried from the Hierothesion hysterical, bloody, and unwounded."

Her mouth opened and closed a few times. Finally, weakly, "Holy Mithras. Has he done that before?"

"Not that I know of."

"Why would someone think such a thing?"

"Other Lord Marshals have."

"To their girlfriends?"

He hesitated. "Some. To their unconverted bedmates. Among others."

"I hate this place."

Something dark flickered in Nin's eyes. "'The strong do what they will. The weak endure what they must.'"

"I've heard that before."

"Many have." Nin went very still. Put a finger to his lips, lifted her off the conference table and set her in a corner. **Fuck. There was a time I could have leapt over that thing and kicked someone in the head on the way down. Now, he's right, I would have fallen if I tried to get off myself. He was out the door silently, closing it behind him.**

_Someone's here, and the door guards didn't page us. Shit. Roving bands of purifiers. I gotta get strong. I hate this._

The door opened and Vaako entered, Nin shadowing him. Smiled at her. "Ma'am."

She smiled back. "Hey." *Praise merciful Kuan Yin. I don't think he plans to rape me.*

"May I have a word?"

Her eyes widened at the courtesy. "Of course."

"Please sit." She did. He did too. He looked at Nin. "Soldier, please step outside." Nin hesitated, then complied, closing the door softly. It didn't latch, she noticed. Vaako did not seem to. "I wanted to apologize for my wife." Vaako's voice was haunted. "And to thank you."

"Thank me?"

"If you had told Riddick last night exactly what happened-" he stopped. "I think it would have been very bad for her. I promise you. She won't cause you any more trouble."

"She almost got me raped."

"I know. You have my word. It will not happen again. And I am profoundly sorry." *You killed millions yesterday. You're sorry about this?*
Because he loves his wife. She rubbed her eyes. And because Riddick would kill her if he knew. Kyra's snide commentary was strangely warming. "It's okay. I – I don't really want any more deaths on my conscience. And you've been kind to me."

He gave her a strange look. "Not hard. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Get me some shoes? Let me go? Stop destroying the universe? "Tell me something. What would happen if I walked out of Riddick's rooms?"

"The door guards would stop you."

"If I got past them."

"You wouldn't." He stopped, considering her carefully. "But if you're lucky, someone would recognize you and take you to Riddick. He would not be happy. At the least, he would execute your guards."

She flinched. "If I'm unlucky?"

"If you seemed strong enough to survive, and you were found by a kind hearted person, conversion. Otherwise, to put it delicately, you would be treated as spoils of war. Because of our selection criteria, there aren't nearly as many female candidates for conversion as male. Many of our men eroticize unconverted young women and they are sometimes smuggled back. Most would assume you were one. They rarely last long. Got it. Gang raped to death. Great. She swallowed. "It would also be inconvenient to me because Riddick would rip this place apart looking for you. He loves you very much. Why are you asking me this?"

What the fuck do I tell him?

Kyra's voice. Do you trust him?

Not even a little bit.

The truth, or something like it. "I was locked up for years because of Riddick. And now I've been locked up by Riddick. I'm not saying I want to leave, but I'm really tired of being behind locked doors."

Vaako's eyes softened slightly. "Ma'am, it really is for your own protection." He stopped, seemed to be thinking something through. His voice became louder. "For what it's worth, it wasn't his plan. He thought you'd rise out of the status pod strong and ready to fight at his side. If you had, no door in the Necropolis would be locked against you. You would have been the first Necromonger Queen, in fact if not in name. When you didn't wake up strong, he had to improvise. We had to improvise. Quickly."

So Riddick didn't mean to bring me back weak and stupid? Riddick though I'd help him destroy the universe? Was I really that much of a bitch? Her eyes prickled. Her voice dropped low. "I converted. Why do people keep saying I didn't?"

Vaako touched his neck. "Ma'am, you didn't convert. You have no mark." He stood abruptly. "The Lord Marshal would get you back, of course. One way or another." His eyes were intense. Right. Riddick can bring me back from the dead. No wonder he thinks he's entitled to fuck me. He really must think he's a god. Vaako kept talking. "If there is anything I can do to make this better, pass word." He sketched a slight bow and was gone.

Nin came back immediately. His eyes were intense. "He's right. Unless you convert, you should not
leave the Lord Marshal's chambers."

*Oh crap.* "That door's not sound proofed, is it? You heard all that?"

"Some of it." He hesitated. "My apologies. But the Lord Marshal told me to keep you safe. Vaako is my superior officer, but I would have . . . intervened if necessary."

"Huh." She rubbed her eyes. *You would have fought the number two guy for me?*

*Would you fight the number one?*

*Where the hell that'd come from? I love Riddick. He loves me.*

Kyra was laughing at her. *And that's why you've started to plan your escape?* Ninshubar kept talking. *Which one hurt you yesterday?*

"Peter." She paused. "Why?"

He smiled thinly. "I will talk to him."

She closed her eyes. Thought about it. "Thank you."

He snorted. "It's really not a problem, mum."

"Jack," she said, automatically.

"Jack." He nodded. "You should tell the Lord Marshal exactly what happened. I think he cares for you."

She swallowed. "Yeah. But if I did, I'd have to tell him why he stopped. And I don't want to." At Ninshubar's blank look she continued unwillingly, "he's kinda jealous."

Ninshubar blinked a few times. "Of me?"

"I think so. I like you. He doesn't like that. I don't . . . I don't want to give him reason to dislike you more."

His eyes were intense again. "You don't need to protect me. I am a very big boy."

She laughed, hollowly. "It's not just protecting you. If he thought you were a . . . rival for my affections, even only in other people's minds, he might do something about it. And then where does that leave me? I don't have the feeling there's a lot of former body guards around. I get the feeling there's a whole lot of folks like Peter and Kelmis."

He did not deny it. He spent the rest of the day telling her stories of terraforming lore, of worlds brought from grand and sterile darkness into lush and messy light. She was almost pathetically grateful.
It was going to be a good day. There were pockets of resistance, creating an opportunity for some satisfying kills. And some satisfying adulation. Riddick was beginning to like the latter more than he cared to admit. But when a crowd fell to its knees worshipfully – *shit, yeah*. Scratched a serious itch.

And waiting for him, back in his room, was Jack. She scratched a serious itch too.

But there was an unexpected problem.

*She doesn't want to be here.*

Here, where soldiers followed him and mercs didn't; where crowds collapsed to their knees in adoration and he could fuck anyone he wanted. She didn't like it.

*No, she hates it.*

And that was an unintended consequence of getting her back more Jack than Kyra. Kyra, he thought, would have been just fine here; rampaging across the galaxy, showing it that she was the better killer. But Jack had a real streak of . . . kindness. She cared about people.

*Stupid kid. Even cried for Johns.*

*Wonder how much she cried for me?*

The thought was unsettling. He shoved it away.

*She loves me. But what happens when she hates the Necros more than she loves me?*

Maybe I should just keep her drugged up. She'll be happy, and I'll know what she's feeling.

*Tempting.*

*Very tempting.*

*Probably wrong.*

Decided to start by giving her presents. Made some calls.

0o0

Riddick sent the door guards away, came in to his rooms quietly. He could hear the soft murmur of Jack and Ninshubar's voices. He moved silently through his rooms towards them.

Her voice, wondering. "How long would it take?"
His, soft, nostalgic. "Years. Maybe decades."

"Wow. Were we out of systems?"

"No. But it penciled out. There are places a new star system would fit-" Ninshubar's voice hesitated almost imperceptibly, "—beautifully." He was moving towards the door almost silently.

_He can hear me_, Riddick realized. _I don't think he knows who I am. But he knows someone's here._ He was grinning. Damn. Vaako nailed it. _He's the right guy for this._ He eased himself back into a handy door into a darkened room. The faint smell of Jack's fear trickled down the hall. _She knows someone's here too._ Of course she does. _He's probably worked out hand signals with her._ Poor kid. He could almost see Nin gesture to her away from the door and indeed there was a soft noise; Jack's bare feet moving almost silently away. Then Ninshubar eased out into the corridor. Standing in the shadows, Riddick didn't think Nin could see him. Most men wouldn't. Somehow, though, Nin's eyes locked on target. "My Lord."

Riddick stepped into the light. "You're good. How's my little princess?"

The other man's voice was flat. "Afraid."

Riddick nodded, thoughtfully. "Smart. But you wouldn't let anyone hurt her."

"If I could stop them." There was a hint of a challenge in there. Riddick grinned again. _You poor bastard. You think I'm a bad man, don't you? You think I like hurting the defenseless little girl? Leavin' her bleeding? Like I'd ever do that._

Jack poked her head out the door. "Jesus, Riddick, you scared me half to death."

"Don't be afraid." He jerked his head at Nin. "This guy'd die for you."

Her look stripped him to the bone. "And you know how much fun that is." Nin gave her a sharp look.

Riddick scowled at her. _No givin' away our secrets, little girl._ Then he laughed. "Depends who it is. Nin, you can go now."

"Sire," he responded woodenly. His hand raised towards Jack, fell without touching her. Settled for a nod, headed down the hall.

"Wait up," Riddick called after him.

"Sire?"

"Bring your knitting tomorrow."

"Sire?"

"Something to do. Book. Whatever it is you do for fun. Solo fun."

Nin gave him a blank look, nodded, and left. Riddick offered Jack his arm. After a moment, she took it. He led her down the hall. "You like torturing him, don't you?" Her voice was quiet.

"Maybe a little. It's a guy thing. Got you some presents."

That diverted her completely. "Really?" Her voice was hopeful again. He grinned down at her.
"Yeah." He pushed into the bedroom. Swept her into his arms, spun her around. "God, I love you."

She blinked at him, her little feet kicking in the air. "I love you too. . ." it was almost a question.

He grinned. Crossed the room, set her on the bed. Pulled a bulging bag out of a big pocket, handed it to her. She opened it, blinked at what was in her hands. "They're . . . pretty," she said, surprised.

He snorted. They were stunning. The jeweled spoils of a dozen worlds and one special piece he had built just for her. Black and silver, built from spun jewels and silver and things even more valuable. It looked like his own soul. Except when the light caught it just right, then it rippled into rainbows and dark shadows dancing around the room. You could build a medium sized city for what it would cost to buy. You could buy a planetary system for the lot. He dumped the bag out in her lap, sorted out the special bracelet, latched it on her left wrist. "This one's a communicator. Wired to talk to me, Vaako, or Neith. Plus there's a panic button. You wanna talk to anyone else, you let me know." He showed her how to use it, twisting the strands into different configurations. Her eyes were shining. "Now, I don't want you to use it too much. The communication folks can hear anything you say on it. But in case you need me. Or something. The rest," he let the jewels stream through his hands, "are just pretty. Like you."

"Thank you," she said, sounding impossibly touched. She wrapped her arms around him, kissed him. He kissed her back, hungrily.

He drew back. "This bracelet is pretty much indestructible. I want you to leave it on. It's got a tracking device in it. You take it off, a phalanx of soldiers show up unless I give the counter-order, understand?"

Her face fell. "Tracking device? Like an electronic shackle?"

He snorted again. "No. You can take it off; just some folks will be coming by to check on you. And it only tracks you if I turn it on. But if someone takes you or hurts you, hit the panic button. It'll start yellin' for help. If they take it off you, at least we'll know where you were when they did. Figure it'll give us an edge."

Her eyes were big. "Do you think someone might?"

"Maybe. Why do you think you have guards? Got you something else." He pulled it out of a different pocket, handed it over.

It completely derailed her distress. "A datapad?"

"Yup. It's autonomous. Got thinking about your cheat code notion. Smart. Dunno if there is such a thing, but it's loaded up with all the Necromonger mumbo-jumbo shit I could find. Plus a bunch of stuff. It doesn't hook up with the computer system, so no one will know what you're readin'. If you want somethin' that's not on there, let me know. The priests would bitch at me for weeks if they knew what I was givin' you."

Her eyes were shining and she kissed him again. "Thank you." She laughed, a little ruefully. "I didn't get anything for you."

"You're for me," he said roughly. She gave him a startled look, like the words meant something more to her. He started kissing her, hungrily, hard, pushing past her hesitation. He felt a little bad about that, really, he really intended to go slower, but he was already falling into her impossible green softness.

000
Nin had been extra wooden this morning. Jack didn't seem to notice; she was losing herself in the datapad within a few minutes of getting dressed. He was very pleased about that.

Prytania was almost behind them; he was scrutinizing Tauri, their next target. The Taurians had a strategy. Heavy and bull headed, it appealed to him for some reason. No chance against the Necro superior strength and Riddick's willingness to waste his own battalions. Vaako came in, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"What?"
"Did you order Ninshubar to kill Peter?"
"Huh? Who?"
"Peter. He was one of Jack's guards the day-" He broke off. "For a day."

Right. One of the fuckers who rouged her up. And let that bitch of a wife of yours in. "Ninshubar killed him?"
"Yes. I take it you did not order it."
"No."
"Very well." Vaako wheeled away.

"Wait. Why do you care? Our soldiers off each other sometimes."

"There are . . . forms that must be observed. According to witness reports, he did not. If he was executing your will, I would turn a blind eye. Since you did not, discipline must be extracted."

"What kind of discipline?"

"Most likely public and fatal. Depending on the results of our investigation."

Jack likes him. Likes him a lot.

Fatal discipline would solve that problem.

She'd be sad. Blame me. He sighed noisily. "You got it on tape?"

"So I'm told."

"Let's watch. Been too long since I saw a movie. Have someone get us popcorn."

000

The cameras told a story, and it started with Ninshubar hunting, prowling through the entertainment deck until he found Peter drinking in something like a bar. Nin slid in easily, the men parting around him. The chatter was a low roar. Vaako did something and all excess sound was pared away.

Ninshubar stopped at the table where Peter and some other men were drinking. "We need to talk."

"Pull up a chair."

"No. This won't take long. The Lord Marshal's girl. You hurt her."

"No one told us not to," Peter said lazily.
"I think that was fairly implied from our orders."

"I didn't. And I consulted with an expert, and she didn't think so either." Riddick slotted his eyes towards Vaako, who exhaled noisily. Riddick hid his grin in a mouthful of popcorn.

"Then let me make it explicit. Should the opportunity arise again, Don't. Hurt. Her."

"Oh, get off yourself. If she'd just laid back and relaxed it wouldn't have hurt a bit. She must like it rough. You fuck her yet?"

Ninshubar grabbed Peter by the throat, pulled him out of the booth and smashed him down on the table. Drinks fell and other men scrambled away from the sticky flood. Nin let go abruptly. The man stayed down, but he smiled knowingly, maliciously.

"You haven't fucked her yet, have you? Have you even touched her? She's the softest thing ever. Almost came in my pants when I got to her breasts. Fuckin' amazing. Like our Lord Marshal had her built for fucking."

Almost dreamily, Nin reached forward and broke the man's neck. The crack seemed to echo. Peter's companions launched themselves at him. There was a flash of red and three bodies hit the floor. Nin was standing over them all, a bloody knife in one hand.

He looked around the room, waiting. Waiting for someone else to challenge him. When no one did, he stepped over the bodies and out the door. Vaako turned off the recording. He'd gone slightly pink. His popcorn was untouched.

"Nice," Riddick drawled. Had a few more fluffy pieces. "Fast. I could really get to like him." He chewed thoughtfully. "We've got experts on the orders of the Lord Marshals, do we?"

"Not as such," Vaako ground out.

"Hm." He stared at Vaako hard, enjoying his discomfort. Decided to prolong it. Took another mouthful of popcorn, talked around the edges. "Just remembered. Last movie I saw was Apocalypse Now."


"Huh?"

Vaako shook himself. "It's based on the book."

"You read books?"

"When I can."

Riddick grunted. Vaako continued, a distant look in his eyes. "It's about going into the dark. About being changed." He shook himself. "We all began as something else," he said, almost defensively.

"What the fuck ever man. Watched it with Jack. She fell asleep. Said there weren't enough real girl characters. She didn't identify with anyone." Riddick snorted. "What the fuck ever. So what did Nin do wrong?"

"He didn't give Peter a fighting chance."

Smart. "We're supposed to do that?"
"Yes."

"So what, no overwhelming force in battle?"

"That's different. We give our own people a fighting chance. We're trying to save everyone else."

Is that what we're doing? "Let's let this one slide. You gonna eat that?"

0o0

The diaries of the old Lord Marshals had to be about the most disturbing thing Jack had ever read. Riddick had nailed it. These guys believed their own shit. And their shit stank.

They loved the Underverse. As far as they were concerned, it was the greatest thing since slicing things.

There was a way for a converted soul to avoid it. "The True Death," whatever that was. Lord Marshals could do it. Great. I can avoid an eternity of torture by getting Riddick to kill me in some special way. She shivered. Come to think of it, he might go for that. . . .

Kyra laughed at her. Yeah, right. Then he couldn't fuck you anymore. Can't pretend he's doin' all this for you. He ain't goin' for that. She shuddered. Nin's head snapped up from his own reading. "Mum?"

"Jack," she said, automatically.

"Jack," he repeated. "You seemed . . . ."

"Bone deep terrified?" She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. It comes and it goes. Don't worry about it."

He stared at her, clearly unhappy. She smiled at him. "Look – It's just – it's just it hits me every so often, what's going on. I'll forget one of these days."

His expression was dubious. "Forget what, specifically?"

She sighed. "Look, you guys are destroying all life in the universe, you get that, don't you?"

"Yes." His voice was flat.

"And I'm in the middle of it. It's not – it wasn't my life's ambition, you know?"

"It's not your fault."

Riddick thinks it is. She rubbed her eyes. "I know. It's still really fucking scary."

He was staring at her hard. Oh shit, what if he narcs on me? Tells people I'm not down with the universal destruction? "Don't tell anyone?" she said in a small voice.

"Never."

Her eyes prickled. Turned back to the diary of Naphemil. Couldn't bring herself to look at Nin. It took a few hours but she found something. Naphemil mentioned a secret passage out of the Lord Marshal's chambers. She'd read right past it before she realized what it was. A way out.

0o0
The weeks rolled past. Jack, mostly, settled down. They'd reached an uneasy accord; he didn't tell her what he was destroying; she didn't ask. She was there for him, whether she wanted to be or not, and that was good enough for him. Most of the time. Whether it was good enough for her, that was a question he wasn't going to tackle until he had to. He tried hard to be sweet to her in the mean time. For the most part, she drank it up. But there were moments when she was so bitter he seriously considered letting her have what she seemed to want; the run of the Basilica.

Yeah. You say that now. You won't feel that way when you yank her bleeding outta some soldier's bunk. He mostly ignored her when she got too much. It didn't happen often. More than he liked, though.

There were plenty of other problems to tackle. Running a war fleet could be a pain in the butt. Riddick now knew a whole lot more about hydroponic food production than he ever wanted to. But for the most part, this place ran itself; make sure the right people where in the right place, make sure they got what they needed, and problems were few.

The right people. To the irritation of the surviving priests, Riddick hadn't "gotten around" to appointing a replacement for either the Propolos or the Purifier. None of the people who wanted those jobs seemed right. Plus irritating priests was fun. It also meant the Hierothesion was likely empty save for the Quasies. Several weeks after Jack got her concussion, Riddick made time to go visit.

"How can we serve you, our Lord Marshal?" they sniggered self importantly into his head.

He smiled, grimly. "I wanna bring someone else back. And I don't want him weak or hurt and sniveling like the girl. I want him to walk out on his own two feet and be ready to work. What do we have to do?"

Theirs was a sullen silence. Then a whisper. "Heresy . . ."

"How the fuck is that heresy?"

"Birth should hurt."

"Fine. Make it hurt. But I want him walking out on his own two feet."

There was a thoughtful silence. Then, finally, grudgingly, "It can be done."

"Good. Another thing. You did good with the girl."

"Thank you. We tried."

"Can you do better?"

There was a pause. "What would you have us do?"

"It's like – it's like she's two people. The sweet little girl and the bitter woman. I really like the girl. The woman's a little irritating. Can you – can make her the little girl, all grown up?"

There was a long silence. Then something like petulance. "We tried our best to give you what you want. But the woman is the little girl, all grown up."

"Grown up hard. I like her better soft."

"We knew. We tried. We softened her as much as we could without fragmenting her. There is
"nothing more we can do."

"Try."

"... maybe . . .

"Give us time to think on this. Bring us the girl in a few days. We shall try, Lord Marshal, to make her what you want. And when you have the soul you wish to remanifest, bring us another body."

Riddick nodded. Smiled. "Does it have to be dead?"

Dark laughter flowed through the room. "Oh, not at all, Lord Marshal."
Chapter 11: Cherries

Jack was a little girl, wrestling with a monster. She was giving it all she had, using every trick he'd ever taught her, showing no fear. Maybe she thought she was holding her own, but Riddick knew the thing was well fed, lazy, teasing, enjoying the momentary defiance of its prey. And Riddick knew that when it got bored, she was dead. He tried to intervene, to rip this thing of teeth and talons off of her, but his muscles were frozen. He could only watch, sick, knowing what was coming.

The monster had her down, pinned. She was strangely unafraid, even pleased. Stupid, Jack, he thought, anguished, helpless, raging. This isn't a good thing. Then the monster morphed into something that looked just like him, still pinning her down, but grinning. "Got you," his own voice whispered. Both her little wrists were held above her head in one massive hand. The other hand was on her throat, gently, palm over her jugular. He knew what his double was doing. Feeling her pulse in his hand. He loved feeling her blood pulse underneath his hands. Always had. Liked it even more now. He tried again to step in, pull the heavy body from her, even if it was his own. But he was still paralyzed.

She rolled her eyes. "Shit. You win again."

"You did good, kid," his double said, approvingly. "Do you know what you did wrong?"

"Bein' born?"

He heard himself rumble, amused. "We all did that. I mean today."

"Shouda hit you in the balls."

His double grinned, delighted. "Yeah. But no. It's actually really simple. All you got is speed and flexibility. You'll never been strong enough to fight me on my own terms. Make me fight on yours." He leaned his head forward, sniffed her neck. His own voice whispered, low and rough. "And never, ever, let someone like me get a good grip on you."

This all happened, Riddick thought distantly. We did this. When she was a little girl. Shit. Again and again. Smelling her. Tripping on her heart beat. Pinning her down. Did I really want to fuck her, even then? She tried to buck him off. It was the wrong thing to do. His double agreed, frowning down. "Don't do that."

"I'm supposed to just lie back and take it?"

"That'd be smart, yeah. Wait for your shot, kid. Don't meet strength with strength if you don't got more of it."

"So what do I do?"
"If I'm around? Wait for me to save you. Hardly anyone would kill a sweet treat like you. We'd have some time."

Did I say that? Did she think it was a promise? He swallowed. Wasn't it a promise? The little girl morphed into Kyra underneath him. And it was him, he wasn't watching in the shadows any more, it was his body pinning her down, her body, her like she was in Crematoria, all hard and bitter and bloody and strong and drop dead gorgeous. He wanted to fuck her so bad it hurt. Her voice was a weapon. "My hero. You left me for monsters."

He shook his head. "Left you someplace safe and pretty. You're the one who escaped from paradise. And then I stormed the fuckin' gates of hell for you. I've been a good guy." He lowered his lips to her throat, kissed it roughly. Smelled her scent the way his double had. Not afraid. Not getting much meat. Not fertile.

She snorted. "Yeah. You just keep telling yourself that. But I know, even if my stupid little doppleganger is buying it. You didn't do it for me. You did it for you. And some day, I will make you pay for it." He chuckled against her. Raised up slightly, pulled a knife from his pants. Her eyes widened. "What are you doing?"

"Open your mouth."

At that, she pressed her lips together hard, shook her head. He shifted his grip on her hands, put some weight on them. She's gonna be bruised, some part of him observed, regretfully. Gently, he traced those lips with the tip of the knife. "Come on, baby. Can't use your blade when it's trapped in there. Give it to me." She shook her head again. He pressed the knife in between her lips carefully enough that there was only a tiny bit of blood. Her eyes went wide. He whispered, low, "give me the blade or I'll cut it out of you."

He wasn't sure if she believed him, but she opened her mouth. The blade was right there, like a cherry held between her teeth. He used his own knife to flick it to the other side of the room. Deliberately laid his knife down close enough for her to grab, if he wasn't pinning her wrists. Her eyes fixed on his knife longingly. He searched her mouth with fingers that made her gag until he was satisfied there was nothing there more deadly than her tongue. She turned her head and spat. Glared at him. "Asshole. That thing's saved my life."

He grinned down at her, and suddenly there were two of him again. The one watching. And the one doing. The one doing whispered, "don't you want to die? Isn't that why you came lookin' for me? I am Death. The Destroyer of Worlds." He watched himself kiss her bloody lips tenderly, raise himself off of her body. Let go of her wrists rolled her over, pulled up her hips, hooked the knife into the waistband of her pants and slit them open. Nicked the skin and the smell of her sweet blood was maddening, intoxicating, transporting. She cursed and tried to scramble away. He heard himself laugh again. He felt himself thrust into her. Three more thrusts and she stopped fighting. He was almost disappointed with her. Then she took one long breath and twisted her neck against the knife, hard, severing the jugular. She went limp under him, her blood cascading over his hand.

She froze. "You wouldn't."

"News to me," his own voice laughed. His double opened his pants one handed, positioned himself, and thrust into her hard. She screamed and bucked and tried to twist away, grazing her neck against the knife. He heard himself laugh again. He felt himself thrust into her. Three more thrusts and she stopped fighting. He was almost disappointed with her. Then she took one long breath and twisted her neck against the knife, hard, severing the jugular. She went limp under him, her blood cascading over his hand.

Riddick jerked awake, heart pounding. He'd rolled away from Jack in the darkness and now he
groped for her. She woke with his hands on her throat and the heady scent of her terror made him
groan. He managed to move his hands, run them down her body. Checking for wounds that couldn't
be there. He wasn't holding a knife. He hadn't pinned her wrists hard enough to bruise. Only a
dream. I didn't kill her. Not this time.

"It's okay, Jack," he whispered, his voice ragged. "Bad dream. Thought you were-" he broke off.
"Thought you were dead." He pressed his forehead into hers, hooked a heavy thigh over her hips,
pinning her close. He could feel her rapid breathing.

Her voice cracked. "Can – can you turn on the light?"

He nodded, bumping her forehead with his own. "Lights dim," he whispered, and the room filled
with a soft silvery light.

She released a shuddering sigh against his face. "You scared me." She reached for his cheek,
touched it gently. He groaned again. She tried, awkwardly, to get her arms around him. To comfort
him. For dreaming he'd killed her. Poor kid. Poor stupid kid. I gotta take better care of her. I gotta
not be the bad guy. "It's okay. I'm okay." She was trying to make her voice soothing, to keep her fear
out of it.

He nuzzled her cheek with his own. "Yeah." He kissed her softly on the lips. "Fuckin' glorious." He
could almost taste the blood he'd spilt in the dream. Kissed her harder. Rolled her on to her back and
straddled her. Kissed her throat roughly where the knife must have cut her. She made a small noise,
afraid again.

"Not so fast," she whispered. "Please." She stroked his back with her soft hands and he shuddered.
He took a deep breath, forced himself to calm down. Kissed down her neck, her chest, her breasts,
the impossible softness of her skin surreal against the memories of that skin in his dream, so much
rougher than this and littered with scars. I should be horsewhipped for this, he thought, irrationally.
She died under me and all I can think of is how much I wanna fuck her. He kissed a small circle
around her right breast, felt the nipple harden against his cheek. Took it into his mouth and suckled it,
gently, worshipfully. She made another small noise. He sucked harder and her breath caught. He
 glanced up at her face as well as he could with his lips on her breast and could see her eyes glazing
over with pleasure.

He switched to the other breast and her breath hitched. The scent of her desire was sweating from her
armpits, from between her legs. He groaned again. Dragged his lips down her chest, her belly, her
pelvis, thrust his tongue between her legs. She gasped again. "Slow down," she pleaded. "Riddick, I
can't go from dead sleep to abject terror to sex this fast."

He chuckled. Kissed the surface of her pelvis, pulled himself back up to her lips. "Okay." He
reached down and took his cock in his hand, rubbed it against her. She tensed, unready. He relented.
Kissed her lips hungrily again, then kissed and sucked and nuzzled her breasts until she was panting,
arching, thrusting herself against him. He raised and twisted his hips slightly and was inside of her,
thrusting and panting himself. Buried his face against her soft neck, pressed his lips hard against the
pulse, and stopped thinking.

She was sleeping peacefully. He let his hand sink into her head, just to be sure. No dreams. Kissed
her on the forehead, pulled himself away. Dressed silently, gazing at her. Took a deep breath,
reached into himself, and he was back in the Underverse, falling. Let there be land, he thought, and
the lone and level sands stretched far away. He smiled, grimly. "Eris," he called. "The Furyan
Purifier. The last.

Found him sitting at a table, scrutinizing a chart. "Hail, brother," he called. "You went back to the Necropolis, I hear?" His voice was light, ironic. "I am glad. What brings you to death's other kingdom?"

Riddick frowned at him. "Ya know, I could have used you. Rather than have you walk into the fire. Kinda self centered."

The man shrugged. "You think so? I think I played my role. You were what was needed. You burned with it. Revenge, immortal hate, and courage never to submit or yield. What is else not to be overcome?"

Someone else told me that. "Whatever. I could use you now. Come back with me."

The man sighed. Made a note on the chart. "Leave death's dream kingdom. For what?"

"I wanna beat Zhylaw, not just kill him."

The man's clear eyes sharpened. "Really?"

Riddick laughed. "Oh yes." He hesitated. "There's a girl."

"The spear maiden? The Lord Marshal's little mistress?"

Huh? "Huh?"

The man sighed. "Kyra?"

Riddick hesitated. The Lord Marshal's little mistress? Is that what she is? "Yeah. Real name's Jack. Don't want her comin' back here when she-" he broke off. "I don't want her to spend eternity bein' tortured."

The man's pale eyes pierced him. "Why? She's not one of us, is she?"

Riddick grunted. "I ain't exactly one of us either."

Eris exhaled, noisily. "This is easy. All you have to do is give her the mercy of the True Death. Any junior purifier can show you how. Her soul will be extinguished. There will be nothing left to hurt."

"I'm not killing her." Riddick's voice was flat. "Find another way."

"I know of nothing else."

"What'll it take for you to find out?"

"The supplication of a dead man's hand?" At Riddick's blank look Eris continued, "I do not know. But I'm willing to try. For the right reward. You're the Lord Marshal now."

"Yeah."

"Who is the Purifier?"

"Never got 'round to namin' no one."

Eris nodded, thoughtfully. "Me. The wanderer returned."
"Done."

The other man smiled. "And I get a free hand?"

"Long as you don't undermine me or-" he broke off. "As long as you're on my side. I need – I need someone on my side. Someone who knows stuff."

Eris smiled. "Acceptable. One more thing."

"Name it."

"Furya."

"Huh?"

"I want Furya. I want to bring it back."

_Do I have the power to do that? _"What the fuck ever man. It's yours."

"You'll give me what I need?"

"You save Jack, you can have anything you want."

"Then we have a deal."

Riddick pulled out a knife. Slit his arm, started to offer it to Eris. The man held up a hand. "The knife will be adequate." Bemused, Riddick handed it over. Eris ran a finger down the bloody blade, delicately licked the blood from that finger. Riddick grasped his shoulder, reached into himself, and they were back in the Lord Marshal's bedroom.

While he was gone Jack had curled into a little ball, looking very childish. He pressed his lips to her forehead and for an instant, he was in her dream. She was a little girl wrestling with a monster. It clutched at him, so close to his own nightmare. The dream ended abruptly as Jack's eyes flickered open, locked on his, glinting in the darkness.

"Hey," she whispered.

_Whoops. Didn't mean to wake her. _"I gotta go do somethin'. I'll be back before morning."

She blinked up at him childishly, yearningly. Like she wanted him to protect her from monsters?

"Promise?"

"Promise." He could almost feel Eris rolling his eyes. _Can he hear this? _He kissed her again tenderly and made his way out.

The Necropolis never slept, but it did quiet. He stalked down the halls, calculating. _Who? _His eyes played over the scurrying techs who dominated the corridors this time of night. _Right size . . .

"Riddick?" A voice from inside of him called.

"What the fuck? You can talk to me? Jack didn't talk to me."

He could almost see the other man smile. _One of those things I know. You need a body."

"Yeah. Quasies said it didn't have to be dead."
"It doesn't. Nor do you need the Quasi-Dead."

"Really?"

"I would recommend letting them into your mind as little as possible. They will sense the shallowness of your commitment to the Necroverse. I will show you how to do it yourself. If you let me."

"You bet." Riddick hesitated. "Any thoughts on whose body I should use to bring you back?"

The other man laughed. "Dame Vaako?"

Riddick snorted. "Tempting. Nah... someone else."

The other man was quiet for a long moment. "You are fond of Vaako." Riddick shrugged. "Be careful of him. And very careful of his wife. She is ambitious and charismatic." Riddick shrugged again. "Who is doing my job?"

"Some twerp named Keegan."

He could feel Eris nodding, solemnly. "I know him. Yes. Him." Eris knew where the man slept. Riddick knew how to override the lock. He wasn't there. Riddick decided to wait.

______________________________

Jack waited until she could hear that Riddick had left. Waited a few minutes more. Pulled herself out of bed and dressed in the darkness. Her heart was hammering. First time she'd been alone in a very long time, and she was about to do something very, very brave. Or very, very stupid.

She turned on the datapad and by its dim light she pushed into one of the wardrobes. Past clothes that Riddick would never wear. The back of the wardrobe was fitted wood. But there was a spot that was indented slightly. She got her fingers into it and twisted.

An agonizing pause. Then, silently, the panel slid back. A tunnel appeared. I shoulda packed a bag, she thought, giddily. She shoved the thought away. This was just reconnaissance. She grabbed an armload of clothes, shoved them in the gap to keep it from sliding closed behind her. Slid over them and snuck down the passageway.

The first opening led into the throne room. She paused at the peep hole. I died in there. She swallowed, forced herself to look. The room was almost dark, almost silent. She almost moved on before she realized that Dame Vaako was there, on her knees, prostrate before an empty throne. That's weird.

How would you know if that's weird? Maybe everyone takes a pilgrimage here. Everyone but you and Riddick. Hell, maybe that's what Riddick's doing when he's not cuddling with you or hacking people to bits. She barely repressed a snort at the surreal image of Riddick on his knees, forehead pressed to the ground. Barely repressed a snort until the image made her heart ache.

He did this for me. I can't leave him.

No, probably not. But you could man up and try.

What will he do to me when he catches me?
Kyra's voice was sardonic. *He'll up your security. He wouldn't even let Abu spank you, remember? He's never actually tried to hurt you. Just control you. No reason to think that's gonna change.*

"Hail, lady," a cool voice cut across the semi-darkness of the throne room. "Your reverence does you credit."

Two robed men eased into the room. Dame Vaako stretched luxuriously, stood only a few meters away. *Stay very, very still,* Kyra whispered.

*I'm not a complete idiot* she shot back at herself.

"Thank you, my lord purifier," Dame Vaako's voice was warm and sweet. "I pray every day. Pray for the Lord Marshal."

"My lord purifier," the front man repeated, "is dead and gone. I fill the role. I do not have the title."

Dame Vaako shrugged. "My Lord Pardoner Keegan, then."

Keegan sketched a bow. "My lady," he said, terribly formally, "we are glad you are here. You are one of the few who listen to us who has access to him. We fear he does not understand the gravity of the situation. A new Purifier must be invested. And a new Propolos."

"You do me a great compliment," Dame Vaako's voice was still warm and sweet. "But I have very little influence with our new Lord Marshal. If you men cannot persuade him to name a new Purifier . . ."

"Madam, I fear he does not grasp why it is important."

"You have told him, have you not?"

The man made a complicated gesture. "I have tried."

"Why is it important, Lord, Pardoner?"

"Please. Call me Keegan." The man seemed to be thinking. "These are secrets of the highest order, madam."

"Which is why you wanted to meet here, away from prying eyes." The man fell pensively silent. Dame Vaako continued, saccharine sweet. "Sir, I want to help. But without knowing more, I fear I cannot persuade him."

The man nodded, turned to stare at the throne, giving Jack a full look at his face. Angular. Old. Sharp. "No one must know this," he said.

"Of course."

"The Lord Marshal is not merely our leader. He ties the Underverse to this twilight kingdom. Without him, our . . . particular connection to the better world beyond will be broken. Our faithful will not, necessarily, awake in the Underverse. We see paradise because we convert to his cause and he can walk between these worlds. If he can't . . ." Keegan shuddered.

"Lord Marshals die, and the mantel passes to their natural successor, does it not?" Dame Vaako asked with the sort of calculated wide eyed innocence that made both Jack and Kyra want to slap her.

Keegan shrugged painfully. "We believed the mantel passes naturally to the Lord Marshal's killer,
should he be an appropriate candidate. We knew that if the kingship did not pass naturally, a properly invested purifier could bind an appropriate candidate to the Threshold."

"That is interesting," Dame Vaako murmured.

Keegan shuddered again. "Madam, Jason, what I am going to tell you next is known to almost no one. Riddick simply should not be the Lord Marshal. He is not an appropriate candidate. The Quasi-Dead have probed him deeply. He does not believe. He is not one of us. And yet the Underverse has claimed him as its own as completely as it ever claimed Zhylaw. We do not understand why. If the dark helm could pass to him," Keegan shuddered again. "If it could pass to him, we fear it could pass to anyone. A foreign soldier. The breeder who shares his bed. He risks himself in battle almost daily, and he is known to be brutal with the girl. If he should be killed in battle; if the breeder should take into her head to take up arms against her oppressor some dark night . . . should it pass outside the faithful again . . . " He trailed off, woefully. "A surmountable problem, if our people in the right positions. Catastrophic if not."

"So the purifier also ties us to the Underverse?" Dame Vaako asked quietly.

Jason and Keegan exchanged looks. Seemed to reach a decision. "No," Jason answered softly. "The Purifier is just a vessel. The Quasi-dead tie us. They live in both realms."

"And they are scattered through the fleet."

"Yes. The Quasi-Dead and the lesser threshold."

"Guarded by loyal troops, Jason."

"But vulnerable to attack. Especially if some of the converted are not truly loyal, like the woman Riddick followed here."

"So," she said, thoughtfully, "a properly invested Purifier could tie a suitable candidate to the better world beyond, even if it did not pass through the death of the Lord Marshal. But kill the Lord Marshal, destroy fleet and the lesser threshold, and our dream of universal salvation fails."

The men nodded. "Who do you think he should name, Keegan? You? He does not seem to like you."

"No. I pushed my own claim too hard for him. But young Jason here would be an excellent candidate. He has proven his worth and his courage." Jack stared at the man. He looked like he believed hard.

"You serve the Lord Marshal faithfully, young Jason?"

"I serve the Necroverse, my lady," he answered, his voice earnest.

"And you will do what is necessary?"

His voice dropped, reverent. "Yes, my lady."

Dame Vaako nodded, even more thoughtfully. "It would be a pity should his breeder toy kill him. Sad for her should the mantel of kingship fall on her frail shoulders. I imagine she would not live long, carrying that burden. So tell me, do you believe his last pet died by her own hand?"

Jason chuckled. It was not a happy sound. "She grieved the death of her world deeply. I am sorry I was unable to guide her through her grief to the better life beyond."
Dame Vaako laughed. "Well done. Unfortunately, he seems far more protective of this girl." Jack swallowed. "At least thus far."

"I hear you called on her?"

"I did. He was not pleased. She is more than a passing fancy for him. I suspect they have a connection from before his ascendency. But if we could convert her . . ." she paused thoughtfully. "If we convert her, that would give us a friend in his bed." She paused. "She might be useful in other ways."

"Your husband has assigned some of his best men to protect her."

"Yes. I was able to persuade him to send men loyal to the true path one day." She sighed, wistfully. "They have gone to the better life beyond now."

_Huh? Did Riddick kill them even though I asked him not to? Why the hell did I ask him not to?_

"Yes. We heard about the bar fight," Keegan said dryly. "The girl's gallant champion." _I have a champion?_

"The Omphalos man will play his part," Dame Vaako said, back to sweet. _Oh god. Nin killed them. Why did Nin kill them? Kyra's voice cut back. Nin killed them because he's falling in love with you, you stupid little girl._

_Why the hell would he do that?_

"I've never trusted the Omphalos," Jason grumbled. "I know it amused Zhylaw to watch terraformers destroy terraformed worlds, but if he kills Riddick, we could be in a worse position than we are now. Riddick is too ignorant to be all that dangerous. The Omphalos are smart."

"All the more reason to be sure we have our men in the right positions for that sad and joyous day when we welcome a new Lord Marshal," Dame Vaako smiled prettily. "My husband will be wondering where I am soon." She left grandly, her eyes sweeping past the point in the wall where Jack stood, frozen.

Keegan looked at Jason. "That joyous day when we welcome a new. Or welcome back an old one."

"Or welcome back an old one," Jason echoed. "It would be the end of the Vaakos."

"Which is why we do not shadow their happiness with what might be," Keegan said softly. "She'll play her part."

"Till the Underverse comes."

"Till the Underverse comes." They left.

_Shit, I didn't mean to stand here this long._ Jack hurried down the passageway. The next exit was into a corridor. Even in the middle of the night, men and woman were passing. The next was into a dark room. No way to know if she needed a key without opening the door. The passageway kept on going, but she was terrified she'd been gone too long. She hurried back up to Riddick's rooms, back through the wardrobe, putting it back the way it was, stripping her clothes hastily and crawling back into the empty bed.

_Dame Vaako is going to try to kill him. Just waiting until she has her people in position to take advantage of it. Shit. Riddick names a new Purifier and they kill him._
Shit shit shit. I can't bear to watch him die again.

Yes, that'll be a nice side benefit of running away. Kyra noted dryly.

Oh god, I can't leave him. He stormed the fucking gates of hell for me. He loves me. And I promised him I wouldn't.

Yes, concussed and drugged out of your mind, you promised your rapist jailer you wouldn't leave him. Not exactly a binding contract.

Is it really rape? I never really say no. And he's usually so sweet and careful.

Kyra snorted.

Aside from the occasional rough sex and locking me up and not letting me have shoes he's been really nice.

Yeah. Aside from that.

Maybe I should talk to him.

Yeah. 'Cause Riddick's such a talker. He'll just love hearing that what he thinks is love, you think is rape. And as soon as you tell him you can get out of here, that passageway will be bricked up.

She stared into the darkness for a long time.
Chapter 12: Waking Up

Riddick was bored. Talking to Eris while the guy was in his head had been a trip, at first, but now he seriously wanted to get on with the killing. And then with the sleeping. Maybe wake Jack up again and –

"You are really besotted with the girl," Eris noted, dryly.

"Guess so."

"Does she share your infatuation?"

Riddick hesitated. "Dunno. Used to. Sometimes I think she still does."

"How do you know her?"

"I saved her from monsters when she was a little kid. She –we – spent a lot of time together. She got under my skin. Christ, she slept in my arms almost every night for a year."

"Were you lovers?" The voice was terribly formal and polite.

"Christ, no. Way too young. Before that could happen, I left her on New Mecca, thinking she'd be safe and happy. She wasn't. She spent the next five years getting ripped apart by monsters. Fucked her up big time. That's why I went to Crematoria. To get her out. Fuck, it's why I came here. Because she did."

"The little girl the Quasi-Dead saw."

"That's right, you were there. Yeah. You opened the door, didn't you?"

"I did. That is the woman you followed back to the Basilica."

"Thanks. And yeah."

"She is the one you took from Zhylaw. The one in your bed. Whose dreams you can see."

"Yeah."

Riddick had the distinct feeling Eris changed what he was going to say. "I did not recognize her."

"The Quasies brought her back a little different."

"Very different. Did you ask them too?"

"No. Asked 'em to put her back in her body. They did something else."
"Why?"

Riddick paused. "They said they body was spoiled. They said they'd give me what I wanted. I think – I think they rearranged her a little. So she was more like the little girl; less like the woman."

"What does she think of that?"

"Never asked." He hesitated. "After she got hit in the head she said I brought her back wrong and she wanted to be herself again. Never followed up."

There was a long and thoughtful silence. "What did the Quasi-Dead change?"

"Took away the scars. Took away a lot of the bitterness. Made her nicer. Made her drop dead gorgeous. Made her weak. She hates that. They told me you didn't have to be weak."

"No, weakness is not mandatory, merely customary. Are you sorry she's weak?"

"Not really. Makes her easier to control."

"This girl you're besotted with."

Riddick shrugged, forgetting Eris couldn't see him.

"Are you afraid she'd leave you if she could?"

It slid out before he could stop it. "Yeah."

"She seemed comfortable in your bed."

"I think she's making the best of a bad situation." He hesitated. "She hates the Necromongers. What they do. And I've raped her."

There was another long and thoughtful silence. Finally. "You raped the woman you love."

"I've had a tough life."

"Well, that makes it all better."

Riddick snorted. "I didn't mean it to be rape. I just wanted her and she didn't stop me. It wasn't until later that I figured it out."

"She didn't tell you?"

Riddick sighed, noisily. "She did. Then she started sobbing. I wasn't listening. Why am I telling you this?"

"I have no idea."

The silence continued. Finally, Eris broke it. "Zhylaw believes he's getting her back. How far would you really go to stop that?"

"Whatever it takes."

"I told you already. Give her the True Death."

"What's that?"
“Pull her soul from her body. Extinguish it so that there is nothing for the Undervest to claim.”

"That would kill her?"

"Oh yes."

"Then no."

"Would you destroy the Undervest?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Even if it meant you would not be the Lord Marshal anymore?"

Riddick hesitated. "Find another way."

They sat in silence for a long time. Riddick began thinking of Jack, her soft skin, the way she'd sobbed underneath him that first time, the way her tears tasted, the way it felt when he slid in -

Eris cut him off. "My Lord. I am begging you. Stop."

"Stop fucking her? Who the fuck are you to tell me that?"

There was dead silence in his head. Finally, Eris said, with terrible formality, "I have no interest in meddling in your . . . relationship with the girl. I simply do not wish to experience your memories of . . . congress with her."

"We're not in congress. Do the Necros even have a congress?"

The silence came back. Finally, Eris continued, "I am experiencing your memories of being intimate with Kyra. A woman I will need to spend time with. I would rather not experience those memories. It seems . . . unseemly. It will make it . . . awkward to work with her."

"Oh. Right."

Mercifully, the door opened at last. Keegan walked in. "My lord!" Riddick smiled, so grateful for the distraction he almost forgave the man for being a Necromonger. Still his fear was tasty. "I meant no treason."

Huh? Riddick stared at him, suddenly derailed. "Keep on talkin' holy man."

"We just wanted her help. My lord, you really must appoint a replacement for Eris. If something happened to you – if the dark helm were to fall on another unsuitable candidate -"

"You think I'm unsuitable?"

"That's not what I meant, sire."

"Where were you?"

"In the throne room."

"Who with?"

The man swallowed. "Dame Vaako."

"Why?"

The man took a deep breath. "She's planning on killing you. Replacing her with her husband."
"What else is new? What aren't you telling me?"

The man shuddered. Riddick was done. Two steps, he had him against the wall, hand on his head hard. One blink, the man was light. One push, and he was screaming. And Riddick was in his brain.

After an eternity, he stepped back. "You think you can bring Zhylaw back if you have the right Purifier. Well, huh. Thanks for the tip. Ready, Eris?"

"Oh yes."

There was one more scream. Then, after some time, there was a new man, built from the blood and bone of the old. And Riddick had a new skill. Set up Eris in a spare room in his own chambers, went to bed very satisfied. Cuddled Jack close. She barely woke, blinking up at him just enough to confirm that it was him before relaxing into his arms. Damn. I should have gotten a guard in here, he thought blearily. She coulda gotten into all sorts of trouble.

Resolved, again, to be nicer to her. Tomorrow was a brand new day. He'd bring her more presents. Try not to rape her.

oOo

Jack woke up first, muttering about having to pee. He turned the lights on for her, buried his head under a pillow and tried to go back to sleep.

Failed because someone seemed to be knocking at the bedroom door. He pulled himself out of bed, flung the door open, irritated. Eris, fully dressed in clothes they'd taken from Keegan, blanched slightly at his nudity. Riddick glowered at him for an instant, then remembered. Right. Stuff to do. Riddick grinned at him, indicated with a jerk of his head that the man should come in. Went to find pants.


After an instant's hesitation, but with exquisite politeness, Eris stepped forward, extended a hand. Jack took a step back, then defiantly, three steps forward. Shook his hand firmly. Their eyes met and she flushed. Went fast to the closet, yanked a dress over her head. Eris was having trouble pulling his gaze away from her.

"Been here long?" she asked, an arch note in her voice.

Eris hesitated. "Depends how you mean it."

"He's like you, Sunshine." Riddick grinned. "I brought him back from the Underverse last night. Don't tell anyone." He went back to dressing.

"Last night." Her voice was flat.

"Yeah. What I went off to do." Found his shoes. Watched her out of the corner of his eye.

Something strange passed over her face. She turned to Eris. "I know you. You worked for Zhylaw."

Eris flinched. "I did. Once upon a time."
"And Riddick brought you back. Like he brought me back. Last night."

There was something dark and bitter in her voice that Riddick didn't like at all. *What's she goin' on about? Is she jealous that I brought someone else back?* "I did it for you, Sunshine. He's gonna help me figure out how to keep you from Zhylaw."

"Keep me from Zhylaw." Her voice was back to flat. She and Eris exchanged a long look, seemed to reach some sort of understanding. It made Riddick uneasy.

"Yeah. Somethin' botherin' you doll?"

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, of course not." She took a deep breath. "Thanks. Sweet of you to think about the eternity of torture I'm facing."

He stared at her blankly. *What crawled up her butt?*

"I'll wait outside," Eris backed toward the door. Riddick shot him a look.

"Hold on. Jack, what's up?"

She stared at him, fists clenched. "Nothing," she ground out. He blinked at her and she dissolved into light. The sweet green of Jack and the bitter olive of Kyra were equally balanced, fading into each other. Both furious with him. *I do not like this.* Riddick glanced over at Eris and was promptly distracted. The man was gold and black and the black seemed like family. Disconcerting.

Before he could figure it out, his communicator beeped. Vaako. "What now," he snapped.

"Sire, Keegan's missing."

"Who?"

"The acting purifier. He's gone."

"Yeah I kil—look, we gotta talk. Meet me in my office in 10 minutes." He snapped the communicator off, glared at Jack. "We'll finish this later, Sunshine."

"Fine." Her voice was clipped. He frowned at her. She didn't back down. He stood abruptly.

"Come on," he growled at Eris. The man followed him out. Riddick called back, "Hey, Jack?"

"What?"

"Stay out of trouble. Your guards will be here soon."

She snorted but said nothing. Eris followed him silently down the halls of the Basilica.

"Dunno what's gotten into the girl," Riddick muttered. Eris gave him a sardonic look, said nothing. They got to Riddick's official office. Riddick shut the door, spun around, got intrusively close to Eris.

"What?"

"Sire?"

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Eris cocked an eyebrow. "Like what?"
"Like you know what's chewing on Jack's colon."

Eris smiled faintly. "Riddick, the Quasi Dead made that body for her?"

"Yeah?"

"When she came back, she was in pain, naked, weak, bloody, and hysterical? Looking and feeling very different from the person she was the day she died?"

"So?"

"And I came back, as far as she knows, cool, dressed, clean, and comfortable in my own skin?"

_Oh shit. She thinks I did that on purpose._ "Okay. I get it."


"Yeah. He's back. What's up?"

"Back?"

"From the dead. Like Jack."

Vaako spasmed slightly. "Like Jack." His voice was unsettlingly flat, just like Jack's. _No one's happy with me today._

"Yeah. Like Jack. That a problem?"

"No, sire," Vaako's voice was not entirely sincere. "He is an old . . . acquaintance." Eris gave him another thin smile.

"Huh," Riddick said. "You said it was urgent."

"Someone killed the acting purifier." Vaako's voice was back to flat.

"That'd be me."

"I had realized that after we talked."

"That a problem?" Riddick growled.

Eris cleared his throat. "Vaako. It was my suggestion. Riddick and I agreed I would resume my position. Keegan was an obstacle. My apologies if you had become close."

"Of course not," Vaako snapped. Then softened. "I am just concerned about the . . . repercussions."

"Huh?" Riddick looked in between Vaako and Eris. "Huh?" he repeated.

Vaako sighed. "My lord. There are . . . factions. Some are loyal. Some . . . less so. Keegan was very important to several of these factions."

"So he was like your wife. Who he was talkin' too last night, all secret like."

Vaako quailed, then rallied. "Yes. He was like my wife. And like her, he has partisans."

"Yeah, well, you know the two of them were plotting to kill me and put you on the throne."
Vaako exhaled noisily. "Everyone's planning something like that, Riddick. They always are. One reason I appreciate" he stressed the last word "my wife's growing popularity with certain factions is that I have a better idea of what is going on."

"We gotta do anything about Keegan?"

Eris and Vaako exchanged a look. "I'll take care of it," Eris said at last. "More in sorrow than in anger and all that. I recommend an immediate public investiture in the throne room."

"Huh?"

Eris and Vaako exchanged another look. "My lord," Eris said finally, "I recommend you confirm the fact that I am the Purifier in the throne room before the witnesses. I will then explain that upon my return, Keegan's treachery was discovered by you and you dispatched him, but in your mercy you have allowed him his rebirth in the better world. But your mercy should not be further tested."

"Will anyone believe that crap?"

"Absolutely."

"Fine. Do what you have to do. Tell me what to say."

"Oh I shall."

oOo

Jack was in Riddick's gym deliberately hitting his punching bag all wrong and bloodying her knuckles. It hurt. She kept doing it.

"Mum?" Nin called from the door.

She spun around, glared at him, went back to hitting the bag.

"Mum, you're bleeding."

"What the fuck ever. He likes it when I bleed." She hit the bag again. *Motherfucker, that hurts.* Did it again harder.

Nin blanched. "Mum, you have to stop." He came closer.

She hit the bag right with all her strength. Watched it swing, deliberately staying in its path, waiting for it to knock her over. Nin moved across the room fast, reached past her, stopping the bag cold. He was behind her close enough she could feel his breath ruffling the top of her head.

"Jack, I will stop you if I have to."

"Fuck you." She hit the bag hard, shoving it away from his steadying hand.

Nin put his hands on her waist, spun them around so he was in between her and the heavy bag. "Jack, I can't let you hurt yourself."

She almost spat at him. "Oh yeah, your orders. Protect me from outside threats, keep me from hurting myself, and keep me from leaving. Peter told me. All you big men doing whatever your Lord Marshal wants. Don't you dare get my blood on yourself. Mr. Super Nose will get all huffy."

Nin deliberately lifted her right hand in his own, brushed his fingers of his left hand softly over the
bloody knuckles. "Let's get you cleaned up." He tried to pull her to the door gently. She dug in her heels.

"I'm not done here."

"Mum, we can come back after we clean and tape your hands. I'll show you how to hit. Or do something less . . . bloody."

"Why the fuck do you care all of a sudden that I'm bleeding?"

His voice went flat. "I have my orders."

"And if your Lord Marshal orders you to kill me, would you?"

Ninshubar's eyes widened. "Mum. He would never do that."

"What, you know him that well?"

"Well enough," Riddick growled from the door behind her.


Riddick made a dismissive grunt. "I was real quiet." Jack finally looked back at him. He was staring at her bloody fingers still laying in Nin’s hand. He looked at the blood stains on the punching bag, then back to her fingers. His grimace softened. "Jack . . ." Seemed to change his mind about what he was going to say. "Ninshubar, go away. I need to talk to my Sunshine."

"Yes, Sire," Nin said softly, finally letting her hand go. Gave Riddick a nod. Their eyes locked for an instant and some sort of understanding seemed to pass between them. Jack watched, irritated. Oh great, they've decided to take care of me together. My new psychofuck parents. Only mommy's fucking me. I fucking hate this.

Nin was down the hall before Riddick hailed him "Hey. She's right."

"Sire?"

"Mr. Super Nose don't like her blood on you. Wash up."

Oh shit, just how much of that did he hear? Jack flushed, stared down. Riddick crossed the room quietly, picked up her hands. "Jack. . . "

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

She blinked. "Huh?"

"I'm an idiot."

"Yeah." He really did look sincere. Enough to make her thaw slightly. "Yeah. You are. Uh – what brought this on?"

"Let's get you cleaned up. You want me to carry you?"

"No." He looked like he was going to anyway, so she hurried to the door, him following closely. Flustered, she missed the nearest bathroom, ended up leading him back to the master bath. She washed her hands. He watched. After she finished cleaning them, they hurt more. She wrapped a towel around them and let Riddick lead her to the bed. He sat beside her and wrapped his own hands around the towels, applied gentle pressure. Nuzzled her.

"I'm sorry kid."
"Good. About what, specifically?"

He smiled strangely. "About a lot of things. But today – look, when I brought you back, I didn't know what I was doing."

"That's comforting."

He rolled his eyes. "Everyone said it'd hurt and you'd be weak, and I just accepted it. But Eris just told me that was just shit. If I'd known to put my foot down, you'd have had an easier time of it."

She took a deep breath. "Thanks." Stared at her wrapped hands. "Yeah. That was really bothering me."

"I get that."

*What the fuck, he seems to be listening.* "I think you like me weak. And sometimes I think you like hurting me."

He sighed. "Of course not." Now he seemed to be thinking. "You do get you'll never be as strong as these assholes. You get into a fight with them, they'll rip you apart. Might be safer not to be strong. Less likely to be an issue."

She snorted. "You fought with me once. I was pretty good."

"You were great. I was damn proud when you got first blood on me. But these guys aren't human anymore." She swallowed, looked away. He unwrapped her hands. The blood was still seeping slowly from cracks on her knuckles. "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah."

"I'll get the doctor."

"That's sweet." She looked down at her hands. "I really hate being locked up here."

"I know."

"Can't we leave?"

"Jack, we can't leave. You can't believe what'd come after us if we did. Make those mercs look cuddly."

"I know you hit me last time I said this, but why don't we stop them?" She hated how small her voice sounded.

"Jack," his voice was slightly choked. "Kid. I've never hit you."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, you haven't made a fist and punched me. But the first time you squeezed my neck, yanked me to the door, handed me off to bad guys with permission to "have fun." The second time, you knocked me down."

"Jesus, kid, I didn't mean to hurt you. I just don't want you talking like that. It's not safe. But I'd never hit you."

She rubbed her face with her hands, forgetting they were bleeding. His eyes went soft. "Promise?"

"I promise."
I'm gonna cry, she thought. Have I completely misunderstood what's going on? "Why can't we stop them? It's killing me, knowing how many people you're killing because of me."

He frowned again. "Kid, you gotta stop thinking about it. There's nothing you can do."

"Why?"

He sighed, ran a hand over his head. "Jack. Drop it."

She stared down at her hands. "I don't want to."

He grunted. "Tell you what. Let's see what happens with Eris. He's got all sorts of ideas. Maybe he'll have one that makes us both happy."

"He was the purifier? That's like the high priest?"

"Yeah."

"Why would he help you undermine the Necromongers?"

"He's a Furyan. Like me."

"What's a Furyan?"

He smiled. It wasn't a pretty smile. "Fuck if I know. The Necros tried to wipe us out a while back. How I ended up in a liquor store garbage can, I'm pretty sure. Eris wants revenge. So he'll help me. Help us."

She blinked rapidly. "Riddick, you have any more hidden depths? You and Eris are part of some people the Necros tried to massacre? And now you're on their team?"

He snorted. "I beat their team. By the way, you're right about my eyes. It wasn't a prison doctor. I thought it was. It's a Furyan thing. Adaptation."

Is he trying to distract me? "So you were genetically engineered? Like Nin?"

"Nin's genetically engineered?"

"Yeah. Why do you think he's so freakin' big?"

"Never thought about it. And dunno. Probably."

"Can I talk to him?"

"To Nin? Don't you? I still don't want you tellin' him our secrets."

"I haven't. I meant Eris. Can I talk to him? Can I really talk to him? About who I am? About what's going on?"

He stared at her, calculating. Finally, "yeah. You can talk to him. He knows I brought you back," he found himself grinning salaciously, "He knows a whole lot."

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"'cause he was in my head when I was thinking about you. So he's like the only guy in the world who's seen us having sex. Sort of."
She laughed, unsteadily. "Riddick, your exhibitionist tendencies scare me."

He pouted with mock outrage. "Whatcha mean? I'm very discreet."

"So carrying me naked through the Necropolis was discreet?"

"Just makin' a point."

"And letting Eris in while we were both naked?"

"Just sorta happened."

She laughed again. "You're a lot of things, Riddick, but you're not discrete. You like people looking at you."

He grinned at her. "Maybe you've got a point, Sunshine." He rubbed her face with the back of his hand, tenderly. "I'm really sorry, kid. You deserve better than this."

"Who doesn't?"

"Yeah. You want the doctor now?"

"Nah – nah. I feel silly calling her here for stupid stuff like this."

Riddick's voice went soft. "What, you'd rather she be patching up killers? Thought you didn't like that part."

"No one should hurt, Riddick."

"When did you go become so utopian, Jack?"

"I think you brought me back that way." She laughed unsteadily. "You always thought I was better than I really was."

He gazed at her thoughtfully, started playing with her hands gently. "Neith said she brought you some painkillers? Got any left?"

"Yeah."

"Where are they?"

"I don't need them."

He pitched his voice low. "I think you do. Let me take care of you." His fingers got more suggestive. *He's getting turned on, isn't he?*

Kyra's voice answered her sardonically, *of course he is. You're bleeding. He loves that.* She closed her eyes. "Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you do. You can fight me or you can just lay back and enjoy."


"Huh?"

"Do you not know the old saying, 'If rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy?"
His eyes sharpened, but he kept his voice gentle. "No. I didn't know that. I'm just teasin'. You get that, don't you?"

"Sometimes." She shook her head. "But it doesn't matter."

Without letting go of her hands, he leaned forward, nuzzled her neck, breathing in deeply. "Huh?"

"It doesn't matter if I get it. You're just going to do whatever you want, whether I'm laughing or crying."

"So laugh," he whispered, his face buried against her. "Where are the pills?"

Despite herself, she laughed unsteadily again. "In the liquor cabinet. I didn't know where else to put them."

He pulled himself away with obvious reluctance. Came back with a bottle of port in one hand, the bottle of pills in the other. Squinted at the label, shook two white tablets into his hand. Handed it to her with the port. "Drink up."

She scooted back. "I don't usually drink before breakfast, Riddick."

"Indulge me."

"Doctor didn't say I could mix these things."

There was an edge to his smile. "I'll fix it if anything goes wrong. Drink."

"Why?"

"'cause I want you to relax."

Jack's eyes went wide, then hard. Shit, maybe I shouldn't have said that. "Just funnin'" he said softly.

She shrugged, not looking at him. Took the pills from his hand, took a big swallow of the port. Then another. Then another.

He took the port bottle from her. "That's probably enough, kid." She snorted without looking at him. Swung her legs of the other side of the bed, stood, swaying slightly. Pulled the dress off, dropped it on the floor. Yanked off her underwear. Laid back down on the bed, naked, legs apart, knees up and slightly bent, fingers entwined on her stomach. Her eyes were focused on some spot on the ceiling.

She's making a point. I get it. I should leave. God she's beautiful.

He eased himself down the bed, started rubbing her right foot with both hands, keeping his back to her face, her hands, her breasts. Someone had shown him pressure points once, and he tried them, tentatively at first. She made a funny noise, and he glanced over his shoulder. She had tears in her eyes.

"Want me to stop?"

Her breath hitched. "Not really," she allowed grudgingly. For an instant their eyes met.

"Good girl. He kneaded and pressed and concentrated all of his attention on that one foot. Her breathing started to slow and, as he'd hoped, as the drugs took hold, he could feel what she was feeling. Jack's anguish. Kyra's simmering fury. The world swirling from the port and the drugs. And
something damn close to orgasm in her foot. He concentrated hard on that last feeling.

When the right foot seemed incapable of receiving any more pleasure, he laid it down gently on the bed, switched to the left. The anguish and anger seemed to be dissolving into the whirling intoxication. He pressed his fingers in between her toes, hard into the ball of the foot, softly into the instep, felt the muscles give under his fingers.

She made another small noise. He glanced over his shoulder at her again. Their eyes met. "Tell me to stop," he whispered. "I will. I promise."

She blinked a few times, shook her head. It set her world spinning faster and he gripped her feet harder than he meant to keep from tipping. She giggled. He moved his hands to her ankles, one per hand. Exulted in wrapping his fingers all the way around them. Then started working the joints. She was nearly limp already, so he concentrated on what felt good to her. Worked up to her calves, and there was some tension. He applied himself and in almost no time, it faded away.

Her knees . . . he had the sudden surreal memory of shattering a man's kneecap while – almost – tied hand and foot. He closed his eyes and was deeper in her awareness. Felt her awareness of his fingers, his hands, so enormous compared to hers. She was doing what he wanted, giving over to the sensations, but there was a thread of fear underneath that almost hurt. He forced himself to breathe steadily, sink deeper into her awareness. Past the swirling sensations. Under the pleasure. Scooted back and moved his hands to her thighs, wishing she'd touch him.

Something seemed to click and he was her, lying back, drunk, drugged, with someone enormous holding her down. Too big, bigger than him. It didn't make sense. Who was bigger than him?

She tensed and something cold answered. *That old asshole who fucked her when she was a little girl. Comparatively speaking.* He concentrated hard on that thread of fear. It seemed to be a physical thing coiling deep inside of her, orange and malevolent. He stroked it and she convulsed slightly, goose bumps springing up all over her body. *Something I stirred up? Is this a two-way connection?* He rotated on the bed so he was facing her, still sitting. Hands still on her thighs. Studying her intently.

"You okay, kid?" he whispered.

She seemed to come from very far away. "Yeah. Feels good. Just. . . "

"Just what?" He applied both hands to her right thigh, rubbing and kneading again.

"Just . . . remembering . . . "

"Your first time? With that old guy?"

She gave him a rueful look. "Yeah."

"You want me to kill him? Smash his world to little bits?" He moved up to her right hip, and found some tension there.

Her stomach lurched. "Revenge fantasies. . ." She sat up abruptly, leaned over to the bedside table, grabbed the bottle. Took another long swig. Set it down gracelessly, fell back down to the bed. Put one hand on his knee, closed her eyes.

"My specialty," he rumbled. Leaned over her body, trapping her hand between his stomach and his leg. Rubbed her left thigh gently, then more insinuatingly. She made a small noise. He made an answering noise deep in his throat and whether it was because of that or his touch or something else
entirely, he was rewarded by a rush of arousal. She arched her back unconsciously. "Lights out," he whispered and they were in darkness.

He let his fingers slip in. Deep inside her was the orange thread of fear he'd brushed earlier. He ran his fingers along its curves and she made a strange noise.

"Jack?"

"Oh god." She took a deep shuddering breath. Then she started to cry, heartbroken sobs of a child.

"I'm sorry, Sunshine," he whispered.

She grabbed at him clumsily. He laid down beside her, pulled her close. She buried her face in his chest. He stroked her hair, down her back, into her back, into that coiling fear. Reached his fingers around it and pulled, tentatively, gently.

She cried harder. He pulled harder. His vision shifted and all of a sudden it wasn't a snake any more, it was a mesh, intertwined through her body.

"I love you," he whispered. "It breaks my heart I wasn't there to protect you." She pressed into him harder.

Now or never, something whispered. He pulled, and the orange flared. She cried out, but his hand was already out of her body, the orange flailing around his fingers in the darkness. He squeezed it into ball, then squeezed harder. It dissolved into nothingness.

What the fuck did I just do? She laughed, a strange sound. "Baby?"

"I'm okay," she whispered. "God. I survived that. I survived Zhylaw. I've survived you." She sucked in a lungful of air like it was water, spat it out. "No. Wait. I didn't." She laughed again, ragged, hysterical.

He hugged her. "You've done great." Pressed his forehead into hers, and the world was spinning, exultant, crazed, unleashed. He kissed her, almost more to have something hold onto than anything else. She laughed, pressed into him. Her sharp teeth scraped his tongue and her mouth was full of blood, his blood. He pulled back. "Hey! No biting."

"Stop me," she whispered. Her teeth were on his jugular and suddenly he knew they were still sharp enough to slide right through the skin.

He pulled back abruptly, put his fingers on her lips. "That's enough, Jack."

She shook her head and the spinning intensified, spinning him right along with her. He ran his hands up her body, gripping it tightly, feeling his own hands on her. She laughed again, delirious and beautiful in his arms. She reached forward, still clumsy, and tried to unbutton his pants. He helped her. She grabbed his cock, gripped it tight enough to hurt.

"Softly, Jack," he whispered. "Softly." She made a small noise, relaxed her grip. He rolled her on to her back, knelt between her legs. Nuzzled her breasts, reveling in the doubled sensation. Nuzzled down her belly, in between her legs. He'd barely touched her before she came hard, pulling him along with it. He collapsed, his head on her belly, panting, aching.

She started to laugh again, her head whirling fast. He pulled himself up, feeling drunk. Kissed her again. She kissed him back hungrily, her teeth teasing now.
"I wanna fuck you," he whispered. "Can I?"

"Since when do you ask?"

"I'm asking now."

She giggled. "Guess I should reward that sort of behavior." Wrapped her arms and legs around him and held on tightly enough to make getting into position difficult. Sliding into her was harder than usual. She arched her back and lifted her hips off the bed, impossibly taking their weight onto her shoulders. Suddenly afraid he was going to break her spine, he rolled them both over. She laughed again, exultant, drunken. Buried her face into his neck. He thrust in, lost in the sensations. Felt her teeth on his neck. Groaned, rolled them back over, gently pushed her head down to the pillow. Caressed her face. She went after his hand with those sharp teeth, laughing.

"Be nice," he whispered. She arched her back less dramatically, reached for him, tried to draw him back down on top of her, whether for the weight or the access to his neck, he wasn't sure. He tried to push her down gently with just his hands on her shoulders but she went after him again with her teeth, laughing, delirious. Somehow his hands were on her throat, away from those teeth, feeling her rapid pulse, holding her down, and she was pressing against them, her jugular flattening under his palm. He was falling into her awareness, and the whirling was faster and faster, terrible, wonderful. Restricted oxygen, he realized dimly. Hypoxia? Do I know that word? She pressed up against his hands harder and despite himself, he reciprocated, putting some real weight down into her. Her laughs were choking, rasping. I shouldn't do this, he thought dimly. Then everything dissolved.
Chapter 14: Temperance

When he came back to himself, she was lying slack underneath him, breathing fast shallow breaths. With an enormous effort, he rolled off of her. She barely moved.

"Hey kid," he whispered. "You okay?"

After a long time she murmured, "little queasy."

"You drank too much." There was no sound but the air rasping in and out of her and a disturbingly fast heart beat. He propped himself up on one arm, looked down at her tenderly. "Lights, dim."

She blinked a few times, laboriously. Her voice was rough. "You're really not human, are you?" For an instant, their eyes met. Hers slid away as if the pupils were not under her control.

"No."

"Am I human?"

"You smell human."

"Do you smell human?"

"Never thought about it. Right now I smell like you." And you smell like me. Something about that bothered him. He shoved it away, smiled at her tenderly again.

She barked a laugh that dissolved into a cough. "What just happened?"

"We had sex."

"Is that what that was? What were we doing before?" She tried to sit up, get her feet on the floor, but they weren't working. She slid down to the floor bonelessly. Concerned, he leaned over the side of the bed.

"Jack?"

With great drunken dignity she announced, "I'm gonna go hide in the closet now."

"From what?"

"Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not. That was pretty intense." He reached down, squeezed her shoulder. Slipped into her awareness. A wave of nausea hit him and he almost backed away. Forced himself not to. Aside from the nausea she felt hollow, empty, stuffed with straw. Feeling nothing else, not even a hint of Kyra,
he pulled out of her sensations, sat up, swung his legs on either side of her. She turned and buried her head in his inner thigh. He stroked her head, trying hard not to fall back into her. She relaxed for an instant, then tried to pull herself up, gripping his pants. Since they were unbuttoned they slid down his waist uncomfortably. He pulled her upright, swung them around so they were both lying back on the bed.

"Fuck," she said.

"Give me a minute," He nuzzled her. "I really liked that."

Her skin pricked. His wrist communicator buzzed. With a sigh he answered it without getting up. "What?"

Eris's cool voice. "Sire. Did you find the vestments?"

"Huh?"

There was a pause. "The garments you wear when you confirm me as Purifier?"

"No. You come find them."

He could almost see Eris press his lips together. "Yes, Sire. I shall be there directly." Riddick clicked off the communicator with a grunt. Jack had closed her eyes. Her breathing was slowing.

"Hey, Sunshine." She didn't move. He nudged her. She still didn't respond. He propped himself up to look at her. She seemed to have fallen asleep. He shook her a little harder. "Let's get you dressed. Eris is comin' back.

Her eyes flickered open. She shrugged, tried to sit up. Failed. He frowned at her, ran his fingers over the red marks on her throat. She's gonna be bruised, he thought, regretfully. He nuzzled her again. "Guess you need the doctor after all," he said, as much to the air as to her. She spasmed. This time, she managed to rub her eyes, sit up. He sat down beside her, touched her face gently. "Guess you were right about mixing that stuff."

She took a long deep breath. Then another. Then she giggled, slid back down on the bed. "Dunno. Felt pretty good. How did I get blood in my mouth?"

"You bit me."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"Okay. I was mad at you."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

He felt his lips twitching. "Dunno. Maybe because I'm an asshole sometimes."
"Right. You should be nicer to me. I'm your princess."

"Yeah. You're the princess I rescued from monsters."

She giggled. "The one who made you king. So my real mother was a queen. Wait. Aren't you my mother?"

"Huh?"

"I was inside of you. You gave birth to me. That's very maternal." She laughed again and he found himself chuckling along.

"I've been inside of you. Doesn't make you my mother."

"I was all the way inside of you. Oh god. Don't try that."

He nuzzled her. "Dunno, could happen." Let his fingers work their way down her body, slipped two fingers in, let his thumb caress her little nub. She giggled again. He was sucked into her delirious, whirling sensations, the undercurrent of nausea. He could feel himself grinning stupidly. This is the life.

"Did you put your hand in me?"

Uh oh. "I've never fisted you. Not really my thing."

"Riddick?" Like a guilty schoolboy, Riddick jerked his fingers out of Jack and was on his feet, furious at himself for not hearing Eris, furious at his fingers for being wet and sticky. The man was dressed in substantially the same outfit he had worn when they met, long and black. He gave Riddick a sardonic smile, turned his eyes to Jack. "Kyra."

She giggled. "Hey, you're my brother. My Furyan brother."

Eris seemed to go impossibly alert. "What?"

"Riddick carried us both inside of him. He's our mother. And you're a Furyan." She giggled again, then looked sad. "Brother. I used to have a brother."

Eris studied her carefully. "Good point." His eyes took in the bottle of port and the painkillers. Turned to Riddick. "An early indulgence?"

"No," Riddick growled. "I haven't had any. And don't call her Kyra. She's Jack. Kyra's dead." Jack made a small, mournful sound. Eris quirked an eyebrow, opened one of Riddick's wardrobes, almost immediately pulled out an ornate jacket.

"He wanted me to relax," Jack announced seriously. "So I'd lay back and take it." Eris's head jerked to her. She spoiled the effect by giggling.

"I'm gettin' her a doctor," Riddick muttered.

"I think that would be a good thing," Eris nodded solemnly. "And perhaps some clothes?"

Riddick took the costume from him, shrugged it on. "You look evil," Jack informed him, sitting up. He waggled his eyebrows at her, triggering another spasm of giggling.

"You look naked," he shot back.
"In vino veritas," Eris murmured.

Riddick shot him a look. "Huh?"

"In wine, truth. There is a large man pacing outside. Ninshubar. He was waiting to come back in? He appears to believe he is . . . Jack's bodyguard?"

With what was clearly an enormous effort, Jack got her hands in front of her face, inspected them, still flat on her back. A few knuckles were sticky with blood; she'd bled again and Riddick hadn't even noticed. "Right. 'cause a purifier killed Riddick's last girl. Maybe. Are you going to kill me?"

"No, little sister," Eris said softly. Looked at Riddick.

"I'll tell you about it later," Riddick muttered.

"Or maybe Riddick choked her to death," Jack confided. "Dame Vaako wanted me to believe that."

Eris's eyes played over her throat thoughtfully. Riddick swallowed. Shook his head. Eris shrugged. "Selket has a puckish sense of humor."

Jack giggled, rolled over to look at him better. "Her name is Selket? Why do you all have such silly names?"

Eris smiled at her. "Tradition. Many of us take new ones when we convert. To mark our new lives."

She nodded seriously. "Did you?"

"Yes."

"Why Eris? Isn't that a girl?"

"It made sense at the time."

"That's not an answer, silly."

Eris shrugged, keeping his mouth shut. "Answer the princess," Riddick growled.

With the air of a man indulging a child Eris answered seriously. "She was the Caller of War. That seemed suitably grandiose and warlike for a Necromonger. But she was also Discord. I always harbored . . . a secret hope I could undermine the killers of my people."

Jack's eyes fixed on him for an instant. Then she made a small sound, rolled back on her back. "Oh god. Nin's outside. Don't kill him?"

"Not planning to," Riddick managed to keep his voice light.

"He likes me," she said, serious again.

"I know."

"He's not going to be happy."

Eris looked from one to the other of them. Turned to Riddick. "Is he a problem?"

"No."

"Shall I let him in while you finish dressing?"
"Finish?" Eris smiled thinly, gave Jack a pointed look. Right. "Go." Riddick walked around the bed, found the dress she'd dropped.

"Not that one," she said, sitting up abruptly.

"Huh?"

"That one's dirty."

Riddick looked at it blankly, realized there were drops of blood on it. He closed his eyes. "What one do you want?"

"The green one."

He headed to the closet. Stopped. "They're all green, Jack," he said exasperated.

She giggled. "That's what you wanted, wasn't it?" He picked a dress out at random, held it out to her. "Not that one. It makes me look fragile."

He snorted. "Pick one yourself." Went to look for more weapons. Plenty of room in the stupid jacket.

She got off the bed, made her unsteady way to the wardrobe. Stared into it with a strange longing, touching the clothes. Riddick watched her out of the corner of his eye until he was distracted by the sound of Nin and Eris.

"She feels no pain," Eris said, with so much compassion Riddick wanted to shove him into a wall. Their steps quickened. Jack hadn't seemed to have heard, she was struggling to get a dress out of the closet. Riddick went to help her.

Eris and Nin rounded the corner fast. Nin stopped dead, his eyes skating up and down Jack's naked body. Fixed on her throat, where, Riddick noted grimly, bruises were already forming. Damn him.

She smiled at Ninshubar. "Hey, I know you." Nin jerked his eyes up to hers. "You're supposed to keep me safe."

Riddick grunted, gathered up the dress, jerked it down over her head more roughly than he meant to. She made a small noise and started to go down. He barely caught her. Ninshubar's eyes went hard.

"Did you call a doctor?" Eris asked, politely.

"Not yet. Nin can do it," Riddick said flatly. Got Jack more or less upright, got the dress more or less where it was supposed to be, wishing it was sleeveless. He started fishing for her right arm. She made a small noise and started to go down. He barely caught her. Ninshubar's eyes went hard.


"We can't tell you," Jack said and started to giggle. "It's a secret."


Jack stopped giggling abruptly. Looked up at him from the mess he was making of getting her dressed, suddenly seeming heartbroken. "Is it my fault?"

Riddick sighed, noisily. "No, kid, you're just an innocent victim."

"Your innocent victim?"
He grunted, finally got both arms through the sleeves, decided he didn't care about panties. Let her
go and she promptly slid down to the floor again. Nin took a convulsive step towards them. "Yeah.
My favorite. I'll be back, Sunshine."

"Promise?" Jack asked, guilelessly blinking up at him.

Nin's eyes were simmering again, banked anger. "I promise, Sunshine," Riddick said softly. "Never
leaving you again."

"Did you promise not to hit me?"

"Jesus, kid!" He jerked away from her, swallowed hard. "I've never hit you. Remember. We went
through this already."

"Right," she said. She looked at Nin. Lifted her arms to him. He took another convulsive step. Jack
looked at Riddick, dropped her arms sadly. Leaned back and almost fell into the wardrobe. Tried to
pull herself into it. Eris's eyes sharpened. He seemed about to say something.

"Don't you start," Riddick snapped at him. "And stop trying to hide in the closet, Jack." He fished
her out, feeling even more exasperated and slightly hollow himself.

"Yes, mommy," she whispered. She giggled and wrapped her arms and legs around him as he
picked her up.

He laid her down on the bed carefully, having to untangle her. Kissed her on the forehead, glared at
Ninshubar. "Call the doctor. Neith. Tell her to come here right now."

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"Mum?"

Someone was shaking her gently. She tried to open her eyes; she wanted to help whoever it was, but
she just couldn't. She was floating in a stormy sea and it was all she could do not to slip under the
waves.

"Mum?" the person repeated. Warm hands touched her throat. It hurt. She tried to roll away but the
waves crashed over her and she almost went down.

"Mum?" This time someone pulled her eyelid back. Her eyes weren't under her control, they didn't
want to look. Someone was bending over her. Ninshubar. He wrapped his arms around her, pulled
her up. Shook her slightly.

"I'm sorry mum, but the doctor said not to let you fall asleep. She's on her way"

*He's freaking out,* she realized. Forced herself to breath deep, once, twice. Tried to tell him she was
okay. Got her eyes open and realized she was nearly in his lap. She managed to fix her eyes on his
face. "You're pretty."

He laughed, slightly hysterical. "Whatever you say, mum."

She rested her head against his shoulder. He pulled her closer, pressed his forehead into hers, just like
Riddick had done the night he'd dreamed she'd died. Blindly, she turned her face up and kissed the
warm lips that were there.

For several heart beats, Ninshubar kissed her back. Then he pulled away. "I'm sorry," she whispered.
"It's okay," he whispered back, eyes glistening. "Everything's going to be fine."

It came out of her mouth before she knew it was even there. "You think he's going to kill me."

Ninshubar closed his eyes.

"He's not. I swear."

"Whatever you say, mum."

"In vino veritas. I just learned that."

He laughed. The doctor got there. There was poking and prodding and scanners and finally a shot of something. The world came painfully and abruptly back into focus. Realizing she was still laying in Riddick's bed, she managed to sit up.

The doctor pulled up a chair, sat directly across from her. "Jack, were you trying to kill yourself?"

She rolled her eyes, then regretted it because it hurt. "No."

"That was an extraordinarily dangerous thing you did."

"Huh?"

"Mixing those things."

"What the fuck ever."

Nin's voice was soft. "Doctor, I do not think your lecture is appropriate. My impression from the Lord Marshal is that he is responsible for her state. She's just an innocent victim."

The doctor flushed scarlet. "Oh. Is that true, Jack?"

_Innoscunt victim_ . . . "I don't fucking know any more. He wanted me to take them. I didn't want to. I did anyway. Because he wanted me to."

"We all must do what the Lord Marshal wants," the doctor said briskly. "But it's clearly not safe to leave these here." She pocketed the painkillers, watching Jack closely. "Now, about your throat."

"Yes?"

The doctor stood. "You managed not to do any permanent damage. But those games are not safe."

"What games?"

"The strangulation games. One girl has already died in this chambers from such things."

It welled up before she knew it was there. "Get out."

"Jack, I need to see to those bruises first."

"No. Get out. Now. Riddick said I could order people out of here and I'm telling you to leave."

The doctor looked at Ninshubar with a faint smile. He nodded slowly. "Shall I help you to the door, doctor?"

really should see to those bruises."

"Will they heal on their own?"

"Yes, but-"

"Just go. If Riddick doesn't like them -" Jack heard her own voice crack. She took a deep breath, managed to continue more or less steadily, "if they bug Riddick, he'll fix them."

The doctor gazed at her sadly. Finally, she stood, bowed slightly, and left. Jack waited until she heard the door click, then she turned to Ninshubar. "Thank you for backing me up."

Ninshubar shrugged. "It was nothing." He hesitated. "How do you feel?"


He gave her a small smile. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Get me a glass of water?"

He was gone the absolute minimum amount of time possible. His eyes were intense on her as she drank. Finally, she couldn't bear it. "Spit it out, man."

"I took an oath to the Necromongers."

"Your lady told you too. You told me." She made her voice neutral.

Nin smiled thinly. "Yes. She did. My sworn loyalty is to the mission and to the Lord Marshal, so long as he is the chosen one of the Underverse."

Uh oh. "Yes."

"Riddick challenged Zhylaw and won. There are those who say his victory was tainted, because he did not fight alone. A woman, Kyra, struck what certainly looked like a fatal blow. If she had survived, there might have been a succession crisis."

You think I could have run this place? "Why are you telling me this?"

"What would you do if someone successfully challenged Riddick?"

"I would die." She swallowed. "Look. Things are weird between us right now. But trust me – you're seeing the worst of it. Don't tell anyone this, but he's been my best friend for years and years. This place is doing a number on us both, but it would break my heart if he died. I can't bear that again."

Nin blinked rapidly. "Again?"

"Oh god. Please – just forget I said that. He wasn't dead. I just thought he was."

Nin searched her face. "Do you know who Kore was?"

She was almost pathetically grateful to him for changing the subject. "The woman you worked for? I keep meaning to look her up."

He smiled, sadly. "Not that one. The old one. She was a goddess once. Daughter of the Earth goddess, she was kidnapped by the Lord of Death and held underground. Her mother stopped
everything from growing until the gods gave her back. But she'd eaten the food of the dead already. So she spends some part of every year with her husband, death; the rest with her mother."

"I've heard that story about someone else. Persephone?"

"Another one of her names. She has many."

"Your boss was named for her?"

"Yes. Kore. Life. Death. Good name for a terraformer."

_Why are you telling me this? "Eris told me the Necros sometimes change their names when they convert. Did you?"

He smiled beautifully. "No. I wear the name my mother gave me. Ninshubar was a friend of a . . . goddess who went to the underworld to rescue her beloved. Inanna. Inanna went through the last gate to the underworld naked and alone-" He almost physically stopped himself from quoting a story he clearly knew by heart. "Enough to say she went to beg her sister death for the life of her love. Her sister refused; hung her from a tree in the underworld. Ninshubar organized her rescue."

_Uh oh. Maybe he wasn't changing the subject. "Wow. That's quite the name."

"We all had names like that. We thought we were heroes. I even knew a Kyra."

She swallowed. "What does that mean?"

"Sun." Jack closed her eyes. "Another thing that has to be rescued from the darkness from time to time," he said softly.

She knew she was prattling. "Like you terraformers used to do. Like with your sunseeder. And stuff."

His expression was rapt and adoring. Suddenly she understood. _You're trying to find a way to be true to your fucked up oath and your fucked up job to keep me safe, aren't you? You're gonna challenge Riddick to a death match. For me. Oh god. "Yes," he said, his face beginning to shine. He took her hand, started caressing it gently. "Yes. Like we did. Like I will."
Chapter 15. On Being Inanna

Jack swallowed. "I can't – I can't do this with you. I'm not your Persephone. Inanna. Kyra. Whoever."

Ninshubar's hand stilled.

"I know what you're trying to say. And I'm grateful. I really am. But I don't want you to save me."

He closed his eyes.

"Riddick saves me. I'm his princess." She could feel her face twist.

"You're his victim, Jack. He is the dragon. He is the dragon that swallows the sun."

She swallowed. "No. He's the hero. My own special psychofuck hero."

Ninshubar shook his head. "He's no hero. A hero wouldn't do the things he does."

"He saved me. He's gone toe to toe with monsters again and again for me."

"That doesn't give him the right to-"

Suddenly she was angry. "To what? To have sex with me?"

"To rape you."

"He's never-" She stopped. "I've never said no. When I ask him to stop something, he does."

His voice was very gentle. "Jack, the situation is inherently coercive."

"You're right. But you know, he could have done anything he wanted to me for years and years before he killed Zhylaw and he never did. After three months in charge here, he restrains himself for mere minutes. So let's say you challenge him. Let's say you win. You become the grand poobah of the army of darkness. How long before you're just like him? He made it three months. You're a better man than him. Will you make it six? Or are you gonna take me over the body of my best friend?"

Ninshubar let go of her hands. It almost hurt. Heartsick, she watched his face stiffen, watched him withdraw. Almost all her anger drained away and she found herself continuing in a small voice. "And if you fight, one of you will die. Probably you. I can't bear that." There was a long silence. "Are you okay? Are we okay?"

He said nothing.

"I need us to be okay. I don't—I don't have anyone else."
After far too long he seemed to reach a decision. "My job," he said with great dignity, "is to keep you safe. For the Lord Marshal's pleasure. Whoever that is," Ouch. "I understand that."

What the fuck do I say to that?

"Ninshubar was a hero, once," he continued. "Saved the day. You – you have reminded me of what I once was. Before I became a killer of men. Thank you. We are," he smiled slightly "okay."

No we're not. We'll never be okay. Not now that you made the offer and I turned you down. We will never be okay. Her face began to hurt, she was trying to hard not to cry. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. You have nothing to be sorry for. You are an innocent."

She rolled her eyes and a sob leaked out. She tried to turn it into a laugh. "I've done some pretty evil and stupid things in my time. And a whole lot of people have died for me. Don't put me on a pedestal. That's Riddick's job."

"He hasn't put you on a pedestal, Jack," Ninshubar shot back. "He may have chained you to one."

"He just wants me safe."

Nin's eyes went to her throat. She flushed. "I'm sick of being fragile. I'm going to the gym. You comin'?"

He nodded, slowly.

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Riddick liked the throne. It fit. Felt good. Would feel better if Jack was there, maybe between his legs, leaning back into him, her head in his crotch. Or sitting on his lap. Much more accessible. He grinned.

Lap . . . He'd thought of her on his lap on the skiff, the two of them wrapped up together in the pilot's chair, so many times over the years. Those memories always made him happy. Until she died. Then they hurt.

The thought had a different flavor now.

I should bring her here one of these nights when no one's around. Disable the cameras and –

Eris cleared his throat, gazed at him meaningfully. Riddick gave him a quick grin, feeling inordinately pleased, given the Jack-related trauma he'd walked out on, and likely, would walk back into. Oh well. She'll get over it. One way or another. Maybe I'll take her flying. Like old times. The sex had been fantastic. He'd let her drink too much, but that was easy to control. A little wine, some of those pills and –

Eris cleared his throat again. Right. Riddick stood. Everyone went silent. He let his eyes play over the crowd. Dame Vaako was there, right up front, looking supremely pleased with herself. Why is she always here? Vaako was behind her, still glowingly slightly at Eris. Eris was calm. Behind him was a man whose face was calm only between twitches. Jason. Keegan's buddy. He wanted the Purifier job. Right. So am I supposed to be nice to him or slap him down?

"Zhylaw had a Purifier." He gestured at Eris. "I almost killed him once." True that. "He found his way back. He was Zhylaw's friend. Zhylaw's Purifier. He'll be my friend. My Purifier."

Those weren't the right words. Oh well. Eris inclined his head graciously. Riddick took the necklace Eris had given him off his own neck, lowered it back around Eris's head. "My Purifier." He found himself grinning. "Jason."

"Sire?" the man said, startled, scared.

"You do good. You help him. Givin' you - " something was tugging at him. Some stray memory of Keegan's? "Giving you another chance."

"Yes, Sire," the man said, his eyes wide. Riddick noticed that Dame Vaako -Selket? Really?- looked supremely calm and content, the sort of calm contentment that was anything but. He grinned at her, held her eyes for an instant more than appropriate. Vaako glowered harder.

"I have spoken." Riddick managed. Walked off the dais, back to his office. Eris was speaking. Riddick didn't listen. There were things to do. Important things. Things involving killing Taurians. Something I'm good at.

He stripped off the ornate jacket, dumped it on a chair. Stared at himself in the polished metal door. Lookin' good. Gotta start workin' out more, though. There was a cautious chime on his desk. With a sigh he hit the intercom button. "What?"

"Sire. Doctor Neith craves an audience."


"Now, Sire."

"Send her in."

The doctor entered cautiously. "My lord."

"What?"

The doctor licked her lips. It was as strange gesture. "My lord. I wanted to talk to you about . . . the young lady."

"Jack?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

The woman seemed to be having trouble organizing her thoughts. Riddick finally took pity on her. "How is she?"

"She will be fine, in time. Physically. But she would not let me finish treating her. This worries me."

"Huh?"

The doctor flushed. "She ordered me out. Before I could heal the bruises on her throat. My Lord."

"Stop calling me that."
"My Lord?"

"Yeah. That. It's Riddick. And why the fuck did she do that?"

The doctor blinked, licked her lips again. "I think I offended her. I told her she should not mix her painkillers with alcohol and not engage in strangulation games. She seems to think she had no choice." There was more than a hint of accusation in the woman's gray eyes.

Riddick closed his own eyes, his good mood fast evaporating. "Okay."

"My Lord, she easily could have died."

"And I easily could have gone back to the Underverse and brought her back," he growled. "Vaako told you that, didn't he." It wasn't a question.

The doctor raised her head defiantly. He liked that. He smiled at her. She continued. "I surmised from my original exam, yes. Do you want to follow her to the Underverse again?"

"No."

"Then, my lord – Riddick – you need to be more careful with her." She laid a piece of equipment on the table. "She is bruised. If you want the bruises to heal fast, turn this on and run it over them slowly. I have already calibrated it. If you want nature to take its course, it will take a few weeks."

Riddick grunted. "Thanks." They looked at each other. "Spit it out, doctor."

"There is a chance," the doctor said carefully, "that she is suffering from depression and post traumatic stress disorder. If you care for her happiness and . . . longevity, she should be evaluated and treated."

*Longevity?* "How?"

"Conversion would work. Necromongers," her lips twitched, "do not suffer from either malady."

Riddick shook his head. "Don't feel like putting her back in a conversion chamber. She already did it once. I didn't like the way she looked afterwards. Keep talking."

The doctor looked fretful. "There are drugs. Or talk therapies. Since Necromongers do not have those problems, I am not well versed, but I could learn."

There was Vaako's perfunctory knock on the door and the man himself pushed in, Eris following calmly behind. Vaako took a slight double take at the woman. "Doctor? What are you doing here?"

Riddick sighed. "She's leaving, Vaako."

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Just – wanted her to take a look at Jack. Neith wanted to read me the riot act about being rough with her." Gave her a sidelong look. "Rightly so."

Vaako blinked rapidly. "Ah. Are you two done?"


Vaako was clearly upset. "Why were you staring at my wife like that?"
Eris gave him a small smile from behind Vaako's back. Riddick grinned back. "That whole plotting against me thing has got my attention. Plus she told Jack I strangled a girl to death. Don't like her giving Jack those ideas. Kinda undermines the whole trust thing."

"My wife is no threat to you, Riddick," Vaako said exasperatedly. "As long as I'm on your side. Let her play. She gives a harmless outlet to a lot of people who otherwise might actually get things done against you. And I've told her to stay away from Jack. She will."

Riddick glared at him. "Are we ready for the Taurians?"

"Yes. We are ready to send an emissary to offer peace." Vaako said, stiffly.

"You still willin' to go?"

"Yes. I was going to bring Keegan as my Purifier. Do you want me to take Eris instead?"

Eris shook his head slightly. "Nah. Let him settle in. Take Jason."

"Fine."

Before Vaako left they went over the battle plans one more time. There were people to destroy. Convert. Whatever.

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Hours later, Riddick headed back to his rooms. Day had been productive, but oh so long. Then he'd spent a couple of hours blowing off steam running unarmed combat drills. He was on edge, not entirely looking forward to coming back to Jack. Hopefully she'd blown off some steam too.

He sent the door guards away, entered silently. Listened carefully. There was nothing to hear. That's weird. Normally, they were talking or moving or something.

Oh shit. Did they make a break for it?

Some traitorous part of him answered. Would that really be a bad thing? She's not safe with you. You almost choked her to death.

Almost. There are people out there that won't stop at almost, once they know she's yours. She'll never be safer than she is here. Jesus, the Taurians have gotta be watchin' us. They'll scoop up anything they see leavin' if it don't got a battalion with it.

He moved fast, not caring if they heard him.

There was at last a noise. Nin stepped into the hall, his sidearm in his hand, almost pointing down. Their eyes met. After a long, still moment, Ninshubar made a gesture away from the room he'd come out of. An invitation, of sorts. Riddick hesitated, then nodded. They walked down the hall. No one said anything for a long time.

They stepped into the little sitting room by the front door. Riddick finally broke the silence. "How is my little princess?"

Ninshubar's eyes narrowed. "Damaged. You two have a history." It was not a question.

"She told you that?"

"No. I told her that. My first day here. No one could watch you two and not know that. She begged
me not to pursue it."

_All these people figuring out things. Gotta keep a closer rein on her. "Smart girl."

"I've tried to thrust it out of my mind since. But it keeps coming back. From the way she talks, I've wondered if she was your little sister." Riddick flinched. Nin saw. Smiled darkly.


"Though I find it hard to believe that any brother would do to any sister what you do to her. Object of obsession you locked in stasis until she could not resist you? Forever young and innocent as you grew older and stronger?"

Riddick could feel his eyes narrowing. "You got something to say, soldier?"

"You are a lucky man."

Riddick snorted. "You don't know shit."


_Ah. You're just jealous. I would be too. It made him soften slightly. "Are we going to have a problem?"

"Not today. It would break her heart."

"You two had quite the chat."

Nin shook himself. "She swears you will not kill her. She will not tell me why. I will be frank, my lord. If you kill her, kill me. Because if you do not, I will do everything I can to end you."

_Wow. He's really fallen for her._ "Big words."

"I am a very big man."

_I get it. You offered to try to kill me. She turned you down. Poor boy."

"Stop it." Jack's voice rang out surprisingly clear. "Both of you. Stop it."

There was a long silence. Jack moved in between them, ramrod straight. Riddick snaked an arm around her, pulled her close. She did not resist, but did not exactly relax into him either. Nin's eyes narrowed.

"You givin' orders now, Jack?" Riddick stage whispered into her ear.

"I'm tryin'. If you two kill each other, I swear I'll never speak to either of you again."

Riddick laughed involuntarily. Nin was glaring at Jack now, real anger in his eyes. "You got a problem with the girl, soldier?"

"No."

There was a note of conciliation in Jack's voice. "I think he's mad 'cause he told me to stay put, Riddick, until he said it was clear. He's just trying to do what you said. Keep me safe."

_No, he wanted to pick a fight with me. Since you told him not to, and he wants you to be happy with
him, he needs me to throw the first punch. But you got here before he could goad me into it. He grinned, squeezed her affectionately. Kept his eyes on Ninshubar. "You don't get to tell her what to do, soldier. Hell, she barely does what I tell her to, and I'm all in charge and everything."

Jack snorted. Riddick grinned wider. God, I love her. "I'll tell you what. I'll make you a promise. I kill her, you do your worst. I'll deserve it. Keep your fuckin' mouth shut about this, but I love her with all my bad, black, murdering heart. But whether she's my girl, my little sister, or my innocent victim is none of your fuckin' business. Your job, soldier, is to keep her safe when I am not here. Don't much like the fact that you two have gotten all chummy, but I'm willin' to live with it. As long as you don't cause me any problems. Right now, you look like you wanna cause me problems."

Jack caught Nin's eye, shook her head. Riddick pretended not to notice. Nin closed his eyes, seemed to deflate. "No sire. I do not wish to cause – problems." Finally, he holstered his weapon. "Do you want me to come back tomorrow?"

No. "Of course I do. You're her bestest chum. She'd be lost without you. But do you want to come back? Knowin' she turned you down? Knowin' that I know?"

Rage flickered across the other man's face. Jack cringed. "Are we going to have a problem?" Riddick repeated softly. "Happy to give you another job. Maybe at the threshold garrison. Nice and safe and a long way away. Wouldn't want her to think I set you up to get killed or anything. But I don't want to leave her alone with someone who's pissed at her. Doesn't seem . . . prudent."

Ninshubar got control of himself. "My apologies, my lord. I have overstepped myself. She has absolutely nothing to fear from me. It would be an honor to continue with this assignment."

Riddick snorted. "Don't worry about that. See you tomorrow. Now go the fuck away." Nin started to leave. "One more thing." Nin looked at him without speaking. "I shouldn't have choked her. That won't happen again. But at the time? She loved it."

Something flickered across Nin's face and Jack slumped slightly in his arms. As soon as Nin was gone, Riddick swept her up like he was going to carry her over a threshold. She gasped, girlishly, attention redirected his way, just like he'd wanted.

"Hey," he said, grinning down at her.

"Hey," she said, cautiously.

"How ya feelin'?"

"Fine."

"How's the stomach?"

She blinked at him. "Fine. Um. Why am I up in the air?"

He laughed. "Seemed the thing to do. Wanna go flying with me?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh, hell yeah."

"That's my girl." He kissed her and set her down. "This way." Led her through his rooms to a spot on the wall. Put his hand in a special place, and a door slid back.

"I didn't know that was there," she said.
'Fast access to a hanger.' He grabbed her around the waist. 'Trust me.' Took two steps and jumped into hole into – hopefully - a gravity field.

'Riddick!' she shrieked as they slid down the slightly sticky field and rushing air.

'Acceleration is 10 seconds per second per second' he shouted back. 'In theory this will keep us from getting squashed at the bottom.'

"In theory?" she yelled, breathless.

'I've never done this before!' She tried to wriggle around to face him. He didn't let her, but the momentum sent them crashing around the tube. He laughed, delighted, squeezed her tighter.

Too soon, it was over, and they were landing lightly on a platform. "Nice! We gotta do that again!" He almost shouted. Several members of the ground crew hurried up.

"My Lord!" one said. "How can we serve?"

"Gonna take the yacht out. She ready?"

"Always. Will you need an escort?"

Riddick almost told him no, reconsidered, grinning down at Jack. She'll gripe at me less about making a run for it if we've got an escort. "Yeah. Couple fighters should do it." He took Jack by the upper arm and led her into a ship that looked a whole lot like a little dragon.

"Sweet ship," she whispered as they climbed aboard.

He grinned. "Yeah. Only taken her out once before." It was small, overmuscled, built to take down ships fifty times its own size. It was a fuel hog too; no long range trips possible without dumping a lot of the weaponry.

They strapped in. Riddick hit some controls and the bay doors opened. Hit a few more and the cockpit seemed to go translucent, a star field covered by heads up displays. They shot out, followed closely by two fighters. Riddick set a course almost perpendicular to the main fleet's formation, up towards the unfettered stars. Jack gasped in delight. He made an unnecessarily banked turn, circled the fleet from above.

"Wow. All these ships are yours?" she said wonderingly as the fleet displayed itself from beneath them.

"Yeah. Crazy."

"You said it." They flew in silence for a long time over the thundercloud of war ships.

"Remember when we were on the skiff?" she asked suddenly. "After the monster planet? Before we got picked up?"

"Yeah," Riddick made his voice soft and sweet. "Second best time of my life."

She blinked rapidly. "Sitting in a cold dark skiff with two strangers and your leg ripped up was the second best time of your life? What was the first?"

"Right now. When you're happy with me. Hate it when you're not."

She laughed, leaned back in the chair. "Little sugar and I'm all yours."
He grinned at her. "That's my girl." He sent the ship on another perpendicular vector. One of the fighters overshot. Jack giggled. He gave her a side long look. "We should do this more often. Good to get out. This place is doin' something to me."

She snorted. "To you? Yeah. To us both. I mean, look at me."

"Do it all the time."

She laughed again. "Though you know, Abu thought you were going to eat me, back on the skiff. He told Lajjun when he woke up that first time and I was on your lap and were all wrapped up in blankets he almost had a heart attack."

Riddick snorted softly. Weird change of subject. "He thought I was gonna eat you?"

"He said you were sniffing me. Thoughtfully."

"Well, yeah, that's probably true."

"What were you looking for? I mean, smelling for?"

"Dunno."

She snorted, rolled her eyes. "So I just smelled good?"

"You smell great. Especially now. "Maybe I was tryin' to figure out why I liked you." They passed one of the heavy warships. Dagon? Jack's eyes tracked it.

"You thought you could figure that out by smelling me?"

"Sort of thing I'd do."

"Men," Jack said. "Or whatever you are." Turned her chair around to watch the fighters shadowing them. "Do you think they're having fun?"

"Oh yeah. Wanna take the controls?"

"Oh hell yeah." Riddick grinned, hit some controls, gave her partial control. She was a little rusty at first. But seemed to remember fast. She dove through the fleet, rotated the ship so it was still underneath them as they flew below it. She wouldn't make a hell of a pilot, Riddick thought, slightly regretful.

He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, she was skimming over the bottom of the Basilica, dangerously close. "Hey, careful."

"Afraid I'm gonna break your pretty ships?"

"Little bit."

She grinned, shed speed, reached forward and hit a few controls. The view screen shifted as the long range sensors came up. "What's that?"

"The Taurians."

"You goin' to war with them?"

"Up to them. We'll make 'em an offer first. Sometimes people just roll over."
"Convert or die?"

"Pretty much."

"Huh." She stopped the ship. The fighter escort overshot again. She chuckled. "They're one of the oldest colonies."

"Huh."

"Anything I can do to talk you out of it?"

He sighed. "Jack. We're having a good time. Don't spoil it."

"Just lay back and enjoy?"

He ran a hand over his face. "Please don't pick a fight with me. You can't win. And remember, I did this for you, Sunshine."

She started the ship again. "When?"

"When what?"

"When are you going to destroy them?"

"Couple of days. Sent Vaako over to talk first."

"Brave man."

"He's got a legion with him. They kill him, we'll just destroy them wholesale. Then I'll go get Vaako."

"You really like him?"

"Yeah. Good guy."

She laughed. "Coming from you that means?"

"Absolutely nothing," he said, finishing the line. "I dunno. He's been . . . solid. Plus he's also got a wife who's constantly got her own thing goin' on in her head. Kinda like me."

She jerked, sending the ship up at a steep angle back towards the main fleet. He almost took back the controls, but she managed to thread a needle course through the ships. "Kinda like you?"

He laughed. "Okay. You're not much like scorpion lady."

"I meant the other thing."

"Huh?"

"Do you think I'm your wife, Riddick?" Her voice quivered slightly.

He thought about that. "You're right. That's not the right word."

Now her voice was arch. "Yeah. You'd have to ask me first. And I'd have to say yes."

He snorted. "Maybe where you come from. Not sure it works like that here. Would you?"
"Maybe. I'd want a bachelorette party. And a nice white dress. And a reception where I got to dance with all the boys."

He laughed. "You want a wild party? I could arrange that. There're guys here who would piss themselves to strip for you."

"Well that's attractive," her voice arched higher. "I'll think about it. In the mean time, how about . . . concubine? That seems about right."

He shook his head, pitched his voice low. "How about mate."
**Chapter 16. Going to Church**


He gave her a sidelong look. "I'm takin' back the controls." He hit a few switches. She leaned back into the seat, heart beating fast. Rubbed her arms.

"Cold?" He inquired, solicitously.

She swallowed. "Yeah." He hit a switch and her seat was almost immediately warm. "Thanks. This is way better than that skiff." He shrugged, noncommittally. There was a long silence as the fleet streaked by. "Does it have a name?"

"Probably. Don't know it." He hit a few more buttons. "The Tiamut. Huh."

"Huh," she echoed. "Mate sounds kinda . . . primal."

"I'm a primal kind of guy."

"Yeah. That's true."

"Why does it bother you?"

"Just . . . a lot to take in. Implications."

He grunted. "Don't worry about it. We don't need a name."

"Good thing."

He stared at her, then turned back sharply to the front view screen. "I'm gonna take us in."

"This was really fun," she said, softly. He grunted again. *Good grief, I hurt his feelings.* "Thanks for taking me out. That's one big fleet you've got."

"Yup."

*Is he trying to show me why he can't just stop them from killing everyone?* Suddenly, she felt very tired. She yawned. He gave her another sidelong look.

"Abu thought I was gonna eat you?"

"That's what he told Lajjun. His wife."

"We met."
"You met Lajjun?"

He grinned. "Pretty lady. Just like her daughter."

Oh god. "Ziza?"

"Yeah. Ziza. Cute kid."

"What – when.« She stopped, took a deep breath. "When did you meet them?"

"Right before the Necros attacked. That's when I found out about you."

"Do you know what happened to them?"

Riddick didn't answer, busying himself with the controls. A docking bay opened. Riddick landed the ship with surprising gentleness. Undid his safety harness, then hers. Waggled an eyebrow at her. "I'll tell you later. Come on." He took her by the upper arm again and led her off the ship.

"Are we going to take the shoot again?" she asked, dubiously.

With his free hand he waved off the guards. "It's one way. Security. We'll have to go up the old fashioned way." He took her to an elevator. It went up about three floors and stopped. An older man started to get on, did a double take at Riddick, did a second double take at her.

"My apologies, sire," he stammered.

"Goin' up?" Riddick said, in a cheery voice. "Come on in."

The man stepped in, nervously, shooting furtive looks at Jack. After a few floors, Riddick said in a jovial tone, "know her or something?"

"I think so, Sire."

Oh god.

"Oh? Where from?"

"New Mecca, sire. She looks like the daughter – foster daughter – of a neighbor of mine."

"Who was that?"

"Minister Abu al-Walid. She looks like his foster daughter, Jack."

Riddick barked a laugh. "Good eye." He gave her arm a squeeze. "Do you remember him?"

Jack gave him a look. "Hey. Paul, was it?"


"Ah." The man said, eloquently. "You are not." He scrutinized her throat again, "-one of us?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I'm sorry," Paul said, sounding like he meant it. Then he flushed scarlet. "My Lord. I did not mean to appear to question your-" he took a deep breath, "Your decision making."

Riddick stared at him blankly for an instant. "Don't worry about it."

Mercifully, the elevator stopped. Paul managed to half bow to Riddick, gave her a nod, and was gone. Jack yawned again, only slightly forced. Looked up at Riddick. "Sorry. Long day."

Riddick laughed softly. "Yeah. Guess you're right." He let go of her arm, stroked her head, letting his fingers linger on the back of her neck. Did it again. And again. The door slid open. He gave her a small push, followed her out of the elevator into a long, open hall she dimly remembered from her first day. They walked down in silence. When they got to the door, she broke it. "Aren't there usually guards here?"

"Nah. Just when I'm not."

"Why?"

"Not that worried about me. Just you."

"Huh." They were through the door and the awkward silence was back. She yawned again as they headed to his bedroom.

As soon as they were in the room, he leaned down and nuzzled her. "Let's get this off," he whispered, picking at her dress. She shrugged and pulled the dress over her head and let it fall to the floor. Started to head to the bed. "Stay."

"Huh?" He was fishing in his pockets. Pulled out a piece of equipment. "What's that?"

"Something the doctor gave me." He fiddled with it until there was a click and the tip started to glow. He stepped very close, tilted her chin up. Brought the device to her throat. She flinched away. His fingers on her chin tightened. "It's okay, Jack."

"What are you doing?"

He didn't answer. Why won't he tell me what he's doing?

Maybe he doesn't know what he's doing, Kyra observed. "I sent them away," he rumbled, softly.

"Who?"

"Lajjun and Ziza. Gave 'em a ship and some unconverted New Meccans and sent them away." He lifted her head a little higher, uncomfortably, as he played the device at the hollow of her throat. "Did they make it?"

"Dunno. Didn't swap phone numbers or anything." Gave her a sardonic smile. "Figured that'd make 'em even more of a target. Gave 'em a good ship. Soldiers. Some kids who made it. If they're smart, they kept goin'. Suspect they tried to warn people. Not smart."

"You old softy," she whispered. He tilted her head back down, played the device over the other side of her neck.

He snorted. "That's me. Soft and delicate." He let her go, stepped back, eyed her critically. "How's
"Good."

"Turn around." After a beat she did. "Slower. Let me take a look at you. Lift your arms up."
Awkwardly, she did. He grunted. "Guess I didn't get you anywhere else." He switched off the device, laid it on a dresser, turned back to her. She still had her arms up, almost guilty. He grinned, wolfishly. "Ain't you a picture." She started to lower her arms. "Don't move."

He came close, started running his hands over her, possessively, searchingly. "Man, you're still so soft." He leaned down, sniffed her neck theatrically. His probing hands turned into caressing ones. "Know you're tired. This won't take long."

"Okay," she said, a little unsteadily. He groaned, moved behind her. Fixed his lips on the side of her neck, kissing hungrily, one hand teasing a breast, the other slipping lower.

"Lights out," he muttered. She sighed and leaned back against him, letting her hands drift down his arms, feeling the muscle. He groaned again. The hands on her breast and in between her legs got more insistent. His lips moved to the back of her neck, his teeth pressing right behind them. She shivered involuntarily. She could feel him smile.

Suddenly he wasn't touching her any more. "Riddick?" she asked, uncertainly.

"Give me a sec." She could hear him undress, struggling with his boots. "Lot easier to get your clothes off than mine," he grumbled.

She laughed, slightly. "Didn't you plan that?"

He snorted. "Good point." Several heavy things hit the ground, then his hands were back on her. She could feel him slide to his knees, start kissing her breasts rapturously, his hands on her back, sliding down her legs. She stroked his head and he groaned again.

"God you're big," she whispered.

He stood, still gripping her. She ended up over his shoulder. She giggled. A few steps and he laid her fairly nicely on the bed, kneeling between her legs. His fingers probing inside of her. He grunted.

*I'm not ready,* she thought, dimly. He seemed to reach the same conclusion. But instead of continuing to caress her, she heard him spit into his hand, reach down and stroke himself. *Guess he doesn't care.*

Then he was pressing in. Not roughly, but not tenderly either. She made a small strangled noise, and he rumbled back wordlessly. "Wrap your legs around me," he instructed. She complied, awkwardly. He made a satisfied noise, started thrusting in fast, his face buried in her neck.

It didn't take him long. He collapsed on her, spent. She let her legs lower back to the bed, stroking his back awkwardly.

After what seemed like an eternity, he rolled off of her. Leaned over the side of the bed and picked up something, pressed it into her hand. Her dress. "Clean up. You're all gooey."

*Oh-kay, guess we're done with the sex,* she thought as she wiped herself off, feeling very alone. Riddick was worming his way under the covers. "I'm going to pee," she said, cautiously. Riddick grunted, unconcerned.
She felt her way through the darkness, feeling hollow. Whadya expect? Kyra queried nastily. He essentially asked you to marry him. You essentially turned him down. He's letting you know he's settling for concubine. Stupid shit.

Riddick was sitting in the bleachers on some forgettable planet. They'd landed there, somewhere between escaping from that crazy bitch Chillingsworth and getting to New Mecca. Riddick had made a little money there. When he got back, Abu had closeted himself up with a bunch of his co-religionists and Jack had wandered off to Abu-had-no-idea. Riddick hunted her down, found her at a park playing soccer.

"Cute kid," a woman observed. He gave her a side long look, remembering. Her daughter was down there, on Jack's team. Mom had invited them both home for dinner, and then to spend a very satisfying night. There'd been a moment, early that next morning in bed with this woman, hearing Jack and her daughter whispering in the next room, when Riddick had almost wanted to stay there playing happy families forever.

"Yes, she is," a new voice observed from higher in the stands. Riddick felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Turned slowly. Zhylaw. Eating a hotdog. Wearing a Hawaiian shirt. The man gave him a cheery wave.

Just then there was a murmur from the crowd. Riddick's head snapped around. Some kid had been knocked down, gasping on the ground. Some of his team mates were rallying around him, closing on the offending player. Jack was in the middle of it, hands spread, tryin' to make peace. Riddick started to stand.

"Stay," the woman said, her hand on his arm. "She's doing good. They're just kids."

"And you'll get your turn to save her," Zhylaw observed again, sardonically. "Give her room to fail, here where it's safe." He took a bite of the hotdog, dabbled his lip with a napkin. His eyes weren't on Jack at all, but on the bleachers on the other side of the field. Riddick followed his gaze.

Kyra. Kyra like she was on Crematoria. One side of her was Toombs; the other side that female merc from Toombs' team. Eve? Johns was behind them. He reached into Jack's lap, helped himself to a handful of popcorn. Kyra slapped his hand away. He laughed and whispered something into her ear that Toombs laugh and Kyra turn red. Johns squeezed her shoulder familiarly. Left his hand there.

Riddick growled. The woman squeezed his arm harder. The game resumed. Jack had the ball. The big boy, the one who'd knocked the kid down, was pursuing, flanked by two even bigger guys. Jack was clearly concentrating on her feet and the ball, not the threat behind her. Heading for the goal.

Someone should have her back, Riddick thought dimly. Where's her teammates? She's got three guys after her. Jack took the shot. Scored. There was a roar from the stands. She turned, fists in the air. Riddick relaxed slightly.


Game started up again. Jack was in the pack running down the field. Kyra leaned back between Johns' legs. Eve was whispering in her ear busily. Kyra was laughing. Riddick glared at them. Toombs met his eyes, smirked, his hand drifting to Jack's thigh, down between her legs. Kyra...
smiled, meeting Riddick's furious gaze boldly. Reached between Toombs' thighs, helped herself to his hotdog.

Zhylaw leaned down solicitously. "She grows up to be quite the woman, doesn't she? All because of you."

Johns leaned down and handed Kyra something to drink in a paper bag. She laughed and drank deep. Riddick stared across the soccer field. "Didn't mean it to turn out that way," he muttered.

Kyra's head lolled back against Johns' crotch. Toombs grinned, took the bag from her unresisting fingers.

Jack blocked a scoring shot. The crowd roared again. "She's very good," the woman said. "My daughter really likes her. Have dinner with me tonight? Both of you?"

Zhylaw laughed. Riddick's head jerked around. Zhylaw finished his hotdog, stood, stretched. "You should do it. You should stay. Take care of her."

Riddick shook his head. "Not safe," he muttered. Jack was defending a teammate and doing it well. "Not safe with me." His eye was drawn back to Kyra. Toombs was taking the popcorn off her lap. "She deserves better."

"Who doesn't?" The woman said. "But that's not really the question is it?"

Zhylaw stood. "What would you give me for her?"

"She's not yours," Riddick growled.

"Not yet," Zhylaw conceded. There was another roar. Jack had scored again. Two of her teammates hoisted her up in the air. "I have no interest in the little girl, you know. Just the woman who killed me."

Riddick stared at Kyra. Toombs was helping her up. She took another big drink from the bag, stumbled slightly. Riddick swallowed. "The woman is the little girl. All grown up."

"That depends, doesn't it?" Zhylaw said easily. "They seem like different people from here."

_Just because you didn't see the girl become the woman_, Riddick thought.

_Just like I didn't see the girl become the woman_.

_Just like me_. He looked up at Zhylaw, suddenly thoughtful. Zhylaw was packing up his things. Gave him a friendly smile. "See you all soon!" He called.

Riddick woke abruptly. _Not if I have anything to do with it_, he thought, grimly. Jack was curled to a little ball on the other side of the bed. He suddenly felt bad about giving her the cold shoulder last night after she'd freaked out about the mate thing. He scooted over, wrapped his arms around her, pulled her close. Jack stirred, blinked up at him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, softly. "Go back to sleep."

"Brand new day," she murmured, cuddling back into him.

_Brand new day_, he thought. _Time for us to visit the Quasies._
Riddick had been distant but tender that morning. Nin was distant and oh-so-respectful. Jack wasn't up to it, she buried herself in the datapad, browsing mindlessly.

After an hour, Nin's communicator beeped. He listened abstractedly. "The Purifier is here to see you, mum," he announced, politely. There was a pause, and Eris appeared.

"Hello, Jack. We have some things to discuss. Soldier, could you leave us please?"

Nin's eyes narrowed. "The Lord Marshal left no such orders."

*Oh boy.* "Nin, could you just wait outside the room, like you did when Vaako came?"

There was a pause while Nin clearly worked it through. Finally, he gave her a nod. "Yes, mum." He stood.

"Wait, soldier." Eris looked at him steadily. "You were one of the terraformers. The Omphalos."

"Yes." Nin's voice was flat.

"I begged Zhylaw for your life. On my knees."

"I heard."

"And I hear you have very good ears." Nin went utterly still. "Very well." Eris stood, smiled at them both. "I shall speak with Riddick. If he is comfortable with your . . . body guard being present while we discuss . . . matters, so be it."

As Eris started to leave, Nin said softly, "a purifier killed a girl here," Eris gave him a sharp look. "Some say."

"Ah. A non believer?"

Nin nodded. "Yes. Like Jack."

"I understand."

"If you hurt her, I will rip you apart."

Eris smiled. "I think we understand each other. I will be back, little sister." He bowed, left. Jack stared after him, feeling even more alone.

Not too long afterwards, Riddick came back.

"We're goin' to church."

He'd intended to explain, at least part of it. But instead of waiting for him she looked at Ninshubar. A look of white hot panic passed over the man's dark and generally implacable features and the desire to reassure her died a quick, jealous, and inglorious death. *I gotta separate these two. Mr. Goldy is gonna make a move at some point.*

She blinked, kept her voice light, though there was a tremor underneath. "We're going to church? Should I dress up?"

"You look great in anything. Or in nothing." He started to play with her collar, unbuttoning the top
button then the next. She put her hands on his. He leaned down and kissed her hungrily. She didn't resist. She didn't respond.

"So is this like a marriage thing? Or a baptism thing?" She blinked at him guilelessly. Remembering her reaction yesterday, remembering Baylock, "baptizing" himself with the blood of dead children, he scowled at her.

"No. Come on." He put his hand on the small of her back and pushed her towards the door.

She stumbled a step, stopped. Looked at him wide eyed. "The Necromongers have churches?"

He snorted. "Yeah. Place is lousy with 'em. Taking you to a special one." This time, he wrapped his left hand around her right upper arm and started pulling her towards the door.

"Will I like it?" She looked back at Ninshubar again. Riddick did too. The man was so tense you could see the blood pounding in his veins. *Shit, what's up Mr. Goldy's butt now?*

Riddick's anger suddenly drained away. *Baptize her.* *Take her to the Hiero-what-the-fuck-ever-theasion and ritually kill her. Which means he might do something stupid. Which means he should do something stupid. I told him to protect her. He sighed. 'Dunno if you'll like it, but you'll survive it. I promise.'* Ninshubar relaxed noticeably. Which she noticed. Now her fear response kicked in hard and she dug in her heels.

"What if I don't want to go?"

"I'd feel bad about making you."

She laughed unsteadily but stopped struggling. He hit the door controls, smiled grimly at the two guards. "We're going for a walk. Nin, you take point. You two, follow. Grab her if she makes a break for it."

"Where are we going, sire?" Nin asked woodenly.

"The Hierothesion." Nin nodded, pushed through.

"What's that?" Jack was walking beside him, looking more than a little ridiculous in her bare feet and schoolgirl outfit out among the exquisitely costumed Necromongers. Riddick entertained himself by counting the accentuated spines among the fascinated audience.

After he didn't answer, Nin did, softly. *Holy tomb. Consecrated to the threshold itself."

_Huh. Mr. Goldy knows stuff I don't._

Riddick had walked these paths dozens of times, but this time, they were increasingly full of people. *Folks must be putting out the word. Come gawk at the Lord Marshal's little fuck toy. Might be your only chance. He shouldn't have been surprised when Dame Vaako's clear voice broke through the growing crowd. "Taking your pet for a walk, Sire?"

He snorted. "Yeah. Guess I am."

Dame Vaako undulated closer. *She is beautiful. My Lord Marshal is cruel not to allow her to convert and be one of us."

She took his right arm. He considered shoving her into a wall. Instead, he shrugged. *Maybe if she asks me nicely.*
"Like she asked for the clothes?" Dame Vaako's voice was smooth and self-satisfied. "They are also very beautiful. Certainly marks her as unconverted. But no shoes?"

He snorted. "Don't wanna make it so easy for this for this one to get away." Jack flinched.

"Explaining the guards at last," Dame Vaako responded sweetly. He snorted again. "So where are you taking this enchanting creature?"

"Where you took me. Sorta. I'm gonna let the Quasies take a crack at her." Up ahead, Ninshubar tensed. Jack saw that. He tightened his grip.

Tinkling laughter. "Well, that should help dispel the pernicious rumors that she is more than just... a plaything for you."

Jack made another small noise. Dame Vaako smiled at her, sweetly malicious. "My husband is quite taken with her."

Riddick barked a laugh. "When's his birthday?"

She blinked. "I have no idea. Why?"

"Maybe I'll give her to him when I'm done with her."

Dame Vaako reared up slightly. "We would of course be delighted to receive something so sweet from your hands," she said, stiffly.

Jack made a hiccupping sound, stumbled. He kept her upright with a theatrically rough hand. Leaned down and whispered into Dame Vaako's ear, "I wouldn't give her to you, sweetheart. Not unless she really pissed me off."

"So you do care for her."

"You got somethin' to say, Selket?"

Her eyes widened. Clearly, she didn't know he knew her real name. Her voice was cool. "May I speak privately?"

Why the hell not. He let Jack go. She stumbled again. "You guys go ahead. I'll catch up. Nin, you take her in to the Quasies. They know what to do with her. Stay with her. You two," he jerked his head at the door guards. "You keep everyone else out. I'll be there soon."
Chapter 17. Between Worlds

Ninshubar held her upper arm loosely. Walked slowly, despite the crowds. It was more than a little terrifying. She kept shrinking into him, away from the smirking faces. It didn't help.

At long last, he pushed open an ornate door, gestured her in politely. When she hesitated, he put a hand on the small of her back and pushed, gently. Closed the door behind them, closing out the muttering masses.

"I've been here before," she whispered. His head jerked around, gaze suddenly sharp. "Riddick brought me here. I didn't know what it was." Ninshubar stared down at her, something strange in his eyes. Guilt?

"Yes," voices ancient and salacious whispered in chorus directly into her brain without passing her ears. "Yes. You have been here before, little spear maiden. Welcome back, light of the Lord Marshal's life."

Ghostly fingers in her brain. Just a trickle of memories, then she was smashed to the floor. Her brain wasn't hers anymore; it was a suffocating cascade of memories; memories of Riddick in chains, memories of wetly flapping wings and blood and being abandoned in dark places. Being abandoned in the light. Being taken, every thrust as painful as the first. She was screaming, fighting, ripping at the monsters on top of her, trying to make it stop. Then strong were hands holding her. She lashed out. There was a thud and a scent of blood and she was suddenly pinned on the ground. A moment of heart rending panic then everything went quiet. Something dripped onto her face. She blinked a few times. Ninshubar was on top of her, his hand pinning her wrists, the rest of him pinning everything else. His eyes were wide. Blood was dripping from his lip.

"Mum?"

"You're bleeding. Did I do that?"

"Lucky shot." He smiled, but it stayed far away from his eyes. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry." She shuddered. "God you're heavy." He let go of her wrists, raised himself off of her, carefully. "They're in my head." She swallowed. "They're running through every bad thing that's ever happened to me. This is what Riddick wanted?" She took a deep shuddering breath. Their eyes met for just an instant. "Oh how I hate this."

Nin sat down beside her. She managed to sit up. "Better?" something whispered.

Anything's better than that, she thought, frantically.

They heard. They're in my head. Oh god. "Yes, little one. We shall continue."
They went slower. It was better, in that she wasn't hysterical. It was worse, in that every agonizing moment was drawn out. The second merc ship. Killing, fighting, killing, hurting. The planet. The two years of comparative peace. The third try to find him. The utter failure. Crematoria. Riddick dying, Zhylaw. They loved Zhylaw. Lingered over every memory. And memories she didn't remember. "My savior," Zhylaw whispering, incongruously. "My iron queen." He never said that. Before she could trace that thought out, he dissolved into Riddick. Riddick bringing her back. Riddick hurting her. She heard someone sobbing, realized it was her. Felt blood trickling down her arms. Felt warm hands on her own, holding them away from her body. Risked opening her eyes. Her own fingernails had dug so deep into her arms she'd drawn blood. Nin was holding her hands, looking worried. She tried to relax.

"You do not believe in the better world beyond," the voices whispered.

Helplessly, she responded. I've been there. It wasn't better.

"You want to stop it."

She finally managed to keep her mind blank.

"Traitor," the voices whispered. She shuddered.

"TRAITOR TRAITOR TRAITOR!" They shrieked in her head. She started to whimper. She started to fight. Her hands were claws, ripping at anything she could reach. Ninshubar's strong arms were holding her against himself, pinning her hands to her body. She clawed at him, fought him, hating herself for trying to hurt him, unable to stop. Her mouth filled with blood.

"TRAITOR!"

"Who?" Riddick's voice cut through, testily. He'd got there at last. She couldn't look at him.

"The girl! She thinks treason!"

Riddick was angry. "Jesus. What she thinks doesn't matter. Just do what I told you to do."

The pressure in the room seemed to drop. The pain and panic in her head faded. They were replaced by a sense of slow hands, turning over the most intimate places in her brain. Thoughtfully. Deliberately.

She was dimly aware of Riddick's voice. He didn't seem to be talking to her. "What happened?"

Ninshubar answered slowly. "Something hurt her and she started striking out."

"How'd she get so torn up?"

"She's got sharp fingernails. And I think she bit her tongue."

The probing fingers in her head went back to Riddick leaving her locked in a cave. Leaving her to die. She shuddered back into Nin's warm arms. Riddick's voice dropped into a threat. "You wanna let her go now."

There was a pause, then the warm arms were gone. She slumped back to the tiled floor.

She was in the Underverse, on a cold stone floor. Zhylaw was stroking her hair. "My dear girl. You have the chance to become something very special don't you? All because he loves you enough to challenge the gates of hell for you. Just delicious."
She shuddered. Tried to hit him. Connected with Riddick, judging from the soft oomph. "You are
getting stronger, kid." She opened her eyes. She was back in the Necropolis, with Riddick. He was
crouching over her, frowning.

The fingers in her head were gone abruptly. "We cannot help you, Lord Marshal Riddick," the
voices said. "She is what she is."

"What's going on?" she whispered out loud, her voice cracking.

Riddick just shook his head. But she heard a whisper, far quieter, a lone voice. "The Lord Marshal
wants us to remove the parts he doesn't like, girl."

Her eyes widened. Riddick didn't seem to have heard.

The chorus was back. "Don't worry. We won't. The Lord Marshal wouldn't like it."

Then a quieter, lone whisper. "The real one. Don't tell. Bring him back soon, sweet child." There
was a low chuckling, followed what seemed one quasi-dead being scolded by the others. She curled
into a little ball, shaking. Riddick pulled her into his lap and she buried her face in his chest, heart
hammering, terrified. He held her, rocking back and forth. "I'm sorry Sunshine," he whispered.
"Never would have brought you here if I knew . . ." She glanced up at him. He looked torn. He
looked like he was also talking to the damned dead people.

A strange sense of calm came over her. They're in my head again, she realized, dimly, and the calm
Be content, sweet child. The Lord Marshal loves you. The Lord Marshal needs you. We know." They
laughed. It was not a nice sound.

How do you know? She thought, desperately.

"Because we made you irresistible to him."

You fucked with him too?

"Oh no, sweet child. We would never . . . fuck . . . with a Lord Marshal.

"Just with you . . .

The lone voice was back, boastful. "It wasn't hard . . . he brooded in the ice for five years, dreaming
of you, falling in love with the dream . . . we just nudged your shape into the dream . . ."

I have got to get out of here, she thought, hysterical.

Finally she recovered enough to look up at Riddick. "Can we never, ever come back here again?"
she croaked. "I'm gonna start needing transfusions. Plus the dead guys in my head are really
beginning to freak me out."

Riddick looked startled. "They're talking to you?" She nodded. He laughed and hugged her hard,
with real affection. "Don't listen to them. I'm sorry, kid. I didn't think it'd be like that. It wasn't nearly
this bad for me."

Her eyes prickled. "What did they do? Do you really want to take parts of me away? Please tell me
that's not it."

He didn't understand her question. Maybe because you didn't say all of it out loud. Fucking coward.
"They made me think about you. God, I love you. God damn, I want to fuck you right now. You smell so fucking good." He buried his face in her neck, breathed deep.

She shuddered. "You really have a thing for blood, don't you?" *And fear. Even mine.* He smiled tenderly at her. Something hit her hard. *He likes me afraid. But he feels bad about making it happen. He fights that temptation all the time and usually wins.* Her eyes prickled. *God, I'm fucked. I'm irresistible to the destroyer of worlds. Good thing he likes me.* She whispered, softly. "I think your mental voyeurs might like that too much for me. I don't think I can handle their commentary track."

He laughed. "Okay." He kissed her anyway, sucked on the place where she'd scratched her face hard enough to bleed, ran his hands up inside her clothes. She worked hard not to look at Nin. *Riddick and his sense of entitlement.* Especially when he started licking her arms, sucking up the blood she'd spilled on herself.

*He's going to fuck me.*

"*We made sure of it,*" the voices giggled. She shuddered. "*Don't tell. He won't hear you.*"

"Maybe we should go back to your room?" Her voice was embarrassingly weak.

He pulled his lips away from her arm reluctantly. "*Our rooms. Us.*" The look he gave her was almost crazed with desire. *No wonder he turns out the lights. Either he doesn't want me to know how badly he wants me, or he's trying not to scare me. Weird.* He shook his head. "No time. Gotta go back to work." He lowered his head again, his lips hard on her arms. She closed her eyes and relaxed, trying to convince her body this was all terribly erotic, that now would be a great time to have rough sex in a semi public place.

All of a sudden, she wanted it so hard it hurt. She wrapped her arms around him. For an instant, their eyes met. He smiled, low and dangerous and *understanding.* They kissed. It was the best thing in the universe. Except that Kyra was screaming at her. She ignored her.

Until Riddick's communicator beeped. He turned it on, irritated. "*What?*

*Vaako's tiny voice.* "*My lord, we have a situation with the Taurians. Can you come soon?*

*It's the fucking dead guys, Kyra screamed.*

*Oh shit,* Jack realized. The desire was gone in a wave of Quasi giggles.

Riddick sighed noisily. Jack looked up at him, wide eyed. "*Gimmie a minute,*" he snapped. Turned off the communicator. Looked at her, eyes gleaming. "*Sorry, Sunshine. Know you're not ready. Hey you guys – no kibitzing.*" He twisted, and somehow, she was on her hands and knees. "*I'm not gonna get anything done today if I – we - don't do this,*" he whispered, low. She could hear him pulling down his pants, rearranging her clothes. "*It'll only take a sec. I'll make it up to you tonight.*"

He was nice enough to spit into his hand again, create some lubrication, but it hurt enough to make her cry out. "*Hey,*" he snapped. She flinched, looked over her shoulder. He had turned his head and was glaring across the room at Nin. "*Stay,*" Riddick growled. Every muscle in the other man's body was iron tense. At that, her legs did give out. Riddick held her up with one massive arm. She forced herself to relax, keep her head down. Every thrust still hurt.

"*Butt on the ground, mister,*" he growled. Her head jerked around again. Nin was crouched. She shook her head. Nin sat slowly.

Riddick was right. It didn't take long before he made a funny noise, thrust in harder, reached a
shuddering climax. He was still inside of her when the communicator beeped again. He relaxed against her for several heartbeats before answering it. She could hear Vaako's increasing desperation.

"Yeah. On my way." He cut the communication. Without pulling out, he turned his head. "Nin. Take her to the med deck. Have them check her out, clean her up." His voice darkened. "Stay close to her. Last time some fucker there roughed her up."

"Yes, sire," Ninshubar said, softly. She risked giving him a long look. His lip wasn't bleeding any more, though there was a great deal of blood on his shirt. *My blood. His blood. Mingled.* She shuddered. He seemed frozen.

Riddick pulled out of her at last and stood, pulling her up with him. "I'll make it up to you tonight," he promised again. Turned her around, kissed her one last time, lovingly, tenderly. Fastened his pants and was out the door jabbering with Vaako about troop movements and kill rates.

She slid back to the hard floor. There was an awkward silence. Ninshubar finally broke it. "Mum?"

"Yeah. Med deck ho. Man, we are recapitulating my first day here . . ."

"Heavens forfend," the sniggering voices were back. Suddenly she was underneath Riddick again, just like the first time, except this time she was screaming, fighting, hurting. Riddick morphed into Zhylaw. "The Lord Marshal," they chorused, worshipfully. "The real one. You were with him. You will be with him. Hail Kyra, full of grace, blessed art thou and blessed is - "

She pulled herself up and stumbled towards the door. Nin wrapped a steadying arm around her, hit the door control, saving her from having to figure out if he'd locked her in here too. Zhylaw vanished. The crowd tittered. She gave them one scared look and shrunk back into Nin. *I think I'm falling in love with him.*

*I think that's a problem.* "Can you walk?" he asked softly.

"Yeah." She squared her shoulders. "Lead on." He nodded. The other two guards fell into step behind them. The crowd parted around them. *Everyone is staring at me.*

*I must be a sight.* She touched her face. It wasn't bleeding any more, but it was raw and open. Her arms were still bleeding where she'd scratched herself. Her clothes were spattered with blood. So was Ninshubar. She could feel Riddick's sperm and spit sliding down her legs and her knees almost gave way again. She stumbled into Nin. He picked her up like a doll and carried her to the same med station Riddick had taken her too. Doctor Neith was waiting. "Jack. Riddick called ahead. Come with me." Led them to the same small room.

Ninshubar crowded in, gestured at her other two guards to take up station outside. The doctor quirked an eyebrow at him crowding into the space. "I'm not going to hurt her."

"The Lord Marshal told me to stay with her." He set her carefully on the table.

The doctor shrugged. "Good enough." She damped a cloth with some potion, started dabbing at Jack's arms and face, cleaning her quickly. "So . . . he took you back to the Quasi-Dead?"

"Yeah."

"What happened?"

"They . . ." she shuddered. "I don't know. It was like they were in my head, telling me things, making me relive things . . . But not just memories. *I felt* things."
"What sort of things?"

She flushed. "Being raped. Things like that."

The doctor hesitated. "And the cuts?"

She shrugged helplessly. "I think I did it."

"She did," Nin said, quietly. "I tried to stop her."

"Fingernails?"

"Yes."

"Easy enough. Anything else?"

"The Lord Marshal raped her after her interrogation," Nin said flatly. "Made her bleed."

I should tell her he didn't. Not really. I didn't say no. I wanted it, just for a minute. . .

Kyra's voice cut in. Because of the dead guys. And if you'd said no, they would have fought, and one of them would have died. That's rape, kiddo.

If I open my mouth, I'm going to start bawling. Shit. Shit I want out of here.

The doctor's eyes widened. "Gosh." She busied herself with her equipment. "Fortunately, the tissue grows back quickly down there."

The exam was quick and professional; the synthetic skin covered up everything beautifully. The doctor fixed Nin's lip. When she was finished, he asked, quietly, "Do you have any clothes she could borrow? I'm not relishing the thought of trying to get her back to the Lord Marshal's chambers looking like that. It would be easier if she didn't look so much like-' he stopped, swallowed. "So much like spoils of war."


Pants? Ooh, I like this. "Thank you. I'll get them back to you somehow." She was already struggling out of her bloody clothes, knowing she was smiling goofily.

The doctor's lips twitched. "Call it a gift. I'll leave you to get changed. Leave your old stuff here; I'll have it washed and sent to you." She gave her a smile, left quickly.

Nin didn't leave, but once again, he pointedly averted his gaze as she changed clothes. "How do I look?"

He looked her up and down. "Like a new Necromonger," he said, blandly. "As long as no one looks at your neck. Mind if we swing past my room so I can look like a less-bloody Necromonger?"

What would Riddick think? Fuck it. "Of course." He gestured her out, courteously, distantly. The other two soldiers fell in step behind them. Hardly anyone gave them a glance, and those who did just smirked.

He put them on an elevator in the med section that took them a long way, into a cramped section of the ship. People nodded at him and the men, several more smirked at her, but no one seemed surprised. It was comforting to be anonymous. Nin opened a small door, gestured all three of them
inside. They barely fit.

She blurted, "This is your room? I've had cells bigger than this." He raised an eyebrow. Stripped off his shirt, dropped it down a shoot, started rummaging through a small closet. Unlike him, she didn't look away. His broad back was intoxicating.

"Why were people looking at us like that?" she said, trying to break the silence.

Nin stiffened. One of the other guards responded, somewhat dreamily, "They think we're going to consummate an understanding."

"Huh?"

"That we're going to fuck," the third guard said bluntly.

"The four of us?" she squeaked

Nin turned around, still shirtless. Her eyes locked on his chest and she flushed. Wow. He's as pretty as Riddick. "Yes, that is what they think. And no, we are not going to." His gaze was hard on the other two men.

"Oh, come on," one of them teased. "Maybe just a little?"

"No. I know the Lord Marshal's mind on this."

"Just funnin'" the man said, lightly. "But a man can dream can't he?"

"Not always a healthy exercise," Nin said. He grabbed a shirt almost at random, put it on while watching them all like a hawk. "Let's go."
Chapter 18. Waxing.

The battle was going very well. Some very satisfying destruction. Riddick was almost grateful to the Taurians for rejecting Vaako's peace delegation. Took a small field trip in the Tiamut himself; ten or twelve bombing runs on the Taurian fortifications was a great way to work out some aggressions. The whole thing with Jack and the Quasies had been damn unsettling. He felt bad about how much they'd hurt her. But the way she'd curled up in his lap afterwards, clutching at him . . . that had been sweet.

Never should have given her up.

Never should have let her grow up to be Kyra.

He shook himself. Stop dwellin’. Not helpful.

She should be grateful . . .

He stopped dead, staring sightlessly at the battle schematics.

Where'd that come from? No answer was forthcoming. It didn't feel like the sort of thought he'd think.

She doesn't want you. That's why she recoiled when you said mate.

Riddick glared around the room. Where the freaking hell did that come from? Jack's freaked out because she doesn't want to be responsible for things like . . . he hit a few buttons, hundreds of thousands of people dying today. Just means she's a good person. Doesn't wanna be queen bee of killers.

The inner voice was not mollified. You are doing this for her. She should be grateful to you. Irritation started to bubble up. Do I got another fucking hitchhiker in my head? Someone who hitched back from the Necro-fucking-verse? One that's got it in for the kid? Who ever the fuck you are, she's off limits.

Someone cleared his throat meaningfully. Riddick glared over his shoulder. Eris was standing there. Riddick shrugged, feeling absurdly mollified. "Where've you been?"

Eris smiled at him, slightly worn. "Mostly in the archives. But I stopped in to talk to little sister this morning."

"Yeah?"

"Her . . . bodyguard would not leave us. May I speak candidly in front of him?"
Riddick grunted. "Depends on what you're gonna say."

"If he is . . . secure in his faith, our discussion may upset him."

Riddick grunted again. "Don't much care about his peace of mind." Eris's lips twitched.

"To be completely blunt, I would prefer to speak to her at least once without him hulking over us. I think . . . he may look for an opportunity to assert himself should our conversation distress the young lady or probe matters of . . . faith."

"Can't you handle him?"

"I . . . don't think so."

Riddick laughed. "You need a bodyguard to protect you from the little girl's bodyguard?"

That nettled Eris. "No. But you do understand that man was genetically engineered to be what he is. And he appears to be-" Eris changed what he was going to say. "The Omphalos are not to be trifled with."

"Omphalos?"

"His people. The terraformers."

_The what? _"Necros beat them."

Eris smiled strangely. "Yes –yes. Riddick, I am asking – let me send him away for an hour or so while I speak to Jack. I have no desire to . . . test his loyalties."

"Whatever." He flipped on his communicator, hit a few buttons. Nin answered. "Soldier. Riddick. Your Lord Marshal. Eris gets to hang with Jack without you around whenever he wants, for as long as he wants. Got it?"

"Yes, Sire," Nin answered, woodenly. Riddick grinned. Flipped the communicator off. "Good enough?"

Eris nodded. "Yes. Thank you." He looked around the room. There were techs and soldiers there, all politely ignoring them. "Do you . . . trust her?"

"Yeah." He hesitated. That treacherous voice was murmuring dissent. "Yeah. More than anyone."

"Do you . . . have secrets from her?"

Riddick stared at him. "What the fuck do you care?"

"Riddick, I was in your head. I know things. . . " Eris's voice trailed off. "I will keep your secrets if you want. But I suspect I will have an easier time building a . . . rapport with her if I did not have to."

_Well, there's the crazy lady in my head that wants to kill her. That's a secret._

Riddick blinked. _Where the hell did that come from?_ A memory of a dark skinned woman, touching him, opening his eyes, opening something dark and wonderfully destructive, telling him, _"She's not for you."_ A wolf, blood dripping from its muzzle. . .

"No. No secrets. Not from her."
Their eyes met, then Riddick turned abruptly back to the console, feeling strange again. He didn't look back as Eris slipped away. There were people to kill. Time to get to work. Sooner these guys were toast, the sooner he could start making up time with Jack. Maybe figure out how to get her crying in his lap again, clutching at him. The thought made him grin, darkly. *Yeah. That'd be fuckin' sweet.*

They had walked back from Nin's room in ostensible silence. Kyra was furious; furious at Riddick for everything, furious at Ninshubar for watching it, furious at Jack most of all. Jack tried to stop listening. What was the point?

But as hard as she tried, Kyra's fury was infectious. When they got back to Riddick's rooms, she headed straight back to the bedroom, back stiff. Nin followed close, uneasily. "I'm gonna change clothes," she said, coldly. "Riddick won't like seeing me in pants. He'd have to take them off me to fuck me."

Nin nodded, his eyes not meeting hers.

"You wanna watch again?" Kyra was getting to her; her voice was archer than she meant. Nin looked stricken.

"No, mum."

"Oh, come on. Look at me." She jerked the shirt off. "Nothing you haven't seen before." Pulled the pants down, kicked them towards the closet. He watched her unmoving. She spread her arms wide. "Here I am." She twirled around. "Made to please. Built special for fucking. I won't stop you." She kicked off the slippers so she was completely naked.

Ninshubar swallowed. "Mum-

"You got a girlfriend or something?" Stalked towards him.

He stood his ground. "No."

"Boyfriend? Someone you've got an 'understanding' with?" She got close enough to touch him.

His voice was gentle. "No."

"Am I interrupting something?" Eris's cool voice cut in. They both spun. Jack's face flamed. Nin stepped in front of her.

"God damn it." She headed for the closet. "Why am I always naked when you come in?"

Eris laughed, softly. "My good fortune?"

Nin made a small warning noise. Jack glared at him.

"Ninshubar," Eris said, with such compassion that Jack's eyes prickled. "Soldier. Do not be troubled. I am going to speak to little – to Jack, alone, for a while. You have my word I will do her no harm. But I need you to step outside."

Jack snorted, yanked the dress over her head. Nin's head jerked to her. The look on his face was awful. All her anger drained away abruptly, leaving her feeling awful. "I'm sorry," she said in a little voice. "I'm a bitch today. It's not your fault. Nothing's your fault. I shouldn't – I shouldn't have snapped at you. You've done everything right. I'm just freaked out."
Ninshubar nodded woodenly, turned to leave. "Wait," Eris called. "What happened?"

There was silence. Finally, Jack broke it. "Nin, could you – could you tell him? Please?"

Ninshubar's expression softened. "Purifier. A few hours ago, the Lord Marshal instructed me to take her to the Hierotheisen." Eris went very still. "I did. The Quasi-Dead interrogated her. While I watched. She was writhing on the floor, screaming, clawing at herself. While I watched. Then Riddick came. And he," Ninshubar stopped, swallowed. "When they were done with her, he raped her. In front of me. While I - I did nothing. When he was finished, I took her to the doctor and then I brought her back here. I am – I am a loyal Necromonger. I obey. But I . . . understand her anger with me."

"You poor soul," Eris murmured.

"Oh god." Somewhere in his recitation, Jack had sunk to the floor in misery, burying her face in her hands. Finally managed to look up. "Nin - Thank you. I'm – I'm so sorry you're messed up in this."

Ninshubar's look pierced her to the soul. "As am I." He swallowed. "Summon me when you are finished?"

"Yes, soldier," Eris nodded, and the compassion in his eyes was heart breaking. "I will."

Nin left. Jack leaned back against the closet, breathing hard. The silence stretched on. Eris broke it, crouching down in front of her. "Kyra," he said softly. Her eyes jerked open. He was gazing at her with a faint smile.

"Riddick doesn't want people using that name."

He nodded, still smiling. "What do you want?"

She sighed. "Hell if I know." She hesitated. "Kyra was strong. I told Riddick Jack was weak. I told Riddick Jack was dead. I thought she was. Died under some merc." She stared up at the ceiling. "And you know what's weird? He just kinda shrugged and seemed to be okay with it. Still watched over me. Still killed people who messed with me. Still tried to keep me alive. Then I died and he brought me back and whamo, I'm Jack again. Weak. Pretty. Fuckable. 'Cause it turns out that he really wanted the weak little girl. So I guess it doesn't fucking matter what I want."

Eris nodded, thoughtfully. "Did Riddick tell you about his first time in the Necropolis?"

"No . . ."

"We had assembled the leaders of New Mecca. I gave the standard, 'we all began as something else' speech." He rolled his eyes. "Zhylaw made his pitch. Someone resisted. Zhylaw killed him. Then Riddick challenged Irgun and killed him in front of the assembled leaders of two worlds."

"He told me," she said, softly. "Irgun killed my foster father."

Eris nodded. Touched her face gently. "I am sorry. Zhylaw decreed that he be taken before the Quasi-Dead. Riddick was prepared to fight, but Dame Vaako asked him nicely. Led him there by the arm. I . . . I suspected he was Furyan." She spasmed slightly. He was watching her closely. "The Quasi-Dead peeled back the layers of his soul. They found a young girl. She'd shaved her head. . . He told me it was you?"

She blew out her lips, roughly. "Yeah. Huh. So he was thinking of me."
"Oh, yes," his voice was strangely worshipful. "You weighed heavily on him. He went to Crematoria for you. I saw you fight there. You were magnificent."

She gave him a rueful grin. "Thanks." She leaned back into the closet door. "I worked really fucking hard."

He stood abruptly. "I owe you an apology."

"Huh?"

"On Crematoria. When Riddick fell." She looked at up at him, eyes wide. "I knew he wasn't dead. I could have stopped you from getting in Vaako's ship. I did not. I knew Riddick had followed you to that hell. I hoped Riddick would follow you back to this one."

"Oh." She stared at him. "Why?"

"I hoped he would kill Zhylaw." His voice went soft. "He asked me what Zhylaw would do to you. I said he would do nothing to you that he had not done to me." For an instant, pain passed over his eyes.

"How did you die?"

"Walked into a wall of fire."

"Why? If you and Riddick are long lost brothers, why not help him?"

His lips twitched. "The sudden crushing weight of twenty five years of doing incredible things in the name of a faith that was never my own . . . and a snap judgment about Riddick. That he is a fairly visceral person and the . . . implication that you and I were alike and I was dead would hit him hard."

"You killed yourself to manipulate Riddick."

He nodded. "In part. I am the ghost in the machine."

"One of them," she heard her self mutter.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing. It's just . . . it seems like a whole lot of people are manipulating me and Riddick these days."

His lips twitched. "Yes. I am sorry." The silence ticked on. Finally, Eris broke it. "You know about that closet, don't you. That it's a way out."

She snorted. Kyra whispered, softly, He's trying. He's giving you something. Be careful, but he might be an ally.

"You were tempted to use it, that first night I was here."

"You noticed that?" Her voice was almost normal.

"Yes."

"Did you tell Riddick?"

"No. Does he know?"
"I'm sure he doesn't or he would have walled it up. He really doesn't want me to leave." She picked at the bracelet on her wrist. Eris gave it a measuring look before sitting down on the bed with a weary sigh. "Don't tell him?" She asked in a small voice.

"You have my word as a . . . Furyan. I will keep your secrets."

"Thank you."

He nodded. "But you must know that it is no escape for you. The Lord Marshal's runaway mistress would not find many worlds welcoming. Riddick would come after you."

_Mistress? _"Jesus. I spent five years hunting him down. Pretty fucking stupid if I ran away now. I just . . ." She broke off.

"You hate where you are."

"You noticed?"

He smiled again. "Riddick has. I was in his head for hours. He told me he has no secrets from you."

She laughed, slightly hysterical. "No secrets, huh?"

"That is what he said. He loves you very much."

"Yeah, that's true. In his own unhinged way. But that's not why he has no secrets from me."

"Oh?"

"No. It's because what I think doesn't fucking matter. Just like he told the Quasis."

"Sorry?"

The words came out before she thought them through. "They were screaming 'traitor traitor traitor! The girl! She thinks treason!' and Riddick's all 'Jesus. What she thinks doesn't matter.' God I hate this."

Eris got a very peculiar expression on his face. "I imagine he may have thought he was protecting you. The Necromongers punish traitors rather brutally."

"I noticed," she said, archly.

He nodded. "They will do it to me, if they figure out what I did," he said, softly. "You and I. The two biggest traitors ever to convert to the cause."

_ I converted. Right. _She swallowed. "What's your story anyway? I had the sense from Riddick that you were a long lost brother or something."

"Or something. I . . . fell."

"Huh?"

"I converted. After our people fell. I joined. A loyal Necromonger, dreaming impotently of revenge. Then Riddick walked into the room and everything seemed ever so clear."

"I hear that." She closed her eyes. "Your people?"
"Our people. Furyans."

_Huh? I'm not a Furyan._

_You don't know that._ Kyra whispered. _Just keep your fucking mouth shut about that for now._ She swallowed. "Okay, so here's where I'm at. You've trusted me with a whole lot of information. Thank you. So I'll trust you with some. I hate the Necros because they're destroying all life in the universe and, oh yeah, they tortured me. I want to stop them. The fact I can't figure it out is killing me."

Strangely, that made him smile, briefly. "Shows that Riddick is right."

"Huh?"

"That you are worth loving." She closed her eyes. He kept talking. "Riddick brought me back to keep you from Zhylaw."

"Oh, right, things could be so much worse." She leaned her head back into the closet's comforting door. "I keep forgetting." Eris said nothing. "Here's something I haven't told Riddick. I think - I think he's talking to me. Zhylaw. I dream about him and it's like he's right there. When the Quasis put the whammy on me, he was there. Touching me. Calling me his Iron Queen. I tried to hit him and I got Riddick."

She opened her eyes. Eris's face had gone still again. "He said - he said I was special because Riddick stormed the gates of hell for me. They -- the Quasies -- told me to bring him back soon. Am I," she could feel her face twist, "am I some sort of fucking bridge to hell? Can Zhylaw really use me to come back?"

"Oh my dear girl," Eris murmured.

"Cause if I am, I need to know so I can find some wall of flame to walk into."

Eris shook his head. "If you die, he has you. That -- that would be a very easy way for Zhylaw to come back. You die, Riddick comes for you, and he rides you back."

"Oh god."

"He refused to give you the True Death."

"You told him to kill me?"

"I . . . suggested it would solve the problem he gave me."

"Huh." Jack snorted. "He won't. He couldn't fuck me then."

"Well . . . not for long," Eris allowed. Jack laughed. Once she started, she couldn't stop.

"Oh, that felt good. So - Zhylaw?"

"Let me think about that." Eris gazed at her, thoughtfully. "Bringing him back would not necessarily be a bad idea. It would give us the opportunity to give him the True Death, which would protect you." She closed her eyes. "Why did he take you to the Quasi-Dead?"

She rolled her eyes. "The Quasies said he wanted them to take away the parts of me he doesn't like. They said they won't because Zhylaw wouldn't like it. But I haven't, you know, heard from him on it. He just dragged me in there and let them take me apart for a while. _God damn_ I hate this place."
Eris looked troubled. "Do not put too much stock in what the Quasi-Dead say. Like Selket they . . . are not known for candor. And like her, they enjoy causing pain."

"Do you believe it?"

"I . . . find it hard any man could do that to the woman he loves. And I know he loves you with all his heart."

"He told you that?"

"I was in his head, little sister."

"Oh fucking Christ," she exploded. "That's right. He told me you got to watch us having sex." She flushed red.

Eris looked embarrassed. "Not just watch. And . . . not just sex. I know he's raped you. He knows it too. It eats at him." She made a funny sound. He met her eyes. "I begged him to stop thinking about it while I shared his mind." He seemed to reach a conclusion. "Little sister, Riddick made me a promise. Save you, and I could rebuild our world. Furya."

"Good for you."

"But every suggestion I have made he has declined."

"So you've got something other than true deathing me?"

"Yes. Breaking the connection between this world and the Necroverse would also work. Riddick did not like that idea." He was watching her carefully.

"Would that mean he wouldn't be the Grand Poobah of the Army of Darkness any more?"

"Exactly."

"Yeah. No. He's really loving being in charge. Plus, wouldn't you have to kill him?"

Eris blinked rapidly. "Sorry?"

"Oh, when I snuck out I overheard some people talking. Dame Vaako and some guys. They said to break the connection all someone would have to do is blow up the lesser threshold, the Basilica, and the Lord Marshal and poof, no more connection to the Underverse."

"What an . . . interesting conversation for you to overhear," Eris said, carefully. "That . . . that would be the most . . . clear cut way do it, yes. But there may be other ways. I want Furya back. His genes are invaluable. I have no desire to see Riddick dead."

"Me either." Yet, Kyra chimed in. And you don't need the man to have the genes. "But to save the universe. . ." her voice trailed off.

"Oh my dear little sister." There was silence. "If there was another way . . . do you think Riddick could be persuaded?"

"To bring down the Necros without killing him?" She rubbed her eyes. "I dunno. Thing is, Riddick's been hunted by bounty hunters for years. He's sick of it. I think right now, they aren't after him, or at least they can't get close. If there was a way to keep that up . . ." her voice trailed off. "Maybe."

"Why maybe?" His voice was gentle.
"I think he might be afraid."

"Of bounty hunters?" He sounded dubious.

"Of them getting to me. Or . . . " she stared up at the ceiling. "Or of me leaving him, if I could."

"He told me that, yes. " Eris said softly. "Would you?"

"Not if he was nice to me. But he's not always nice."

Eris nodded, the compassion back in his eyes. "I don't think he means to hurt you," he said, softly.

Jack swallowed. "No. He tries not to – not to hurt me. But he doesn't mind doing it, to get what he wants. Nin was right – he raped me right in front of him and the dead guys, even though he knows Nin is falling in love with me. " Shit, I shouldn't have said that. " He's turned into this weird control freak. He won't let me have pants or shoes or keys. He's locked me up. He tries to keep me weak. That sort of thing's hard on a relationship."

Eris's lips twitched. "Yes, I can see how it might be. " He gazed at her thoughtfully. Suddenly self conscious, she got up, picked up the pants, shirt and slippers and stowed them in the back of the closet. Stashed the slippers too. Gave him a defiant look. Finally, he seemed to reach some conclusion. " So. If I may recapitulate. Riddick is here because of you. Riddick loves you unreasoningly. Riddick has become . . . dangerously close to abusive. Zhylaw wishes to use you to come back. Zhylaw will likely torture you the rest of eternity if he can. The Necromongers are destroying the universe. We are the only two people here who do not approve of that."

She blinked rapidly, surprised at how hard the tears were pressing. " I don't think Nin likes it," she offered, gingerly.

"Yes." His voice was sad. "Your loyal bodyguard. Who once made worlds. Who would not intervene to stop Riddick from raping you."

"To be fair, he offered. I turned him down."

"Offered?"

"To challenge Riddick."

Eris's eyes went sharp. " Hm. " There was a long silence. Shit, should I have kept my mouth shut about that?

"Can we stop them?" she asked, her voice small.

"Perhaps. " He stood. " Perhaps. I have research to do. Some advice?"

"Yeah?"

"Endure. Do not try to escape. Be sweet to Riddick. Tell him about Zhylaw. Warn him. You have an independent streak."

"Yeah. It's called Kyra. " He smiled.

"Sunshine." The word was almost a caress. " Keep her leashed. For now. " He took two steps, bowed over her hand. " Make him feel . . . safe in your love."

"So I'm just supposed to lay back and take it?"
Eris sighed. "Not forever. Bide your time. Be sweet." He smiled at her, low and slow and dangerous. "For now."
It's probably a trap, Riddick thought. But the Taurians had asked for a parlay and his advisors had been so dead set against it he met with their ambassador just to piss them off. Probably a trap. But the Taurian ambassador was drop dead gorgeous and talking to her was strangely restful. He strung her along a bit, giving her reason to hope that conversion-or-death weren't the only options for her people just to keep her talking.

After going around and around she finally turned off the recording device she had brought with her. Looked up at the Necromonger monitor in the corner. He shrugged and flicked a control and it light blinked off. "I know who you are," she said, quietly. "Richard B. Riddick. A throw away. Again and again. I understand, in some way, why you would become a Necromonger. Why you'd have it in for the civilized galaxy. Our punishment for what happened to you."

He grunted. "Sure it ain't your fault, lady."

"Not directly." She was watching him carefully. "But I'm part of everything you have reason to hate."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"But you haven't converted."

His lips twitched. "Not much of a joiner."

"You joined the military."

"Yeah, that worked out."

"I saw the file. You should have been acquitted. I could arrange to have it expunged. . ."  

He eyed her carefully. It's definitely a trap. He grinned, showing some teeth. "Record's a little longer now."

"Yes. But much of that would be covered under sovereign immunity. Other things?" She shrugged, aristocratically. "You make peace with me, I have a whole lot of influence. You end the Necromonger war of aggression, you'll be a galactic hero."

He snorted. "Not a hero."

"You saved a little girl once."

He scowled at her. "Yeah. Moment of weakness."
"I disagree. You were a hero. You could be again. Why make destruction your legacy?"

He shrugged. "It would happen with or without me. Much more fun to have the hords of hell at my back than on it."

She nodded. "I know a few things about Necromonger accession. How long before one of your loyal troops challenges you?"

He grinned at her. "Funny, that. I would have thought it'd be daily. Not one's raised a hand. You know my theory? It's because I win. I'm taking on bigger targets than Zhylaw ever did, and I win my battles. Someone will take me down, some day. I've pissed a whole lotta people off, just by meeting with you. But it won't be the Taurians. I'm willing to be merciful. Open up conversion to more of you all. But even if I knew how to get off the tiger, I don't feel inclined to do it."

The ambassador nodded. "What happened to her?"

"Who?"

"The little girl you saved. Audrey."

He stood abruptly. "She died on New Mecca. Lady, I'm tired. You wanna take this up again tomorrow, great. You're welcome to stay. I'm sure we've got empty luxury apartments, even if I have to empty them. Otherwise, I'll make sure you get home, okay?"

She blinked several times. "I would love to stay," she said, her voice low.

He thumbed a control, issued some orders. Said good night without ever touching her. Went back to Jack.

She'd be a better mate, the treacherous alien voice inside of him whispered. If you don't find one of your own people. Powerful, beautiful, and has skills you don't.

Too bad I don't want her.

He sent the guards away and slipped in. There was a strange rumbling in his rooms and a smell he couldn't quite place. They weren't in the sitting room. They weren't in the gym. They weren't in the conference room. Feeling a strange apprehension, he headed towards his own bedroom silently as he could. The rumbling grew louder.

Ninshubar was there, sitting motionless on a chair. The two men stared at each other. Finally, Riddick broke the silence. "Where's my princess?"

Ninshubar jerked his head toward the bathroom. "In the bath." His voice was rough.

Ah. She pressed the buttons. That's the noise. If you don't find one of your own people. Powerful, beautiful, and has skills you don't.

Too bad I don't want her.

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Ninshubar jerked his head toward the bathroom. "In the bath." His voice was rough.

Ah. She pressed the buttons. That's the noise. Riddick relaxed slightly. "By herself?"

Nin's voice was deadpan. "Should I have joined her?"

The memory hit so hard it almost hurt. Jack, in the bath, between his legs. Slipping his fingers into that sweet green, feeling her feel him, feeling her dissolving. He licked his lips. Remembered Mr. Goldy. Grinned at him. "Maybe someday, if you're real good I'll let you do that."

Ninshubar flinched. "My lord," he said his voice suddenly earnest. "She loves you. It would not be . . . kind . . . to use her like that."

Huh. Mr. Goldy's pickin' a weird point to stand up for her. "I dunno. I think she likes you."
"Not so much today."

"Oh?"

"You raped her. In front of me. I did nothing." His voice was flat.

Riddick could feel his eyes narrowing. "Can't rape what's yours, soldier."

Nin gave him a strangely beatific smile. "I wondered where Jack learned that from."

Still tryin' to pick a fight with me, Mr. Goldy? Riddick grinned at him again, despite the sudden sour feeling in his stomach. "Don't think I hurt her."

"You did. I watched her face."

Shit.

"Okay, guess I was a little rough. I'll be nicer. I promise. Now go away, soldier."

Ninshubar stood. "You're mocking me."

"Are you drunk?"

"Oh no. I never drink on duty."

Riddick stared up at him, utterly mystified. "Go away. Take tomorrow off. Go blow off some steam somewhere, would ya? Find something to fuck. In fact, don't come back 'till you're feelin' yourself again."

Ninshubar's voice was deadpan again. "Obedience without question. Until I'm feeling myself again." He saluted and left. Well, that was weird.

The rumble was still coming from his bathroom. He headed over. Door was locked. Sorta pissed him off until he remembered that she was locking Nin out. Then he grinned.

So what do I do now? Door's locked. I want there. Break the door? Pick the lock? Knock?

Something whispered, you are the Destroyer of Worlds. No door can bar you.

Huh, he thought. Put his hand back on the doorknob. Open says me.

There was a pause, then a click, then the knob turned. Well, huh. He slipped in. It was dim. Jack had found some candles, but otherwise, it was dark. "Jack?"

No response. He slid toward the bath. She was lying in the water, eyes closed, breathing slow. Asleep?

He got close enough to touch her. Then he did, letting his fingers slip through the water, rest gently on her belly. The water was warmer than blood. She'd found some stinky sweet stuff to dump in the water, meaning he couldn't smell her the way he liked. Her eyes opened slowly.

"Hey," he whispered.

She blinked at him slowly, dreamily. Smiled, and he could feel something unknot inside of him. "Hey."
He let his fingers drift up her stomach toward her breasts. "I fucked up." Let his fingers circle her breasts gently. "That thing with the quasies – that thing after the quasies - never should have happened. Won't happen again."

She nodded solemnly, smiled again. "Thank you."

"Whatcha put in the water?"

"Bubbles. But they went away."

"There's bubblebath in here?"

"Was."

*I told you not to go rummaging around,* he thought, slightly nettled. Forced himself to put it aside. Unreasonable not to let her open the bathroom cupboards. "Smells good."

"Opium."

"Huh?"

"Smells like opium."

"Where'dya smell opium?"

She rolled her eyes. "Jesus, Riddick, I'm not twelve."

He let his fingers drift down towards her pelvis. "Right."

"I'm at least two months old." She giggled, leaned back into the warm waters. "I've lost track."

"Can I join you?"

She sat up, leaned over, picked up a dark bottle. Took a swig. Smelled like red wine. Set it down with exaggerated care. Leaned over to talk right into his ear like she was confiding something. "I'm having cramps."

"Huh?"

"I'm having menstrual cramps. They hurt. I mean – yes, you can come in, but I might bleed on you."

"Not a problem." He hesitated. "Why don't you take some of your pain killers?"

"Doctor took them."

"Took them?"

"Took them away. She didn't think we could be trusted with them." She giggled again.

"When?"

She seemed to be thinking. "Yesterday. Wow. Yesterday. Lot's happened since then. Seems longer."


There was a pause that went on a little too long. "Sire, maybe we should talk about this."
"No."

"Alright. I'll bring them to you. Is there something specific?"

Jack leaned over, spoke into his wrist. "I'm having my first period. Again."

Another pause. "Oh. I'll be right there."

Riddick turned off the communicator, looked at Jack. "You drunk, kid?"

"Yeah. Seemed like the thing to do."

"You shouldn't drink alone."

"Why?"

He hesitated. "Tends to mean you've got a problem."

She laughed. Relaxed back into the waters. "I'll remember that." She took another drink. "I gotta tell you something."

"Yeah, kid?"

She looked around like she was expecting to see someone hiding behind a potted plant. Not that there were any. "Zhylaw's talking to me."

He just stared at her.

"I thought it was just nightmares. But then when we were with the Quasi-Dead – I knew it wasn't just that. He's being really nice. It's creepy. I think he thinks he can use me to come back." She closed her eyes.

He grunted. Started caressing her breasts. "Don't worry about it, kid."

Her eyes jerked open. "Don't worry about it?"

"I know about the Zhylaw thing."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"'cause there's nothing you can do about it. Kid, we have so little time together, I'm not that interested in talkin' shop with you."

She swallowed. Looked earnest. "I wish you would. Might make me feel less . . . irrelevant."

"You also didn't react well when I told you what we were doing."

"Ah." She looked away. Whatever burst of energy had coursed through her seemed to be gone now. "The quasies also said they made me irresistible to you."

His fingers stilled. Stared at her for a long time. Dead guys got really chatty. "Dead guys got really chatty. I figured that out."

She rolled in the bath to look at him. "Why didn't you say something?"

"Say what? They did what they did. I didn't ask them to. I told them to put you back in your body. When I figured it out, you were sobbing on the floor covered in blood and it was all I could do not to fuck you right there. What did you want me to do; kill you and have them do it again?"
She closed her eyes, rolled away. "No. But don't deny you like it."

"Kid-" his voice cracked. "Look. I spent five years in an ice cave for that little girl I thought I left safe and warm and loved on New Mecca. Finding out that you weren't any of those things -" He broke off again. "I was up to it. But you were so angry with me. And then there's the little girl again, all grown up and soft and sweet. Lookin' at me like you loved me. Not hard and bitter, lookin' at me like you . . . hated me. Like it was my fault you got hurt, when everything I'd done for six years was to keep you safe. Yeah. I liked it."

Their eyes met. Jack reached out, touched his face. "I've been a bitch."

He snorted. "Not to me."

"You comin' in?" she said, almost shyly. He grinned and started stripping off his clothes. The door chime sounded.

"Oh, shit. Doctor. I'll be back."

He left his armor and shirt on the floor, loped through his rooms, flung them open. The doctor took a step back. "Sire?"

"Got something for me?"

"Yes – yes." She was clutching a small satchel. "But my lord, these," she pulled out the bottle of the good drugs "I gave them to Jack because they worked. But they really are interrogation drugs. They need to be used sparingly. And not mixed with alcohol. For muscle pain," she pulled out a different bottle. "These are much better suited."

Bemused, he took them both. "Thank you." She stood in the door, eyeing him. "Spit it out, doctor."

"You should let her convert. It is cruel of you to keep her isolated."

He started to respond angrily, but decided just to show her some teeth in a friendly grin. She nodded, turned away. Riddick stared after her for a moment. Went back to Jack.

Her eyes were closed again. She was breathing slowly. He crouched down beside her. "Hey."

She opened her eyes slowly. Smiled. "Hi."

"Here." He handed her four of the muscle relaxants and the bottle of wine. She took them dreamily.

"If I let you leave, would you?"

Her answer seemed to come from very far away. "What?"

"If I let you leave-"

"I get it. You're making it very hard to implement my plan of drifting off, Riddick."

He said nothing. After a long time she continued, her voice childish. "Leave you? Not when you're nice. I like it when you're nice. I don't like it when you're not nice. And I can't help but suspect that if you thought I could leave you, you'd be nicer."

He grunted. "Look. I got mad today when you looked at Nin for answers about where we were goin' instead of me. I shouldn't of."
She sighed. Closed her eyes again. "You're jealous."

"Yeah. He gets to spend all his time with you."

"Send him away."

"What?"

"Send him away."

"Don't you like him?"

"Yeah. He's been great. He's a better man than either of us. But if you're gonna get jealous . . ."

"I'll think about it." He hesitated. "I need you to be safe. I can't bear - "

She lifted an arm out of the water, touched his lips. "Coming in?"

"Yeah." He stood, stripped off his pants. Slipped in behind her, pulled her against himself. She relaxed into him. He started to caress her, carefully, gently. "What hurts?"

"Thighs, mostly."

He reached down, started to rub them. She made a pleased noise. "You do that every night and you'll never get rid of me."

"Good." He took a deep breath, blinked, and she dissolved into light. A sweet green, pressed against him, inside his arms, between her legs. He tried to slip his fingers in and she whimpered. "Sorry."

"It's okay. You don't know your own strength sometimes."

He snorted. "Yeah. True that." He let his left hand slip inside her thighs. Kneaded her right thigh by touch; the sweet green was strangely unhelpful when it came to revealing muscle tension. "How's that feel?"

"Heavenly."

He made a pleased sound himself. Blinked and she was a girl between his thighs. His cock twitched. She slowly ran her hand along his left thigh and his cock did more than twitch. He groaned. He briefly cupped her pelvis, switched to the other thigh. Worked it in silence for several minutes.

"How do you feel?"

"Good," she said, dreamily. "This is nice."

"Yeah." He kept kneading with one hand, let his other start to drift in between her legs. Kept it very gentle. With the thick sweet smell of opium in the air, he couldn't tell if she was responding. When he blinked, he could see the dark green threads of Kyra begin to well up through her.

"I love you," he whispered. Watched as the threads seemed to hesitate and retreat. "I was an idiot to stay away so long."

"Yeah," she said, still dreamy. Rolled her shoulders against him. "In the ice and the snow."

"There were hot springs."
"And giants that walked the land."

He hesitated. Took his hand off her thigh, brought it up her side slowly. Cupped a breast. "How did you know that?"

"You were there."

"And monsters."

"Did it feel like home?"

"You feel like home."

She made a pleased sound. "No cities?"

"Not anymore. I read a survey that said before the climate shifted, things were different. Towers full of people."

"What happened to them?"

"Died out. Mostly"

"Ashes to ashes."

"That's my girl." He let his fingers slip through the protective folds of flesh. She made a small noise.

"If we're gonna do that, we should do it soon. I'm gonna fall asleep."

"Bet I can keep you awake."

"Mmm, sleep deprivation. That's always fun."

He hesitated. "Someone do that to you?" His voice sounded low and dangerous, even to his own ears.

She rolled over so they were face to face. "Once upon a time. Let's kiss."

He grinned. Ran a hand down her head, down her back, cupping her buttocks, down to her thighs, still pinned within his own. She sighed, kissed him on his lips, gently. Too gently. He got one hand on the curve of her buttocks, the other on the back of her head. Kissed her a little less gently. She murmured something. "What?" he mumbled.

"Relax," she whispered back, kissing him harder. It occurred to him he didn't know who she meant, but she was kissing him and her breasts were pressing into him and her thighs were lifting up to straddle him and he just couldn't care what she meant.
Chapter 20: Sandcastles

Ninshubar was kneeling on the beach, making sandcastles. She walked up to him. "Hey."

He smiled beautifully up at her. "Sunshine."

She put her hand on his bare shoulder. "I thought you were just the bodyguard. Didn't know you were the builder too."

He sighed. Pressed his cheek into her hand. "Needs must." He looked down the beach the way she came, his voice sad. "Your footprints are bloody."

She spun. There were footprints vanishing in the distance, the near ones brimming with blood, the far ones red splotches on the sand. "Those aren't mine."

"Are you sure?"

She tried to prove it wasn't, that the stride was wrong, that the holes were too big, but her legs weren't working. She stared at the sea, eyes prickling. When she looked back at Nin, an old woman was helping him build. "Who's that?"

"Kore Arkipov." Nin smoothed the walls of a tower. "Didn't you know?"

"Hallow," the old woman hailed. Stood, painfully. "My boy's right. Your footprints are bloody."

"What do I do about it?"

The woman smiled, sadly. "Everything alive bleeds."

"So I have to die again?"

She grinned. "That's one trick, Sunshine. Again and again and again. Every night."

"Each night I save you," Nin murmured. "I would."

Kore smiled sadly down at him. "I know. I am so sorry, little beans. But you will have a chance to take her into the river with you."

"Each night I die. And in the morning?" Jack asked abruptly.

The old woman grinned at her, white teeth against warm brown skin. "You come back. Haven't you noticed, Sunshine?"

"What about Riddick? Aren't those really his footprints?"
"Some of them."

"More are mine," Zhylaw said. Jack hadn't seen him. Jack knew he'd always been there, on the other side of the sandcastles. "But it's an understandable mistake." He smiled down at Ninshubar, lovingly, proudly. Nice work, son."

Ninshubar's voice was dead wood lying on the sands. "Thank you, sire."

"What river?" Jack heard herself ask.

Kore grinned. "The old one. Still burbling along, despite the Z-man's best efforts."

"What about Riddick?"

"He'll be there too. Everyone is. We're all in this together."

Zhylaw walked through the sandcastles and they dissolved at his feet. He opened his arms and the beach went cold. "No. Not anymore. The river flows into the dry sands. Flows into the sands, and dies away. I have a better solution. Something more solid than water." Jack took a step back, away from Zhylaw, away from Nin, away from the flattened castles. Nin made a soft, sad sound. Zhylaw smiled. "All your pretty cities, Kore. I'm burning them all down. Thanks for the boy. He's been a great help."

Nin stood up, towering above Zhylaw. "Yes, sire." Then he made a fist and punched Zhylaw so hard he dissolved into a flock of crows, screaming and diving at her.

Jack sat up with a start, heart hammering. Riddick's eyes blinked slowly open, gleaming in the darkness. "Hey, kid. You okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry to wake you."

"'sokay. Bad dream?"

"Sorta."

"Tell me."

"Gimme a sec." She got out of bed, padded to the bathroom, mind reeling with the birds. Pissed in the darkness, got herself a drink of water, hit a wall of warm muscle. "Uh-"

"Missed you," he whispered, huskily.

"I was coming back."

"I was coming to get you." She was in the air, in his arms. She relaxed, let him do it. He laid her on her back, crawled in beside her. Started to caress her belly. "Tell me," he repeated, low and insistent.

The dream was already sliding away. She grasped and what she could remember. What she was willing to tell. "I was walking down the beach and Nin was there, making sand castles. He told me my footprints were bloody. Then Zhylaw said some of them were his. He kicked over the sand castles and Nin punched him and he turned into a bunch of crows. They were diving at me. That's when I woke up."

"Murder."

"What?"
"Murder of crows. That's what a bunch of crows is called."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Stuck in my head." He went quiet. "Where was I?"

"I don't know. You're not in all of my nightmares, Riddick."

He chuckled. "Fuckin' insulting." His slow hand got more insistent. She shivered.

"You were sort of there, I guess. There was a woman. She told Nin he'd take my body to the river, and that you'd be there too. Zhylaw said no. That the river was gone."

"Huh." He breathed against her neck. "Wacky." His hand moved up to her left breast, began kneading it gently. "Tell me about the woman."

"Older. But, you know, with that eternally young thing goin' on. Darker than you; not as dark as Nin..." Her voice wandered off as he made a strange noise.

"Shirah?"

"What? No, not her." He made another noise. "Wait. Is she real? Who is she anyway?"

He seemed to be coming from a long way away. "Huh?"

"I've had these dreams where someone named Shirah is trying to kill me..."

His hand stilled, heavy on her breast. "Oh," he said, sounding strangled. "Do you."

"Yeah. Did we meet her once?"

"Oh," he repeated. "Huh."

"Riddick?"

He sighed. "I dream about her too. I have to think about this. Later." His fingers started moving again. His voice dropped low. "I love you."

"I know you do, Mr. Bloody Footprints."

He chuckled. Then he was on top of her, kissing her like he was afraid she was going to melt away.

oOo

Jack woke up slowly. The cramps were back. She couldn't remember where Riddick had put the pills. She couldn't remember coming to bed. _Just how drunk did I get?_

She shifted, became aware of the wetness between her legs, under her. _Oh, drunk enough not to think about the fact that I am having a period. Right. Blood. In the bed. Cleaning crew will earn their... what ever it is that they get here._ She shifted. The cramps hit hard.

"Hey, Sunshine," Riddick murmured. His hand was on her belly already. His fingers stretched, started stroking downwards.

"Hey. I messed up your bed."

"Our bed." His fingers were between her legs, exploring. "Mmmmm..."
"I gotta pee."

He sighed, deeply. One finger thrust in, then two, and for a scary moment she thought he was going to follow up with more. Instead his hand withdrew reluctantly. "Okay. Lights dim."

She pulled herself out of bed. "Do you know where those pills are?"

"Bathroom. On the counter. Both sets." He sounded a little wistful. "I think there was other stuff in the satchel. I didn't really look."

"Thanks." She half expected him to follow her. When he didn't, she swallowed some of the pills the doctor recommended, pissed while she examined what the doctor had brought. Pads or something like them. Repurposed bandages, she suspected. *How thoughtful.* Headed back to the room with them, went straight to a dresser.

"Whatcha doin'?"

"Getting dressed. I bled everywhere."

"Don't worry about it. Come here."

She looked over her shoulder at him. His eyes were gleaming. Slightly unhinged. *Guess I'll be earning my keep today too,* she thought, a little tiredly. *Bein' sweet. Right. What Eris said.* For once, Kyra wasn't screaming at her, that was good. He grinned at her, but there was something slightly worried behind it. *He's afraid I won't.*

*He'll rape you if you don't,* Kyra whispered, sounding strangely sad. *That's what's bothering him. Note how the blankets are tenting? He's ready right now. He's fighting fucking you against the dresser.* Jack felt herself blush furiously. Walked over to the bed softly, compliantly, slowly, very aware how his eyes never left her.

He flipped the covers away. There wasn't as much blood as she thought. Still, she didn't want to lie in it. She looked at him, lying naked in the dim light, and suddenly her heart hurt. He was stunning. It didn't make sense. Far, far more beautiful than she could ever be, even with a team of hair and makeup people, which she didn't have, and she hadn't tried once to be pretty since she came back. But him . . . just lying there, muscles rippled under golden skin. His face was slightly alien, ever so faintly feminine in this light, something more than flesh and bone. She let her eyes trail down perfect muscles beginning to tense ever so slightly, down his right arm, strong enough to lift her into the air, down to a hand of perfect fingers that could reach inside of her almost to her uterus. Let her eyes drift from that hand, across his stomach, down, down thighs almost as big as her waist, to feet that seemed strangely . . . normal.

"You like?" he asked, huskily, ever so slightly uncertain.

"Yeah," she whispered, letting her eyes trail back up his legs, pause between them. "Wish you weren't so god damn big sometimes," she allowed.

He laughed softly, delightedly. "You say the sweetest things." He hesitated, watching her. His voice went cautious. "Nin said I hurt you yesterday."

"Yeah."

"'cause you weren't ready?"

*Because I was humiliated and terrified and not in the mood to be essentially raped in front of a*
bunch of semi-dead guys and some guy doing his level best not to kill you? She circled to the other side of the enormous bed, away from the bloodstains, hearing Eris's voice. "Be sweet. Make him feel safe." She smiled at him. "It's okay. It doesn't hurt for long."

"I'll be more careful. I wish—" He sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed, spreading his arms invitingly. She stepped into them and they closed around her. He nuzzled her breasts gently.

"What thy bidding, my master?" she asked, lightly.

His face stilled. Looked up at her. "Bidding? Like how much I would pay for you?"

"Huh? No – I mean – what do you want from me? I mean – if I could grant you three wishes, what would you wish for?"

He groaned softly. "I wish you wanted this as much as I do. I wish you felt what I feel when I'm inside you. I wish . . ." He made a complicated move with his hips and his hands and she was on the bed, back on the bloodstains, under him. He kissed her softly but implacably on her lips, down her face, down to her neck.

"What?"

He kissed down her neck, down her chest, down between her legs. Her body was responding to him, she was letting it, and Kyra was keeping quiet for some reason that worried her. His head was between her legs, then his lips and tongue were between her legs. She gasped and arched her back, making it easier for him. He groaned again.

When she was almost ready, he lifted his head, his lips pink with her blood. Crawled up her body so those lips were right above hers. "I wish you wanted to be here," he finished. Then he kissed her roughly, making her taste her own blood. His knees pushed hers further apart and he ground himself against her.

"This ain't so bad," she managed, lightly, when he raised himself up.

He grinned at her. "Oh yeah. Could be much worse." Was that a threat? He thrust in deep. One enormous hand was on the bed. The other slipped between her legs, touching her gently. She gasped. "Wrap your legs around me." She did what he said, even though it spread her legs uncomfortably wide and his arm was pressing uncomfortably into her hipbone. He nuzzled her, breathed into an ear, "hook your ankles."

She did. He lifted her all the way off the bed with the next thrust, started fingering her. In seconds she was spasming, gasping, unthinking, thrusting herself into him. Riddick growled, thrust in hard, collapsed on top of her.

They laid like that for a long stream of heartbeats until finally with a groan Riddick lifted himself up slightly, his eyes only inches from hers. "That's what I wish. But this is pretty sweet too."

Their eyes locked. Finally, she licked her lips, turned away. With a terrifying gentleness, he caught her face in his hand, turned her to look at him. "What," he whispered, all velvet over steel, "are you thinking?"

She closed her eyes. Make him feel safe . . .

"I'll know if you lie," he whispered, gently, almost into her mouth.

She opened her eyes into his silver backed ones. Nodded. "I love you. I have loved you helplessly,
stupidly, since I was a little girl. Turned me into something . . . hard. With bloody footprints. Like you." He nodded, hypnotized. "Then I died and it was all washed clean. And you brought me back, all soft. Sure this isn't what you want, Riddick? I think you like me soft and clean and innocent. But if I wanted to be here, with you, with them, I wouldn't be innocent any more. I might still be soft . . . but I'd be bloody. Complicit."

"Decadent," he whispered.

"Yeah. Worse than you. Someone who liked the bodies raining down around me, rather than just someone . . ." her voice wandered off.

"Someone protecting his own."

"Yeah. Doing the hard things."

Riddick sighed. Rolled off of her. Offered her a hand. Bemused, she took it. "You're really fuckin' smart."

"About some things."

He was pulling her towards the bathroom. "Good thing you're on my side. If you weren't . . ." his voice wandered off.

"You'd hunt me down and kill me?" she asked, wryly.

"Oh no." He pulled the shower stall open, helped her in with exquisite courtesy. Hit a control and warm water hit them both. "Lights out."

Jack made a funny sound. "Riddick-"

He started washing her hair in the darkness. She closed her eyes, let him do what he wanted. He was gentle, careful, getting the soap out without any of it drifting into her eyes.

"Guides used to say you should always leave a place better than you found it," he said so softly she almost missed it.

"You were a Guide? Were you a Boy Scout too?"

He sighed. Took a hose from some hook, started cleaning between her legs. It felt shockingly good. After a long time, he said, "No. But I sorta like that idea. You're doin' okay if you leave the things you love better than you found them."

He turned off the water. Stepped out of the enclosure. His hands were on her waist, lifting her out, still gentle and careful. "Figure my job is to leave you better than I found you, once upon a time."

"You mean better than dead?"

He laughed, started drying her. "I've found you dead, tortured, about to be eaten by monsters. I'd treat you better than that. I love you. I would find you. I would keep you. In the dark. Safe. Alone. Until you were ready to be on my side again."

"Back in the cave," she whispered back. He made a pleased sound, started drying her hair with a new towel.

"Yeah. Back in the cave. But with no fucking heroes or holy men for company. Or glow worms."
"Do you think that would work?"

"If it didn't, I'd try something else. Ever have breakfast with an ambassador?"
Chapter 21: Breakfasting with Ambassadors

"Ambassador? You what, kidnapped one?"

Riddick grinned down at her. "Not yet. The Taurians asked for a peace conference. The Necros were so dead set against it I let them send over someone."

Something vaguely like hope stirred deep down. "Yeah? You thinkin' about the peace thing?"

He didn't answer directly. "Spent a bunch of time talkin' to her yesterday. She asked about you."

"She knew about me?"

"She knew I took some girl named Audrey off of that monster planet. Guessin' that was you."

"Once upon a time." She shook her head. "Wow. They've really been doing their homework."

He snorted. "Yeah. Or something. Said I was a hero."

"You were."

His lips twitched. "So I'm thinkin' of inviting her to breakfast here. If you wanna eat with us." The offer was diffident.

Jack smiled at him. "I'd love to."

Riddick made some calls and things happened fast. A conference table where a doctor had examined her once was set for breakfast. Of all people, Vaako ushered the ambassador in. He gave Riddick a worried look, bowed over the ambassador’s hand with exquisite courtesy, then hurried off.

The woman was stunning. Tall, dark, muscled, wearing a face that had seen much with its eyes open. She extended a hand to Riddick who just grinned at her. She gracefully diverted it, smiled at Jack. "I am Ambassador Thessaly. Thank you for welcoming me."

Jack smiled at her, uncertainly. "I'm just his pet."

Riddick snorted. "She's Jack. I'm hungry. Let's eat." Riddick sat abruptly at the head of the table. Jack started to sit across from him. He shook his head, shoved the chair away and pulled up a padded bench at his place setting. Sat down hard and pulled her down next to him. There was no place setting there, just Riddick's plate. The servers began to rearrange things. "You can go, men," Riddick growled. After a moment's hesitation, the servers bowed themselves out.

Thessaly gazed around, bemused. "I seem to have created quite a stir."

"They're not used to guests," Riddick observed, spearing a bread roll with a shiv. "Eat up."
With a shrug Thessaly pulled a long thin knife from under her robe, followed his example. "Is every one armed but me?" Jack said, brightly.

Riddick barked a laugh. "You've got me, princess. Better than a gun."

"You don't always do what I want, Riddick."

"You name the guy and he's dead, babe."

Thessaly watched, fascinated. "So . . . how did you two meet?"

Jack gave Riddick a quick look. He shrugged. "Just turned around and she was there one day. Heard she was here and decided to look her up. Had to kill Zhylaw to get to her."

"She was part of the package?"

Jack stiffened. Riddick ruffled her short hair. "More or less."

The Ambassador's voice was light. "If I killed you, would I become the Lord Marshal?"

Riddick laughed. "Sure. If you did it right. But people would have to believe to make it stick. I killed Zhylaw in the throne room in front of hundreds of witnesses. You off me here?" He shrugged. "You'd be dead. I'm sure Jack has thought about it. I know her fuckin' bodyguard has." He shut up abruptly, scowling.

This isn't going well, Jack thought. "I've never thought of killing you," she whispered, not having to fake sounding stricken. There was an awkward silence. Jack put her hand on his thigh. His fingers tightened over it. She continued with an artificial brightness. "Any anyway, even if I did, it'd be a rush to kill me. Avenge your death and become the Lord Marshal. Good fun."

Riddick laughed. Thessaly took a piece of fruit, peeled it with her knife. "Why did you ask me here, Lord Marshal?"

"Piss off the Necromongers."

"Aren't you a Necromonger?"

"Hell no."

"You don't like them?"

He hesitated. "I understand them. Look. Here's what you gotta understand. What they're doing? They are gonna do it with or without me. They believe in the Underverse. And their Underverse? I've been there." Jack closed her eyes. "They believe in something real. Gives them strength. What do you believe in? Cops?"

Thessaly nodded. "An interesting point. I believe in keeping my people alive."

"'cause they made you rich?"

"Perhaps. You were poor."

He snorted. "Yeah. So now you're here, all rich and pretty and you want me to stick my neck out for you. The Necros – you're right. I'm not one of them. They killed my people. They killed my girl. But you know what? They treat me right. And, again, they'll do what they do with or without me. You make me a proposal I can make stick? I'm listening. I don't like this business of killin' kids. I don't
like what the Necros do to the people they bring back and don't convert." He glowered at Jack for an instant. "We ain't a social service agency; we're not in a position to take care of too many sick folk. But maybe more kids . . ." his voice wandered away.

Thessaly stretched. "Interesting. You have been to the Underverse?"

"Yeah."

"How do you know?"

He laughed. "Believe me, lady, I've been a lot of places. That's the only place I've walked and talked with people after I killed 'em." He didn't look at Jack. "That's what it means to be the Lord Marshal. You get to go there. You get to go back. And that's why you and her," her jerked his shoulder at Jack, "can't do it. Killin' the old king is half. The other half is finding someone to show you the way and ain't nobody gonna volunteer to do that."

"Why go?"

At that, he did look at Jack. "Well, it's a trip. And there's this bag of tricks you get."

"Like what?"

He grinned. "Like this." He stood and was on the other side of the room without taking a step.

"Teleportation?"

"Oh yeah. I can go right through doors. Right through barriers. Bunch of stuff like that."

"And the gates of hell will not withstand against you," Thessaly murmured.

"Nope. Not comin' nor goin'. As long as I'm the Lord Marshal."

"As long as?"

"Until you die. Then you're just another soul in hell."


Thessaly looked fascinated. "I didn't expect to learn. . . such details."

He'd left his shiv at the side of his plate. Jack reached for it. Riddick's hand got there first. "What do you want, princess?"

"Some bread with honey?" Riddick speared a roll, split it, buttered it, and added a generous dollop of honey. He seemed to think about feeding it to her. Set it on the edge of his plate instead. "Thanks," she said, a little shortly. "Be sweet," she heard Eris's voice. She made herself smile at him. He grinned back, grabbed her inner thigh under the table.

Jack took small bite, chewed it meditatively. It tasted wonderful. Into the silence she asked, inanely, "you're an ambassador?"

"I have that honor."

"You're a brave woman to come here."
"Needs must." Jack spasmed slightly, hearing dream-Ninshubar's words from this woman's mouth. "Did the Necros conquer your world?"

Riddick grunted. "No. She jumped onto a Necro ship." His fingers tightened on her thigh.

"Yeah. I was young and stupid."

Thessaly shook her head. "Surely not. Best of bad options?"

Jack gave Riddick a quick look. His face was blank, but his fingers had relaxed. "I thought so."

Riddick snorted. Thessaly dabbed her lip gently with a napkin. "You are not a convert? You seem very . . . young." Riddick snorted again. His fingers tightened waringly, stroked up to her pelvis, and were gone.

"It's . . . complicated," Jack managed. "I used to be older." Riddick snorted a third time attacked a slab of meat she didn't recognize. She took a bite of the bread to hide her swirling thoughts.

The ambassador laughed, lightly. "I understand."

"You don't know shit," Riddick muttered. There was another awkward silence. The ambassador smiled beautifully.

"Then teach me."

He stared at her.

The other woman took a thoughtful bite, then continued. "This is what I think. You are no Necromonger. Neither is your companion. Why continue their way?"

"You got another solution?"

"Change them."

He snorted again. There was a sound at the door. "Forgive me," Eris called, sounding sincere. "I did not know you were entertaining guests."

Riddick glowered at him for an instant. "What's up?"

"May I speak with you alone . . . sire?"

Riddick seemed about to tell him to go away, but changed his mind abruptly. "Oh, what the fuck. You." He pointed his shiv at the ambassador. "You hurt the girl, I'll shred your world." Then he was gone. Eris winked at Jack over his back as they left.

Jack cleared her throat. "Sorry about that. He's . . . abrupt sometimes."

Thessaly smiled at her, seeming bemused. "That would be the least of his sins."

Jack rubbed her face. "Yeah."

"Audrey?"

Jack spasmed. "Oh. You figured that out."

"You were the little girl he saved from monsters."

"Yeah."

"He told me you were dead. He told me you died in New Mecca."

"Yeah. I did."

Thessaly nodded. "He brought you out of the Underworld."

_Why did Eris wink at me?_ "Yeah. That's what Riddick did before he locked me up all snug here. He went into dark places and yanked me out. That monster planet, the Underverse, Cremetoria . . ."

The other woman blinked. "You were in Cremetoria? You survived Cremetoria?"

"Yeah. I was older and stronger. I'm younger than that now."

"Kyra," the woman breathed. "Three women have ever meant anything to Richard B. Riddick. And you are all three."

There was silence. The ambassador broke it. "Why you?"

"Just sorta happened, I think. I was there at the right time. I was just a kid and he saved me. I loved him. He went away and hid to keep me safe. Came hunting for me when he found out I was in trouble. Then I died for him and . . . dunno. Things went from there. He'll kill you if he finds out I told you this."

Thessaly shrugged. "He'll probably kill me anyway. You died."

"Yeah. _I shouldn't tell her this_. But it felt so good to tell someone that the words just kept coming. "He got me out of Cremetoria, but the Necros showed up just as we were about to get on the ship. He got shot. I saw him dead on the ground. Or, at least, I thought he was. I got on the Necro ship, came here. Converted and everything. Then Riddick shows up. Challenges Zhylaw. For me. I tried to talk him out of it. They started to fight. Zhylaw almost had him down. I stabbed Zhylaw in the back, he backhanded me into a spike. Seconds later, Riddick kills Zhylaw, becomes the Lord Grand Poobah of the Army of Darkness. I bled to death in his arms."


"But he saved you."

"Yeah. A few months later, Riddick he shows up. Tells Zhylaw he's taking me. Zhylaw thought it was funny. Riddick brought me back, has this stupid new body made for me, and there you go."

"You are not happy."

"No."

"Why? You have done something amazing. You have come back from the dead."

Jack shook her head. "I've had something amazing happen to me." She rubbed her face. "I hate what they're doing. The Necros. But Riddick's made it real clear I'm not going anywhere and he's not going to stop them."

"I am so sorry," the ambassador said, sounding like she meant it. "Living here . . . it must be torture."
"Only when I think about it. Or when Riddick's feeling-" She stopped abruptly.

"Insecure?"

Jack spasmed. "How did you know that?"


"Yeah. They aren't all that bad." *I'm babbling.* "Nin – the guy who takes care of me – he hates it too."

"The one Riddick thinks wants to kill him."

"Yeah. But I asked him not to."

The Ambassador hesitated for just an instant. "How interesting. Why?"

Jack shook her head. "Why what? Nin—Ninshubar was a terraformer. He made worlds. Now he's taking them apart. He cares about me. He hates it when Riddick's brutal with me. He hates what the Necros do."

The Ambassador seemed to stop moving. "Ninshubar. Your bodyguard was one of the Omphalos."

"Yeah. Bodyguard to the woman in charge of the Omphalos. You know about them?"

"Kore Arkhipov," Thessaly breathed. "Your bodyguard was Kore Arkhipov's bodyguard."

"Yeah. Is there anything you don't know?"

"Oh yes. Many things." She clasped her hands together. "I know this. The Omphalos were miracle workers. I was born on one of twenty two livable worlds in one solar system that they built. And they hurt the Necros more than anyone else ever did. Zhylaw didn't kill them all. How . . . interesting."

"Nin said Arkhipov told him to convert."

"If Kore Arkhipov told me to convert, I would have too." Thessaly breathed her name like it was a prayer. She took a deep breath. "Will you help me?"

"How?"

"Information? How do we stop them?"

"I don't know. I've been told-" she stopped. *Is this why Eris winked at me?* "Okay, this might be bullshit. But what makes the Necros Necros is their magic link to the Underverse. You break that? They're just a bunch of guys. To break it, you gotta break the points of connection. The Lord Marshal – gotta kill him in some way that doesn't pass it on. Like old age or from a really big distance. Not hand to hand combat. You gotta kill the quasi-dead. The Basilica – the city that's on this ship. And the lesser threshold. You destroy that, you break the connection. But you gotta get all of it."

The ambassador spoke very carefully. "The lesser threshold. I've heard of that. Where is it?"

"I have no – wait a sec." Jack got up, went to the bedroom, grabbed her handheld, punched some
buttons. "Here. The coordinates."

The Ambassador's eyes went wide. "Wow." She pulled out her own handheld. Started recording. Hit some buttons. "This is amazing. What's on here. Is it yours?"

"Yeah. Riddick gave it to me."

"The information on here could save the universe. May I have it?"

And yes, that is why Eris winked at me. I give her this, I give her the secrets of the Lord Marshals. "Oh, god."

Thessaly spoke quickly. "You can give us a chance. You would be a hero."

Jack stared at her. "I want something."

"Anything in my power."

"If – if we get out of this, I want amnesty. For both of us. And for my bodyguard Ninshubar and for Eris. The guy who winked at me."

The Ambassador hesitated. "He got Riddick out so we could talk."

"I think so. He hates the Necros too. He's Furyan. He wants to rebuild his world. Riddick told him he could if he saved me from Zhylaw."

Thessaly nodded. "For you, for him, and the Omphalos? I can promise. For Riddick? I will try. If he helps us. . . ."

Jack rubbed her face. "I love him."

Thessaly's voice went low. "I understand. I will do my best. But I do not want to lie to you . . . it would be easier if he switched sides."

She's telling you the truth, Kyra whispered. Make your choice. Who do you fall with?

Jack took a deep breath. She popped the memory chip out of her handheld. Offered it almost shyly.

Thessaly nodded. "Brilliant." Hesitated. Pulled out her own handheld, popped out the chip. "For you. And this." She pulled a necklace from her neck. "My crest. Show it to any Taurian, you'll be treated like a queen."

Jack inserted the chip, shoved the necklace into a pocket. "Thank you." She closed her eyes. "Shit. I'm gonna start bawling."

"When you're alone."

"I'm never alone." Jack took a deep shuddering breath. "Okay. I'm okay. Now what?"

"Now I do what I came here to do. Try to cut a deal with the Lord Marshal." Thessaly crooked a grin. "At the least, buy some time."

"Why are you trusting me?"

"What else do I have?" Thessaly shrugged. Smiled beautifully. "I know who Audrey was. Before you ran. I know what you were running from. I have some notion of who Riddick is. I know what
the Furyans were. I absolutely know who the Omphalos were. Kore Arkhipov was a hero. If she told her bodyguard to convert, it was probably for such a time as this." She pocketed the hand held, straightened herself, and seemed to reach some sort of decision. "I know what to do."

"Do you know about the Quasi-Dead?"

"Telepaths."

"Yeah. Riddick had some of them rip my head apart a few days ago. He promised not to do that again. But sometimes he's . . . technical . . . in his interpretation of promises."

"He will punish you."

"He'll hurt me. But more importantly, he knows what's on that chip."

"I understand. We will move fast. Stay close to Ninshubar."

Meanwhile, Riddick let Eris lead him into a small conference room and shut the door. "What's up?"

Eris took his own sweet time. "Shirah talked to me."

"Huh?"

"Shirah. The Furyan Nemesis. Dark skinned woman, says she appears to you?"

"I know who she is. Vengeance lady."

Eris was staring at him. "You never thought to mention her?"

"Why? She's kinda annoying. Gives me good toys though."

"Toys."

"I can see in the dark. I can kill people without touching them. That sort of thing."

Eris blinked slowly. "First, she does not believe Jack is an appropriate mate for you."

"Yeah. She brings that up. A lot."

"Riddick," Eris said, with a hint of asperity, "She is Furya. What's left. Except what lingers in the genes of a few people. You. Me. Nor Jack. She is not Furyan."

"So?"

"You need a Furyan mate."

"You mean like my mother who left me in a garbage can?"

"Your mother was killed. You were cut out of her belly and strangled by Zhylaw."

Dead silence. Finally. "How the fuck do you know that?"

"I looked it up. There's video if you would like to see."

It was Riddick's turn to stare. "Yeah, that sounds fun. Anyway. I like Jack. So do you."
Eris nodded carefully. "I do. And, unlike Shirah, I understand why you've kept her close. As a pet, as a little sister, that is fine. But as a mate? You need a Furyan mate."

Riddick grunted. "I don't think I do. Jesus, I'm not having kids. Even if I was, what's wrong with mutts?"

Eris ignored part of the question. "Your genes are invaluable."

"Whatever. If Jack wanted kids, I'd think about it. Probably turn her down, but maybe. I didn't sterilize her for some reason. But some random woman who you want me to hook up with because she was born on some planet I don't remember? I don't think so."

Eris looked almost physically pained. There was a long silence. Finally, Eris nodded. "Remember, you promised I could rebuild Furya. It is close. I would like your permission to take a fast ship to visit. Like Jack, it was not sterilized. I would like to see the state of any survivors."

"You just got here."

"I know. But there are many reasons Necromongers attacked Furya. There may be something . . . acceptable . . . we can use to save your pe—to save Jack from Zhylaw. And we may never be this close again."

"She's not a pet."

Eris's voice was gentle. "Don't delude yourself, Riddick. That's exactly what she is."

Something clicked. "You thought Jack was Furyan. When you thought that you thought she was great. Shirah told you she wasn’t, and now you've changed your mind."

"She smells Furyan. She fought like one on Crematoria." Eris shook himself. "This isn't about her. This is about saving our people. It's possible Jack could be a surrogate mother for Furyan children if you are determined to keep her as your mate. I suspect she has your mitochondria. That's why she smells Furyan."

Riddick glared at him. It burst out before he could stop it. "She don't wanna be my mate."

Eris smiled sadly. "You can't blame her, Riddick. You treat her like a spoiled child treats a pet. Alternately abused and adored."

At this Riddick came out of his chair. "You wanna go back to the Underverse?"

Eris stood his ground. "No, I want to go to Furya. I will be back in a few days. Do I have your permission to take a ship?"

"What the fuck ever man. Just remember our deal."

"I shall mediate upon it hourly."

"Are we done?"

Eris looked sad. "Yes. I suppose we are." He turned to leave.

Riddick growled after him. "Take Shirah with you. Tell her if she messes with Jack, I will find a way to end her."
Chapter 22: A Penny for the Old Guy

Riddick came back, looking dark. "Hey," Jack called, as soft and sweet as she could make it. "What's up with Eris?"

He stood perfectly still for several heartbeats too long, seeming to wrestle with the question. Finally, he growled, "nothin'." He collapsed down at the empty place the servers had set for Jack, leaving her alone at the head of the table. Speared a piece of meat with his shiv. Glared at it.

Thessaly looked from one to the other with a faint smile. "I have been thinking over what you said. You don't want to kill children?"

He glared at her as if she wasn't making sense. Finally, he ground out "no."

"As a gesture of good faith, would you take that off the table?"

He looked blankly at the improvised breakfast table. "Huh?"

"Will you promise not to kill children?"

"I've never killed a kid. I've-" He's not tracking, Jack realized. He seemed to reach the same realization. He stopped. Took a deep breath. "You offerin' to surrender if I do?"

Thessaly laughed, ruefully. "I have . . . authority to negotiate a peace treaty. Surrender is out of my writ."

"Huh?"

"I would have to . . . go back and present surrender terms to the council."

Jack slid in. "How about this. No child dies. As they hit, whatever, sixteen, they go through conversion."

Thessaly eyed her. "You're assuming any of my people will accept conversion."

"Conversion or death," Riddick said, ponderously. "That's the deal. That's not negotiable. I'm willin' to-" He looked at Jack, and his eyes softened. "I'm willin' to dicker on the details. But that's not negotiable."

"Oh." The ambassador looked at the ceiling. "Does it have to be conversion now?"

Riddick hesitated. "Dunno. Whatcha thinkin'?"

"Perhaps conversion later? After everyone else has been conquered?"
He stared at her. "Why wait? Sounds like you're trying to get away with something." He looked at Jack. "What was your idea?"

"They – we – don't convert kids because they aren't strong enough. Maybe turn it into a rite of passage? You gotta go through conversion to grow up?"

"Hm." He looked interested. "I kinda like that."

Thessaly looked distressed. "I'll be frank. My people are unwilling to convert."

"Then they'll die. On the battlefield or in the conversion chambers," Jack said, softly. Riddick gave her a sharp look.

Thessaly closed her eyes. "I don't have authority for this."

Riddick snorted. "Better deal than anyone else ever got. What's your real proposal?"

"I have the authority to sign a mutual non-aggression pack."

Riddick looked incredulous. "You're fuckin' kidding."

"Can you take a different deal back?" Jack slid in.

"Yes."

"Okay. How about this. No selection criteria. People go through conversion in an orderly fashion. Army first. Then the government. Then – dunno, vital industries. No one is killed by Necros."

Thessaly stared at her. "Thought you were on my side." Riddick's head snapped around. He growled, softly, his face darkening.

"I just don't want people to die," Jack said. "I don't have a side."

Riddick's eyes were hard on her. Thessaly's necklace was heavy in her pocket. She forced herself not to touch it. He finally nodded, his voice distant and cold. "Okay. Here's the deal. Call it surrender, call it a peace treaty. I don't fucking care. At least 10,000 converts a day. Army first. No kid gets killed. We'll let them get big enough first."

"And our old folks? And the disabled?"

"Really don't fuckin' care about them. If they can survive the process, they're welcome. If not," he shrugged. "To tell you the truth, the death we woulda given them woulda been nicer than the one they'll get in the conversion chambers. But if that's the deal, that's the deal."

Thessaly stared at the ceiling. "You aren't converted. Nor is your . . . girl."

"We're special."

Jack swallowed. "I went through the conversion chambers. I saw the Underverse." Riddick was still staring at her. She didn't meet his eyes. "It hurts. But I've had a hell of a lot worse things happen to me. And you come out the other side with . . . insights. And you're part of something . . ." her face twisted. "Or you are. If it takes. It didn't quite . . . take. It doesn't always."

There was silence around the table. Finally, Thessaly nodded. "How about this. Contingent surrender. Five hundred volunteers go through. They come back and make a report. If what they tell us is acceptable, then we all surrender. No one is executed." She swallowed, but her voice was
steady. "The rest of your terms are acceptable to me. If that works for you, I will make that recommendation to my people."

"Huh." Riddick had a strange look on his face. "Okay. I can live with that. I'll give you . . . one day."

"I need ten."

"You ain't gettin' it."

"Please?" Jack smiled at Riddick, hopefully. Riddick stared at her. Finally, he softened again.

"Seven. But don't push me."

Thessaly looked at Jack. She nodded, pleadingly.

"I agree." Thessaly smiled, beautifully. "I shall present this proposal and give you a response within seven days. Lord Marshal. After some more of this delicious bread."

The rest of the breakfast passed in a blur. Thessaly sparkled, keeping almost all of Riddick's attention. There were several points that Jack almost felt jealous. Which was ridiculous; life could only be better if Riddick started fucking other people. At some point, Jack realized that Thessaly was deliberately distracting Riddick, just so Jack could compose herself. She was terribly grateful. Even as she realized, dimly, that there was something cold and calculating underneath it. The better Jack faked it, the better chance Thessaly had of pulling this off. At some point, Jack sat back and let their flirtations wash over her.

_I miss Ninshubar._

_I was kind of a bitch to him yesterday._

_I just got him amnesty._

"Okay," Riddick said, abruptly. "I think we're good. I'll walk you back to your ship, Ambassador."

Jack stood, a little uncertainly. "I enjoyed breakfast," she said, softly. Kyra snorted at her. _End of the world_, she whispered deep in Jack's head. _One way or another. You just sold out Riddick. Good for you, but man, he's gonna go ape shit._ "Can I come see her off?"

Riddick hesitated. "I'm gonna have to go do some shit after I drop her off. I told Nin not to come back until he was feelin' himself again," he said, slowly. "I think he needs that. We – I – freaked him out yesterday. Not sure I . . . want . . . you walkin' around without him."

"Oh." She rubbed her face. "Okay. I'll just . . . stay here then."

"Yeah." He moved so fast she didn't see it happen. His hands were on her hips and he lifted her up on the table and kissed her, like he had kissed her after he found out about Shirah. Like he was afraid she'd melt away. Like was trying to inscribe himself on her flesh. She relaxed into it.

After a long time, Riddick helped her off the table. Kissed her on the top of her head, gestured at the Ambassador, and they were gone. Jack stared after them.

_No Nin today._

_Maybe no Nin ever._
I'm gonna be alone today.

There was a sound. Or maybe not. The cleaning crew was there. Since Nin had gotten there, they'd mostly politely ignored her. "Where's Ninshubar?" one asked, conversationally.

"Riddick gave him the day off. Lemme get out of your way."

"Stay," one said, nicely enough. "We never get to talk to you. We talked to the last one."

Talkin' to lots of people today. "Okay," Jack said, cautiously. "What was she like?"

"Selena? She was sweet. Younger than you. Sad, like you."

Another one smiled at her, cautiously, "she was a princess. How weird is that? Are you a princess?"

Riddick calls me princess.

And sunshine.

Things that don't exist here. She swallowed. "No. I'm just a girl. What were you, before?"

The one who brought up princesses sighed. "I was a slave."

"Oh," Jack said faintly.

"Miner," the other one offered. Born in a mine." He started telling her about it. It was appalling. They made short work of the table. She trailed them to the bedroom.

The two of them started stripping the bed. They stopped when they got to the bloodstains. "You sure bleed a lot," one said.

"Riddick kinda likes it," she said without thinking.

One of them grunted. "No wonder Nin's in such a state."

"What do you mean?"

He rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows that Ninshubar Arkhipov is sweet on you."

"Arkhipov?" she said, involuntarily.

"Yeah. I know, it's a weird name. Pre-conversion. He never changed it."

Change the subject, Kyra whispered urgently. "Why aren't you two soldiers?"

They exchanged looks. "I've got a bad habit of doing what people tell me," the one who had been a slave said, ruefully. "The Quasies thought this sort of work would be better for me."

"I gave it a try, but I broke too many broken bones," said the one who had been a miner. "Something about the water where I grew up."

"Do you like it here?"

The former slave shrugged. "They treat us alright. Good food, no one beats us. We're gonna have to go get fresh bedding. Do you," he broke off, almost shyly, "Do you need anything?"

Jack's eyes prickled. Did I sign their death warrant? "Shoes. But Riddick doesn't want me to have
any. Do you think Selena killed herself?"

They exchanged looks. The compassion in their eyes nearly broke Jack's heart. "Not our place to say," one finally said. They bowed and were gone.

Jack sat on the floor next to the closet with the escape hatch and started to cry. Once she started she couldn't stop. She was still crying when they came back with fresh sheets. One of them wrapped his arms around her and rocked her until she cried herself asleep.

She was piloting a ship in a tight orbit around a blue and green world. There was something chasing her, but she didn't care, she was free, she was alone, she was exultant in an ethereal sky.

"Doin' good kid," Riddick's voice crackled over the radio.

"Thanks, bad guy," she shot back.

His snort was clear over the static. "It's gonna be dark soon, kid."

"I'll pass."

"Maybe. But you should come home first."

She flipped off the com-link and accelerated. The ship chasing her dropped away. She laughed, dizzy.

The ship chasing her got bigger, blocking out the stars. She was running through the dark. A sliver of a moon and a scattering of stars provided all the light that was. Something was chasing her. If she could make it to the trees, she had a chance. She could see the forest, a darker smudge against a dark sky. She could lose herself in the forest. She could lose herself –

The forest was there. She didn't break stride, just angled between two trees and kept going. It got much darker. Dried things snapped unpleasantly under her feet. Something hit her in the face and she pushed past, pushed past more soft cold things slapping her.

She tripped over a short branch and went sprawling. The ground splintered under her hands. She pulled herself up and slowed down.

It grew lighter. She stopped. Bones were crunching under her feet. The soft things hitting her face were hands and feet of naked men and women, dead, hanging from the trees. Right in front of her, each hanging by one leg, were the cleaning crew. She crammed her hand into her mouth to stop herself from screaming. It tasted like chalk.

There was a hand on her shoulder. She tried to twist away but failed, hitting her head against a tree –

"I'm sorry, my child," a man's voice cut in. "You're having a nightmare."

She opened her eyes. She was in Riddick's bedroom, leaning against a wardrobe. A man was standing above her, compassion in his eyes and something hungry underneath. He was vaguely familiar. She took a deep, shuddering breath. "Sorry. Guess I dozed off."

He nodded, sagely. "I am Jason. I am … filling in for Eris while he is gone."

"Eris is gone?"
"Why yes, didn't Riddick tell you?"

"Must have slipped his mind." She stared at the bed, neatly made. "Can I do something for you?"

He smiled, gently. "I was wondering if I could do anything for you. I see from Eris's schedule he came to see you regularly the past few days."

"Yeah. I think he felt sorry for me." Shut up, Jack, Kyra hissed. This one is not your friend.

Jason nodded, sagely. "You are in an extraordinarily difficult position."

Get up, Kyra urged. Get out of the bedroom. Get closer to the front door.

The soundproofed front door?

You've got a panic button. Jack shook herself, stood, somewhat unsteadily. "I need a glass of water. Can I get you one?"

"That would be kind." He trailed her out of the room, back to the small sitting room. She found too glasses, filled them, brought them back. "To life," he saluted her.

"Thought you didn't like life."

His lips quirked. "My dear girl, you have been misled. We cherish life."

"Maybe it's just the name. Doesn't Necromonger mean death dealer? And don't you kill a whole lot of people?"

He sat down the glass precisely, smiled broadly. "This life is an illusion. There is a better world beyond the threshold. Our calling is to bring life across that threshold."

"By killing people."

"A sad but necessary cost. But we kill no one who would not have died anyway. And those we save -- they will live eternally in a better world."

"That's what you say. How do you know?"

"Faith."

"Huh."

"And that glimpse we see of the Underverse during conversion. And all those men who have walked in that world and came back to tell of it."

All those men and one woman. All of us who have passed to death's dream kingdom. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

He nodded. "A fair question. I thought I recognized a . . . foreign hand in the terms Riddick and the ambassador hammered out. Also," he smiled, wryly, "the Quasi-Dead are concerned."

Her insides cramped unpleasantly. "About me?"

"About the influence of an unconverted woman on the Lord Marshal."

She rolled her eyes. "I have no influence on Riddick."
For an instant something dark passed over his face. He hates the fact I'm here. "That is manifestly untrue. The Lord Marshal adores you. And the deal the ambassador took home was extraordinarily generous."

"Maybe he liked her."

"My child," his voice went low and compassionate. "Believe me. You have tremendous influence on the Lord Marshal. And you are miserable." She flinched. "You are full of delusions about the Necroverse and the Necromongers. I want to help you find your way to us."

"How?"

"You need faith. You need to believe you are part of something wonderful." She shook her head. Just a small move, but he saw it. "You are. And you have a vital role."

She snorted. "Oh?"

"You keep the Lord Marshal settled and happy. You did not see him before you came. Miserable, brooding, living for nothing but the kill count. Since you came here he has blossomed into an amazingly effective war leader."

Oh goody, I am the wind beneath his wings.

I'm gonna go find a rope myself. Just like Selena –

She stared at this man, on Riddick's couch, offering to help her. And she knew she had seen him before.

Oh god. I get it. Why I recognize him. He was in the throne room that night I snuck out. He's the one who killed Selena. Does anyone know he's here?

I gotta get him out of here.

"This troubles you?"

She blinked, trying to remember what he had said. "You mean that I'm the special friend of the biggest killer ever? Why would that bother me?" Shit, I have got to keep my mouth shut. She made her voice small. It wasn't hard. "How could you help me?"

He nodded. "Exactly the way the Necromongers helped me. By taking you through the conversion process. The Lord Marshal's mistress must believe in the better world beyond."

"Doesn't it hurt?" She said inanely.

"Yes. But not for long. A small pain to stop the greater."

She closed her eyes. "I don't think Riddick wants me converted."

"With all due respect to the Lord Marshal, I don't think he's ever thought about it. If you and I both went to him and asked, he could be persuaded. He clearly adores you."

"I don't know about that. He's pretty brutal with me when he's unhappy." This man killed Selena. Because he couldn't help her to the "better world beyond." Is he going to kill me? Then Riddick comes to get me and Zhylaw hitches back? She shuddered.

Won't matter in a week, Kyra sad, matter of factly. Either the Taurians figure out how to take down
"I am sorry to hear that," murmured Jason. Her eyes locked on him. "I wish I could promise that would not happen once you converted. But you would not be so isolated. After conversion, you would be one of many. That can help."

She rubbed her sweating palms together. "I'll think about it. But it's Riddick's decision, you know."

"I know." He scrutinized her face. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

*People keep asking me that.* "You could get me some shoes. But Riddick wouldn't like it. Where did Eris go?"

"I do not know. Some secret mission for the Lord Marshal."

*Then why is Riddick so pissed at him?* "Okay." She took another deep breath, stood up and met his eyes. "Let me think about this. Come back in a week or so."

He stood. Bowed over her hand. "I will. And I'll talk to the Lord Marshal about shoes."

Then he left.

Jack stared after him for a very long time. Then she went to the gym.

Riddick was in a surly mood. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the fact Jack had sweet talked him into giving the Taurians seven days to decide to take a very sweet deal. He really didn't like Thessaly's line to Jack, "I thought you were on my side." And he really didn't like Jack's statement she wasn't on anybody's side.

I thought she was on my side.

*What the fuck did they talk about while I was gone?*

*Why the fuck did I leave Jack alone with her?*

He stepped up patrols. He ran ambush scenarios. He worked out with Necromonger commandos, now they were a fun bunch.

*Be reasonable,* he chided himself. *What really has changed? The ambassador knows you've got an unconverted girlfriend. She knows you don't like to kill kids. She knows you will. Jack doesn't know anything that bitch could use against us.*

Somehow it didn't help. She had said something, done something, that made that woman think she had Jack on her side.

*She needs to know she can't do that.*

*Or Kyra does . . .*
Chapter Notes

Chapter 23: Meeting Shadow.

Or Kyra does.

Kyra. Jack would never work against me.

It made him stumble. Some of them seemed to change his mind about saying something. Riddick decided he didn't care. Slid through silently in until he found her. She was alone in the gym, working through martial arts drills he'd taught her, once upon a time. She was dripping with sweat, but it didn't hide the lingering smell of her fear. He watched her silently, churning. After a long time, he eased into the drill with her, parrying a blow. Her eyes widened but she kept going.

They moved silently. Punch, parry, kick, sidestep – she was slow and careful. Not the girl she had been. He let her set the pace for about three minutes. Then he started pushing. She tried, she really did, but he wasn't above cheating. One sweep kick where she was expecting a punch and she was on the floor, gasping. He collapsed on top of her, barely catching enough of his weight on his arms and thighs to not hurt her.

He buried his nose in her neck theatrically. "You're scared."

"Yeah."

"Of me?" He let it rumble, low and slow. Let his lips rest on her jugular. Relaxed, letting more of his weight settle on her.

Her voice was light. "You're pretty terrifying, yeah."

"You smelled scared before you knew I was here."

Her heartbeat accelerated. "I guess I – I freaked myself out."

"Mmmmm?"

"A purifier came to see me. Said Eris was gone?"

He went very still, mind swirling. Jack licked her lips, shifted against him. After a long time, he whispered, "he'll be back."

"Good." Her heart was still beating very fast.

"You scared of Eris leaving?"

"I like him."
"The purifier freaked you out? Why?" She said nothing. After a long time, he pulled his head back from her neck, stared into her eyes. "The Quasies can help you remember."

Her fear spiked. "Shit, Riddick, you said you wouldn't take me back there."

He chuckled. "I remember it differently. I won't let them hurt you again. But to help you remember . . ."

She closed her eyes. Her voice was Kyra's voice, bitter and sad. "You're kind of an asshole."

"Yeah."

Her eyes opened, and it was little Jack again. "Here's the thing. If I'm right, then he's one fucking scary dude. If I'm wrong, then I'm—I'm doing a bad thing by telling you why I got freaked out."

He nodded, thoughtfully. "Tell me, or I'll just kill him."

A ghost of a smile. "I think he killed Selena."

"Who?"

"Your girlfriend. Before me."

He rolled his eyes. "She wasn't my girlfriend." He got up, abruptly. "Knew her for a week. Let's try it again."

"What?"

"The drill. Where we left off. I'll lead."

He kicked the same sweep kick. She side stepped this time. Fell back into the kata's steps. "Did he kill Selena?" she asked in a small voice.

"Dunno. Do you think he wants to kill you?"

"He wants to use me. Didn't you care about her?" Her voice was strangely wistful.

Why the fuck does she care? Threw him for an instant. She almost landed a punch. Pleased him obscurely. "Yeah. When she died—that's when I couldn't leave you in paradise any more."

"It wasn't paradise."

"I'm getting that purifiers lie a whole lot. I'm done with this. He stepped up the attack. She threw herself into it with such ferocity that he blinked and it was Kyra shining in front of him. He stepped it up again, barely pulling punches. Grazed her lip, splitting it every so slightly.

Her eyes narrowed and he knew he'd pissed her off. If I had hair he'd be pullin' it. That made him grin even broader. He could smell it when she'd decided to kick him in the nuts, a sharp, bitter scent that was all Kyra. He side stepped, spun, and locked an elbow around her throat, lifting her high. A big drop of blood fell from her lip to his arm. He remembered who she was and wrapped an arm around her waist, taking most of her weight there.

"Now, now," he whispered. "That any way to treat the guy who saved you from paradise?" He closed his eyes and reveled in the turmoil inside of her. Jack was afraid, longing for him to be happy with her, despairing that he wasn't, wanting . . . something. . . he couldn't put his finger on. Kyra strangely triumphant. Like she'd proven something. The temptation to reach in and pull it out of her
was so overwhelming he shoved her away. She stumbled, caught herself, spun around. Dropped back into a fighting stance and it was all Kyra. He grinned and licked the blood off his arm slowly, lingeringly.

She took a deep breath. Then another. Almost grumpily, Kyra seemed to withdraw and the sweet green of Jack flowed over. She dropped the fighting stance, smiled, lovingly, sadly, and wiped her lip. "You're right. Thank you." She came close to him, unthreateningly. He collapsed onto his knees and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her chest. She put her hands on his head like she was blessing him. He started to nuzzle her.

She cleared her throat, awkwardly. "You never want oral sex."

"Huh?"

"You never want me to go down on you. How come?"

He looked up at her. Is she trying to distract me? Smiled and stood, sweeping her up into his arms. "Teeth are too sharp. That whole newborn thing I figure. 'fraid you'd bite it off."

She sounded shocked. "I'd never do that."

He loped down the hall to the bedroom, the bed all nicely made. God I could get used to this. He laid her down with exaggerated care. She laid there, blinking up him. "Jack wouldn't. Kyra would."

She made a funny, scared sound. "I'm just one person, Riddick."

He sat beside her. Kissed her lingeringly, reveling in the blood from her split lip. Pulled back. "I know." Kissed her harder. Pulled back, smiled tenderly. "The Quasis told me that."

Her breath hitched. "They said I couldn't be disentangled. That's what that was about. You really were trying to figure out if-" She stopped abruptly, looked sick, tried to roll away from him. He didn't let her, a hand heavy on her chest.

"If what, Jack?"

"If you could separate me into two people. I thought they were just messing with me."

He smiled, enjoying her distress. Felt guilty about it. "Something like that." He started unbuttoning her dress.

"Shit, Riddick," she whispered. "That's really disturbing. It's like you're projecting a dissociative personality disorder on me."

A what? "Don't worry about it. They told me it couldn't be done." He finished unbuttoning her dress, pushed it off her shoulders. She didn't move. He kissed one of her breasts, rapturously.

"Yeah, Quasis," she said, weakly. "Saving me from ego disintegration."

He laughed, nuzzling her. "I won't let them disintegrate you. I promise."

"Why did you take me there?"

He sat back, considering. "Sometimes, you're so bitter it sets my teeth on edge. I like you better sweet. I wanted to know — I wanted to know if I could fix it. Make you happier. Make me happier."

"By giving me a lobotomy?"
He took his hands off of her. "Shit, kid, do you think I'd do that?" He squashed the flicker of temptation. "No. Just – just wanted to make it easier for you to be here. I know you're not really happy."

"You're destroying all life in the universe. Cutting out the part of me grew up won't make me like that anymore."

There was so much sorrow in her voice he softened. Stroked her face. "Got a better idea?"

"Stop destroying all life in the universe?" Her voice was wistful, but there was something dark underneath it. "Switch sides?"

He chewed that over. Finally he smiled at her, making it as dangerous as he knew how. "No. A better idea of how to make you happy living with it."

She made a small sound that was almost a sob and rolled away from him, all the way off the bed. Stood, her dress still hanging open. Two steps and she had a knife he'd left on a dresser. Half turned to face him. "I die again, you'll come get me again."

He made his voice velvet. "Yeah."

"Dame Vaako said if I killed you, I'd to be the Lord Marshal. She said I wouldn't survive long."

"When the fuck were you talking to Selket?" She rolled her eyes. Oh, right. She was here. I can't believe that bitch told her that.

"Whatcha doin' with the knife, Jack?"

She looked down at it. "Thinking things through."

"You wanna sleep in restraints from now on?"

Her eyes widened. She didn't put down the knife.

"No. But in some ways, that might be easier. When I was with Zhylaw," she swallowed, "sometimes he'd leave me alone for weeks, even months. In some ways, those were harder than when he was hurting me. I had all this time to think about how useless my life had been. The only good thing I ever did was die for you. Then you go and become the Big Bad of Big Bads. When he was hurting me, I didn't think about that. I just thought about making it stop." She traced her finger down the knife.

He shook his head. "Jack, you weren't gone that long."

"91 days. I know. Here. I looked it up." Her voice went clinical, detached. "Time travels differently there. My years in the Underverse. Without hope. With nothing I could do for myself. With nothing I could do for anyone. I had killed the man who tortured me, and it didn't help."

She looked down at the knife. Very deliberately laid it down. He breathed a little easier. Gotta get that girl on drugs. "Sunshine . . ." She looked at him, still detached. "If you don't find a way to live with this, I will find a way to make you. Maybe make the purifier happy and put you back through conversion."

Her voice went dead. "Really."

"Really. Necros don't get depressed. I checked."

"Huh." She looked at the knife. She seemed to be talking to it. "I tell myself that, whatever your sins,
you've never set out to make me hurt. That would hurt."

"I wouldn't do it to hurt you. I'd do it to make you happier."

"It wouldn't work. Conversion has to be voluntary."

"I'll risk it. Worst thing that happens, it doesn't take. Like you said."

"Then I'll just spend days being tortured for nothing. You'd do that to me." Her voice was flat.

He came up behind her, began caressing her breasts. Whispered into her ear, "in a heartbeat. I'm not kidding. Find a way to live with it. Or I'll find a way to make you."

A hot tear hit his hand. He licked it up. "And if I do have to bring you back," he smiled, low and dangerous. "If I do have to bring you back, I'm gonna ask the Quasis to roll you back all the way to the little girl I left on New Mecca. I'll tell you got hit on the head and lost your memories. Make up a whole past for us. One where I never left you. Won't that be fun."

She twisted in his arms to stare at him, stricken. One perfect tear fell down her cheek, followed by another. Riddick licked them up, picked her up, brought her back to the bed, cuddled her while she cried. When he got tired of chaste cuddles it wasn't hard to figure out what else to do with her.

He was walking through a forest. It was dark. There was a man in the woods, through the trees. In the dream, Riddick knew him. Had walked with him before.

The man was tossing a gold coin into the air, catching it, tossing it, again and again and again.

The trees parted and the other man stopped. "Hey, kid. Wanna see a trick?"

Riddick scowled at him. "Kid's not here."

"That's what you think." He tossed the gold coin high. It sparkled, lighting the grove for an instant. Then it fell and everything went dark again. "Hold out your hand." Grudgingly, Riddick did. The other man dropped the coin into Riddick's hand. Riddick closed his fist around it, warm and solid in his palm. Felt good. The other man leaned over, giving Riddick a good view of his head. Dark black hair, closely cropped. He blew on Riddick's fingers theatrically, straightened. "Take a look."

Riddick opened his hand. It was empty. He grunted. "Good trick."

The man opened his mouth. The gold coin was there. He spat it out. It arched across the sky. Riddick started to run. He was chasing the sun, he was swinging towards those god damn flames, he had to get to Jack before Johns did –

The other man laughed. Reached up and grabbed the sun out of the sky. "Look what I've got." Held his hand open, showing the gold coin shining almost too bright to look at. Riddick growled, reached for it. The other man closed his hand again. "You think you deserve her?" He opened his hand. For a moment, it was Jack lying there, asleep. Then it was just a coin, a five pointed star inscribed on it. The man folded his hand over it again. Riddick's hand closed over the other man's fist.

"Want." It was barely a word.

"You've had her all night." The other man stepped away easily. Riddick stalked forward. "But the dawn is coming."

"Fight you for her."
"I'm no angel," the man said, far too amused. "Neither are you. Wrestling me won't do you any good. Day or night, cos. What do you really want?"

Ridick opened his eyes. He was lying in bed. Jack was curled up in a tight ball as far from him as she could get. *Fuck.*

_You were a little rough with her yesterday._

He closed his eyes, remembering her trembling against him. *Fuck. I gotta stop being an asshole to her.* He gathered her up in his arms tenderly. Her eyes opened briefly, then she relaxed into him. The rest of his anger faded away, and he tucked himself around her as if everything was just fine.

He woke up with the girl still in his arms. He stared down at her, shining green in the darkness. Thought, blearily, *it wasn't her. She's not gold. Nin's gold.*

*Where the fuck did that come from?* He nuzzled the back of her head, trying to slip inside her dreams. Only she wasn't dreaming. Just dead asleep.

*Dead...*

He untangled himself, pulled out of bed. Picked up his communicator and headed to the bathroom. Told the system to connect him to Ninshubar. Started pissing while he waited.

"Sire," the man's voice was flat.

"Want you back here today."

There was a moment's hesitation before Nin's voice came back. "Yes, Sire."

"Jack had a bad day yesterday. Purifier freaked her out. Not happy."

There was another hesitation. Nin's voice was a little less flat. "Eris?"

"No. Eris is on a fuckin' field trip. Jason."

"Oh." There was something in that word that bothered Riddick.

"You think he killed Selena?"

"I would not know, Sire."

"You think he could have?"

Ninshubar hesitated. His voice was reluctant. "Yes."

"Why?"

The other man was quiet for almost too long. Finally, softly, "he had motive, means, and opportunity."

Riddick grunted. "Motive?"

"The purifiers are offended that you share your bed with unconverted women."

*I didn't know that. Everyone cares who I fuck.* "Huh. Be here in an hour."
"Yes, Sire."

Riddick set the link down, washed his hands. Went back to bed. Jack had rolled onto her back while he was gone. He sat down on the bed beside her.

Her eyes fluttered open. "Riddick?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Is it time to get up?"

"Soon." He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. "Brand new day."

She blinked. "Is it?"

"Yeah. I asked Nin to come back. I don't like how yesterday went down."

She sighed. "Thank you." She caressed his hand. "That's . . . kind."

He snorted. "Yeah." He ran his hand over his head. "Look. I got pissy yesterday 'cause you told that bi—the ambassador that you weren't on anyone's side. Like you're not on my side."

"Oh," she said, softly. "Yeah."

"I thought you were with me."

She blinked into the darkness. For a moment, she seemed to flash gold. Then it faded back to green. "I'm with you. I love you. I died for you. I'd do it again. But you're destroying all life in the universe. I'm not with that. I told the ambassador that. That's why she thought I was on her side."

"But you converted."

"I was furious, grieving, numb . . . And then you made me whole." She smiled, ruefully. "And the rest of the universe didn't seem so bad all of a sudden."

He grunted. "So it's my fault."

"Something like that." She sat up, feeling for him. Settled her head on his shoulder. "Yeah. You brought me back better than when I left and now I want a universe that doesn't have Necromongers taking it down."

He snorted, but his heart wasn't in it. He wrapped his arm around her and squeezed her tight. "It's gotta end sometimes."

"Why now? Why us?"

He sighed again. "Kid . . ." He stroked her hair, still strangely short but beginning to soften her face. "I'm no hero. I got no idea how to stop the Necros without making things worse for us."

"I'm okay with that."

"Good thing it's not your decision."

She made a noise that was half a laugh, half a snort. "Yeah. Good thing."

He laid her down on the bed, crawled on top of her. Nudged her knees apart so that he could press
his pelvis into hers. Kissed her gently. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and hugged him
fiercely, like it was her turn to be afraid he was going to melt away. He reached down between her
legs and rearranged things so he could thrust in. She gasped, eyes widening, tense.

"That hurt?" he muttered.

"Little bit."

He groaned. Kissed her harder. Staying as still as he could, he started to stroke and caress her down
between her legs, fingers slick with her menstrual blood. Didn't take long before she was gasping,
moving against him, enough that it was beginning to hurt his hand. He stopped playing.

Before too long, he groaned and collapsed on to her. Jack laid still, accepting his weight. Stroked his
back with her hands. He seemed to be falling asleep.

_Don't think about what's coming_, she told herself. _Just be here._

_Things are going to get bad._

_Don't think about that._

_Think about how beautiful he is._

_He brought me back from the dead._

_He stormed the gates of hell for me._

_He loves me._

_He's beautiful._

He lifted himself off of her with a groan. Pressed his forehead to hers so hard it hurt. He grunted,
sounding pleased, finished lifting himself off of her. Moved her around until they were spooning
together. Cupped a breast with one hand, reached another between her legs and started to caress her.

"Lights, dim," he called, surprising her. She craned her head around to look at him. He groaned,
twisted, so he was still holding her but she almost on her back, his legs pushing hers apart. Giving
him access. Letting her see. His hands were bloody. Her blood.

_Don't think about it._

She watched his hands. They were beautiful under all that blood. He was working hard, the
destroyer of worlds, trying to get her off. She arched her back and spread her knees, giving him
better access. He made another pleased sound. His hands got more insistent. She focused on them
and it took no time to give him what he wanted, her wordless, mindless, thrusting against him.

He slowed, gripped her tightly. Again, his head was pressed hard into hers, hard enough to hurt.

_I love him. Hold on to that._

He smiled, tenderly. "We gotta get up," he murmured. "Get cleaned up."

"Okay."

a/n - Guest appearance by Shadow of American Gods. Neil Gaiman once described him as "Vin
Diesel with hair." Riddick and Shadow make sense together for me. Illustrate some of the same troubles the solar hero has after the enlightenment comes. Standard disclaimer.
Chapter Notes

A/n This is where we start heading down the wheel. Riddick does something intentionally cruel to Jack in this chapter (not Kali-Red cutting Jack open and . . . well, anyhoo. Not that cruel). Things do get better in a few chapters, but fair warning.

Chapter 24: Temptation

Riddick was gentleness itself in the shower, in helping her dress. She was almost sad when Ninshubar arrived. Riddick kissed her one last time, lingeringly and lovingly, and was gone.

Nin wasn't meeting her eyes. "I wasn't sure you were coming back," she said, cautiously. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, mum," he said, softly. "The Lord Marshal was worried about you."

"Yeah. I got freaked out. It was silly."

He met her eyes. "The purifier?"

"That was . . . part of it." This isn't going right. "Look. I met this woman. Ambassador Thessaly."

He nodded, distantly.

"She knew about Kore Arkhipov. She thought she was the real deal."

Something flickered. "She was . . . well regarded."

Jack stared at him. Kore Arkhipov told him to convert. His lady. He still worships her.

She tried to destroy the Necros.

Do I tell him I betrayed the Necroverse?

It's not if, Kyra shot back. It's when. She temporized. "You don't want to be here."

At that he met her eyes. "Mum, I am struggling with how to be . . . true . . . to all my obligations."

She nodded. "Yeah. I hear that."

He took her hand in his own. It set off shivers, deep down. "The Lord Marshal was kind enough to give me some time. He called me back sooner than I expected."

"Oh," she said. "You don't want to be . . . with me?"
Riddick's good mood lasted through the first few rounds of reports. Whole lot of activity in Taurian space, lots of emissaries, no real sign of military build up. In a lull, Vaako asked if he could speak to him in private.

"Sure." They retreated to Riddick's office. "We doin' the right thing?" Riddick asked abruptly.

"What?"

"All this killin'. Is it really gonna make things better?"

"Riddick, you've been to the Underverse. We're trying to bring all life there. To be cherished. To live forever. In paradise."

Riddick stared at him. "You know, people told me that. That's why I didn't go get Jack right away. 'cause she was in fuckin' paradise."

Vaako nodded, cautiously.

"Then I went and Zhylaw was torturin' her." He closed his eyes. "Brought her out to me in chains."


"That's what's gonna happen to you, isn't it? Zhylaw's gonna take it out on you?"

"My god," Vaako repeated. "No. That can't be right. All life is cherished there. There must have been something wrong with her . . ." He shook himself.

Riddick grunted. "Maybe." He stared into the middle distance. "And the Quasies. They fucked her up. They brought her back all weak and . . . different. What's up with that?"

"I'm sure they did it for the best."

"Yeah. The best. Don't get me wrong, it's pretty sweet for me, but it's killin' her. You wanted to talk to me about something?"

"Yes." Vaako shook himself. "Ninshubar came to me this morning to discuss reassignment."

"Huh? Why?"

Vaako gave him a direct look. "I could guess. I would rather not."

What now? He finally admit he wants to fuck her? That doesn't make sense. Riddick stared at Vaako blankly. "Spit it out."

Vaako sighed. "He has not made a formal request. He is eager to help select and train his replacement. But I am reluctant to recommend we allow this. She will never have a better bodyguard. She's . . ." He shook his head. "Our soldiers are not used to taking care of someone. Most are likely to be brutal with her if she steps out of line."

"You think she'll step out of line?"
Vaako snorted. "Sire, I was the one who brought her back to the Necropolis. Maybe she's sweet and tractable for you, but I almost executed her on the way several times."

He stared at Vaako, unsettled. *I didn't know that. Neither of them told me that.*

*Did he fuck her?*

Riddick finally shook his head. "I'll think about it."

More than that, he couldn't stop thinking about it. Riddick was restless. Even a work out with favorite killers wasn't getting it done. Decided to head back to his rooms early. Slid in quietly. He found her in one of the sitting rooms, on a couch, reading quietly. She smiled at him, and it was like the sun rising. "You're home early," she said sweetly and softly. He thawed slightly, smiled down at her.

"Yeah. Where's Nin?"

She shrugged. "Said he had to take a leak."

Riddick dropped down next to her on the couch, hooked a rough arm around her. "Okay." He breathed carefully.

Yeah. Mr. Goldy wants to fuck her. I can smell it. Wonder if he's jerking off in the bathroom?

She looked at him sidelong. After he did nothing, she started reading again. He read over her shoulder for a few minutes, but it was about terraforming. *Boring. But harmless.* After far too long, the door slid open and Ninshubar came back, gold and green. He went into parade rest at the sight of Riddick. Jack looked between the two of them, suddenly uncomfortable. Riddick stared hard at the man.

"Hear you've talkin' about reassignment," Riddick said.

"Yes, sir," Ninshubar replied tonelessly.

Jack laid the reader aside. "Why?" she asked, stricken. "Did I do something wrong?"

The man gave her a quick look. "No, mum." He stood stiffly at attention. Didn't offer anything else.

"Answer the little princess's question," Riddick said, all velvet over steel. "This is a pretty chushy gig. Sit around all day with a beautiful girl? Not getting shot at? What's wrong with that?"

Jack shifted against him, unhappily.

Ninshubar stared fixedly at a point above their heads. "It has been an honor. But..." He looked at Jack for an instant, and for that instant, his face was raw. "But I have come to believe that I am not capable of fulfilling this assignment."

"Do you want to fuck her?" Riddick asked, softly. Ninshubar rolled his eyes as if it was a ridiculous question. Jack made that hiccupping sound she made when she was scared, tried to pull away. He didn't let her. Ninshubar's eyes narrowed.

To Riddick's surprise, he seemed to answer honestly. "Yes." His voice was soft. "Among other things." He met Riddick's eyes. "I ask you not lead me into temptation."

Riddick barked a laugh. "Good answer! What if I give you permission to fuck her when I'm not around. She should be pretty safe under your big ass. Would you do it?"
Ninshubar was back to staring at the wall. "If she would have me." Jack made a hiccupping sound again. *At least she seems utterly floored by this. That's something.*

"Fuck what she wants. What if I made it an order? Ordered you to rape her a couple of times every day?"


He smiled down at her, tenderly. "Who says I'm teasin'? You've been under a lot of guys. Why shouldn't I reward one of my soldiers for a job well done?"

"Fuck you," she said, and she was all Kyra. With more strength than he thought she had she tried to jerk away from him. Failed. She blinked back hard tears, and it was his little Jack again. He cuddled her closer.

"Hypothetically?" Ninshubar broke in, no longer staring at the wall.

"What the fuck? Hypothetically."

Ninshubar met his eyes. "Hypothetically, my Lord Marshal, if you issued that order, my sworn duty would be to obey it. Obedience without question. 'Till the Underverse comes." Riddick grunted with amusement. Jack made that hiccupping sound again. Smelled scared. He did not look at her. "I would have no choice. I would have to challenge you."

Huh. "Really? Now you want to be the Lord Marshal?"

"No. But I see no other honorable road."

Riddick roared with laughter. "Oh, I like you. You've thought about this. You know you'd lose."

Ninshubar shrugged, indifferently. No, not indifferently, like that was a good thing. *Death wish?* "Please stop," Jack whispered, brokenly. "I don't like this."

Riddick smiled down at her, reveling in her reaction. "You don't like men fighting over you? You didn't like that I challenged Zhylaw for you? That prison guard who was gonna rape you? That merc who wanted me to trawl for monsters with your bleeding corpse? I've been killin' for you since you were a little girl. I've lost track of how many men died so you could be sittin' here on the comfy couch with me right now. You tellin' me you didn't like it?"

Ninshubar stepped back, eyes widening white against his dark face. "Kyra," he breathed. "You are Kyra. He's been telling me all along. Sunshine. Risen."

Riddick gave him a long, malicious smile. "Just figured that out, did you? Still want her?"

"Jesus," Jack whispered. "What's gotten into you? You're setting this up so you can kill a good man just because he cares about me."

"Good man? I've seen him kill children."

"At your order," Ninshubar said, back to tonelessness.

Riddick's head jerked over to him. "You were doin' it long before I got here."

Jack's heart was beating so hard Riddick was surprised it wasn't pulling her off the couch. He pulled her closer. Caressed a breast thoughtfully. She shuddered.
"Still want her?" Riddick repeated. "Cause if you don't, this is real easy."

Ninshubar's nodded slowly, a look disturbingly like worship in his eyes. "On my life."

"Oh." Jack breathed it as if all of a sudden the world made sense. Riddick looked down at her. What the fuck did she just figure out? Can't have taken her this long to figure out Mr. Goldy wants to fuck her. We've been talking about it for five minutes. Stroked her hair meditatively, wishing he could sink her fingers in her brain, pull out the truth without her pitching a fit. Maybe I should keep those drugs handy so I can . . . She didn't flinch from his touch, but her eyes were on Ninshubar. The man's stance had shifted.

He's ready to fight. Fight for what? Fight for her? Why her? If he wants to fight for her, why ask to be reassigned? He blinked, and saw the man's soul was no longer the washed out gold and pale green it had been, but lush green against burning gold. Almost hurt to look at it. Blinked at him. What's special about her? Lots of beautiful women in the Necroverse. Even if the Quasis gave her porn star looks. They convert everyone who's that good looking. What's different about her?

To stall he let his hand slip from Jack's hair to her neck. Positioned his palm over her jugular, reveling in the feel of her accelerating pulse. Ninshubar's eyes locked on his hand.

What's different is that she's the only living thing he ever sees that doesn't die or become a warrior for the dark. A spark of life, here in the heart of the Necroverse. Sunshine. He wants to save the day.

Revelation struck him so hard his fingers tightened around Jack's throat. She made a strangled noise, tried to pull off his hand with both of her own. Ninshubar moved forward. Riddick let go abruptly.

It's not Jack that tempts him. He's tempted to fight the Necroverse itself. A dark warrior for the light. That's so . . . cute. I don't know whether to applaud or yank his soul out by the roots.

"All right. She don't want you dead. I don't really either. She'll never have a better bodyguard. I'll make you a deal. We fight to one fall. You get me down, you can have her when I'm not around. Fuck her, don't fuck her, whatever you want."

"And if you get me down?"

"Hm." Riddick stared at him for a long time. "You make me a promise. Anything happens to me, you protect her." Jack's breath caught.

Ninshubar's eyes widened. "'till the Underverse comes."

"Might need you after that. Let's see what you're made of." Riddick stood abruptly and without preamble launched himself at Ninshubar. The man side stepped easily, letting Riddick's momentum carry him past.

Riddick spun, pissed. Damn, should have set some rules. Feinted like he was going to try a throw, end it quickly. Nin didn't fall for it, literally or figuratively. Stepped right past, sweep kicked impossibly fast. Riddick had to jump awkwardly to avoid going down. He was still in the air when Ninshubar had his upper arms, shifting his weight back, clearly intending to guide him right down to that floor. Shit, he's really fightin' smart. Riddick grabbed for Nin's throat with one hand, his arm with the other. The two of them hit the ground at exactly the same time. Jack made a small noise. Riddick was up first. Nin stayed down.

They stared at each other. "You win, sire," Nin whispered.
Riddick snorted. "Is that what happened?"

"When you're gone," Nin said, "I will take care of her."

He stood. Then he was gone. Riddick stared after him.

Jack was leaning back against the couch, breathing heavily. She still had the datapad on her lap. She swallowed, closed it, laid it aside. She met his eyes.

"You got somethin' to say, Sunshine?"

She shook her head, slowly.

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Sex.

Riddick woke up slowly. *Mmmmm* . . .

Jack was dreaming again. It was a *good* dream. She was wet and hot and on her back and her hips were moving, slowly, slightly, invitingly. He was bathed in the scent of her arousal and it was making him hard and ready right now. He propped himself up on one arm and gazed down at her, tenderly. *Hmmmmm* . . .

He concentrated, and she dissolved into light. He pressed one hand against her hip and almost came on the spot. She was right on the edge. He pressed his other hand on her forehead and sunk into her dream.

A heavy body pinning her. Worshipful hands. Kissing, thrusting, nuzzling. Muscles tense under her hands. She was having sex in her dream and she was loving it. He was so hard it almost hurt. He sunk in deeper.

Revelation was like ice. She was having sex in her dream, *but not with him*. With Ninshubar. He jerked away, breathing hard. Still wanting her. Now furious with her.

*Relax. It's just a dream. It doesn't mean anything.*

*Except that she wants him.*

*He's dead.*

He kissed the hollow of her throat. Her eyes opened and something like guilt flitted past them. "Hey."

"Hey. You smell . . . interesting. Whatcha dreaming about, Jack?"

She blushed. "I think you know." He reached for a breast. Forced himself to caress it gently. She found his cock. Ran her fingers up and down it lightly. *Yeah. You willin' to take my cock as a stand-in for what you really want, baby?*

He pitched his voice low, seductive. "Who were you dreaming about?"

She blushed furiously. "I forget."

He let his other hand slide down between her legs, testing. Thrust two fingers in. "You're *very* wet, Sunshine. Who gets you this wet?"
"You do."

"Yeah. Sometimes. Sometimes you just lay back and think of New Mecca or what the fuck. Who did you dream about?" He started to finger her. She was right at the edge of orgasm, but she was scared now.

"I don't remember."

He groaned, withdrew his fingers. Rolled her on to her stomach, pulled her up on to her knees. Thrust in a few times, roughly. He whispered into her ear. "Don't lie to me, Jack." Pulled out. His fingers were still slick with her arousal. Thrust one into her asshole.

She yelped and tried to pull away. "That hurts."

He groaned again. "Yeah. It will the first few times. Maybe always. It'll be better if you just relax. Lemme get you stretched out a bit first." Added a second finger.

A sharp intake of breath. "You're going to fuck me in the ass because I dreamed about having sex with someone else?"

He nuzzled her. Thrust both fingers in hard. "Thought you didn't remember."

She shuddered. "Please don't."

"Don't worry. I won't last long. The thought of you under some other guy's got me about ready to cum right now." Leaned down and licked her anus, thrusting his tongue in just a bit. She whimpered. He positioned his cock, started to press in gently.

She gasped in pain. "Don't."

He pushed in half an inch. "Relax, Sunshine," he whispered. "Don't tell me you've never done this before."

"Never happily."

He laughed, pressed in another half inch. "Tell me."

"About being butt fucked by some merc?"

"Ooh, that hurt, Sunshine. We'll talk about that some time. But right now, I want to know about the dream." He pressed in another inch.

"Why are you doing this?" She sounded like she was going to cry.

He groaned. "Just playin'. Aren't I entitled? Seein' as I am the hero? And you're the girl I saved from scary monsters?" Pushed in slowly and steadily. Started playing with her with his fingers in the way he knew she liked best. She was responding to his fingers helplessly, moving against them even though that had to be increasing the pain in her ass. She was so tight and hot he was fighting coming as hard as he could, wanting this to last as long as it could.

She wanted it over. "Promise not to be mad?"

He nuzzled her neck. "Cross my heart."

She made a scared, hiccupping sound. "Promise not to kill him?"
He pulled almost all the way back, then sunk all the way in, faster, harder. Something tore, and she made a strangled, choking sound. He did it again. And again. And again. She was quivering underneath him. He growled into her ear. "Just 'cause you wanna fuck him? Why would I kill a man for that?"

She gasped out. "I don't. It was just a dream. I dreamed you turned into a flying monster once. Doesn't mean I want it to happen."

One hard thrust. "Don't lie to me, Jack."

"Why are you being so mean?"

_Why am I being so mean?_ It felt like an important question, but he couldn't hold on to more thrusts, and something dark and wonderful overwhelmed him. The world fell away and it was nothing but glory; every cell in his body was cumming. He roared with it.

When he came back to himself, he was collapsed over the girl. She was gasping for breath in between sobs. With a groan, he pulled out, rolled on to his side, spooning her, gripping her, entangling her. Stroked her hair with shit stained fingers. "Sorry, Sunshine. I shouldn't have done that."

She was crying in earnest. "No, you shouldn't."

"And you shouldn't want to fuck your bodyguard."
Chapter 25: Breaking Away

Oh shit.

"Did I say something in my sleep?"

He snorted. "Somethin' like that."

"Nothing's going on, I swear."

"I know. I'd know if it was."

Bitterness welled up. "Why do you care? You practically ordered him to rape me yesterday."

He snorted again. "That's what you think was goin' on?"

Was that just about marking territory? She shuddered. Be sweet. Delay. The Taurians could still come through. "I didn't tell you something."

"You don't tell me a lot of things," he grumbled.

"That second day. Those two guys who roughed me up." She hesitated. He seemed to be listening. "They – Dame Vaako asked them the same thing you asked Nin. If they'd rape me if ordered to. They said they would. I said you wouldn't like it. They didn't believe me."

She shuddered again. Didn't have to fake it at all. He was still stroking her hair with stinking fingers. "One of them tried. Had me down. I was begging, telling them you wouldn't like it. Then one realized Nin wouldn't like it, and they stopped. He saved me, even when he wasn't there. Because he told people something you won't. That he cares about me. I should beg you to send him away, I know I should, but I'm so fucking scared of what might happen to me."

He stayed quiet a long time. Finally. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"You."

"Why are you afraid of me?"

"Jesus, Riddick, you've locked me up without shoes, you've threatened to send me through conversion and now I'm bleeding out my ass. You really have to ask me that question?"

"Yeah. I think I do." His voice was soft, but there was something sharp underneath it.
"Okay. First, you're a killer. Second, you're a kidnapper. Third, you're in charge of millions of killers. Fourth, you've locked me up. Fifth, you control just about every aspect of my life. Sixth, you know things about me I don't understand. Seventh, you do things like fuck me in the ass while I'm begging you not to."

He chuckled. "I feel bad about that last one. Anything else?"

"Yeah. You think you own me."

He snorted. "I wanted mate. You didn't like that. I'm bein' accommodating. Relieving you from moral accountability and all that shit. Not like I can let you go without signing your death warrant. And then you go back to Zhylaw." His voice got louder. "What the fuck do you want me to do?"

*I really did hurt his feelings.* "I never said I didn't want to be your – your mate."

"Yeah. You never said shit. Just acted like I'd handed you a warm turd. I went to prison for you. I killed the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers for you. I stormed the gates of hell for you. For you, Sunshine. Doesn't that give me some rights?"

You think it does. And that's really fucking scary.

*Make him feel safe.* "Of course it does. I love you. I owe you everything. But it's still pretty scary."

"What does any of this have to do with Nin and not telling me those guys tried to rape you?"

"Only – only one did." She swallowed. "Look, I thought if I told you why they'd stopped, you'd get jealous and do something to him. And – and I was terrified whoever you saddled me with would be – would be worse."

"You thought I'd kill the guy who saved you?"

Her voice was very small. "Yeah."

He chuckled. "You really think I want him dyin' for you? I know what that does to a person. If he dies for you, it won't be because of me."

*Oh thank god.* "Thank you."

Abruptly, he sat up. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up. See if we gotta wake up your doctor."

He was gentleness itself for the rest of the night.

**oOo**

Riddick let Jack sleep. Poor kid had a rough night. He felt a little washed out himself. Dressed silently, closed the door, greeted Ninshubar in the hall.

"Sire." Nin's voice had a hint of warmth in it for the first time. Riddick found himself smiling.

"It's Riddick. Look." He ran a hand over his head. "Look. I was an asshole to Jack last night."

Nin's face betrayed nothing.

"I think she's okay, but if she wants to see the doctor . . ." his voice trailed off.

"You are getting more brutal with her." It wasn't a question.
"I'm tryin' not to. But this whole thing with the Taurians. . ."

Nin's voice was dry. "Are they a particularly formidable opponent?"

Riddick snorted. "Not that. I'm just . . . I just have this suspicion Jack did somethin' stupid. Told that Thessaly bitch something she shouldn't have."

"You think she betrayed you?"

"Dunno. Not me. But the mission . . ."

"Treason is punished by death by torture."

Riddick stared at him. "You looked that up?"

"Hey," Jack was coming down the hall, looking sleepy. "I'm sorry I didn't get up with you."

"I was gonna let you sleep. Rough night."

"Yeah." She came close. He wrapped an arm around her. She leaned into him. "Rough night." Her voice was soft.

"Sorry, kid." Strangely, he meant it. "It won't happen again, I promise." Nin was completely still. Riddick sighed, met his eyes. "You're right. Just take care of her, okay?"

Nin nodded without speaking. Only later did Riddick think about that.

oOo

By the time he got to the control room, he knew something was very wrong. Vaako dragged him into his own office, face white. "What's up?"

"The Lesser Threshold. It's gone."

"Whatdyamean, gone?"

"Gone. Closed. Gone."

Huh. "And the garrison?"

"We don't know. No communication. We suspect it was destroyed."

"How do you know this? Some helpful passerby phone in a tip?"

Vaako grimaced. "The Quasi-Dead are screaming about it. Jason is trying to calm them down. I ordered a fast striker unit prepped."

Riddick stared at him. "Any word from Eris?"

"No."

"Huh."

"Riddick," Vaako said, intently. "This is a problem. This is the biggest blow since the Omphalos. This is a blow to our connection to the Underverse itself."

He grunted. "You still got me."

"Let 'em. Feel good to kill someone. I've been too fuckin' well behaved since I got here."

They spent a great deal of time unsuccessfully trying to figure out who did it. Finally, Riddick decided to work out with the commandos. *Rally the troops and all that shit.* He liked the dojo.

It was full of men blowing off steam. He had fun at first. Then, from across the room, a man called imperiously. "Riddick!"

Riddick searched him out with his eyes. The room fell dead silent.

*Mr. Crimson. Kelmis. Little twerp. Might be a good time to try this "true death" shit. What?"

"I challenge you!" Someone tittered. Kelmis's head snaked around, eyes narrowing. The floor between them cleared fast.

Riddick snorted. "Give it your best shot, son."

"Let us hie to the throne room."

"I'm not hie-ing anywhere with you. If we're doin' this, we're doing it right here, right now. I'm busy." Someone tittered again. Riddick smiled, showing some teeth.


"I've accepted. Now you're stalling, boy."

Kelmis pulled a wicked looking knife from his belt, got a running start. Riddick just watched. Blinked, and the man was, again, jagged black and crimson; so intense it almost hurt. *Two moves. Got it.*

He blocked Kelmis's thrust with his left hand easily. With his right, he grasped the beating heart of the crimson soul. Kelmis gurgled. Riddick yanked the soul back and it separated abruptly from the body. The body dropped hard. He glared hard at the soul, squeezed, and it frizzled into nothingness.

*That was . . . fast.* The room got even more silent. Into the silence there was a whisper. "Soul taker."

"Yeah. Soul Taker. That's me. Anyone else think I'm not the Lord Marshal? Step right up."

There was silence. Then they started chanting his name. It was wonderful, it was terrible. He drank in their adulation like blood. It made him gag. He managed to get away, headed back to his rooms fast. He needed Jack. He needed to lose himself in that soft living innocent green. He needed to be sure –

He shoved the thought away, as best he could. *She's innocent. No way she had anything to do with this. She doesn't even know where the Lesser Threshold is.*

He was at his rooms before he knew it. She was with Ninshubar, standing behind him, hand on his shoulder, watching a view screen. They were both too transfixed to notice him, to his growing irritation. They were watching him fight Kelmis. And she was all olive, all Kyra, hardly anything of Jack there at all.

"You spyin' on me?"
His voice was low and dangerous even to his own ears. She looked up at him with Kyra's eyes, smiled at him with Kyra's smile, edged and sharp. "That was amazing. Thank god you're okay."

Riddick ignored her, turned to Ninshubar. "I don't let her watch that sort of thing. She's not old enough." Kyra snorted. Riddick slotted his eyes towards her. She met his eyes unafraid, almost exultant. Sharing in his triumph? Thinking she was entitled? Something else?

*Something else?*

The thought he'd been trying to shove aside reared up. *Did she do this? Did she give the Taurians something to use against me? She happy about us getting hit?*

It iced down his back. *She had time. She was with that bitch Thessaly for a long time. Coulda told her all sorta things.*

"My apologies, Lord Marshal," Ninshubar said, formally.

He stared at him blankly. "Fine. Don't do it again. Take a break. But don't go far. This won't take long." Ninshubar moved slowly. Too slowly. Riddick shoved past him. Jack would have taken a step back. She didn't. Maybe a good thing. It was Kyra he wanted to interrogate.

"You seem . . . on edge," she said.

"Yeah." He pushed her against the wall. "Someone blew up the Lesser Threshold. Kinda wondering if it was the Taurians." Started kissing her hungrily, scraping his tongue past her sharp teeth, the pain invigorating. Especially since she kissed him back, aggressively, joyously. All olive and brown. All Kyra. Distracting him from the coming interrogation. *It'll keep.* He groaned, slid his hands inside her clothes.

*Why is she so fucking happy?*

His thoughts were running fast. Her soft hips were under his fingers. She groaned. *This isn't what I want. I want the little girl.*

His body thought it was just fine. It was ready fuck her against the wall, who ever she was. *Maybe this'll do after all. Fuck her, then yank the info out of her brain.* He hoisted her up over his shoulder, spun around and took the three steps to the couch. He could see through the open door that Ninshubar was still down the hall. *Irritating.*

*Not just irritating. Infuriating. She spends all her fucking time with him. She fucks him in her dreams. I did all this for her, and she wants him.* Something snapped and fury was cascading through his defenses. All his fury at her for dying, all his fury at her for running from New Mecca, all his fury at Kyra for taking his Jack from him was right there, maddening. He shoved her down onto her knees in front of the couch. "Lights out."

He pulled her underwear down, used them to pin her legs in place. Pushed her face down onto the cushions, positioned himself and shoved in hard. He was almost disappointed that she was wet and ready for him. He pinned her hard enough that she was gasping for breath. He hesitated for half an instant, then thrust in again. "You don't like that . . . Kyra?"

She shuddered, shook her head. Kept her mouth shut. But it was all Kyra; all bitter olive under him, her ridiculous joy turning into fury. He closed his eyes but it didn't help. She was bright enough to burn through his eyelids.

"Kinda wondering if you had anything to do with the whole Lesser Threshold thing," he growled into her ear. "Kinda wondering if you might have told that bitch something you shouldn't have."
A shock of fear. Confirming fear. She did. She did. He wanted to squeeze her throat until she went limp underneath him. He wanted that sweet green again. Can't have both. He groaned. He eased some of his weight off of her and she gasped in relief.

He pulled out, but kept pinning her down. The colors of her soul, or whatever the fuck they were, were swirling, sweet green threading through the military olive. "I love you," he whispered, and the olive subsided slightly. He nuzzled the back of her neck softly. She relaxed involuntarily. She said nothing. "But I'm still pissed about this Threshold thing. Someone tried to kill me today because of you."

Her fear spiked. It smelled so damn good. He started kissing the back of her neck with studied languidness, caressing her pinned body gently. Smelling her involuntary arousal. Seeing the sweet green surge. After a moment, he repositioned himself to ease back into her. She made a small noise but didn't fight.

Hm . . . I wonder. What the fuck do the Quasies really know anyway? Sure looks like two different people. If I could just get rid of one of them, might solve all our problems. Let Zhylaw have Kyra. Especially if that bitch really did betray me. I'll keep the kid. She couldn't do that.

He raised himself slightly on his left hip, curved his left arm around her, close enough to feel her breath on his arm. Caressed her back with his right hand gently, gently. Felt the sweet green involuntarily rising to meet him. Stroked it, focused hard. Underneath, woven through, was the olive. He flexed his fingers and eased his hand into the undulating colors.

He knew he was hurting her. With her awake and undrugged, it hurt him too; a feeling of electronic repulsion. This time he pushed through the pain, the way he had with Keegan. Been too fast to notice with Kelmis. Like Keegan, she made an unearthly sound. Her body clamped down on him, not in pleasure. Felt pretty good anyway. "No," she managed, gasping.

"Just relax, Jack," he whispered. "I just wanna try something." He flexed his fingers, catching at the olive threads.

"No," she said, louder, in Kyra's voice. "What the fuck are you doing?" The olive blossomed underneath him and the soft green drained away. He grinned against the dark. Closed his fist and started to pull the olive threads out of her. Thinking about Zhylaw. It was like he was in the room.

She screamed, started to fight, impotently. It's working, he thought dizzily. I can see them separate.

"Stop it you bastard!"

He shook his head, entranced. Right up to the point she buried her still-new sharp teeth into his left arm. He tried to jerk away and the flesh tore. The pain was more than he could bear. He pulled back, fist still closed, but the olive threads dissolved back into her. She made another unearthly noise, tried to scramble away over the couch, but they were all tangled up and fell to the floor together. Her on top.

She turned her head blindly and bit again, this time his chest, protected by cloth. He grabbed her head and pulled it away, heart hammering. The smell of his own blood was infuriating. He shoved her off him, rolled over on top, pinning her again, fighting the urge to snap her neck. She was on her stomach, convulsing underneath him on the hard floor.

"God damn it, Riddick, what the fuck did you just do to me?"

I have no idea. He forced himself to relax. Pressed his bleeding arm against her back to try to staunch the blood. Gotta get that cleaned. Shit. She bit deep. "Sorry, kid. Didn't think that would happen."
"The fuck you didn't. You just did that to Kelmis."

No. Yes. Sorta. "No. I killed Kelmis. I wasn't trying to kill you. Calm down, Jack. I made a mistake. It won't happen again." Next time, you'll be sedated and restrained. Gagged so you can't bite me. Shit, my arm hurts.

"God damn you." She started crying. Managed to turn her head so she could look up at him in the dark. "You must really hate me."

Oh, shit. She was looking up at him with shined silver eyes. She blinked and those eyes were green again. He forced perspectives and it was horrifying. Her body was a battlefield, not just of greens and reds, but black and silver ripping through both. The colors of his soul, seeded through her. That's me. She got some of me.

Revelation was like ice. What do you think turned her from that sweet kid into the bitter killer anyway? You. You put something of yourself inside her and it infected her. Quasies filtered most of it out. Now you just dumped it back.

Could just kill her again . . . may have to anyway. Bring her back and wrap her up and never let anything bad happen to her ever again. Make a whole fake world for her. She'll never remember being tortured to death. . .

He felt sick. I can't bear that. He rolled onto his back, still holding her. She was sobbing bitter tears in the darkness. He sat up, arranged her into his lap. Wrapped his arms around her, even though one was bleeding heavily. "No, baby. I don't hate you. I don't hate – I don't hate anything about you."

She shook her head, still crying. "You hate Kyra. You think we're separate people, but we're not."

I want you to be. He stroked her hair. "No. I'm sorry. That was fucking stupid of me. I didn't mean to hurt you. I never mean to hurt you." Except last night. And maybe just now. He pressed his bleeding arm against her. "I'm sorry kid. The Taurians hit us hard, and I thought maybe you had something to do with it." She shuddered in his arms. You did have something to do with it. I know you did. I just can't deal with that right now. The black and silver in her were slipping down. Fading or entrenching themselves? It was a grim thought. He cuddled her close. "I love you. All of you. Remember, I stormed the gates of hell for Kyra twice after I knew what I was getting myself into. Risked death and everything."

Saying he loved her was usually the magic bullet that tore through Kyra and brought back Jack. Not this time. Jack was there, but submerged, like the black was pulling her down and suffocating her. He cuddled her closer.

The room was abruptly illuminated. Ninshubar was there, shining a light on them so bright it hurt. Riddick closed his eyes, but he could still see the man's colors, the green sickly; the gold almost urine colored. He's crying too, Riddick realized abruptly. Fuck, is he gonna challenge me? Fuck, all we need right now; me to kill her only friend in front of her. What did he think I was doing?

Exactly what I was doing. Hurting her. He's right to be freaked out. "It's okay, soldier. We're okay. She's – she's okay."

Jack snorted through her tears. "Speak for yourself. I fucking hurt."

"He raped you?" Ninshubar said, softly.

She laughed hysterically. "I'm used to that. This was something entirely and excruciatingly new."
He stood up, a little unsteadily, with Jack – Kyra – _who ever the fuck she was_ – in his arms. "Lights, dim."

Ninshubar clicked his own light off. Put it away. Riddick half thought he was going to pull a weapon. _A little late, Mr. Goldy_, he thought grimly. Took three steps and thrust the girl at him. "Take care of her." The solder took her, carefully. He was trembling in fury. "Unless you're not up to it."

She laughed, hollowly. "Just – just go away, Riddick. Don't you have innocent victims to slaughter?"

He grunted. "Plenty of those." He looked down at his arm. _Do I need stitches?_ He was beginning to feel light headed. Stumbled away to find a med tech.

**oOo**

Ninshubar carried her to Riddick’s bathroom, set her down on the high counter. Got her a glass of water. She rinsed her mouth and spat into the sink. Stared at the red fluid in the basin. He damped a cloth and started dabbing at her face, cleaning off the blood. She realized abruptly that he was crying. She touched his face, gently.

He pulled back. "Is it true? Did you – did you tell the Taurians Ambassador about the Lesser Threshold? Did you betray the Necroverse?"

She took a deep shuddering breath. "You really want to know?"

"Yes."

"Yes. I gave information to the Taurians they can use against the Necros. I betrayed the Necromongers. I betrayed Riddick."

He nodded. "We have to leave. Now."
Chapter 26: Leaving Kansas

All oxygen seemed to leave the room. "What?"

"We have to leave. They will torture you to death." Ninshubar's voice was quiet, intense. "We'll tell the door guards he told us to take you to the clinic, steal a scout ship. We can be light years away before anyone knows we're gone."

"You're willing to break your oath to the Necromongers?"

"Yes."

She closed her eyes. "I got us amnesty."

"What?"

"Amnesty. For you and me and Eris. Maybe Riddick, if he switches sides. From the Taurians. It was part of the deal. Riddick doesn't know."

Ninshubar swallowed. "Oh." He closed his eyes. "Those med tech scrubs. You still have them?"

"Yeah." She took another deep breath. "You'll help me?"

His lip quirked. "To infinity and beyond."

"Will you help me stop the Necromongers?"

Nin went very still. "That's treason."

She snorted. "Oh, come on. Helping the Lord Marshal's fuck toy run is treason. I'm talking about saving the universe."

It was his turn to swallow. "How?"

"Will you help me?"

He closed his eyes.

"Hear me out. If you – if you decide to narc on me," her voice caught. "I won't blame you. But hear me out."

He nodded.

"I'm not supposed to know this." He made a dismissive gesture. "Necromongers are Necromongers because of the fancy connection to the Underverse. That's gone, and they're just men. We have to kill
the Quasi-dead, destroy the Basilica, blow up the lesser threshold and kill the Lord Marshal some way that doesn't pass the connection. Like, not hand to hand combat.

"One down. If we blow this place up with Riddick in it," her voice cracked. She took a deep steadying breath. "If we blow up this ship with the Lord Marshal in it, hunt down any remaining Quasi-dead, it that's it. It all falls apart."

Nin's eyes were intense. "That's a massive amount of firepower."

Fire . . . "You were a terraformer. Didn't you tell me you guys could make suns? What did you make them out of?"

He shook his head. "I was just a guard. I never understood the science. And my lady told me -" He broke off, looking sick. "Oh my goddess. Bring light to dark places." He shook his head, heartbroken. "She told me to live."

"If her sunseeder had gone off, what would have happened to you?"

His lips quirked. "I would have died and she would have made a new world out of my corpse."

Suddenly, she understood. "You were the backup plan, in case things went wrong. You were supposed to bring light to dark places."

"Sunseeder," he whispered. "Light in dark places. Turn the Necromonger fleet into a new sun. No. A whole new solar system. Shit. That is why I'm here." Then he shook his head. "No. They took us in front of the Quasi-Dead. There was nothing there. No plan."

"Nothing there yet."

He laughed, slightly hysterical. "Oh my goddess. Sunseeder. Set it off, no more Necromongers. My grandmother was smart."

"Your grandmother?"

"Kore Arkhipov was my grandmother. I never told you?"

"Your grandmother ran the terraformers? You were her body guard?"

"Yes."

"Jesus. Doesn't that make you some sort of prince?"

He laughed, a deep, booming, real laugh. "She had a lot of grandchildren. An ovary in the lab and a few uterine replicators made sure of it." He moved to Riddick's computer. Jack followed quietly, watching him type on the keyboard. "The ship it was on – The Cochraine. It was the only one that wasn't destroyed. It was also docked with the Basilica. With this ship. I think I know what happened." He swallowed. "Mercifully Lady, I know what was supposed to happen."

His eyes were shining. Impulsively, she reached for his hand. He squeezed it. "We never had a lot of sunseeders. Still experimental, and we worried if we did it wrong, we could have a black hole on our hands. The Necromongers have one sunseeder. It had to be from the Cochraine. Grandmother must have planned for it to set off its sunseeder while docked. It must have docked because Zhylaw thought the crew turned. It would have destroyed everything. All burned away, consumed in the fires of a new sun. The genesis waves were probably supposed to turn the fleet into a new, made to order system. Even if it failed to support life, there's not enough matter in just the fleet, there wouldn't be a
molecule in range that wasn't redeemed from the darkness in the process."

His face darkened. "Except the ship in the center didn't play its part."

There was silence. She broke it. "What happened to its commander?"

A few more keystrokes. "Died during the conversion process." He smiled, grimly. "Oh, my lady could be cruel."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone on that ship died during the conversion process." He laughed out loud, a rich throaty laugh. "I understand. She hedged her bets."

"I don't understand."

"Look." He punched a few more controls. "I told you only a few of my friends survived? Only fifty-six Omphelos survived out of thousands. Seventy eight of us went into those chambers. The rest were from the Cochraine. My guess? They cut a deal with Zhylaw. But she did something to make sure that they wouldn't survive conversion. Those of us who survived conversion – we were all big, dumb, earnest and loyal."

"You're not dumb."

He laughed and kissed her hand again. "I come from people who have been genetically engineering themselves for dozens of generations. Every one of us designed in a laboratory. My intelligence is above Earth normal, but believe me, I was an idiot compared to just about everyone else I grew up with. I was designed to survive the boredom of guard duty."

His voice went soft. "You were right. We were the backup plan. If it didn't work, a little resistance cell in the middle of the Necropolis. Except . . ."

"Except what?"

"They didn't tell us, and we didn't figure it out. And we – and I have served the Necromongers faithfully for almost thirteen years." He rubbed his eyes. "Riddick was telling you the truth. I have killed children with my bare hands. And worse."

There was an awkward silence. "Are there many of you left?"

"A few." He hit a few keys. "That's odd. Your friend Eris took them all with him. All but me."

"Huh. Riddick says he hates the Necros too. Maybe he's hedging his bets. Where's the sunseeder?"

He reached over, typed a few more commands. "Here. Ah."

"What?"

"On this ship, where I can't get it. The Necromongers aren't stupid; all Omphalos technology is being held where anyone with my genetic signature can't go."

"But I could?"

He was cautious. "Theoretically."

"Do you know how to turn it on?"
He laughed, softly. "Easy as pie. For someone with my genetic signature." He hesitated. "It is a suicide mission."

"I'll be with you."

They stared at each other. He turned abruptly back to the computer. "No. There are three Quasi-Dead out of the fleet. They'll have to be taken care of too. Can you kill?"

"Done it before."

"That's right." He looked anguished. Finally, he nodded. "You get it for me. You get out, hunt down the rest of the Quasi-Dead. I'll set off the sunseeder once you're clear. It will wipe out most of the Necros. Do you know how to fly?"

"Yeah," she said, softly. "Riddick taught me." There was a long moment of silence. "That doesn't make sense. Someone had to die to set off one of these things?"

"No – no. There were remote triggers. There just aren't any listed on the inventory." He hesitated. "We've only got one shot at this. We can probably persuade the door guards to let us past without a fuss once."

She laughed, only slightly hysterical. "Oh no. I can get in and out of Riddick's rooms easily enough. There's a secret passage."

"There's a secret passage."

"Yeah. Couple of them."

He got a strange look on his face. "You didn't think your body guard should know that?"

She snorted. "Thought you might tell Riddick. You know you're a bit of a collaborator." He got a stricken look on his face. She rubbed her arms. "I think we gotta move fast. I'll go get them. We'll come up with a plan from there."

Nin nodded.

"You – you tell me what to do. Stay here."

He shook his head. "I'm going with you."

"Riddick will kill you if he catches us."

"Mum – Riddick will kill me if he catches you. I am very surprised he's let me live this long." There was another long silence. His voice went soft. "You do know Riddick has to die for this to work."

"Yeah. Maybe. Yeah. I can't – I can't think about that right now. Let's start with the sun thingy."

"I am going with you."

Our very first date. "Okay."

It was too easy. They slipped through the secret passage in the dark almost to the lab. Two corridors and a lift and they were there. Jack walked in as bold as day. No one questioned her as she made her way to the cabinets in the back.
She had a moment of panic when the door didn't open easily. The lock must have been stuck because it clicked back when she pulled. The sunseeder was there, a heavy golden disk. It was nestled in a clutch of egg shaped objects and something that looked like a tiny scroll. She swept it all into her bag, left like she had the right to. Once she was out of the lab, Nin shadowed her silently. They went back to Riddick's rooms. Jack put the bag on Riddick's bed, opened it.

Ninshubar's breath caught.

"I just grabbed everything," she said, uncertainly. "Did I get it?"

"You're a goddess," he whispered. "Yes." He lifted the disk up, put it aside reverently. "Sunseeder."

He pulled out a small blue egg. "These are the seeds of worlds. My aunt Hathor designed this one."

He pulled out another. "My great uncle Oberon." He smiled at her. "Oh yes. You got it."

He kept pulling things from the bag, handling them as if they were old friends. "Oh," he breathed when he got to something that looked like a scroll.

"What's that?"

"Remote control." He swallowed, started packing it all up again. "With this – with this, we can build worlds from their corpses. Life for death. And we can live there."

"Oh." She stared at him. "That's . . . nice. What would we have to do?"

"Set them in the right places, trigger them. It will take a few hours . . ." He looked blank. "More than a few. Tonight. When I leave. I will check out a scout ship, set them up. Come back in the morning, we'll go together."

"Go now."

"You need a guard."

"No. I really don't. I've got this." She lifted her bracelet. "It's a lousy communicator, can't talk or anything, but I push a button, guards will show up. Riddick got it for me after that thing with," she cast around, couldn't remember their names. "Those guys. The day you weren't here. And anyway, the longer we wait, the more likely someone will figure out those things are missing."

"Riddick told me to stay."

"Riddick told me I could kick people out of here. Even you. Go now. I'll tell Riddick I sent you away. He said I could. Just get it done. Don't come back."

"Where shall we meet?"

"That's easy. Go to the Taurians." She grinned. "Show them this." She pulled out the necklace. "Thessaly gave it to me. Plus, I bet if you say you're Kore Arkhipov's grandson, they'll treat you like royalty."

He'd been shaking his head for a long time. "Jack."

"No. Look. This thing," she touched the bracelet "It's also a tracker. Riddick said he's keeping it off most the time, but I bet he comes back and finds out I'm not here, he'll turn it on and that'll be it. You do what you have to do. Last minute, I'll sneak out, take a ship. That way even if I get caught, it won't matter."
He stared at her, stricken. Finally, he nodded. "Yes. You're right. I'll set everything up to go at," He looked abstract for a moment. "At 10:00? Riddick's usually out of here by 8:00. Get out, get as far from the fleet as you can. Keep your weapons off line like they are broken and the Taurians will probably try to capture you. You should keep this." He tried to hand the necklace back to her.

"No. Thessaly knows me. She doesn't know you. Please. Keep it."

He looked stubborn. From somewhere the words came, "wear it in remembrance of me. I'm willing to die again to make this work. But if we both die, then no one knows to kill the Quasis."

He sighed, pocketed the necklace. Then he secreted the Omphalos technology around his body. Then he kissed her forehead, and left.

Having nothing else to do, Jack went to the gym.

It had been a tough day. No attack, no response to the offer Thessaly had brought back. Riddick had called the Taurians twice, to polite non-answers. The ship they'd sent to the Lesser Threshold would take days to get there on high boost. The fleet was on alert and everyone was on edge. Two more people had challenged him. The last he'd simply killed without engaging.

*Time to call it a day.* He met with Vaako one last time. Vaako's face was drawn tight. "Riddick, there are murmurs. You spent time alone with the ambassador. Then somehow, someone figures out where the Lesser Threshold was, and how to hurt it. People think you told her."

"It didn't come up."

"The Quasi-Dead are screaming about treachery."

Riddick stared at him. He must have flinched because Vaako said, softly, "Riddick, is there any chance that it came up accidentally?"

"No. But." He stopped, stared out the porthole.

"But what?"

Riddick sighed. "Eris pulled me away. Jack and Thessaly were alone for a good while. I don't know what they talked about."

Vaako took a deep breath. "Riddick, the penalty for treason is death by torture."

"Fuck that. She's not a Necro. She can't be a traitor."

"Maybe not in the halls of heaven. But our laws do not cut things so fine."

"Dunno how she'd know about the Lesser Threshold. We never talked about it."

"Are you sure?"

"Jesus, Vaako, it's amazing the things I don't talk about with the women I'm fucking." He rubbed his eyes. "Look. I'm real worried about the Taurians. I'm thinking of sending a small deep cover crew to check out all the activity we're seeing. What do you think?"

Vaako blinked. "I think that's a very good idea. I think I'd like to lead that crew."

"Okay. Be back soon."
Vaako's lips quirked. "Obedience without question."

Riddick snorted. "Wished someone had told Jack that."

He killed two more people on the way to his rooms. When he got there, Jack was already in bed, reading. He sat down beside her.

"Where's Nin?"

"I sent him away."

He put a hand on her knee, under the covers, stroked down to her ankles. Made his voice low. "He left you alone?"

"After I threw a fit, yes. Remember, you said I could send people away?"

He started up her leg again. "Yeah. Why did you send him away?"

"I'm not naïve, Riddick." She hesitated, finally put the console aside. "Well, sometimes I am. I didn't used to be. But I get this one. You're getting more and more . . . rough with me because this place is getting to you and because you're feeling insecure about . . . me." She kissed him on the cheek and laid down. She was still dressed. He could see the collar of her dress.

He pulled the blankets aside, stared at her. "You aren't telling me everything." He could smell the sudden spike of fear. Leaned down to sniff theatrically, just to be sure. "Don't make me be an asshole about it."

She stared at him. Finally, her shoulders slumped. "He offered. . . " Her voice wandered away.

"To try to kill me?" He started caressing her breasts.

She shook her head. "To help me escape."

He felt an irrational stab of admiration. "Huh. You tempted?"

"Yeah. You're getting . . . meaner."

"I'd come after you."

"I know." She rubbed her face. "And I'd miss you."

His growing irritation deflated abruptly. "I'm sorry," he said, and meant it. "You're right. This place is getting to me."

"Yeah," she said, her voice very sad. "It is."

"I promise-" he stopped. "I'll be nicer. But Sunshine, I gotta know. Did you tell Thessaly about the Lesser Threshold?"

"Yes."

"Jesus, Jack. That coulda gotten you killed."

"I know. I'm dumb." She looked at him yearning. "I just – I just want to do the right thing."

"That wasn't it."
"You could save the universe, you know. Just by changing sides."

He nuzzled her, kissing her neck. "You say the sweetest things."

"I'm serious."

"So am I." He started unbuttoning her dress, delighted he'd gotten some with buttons. Made it feel like he was unwrapping her. "I'll think about it."

"Thank you," she said, softly. "Would you take me flying?"

"Now?"

"No . . . I'm tired. Tomorrow? First thing?"

He stopped. Looked at her. "Feeling restless?"

"Yeah."

"I'll try." He finished undressing her, started kissing her. She kissed him back with surprising ferocity. He liked it. He liked it so much he had trouble getting his own clothes off to fuck her.

Jack woke up before Riddick. Made her way to the bathroom, rubbed her face hard.

*Don't think about it. He has this weird habit of picking up on what you're thinking.*

*Don't think.*

She made her way back to bed. Riddick was talking on his communicator. "Fine. I'll be there soon." His silver eyes moved, found her. "Hey, kid."

"Hey." She sat down, found his face with her hands. Kissed it. He grabbed her, kissed her hard.

"I gotta go to work," he muttered. "Taurians are movin'."

"Okay."

He moved her until she was laying down. "I really do."

She kissed him again, running her hands along his sides. "Okay." She spread her legs and moved his hand between them.

He rolled on top of her almost automatically, ground himself against her. "You're gonna be the death of me."

*Don't think.* "Sorry about that."

He laughed. Kissed her again, twisted his hips and he was inside of her. She wrapped herself around him and he groaned. Took him no time to come. He laid on top of her, breathing hard.

"I really gotta go." His voice was apologetic.

"It's okay," she said awkwardly. Pulled herself out of bed. "Are you making Nin come back?"

"Do you want me to?"
"No – not today." She grinned at him. "For one thing, I'd feel funny getting myself off while he's here."

He laughed uproariously. Followed her out of bed. As they dressed, she asked, wistfully, "will you take me flying?"

"Flying?"

"Yeah. Please? Today? This morning?"

He stared at her. "I'll - try. Gotta find out what the Taurians are up to first."

"Please? Soon?"

"I'll do my best."

"Is Eris back?"

He hesitated. "I don't think he's coming back, Jack."

"What?"

Riddick shrugged. "I'll tell him to come see you if he does. But I think he buggered out. I think – I think he gave up on me." He kissed her tenderly and left. It was eight in the morning.

She showered. She smiled at the cleaning crew. She ate. She packed a bag. She laid out the medical scrubs. She hid them. She found some shivs. It was nine in the morning. She wandered through Riddick's rooms. She picked at her bracelet.

Finally, she sat down at Riddick's computer. Signaled Riddick.

His voice was curt, distant. "What?"

"I need to talk to you."

"Okay. Talk."

"Alone."

"Busy."

"Please?"

There was a long moment of silence. Then he said, softly. "Later, Jack." He cut the connection.

She stood, alone, in the middle of the Lord Marshal's chambers. Time to go. She changed clothes, slipped on the ridiculous slippers. She shouldered her pathetically small bag. Then she went into the closet. Made her way down four levels, let herself out into a quiet hallway.

Hardly anyone gave her a second look. She walked purposefully, numbly, through the halls.

"Jack," someone called.
Chapter 27: Honey Monster

Shit.

She turned slowly. Abu's old neighbor. "Hey, Paul."

"Jack. Where are you going?"

She shook her head. "Secret stuff. Just pretend you didn't see me."

"Does Riddick know-" He stopped abruptly, backed away. "You're running away," he whispered. "You're running away again."

*You have to kill him, Kyra whispered. No one else is here. Do it fast.*

She shook her head. "Just walk away, Paul." She turned and walked steadily down the hall.

He grabbed her arm. "Jack. Let me take you back to the Lord Marshal's rooms." His face was serious. "You can't solve your problems by running away from them." She fingered the shiv in her pocket.

*Kill him! He's gonna die anyway!*

The compassion on his face was too much for her to bear. She let go of the shiv. "Thank you. That'd be nice."

Kyra was raging at her. *You can kill at a distance but not up close? What sort of a fucking coward are you?*

*Shut up, Kyra. He's right. Running away hasn't really worked out for me so far.*

She let him lead her back several levels. They were nearly there when Dame Vaako was standing there, flanked by soldiers. "Jack. My dear girl. I heard you were wandering around. I am so glad I caught up with you. You could have gotten yourself in trouble out here all alone." She looked thoughtfully at Paul. "Or, I see, not alone. Who might you be?"

"I was taking her back, mum," the man managed. "I found her – wandering-

"Hmm," Dame Vaako said. Gave Jack a friendly smile. "You do seem to make friends with older men."

"He's just some guy, Selket," Jack said, tiredly. "Riddick and I ran into him once." Dame Vaako's eyes narrowed.
After a muttered conversation she didn't listen to, they took her to the war room. Everything in the room stopped abruptly. All eyes were on her. Then activity surged again as Riddick came forward.

"Jack." He sounded confused, but oddly pleased to see her.


Riddick was gazing at her, slightly mystified. "Where did you get those clothes?"

She swallowed. Didn't answer. He came very close, took her face in his hands with an exaggerated gentleness that was strangely terrifying, like something out of a nightmare. "Jack. I'm gonna find out. Better if you just tell me."

Or you'll rip it out of my brain? Oh god, he would, wouldn't he. "When you took me to the Quasis, I got all bloody. Nin thought – Nin thought I'd be safer heading back to your rooms if I didn't look all . . . bloody. The doctor gave them to me."

"Good girl." He rubbed her cheek gently. "What's going on?" No pleasure at all now, just something raw and confused. Could I just die right now? She was expecting anger. Not this hurt mystification.

"My lord," a tech called, his voice strangled. "You're needed-" Riddick shot him a dark look, went back to Jack.

She tried to look down. He wouldn't let her. "Jack . . ."

The truth, or something like it. "I was leaving. I was going to steal a ship and take my chances."

Something awful passed over his face. "You wanted me to chase you?"

She rolled her eyes. There was the faintest grin in response. "No, Riddick, I want out of here."

"Why?"

"Why do you think, Riddick?"

"I've got no fucking clue, Sunshine."

"For one thing, watching you destroy the universe is destroying me."

He was still staring at her, still mystified. "I don't make you watch."

"My lord," Dame Vaako broke in, smugly. "We execute deserters. Give them the True Death."

Riddick actually flinched.

"Be merciful my lord," Jason said, softly. Dame Vaako, Riddick and Jack all shot him blank looks.

Without letting go of her face, Riddick turned to the tech. "Where's Ninshubar?"

The tech hit buttons. Hit more. "He was caught in the Taurian attack this morning. He was destroyed."

Jack's legs gave way. Riddick let her fall. His voice was still strangely gentle. "You goin' to meet
him?"


Riddick was staring down at her, still looking mystified. Finally, he crouched down, ran a finger up her cheek, gathering some of the tears. "You're crying for him."

She rolled her eyes. "He was my friend, and now he's dead. Shit, Riddick, of course I'm crying for him."

"Don't you dare," he whispered. Their eyes locked for an instant. His mystification finally gave way to revelation. "You were trying to leave me."

"Just figure that out?" she whispered back. It all welled up and she couldn't stop it, despite the audience. "Jesus, Riddick, you think I want this life? Locked up and raped by my childhood hero while he destroys the universe?" Her voice got louder. "Yeah. I'm done lying back and taking it. I am trying to leave you."

He looked heartbroken, devastated, hurt enough that despite it all, her heart ached for him. Without thinking, she touched his face. Then he looked angry. He stood abruptly, staring down at her. "This ain't over, Jack. But I don't have time to figure out what's wrong with you right now." Jerked his head towards a soldier. "Lock her in a cell. Someplace she'll be nice and safe and alone." He glared at Dame Vaako and Jason. "Anyone goes to see her without my permission will get this true death shit, got it?"

The soldier pulled her to her feet. Riddick turned away, his shoulders tense as a suspension bridge in a high wind. Without turning, he called after them. "Soldier? Leave her in the dark."

**oOo**

The soldier pulled her out of the room fast. His hand on her arm was firm but not brutal. He led her through a maze of hallways. She lost track of the turnings. Finally took her to a small room bisected by an old fashioned line of bars. Behind the bars was a small bed, a toilet, and a sink. Four paces from side to side, at most. The soldier opened the cell's door, sat her on the bed, backed off, shut the cage. His voice was detached. "I'm sorry, ma'am. You might want to make a note of where things are before I turn off the lights."

"Thank you," she said, quietly. "That's very kind of you." He shrugged. It was a familiar gesture. "You knew Ninshubar?"

He hesitated. "Yes. He was fond of you."

"He's in the Underverse now?"

The soldier nodded. "That is the promise."

She took a deep shuddering breath. "If you—if you see him there, would you tell him it wasn't his fault? Would you thank him for me?"

The soldier's expression softened. "Yes, ma'am. I will." He hesitated. "I hope – I hope he forgives you." He seemed about to say something else. Instead, he hit a control. The lights went out. The door was still open, and by its light she watched him leave. The door shut with a click, and the room was pitch black except for a spot of red high on the wall where the surveillance camera lurked, and dead
silent except for the sound of her own breathing. It was cold.

She felt her way to the sink. It worked. Cold only. Splashed her face with water, took a drink. Laid down on the bed. There were no blankets or pillow, just a pad sunk into a frame.

She started to cry. Once she started she couldn't stop.

oOo

She was walking in a graveyard. She'd been there before. An old woman she had to know because she kept seeing her in dreams smiled. "My dear girl."

"I failed," Jack whispered, trying not to cry. "I tried and I failed. I got the only guy in the universe who could have stopped the Necromongers killed."

The woman shook her head. "Life prevails, child."

Jack laughed, disbelieving. At the edge of the graveyard, a pack of wolves were ripping into the body of an enormous bull. One wolf looked up at Jack, his muzzle dripping with blood. He took a few steps towards her, snarling. A larger wolf snarled back at him and he slunk back the pack. His red eyes stared at her over the corpse.

The woman's voice was soft. "You'll have a chance to rise again. You'll have a chance to bring light to dark places. Be bloody, brave, and resolute, my child. You are none of woman born . . ."

"Huh? Why are dreams always so fucking cryptic?"

The woman laughed. "Remember, mercy matters. Even for them. Even for the bloodier and more resolute."

"Riddick?"

One of the wolves raised his head, made a low noise that was almost a purr. Another growled at him.


Then she woke up, blinking at the darkness. "Lights?" she called out, with dim hope. Nothing happened. Stumbled to the toilet. Had another drink of water. Stretched. Ran her fingers through her hair.

Nin's grandmother. Kore Arkhipov.

Something twisted deep inside. Kyra Kore Arkhipov. If we'd escaped. If we'd had a daughter. That would have been a pretty name.

She shoved the thought aside. Fingered the bracelet on her wrist. Strangely warming. Some tie to Riddick. Some tie to the outside world.

The outside world.

Riddick.

Why the fuck do I care? Everyone I ever cared about is dead but Riddick, and Riddick's the one destroying the rest of it.
Because of me.

Nin's dead.

Riddick's hurt.

Kyra's voice, sardonic. And have you really thought about the fact that when you die, Zhylaw gets you back? Riddick was willing to destroy the universe to keep you safe. Maybe you should have let him.

Oh, you really are a two faced bitch, aren't you? You're the one who was raging at me.

Kyra seemed to shrug. That's before I knew you were going to fuck it up.

Jack laid back on the bed, staring into the darkness.

oOo

She was back in Crematoria. Riddick was falling from the sky, falling so slowly she had plenty of time to turn and turn again. She hefted the chain in her hand. She turned into the darkness and hid, leaving him to the wolves.

He beat them. He found her. He was not gentle.

oOo

They'd fought all day and now each side had more or less withdrawn to their corners. Riddick was tired and hungry. Stopped at the mess kitchen to scrounge some food. People stayed out of his way as he rummaged. Found the honey Jack had liked. Had it in his hands before he figured out what it was. Shoved it into her satchel; be damned if he was gonna put it back just because she liked it. Grabbed bread and some protein butter, headed to his rooms.

His rooms were silent. Irritating. Took a big drink of whiskey, made himself a sandwich. Chewed it thoughtfully.

Went through the satchel she'd had with her. He'd been holding on to it all day for some fucking reason. The little datapad was in there. With a sudden sense of inevitability, he turned it on. The data was Taurian.

They switched chips. Smart. No wonder they're doing so well. He rubbed his face.

He punched up the camera in her cell. The image came up infrared, making his eyes water. The computer drew in the furniture – a bed, a toilet, a sink, and a wall of bars bisecting the room. Infrared showed her curled up tight.

Does she have a blanket? He punched up the room's equipment. No blanket, no pillow. Temperature was twenty degrees colder than she liked. After a moment, he turned it up.

Finished the sandwich. Made himself another.

I'm beat. Up 22 hours. Gettin' old.

He didn't want to go to bed alone. Maybe I should have brought someone back. Some girl waiting for conversion. His stomach twisted at the thought. He picked up the special bottle of interrogation drugs. Smashed one, touched it to his tongue. Almost tasteless. Smashed two more, made a drug,
honey and peanut butter sandwich. Wrapped it up. He dumped out her bag, put in a few things, grabbed a blanket and a pillow, feeling absurd.

Went to her cell. Opened the door, closing it silently as he could.

_Jesus Christ, Jack. Why did you have to go and blab? If you'd just kept your mouth shut, said the door was open and you were restless . . ._

He could feel himself softening, just looking at her. She rolled over, peered into the darkness. Made a small hiccupping sound. Smelled scared.

"Hey, kid," he rumbled.

"Hey," she murmured. "Are you real this time?"

He snorted. "Was I last time?" She stood unsteadily, came up to the bars. "Got something for you."

She sounded heartbreakingly hopeful. "Yeah?"

He unwrapped the sandwich. "Did you get dinner?"

She made a small noise. "No." He put it in her hands. They were shaking slightly. She ate it quickly and stood awkwardly by the bars. "Thank you."

_I am the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers. No door can stand against me_. He put his hand on the lock. It clicked open. He opened up the door, came in, closed it behind him with a click. She was very tense. He pulled her to the bed, sat down with her on his lap. "I turned on the heat too. It'll warm up soon. Oh, got you something else."

"Yeah?"

He pulled out the pillow, laid it on the bed. Put her hand on it. Then he wrapped them both in a heavy quilt. She finally relaxed into him. "Thanks. So, ah, I'm gonna be here a while?"

"Yeah. Remember the skiff?"

"Always."

He leaned back against the wall. They were silent for a long time. "Were you really going to leave me?"

Her voice was a quiet murmur. "I was gonna try."

He sighed, ruffling her hair. "The Taurians are hittin' us pretty hard."

"Good."

He chuckled. "You gave them the memory out of that datapad I gave you? Or did Thessaly steal it?"

She went quiet for a long time. "I gave it to her."

"Smart."

She made a funny sound. Then the words came out in a rush. "I got us amnesty. All you have to do is switch sides."
Riddick sighed again. "All I have to do, huh?"

"That's what Thessaly said."

He cuddled her close. "You're sweet. And dumb. It wouldn't work. Just about numbers. There's too many Necros. It's inevitable."

She giggled. "What you don't know . . . what was in that sandwich?"

"That honey you liked. And something to help you open up, kid."

"Ah. You drugged my food."

"You bet. I gotta ask you some questions."

"You're here to interrogate me?"

"You rather I let someone else do it?"

"Oh." She went quiet. "No . . ."

He made his voice gentle. "Why were you laughing?"

She blinked up at him, confusedly. "Are you glowing?"

He peered down at her. "Everyone glows, Sunshine. Even me. Now spit it out."

She giggled again. "Irony. Nin knew about these great bombs. He was gonna set them off this morning. If they hadn't killed him . . ." Her voice trailed off woefully.

Riddick snorted. "So you weren't just runnin' away from me? You were gonna sabotage me too?"

"Yeah."

"Smart."

"Thank you." She touched his face. "Am I going to get tortured to death?"

He made his voice teasing. "Maybe. If I let them do that, and bring you back as that adoring kid with no memory of it, it solves everybody's problems. The Necros get their show, I get the girl I want, and you don't remember how fucking miserable your life without me was."

She went quiet. "You're an idiot, you know."

He started to shoot back that she was the one facing death by torture, then it hit him—the drugs she's on, she's not lying. He made his voice soft. "What do you mean?"

"Do you really think the part of me that became a merc and got sentenced to Crematoria risked everything to bring down the Necros? That part is pissed at you about the whole BDSM thing you've got going on, but she doesn't really care about puppy dogs and rainbows and all that shit. She loves you with all her heart. Vaako said if I'd come back as her, you would have made me the first Necro Queen. She would have loved that. The part of me that's fighting you is the kid you saved from monsters. The one who just wanted to help."

Riddick closed his eyes against the sudden stabbing headache. "Huh. Thought you weren't two separate people."
"I'm not." She went quiet. "It's complicated. And your fault."

He leaned back, thoughts swirling darkly. Finally, he heard himself say, "no, Jack. I promise. You will not be tortured to death."

Some of her tension faded. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Jesus, Sunshine, of course not. I told you. Watching you die is my nightmare."

"You're sweet."

He snorted. "As a honey monster. Are you gonna keep fighting me?"

"Yeah."

"Huh." He tightened his arms around her. "What do you think I should do about that?"

"Give in?"

He laughed, softly. "I'll think about it."

She cuddled into him. They sat in silence for a long time. Suddenly something slid into place. "Nin was supposed to blow up this ship."

Her voice was very sad. "Yeah."

"Is that why you wanted to go flying with me? To get us both off the ship?"

She sighed. "Yeah. I'm pretty dumb some times."

"Yeah. You are." He said it, but his heart wasn't in it. "As I see it, we've got two problems."

"Only two?"

"Two big ones. One, I'm an asshole."

"You know that?"

"I always feel bad afterwards. Two, even if I wasn't an asshole, I'd still be the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers. Because I tried to save you. And you don't like that."

"No. I don't."

"Not promising anything. But if figure out how to take it all down, would you stay with me?"

She tried to twist up to look at him in the dark. "Yes. Oh yes. You stop them, I'm yours forever."

"Even if I didn't have the Army of Darkness keepin' you with me?"

She giggled. "Even if."

"Even if Nin was alive?"

"Even if. What?"

"Just askin'."
"Huh." She went quiet. "Yeah. Even then. You stop them, I'm yours forever. Any way you want."

"I could go get him, you know."

"Oh," she said, softly. "I keep forgetting you can do that. Would you?"

He shrugged, forgetting she couldn't see him. She could probably feel it. "Maybe. Not while this thing with the Taurians is going on."

"Why does that matter?"

He hesitated. "Like you said, time travels differently there. Wouldn't want to find out I'd been away for years and years in the middle of a battle."

She was quiet so long he thought she had fallen asleep. "Are you going to let me out?"

He sighed. "Yeah. Later. You're safer in here for now."

"Stay with me? For now?"

"Sure." He rearranged them so they were spooning, heads on one pillow, under one blanket. He meant to stay awake and surf her dreams, but he slept too hard.
The sun beat down on the beach. She was dozing in a lounge chair, watching children frolicking in the waves. Zhylaw was sitting up straight in his beach chair next to her in his very best black, absurdly set off by a Hawaiian shirt. He smiled down at her. "My dear, fickle, little girl. You betrayed Riddick to his worst enemies. You betrayed the Underverse for Riddick. Now you betray Riddick again? The man who took on an empire for you? The man who loves you more than everything else in the universe?"

The sun felt good on her bare arms and legs. "Guess so."

Zhylaw laughed. "Suppose I offer you a deal? A way to make it right?" He was drinking a pina colada with a little umbrella. He snapped his fingers. A beautiful man with long blond hair and nearly nothing else on trotted over. Jack found herself staring up at his thighs. Not even Riddick had thighs that perfect.

"Since when do you deal with breeders?" She managed.

"A pomegranate daiquiri for the lady," Zhylaw instructed the beautiful boy. He left with a low bow, his hair almost touching the ground. It was good hair. She wanted to run her fingers through it. Zhylaw kept talking. "You are more than just a flesh and bone, Kyra. You dealt one Lord Marshal a death blow. You drank the blood of another. You walked in the Underverse and lived to tell the tale. The Underverse has accepted you as a worthy anchor to the fallen world."

"Yeah. No. I hate the Necromongers. I will do everything I can to take you assholes down."

"You will fail."

The boy was back with something blood red in a big glass. He set it down with a flourish. "Oh, thank you," Jack said, absently.

The man grinned at her, a twinkle in his eye. He sounded like he was from old Australia. "No worries. Can I do anything else?"

"Shoes?"

"Nice." He hurried away.

Jack watched him go. Turned back to Zhylaw. "You're probably right. Doesn't mean it's not worth doing."

His lips twitched. "Let me make you a different offer. Bring me back. Like Riddick brought you back. The Underverse will no longer accept me as an anchor. It has already accepted you. I long to give eternal life to everyone. Be my other half. Be the first Necromonger Queen. My Persephone."
She took a long drink. Sweet and tart and salty and just about perfect. "Why in the name of fucking hell would you think I'd do that?"

"Because, Kyra, we are going to win anyway, and you would be strong again. My Iron Queen. I will let you save children. I will give you legions of soldiers. You will help everyone be reborn in this pure land."

"What about Riddick?"

"Do you like any of them?" The beautiful man was back with three sets of shoes; flip flops, sandals, and boots. "Let me help you." He knelt by her feet, massaged the soles, his hair tickling slightly, then slipped on the flip flops. He stood and offered her a hand. She let him help her up and took a step.

"Very nice."

The man was very close. He sunk to his knees and grinned up at her. Then he pressed his forehead down and kissed her feet. Then looked up again. She could feel the blush all the way down to her toes.

"May I help you with the sandals?" he asked.

She sat back down, feeling like she was missing something. He took the flip flops off, started massaging her feet again. It felt wonderful. She took another drink.

Zhylaw continued. "You owe him nothing. Let him die. Or keep him as a pet if you want. After I kill him, you can bring him back. Make him weak. Like he made you."

It was horribly, achingly tempting. "I can't bear to watch him die."

"Then don't. We'll keep him alive. Give him a job. He is a gifted fighter. A gifted strategist. He can be my war leader by day, yours by night. I am not a jealous man."

She closed her eyes. "You tortured me."

The kneeling man started to kiss her feet again, rapturously. The blush traveled all the way up between her legs. He slipped the sandals on, helped her up. She took a few steps. "Nice."

"May I help you with the boots?"

She smiled at him, and their eyes locked. Her heartbeat accelerated.

"You did kill me," Zhylaw said reasonably. "I am willing to put that aside. If you join me."

She sat back down. The beautiful man slipped her sandals off, kissed her feet. She was having trouble remembering Zhylaw was there. Then the boy dried her feet with his hair, pulled a pair of socks out from somewhere, and put them on with firm and skilled fingers.

She managed to shift her attention back to Zhylaw. "Was that a threat?"

Zhylaw looked thoughtful. "Yes. Yes I think it was."

The young man was unlacing the boots. She looked at him. He met her eyes and smiled. He caressed her ankle, letting her fingers creep up her calf. "Not making me like you," she managed.

The man slipped the first boot on.
"Has Riddick?"

Jack woke up. Somehow, her head was in Riddick's lap. Shockingly comfortable. He was talking into his communicator, softly. She blinked up at him. By the tiny light in the communicator, he looked like stone. He rubbed her cheek with his free hand, kept talking. After a long time, she heard the click of the communicator turning off and it was pitch black. "I gotta go. Your buddies attacked again."

"Okay. Can I have some light?"

"Not yet, Sunshine," he said, softly.

"Why?"

He sighed. "'cause I haven't figured out what to do with you yet." He rubbed her cheek softly. "Plus this way when people give me shit about the torturing you to death thing, I can tell them you're sitting in the dark, waiting for me, not knowing what's coming. That's been shutting them up."

He lifted her head, laid it on the pillow. Seemed to kneel down, kissed her on the forehead. Then he was gone. She laid there, thoughts swirling. It was wet between her legs. She fingered herself absently, thinking of the long haired man, his lips on her feet. Imagining those lips on her breasts, that hair falling over her. Imagining those lips on hers. Zhylaw kept intruding on her thoughts. Bothered her a great deal that she was thinking of Zhylaw when she finally came, crampingly hard.

She laid in the darkness for a long time. After a while, she noticed the pinprick red light of the camera turning back on. She hadn't noticed it turning off.

After an indeterminable amount of time, she explored the bag Riddick had left. There was a dress, two changes of underwear, and a plastic bottle of what smelled like whisky. She snorted.

She couldn't find the med tech slippers. Riddick must have taken them. It made her head hurt. She paced the darkness barefoot, in small circles.

The battles were brutal. Every scenario Riddick ran said the Necros would win. The Taurians didn't seem to know that. That made his head hurt. He headed out in strike ships himself several times to join the battle. Vaako's ship came back into range dumped a whole lot of new data. He sent a battalion of ships to join up with Vaako, told Toal he was third in line.

Fell asleep at his desk. Woke cramped, crabby, and very hungry. Realized Jack was probably hungry too. Left a message for her doctor to check her out, make sure she was fed. Went back to the battle. Killed a few more challengers.

Many lifetimes later, there was a lull in the fighting. He went for a walk, thinking he might check up on Jack. Took a wandering route, passing the Hierothesien just as Jason came out. The junior purifier blanched slightly when he saw Riddick. "My Lord Marshal."

"Whatcha doin'?"

"The Quasi-Dead wished to speak with me."

"About what?"
Jason flushed, but his voice was clear. "Your young lady. Jack. They are very concerned about whether she had something to do with the destruction of the Lesser Threshold.

*Shit.* Riddick rubbed his eyes. "Why?"

"They said you brought her there not long ago. They said she does not believe."

Riddick snorted. "Well, not like she's actually a Necro. They say anything specific about why they think Jack had anything to do with the lesser threshold goin' boom?"

"No." Jason looked down the hall, rubbed his eyes, looked very tired. "But they think Eris has turned. The Quasi-Dead on his ship has gone silent."

"Huh."

"He was gone a very long time." Jason's voice was ever so slightly silky. Riddick glared at him. "You want his job?"

Jason flinched. "Yes, my lord, I do." He swallowed. "But I am pleased to serve in any way the Lord Marshal pleases."

Riddick scrutinized him. He was hiding something, but in that, the man was completely sincere in that answer. He sighed. "Good to know. Do they think Eris is dead?"

"No, my lord. They do not. They would very much like to talk to you. . ."

"Kinda busy."

"I told them that." Riddick felt an irrational stab of gratitude.

"Thanks." His communicator buzzed. Toal was calling. He wheeled back to the war room. Jack would have to wait.

---

Jack had finished the whisky a long time past. She was very hungry. Felt like days since the drug sandwich. No real food since.

*He said can't watch me die. Could he just let me starve to death?*

*Makes sense, Kyra snarled. He'd get his do over. Gets to bring you back as the stupid little girl who loved him. *

*Would he really let me die?*

*You were going to let him die.*

She tried the communicator on her wrist again. Nothing. She stared up at the camera, imploringly. "I'm hungry," she said, again, embarrassed at how broken she sounded. It stared down unblinkingly.

---

She was back in Crematoria, sore and furious and hungry and heart broken. Guv snuck into the cell, crouched beside her.

"Sorry, kid," he whispered. "That guy really worked you over."
"Yeah," she said. "He really did."

"You knew him? Before?"

"Yeah. I did."

"Unfinished business?"

"I guess."

"Can I get you anything?"

"He left me my shivs. Except the one in my mouth." She rubbed her eyes gingerly, closed them. "I'll be okay. I think he got it out of his system."

There was a wet crack and the sound of something hitting the ground. She opened her eyes, feeling sick. Guv's body was there, neck at an impossible angle. She looked up. Riddick was there, a silver snake draped over his shoulders like a boa, a hellhound at his side. "Hey, kid," he grinned at her.

"Shit, Riddick, I liked him."

He snorted. "You'll like me more. If you're smart. Got you something." He stretched his arm out towards her, and the snake undulated down his body. She tried to roll away but she was too slow. The snake was winding itself around her, she was yelling, she was struggling, Riddick was laughing, she got her fingers around the snake's neck, flinging it away –

There was a noise. She woke abruptly, heart hammering, stomach empty. She'd thrown her bracelet through the bars hard. For an instant it flashed in the darkness. Then there was nothing. She held her breath for a long time, hoping for those soldiers Riddick promised would show up if she ever took it off.

They didn't come.

After a long time she buried her head in her hands and sobbed.

The door opened and the light clicked on. "Poor Jack," Dame Vaako whispered.

Jack blinked up at her. "Are you real?"

Dame Vaako laughed. "As far as I know."

"Riddick told you to stay away from me."

"Alas, he's busy. Very busy. There are very serious men, very seriously trying to kill him." She smiled brilliantly. "Because of you."

"What do you want?"

She didn't answer directly. Instead, she made a point of examining the shattered tracking bracelet. "You did take it off. We had wondered."

"Huh?"

"The tracker."
"Oh. You knew about that."

"Oh yes."

"You were tracking me. The other day. That's how you found me."

Dame Vaako shrugged, beautifully. "We all must do our part for the Lord Marshal."

"So Paul didn't matter."

"Paul?"

"The man who found me."

Dame Vaako sighed with apparent deep regret. "Oh. Yes. He talked you out of leaving, didn't he?"

"Yeah."

"He mattered," Dame Vaako said, darkly. "If you had left the ship . . ." her voice trailed off. She smiled brilliantly. "Well. We had to adjust."

"Adjust?"

"Never mind, child." She looked up at the camera. "So strange that the recording of your first day is cycling over and over. As if nothing has happened since Riddick turned the recording off when he came to visit you. What did you two talk about, my dear?"

Jack swallowed. Finally, said, softly, "whether or not I was going to be tortured to death for - for trying to leave him."

Dame Vaako sighed, with all appearance of sorrow. "Oh my poor child. What a thing to look forward to." She smiled sweetly for a very long time before continuing. "You did betray him. Almost every woman here would risk death by torture to have what you want to throw away." She came very close to the bars. "But Riddick should not be the Lord Marshal. My husband should be. If Riddick was not the Lord Marshal, then what happened between you was simply a domestic dispute. Something for the two of you to work out. Or not. If you were one of us, and he was not the Lord Marshal, you could simply . . . walk away. Even here."

Jack closed her eyes. Walk away. "I thought the only way to stop being the Lord Marshal was to die."

Dame Vaako shrugged. "We're a new people. I have reason to believe Riddick would abdicate for you. If you asked him . . . in the right way. From . . . the right place."

Jack snorted. "You know what I think? I think he'd rip the universe apart to get me. But I don't think he'd give up anything. Certainly not absolute power."

"Not even to save you?"

Oh shit. She tried to think it through. Her stomach growled, loudly. "I think he's letting me die, Selket."

"Hm. You think he'd rip the universe apart to get you, and you think he'd let you die?"

Yes I do. Does that make sense? Jack said nothing. After a polite amount of time, Dame Vaako continued. "A pity. Though," she said thoughtfully, "there has been . . . trouble . . . with our
communications lately. It is entirely possible orders to feed you have simply . . . gone astray."

Jack's stomach growled again. Dame Vaako smiled. "Well. I'll be blunt. Come with me and accept conversion if you want to live with some modicum of safety and . . . food. Help persuade him to let my husband become the Lord Marshal he is meant to be. Or stay here and go gently into that good night. Relatively."

"Does your husband know you're here, Selket?"

The other woman smiled, but there was a brittleness to it. "Sometimes, we do not tell our men things. I'm sure you know all about that, my dear."

Jack laid back, trying hard to think. "Thanks for turning on the light, Selket," she said after a very long time. "It was good to see you. But I am not going with you."

Dame Vaako smiled sadly. "Well. Not today then. I will see you again."

She turned off the light as she went.

Vaako was coming back. Riddick was happier about that than he cared to admit. Asked him to come straight up his office off the war room. He did. Vaako debriefed him in a low, hurried voice. He'd taken casualties. He seemed haunted. Riddick let him talk. Found himself gripping the other man's arm often.

When he finished, Riddick sighed. "Looks like we're gonna win this one. Man, I'm glad Jack got caught. Sounds like she would have been shredded in the crossfire."

Vaako stared at him blankly. "What?"

"She made a break for it the day you left."

"Oh," Vaako flushed. "I'm – sorry." He shook himself. "I think we need to flank their fleet. Cut them off from their supplies. Take advantage of this nebula at our backs; our scanners are superior after all."

Riddick wasn't really listening. "I did something really . . . bad."

"What?"

"You know part of being Lord Marshal is that you can see souls?"

"Yes?"

"You can take them too."

"Yes."

"You can . . . take parts of them too. Or something"

"Did not know that."

"Couple months ago, I was with Jack and she was . . . remembering . . . bad stuff. I just reached in and took it away. Or something."

Vaako stared at him. "Reached in?"
"It's like, I can reach into someone's . . . body . . . and just take things."

"Wow."

"I tried to take . . . Kyra . . . out of Jack the day before she . . . tried to leave. It didn't go right."

Vaako said nothing.

"She bit me. I needed stitches."

Vaako's lips quirked. "Is that why she ran away?"

"She said it's 'cause she couldn't-" Riddick broke off. "She doesn't like the Necros much."

"Zhylaw tortured her?"

"Yeah."

"And will again?"

"Yeah."

"I take her point." Vaako shook himself. "I'm thinking eight heavy battalions should be enough to hold their own in a pincer move." Riddick didn't move. Vaako said, gently, "did Ninshubar go with her?"

"Damnest thing. I guess he offered to help Jack escape after I-" He swallowed. "She told him to leave. The next day, she tries to escape. Without him. He'd already been shot down by the Taurians, but I keep thinking they were going to hook up. I just can't figure out why'd they go separately."

"Did you ask her?"

"Yeah. She says she never thought she'd see him again." Riddick rubbed his eyes. "I'm sorta thinking of going to get him. When this thing with the Taurians is over. She'll never have a better keeper."

Vaako looked dubious. "Did you find an adequate substitute for the mean time?"

Riddick shook his head. "I had her locked in a cell until I could figure out what to do with her."

"A cell." Vaako's voice was as flat and hard as a duraplast landing strip.

"Yeah. You got a problem with that?"

"Did you tell anyone to feed her?"


"Riddick, she's my doctor. She came with me. And now she's dead."

Oh fuck. "What?"

"We got hit. They got the med deck." Vaako rubbed his eyes.

Riddick swallowed. "I didn't know that. Shit. Shit. Jack's been sitting in a cell in the dark for three days with no food but a drug sandwich and some whisky."
If she's still alive. I haven't checked for days. This just gets better and better. He punched up her cell on his computer. She was curled into a tight ball, shaking. He stared at her for a ridiculously long time. He switched it off, stomped to the door, glared around the room. Singled out a heavily muscled soldier, one who looked strangely like Abu. "You. Get Jack. Take her to the infirmary. Tell them – fuck, tell them to treat her, whatever doctors do. Make her better. And keep her there. I'm putting her in your hands. Don't fuck this up."

The soldier nodded. "Yes, sire." He left with a steady jog. Riddick closed the door. Sat down heavily, rubbing his head.

She must have fallen asleep, because she was hovering in an enormous hanger. A one man fighter was being brought in by tractor beam. About twenty men and women, heavily armed, pointed their hand guns at the ship.

The cockpit opened, and a man stood slowly, hands above his head, Thessaly's necklace gripped in his left. Ninshubar. Her heart leapt. There was a murmur from the crowd. He looked at them with a faint smile on his face.

His voice rang out, louder and clearer than she had ever heard it. "I was – I am Ninshubar Osiris Arkhipov. Tell Ambassador Thessaly that Kore Arkhipov's grandson is here."

The dream shut off abruptly. The door opened, and the lights were turned on. Jack blinked, eyes watering. The other purifier, Jason, came in. A blond guard who looked shockingly like the one who had brought her a drink in a dream stood behind him. "Hello, Jack," Jason smiled. "The Lord Marshal sent me."
Hey, guys, if you didn't get a thank you for your review, my apologies – I sent them but I'm not sanguine they all got through . . .

A short chapter. It's been a tough week.

**Chapter 29: Nekyia**

Jack stood, unsteadily. "Riddick sent you?"

Jason smiled, comfortingly. The soldier glared behind him. "Let me take you to him."

"You killed Selena."

Jason shook his head. "Jack. I swear to you. I never lifted a hand against her. I tried my best for her."

"Okay." She looked at his guard. "Riddick sent you?"

Jason's voice was gentle. "He didn't know they weren't feeding you. It's very busy right now. Here." He held a military ration out to her through the bars. She looked at it. Took it.

"Is this one drugged?"

"What? No. Of course not."

She looked at it. It was horribly tempting. She put it down on the sink. Shook her head. "Maybe later."

"Jack," he said, softly. "Let me prove it to you. The Lord Marshal has forgiven you. Open the door."

"What?"

"Just put your hand on the lock. It will open." He put his own hand on it, rattled it. "It doesn't open for me," he said, ruefully. "Riddick gave you this. The Lord Marshal. He says." There was something hungry in his face.

*Hungry.* She looked at the ration. She was so hungry she couldn't think straight, but she was nearly sure she was missing something. Finally, she put her hand on the lock. *Okay, open says me.* After a moment it did, and she pushed the cage open slightly. "Why would Riddick send you? He knows I think you killed Selena."

The hunger in his face got stronger and his hand was reaching towards her. She stepped back, trying to pull the door with her and there was a sickening crunch. He made an unmanly noise, grabbed the door with his other hand, trying to pull it off. She yanked hard, smashing the bars against his
smashed hand. "Get her," he hissed. The soldier moved at last. Panicked, she yanked one last time to one last sickening snapping sound. Jason screamed. The soldier simply threw the door open, pulled her out of the cage, pushed her against the wall. Not too hard at first. Then his face hardened and he pressed harder.

"Bitch," Jason muttered.

"Riddick didn't send you."

"I never said he did."

She fixed the soldier with pleading eyes. "Did Riddick send you?"

He shook his head, just a tiny bit, but enough. "Put me back in there. Call Riddick. Just call him. Ask him if this is what he wants."

Jason struggled to his feet. "The real Lord Marshal sent me, soldier." The man's head snapped to him.

"Zhylaw?" Jack looked at the surveillance camera. Its red eye was dark. "Jesus Christ. Zhylaw."

"Something like that." Jason was cradling his arm. "Soldier, I think she is going to resist. She betrayed us to the Taurians, and Riddick is abdicating his responsibility by doing nothing about it. Please knock her out. I will take responsibility."

She shook her head, pleadingly. The soldier hesitated, then drew himself up. "Please," she whispered. He shook his head. Then the world went dark again.

She was back in the Underverse, in Zhylaw’s stone castle. They were sitting in the throne room. The door to the dungeon was open behind him.

"Welcome back," Zhylaw said. He smiled expansively. He had a suitcase. His black body armor was set off by a Hawaiian shirt and a straw hat. "Do you remember how this works?"

She shook her head. "How what works?"

"How to drive one of these things?" He pointed. There was a solar sand cat in the throne room. She frowned at it. There were three boogie boards in the back and a plastic hula girl hanging from the rear view mirror.

"Huh?"

"Well, I could drive. But I thought you'd like to." He stood up and slung the suitcase into the back of the sand cat. Smiled at her.

She stared at him. "You've got to be kidding."

"You don't know how to drive?"

"That's so not it."

"Where are my manners? Would you like some cheese?" He made a gesture, and Irgun loomed up behind her, a frilly white apron over his armor, a tray of cheese and crackers in his hand. Almost involuntarily, she took a handful.
"Thanks," she said, grudgingly. Something was nagging at her from a long way off. But the food tasted so good and Zhylaw was being fairly decent. She ate some more. And some more.

"Would you like a pome-rita?"

"What's that?"

"That is a very good question. I believe it is pomegranate juice, simple syrup, lemon, and vodka, shaken with ice and strained into a salt rimmed glass. Irgun?"

Irgun held up a drink shaker, gave it an inviting shake. She shook her head. "Not if I'm the one driving."

"Good thought. Would you like a virgin?"

"Uh-"

"Or some milk?"

"Uh-"

He made a gesture, and Irgun stomped off. She watched him, something still tugging at her. "Don't you, you know, hate me? For killing you?"

Zhylaw laughed, ruefully. "Yes, I can see how you would think that."

"What with the torture and all."

"Yes. My dear girl. I really am ready to let bygones be bygones. To let you be my Persephone. And to give you a very nice hat. Let's go for a drive. Get out of this place."

Irgun was back. He handed her a glass bottle of milk, and suddenly she was amazingly thirsty. She took a long drink.

Looked at the door to he dungeon. "Mercy matters," she said, "even for you. But why do you want me to drive?"

Zhylaw shrugged. "I think it's your turn."

She took another drink. And another. The bottle was empty. She set it down, walked around the sand cat. It really was solar. Irgun shrugged on a Hawaiian shirt and a straw hat himself. Sat on the ground and smiled at her hopefully.

Zhylaw collapsed across from Irgun and the two of them started to play patticake. Jack stared at them for a long time. "You guys are very disturbing."

Zhylaw cast a look over his shoulder. "You'll like us if you give us a chance."

"That sand cat's solar. There's no sun here."

"You just can't see it. Give it a try. I'll buy you some ice cream when we get there . . ."

She sat in the driver's seat. Zhylaw slid into beside her. Irgun squeezed in behind, growling at the surfboards. She battled at the hula girl. "I can't help but think that's in poor taste."

"Say the word." He tossed the girl at a soldier who caught her easily. "Give me a chance. You're in
the driver's seat now. It's your show."

She laughed and turned the sand cat on. To her surprise, it turned on even though they were indoors with no sunlight. She hit the accelerator.

They accelerated.

She opened her eyes. She was back in the Hierotheisen, leaning against a metal pole. She was as weak as a kitten, as weak as she'd been the first time there. Jason was there, his hand was hanging strangely from his arm. The blond soldier was standing by the door, stoically.

"Welcome back," the ghostly voices chorused in her head. "Our Lord."

*I'm not your lord,* she thought back.

It came from inside her."Oh no, Sunshine. They are talking to me."
Chapter 30. Pyramids.

"We need more bodies," the ghostly voices chorused. "Unless you wish to use the vessel."

"No," Zhylaw said in her head, precisely. "I have plans for her. The Vaakos. A problem we will have to solve at some point anyway. Summon them.

"The Vaakos," the Quasi-Dead whispered.

"The Vaakos," Jason said, thoughtfully. "Yes." He hit his communicator. "Dame Vaako. Would you be able to join me in the Hierotheisen now? With your husband?"

Jack was shaking her head, but the words just would not come. She could hear Dame Vaako's voice. "Of course, Purifier. I am on my way. It is time for my husband to wake up anyway."

oOo

There was a resolute knock on Riddick's office. He stood and flung the door open. The soldier he'd sent after Jack stood there, stoically, his dark skin slightly flushed.

"What?"

"Sire, she's gone."

"Huh?"

"Your – Jack. She's gone."

Riddick stared at him.

"I went to her cell, and she's not there. There's blood on the bars and her communicator is broken on the ground. Someone switched off the surveillance camera. I asked control to figure out who. But I wanted to tell you she's gone."

Riddick bolted out the door. Somehow, he was in her cell. The cage door was open. Her bracelet communicator was in little pieces on the floor. He closed his eyes.

I am such an asshole. I left her locked up here. Hungry. In the dark. I left her . . . vulnerable.

Who ever took her might have saved her life.

Opened his eyes. Examined the blood on the bars. Smelled it. Not Jack's. He found himself grinning mirthlessly. Good girl.

He sniffed it. Familiar. Let his brain drift. Nin?

Who would come to see her? Selket Vaako? Her scent was there, or something like it.

No . . . man's blood. He growled. Who would fucking dare come to see her?

Zhylaw.

He's dead.

He couldn't get Zhylaw out of his head. He sniffed the blood again.

Jason.

Wanna-be purifier.

Who probably killed Selena.

Who's been talking to the Quasi-Dead.

Who Jack thinks wants to bring back Zhylaw.

Shit.

He forced himself to move slowly, deliberately. Called the command deck. "Where's Jason? The junior purifier?"

The tech seemed out of breath. "Sorry, sire. He is not answering, and I cannot get a fix on his location. There has been some disruption to our interior senses."

Riddick grunted. "Selket Vaako. Where is she?"

There was another pause. "Sire, I believe she is visiting the Heirothesien." Riddick closed his eyes. "Her husband?"

The silence went on far too long. Finally, "My lord, his attendants say he sleeps. Shall I have him woken?"

Riddick snorted. "Yeah. Tell him to get the fuck up and to meet me at the fu – at the Hierothesien."

He crouched, swept up the remains of her bracelet. It smelled like them. Took one last sniff of her cell, and left.

oOo

Dame Vaako entered the Hierothesien, alone. Jason greeted her warmly. Jack fixed on her, blearily. I was supposed to tell her something . . .

Kyra whispered as if she was a long way away, they're gonna kill her. Do you really care?

"Leave," Jack whispered. Dame Vaako fixed her with a look.

"Sorry?"

"They're gonna kill you," Jack managed.
The other woman backed away. "Do I need my guard, Jason? I left him outside."

Jason laughed. "By all means, bring him in. If you trust him. It's time for the pretender Lord Marshal to go to his reward."

"Hm," Dame Vaako said, noncommittally. Eyed Jason's blond guard. Walked back to the door. Opened it.

"Madam?" a low voice asked.

"Send my husband in when he arrives." She closed the door. Smiled at Jack. "Why would they kill me, girl? My husband is going to be the next Lord Marshal." She smiled at Jason. "We have been planning this for months."

Jack shook her head, tried to speak. Couldn't. "Where is your lord?" Jason asked, something bright in his eyes.

Dame Vaako shrugged, beautifully. "He was sleeping when I left him some hours ago. My communicator did not wake him. I sent a guard. He will be here soon."

"A pity," Zhylaw whispered. Then things happened very fast. The wind whirled. Dame Vaako opened her mouth and was struck dumb. The blond soldier took a step and was frozen like a statute. Jason fell to the floor like an uncut puppet. Jack opened her mouth to scream but some invisible hand clamped down. A moment of incandescent pain, a moment of wetness, a sharp coppery smell –

And everything went still. Zhylaw was standing in front of her, smiling. Irgun was behind him, grinning. Both fully dressed. Dame Vaako and the blond guard were gone. There was blood on the floor. And on the walls. And on the creepy creepy equipment. But none on Zhylaw or Irgun. Jack blinked up at them.

"All hale the Lord Marshal!" the quasies chanted in her head. Zhylaw was smiling down at her. "They brought you back with clothes?" she managed, inanely. "I was all naked. And bloody. You're all clean."

Zhylaw nodded, seriously. "They like me better." Jack swallowed, tried to scoot away from him. "I suspect they were trying to make Riddick happy." She made a small noise. He smiled. "Don't worry little Persephone. We're a team from now on." He walked easily – they brought him back strong – to the wall. Pulled a long curved knife out of a decorative holder. Irgun pulled two. They grinned at each other.

"Oh goody, teammates," she murmured. "Does that mean you're not going to torture me anymore?"

"If you don't give me a reason to. But I am the . . . team captain. It is my job to maintain . . . discipline." He smiled indulgently at Irgun. "Irgun has missed you, you know." Irgun ran one of the knives over his lips and smiled at her, hungrily. "Behave, and you'll be treated like a queen."

She could feel the quasi-dead in her head, probing. "Don't trust her," one whispered. "She would have destroyed us all with those filthy Omphalos weapons." Zhylaw seemed oblivious. Jason made a strange sound, tried to lever himself up with his arms. Failed. Jack finally looked at him. There was raw hatred in his eyes.

He has no legs.

"We needed the matter," the Quasies sniggered. "Zhylaw didn't want to wait."
Zhylaw smiled at Jason. "Your sacrifice will not be forgotten," he said.


"Because, my dear boy, she now binds this place to the Underverse for reasons I confess I do not completely understand. While you? You did the Underverse a service and you have my gratitude. Do not tax it."

"They're right," Jason ground out. "Don't trust her."

"Sorry?"

*He can't hear the quasies,* Jack realized, dimly. *That's weird.* Jason seemed to reach the same conclusion. "The Quasi-Dead say she almost brought down the fleet with that bodyguard of hers and that filthy sunseeder. You should have destroyed it."

"Ah yes, the Omphalos. I will see to it that she has . . . more suitable attendants. Or perhaps I'll just keep her with me." He smiled down her. "At my side or on my leash, I really can be quite flexible my dear."


"Oh, good," Zhylaw said, mildly. "Let's welcome the man properly." He smiled down at her almost cherishingly. Then he yanked her up, the knife at her throat, his other arm around her middle almost tenderly.

The door opened. Riddick stood there, shockingly frozen. Jack almost forgave him everything at the stricken look that flashed across his face.

"Come in, son," Zhylaw called, easily. "Close the door behind you."

Riddick obeyed, slowly. "You kill her, I kill you and bring her back," he said, softly. "Not much of a standoff."

"Hm. That would depend, I think, on whether I could still give her the True Death, wouldn't it? Shall we find out?"

Riddick swallowed. *This is really freaking him out,* Jack realized. Her brain felt fuzzy. Riddick said, softly, "What do you want?"

"What I've always wanted, my son. To bring all life across the threshold into the bliss of the Underverse. What do you want?"

There was a long silence. Finally, Riddick seemed to reach a decision. "Her. I want her. Give her back, give us a ship, and you'll never see us again."

*A week ago, I would have given anything for that.* Her eyes filled with tears. Riddick saw, and his expression softened.

"Hm," Zhylaw said. "I appreciate your honesty."

Riddick shrugged, seeming to regain his equilibrium. "Room full of telepaths." Jack could feel Zhylaw tensing slightly. *He really can't hear them."

"The Underverse has rejected him," a ghostly voice whispered, hushed by its fellows.
"That's why he needs me. I really am the link. She closed her eyes. Me, Riddick, this city, and the Quasi-Dead themselves. Oh, Nin, couldn't you just blow us all up right now?"

"TRAITOR!" The quasies shrieked in her head. Riddick flinched. Jason made a small noise. Riddick's head snapped to him. "Didn't he have legs?"

Zhylaw laughed. "Ah yes, they have been put to better use."

Riddick looked around, seeming much more himself. "Where's Selket got to? Her bodyguard made a point of saying there's no way outta here 'cept through him."


"Got it." Riddick grinned at him. "The quasies knitted these two from two and a half men. Huh."

It wasn't quite Jack's voice, but it came from Jack's mouth. "Mothers of monsters."

Riddick gave her a strange look. Focused on Zhylaw. "Look. I killed you once 'cause of that girl. Give her back and give us a head start and we'll call it good."

Zhylaw sighed. "Alas, son, it's not so easy. I need at least one of you to keep the connection with the Underverse. I promised to make her a queen if she helped me." Riddick tensed. "She seems... oddly reluctant, given that she converted without resistance."

Riddick shrugged. "Quasies gave her back her conscience or somethin'. She was bitchin' at me about it right from the start."

"Hm. Good to know." The two men stared at each other. Irgun circled. Zhylaw shook his head slightly.

Riddick grunted. "How the hell did you get here anyway?"

Zhylaw kissed her on the top of the head. "I have her to thank for that."

Shit. I did this.

"Not smart, kid," Riddick said, softly. Jack seemed to be very far away. Her eyes focused on him with obvious difficulty.

"Thought it was a dream. I thought we were just going for a drive." Their eyes met. His eyes flickered down to a bloodstain on her cheek. Jack raised a hand to wipe her face. Zhylaw smiled down at her indulgently. Didn't move the knife.

"I had to drink your blood. I didn't think-" She stopped, swallowed. "It's my fault. But they were playing patticake."

"It's okay, kid," he said, still soft. Focused back on Zhylaw. "Why are you here? No other Lord Marshal ever came back. Hasn't the fucking mandate of heaven or what ever passed you by?"

"Ah yes. I am no longer a suitable anchor. But you are. And so," he nuzzled Jack with his cheek, "so is this young lady."

Riddick growled and took a step forward. Zhylaw hoisted her up slightly, pressed the knife tighter. Almost dreamily, her hands drifted on top of it. Zhylaw didn't seem to mind. "This is a very sharp
knife. It will go through her like she is butter.'

Riddick shrugged. "Always just go get her back. If you ain't a Lord Marshal, you probably can't true death people any more."

"You love her with all your heart." Zhylaw said softly. "Are you really willing to risk that? I don't want that much from you. Just to have you do what you do . . . with better guidance. Plus, I have backup. You don't."

Riddick could feel his jaw tick. "I'm listening."

"My offer. I become the Lord Marshal again. You become a duke – our war leader. You keep the girl and you lead the armies."

"A duke leading an army of darkness?"

"Just so."

"I really like the rooms, you know."

Zhylaw shrugged. "Very well. I don't need the title. You keep being the Lord Marshal. You install me as the Purifier. You still get the girl, you keep the girl under control this time, and you listen to my counsel."

"Tempting. But I don't get it. You give her the true death, you're out of luck. You just kill her, she can't be a conduit anymore, right? She loses the fucking mandate of heaven or whatever?"

"That is . . . unclear. Generally, once death closes our eyes, it seems we cannot perform that function. But the Quasi-Dead say she's a new animal."

"You win, what do you get? If I'm understandin', you can't really be the Lord Marshal even if you kill me."

"I am willing, though not eager, to take the risk that our priests can figure that out. I am not willing to leave an unbeliever unfettered on the throne. One who stupidly let this little girl loose with the Omphalos weapons."

"Huh?"

"Omphalos." At Riddick's blank look, Zhylaw continued. "The legacy of Kore Arkhipov." Jack spasmed slightly at the name. "But for the chance intersession of the enemy, this little girl would have turned the black fleet into a sun."

"Who the fuck is Kore Arkhipov?"

"Nin's grandmother," Jack answered, her voice dreamy. "I told you about her. I dreamed we were on the beach together. Nin punched Zhylaw and he turned into a bunch of crows."

"Murder of crows, Jack" Riddick said, gently.

"Yeah." She sniffed mightily. "Murder."

"I killed Kore Arkhipov," Zhylaw broke in, sounding slightly put out.

Jack twisted up to look at him. "Yeah. You killed me too. It doesn't always take."
Zhylaw laughed. "No. Not when you're like us."

"Like us," she murmured. "I'm really a Lord Marshal too? I tie this place to the Underverse?"

Zhylaw shrugged. "I wouldn't call you a Lord Marshal. Our armies would not follow you. But yes, the Underverse has claimed you as its own. The way it had claimed me. The way it claims Riddick."

He gazed at Riddick, almost affectionately. "Look at him closely. What do you see?"

"Black and silver . . . ."

Zhylaw smiled. "Very good, girl!"

Despite the knife at her throat, she twisted to look up at him. "And you're just black." She looked blank for a moment. "I'm green. With a little red. Wow. Is that why you dressed me in green, Riddick?"

"Yeah, Sunshine." She nodded.

"I understand now." She smiled beautifully. Her eyes were fixed on him, luminous, loving enough to hurt. "I don't want to be a Lord Marshal." Her hands were still on Zhylaw's knife.

Zhylaw laughed. "No worries, pet. No one will ever know."

Her eyes focused on Riddick again. "You really locked me up in the dark with no food for three days?" Her voice was dreamy, but there was an undertone of woe that made his stomach hurt.

"I'm sorry, Sunshine. I told someone to feed you," He broke off abruptly. "I fucked up. I'm sorry."

She nodded. Smiled. "Would you do something for me?"

He swallowed. "I'll try, Sunshine." *Anything you want. Tell me what you want. Tell me what to do so you'll always look at me like that.*

Impossibly, her eyes softened. "Thank you for coming back for me all those times. I'd have died on that monster planet if you hadn't. We're good. But," she swallowed, her fingers tightening on Zhylaw's knife. "But we're done now. I don't like what you've turned me into. Don't come for me again." Just like in his nightmare, she twisted her neck hard against the blade at her throat. Her blood cascaded over Zhylaw's hand. Without thinking, Riddick leapt. One arm caught her. The other grabbed Zhylaw's soul and yanked it out. Riddick squeezed until it was gone.

Chapter 31: To Sleep, to Dream

Riddick ducked under Irgun's first blow, kicked up hard. It should have shoved Irgun half way across the room. It didn't. Irgun twisted, the knife in his left hand headed for Riddick's lung; the right for his gut. Riddick blocked the left clumsily, feeling the knife cut through the Necromonger uniform, slash the skin. Kicked the knife out of the other hand, tried to pull a weapon himself. Irgun kicked out his knee. Riddick went down. Irgun's left hand was coming again for the kill –

Then Irgun was on the ground, twitching. Vaako and Dame Vaako's guard were there. Vaako had fired a stun shot. His eyes were wide. For an instant, they met Riddick's.


Riddick got his fingers onto Jack's jugular. No pulse. A sob ripped from him.

"Riddick?" Vaako's voice seemed to be coming from long away. Riddick pulled Jack's body into his arms. Her dying words raged at him. *Don't come for me again.*

Vaako was crouching beside him, his voice gentle. "Riddick?" Their eyes met. *His woman's dead too. She was an ass, but he loved her.* A whole new kind of pain. He tried to speak. Couldn't make the words come out.

Jason laughed, a bitter, raw sound. "The heretic's grieving, my lord. His little bitch love's dead. Just like yours."

Vaako's face hardened. He stood. He stalked over to the legless man. "What did you say?"

Jason spat. "She thought she was going to make you the Lord Marshal. Stupid bitch."

Vaako's head snapped over to Riddick's. "What's he talking about?"

Riddick dimly knew he was crying. "I'm sorry, man. The quasies – I think the quasies used your wife's body to bring back these assholes."

"Her body?" Vaako whispered.

"Yes, my lord," Jason spat. "Her body. My guard's body. And my legs. You should have been there. Then I could still walk."

"I'll go get her," Riddick muttered. "When I go get Jack." *If I go get Jack...*

Jason spat again. "The hell you will. The quasies gave her the True Death. Was supposed to have
given it to you too. Zhylaw was our last best chance of fixing what you two are breaking."

Vaako reached down and hauled Jason into the air. "What did you do?"

"Me? Hardly anything. Took that little bitch out of her cell before she starved to death. She did the hard part. Bringing them back. Guess our heretic Lord Marshal there made a breeder into something she had no right to be."

Riddick's communicator beeped. So did Vaako's. There was a pause. Finally, Vaako dumped Jason, answered. "What?"

"My lord, the Taurians have attacked again. We can not find the Lord Marshal."

"He's with me." Vaako stared at Riddick. "We're on our way." Vaako came back to Riddick, crouched beside him. "Riddick . . ."

Riddick shook his head. "You shoulda waited to take the shot. If you'd waited fifteen seconds, you'd be the Lord Marshal now."

Vaako's lips pursed. But his voice was strangely gentle. "I know. We have work to do."

Riddick stood, unsteadily, Jack in his arms. "I gotta – I gotta clean this up first. If folks see Zhylaw's body it could – it could be complicated."

"You're right," Vaako said, still gentle.

Riddick handed him Jack's body. "Have someone stick her in a status tube and have it sent to my room. I'll join you soon."

Vaako looked down at Jack almost tenderly. "Yes, my lord."

"It's Riddick. Vaako-" they looked at each other. "I'm sorry," he managed, lamely. "About your wife."

Vaako shrugged. "There will be time for grief hereafter." Then he was gone.

In a daze, Riddick found himself staring down at Irgun, stunned and twitching. Crouched beside him. The words seemed to come from far away. "You killed a man I saved. You hurt a girl I love. Don't like that much." Reached in and took his soul. Then he stomped hard on his face. Again. And Again.

He was starting down at Zhylaw, dead but recognizable. Riddick raised his boot and Zhylaw wasn't recognizable for very long.

Then he was looking down at Jason. Jason was staring up at him with hatred. "Traitor," he whispered.

"You tryin' to piss me off?" Riddick was surprised at how soft his voice was.

"What if I am? The Quasies fear that Ninshubar gave those weapons to the Taurians. You don't have the stomach to do what needs to be done. Even if you win today, it will take us decades to recover from your bad government."

Riddick crouched beside him. "Who else knows what you did?"

Jason glared. "Why would I tell you?"
"No one, my lord," the quasies volunteered, respectfully.

"Not really full of trust in you guys," Riddick muttered. Stared thoughtfully at Jason. Stroked his face. Stuck his hand into his brain and pulled out what he wanted as the man screamed.

Broke his neck when he was done, and almost immediately regretted it. _Lot more pain I coulda inflicted on this one. And I shoulda given him the true death._

Then Riddick turned to the Quasi-Dead.

**oOo**

"Welcome, my child." The voice was warm. Jack opened her eyes. She was back in Zhylaw's Underverse castle. An old man she dimly recognized was gazing down at her, warmly.

"Hey."

They stared at each other for a long time. Finally, Jack said, softly, "Do you know who I am?"

"Oh dear, do you?"

"Yeah." To her surprise, she did. There was no second voice in her head. She snorted. _Riddick's projected personality disorder. All undone. I'm all me again. All me and all dead._

"Good. I'm Zhylaw's seneschal, David. Let me take you to the book of life."

"Huh?"

"So you can sign in. Let people know you are with us."

"I didn't sign this last time I was here."

The seneschal spasmed. "Oh. You're Kyra. Oh my dear child." His voice was compassionate. "Zhylaw was going to make you a queen."

She swallowed. "Yeah. He said. It didn't work out. Is that a problem?"

"No, my lady." He nodded, his eyes warm. He cleared his throat. "Lord Zhylaw signed in for you last time."

She let him lead her to a big book with thin pages. "Where's my name?"

He gave her a strange look. Pulled a different book from a shelf, turned almost to the end. In what could only be a Lord Marshal's handwriting:

"Kyra Riddick."

She closed her eyes. _Kyra Riddick. Is that who I'm going to be?_

"This is a different book than the one I'm supposed to sign?" she said, inanely.

"Yes, my lady. There is a different book for each Lord Marshal. You converted during Zhylaw's reign. You're in his book." She gave him a look. He kept talking. "Until Riddick comes, Zhylaw has been taking care of his people. Now that Zhylaw's gone, we're just muddling through . . . Under the circumstances, I think you should sign in Riddick's book."
She nodded. Went to the other book, noticing for the first time that it said "Riddick" on its cover, black on black. Paged to the last blank page. Wrote in a far less robust hand

"Audrey Jack Kyra Parnell al-Walid."

She stopped. Her hand hovered over the page. There was room for one more word.

She put the pen down. Smiled at the man. "Now what?"

The man smiled back. "What do you want? Most people start by looking for their loved ones. You'll be with them forever. This is paradise, my dear."

A familiar voice rang out. "Not for her."

Jack turned slowly. Jason was standing there, glaring at her, four of Zhylaw's guards behind him. His voice dripped with hate. "Not for her. We're going to chop you into little bits, little girl. All alone. In pain. Unable to die. Without end."

She stared at him. Blinked, and he was orange and red, with a single black cord coming down his spine and disappearing into the ground. She looked at his guards. Different colors, but all with the black cord. Suddenly, deep down, she knew what to do. She smiled at them, showing a little teeth. "You don't know who you're fucking with."

oOo

It had been a hell of a day. The death totals would make a supernova stand up and salute. Riddick fought until he was exhausted. Took stupid risks. Won every fight.

Finally Vaako persuaded him to take a break, get some sleep. Suggested he bring someone with him. Riddick couldn't bear the thought. Not while Jack was there.

She was still warm. The blood was still liquid, unclotted, thanks to the stasis field. He reached through the field, touched the wound on her throat gently. Sucked the blood off his fingers.

Backed away. Found a bottle of whisky, took a long drink.

Her voice in his head. "Thank you for coming for me. Don't do it again." He blinked. No colors except the fading heat signature. He blinked again, eyes watering.

He turned off the field. Kissed her forehead gently. He shuddered. Took another drink of whisky.

"Don't do it again."

There was a knife in his hand. He didn't remember how it got there. He slit the front of her shirt open, half expecting her to struggle. Caressed the cooling flesh gently. The way she liked it.

"Do it again."

All I have to do is take a step. Go to the Underverse. Drag her back. Tell the quasies . . . tell the quasis to just cut out everything that happened after I left her on New Mecca. Take her back to fourteen. Her life without me sucked. Be doin' her a favor. Treat her like a princess for a few years, marry her, keep her safe and happy.

Except I just killed all the quasies.

Right.
Fuck.

*Maybe she didn't mean it. Maybe it was just a way to break the impasse. Not get the true death.*

*I should go ask her.*

Stepped away. He liked that plan. It was a good plan. He took another long drink.

*And maybe we could just take off together. Leave the Necros behind. She liked that plan.*

Found a large backpack. Found the jewels he'd given her. Dumped them in. A few of her outfits. The data pad he'd given her. Wrapped it up in some more of her clothes. Added a shiv he'd been planning to give her for a long time, in a sheath.

Stared at the pack. Took another drink. Added a change of clothes for himself. Found the rope Selene hung herself with. Coiled it up. Added it. A small first aid kit, some rations. Pack was nearly full. Tucked in a bottle of vodka and a water purification kit.

*I fucked this up. I spent five years dreaming about her. Tried to turn her into that dream. Made her life a nightmare.*

*Don't come back for me.*

Went back to her body. Slit her pants open. Remembered her first night in this room. Burning for her so hot that it burned her reluctance from his mind.

"*Do I get a say?*"

He heard his own voice, teasing, cock-sure. "*As long as you say yes.*"

He remembered her flinching away from him. He shuddered harder. Picked her out of the status tube, laid her on the bed. Collapsed to his knees beside her on the floor, burying his head in her still-soft belly. Remembering what it felt like, that first night. Burying himself in her. The taste of her blood, her tears... . .

*I gotta go ask her.*

He kissed her skin. Kissed down between her legs.

Pulled himself away. Went back for the bottle of whisky. Finished the bottle staring down at her stiffening body. Found another bottle.

*I raped her. I don't have to ask about that. She loved me and I was a monster.*

*I was just playing.*

Kissed her throat again. She was almost room temperature. The blood was beginning to taste like death.

*Again and again.*

*She doesn't want to see me again.*

*Unless that was all a show for Zhylaw. Just like me being a monster was a show for the crowd.*

*This could be my last chance.*
His own pants were unbuttoned. He was not proud of what he did next.

oOo

He staggered back, buttoned up his pants. *Awfully uncivilized thing you just did there, Riddick.* Stared down. Her body was looking less and less human. Collapsed on the bed beside her. Staring at the ceiling, fingering a knife.

At some point, he started to sob. Once he started he couldn't stop.

After a very long time, he became aware the door to his chambers was opening. *Fuck.* He made it to the bedroom door, swaying. Eris was coming down the hall. "I thought you weren't comin' back," Riddick growled.

The man's eyes skated up and down. "No. Just – my god, what happened to you?"

"Huh?"

"You are covered in blood."

"It's not mine." He could feel his eyes prickle hot.

Eris swallowed. "We have to go."

"Huh?"

"We have to go." He hesitated. "You're drunk."

Riddick laughed. "No shit."

"Is Jack with you? I told Nin I'd bring her-

Riddick's laughter stopped abruptly. He stepped aside, ushered Eris into the bedroom. The man stepped in, stopped cold. "Oh."

"Yeah."

Eris swallowed. "Did you give her the True Death?"

"Huh?"

"Riddick – we talked about this. The True Death. To keep her from being tortured in the Underverse. That's why you brought me back, remember?"

"Fuck you," Riddick growled again. "I didn't give her anything. She offed herself. Told me not to come back for her again and slit her own throat with Zhylaw's knife."

Eris stepped back, breathing hard. "Zhylaw?"

"She brought him back. Don't worry. I gave him the true death."

"We have to go, Riddick."

"Go where?"

"I'll tell you everything. When you're not drunk."
Things were beginning, vaguely, to not make sense. "You talk to the dead too?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Nin's dead."

"No – no he's not. He got caught by the Taurians. He's about to -"

"Fuck him. That bastard loved her. Him dying broke her heart. He failed her. If I see him, I'll kill him. Kill him slowly."

Eris swallowed. "Riddick, Ninshubar Arkhipov has planted bombs that will destroy the fleet. We have to get out of here."

"Motherfucker shoulda gotten her out of here. He shoulda saved her. That was his fucking job."

Riddick's fists balled. Eris took a step back.

"You're not hearing anything I say, are you?" Riddick glared at him. "If you come with me, you might still be able to save her. If you don't, you're both dead."

"I'm not going without her."

Eris took a deep breath. Reached into a pocket. "There's no time. We are going to be the fathers of a mighty race, you and I, once the Necromongers fall."

Riddick stopped listening. There was a stunner in Eris's hand. Killing him was just too much work. Knocked the stunner away, snagged the pack, reached inside of himself, and fell into the Underverse.

He vaguely heard the muttered word "balls" as the Basilica faded.

oOo

After an eternity of falling he remembered he had to tell this place to have land. After an eternity more he remembered to do it. He hit the sands hard. Jack, he thought. The world started to shift. Then he hesitated.

*I'm covered in her blood. I can't – I can't come to her like this.* He closed his eyes, tried to will himself clean.

It didn't work.

*Water. I need water.* He concentrated. A pool he saw once, on a mission. A waterfall plunged into a rock basin in a forest. There had to be something like that here.

The world responded sluggishly, like it had other things to do, but it responded. There was a pool and a waterfall and creepy black plants. He stripped his clothes off, dove in, holding a shiv tightly.

He got out, rinsed his clothes in the cold water. *I'm tired.* There was a cave behind the waterfall, he decided. Thought hard and after a long time, it was there. He pushed in. It was surprisingly dry, with convenient rock formations to hang his clothes on.

*I made this cave. Can I make Jack come?*

He decided he shouldn't be drunk when he saw her. Tried to will sobriety into existence. Nothing happened.
I can change other things, but not myself. Huh.

Maybe I'm just too tired. Need to take a nap. On something soft. He concentrated. It took an enormous amount of work, more work than the cave, but eventually, a pile of furs appeared. His bed from the ice planet. Never should have left. Eyes prickling, he burrowed in.

I miss her.

I miss her a lot.

I was a raging asshole to her.

I'm going to be better. I'll be . . .
Chapter 32: Shrubberies in the Underverse

The seneschal stumbled back. "My lady," he whispered, horrified, awed. "What did you do?"

She smiled at him. "You said Zhylaw was gonna make me his queen?"

He nodded, eyes wide.

"Riddick got there first. He gave me a present. Made me a type of Lord Marshal. It comes with perks." She flexed her fingers, remembering the feel of the black cords, the feel of the snapping, the men vanishing away . . .

"Soul taker," the man whispered, sinking to his knees. "You gave them the True Death. You are the Dark Lady of the Underverse. Riddick's queen . . . "

She smiled, something dark and exultant stirring inside of her. "Yes."

There was the sound of running feet. A woman flew in, eyes wild. "Where is he?"

"I'm sorry, Annie," the seneschal said, standing. "He – Daniel attacked our new Lady Marshal."

The woman's eyes widened, focused on Jack. "Where is he?" she demanded, absurdly brave, her voice hoarse.

"She gave him the True Death, Annie," the seneschal said, low and compassionate.

The woman quailed. Stared at Jack. Came very close. Jack tensed. Then the woman fell to her knees. "Please. Please, my lady. Send me too."

Jack fell back a step. "What?"

"Send me too. Life here without him – I can't bear it." The woman's voice cracked. "I loved him. He was my life-"

Jack looked at the seneschal helplessly. He nodded, sadly. "She loved him with all her heart."

What ever was dark and exultant in Jack chilled to ashes. "I'm so sorry."

"Take me, dark lady. Take me-

Jack shook her head. "I'm sorry. I can't."

"Take me!" the woman stood, launched herself. Without thinking, Jack's hand shot out. Snarled that black cord snaking down the woman's spine and pulled. It snapped away from the ground. The woman collapsed, unhinged, and vanished.
The seneschal fell to his knees again. "Oh, get up," she said, crossly. "I'm not going to kill you. Unless you give me a reason."

The man nodded, slowly. Cleared his throat. "What are your orders?"

"Huh?"

He smiled, but there was something haunted underneath. "Until Zhylaw or Riddick comes, those men and women who converted during their reigns need you. My lady."

"Oh you've got to be kidding."

The man shook his head, slowly. "No, my lady."

"I am not remotely qualified for that."

He smiled, quickly. "My lady, manifestly, you are. Only a Lord Marshal could do what you just did."

_I can't deal with this._ Jack closed her eyes. Breathed hard. _But maybe it's better than the alternative._

"You said most people start by finding their loved ones?"

"Yes, mum."

"How?"

He smiled, quick. "Most people start with the books."

---

Nin wasn't in the books. At first, that made her sad. Then it made her hopeful. Vaako's doctor, Neith, was in the book. The seneschal had found her, and Jack was damn grateful. Riddick had apparently asked her to brush up on her therapy skills. For her. That made Jack feel strange inside. Plus, the woman actually knew now to run things. They spent a lot of time together.

The Underverse might be paradise, but every day people crept in, begging for release. At first Jack resisted. But their sad stories broke her heart. The cords were easy to snap.

_Nin's not here._ But thousands of other people were. People were flooding the castle. Riddick's book was longer by the day.

Something was changing. Time traveled differently, but the dead from that battle with the Taurians took months to arrive. People who died next to each might show up days apart. The seneschal murmured that the time difference was accelerating.

Jack was lonely. Other than Neith and a few random guards she didn't much like, she knew no one here. Everyone was nice, in an awed way. But no one was warm. They called her the dark lady. They kept their distance.

_This is what Riddick felt like_, she let herself think after one tiring day. _He had no one but me._

The thought hurt.

Riddick was doing what she told him, as far as she could tell. Staying away. As the days wore on, she wasn't sure how to feel about that.

_He was getting more brutal._
But the look in his eyes when he saw Zhylaw's knife at her throat haunted her. In his own way, he begged for her life.

And I made him watch me die.

His nightmare. He'd told her that, and she believed him.

She felt guilty about that. Before she died, she could have sent him a message through the quasies. But he'd killed the quasies. Given them all the true death somehow, even the ones far away.

She was alone. Everyone else here had converted. Everyone else here believed, even the ones begging for release.

But the bed was soft and the food was good. She endured.

She was on Zhylaw's throne when Covu came. The first Lord Marshal. They ate and drank and Covu told her that things had not gone like he hoped, that long ago day when he became the first. But he loved his wife and children and could not bear the thought of being apart from them. She'd nodded, serious, finding it hard to hate this sad, small man who had been the death of so many. He thought he was doing the right thing.

He told her that sometimes, new souls avoided the castles. That some of the risen Necromongers appeared in the eastern mountains, and some stayed there. Heretics, he said. He did not seem to mind.

The flood of new souls had slowed drastically. There wasn't all that much to do. Neith could do it.

Jack woke slowly, alone.

Someone had given her a hammock. She cursed the weight at first, as much as it made the nights better. But one day she told it to stop weighing so goddamn much and it had obliged. Didn't take up half her pack any more either. Good stuff. She thanked that man nearly ever night. Metaphorically, since she'd killed him.

Three years ago, she'd walked out of Zhylaw's castle with a pack and a mission, looking for Covu's eastern mountains. Looking for Nin. Looking for Riddick, though she didn't tell anyone that.

It had taken her a month to walk through Zhylaw's lands. According to the lore, Lord Marshals could go anywhere in the Underverse instantly, but when she had asked Covu how, he'd shrugged. "Just do," he said. Not helpful. So we walked, and the whole way through, men and women came to her, begging for death.

After a while, she started imposing conditions. Making them carry her pack for a day. Making them stay with her, talk to her, be with her. Persuade her that this was the right thing to do. That they wouldn't be leaving people behind.

She found the heretics in the hills. None of them were Nin. All of them wanted release. She stayed with them for a season, these quiet, serious men and women, deeply anguished at what the Necromongers were doing and their part in making it happen. She stayed with them for a season and then she gave them what they wanted.

Not knowing what else to do, she went back to Zhylaw's lands – her lands – quietly, by a different route. She'd crossed the border two days before, and wasn't at all sure what to do next.
She scratched herself.

"Hello?" a woman's voice said cautiously. Jack spun.

The woman standing there was beautiful. Long silver hair and the face of an angel. Jack swallowed. "Hello."

"I'm Lena," the woman said. "I've been looking for you."

*I've been looking for you too,* Jack thought, stunned. *I just didn't know it.*

"I'm glad you found me."

The woman nodded, seriously. And then she knelt. "My lady Persephone. My lady Kali Kore. I beg mercy. Let me go. I have no ties here. I never converted. I am not part of this world."

Jack closed her eyes. *I can't do this.* "All right. But you have to do something for me."

"Anything."

"Stay with me a month. Help me – help me look for my friends." She searched the other woman's face. "Tell me about yourself, your life, before. Tell me stories. Be with me. Just for a month. Just so I'm sure."

A shadow fell over the woman's face. And then she smiled, beautifully. "Okay."

Jack woke up happy, feeling the heat of another body beside her in the hammock. She lifted her head and smiled and the sleeping woman beside her. Then her heart clenched.

*One month today.* She blinked down at the woman. *Christ. I can't do this. I'm going to miss her too goddamn much.*

She forced herself to breathe calmly. Blinked and Lena dissolved into light. Dappled silver and blue, shot through with faint black threads. The black cord of the Necromonger wasn't there, as if the threads had never twisted together . . . .

*Huh.* Jack looked hard at herself, something she had not done since the day she died. Green and red, shot through with black threads. *Huh. Maybe that's why I like her so much . . .*

As if hearing her, the woman's eyes opened. "Hey."

"Hey."

The other woman smiled. "I was thinking . . . ."

"Yeah?"

"These people who come to you, asking for death?"

"Yeah?"

"How about we have them build us a house? And then maybe a garden? Then maybe an orchard? My mom used to have an orchard."

Jack froze. Then she smiled. "That is a beautiful idea."
They were sitting in the garden in the cool of the evening, enjoying a fire in the firepit some man had dug for them and lined with smooth stones. The sun was setting behind the orchard. It was planted, but there was no fruit yet. Lena cleared her throat. "I have to tell you something."

*Oh god. "Yes?"

"I never converted."

Jack nodded. "You told me."

"I don't know how I'm here. Maybe because a lot of people died for me." She went quiet for a long time. "My mother told me to live; she did so much to make sure I survived – and I tried, I tried so hard. But I couldn't bear it. The day the Necros destroyed my world – finished destroying it – I killed myself."

A slow trickle of understanding began to ice down Jack's spine. "Why didn't you convert?"

Lena almost laughed. "Too young and scrawny. My mother made some sort of deal with the Lord Marshal to keep me alive until I was strong enough. I stayed in his chambers. He was actually pretty decent. He hadn't converted either."

The trickle became a flood. "Riddick."

"Yeah. Riddick. The day the purifier told me my world was gone, I tied one end of a rope to a beam. Made a noose, stood on a chair, slipped the noose around my neck, and jumped."

*And I finally get to ask the question I've wondered almost since I was reborn. "Where did you get the rope, Selena?"

"The Purifier gave it to me. He was pretty decent too, in his own way." Jack grabbed her hand, squeezed it tight, shuddering. Lena blinked. "I never told you my real name."

Jack swallowed. "No. Riddick did. I was . . . the next girl. I guess . . . the girl before you too. I didn't know it was you in the middle."

Lena spasmed. "Were you? You're Kyra? Oh goddess. Goddesses. You were the little girl he saved from monsters?"

"Yeah. Once upon a time."

"He used to dream about you. He loved you. You're the one he followed to the Necropolis."

"And to hell and back."

"But we weren't looking for him."

"He'll find me if he wants to." Jack stared into the ethereal sky. "And . . . I told him not to come for me. I begged him . . ."

"Why? He loved you. Loved you with all his heart." Lena sounded utterly bewildered.

"I loved him too. I really did." Jack rubbed her face. "He was turning into a monster. I was watching my childhood hero turn into a monster and there was nothing I could do. He was killing billions."

"For you," Lena said softly.
"Yeah. For me. He raped me right in front of my best friend. He drugged me and let the quasi-dead torture me and butt fucked me while I begged him not to and he tried to rip out part of my soul. Finally, when it got too much and I tried to leave him, he locked me in a room with no light or food for three days. I probably would have died in there if that purifier who helped you die hadn't come for me. And let me tell you, being rescued by that guy? Wasn't even the low point of the day."

Lena laughed, slightly hysterically. "Oh my god. He was always nice to me, in an offhanded way."

"Did you have sex with him?"

"Oh yeah. Threw myself at him. I thought . . . I don't know what I thought. Seemed like the thing to do. And he was gorgeous."

"Yeah," Jack said softly. "He was. Spoiled me for other men."

Lena's lips quirked. "Lucky for me."

Jack asked, awkwardly, "Was he . . . nice?"

"You mean in bed?" Lena shrugged. "Hell, what do I have to compare it to? He . . . he didn't initiate. He was careful not to go to fast. He usually tired to make me orgasm, but it wasn't like he was really . . . there." She stared into the sky. "I think he was thinking about you, you know. I knew he was never going to love me, and not just because I like girls better." She stopped again, thoughtfully. "I think he kind of liked taking care of me. When he remembered to."

_I think he liked taking care of me too. When he remembered to._ The thought hurt.

A man was at the gate. Jack saw him and smiled. Waved him over. He came, fell to his knees. "Merciful lady, I beg release."

Jack stared at him. Then at Lena. Her eyes were bright and the tension was high. "Alright. Bring me a . . . shrubbery, a nice one, and I'll give you what you want."
Chapter 33: Carpets of Flowers

The seasons turned and turned again and again. The orange blossoms smelled like heaven. Jack and Lena were picking berries in the garden and life was good. Not paradise. But good.

Someone made them a statute of the goddess Isis. Lena loved it. She would hang garlands of flowers on her stone neck.

If only Jack didn't miss Riddick and Ninshubar more than she would ever admit. If only Lena did not look wistful everything Jack released another soul from the Underverse, her happiness might have been complete.

Lena was brushing Jack's hair. It was halfway down her back now. Her voice was dreamy and distant. "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time in old Egypt there was a man named Set. He was a bad man, let me tell you. Killed his brother Osiris. Raped his sister Isis."

"Sounds like a hero," Jack said, taking a sip of wine.

"Stories for another day," Lena said, softly. "But he was a bad guy. He hated the day. He really hated Ra, the Sun. His grandfather, some say. He was always trying to blot him out, eat him, end him, replace him."

"Superfun."

"Yes." Lena took a drink, seemed lost in thought. "Ra's job was to pilot the barge of the sun around and around the world; through the heavens during the day and through the underworld at night."

"Pilot? Like a spaceship?"

"Like a boat." Lena caressed Jack's neck, tenderly.

"Sun's in a boat?"

"In this story. One night, in the underworld, this monster comes. Apep. Tries to eat the sun. And it's not like Set; if Apep wins, the world dies. Everything dies." Lena went quiet for a long time.

Jack finally spoke up. "What happened? Did Set hook up with Apep? Take Ra down together?"

"Funny thing. Set comes down and fights him off. Saves the say. Saves the sun. Lets him go too."

"Nice."

"Let me see you." Selena walked around Jack. "Beautiful. You are the sun."
"Huh?"

"Kyra means sun."

"I keep forgetting that."

"I don't."

"What does Selena mean?"

"Moon."

"Huh." Her voice went small. "What does Riddick mean?"

Lena smiled. "I think he was Set to your Ra. The monster that saved you."

"Oh." For a surreal moment, she was back on the monster planet, running back to the ship. Running from Johns. Running from Riddick. She shivered and came back to their home.

"I think he wanted to be Hades to your Persephone," Lena said softly. Jack looked at her sharply.

"Let's get ready for bed."

"Sure."

After an awkward silence, Jack continued. "Zhylaw called me Persephone," as she dropped the last of her clothes to the wood floor. "And Sunshine."

"Zhylaw was smart. Do you know her story?"

"A little. Nin told me some. She closed her eyes against the sudden stab of pain. "Tell me?" Her voice was wistful.

They crawled under the covers, spooning. Lena in back, caressing Jack's stomach. "Okay. Persephone was the daughter of Demeter, the earth goddess. They sometimes called her Kore." Jack stiffened. Lena's hands stilled. "What?"

"Remember me telling you about Ninshubar Arkhipov? His grandmother was named Kore."

"Oh, Kore Arkhipov? She was famous." Jack made a funny sound. After a long time, Lena continued, her slow hands moving in circles. "Hades was Demeter's brother. He was the Lord of Death. He fell in love with Demeter's daughter. He knew Demeter would never allow her daughter into his world. So he kidnapped her."

Jack shuddered. Selena hugged her close, whispered into her ear, "He kidnapped her and raped her and made her his Iron Queen."

That's what Riddick wanted? "Zhylaw called me that too."

Selena's slow hands cupped Jack's breasts, gently, lovingly. "Smart man. But Demeter was looking for her. Searched the world. When she found out what had happened, she withheld her gifts. Nothing grew. Everything was dying."

For a surreal moment, Jack was back in the dark of Riddick's cell. She shuddered again. Selena's voice went low. "The gods agreed to give her back. But Persephone had eaten of the fruit of the underworld. She had to stay with her uncle husband for four months of every year. When she's there,
nothing grows. But when she's reborn. . . " Selena's hands went lower and lower "Everything's reborn."

Jack rolled over onto her back. They kissed, lovingly. Jack broke it off. "Who's Ninshubar?"

Selena's head lowered to Jack's neck. Kissed it languidly. "He was Inanna's friend. She was a little like Demeter, a little like Isis." Kissed again. "She went to the underworld to save her lover. Her sister had taken him. Stripped her naked and hung her in the great hall, dead. Ninshubar saved her."

"Even though he never got the girl"

Selena was on top of her, pushing her legs apart, reaching between them. "Sometimes he was the girl." She smiled, lovingly, tenderly, her hair cascading over Jack's skin like moonbeams. "Can we stop talking about your exes now?"

The seasons turned again and turned again. There wasn't really winter in the Underverse. But there were times when the nights were a little longer. It was one of those times.

Jack and Selena were picking apples. They'd settled down, the two of them, into an easy partnership over the years. Not the first intoxication of love, but something more or less comfortable. If only Lena didn't miss her mother. If only Jack didn't miss Riddick. If only men and women would stop coming, reminding Lena of why she'd come in the first place.

Jack thought often about inventing a reason to go back on the road, where, hopefully, those done with this life would stop coming. Would stop reminding Selena. But Neith sent reports from time to time, usually carried by men wanting death. Inviting her back to Zhylaw's castle. Telling her that the other Lord Marshals were not happy with her. Reporting that no one had heard from Nin, or Eris, or Vaako, or Riddick.

Here in Zhylaw's lands, in Riddick's lands, in her lands, they were more or less safe. Patrols came by regularly, and if they left with fewer than they came with, no one brought it up.

A patrol was coming up now. A part of Jack liked that. There was always the hope of real news. They'd feed the men and women dinner, exchange gossip, find them places to sleep, feed them breakfast, spend the next day cleaning. It was good.

Jack felt like she should recognize the man charge of this patrol. It was a big one; she wasn't sure where she'd put everyone. The man approached with a smile. His men – and they were all men this time – hung back a little.

"Mum," the man said, with a small bow. "Will you walk with me?"

Jack put the basket of apples down. "Sure. Could your men help Selena?"

"Absolutely." He gestured, and two came up, smiling. Something about those smiles made her uncomfortable.

"What's up?"

The man touched her arm. "Let's walk." They walked out of the orchard, towards the gate. "You know the surviving Lord Marshals aren't happy with you."

"Yeah." She stopped. "Surviving?"
"Riddick gave Zhylaw the true death then vanished. No one told you?"

"No."

"Hm." He took her elbow, led her towards the stone statute. The area around it was carpeted with flowers. Jack smiled, entranced. Lena must have done it. Two soldiers were staring at the statute. "That's very beautiful."

"Thank you. A really talented man made it."

"I know," the man said with a real smile. Everything happened very fast. Chains flashed up from the carpet of flowers, and Jack was jerked hard against the statute. Two men were holding the chains taunt. She struggled. Two more were pounding stakes through links in the chains, pinning them down. Pinning her to the statute. "He used to work for me."

"Let me go!"

"Oh no." All the men stepped back. Two more appeared, pulling Lena between them. They threw her to the ground. She screamed. "You really don't know me, do you, little heretic?"

Jack shook her head. "No. And if you hurt her, I'll kill you all."

"I'm Baylock. The Brutal." He smiled. "We don't want to hurt her, little heretic. We want you to use your own special little power. Give yourself the True Death and go away. If you won't, we'll torture your friend in front of you for the rest of eternity."

Jack swallowed. "How do I know if I die, you won't just do that anyway?"

"Ah, trust. A hard thing to earn, isn't it? Tell you what. Most of the things we will do to her, we can't do to you because someone would have to touch you." He crouched, stroking Lena's hair as she whimpered. "But this, this we can all enjoy, and you will know what's coming for your friend. Burn her."

It happened very fast. The men threw bundles of wood at her feet. A grinning Necromonger thrust the torch into the wood. The pain was searing, unbelievable. Jack screamed. It seemed to echo from the sky. Panicked, Jack fought the chains –

Chains. Chains with lock. Locks. More or less. Locks can't bar Lord Marshals. Even heretical ones. She took a deep breath. Thought about the chains. They dissolved.

Thought about the fire. I am the sun, she thought, irrationally. I should have been. She felt like she was expanding, burning hot, exultant, becoming one with everything, drinking in the screams, burning through those black cords -

-A soft cry brought her back to herself. The orchard was nothing but ash. Lena was on the ground, crying softly, badly burned. Everyone else was gone. Jack fell to her knees, face very close to the other girl. "It's okay. It's okay. They can't kill you here. You're going to be fine. You'll get better."

Lena was sobbing, long gasping sobs that shook Jack to the core. I did this, Jack realized, suddenly, sick. I burned her. Hurt her. Like Riddick -

"I'm sorry," she managed. "You're gonna be fine. Just let me - " Do what? Lena's eyes were wild. "Hurts."

Lena shook her head. "They're right; we should both just . . . go. Leave. Please. Let me leave. Let me go back to my mother."

"I don't think death works like that," Jack snuffled. "I think you just . . . die."

"Please," Lena whispered. "Hurts. I can't – I can't do this. I've been waiting to ask you for years -"

"I'll be alone," Jack whispered. Like I left Riddick alone.

"Hurts." Like Riddick hurt me.

"This is too fast. I can't bear to watch you die." Just like Riddick couldn't bear to watch me die. Jack shuddered. Oh god. This is what Riddick felt like all the time, wasn't it?

Lena made a low, mournful noise, and for an instant, her eyes were clear. "Grow up, Kyra. It's who you are. You did this. Please -"

Jack kissed charred Lena on the lips, hungrily, knowing she was hurting her. She tasted like ashes. Jack's own tears were falling on the other girl's face, mingling with the ash. Reached forward, snagged the black threads, and pulled.

"Thank you," Selena whispered. Her body relaxed. And then it was gone.

Jack fell back into the ashes. Stared at the green grass, the only patch of green visible. Selena's body had protected it, blocked out the ash. She looked around wildly.

Their home was gone. Their garden was gone. There were a few trees in the orchard. Their root cellar might be there. The statue of Isis was charred black.

Jack touched the green grass, lovingly. Then she drove both fists into the ground with a scream that echoed from the sky.

Riddick was in the woods staring at a playground. A vaguely familiar old black woman was sitting on a bench, watching over a clutch of children. Her eyes were sharp. She saw him. Smiled at him and patted the bench next to her.

Oh what the fuck, Riddick thought. Walked out of the forest, into the light. Realized, dimly, he had a dog with him. A mutt with a whole lot of German Shepard? He petted its head absently.

When he got close, he gave the woman a nod. She smiled at him. "Sit a spell."

He hesitated. Then complied. She handed him an apple. He stared at it, bemused. "Is it poisoned?"

She snorted. "Not that one." She took a bite out of it herself, still in his hands. Chewed it thoughtfully. He felt his lips twitch, and followed suit. It was delicious. Settled back, watching the kids as he ate his apple. The dog was romping with them like it was where he belonged.

When he finished, he tossed the core behind him. "Do I know you?"

She smiled. "I knew Jack. And you knew my grandson, Nin."

Riddick stiffened. The dog looked up and growled. One of the little girls shrieked and ran. The dog crouched like it was going to leap –
"Down," Riddick's voice rang out. The dog looked at him and collapsed. The girl giggled and circled around, flinging herself at it. The dog rolled over.

"Ninshubar," Riddick managed not to growl himself. One of the boys playing catch looked over, holding the game ball in his hands. Kore shook her head. The boy nodded and tossed the ball to another boy who looked a disturbing amount like a young Eris. "I'm sorry for your loss," Riddick muttered.

She laughed. "He's doing fine. He took what you gave him and did great things." She gestured at the kids. Riddick stared at them blankly.

"Huh?"

"Where do you think little boys and girls come from?"

"I came from a garbage can."

She put her hand on his knee. "In a way. I'm so sorry. Bun?"

"Huh?" She handed him a roll she pulled from somewhere he didn't see. It was warm. It smelled wonderful. He hesitated, then took a bite. It was full of raisins. "Thanks," he said, grudgingly.

"There's hope for you yet," she said, a little smugly. She pulled out another bun, tossed it to the dog. He snapped it out of the air. Several of the children laughed. The little girl who'd run shrieking scampered up to the woman, held out her hand hopefully. The woman grinned at her, handed her another bun. Riddick stared at her. She looked a whole lot like he imagined Jack might have looked when she was five or six, only with darker skin and hair. The girl smiled at him shyly and ran back to the dog.

Riddick watched, uneasily, as she broke off a piece of the bread. The dog sat, almost painfully alert. She threw the bread and he took off like a shot after it. For a disorienting moment, Riddick was that dog. Then he was sitting on the bench. The little Jack-girl was laughing, delighted.

"Cute couple," the woman observed.

"That's sick."

She snorted. "You're one to talk." The girl made the dog sit again. It was drooling.

*God she looks like Jack. God, I miss her,* he thought. "Yeah," he said, softly. "You're right."

She put a hand on his arm. "So. Here's the thing. You helped save the universe. I was going to let you sleep. Let you sleep until it was nearly over around here and the suns were nearly burned out. You could have your reward; splendid isolation in the splendid dark for the rest of your natural life."

He grunted. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Her eyes played over the increasingly familiar looking children. He glared at more than one that could be young Ninshubars. One smiled back at him, faintly. "But I think my grandson's been punished enough."


"I know." She nodded. "I know. I have too."

He looked at her sharply. *I killed children too,* he thought abruptly. It made his guts twist. "Well.
May he be forgiven."

The old woman smiled. "May you all. He misses her."

"Who?"

Suddenly he could see Jack, kneeling over the body of a young woman, sobbing. Their clothes were burned. Seeing her hurt. It hurt bad. He tried to take a step towards her but he was back on the bench, just kicking the ground. "Where is she?"

The woman stared into the middle distance. "Not far. You could go to her and take her away from all this, again. Take her back to the living world. Take her back to my grandson." She smiled at him, and there was an edge to it. "If you were awake."

"I'll wake up," he said, smugly.

She snorted. "Is that what you think?"

"I always do."

"Once upon a time," She stretched. For a disorienting moment, she seemed to have many arms and many heads and a necklace of skulls. Then she was just an old woman, sitting on a bench. "Do you know how long you've been asleep?"

He started to tell her a few hours, but suddenly he wasn't at all sure. He shrugged.

"It's been a while," she said, distantly. They watched the children play.

After a long time, he finally ground out. "How long?"

She smiled. Her eyes twinkled and her mouth opened and suddenly he was falling into it, falling into darkness, falling and failing and alone and he took a deep breath and tried to grab on to something, anything, and it had been an eternity since he'd been on solid ground and someone was hurting Jack and he tried to shout and there was no sound and -

And he was back on the bench. "How the fuck did you do that?"

She shrugged. "It's just time. If I let you wake up, what will you give me?"

He grunted. "What do you want?"

She watched him thoughtfully. Called to one of the children. "Kore?"

The little Jack-girl with the dog ran up. "Yes, grandma?"

"Would you get me my basket?"

The little girl ran away, the dog at her heels. She picked up a picnic basket that was clearly too heavy for her. Staggered back. Riddick met her in the middle, took the basket from her. The dog growled. He glared at it. "Some friend you are," he muttered.

The little girl laughed. "He's an old softy."

The surreal image of the dog ripping the throat of a deer almost made him fall. The dog made eye contact. Licked its lips slowly. The girl ran, looking over her shoulder. The dog tore after her. It clutched at his heart.
"Don't just stand there, bring it here," the woman ordered. His feet obeyed before his head knew what was going on. He set the basket before her and stood, hands clenching into fists.

The old woman pulled out two stone bottles. Handed him one. He had to consciously unclench his fist to take it. "You became death, the destroyer of worlds."

"Seemed the thing to do."

"No. Killing Zhylaw was the thing to do. Saving the girl was the thing to do. Becoming Zhylaw – that was the wrong thing to do."

He grunted noncommittally. "Guess I didn't get the memo."

The woman took a long drink. He hesitated, followed suit. The fluid was honey sweet and intoxicating.

"I am not what I was in olden days," the woman murmured. He gave her a sharp look, and for a disorienting moment, she was a stunning young woman running out of a dark tunnel into a sunlit landscape, flowers blooming at her feet. "My death toll would put yours shame, once upon a time." The vision shifted and a river of blood roared around them. "But I am not without influence. If I let you wake up, will you play nice?"

He grunted. "Do I get the girl?"

She sighed. "That's not up to me. Maybe you need to sleep a little longer."

Riddick opened his eyes. Well, that was wacky. Pulled himself out of his little nest of furs, wrapped one around himself, stumbled to the mouth of his cave. Pissed for a very long time. By the time he finished, he was exhausted again. Drank down a bottle of water he must have put beside himself at some point, and went back to his nest. Back to sleep.
Chapter 34: Going to the Game.

As seasons spun lazily along, Jack made her slow way to the Western mountains. People still came to her. After her small house, garden, and orchard were finished, she rarely asked them to do anything for her any more. Hardly ever invited any in.

She was sitting in the orchard, back against a tree. She was spending more and more time there. A throat cleared awkwardly. She opened her eyes. 

*Vaako.* She stood, unsteadily. "*Vaako?*

He smiled at her and sketched a bow. "*My lady."

"Oh my god, what are you doing here?"

"The traditional way. I died."

"How – how long as it been?" She came very close.

"In the real world? Forty four years."

"You look good."

"You do too. Has it been . . . something else . . . for you?"

"I think so. Maybe nine."

"Hm." There was an awkward silence. Finally, she put her hand on his arm. "I never thought I'd see you again."

His lips quirked. "I didn't expect to end up here. Not after . . . what happened."

"Sit a while?"

"Yes." He sat with a sigh. Gave her a sidelong look. "You're a hard lady to reach."

"Sorry about that. I've been kinda antisocial lately."

He nodded. "I heard . . . some of what happened. With Selena."

"Thanks."
They sat in companionable silence. She offered him an apple. He took a bite. "So," she said, finally, "what happened after I died?"

"You don't know?"

"No. You're the first person who died after me I've really talked to. How's . . . Riddick?"

He rubbed his face. "I don't know. He's not here?"

Is he? The idea he might be squeezed her heart. "I haven't seen him."

Vaako stared into the distance. "Interesting. After you died, he got . . . unhinged. Ordered me out. When I checked back later Zyhlaw . . . what was left . . . was not recognizable. And he killed all the Quasi-Dead. All of them. Even the ones a long way away. Somehow. For some reason."

"They made Zyhlaw a body," she said, softly. "Zyhlaw and Irgun. They plotted to bring him back."

Vaako sighed. "And they did things to you."

She shrugged, not sure.

Vaako nodded. "So. Let me think. It's been a long time. When Riddick came out of the Hierothesien, he was covered in blood. He took command and my god, I knew we would win. He was a war god." His handsome face twisted slightly, a mixture of wistfulness and regret.

"We smashed the Taurians. And then he went to bed. He'd had your body sent to his chambers in stasis . . ." Vaako blushed. Cleared his throat. "He went to his room. He told me he was going to get irresponsibly drunk and that I was in charge at least until he sobered up."

She laughed half heartedly. "I was beginning to wonder if he had a drinking problem."

Vaako smiled gently. "After some paperwork, I went to bed. I woke up on a small ship a long way from the Basilica." He got a distant look on his face. "Eris was there. He told me that the Basilica and the fleet were about to be destroyed. Said I could side with him and salvage something or I could die and come here. He told me Riddick was dead. I decided – I decided to throw in with him. He had a list of ships he wanted me to order a certain distance away from the Basilica. I did. That's when the Omphalos finished their attack at last."

"What?"

"The Omphalos. The terraformers. The rest of Kore Arkhipov's arsenal got deployed at last. They said you were the one who stole the sunseeder and all the genesis wave generators?"

"Yeah."

"Well, they went off. The Basilica turned into a sun."

"Oh," she said, faintly.

"They named it Kyra."

She snorted. Then she started to laugh. "Oh god. Sunshine. I'm Sunshine. Riddick's sunshine. That's hysterical."

"Sorry?"
"That was Riddick's nickname for me. And Zhylaw's. Guess it's what Kyra means."

He nodded solemnly. "You got a state funeral. Nin cried and cried."

"Oh god." She rubbed her face. "I've missed him." She stared into the middle distance. "State funeral?"

Vaako nodded, watching her closely. "They made you heroes. You and Riddick both."

She stopped laughing. "Mercy me. Heroes. Why?"

"They needed heroes."

"What?"

He stared out into the sky. "Look, Nin's bombs destroyed almost all the fleet. A lot of the Taurians too, to tell the truth. There were maybe a million of us Necromongers left, maybe a quarter that many Taurian soldiers. They had allies, we didn't. But we had better ships. Eris came up with a deal. We muscled through a peace treaty. He wanted to rebuild Furya. Ninshubar just wanted – well, he wanted you, but he settled for getting the Omphalos started again. We'd be the muscle until they could get the two things established. Most of the survivors took the deal. Since Riddick named me his heir, I became the Lord Marshal."

"Go back a step. Nin made it? I thought he was . . . dead."

Vaako's face softened. "Turns out Nin got captured by the Taurians. It took him a while to persuade the Taurians that he was on their side."

"Oh," she said, softly. "How – how is he?"

Vaako's eyes were earnest. "He grieved for you for years. As I grieved for my wife. We became close. But he saw these worlds as his redemption, and your monument. To you and to his grandmother. Making them flourish brought him joy. Also - " he stopped abruptly, flushing.

"What?"

He sighed. Gave her a sidelong look. "Eris had your body. It got . . . used."

"What?"

"Eris wanted to save Riddick. Or at least . . . save genetic material from Riddick. To bring the Furyans back. Nin wanted you . . . but he had to settle for your ovaries."

"Huh?"

"You're the mother of a mighty nation. You have many children. So does Riddick."

There was a hint of more in the air, but she couldn't bear to ask. "Oh." She rubbed her eyes again. "Oh. Children. I have children. Wait. Weren't you a true believer?"

He gave her a strange smile. "I was. But . . . you and Riddick shook my faith. It was . . . fairly easy for me to turn. Because of you. And because of you, I have a daughter."

It took her a moment. "We have a daughter?"

"Yes."
"Oh." She stared at him. "What's her name?"

His lips twitched. "Susan."

"That's pretty." I can't deal with this. "You never . . . you never saw Riddick again?"

"No. Eris said he wouldn't leave your body. He told Nin he killed himself, grieving for you."

"God damn," she whispered. "Didn't think he cared."

Vaako sighed. "He cared. He just never should have been the Lord Marshal."

She snorted. "No. But that's my fault." The old bitterness hit her hard. Then something else hit her.
"Told Nin? Did he tell you something different?"

Vaako's lips twitched. "Yes. Eris . . . Eris is a complicated man. He told me that Riddick came here. But I couldn't find him."

"Me either," she said, softly.

They sat for a long time. Finally, Vaako continued, "for what it's worth – Riddick loved you. He loved you with all his heart. What he did to you-" he stopped, swallowed. "It devastated him. I suspect – I know it must have devastated him that he never made it right with you."

She leaned back into the tree. Her face hurt. She heard herself say, "well, guess if he hadn't been the Lord Marshal, you Necromongers would still be rampaging through the universe. Because he loved me, you – they - all lost."

"Yes," Vaako said, softly. "If he hadn't loved you, he never would have come to the Basilica and you and Nin never could have done what you did. You saved the universe."

"Huh." To her surprise, she was grinning. "Huh. That's . . . neat."

Vaako glared at her in mock outrage. "Neat?"

"That's great?"

"That's better." He smiled. "You did good."

"We have a kid."

"Yes."

"Do . . . Riddick and I?"

"Yes." He hesitated. "Many."

"Wow." She rubbed her face. "And . . . Nin and I?"

"Many more."

"Wow."

"I have to tell you something."

"Yeah?"
"It's good to see you. But the real reason I'm here . . ." He stopped, looked at the sky. "I would have come anyway. But I want no part of the Necromongers. Not any more. I am told that you are the only one who can . . . release me."

"Oh." She closed her eyes. "I think any Lord Marshal could."

"But only you would."

There was another long silence.

"I will. But – does it have to be right now? I've been-" She stopped. "It's really good to see someone from the olden days."

"Oh no. It doesn't have to be right now. I just did not want to be here under false pretenses."

"Thank you." She smiled at him. "So you were the last Lord Marshal."

He shrugged, modestly. "In a way. I didn't get the magic tricks."

"I got a couple." She studied him, thoughtfully. "Let me see if I can teach you a few of them."

There was a game in the stadium. Riddick was sitting in the stands, scanning for Jack. There were a disturbing number of people who looked like her. He kept thinking he saw her, or Vaako, or Ninshubar, and it was beginning to seriously piss him off that they weren't really there.

"Popcorn?" someone asked. He looked over sharply. An old woman he'd seen in dreams was sitting there.

"Who are you anyway?"

"Interesting question. Why don't you think of me as . . . Kore."

He grunted. "Ninshubar's famous grammy?"

"Yes. Kore Arkhipov. That's a good start. Popcorn?"

"Sure." The kernels were buttery. He'd forgotten how good food tasted.

"You seen Jack anywhere?" he asked, grudgingly.

"Everywhere," she said, easily. "She's why we're here, you know."

"Is she here?"

"Not yet. She needs a ride. My grandson's dying. And he's getting really whiny about seeing her again."

_Dying? _"A ride?"

"Back to the real world." The woman ate another handful of popcorn, thoughtfully. "You're the only one I can think to ask. But are you going to be a good boy?"

"If I'm not, are you going to put me to sleep?"

She snorted. "So you remember that conversation?"
"I do. And I have the feelin' you weren't shittin' me about the 'you wake up after everyone else dies' thing."

"I wasn't."

He rubbed his eyes. "So. I gotta be a good boy?"

"I'll be frank. Once you wake up, I can't make you."

"Why are you telling me that?"

"You'll figure it out soon enough," she said, mildly. "Might as well be up front."

"Huh." He ate another handful of popcorn. "I didn't mean to fuck up last time."

"Good."

"But I'm not a good person."

"I'll tell you a secret. Most solar heroes aren't."

"Huh." He took another bite. "I'll . . . try."

"Okay." She kissed him on the cheek. The crowd roared. Riddick opened his eyes. He was nestled in a nest of furs. They did not smell good. He stood, unsteadily. His hair was very long. He gathered it in two fists and pulled, shocked at the feeling.

He stared at his clothes spread out on the rocks. Necromonger clothes. He went back to the pack, pulled out the other outfit. Still Necromonger, but not as obnoxiously so. He dove into the pool first, rinsing off what felt like years of dirt. There was nothing clean to dry himself with except the clothes he wanted to put on or the dresses he brought for Jack. He worked out the kinks naked, until he was dry enough. Used the shiv to shave roughly.

Something was caught between his teeth. He went at it with fingernails that were far too long. Ended up trimming them with the shiv. Finally got it out. It was a popcorn husk. He stared at it, disquieted. Last time he really had popcorn was with Vaako, watching Ninshubar kill men in a bar . . .

Really .

Shoved everything he wanted to keep into the pack, put it on. Took a long drink of water from the pool. Addressed the Underverse itself. Jack. Take me – take me near Jack. I wanna see her first.

The world shifted around him, sluggishly. He found himself at the edge of an orchard, a lazy stream meandering through. He was standing under an apple tree. Suddenly ravenous, he picked an apple, ate it. Then another. Then another.

I'm stalling. Looked around. Couldn't see her. Took a deep breath, and her scent came, faintly, from the direction the shadows were pointing. He moved quietly, trying to get his bearings.

Found her sitting cross legged under an enormous fig tree. His heart lurched. He forced himself to take the time to examine her. Her eyes were closed and her back was against the trunk. She was breathing deeply and steadily. She seemed much older than she should be. Her hair cascaded down her shoulders. There was a bowl near her knee and a blanket folded under her butt. No visible weapons.
He cleared his throat. "Hey."

Her eyes opened slowly, fixed on him. A burst of joy that came close to breaking his heart, followed by a burst of fear that came dangerously closer. She did not move through either of them. "So. The Destroyer of Worlds comes to call at last."
Chapter Notes

A/n – given the falling off audience response, I was going to put this on hiatus for a while to see if I was just too close to it to see its flaws, but the humor of posting this chapter on Easter got me . . .

Chapter 35: Mr. Scary Kidnapper Pants

The Destroyer of Worlds? Is that who I am? "Goin' by Riddick these days."

"Riddick." She smiled slightly. "I wondered if I'd ever see you again."

Ever? "I know you told me to stay away." Recklessly, he continued. "But I really miss you."

"I've missed you too," she said, softly. She reached forward and touched the ground like she was making sure that it was still there. "So," she said, a little inanely, "how are you?"

He shrugged. "Well rested." He rubbed his face. "How've you been?"

"Dead." She was watching him carefully.

"You look good for a dead girl." She snorted. "How's the afterlife treatin' you?"

She gazed at him for a long time. "It seems to like me."

"Oh?" He rumbled. "How so?"

Her surreal calm slipped slightly. "On the – on the one hand, I'm the better killer now," she said. "No one dies here. Except by my hand. They call me the Death Goddess of the Underverse. The Dark Lady."

"I'm sorry," he said, and he meant it. There was an awkward silence. He finally broke it. "How'dya get that job?"

"I think you did it. Somehow. Zhylaw said-" something shadowed her face. "Zhylaw said I was something new. Because I gave one Lord Marshal a death blow and drank the blood of another. I'm a type of Lord Marshal. I don't know if I can bind people to this place, but I do know I can break the connection. And then they're gone."

"Good trick."

"Yeah. Good trick."

"On the other . . . hand?"

"Well, no one's torturing me," she said, her voice light.
He rubbed his face. "Glad to hear it."

She smiled faintly. "It's good to see you, but why are you here, Riddick? And why now?"

He shrugged. "Missed you."

"You said that."

"I thought maybe it was a trick. That you killed yourself so you weren't a hostage. Told me not to come for you for Zhylaw's sake. Been wanting to ask."

"No trick," she said softly. "I meant it. I won't.-" her voice cracked. She took a deep breath and the calmness returned. "I won't help destroy that world so that some people can live forever in this one."

"I had a dream," he said, low. "I had a dream that you were kneeling over some chick, burned, sobbing. Then you touched her and she disappeared."

She started slightly, her surreal calm slipping again. "Yeah. That's pretty much what happened." She took another deep breath. "I do understand you better now. I had a friend. A girl. She came to me asking for death. I asked her to stay with me for a month just so I could be sure that's what she really wanted. We... fell in love, I guess. At least, I fell pretty hard for her." He felt a stab of jealousy. Tried hard to keep it from his face. Her eyes were distant enough he didn't think she saw. "We were together for years. Built a nice little house. Then one day Lord Marshal Baylock shows up and threatens to torture her forever and make me watch if I don't do what he wanted. I killed them all. Even her. That was years ago." She finally looked at him. "That was your nightmare, wasn't it? Why you left me on New Mecca? Why you were so freaked about keeping me locked up?"

He kept his voice soft. "Yeah."

She nodded. "I get it now." There was something new in her eyes. A softness that made him want to kill something.

He shoved it down and moved a little closer to her. Pitched his voice low, strangely afraid to tell her the truth. But he did. Most of it. "I had another dream. I dreamed Ninshubar's sainted grandmother told me I should wake up. Said you were alone, and you'd always be alone if I didn't take you back, and I'd sleep until the end of the world, or whatever."

Their eyes met. "Huh," she said. Hers were softening towards tears. He moved a little closer. "Jesus." She looked away from him. "This place is weird. I'm never sure what's a dream here."

He snorted. "I hear that." He ran his hand over his head, frustrated.

"You know, when you took me to the Quasi-Deads, Zhylaw was there. I thought it was just a hallucination. It wasn't. They were showing me this place. He stroked my hair and called me his 'Iron Queen.' I tried to hit him and I got you."

He grunted. She nodded. "I didn't get it. Just thought it was the Quasies fucking with me. Then I figured out that Zhylaw really was talking to me. Selena told me that "Iron Queen" was one of the things they used to call Persephone. The Queen of the Dead. They also called her Kore. Same as Nin's grandma."

*Nin's grandma. Kore Arkhipov. Terraforming queen of the dead lady in the park with the kids... Uh oh. "Huh?"

"Guess she was a goddess, and her uncle kidnapped her, raped her, and made her stay with him.
Made her the Queen of the Dead. His Iron Queen. Zhylaw was offering me that. He did offer me that. I turned him down, and I died. Because I didn't want to be that. And then I come here and I have this crazy superpower. I can kill dead people." She swallowed. "You and Zhylaw. I'm Persephone to your Hades. The Death Goddess of the Underverse."

He shook his head, insides cramping slightly. "I never kidnapped you."

"No. You didn't. But you would have."
He shrugged, irritably. "Maybe. Dunno."

"Oh, fuck you, Riddick. You would so do that."
He grinned. "Once upon a time. Maybe. Not now. I know you wouldn't like it."

She rubbed her face. "She told me another story. About this god Set who hated the sun so much he kept trying to put it out, to keep it from shining. He hated his brother so much he killed him. He hated – and wanted – his sister so much he caught up with her when she was searching for her husband's body. Their brother. Gods are wacky. He found her in the swamp and he raped her." Riddick closed his eyes. "But one night, when a bigger monster went after the sun, he saved it. Saved the day. This brother murdering, sister raping monster saved the day. That's you too, you know."

He sighed. "Yeah. That's a part of me."

"You saved me. I loved you with all my heart. You were my big brother. You were the only man I ever wanted. Then you locked me up and you raped me. Then when things weren't working out, you locked me in the dark with no food."

"I fucked up. I was just trying to keep you - safe."

She sighed. "If you'd stopped a word earlier, I would have believed you."

"Jesus, kid. You're the only person I've ever loved. You're the only person who ever loved me. Because of you I ended up on top of this wolf pack and I didn't know what I was doing. I did my best. It went to my head. I fucked up. But kid, you did too."

"How?"

"You kept letting me get away with it. If you'd gotten in my face instead of being all sideways, I would have thought you were serious."

"Jesus, Riddick, you brought me back as weak as kitten. Do you really think I could make you take me seriously?"
He exhaled noisily. "I didn't mean too. And I never tried to hurt you. Except that one time after you fucked – after I got jealous. If you'd gotten in my face, I would have backed off."

There was a long awkward silence. Finally, she broke it. "Eris said – Did you – did you really kill yourself?"

"No."

"Where have you been?"

"Some cave."
"You've been sitting in a cave for all these years?"

"No – maybe. Been sleeping. Didn't seem that long."

She blinked. "When – when did you get here?"

He shrugged. "The day you offed yourself. I got irresponsibly drunk. Eris got in my face and . . ." he stopped talking. She was laughing. "What?" he said, irritably.

"You've been here asleep since the day I died?"

"Guess so."

"So. Wow. You, uh, talk to anyone since you got here?"

"Just Nin's granny. In a dream. Or whatever."

"Huh." She rubbed her face again. "Did she tell you what happened to the Necromongers?"

"No . . ."

"Well, if Vaako wasn't shittin' me, Nin took 'em down. He wasn't dead, just . . . delayed."

Riddick stared at her. "Vaako?"

"He came a few years ago. Filled me in."

"Nin blew up the fleet?"

"That's what he said."

Riddick stared at her. Then he started laughing. He slapped the ground. "Kid, I'm damned impressed."

"I thought you'd be . . . angry."

"Just 'cause you blew up my stuff? Just 'cause I go back to being hunted by mercs? Why would I be angry about that?" She swallowed. He grinned at her. "Kid, don't you get it? You won. You did what I told you, and you beat me."

"What?"

"Don't you remember? All those times we sparred? I kept telling you. Don't meet strength with strength if you don't got more of it. You found a way to beat me goin' sideways. I am fucking impressed."

She gave him a quick, unwilling smile. "You stopped saying that after you left me on New Mecca."

He grinned at her again. "Come back with me. Let's see this world you made."

She scrutinized him again. "How? I'm dead in that world. If Vaako's right, the Quasies are too. How do I come back?"

He smiled. Leaned back, as unthreatening as he could be. "Eris showed me how to make bodies."

"Out of what?"
"We used a purifier, but I think I could use just about anything."

"Not – not a person."

He shrugged, trying hard not to grin with the sudden rush of hope. "I can live with that."

She got a strange look on her face. "If I come back with you, then what?"

"You give me a chance to do it right."

A look of longing passed over her face. She closed her eyes. "No. Riddick, we can't go back. We broke the connection with the Underverse. We go back, the connection's full on back. Through both of us. We'll tie the world back here. The Necros -" Her voice caught. "They could start over again. Using us."

He nodded. "Hm. Interesting. That old lady told me to take you back or she was going to let me sleep until everything thing else was dead. I think I gotta do it, kid."

Jack stared at him blankly. "So you're a kidnapper after all."

He sighed. "That's up to you, Sunshine." He went quiet. "That old lady told me that Nin misses you. And I think she showed me your kids. Our- kids. I think a lot of time's gone there. And Nin's dying, and getting really whiny about seeing you again."

"Oh." She closed her eyes. "You're one manipulative bastard."

"Yeah." There was a long silence.

She seemed be thinking. "Okay. You can take me back. And I'll give you a chance. But only if – only if you promise not to restart the Necros. And no killing people just because it makes your day easier, no threatening me, no – no forcing me to do things, got it?"

He thought about it. Smiled, low and dangerous. "Okay. No killing unless they threaten you or me. No threatening you, no forcing you. I'll be a good boy. As long as you give me a chance. You got it."

She closed her eyes. He watched her closely. Finally, she opened her eyes, stared into his, nodded.

He pulled a shiv from his pants and pricked his thumb. Pressed it to her lips. Reluctantly, she opened her mouth, licked off the blood. He resisted the temptation to thrust his fingers in. Shouldered the pack. Took her hand, reached in and went back to the real world.

It took a very long time.

Riddick hit the ground hard and rolled like the Underverse and the real world were moving at different speeds. He jerked to his feet, the knife in his hands. There was no one there.

Wherever they were, it sure as hell wasn't the Basilica. He was on a planet. There were stars in the sky and something that looked suspiciously like dawn on the horizon. The air was clean and cold and there was the distant sound of bird song.


There was a long silence. Finally, grudgingly, "Yeah. I'm here, Mr. Scary Kidnapper Pants. And it's
He grinned. Can you see where we are?

There was a moment of silence. Again, her voice was grudging. "Yeah. It's pretty."

Just like you, he thought back. There was a sound. Riddick moved slowly back into the trees. Someone was coming through almost silently. He pulled a shiv.

It was a girl. Thirteen, maybe fourteen, her skin a little darker than his own. She carried a bow, an arrow notched. She was hunting something. Me?

Being disembodied seemed to be making Jack irritable. "I can see her. Run, kid," Jack snapped. "Don't make the mistake I did." He grinned, slipped the shiv back into his clothes, stepped out to where the girl could see him. "Hey."

She blinked at him without fear, lowered the bow. "Hey. Do I know you?"

He considered the question somberly. She did look strangely familiar . . . "I don't think so. I'm Richard."

She nodded. "I'm Kyra Kore Arkhipov." She seemed supremely proud of that fact.

"Oh shit." Jack's voice whispered in his head. He smiled at the girl. "That's a pretty name." He paused. "Family name?"

"Oh yeah. Kore Arkhipov was my grandfather's grandmother." She sounded proud. "And Kyra – well, you gotta know about Kyra."


She smiled happily. "Oh yeah. You know my granddad?"

"I used to. He around?"

"Oh sure. At the temple. You here to see him?"

"Just passin' through. But I'd like to talk to him. Can you take me there?"

She shrugged. "Sure." She hesitated. "He's really old."

Riddick smiled at her. "Means he did something right." He held out a hand. She took it fearlessly. He ignored the voice railing in his head.

The girl walked him to a marble building on a hill. Riddick let her lead him through the outer doors and interior columns to a small door. She knocked. "Grandpa!"

After a moment, the door opened. Nin was a very old man. He blanched when he saw Riddick. Riddick grinned at him.

Nin forced himself to relax, looked at his granddaughter. "Thank you - Kyra. Would you - would you find your mother? Ask her and her brother to come see me? Tell him an old . . . Furyan friend of mine from the fleet is here?"
"Sure." She smiled at Riddick and almost skipped out of the room.

Nin waited until she was gone. "You're a dead man," he whispered, gripping the door frame. "You died almost sixty years ago."

"Not as such," Riddick opined laconically. He rubbed his head. Itched. Needed to get it shaved better. "Can I come in?"

The old man stumbled back into a large office. Riddick walked in, enjoying this more than he should. Nin moved to the other side of a messy desk. Stared down. "How are you here? Where have you been?"

"Around," Riddick said. "Nice world you've built."

Nin moved some papers around and came up with a gun. "You don't belong in it."
Chapter 36: Grand Central Station in the Spring

Riddick grinned. One move and he was on that desk, twisting the gun out of Nin's hand. Held it to the man's grey head. "Not very hospitable, are you?"

"Not to monsters."

Jack pleaded in his head, suddenly sounding very young. "Don't kill him, please, please, please."

Riddick looked down on the old man's bowed head, thoughtfully. "Hm."

"Please," her voice cracked.

Nin shifted, stared up unafraid. "Eris brought me Kyra's dead body. Mutilated. How could you do that to her? How could-" his voice choked. "She loved you."

"You mutilated my body?"

Riddick sighed, feeling slightly deflated. "I didn't kill her. She killed herself. But yeah. I . . . went a little nuts. Nice gun, by the way."

"Why would she kill herself?"

"You, partially."

"What?"

"I told her you were dead. I thought you were. It broke her heart."

Jack sobbed in his head. Nin closed his eyes. "I was captured by the Taurians. Kyra had arranged for amnesty for us. And for you." He spat the last two words out like weapons.

_Sweet you still cared, kid._ Suddenly he was very suspicious. "Eris brought you her body? Why?"

Nin blinked back tears. "Genetic material."

"Why'd he want her genes?"

"He didn't want hers." The man's old eyes were savage with accusation. "I did. _He_ wanted what _you_ left behind."

"Oh god. You raped my corpse, didn't you?"

_You weren't using it, _he shot back petulantly.
"Children, Riddick. Vaako was right. Kore was right. We have children. We have children because you -" She stopped abruptly. "Oh merciful goddess."

"Oh," Riddick said. "Huh."

Ninshubar's face twisted. He was going to start to cry.

"I'll stay with you. As long as you're a good guy. I'll stay with you. Just don't – don't kill him. And don't make him hurt like this. Tell him it's okay."

Done, he shot back. Smiled at Nin, slipped the gun into a pocket. Got off the desk. "Jack's here," Riddick tapped his head. "In here. Begging for your life. She says it's not your fault she died. She killed herself to stop Zhylaw. Died a hero and all that shit. I can bring her back. I just need something."

Ninshubar's eyes widened, all anger and accusation drained away. "Anything," he whispered.

Riddick smiled. "I need a body. Something to build with."

"She can have mine."

Tempting. Jack made a strangled noise. He sighed. "Old man, she'd like to see you. You're gonna be her hero. The body doesn't have to be alive. It doesn't even have to be human. Just about the right size."

"There's deer in the woods. I'll send someone."

"No. I can handle it. Plus," and he eyed the other man shrewdly, "I'm a little worried you're gonna try and off me as soon as I get her out of my head."

Nin nodded. "I might." He smiled. "But I'll talk to her about it first."

"Fair enough."

"Watch out for wolves. We brought them back too."

Riddick snorted. "Good for you. And not a problem."

oOo

It had been a long time since he'd hunted. The gun in his pocket was terribly tempting. But something about that felt wrong. And if there really were kids in the woods, he didn't want to start out by accidentally nicking one. Weird they'd let kids out where there were wolves.

Jack had gone quiet in his head. He probed her occasionally to short answers. They were being tracked. He wasn't sure what to do about that. They weren't getting too close.

He found a deer about the right size. He followed it for a long time. Jack was restless.

You don't like this, he thought at her.

"No," she answered, grudgingly. "I'm tired of things dying for me. I think I'm gonna become a vegetarian."

He leapt. Snapped her neck so fast he didn't think she had a chance to fear. Jack sobbed once.
He buried his hands in its short fur, thinking hard about her. Thinking hard about what she looked like, on Crematoria, in the Basilica, in the orchard. Thinking about her hair flowing down her back. Thinking about the muscles on her arms in Crematoria, the feel of her under him in the Basilica; her strange calm in the Underverse. Thinking of her reborn, naked and bloody at his feet. Thinking of her clean. Thinking about the old lady in his dream . . .

Something happened. Jack was laying under his hands, smooth and soft and muscled and naked. She blinked up at him. "It didn't hurt," she said wonderingly.

"I'm gettin' better at this," Hesitantly, he rubbed her cheek with the back of his hand, not sure how she was going to respond. To his delight, she relaxed into it. "Hold on. Got something for you." He knew he was grinning foolishly. Grabbed the pack, pulled out the rope Selena hung herself with.

Her eyes widened and her skin prickled into goosebumps. A smell of fear he tried to shove aside. "That for me?"

He snorted. "If you want it." Finally found a dress and those ridiculous slippers. "Here."

She laughed, stood unsteadily. "Wow. Things I never thought I'd see again." She dropped it over her head, arranged it. She turned the shoes over in her hands, eyes moist. Is she gonna cry? She slipped them on almost defiantly.

"Been meanin' to give you this for a long time." Almost shyly he handed over the sheathed shiv.

Her eyes widened, this time without fear. She pulled the blade out. "Wow. Thank you." She slipped it into a pocket. "Thank you." Their eyes met. She swallowed, stood. "Wow. I feel . . . strong."

"Good." She took a step away from him. Then another. Then she spun back and hugged him impulsively. He dropped the pack and wrapped her in his arms.

"I think this might work," she whispered. "Brand new day."

"Brand new day," he whispered. Then all the hair on the back of his head stood up. Damn. Let myself get distracted. Stupid, Riddick.

They were surrounded by men and women with guns, materializing out of the trees. Nin was there, in a float chair. Of course he's here, Riddick thought. He wants to save the girl at last.

Nin's grandma floated through his head. "You were supposed to save the girl, she scolded. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a gun barrel rise, a finger twitch -

Without thinking, Riddick grabbed Jack, pulling her against him hard and twisting so that he took most of the shock blast. He fell to his knees, still clutching her. The pain made him grunt. She made a strangled sound, went limp in his arms. New nerves, he realized, dazed. Hit her hard. Poor kid. He pulled them both to their feet. The guns tracked them. I have a gun too. He pulled it from his pocket, pointed it straight at Ninshubar.

"NO," Jack yelled, still gasping in pain. He gripped her tighter, pulling her feet from the ground. She took a deep breath, seemed to make a decision. "Ninshubar Osiris Arkhipov," her voice rang out "Goddamn it, Nin, coming back didn't hurt this time and then you have someone come and shoot me?"

Nin looked stricken, his lined face looking even older. "Jack. That wasn't supposed to happen. No one was supposed to fire without a clear shot." He tried to glare around, but he couldn't keep his eyes off of her. Riddick took a quick survey. Seven people, six of them visibly armed and stifling fear.
Nin's face hardened. "Let her go, Riddick."

Jack took a deep shuddering breath, but her voice was clear and commanding. Not the little girl any more. *She grew up,* he thought, suddenly, feeling strange. "Nin, please. Riddick. Everyone. Lower your weapons. Please."

There was a pause. Several people around the circle's eyes went wide when they got a good look at her and went wider at his name. *They've never pointed a gun at anyone,* Riddick realized. *Not for real. No wonder someone's finger slipped. And they know who we are. Huh.* Jack took a deep shuddering breath. "If you kill him, I will not be happy."

Ninshubar shook his head. "This is my world. He doesn't belong here." Riddick blinked, and his green was so dark it was almost brown.

The air itself seemed to change. *Your world, Little Beans?* Jack whispered. Her voice was warm and rich and weirdly calm. *Like that old lady. Uh oh.*

"Alright," Nin said at last. The soldiers – or what every they were - complied. Jack's heart was beating hard against him. It felt good. He shifted his grip slightly, let her feet reach the ground. She relaxed slightly. He let the gun lower a few degrees.

It was almost her voice again. "Thank you. Nin, Riddick and I have a deal. Don't make a liar of me."

Nin shook his head. "I promised him nothing. He killed billions of people." More eyes widened. *They didn't know that. They know who I am but not what I did. What are they teaching these kids?*

It hit him suddenly. *That I'm a hero. That I took down the Necromongers.*

Jack took another deep shuddering breath, all herself again. "It's not that simple. You know that. And we killed millions when we set off the sunseeder. We turned something meant to give life into weapon. If you condemn him, you condemn us."

"I'm not going to chop logic with you, Kyra." Nin hesitated. "I still have nightmares about those things he did to you." His voice quivered slightly, making him sound even older. "The things he made me watch. The greatest shame of my life is that I didn't stop him."

Jack swallowed. "If he thinks you're going to pull those triggers, he'll take us both back to the Underverse." *That's a really good idea, Sunshine.* "Time travels differently there. It's been a day for him, it's been years for me. Sixty here?"

Nin nodded grudgingly. "Almost."

"When we come back," her voice cracked "all these children you made from us – from me - might be dead and gone. I want to see them."

If possible, the men and women around them went even more alert. *How many of them are hers? Are mine? That girl in the woods – oh god, Nin and I could be her grandfathers.* He looked at the faces around them, seeing shadows of himself, of her. Some looked back with the same recognition. He grinned. Several responded. He shifted his grip on Jack again, not letting her go, but giving her a little more play.

Nin sighed. *"Kyra - Jack . . . He's a monster."*
"I know. Sometimes." She pressed back into him. "But he's my monster. And he promises to be good if I gave him a chance. I want to give him the chance. And who ever kills him becomes him. Let him carry this. Let him die in bed. Let it die with him."

"With you?"

"And with me," Riddick could feel her shiver. "If he's good."

Nin closed his eyes. Into the silence a bird sang. Another answered.

"I'll make you a deal," Riddick said, surprising himself. Nin looked at him without speaking. "I'll be a good guy. You can watch. I step out of line after today, you get to do to me whatever you'd do to anyone else. I'll even take it. You try to separate us for any other reason, you'll regret it. Past stays past." Jack relaxed back into him even more.

Nin looked stricken. Finally he nodded. "I've got a big house. You come home with me."

"For now," Riddick rumbled softly.

Jack nodded. "I'd like that."

Riddick's head snapped up. There was a smell that made some long forgotten place in him go on high alert. He tightened his grip on Jack just as about twenty men and women who clearly had used their weapons before materialized through the trees. 

*Good grief, did I resurrect her at Grand Central Station?*
Chapter 37: Kore and Her Sisters

"Ninshubar," one of the newcomers called. Riddick found him eerily familiar. The man walked fearlessly into the circle. "Furya sends its compliments." He spun, turning his back on the old man. Saluted Riddick with a wicked looking knife. "Hail, progenitor."

Riddick nodded. "Hey."

"I am your grandson, Nikiya." He saluted Jack with the sword and a smile. "And yours, mum. Your chariot awaits."

"Where you thinkin' of goin'?"

"Away from Kore." Nikiya looked around the circle, sardonically. "The Chancellor has been concerned that should you return from the Underverse, the Omphalos would not welcome you with open arms."

"Huh? Chancellor?" Riddick said, just as Ninshubar made an exasperated sound.


"No."

"Then we have a problem."

Jack swallowed, looked around the circle. "Nin, I have children here?"

"Yes."

"And on – New Furya?"

"Yes." His voice was heavy. "For some reason, you have Furyan mitochondria, even though you're not Furyan. The Furyans have been using your eggs." His voice was dark.

She stared at him, clearly not understanding. "Okay. Look. Riddick," she strained up to look at him. "Go to Eris. I'll stay here. For now. I'll catch up with you later."

Riddick stood, frozen. "But I'll miss you." His voice was low and rough. "I came back for you."

"We'll talk every day. We can, can't we? These planets are in the same system?" She looked from Nin to Nikiya, guilelessly.

Nikiya nodded. "Yes. There will be a communication lapse. But you can send messages." He grinned, "or we can simply take you both off planet by force, progenitor. Your call, sir."
Riddick chuckled, pleased, until Jack made a small mournful noise. It poisoned the pleasure. Riddick looked at Nin, ruefully. The man glared back. "Here's my problem," Riddick said, to no one in particular. "I'm a little worried that I walk out of here, someone will try to get in the way of me seein' you again. Creatin' problems."

She sounded affronted. "I keep my promises."

"It's not you I'm worried about."

Jack looked at Nin. "He wouldn't keep me prisoner. Would you?"

Nin also looked affronted. "Of course not. You're a hero." He glared at Riddick. "And I don't repeat your mistakes."

Riddick snorted. Let his eyes rest on Ninshubar. God he's old. "Okay," he said abruptly. "Your granny Kore said you were dying anyway. But I want her back."

A murmur shivered through the forest. Jack made a small exasperated noise, twisted up to look at him. "Jesus, Riddick, are you twelve?"

"I just want my second chance," he grumbled. They gazed at each other.

Finally, she touched his face. "You'll get it. But I want to catch up with Nin."

Riddick let her go. Everyone moved very carefully. She couldn't help but notice that the Furyans knew how to make and maintain a defensive perimeter better than the Omphalos.

"Hey, Jack," Riddick called suddenly.

"Yeah?"

"Catch." He tossed her the pack. One of Nin's men yanked it out of the air. "Hey." Riddick took two steps towards them. "That's hers."

This could go very wrong very fast. "Thanks," she put her hand on the man's arm. After a moment, he handed it to her. Riddick nodded, grudgingly. Their eyes locked. She took a step towards him.

I can't do this. Riddick nodded again, seeming to understand. "It's okay. Nin's granny said – said he was whiny and dying. You catch up or comfort him or what the fuck. Then we get on with it."

Jack laughed, a choked sound. Hugged the pack to herself, suddenly feeling very alone. "Yeah. Yeah. See you soon."

He gave her a grin and loped away with his new pack. Someone took her arm. "Mum. This way."

Nin looked down at her from his float chair with something strange in his eyes. She smiled at him, a little uncertainly. He smiled back. She walked beside him silently as the crew led her to a small ship. Someone guided her to a seat, helped strap her in. Nin sat across from her. Two men and a woman crowded around them, the rest split into other ships.

"How are you?" Ninshubar's voice was intense. "I've arranged for a doctor to meet us. But we could stop . . ."

She shrugged. "Oh, fine. It didn't hurt this time. Riddick says he's getting better at it."
Ninshubar smiled, looking pained. The ship lifted, pressing them both back into their seats. After a moment, she continued. "It's good to see you." Then she rolled her eyes. "Christ, that sounds so—inean. I'm a little overwhelmed."

"You just came back from the dead."

She shrugged again. "Riddick did all the heavy lifting. Again." She clutched the backpack closer.

"What's in there?"

"I don't know. Stuff Riddick brought with him."

"From the Underworld?" the woman next to her squeaked.

"Yeah. I guess. Yeah. He had the Necros make me this dress-" She shut her mouth abruptly at the strange looks in everyone's eyes. "I'll just shut up now."

Ninshubar shook his head. "No, Kyra, please, talk. We need to know."

"Need to know what?" Then she got distracted. "Good god, what's that?"

"What?"

"That tower thing off in the distance?"

Nin gave her a strange look. One of the other men cleared his throat. "It's one of the space elevators, mum."

"One of the what?"

Nin's voice was soft. "Space elevators. Orbiting ribbons. They were part of the design matrix. Nearly free interplanetary transportation. Slow, but good for freight."

"Wow."

His lips twitched. "Classic technology. Something my grandmother apparently decided to bring back. We have eight."

"Your grandmother. Kore Arkhipov."

"Yes." He hesitated. "You remembered."

"She's hard to forget." The woman next to her took a sharp breath.

Nin gave the other woman a warning look. "What did Riddick mean?"

"What?"

"About me being . . . whiny and dying." He looked lost.

"Hell if I know." She rubbed her face. "Look. I haven't seen him since—since I died. Then he shows up a couple of hours ago and announces he's had this dream that your grandmother is going to keep him asleep if he doesn't bring me back and—she stopped suddenly, swallowed. "She told him you missed me. The woman in his dream. That's a lot of why I let him take me back. In case it was real. And he promised not to—promised to be good. If I gave him another chance."
Oh shit, he didn't actually promise not to bring the Necros back, did he? She tried to remember. Nin's eyes were sharp on her. The other three were watching her carefully, as if they weren't quite sure if she was insane.

Nin cleared his throat. "I dreamed my grandmother was with you."

Jack leaned back. "I think – I think she might have been. Sometimes. What's that?"

"What's what?"

"That huge moon behind us?"

Nin craned his head around. "Hecate."

"Huh?"

Nin smiled. "Kore has two sisters."

"Your grandmother?"

"The planet. It's part of a system of three, all orbiting each other. You should know. You liberated them."

"You mean those egg things?"

"Yes. Twenty two planets in seven orbits."

"Huh?"

"Each planet has at least one companion. Kore has three; Hecate and Da."

_Do I know them? _"Riddick's going to Furya. It's in a different orbit? Does it have a . . . sister?"

Nin seemed to flush. "It has a companion. Grendal."

Something deep inside her stirred. "The monster."

"Yes."

"Who named that planet, Little Beans?"

"What?"

"Who named the planet for the monster?"

"I don't remember." He was staring at her. "Little Beans?"

"Yeah?"

"My grandmother used to call me that."

She felt herself smile. "I know." Followed by a moment of panic. _Shit, I finally get rid of the projected disassociative personality disorder Riddick gave me and now I'm turning into Kore?_

"I'll just be stopping in from time to time," something whispered. _"Your young man was thinking about me while he was making you. I won't be any trouble."_ She could feel herself grinning at Nin. He stared back at her with something disturbingly like worship. She cleared her throat. "So, uh,
where are we going?"

"I have a house in the country. You'll be safe there." Nin looked at one of the other men in the aircraft, who gave him a brief nod.

"Safe from what?"

There was silence in the aircraft. Finally Ninshubar focused on her. "You rose from the dead. There are people, even here, who might want to find out how."
Chapter 38: Indulgences

Jack found herself cocking her head slightly at Nin. "You're not telling me everything."

"You just got here." Nin's eyes were smoldering slightly. "Kyra. Give me some time. I need – I need to keep you safe. We've never had a goddess rise from the dead before."

She shook her head. "Vaako said you made me a hero."

"Yes."

"Not a goddess."

Nin's lips quirked. "Vaako led the Prytannia. You served a different role there."


It wasn't her laugh. That struck her as funny. The people in the aircar were watching her intently. "Sorry. It's my head. Lots of new stuff."

They remained conspicuously quiet. Jack watched the impossibly beautiful land pass underneath them. They were high enough she could see the land curving underneath her. They seemed to be heading towards the pole. There were cities in the distance, but they never got very close.

After a time, she started asking inane questions. They fell over themselves to answer her.

oOo

Riddick watched Kore drop beneath him. The Furyan ship swung around the planets and shot away from the sun. Away from Jack.

"We're out in the cold?" He asked abruptly. "Away from the sun?"

Nikiya shook his head. "Not too much further out than Kore. Next orbit."

Riddick grunted. He'd pocketed a handful of the jewels from the pack and he found he was running them through his fingers. Forced himself to stop. "How long?"

"Six hours at high burst for this shuttle."

"We takin' the high burst?"

"Chancellor's orders."
"Would you have killed Nin's people if I said I wanted Jack?"

"No. We would have stunned them and left a guard. Furyans protect Omphalos. But we also protect our own."

Riddick grunted again. "Would there have been a problem if I'd stayed?"

"The Chancellor thought so." He hesitated, measuring Riddick with his eyes.

"Would you have tried to take me?" Riddick kept his voice neutral.

"No. We would have all stayed as an honor guard." He grinned. "I live on Omphalos anyway. But it's better this way. Give us some time"

"Why do you give a fuck?"

Nikiya nodded. "Good question. You and her – you've become the stuff of legend. Eris tells me that much of it is bunk. But many believe that the girl is the goddess reborn, and you are, at least, a legendary dark warrior who took on the monsters out of love for the girl. Others think you're a death god. If things had gone wrong . . . " he shrugged, eloquently. "Wars have been fought for less. And many brothers and sisters chafe at their roles here. Best things not go wrong."

"Their roles? Guardin' terraformers?"

"Yes." He paused. "Well paid terraformers."

"Gotcha." Riddick stared out the porthole at the triple planets shrunk behind them. "Will Furyans be guardin' Jack?"

"Kyra? I suspect not. I suspect Ninshubar will use Omphalos security. Such as it is."

"Should I worry?"

"No. She's a cult figure under Ninshubar's protection. No Omphalos would lift a hand against her."

*Cult figure? "Would anyone else?"

Nikiya shrugged eloquently. "Eventually, perhaps. We'll have time. She's our mother too. It would be . . . difficult . . . if anything happened to her."

Riddick stared at him. "There'll be people after me."

"A possibility."

"They'll go after her to get to me. *Shit.* We shoulda brought her with us."

Nikiya smiled. "If things had been different, perhaps. But Ninshubar knows this. He will take the appropriate steps. He built a fortress in the mountains that it would take a prodigious amount of force to crack." Nikiya gave him a very direct look. "I have some things I want you to see. Documentaries."

"Huh? Like about donkeys and volcanoes and shit?"

"So to speak."

oOo
Jack had not run out of questions, but she was strangely tired. It had been a long day before Riddick had arrived. What felt like hours later, they started to descend towards a snow capped mountain, down to the forest that flanked its side. The ship skimmed over the tops of the trees, some frosted with snow. "Is it winter here?"

"Spring. But just barely."

There was no evidence of human habitation below her. "How much further?"

"Almost there."

"Seems empty."

"A place of refuge." The ship rounded a hill and there it was. It was almost a castle; huge, nestled right into the mountain. They came in low over an enormous wall. "Good god, is this your house?"

"One of them."

"It's a palace. Good god, I felt bad about your little room on the Basilica. You've got to have closets bigger than that."

Nin's lips twitched. "I do."

The ship landed in front of an ornate double door. One of the men helped her out. The wind cut right through her dress and the thin slippers. "God it's cold."

Nin nodded. "Let's get inside." They hurried in, Jack still gripping the pack. "I've asked the doctors to meet us here."

"Oh goody." She was craning around, trying to see everything. The home was warm with huge windows and wood everywhere she could see. Three swooping staircases and four hallways lead away from an entrance hall big enough to hold a hundred people dancing. She spun around several times, trying to take it all in. "Wow. This is amazing."

Someone new was talking to Ninshubar low and urgent. Ninshubar was listening, but his eyes were locked on her. Drinking her in. She smiled at him, crossed the room to his side. "Thank you."

He shook his head. "Oh no, mum. You did this. Not me."

She laughed. "I stole some balls. Not the same as this."

"You saved the universe from darkness."

She laughed. Again, it wasn't her laugh. "I played a part." She shouldered the pack. Nin's eyes followed it, slightly shadowed. "This bothers you."

"Riddick gave it to you."

"Riddick played a part too, Little Beans."

"Set," someone whispered. Her head snapped around to him. "Yes," she said pleasantly. Then she shook herself. "Sorry. Without him, the Necros would still be Necros. Playing a very different part."

"Whatever you say, mum." Nin's voice was soft.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Jesus. I'm like an hour old. I'm no one's mum."
"Yes you are," he said, his voice back to worship. There was an awkward silence. He cleared it. "I have to see to the security arrangements. Unless you'd like me to go with you to talk to the doctors?"

"I'll be fine." Impulsively, she kissed him on the cheek. "Really."

"I'll make sure of it," he said.

oOo
Riddick's fists were clenching. He forced them to relax. As soon as he stopped focusing, the clenching began again.

The first video was sappy. About this plucky band of heroes saving the universe from Necromongers. Only it was about him, Jack, Ninshubar, Ninshubar's granny, Vaako and Eris. Yeah. Plucky. Zhylaw was the bad guy. It was laughable. And had sappy music. Jack died in his arms in that one. The second was religious propaganda. Made him roll his eyes. Yeah, Jack was some sort of virgin goddess and he was some underworld king. *What the fuck ever.*

The third, though, pissed him the hell off. "Who were they really?" it asked, oh so seriously. "Not the myth. The man and the woman. Or," at this, the announcer put on a concern face that made Riddick want to track him down and eviscerate him, "the man and the child."

They knew a lot. They knew a whole lot about him, of course; his criminal record; his military service; his time in Butcher Bay. They loved images of him all tied up. They loved images of him killing.

They knew *way* too much about Jack. They zeroed in on the Hunter Grazner; they zeroed in on Abu; they even had a pretty good guess of Jack's home world. They knew things about her that turned his stomach and that was before she got to the Necropolis.

Somehow, they had bits and pieces of security footage from the Necropolis. Most was in bad shape. Good footage of him challenging Zhylaw, of her dying that first time. They didn't get her reborn, but they got her in his arms, all bloody and floppy, trying to bury herself into his chest. Showed her naked and clean in the medbay, Ninshubar dropping the blanket over her, their eyes locking . . .

Most of the Necro footage was silent. But they caught the entire conversation in the control room. Her voice ringing out. "Jesus, Riddick, you think I want this life? Locked up and raped by my childhood hero while he destroys the universe? Yeah. I'm done lying back and taking it. I am trying to leave you." Him locking her in the dark. With the sanctimonious voice over that Jack had already saved the galaxy. He watched that several times, each time having to fight harder each time not to punch the screen.

Ninshubar had "declined" to be interviewed, but they included clips of him as a much younger man, talking about Jack with a soft look in his eyes. There were clips of Eris discussing it much more clinically. "Riddick loved her," Eris said. "He loved her, and it is very lucky for us that he did."

They didn't know Jack had been in Crematoria; or, at least, they didn't mention it. The story they were putting together was the story of a little girl who redeemed the galaxy because she wormed her way into his heart; not the story of a runaway he'd failed to rescue from Crematoria. Who did something stupid to get there. Left a good life to find a killer. At the very least, Eris and Vaako knew that story, and they kept their mouths shut.

*Why the hell did she decide to save the universe anyway?*

*When the hell did she decide to save the universe?*
Did Ninshubar turn her against me?

He stared out into the darkness, trying to remember. No, she'd been skeptical right from the beginning. From the first morning. She didn't like that he was doing Zhylaw's job.

Though that might have been about the whole torture thing.

She'd been angry about the notion of his men raping unconverted women. He closed his eyes. 
Shoulda done something about that.

Second day, she'd asked him to stop. Why? Why does a girl who gets sent to Crematoria decide to save the universe?

She told you. That you brought her back as the little girl. Not the woman who grew up to be a killer.

And so I saved the universe from Necros. Because I wanted her to be sweet. He snorted. Stared out into the darkness, thoughts swirling.

oOo

"How long were you in the Underverse, subjectively?" the doctor asked as she ran her hands over Jack's neck and chest thoughtfully.

Jack shrugged. "I don't know. Didn't really matter except when I had a garden. I had one for six years." Ninshubar came into the exam room without knocking. She watched him carefully. "There was this flower. It smelled really good. White, with lots of individual little bells . . . I think it bloomed twelve or thirteen times."

The doctor nodded, scribbled something down. "Ninshubar said the first time, you were weak?"

"Yeah. Hurt like hell too."

"But not this time."

"No."

"Do you know why?"

"Maybe."

"Why?" There was a pause. "Why do you think?"

Jack stared at him, thoughtfully. Finally, "Riddick didn't want it to hurt this time." She looked back at Ninshubar. "What do you want?"

Ninshubar nodded. A smile creased his old face. "I was hoping you'd ask."

oOo

Jack woke up abruptly, heart hammering. She sat up slowly, peering myopically through the darkness. No one seemed to be there.

She swung her legs to the ground, padded as quietly as she could to the bedroom door. Tried to open it. It was locked.
That's what I heard. Someone locking this door. She closed her eyes. Opened them, found she could see, dimly. Opened the wardrobe of clothes that had been waiting for her. Almost all summer weight clothes. She pulled a shirt over her nightgown and pants underneath. No shoes here but the slippers Riddick had brought. They'd have to do.

She picked up the shiv Riddick gave her. Turned it over in her hands. She'd have to take off the nightgown to have access to a pocket. She decided to hold it. Dropped a necklace around her head she could hook it to if she needed both hands, took a deep breath, and put her hand back on the doorknob.

I was the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers. No door can stand against me. Obediently, the lock clicked back, the door opened, and she was padding down the dark and silent hallway.

There didn't seem to be anyone there. No one to lock her door. Automatics? She strained her neck around, trying to see cameras. Nothing obvious. She went back down the grand staircase. She was half way down when she heard a footfall.

Why is this damned nightgown white? She hurried down the stairs, flattened herself against a wall. A heavily armed man walked down the hall, checking doors. She swallowed. Why am I hiding?

"All clear," the man whispered. In the silent house it carried. "Alright. I'll check her room."

My room. She waited until his footsteps faded. Then she slipped to the front door. Didn't bother to check if it was locked, just told it to open. It did.

Christ it's cold. It cut right through the thin clothing. Then she caught sight of the sky. It stopped her dead.

It was gorgeous. The sky was crammed with stars. Near the horizon was one of the sister planets, but it had nearly set. The other was not visible. She stepped towards the open yard, head craned up, fear and cold almost completely forgotten.

A throat cleared. She whirled, shiv drawn. Another heavily armed man, one who looked vaguely familiar. "It's alright, mum," the man murmured. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah." They watched each other. "You, ah, a guard?"

"Yes, mum."

"I'm going for a walk."

He nodded his head, his lips quirking slightly. "Very good, mum."

"Okay, then." She backed away, started to walk down the path. He fell into step behind her. "Are you, ah, coming with me?"

"That is my job, mum."

"Ah." They walked in silence for several minutes. The compound wall became visible, much further than Jack had thought. "Off the beaten path here, are we?"

He seemed to think that through. "Yes, mum. Accessible by air car only."

"Hm. Why did Ninshubar build it?"

"Couldn't say, mum."
They walked into a clump of trees. "He wants me to pretend to be his goddess." She hadn't meant to say it, but it just came out. She stopped, turned to him. "I'm not."

The man nodded, seriously, little more than a shadow in the forest. "Mum. I think – I think grandfather wants you to represent the goddess. Not pretend."

"He's your grandfather?"

He smiled. "Mostly."

"Am I your – grandmother?"

He shrugged, a complicated gesture. "Omphalos design their children. I have some of your genes."

"Some?"

"Quite a few."

"Ah." Despite the cold, she sat, back against a tree. "When Nin was my guard, Riddick told him to do three things. Stop anyone from hurting me, stop me from hurting myself, and stop me from escaping. What are your orders?"

He sighed and sat beside her, close enough she could feel the heat from his body. "Grandfather told us to protect you." He smiled at her, gently. "That is what we're going to do."

She turned the shiv over and over in her hands. His eyes followed it. "And if I don't want protecting?"

He sighed. "Mum. Indulge an old man. It would break his heart, if anything happened to you."

"I didn't ask for this."

"Neither did he. Have mercy."

"Mercy matters," she murmured. "Someone told me that, once." She stood. He was on his feet before her. "Let's go back."
There'd been a rough stone table in Crematoria. Someone, probably a guard, had carved it out of a boulder. Big enough to seat twelve. Four legs and two center supports, each as big as a big man's thigh. Prisoners ate at it some times. Played elaborate games. The guards used it too.

The day Jack had been brought to Crematoria, she'd been taken to that table. Those stone supports and ropes had made it easy. They'd each taken a turn or three. Then they'd left.

She should have been able to get free. Riddick had taught her how to dislocate her thumbs, pull her wrists out of bonds like that. But she was exhausted and heart sick, and she was there until Guv cut her lose with that noble look she sometimes wanted to cut right off his face.

She'd rested. She'd recovered. She'd killed every prisoner who'd seen her there except Guv, as tempting as it was again and again. Then she'd destroyed the damn stone table. Took weeks, but she reduced it to rubble.

The guards told her they'd make another somewhere else. Promised she'd be the first to try it out. She'd smiled at them, and they hadn't ever seemed to get it done. Then Riddick got there and there was a lot more rubble.

Except all of a sudden there he was, sitting on that goddamn stone table all not-destroyed like it was a park bench, with an enormous dead bird in his lap. He was methodically plucking its golden feathers. He grinned at her.

"Wheredya get the bird?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Damned thing went for my liver. Sit." She snorted at him. He grinned. "Whatcha afraid of?"

"Can't imagine," she said, eyeing the cut on his cheek. She sat, gingerly, a good three feet away.

"Thought I ripped that out of you," he grumbled.

"What?"

"You know." He shrugged expressively. "That thing." He gestured with the shiv at her belly. She looked down at it blankly.

"Don't worry," he grinned. "I'll protect you."

"Yeah, you've done such a good job with that."

For an instant, his face changed, and it was grief, all the way down. He looked so sad she reached
for him. Then the mask snapped back. "Thank you," he said, smugly. "Told Abu to turn you into a spoiled princess. Did he?"

She snorted. Something fell from the ceiling with an outraged squeal. Then something else. And another.

"Are those pigs?" Riddick asked, sounding amused.

"Yeah, I think they are."

"You get rains of pigs often down here?"

"About as often as giant liver-attacking birds." Jack stared at the ceiling. "I think maybe we should leave."

"Sounds good." Riddick unhurriedly tucked the dead bird under arm, stood, and reached a hand out for her. She took it. The pigs squealed. She took a step away from the altar and they were in the throne room of the Necropolis. It was full of pigs.

"Huh," Riddick said. "This your dream or mine?"

"What?"

"This dream. You seem to be leading."

"I don't think I've been dreaming my own dreams since you brought me back to life that first time. But I've never seen pigs before."

"Huh." They were still holding hands. Jack pulled him towards the secret passage, gently nudging pigs out of the way. He followed, bemused. She pushed at the wall and it peeled back. She pulled him in –

They were on a beach, walking through enormous sandcastles. There were crows everywhere, on the castles, glaring down at them. "Murder," Riddick murmured with apparent satisfaction.

"Nin did it," she said. "Punched Zhylaw so hard he turned into crows."

Riddick grinned. "Neat trick." He raised a fist. Something big and black landed on it, its talons wrapping around Riddick's hand like ribbons. "So this is what's left of good old dad?" He lowered the raven to eye level. It extended its wings, affronted, then launched into the air. With a whoosh, all the other crows followed, blackening the sky.

Jack pulled Riddick into one of the sand castles, and they were back on Kore, in Ninshubur's temple. In the center of a circular room was the stone table from Crematoria, now piled high in fruits and flowers. Nin was standing behind it, young and strong. "Hungry?" he asked. She took a step towards him.

"Yeah," she said. Riddick set the bird down carefully. It didn't seem to be dead any more. It shook itself, gave Riddick the same affronted look the raven had, and stalked away. She took another step. Riddick hung back, but didn't let go of her hand. He must have seen what she couldn't. In the middle of the flowers was a girl, naked and still. Not breathing. Jack jerked back. Riddick still didn't let her go.

"Sorry," Nin said. "I would have used swine if I'd known you were coming."
"Jesus," she whispered. She drew closer. This time, Riddick came with her. In the moonlight, the naked body wasn't a child anymore. She looked like Selena.

"I told you he killed children," Riddick said, his voice light.

"When I have to," Nin said. "For her." He was looking behind them. Jack turned her head. Kore was there, no longer old, but young and strong and beautiful, with blood on her lips. She smiled.

"I loved her," Jack whispered. "You killed her?"

Kore shrugged. "She was an opportunity. You weren't my first choice, you know. Too damaged. If Riddick had brought her back, instead of you . . ." She trailed off, regretfully. "Opportunities lost." Riddick squeezed Jack's fingers.

"I tried to fix her," he said, his eyes on the corpse. One of the pigs, bolder than the others, snuffled up to the altar, pulled down an apple. Crunched it happily.

Kore laughed. She was standing next to Nin, though Jack had never seen her move. She picked an apple, tossed it to Riddick. "You did good, mate. Made her all soft and clean." Riddick took a bite, smugly.

"Thank you."

"What the fuck are you all talking about?" Jack asked. Nin frowned.

"Language, Kyra."

Pigs surged around them. Kore laughed again. Jack woke up, heart hammering. It was still night, but the window was glowing.

For the second time that night, she pulled herself out of bed. She peered through the curtains and a ship passed so close she could have jumped. She opened the window.

The ship landed at the other side of the mansion. The hatch raised and about twenty pigs spilled out, followed by a young man who didn't look up. Several armed men and woman followed, seemingly alert though none noticed her. Then a man who seemed to be in charge. He looked directly at her window. He tapped the man in front of him, jerked his head up to her. She forced herself not to jerk back. There was a long pause, then the two men entered the house through a side door.

She took a deep breath. Dressed. Checked that the shiv Riddick gave her was still under her pillow. Laid down in bed with her eyes open.

Riddick woke abruptly from a whacky dream about food. Grendel swelled in front of them. The planet seemed idyllic. There was a storm in the east, large ice caps, fiddly coastlines and a deep blue sea. They looped around it to the night side, and it was shockingly dark. The ship lazily catapulted around the planet to the dark side of New Furya. There were faint lights beneath them, but nothing like the cities the Necros had destroyed, once upon a time.

"How many people down there?" Riddick asked abruptly.

"About 10,000," Nikiya answered, softly. Most of his crew were sleeping.

"Not a lot."

Nikiya shrugged. "More than there were in your time." Riddick glared at him, irritated for no reason
he could pin to the wall. They landed in a city. The door swung open and Eris was there. He and Nikiya embraced and it hit Riddick at last that Nikiya was Eris's son. Probably. The Furyans who had accompanied him from Kore fell into formation around them. Riddick looked around, bemused.

"Hey," he said, easily.

Eris's lips twitched. "Hey, old man." He seemed hail and hearty, and so much younger than Ninshubar. *He got restarted,* it hit Riddick abruptly. *Like Jack. Huh. Did I get rebooted?* Eris extended a hand. Riddick looked at it for an instant too long. Finally, shrugged, took it. Eris's grip was strong.

"You've been busy," Riddick said, letting himself be led across the dark airfield. "'Chancellor'"

Eris shrugged modestly. "Someone had to be."

"Hear you told Nin I was dead."

"I may have led him to that conclusion."

"Didya think I'd be back?"

"I hoped."

"That I'd be back, or I wouldn't?"

"It changed day by day."

Riddick barked a laugh. Scrutinized his face, looking for hidden meanings. "Nin said sixty years?"

"Hm. About that." They arrived at a door. Nikiya opened it. The other Furyans melted away.

Riddick let himself be led through the house to a sitting room. Eris sat with a sigh, rubbing his eyes.

"You get your purebred Furyan paradise set up?"

"Ah, no. I . . . have moderated my views over the years."

"Huh." A young man brought them a platter of food, set it down, looking awed. Riddick watched him, darkly sure his genes were in that one too.

"Don't get me wrong. New Furya and Grendal," he gestured vaguely at the ceiling, "are Furyan enclaves. I have . . . moderated my views on what constitutes a Furyan. But many have our enhancements."

"Huh?"

"We were genetically engineered to do a job, once upon a time. Protect and entertain the powerful."

"Huh. Did we?"

"Until we rebelled." He poured something gold into three glasses, passed one to Riddick, one to Nikiya. "To new beginnings."

Riddick shrugged, quaffed the drink in a gulp. It was sweet and sticky and had a kick to it. He held his glass out again, and Eris filled it with a smile.
"What about Jack?" he asked, abruptly.

"In what sense?" Eris asked politely.

"Saw some stupid vid show about us. How could you let people say shit like that?"

Eris reached for an olive, ate it meditatively. "We have a free press, you know."

"Tellin' people she's some sorta goddess? And I'm some sort of child molester?"

"Ah." Eris gave Nikiya a sharp look. The other man returned his gaze blandly. "Those shows. Yes. People believe all manner of things. Some of it true." He took another sip.

Riddick snorted. "Yeah. Just don't wanna deal with people thinking that sorta shit about us."

"Life will have its challenges, then." Eris rubbed his brow, looking suddenly old. "We did what we thought we needed too, once upon a time."

"You didn't answer my question. What's about Jack?"

"Kyra will be cherished. Ninshubar adores her. She'll be fine."

"How the fuck could he adore her? He knew her for what, six weeks sixty years ago?"

Eris rubbed his temple again. "Riddick. See the bigger picture. We stopped the Necromongers. Him, you, her, and me. Mostly those two. They are heroes. She is a hero. She became a hero in the popular imagination. She is a hero in Ninshubar's imagination. Let her walk in the sun." Nikiya snorted. Eris shot him another look.

"Conception is a blessing," Nikiya murmured. Riddick glared at him.

"Quite," Eris said. "Just wait." He smiled. "She's safer without you anyway. Anyone who kills you gets to live forever in the Underverse. People would rip her apart to get to you. Better that's the Omphalos's problem for now. They're much less sentimental than us."

"Mum?"

There was a woman crouching next to the bed. Not Kore Arkipov. Not even a little bit. Brown hair, golden skin and gray eyes. Jack blinked at her.

"Grandfather asked you to join him for breakfast. I've brought you some clothes. Would you like to shower first?"


Jack stayed still. "Who are you?"

The woman smiled, stood. She was muscled, lean, and tall. "Call me Deborah. I work for Grandfather – for Ninshubar. He's summon- he asks that you dress and join him."

Jack looked at the clothes the woman had brought, somewhat glumly. Another beautiful green dress. "Yeah. I'll go change in the bathroom."

"As you like," Deborah replied. She stepped back. As she did, Jack saw the holster. Her eyes rested on it.
"You're armed."

Deborah shrugged, disarmingly. "There was . . . a glitch in the building security last night. Nothing to worry about."

_Ah. Yes. You locked me in and I went right out the front door. Got it. So you're a . . . guard?"

"Among other things." Deborah searched Jack's face. "This bothers you?"

"Last twelve years, I haven't had guards. I liked that. Before that, body guards, prison guards . . ."

Deborah's eyes sharpened. "Nothing against you, but it's not something I've missed."

"It would devastate Grandfather if something happened to you."

*And remember. You were the last Lord Marshal. Anyone who kills you gets to live forever in the Underverse with all his loved ones. Oh god, does anyone know that? She rubbed her eyes. "Right. Anyone trying to kill me?"

Deborah shook her head. "Oh no, mum."

Jack rolled her eyes. "I'm no one's mum."

The woman's lips quirked. _Oh, shit, I am, aren't I? They're waiting for you._

She edged around the woman, went to the bathroom, closed the door firmly. It didn't lock. She stared at the doorknob for a moment, then pulled off the night shirt and eyed her new body critically in the mirror. It was different from the one the quasi dead had built. Still bigger breasted than she thought she'd been, once upon a time, and the skin was surreally soft, just like the first time. But there was real muscle on her arms and legs. None of that agonizing weakness. And she had thick hair tumbling down her back, not the newborn baldness. She spun, pleased. Stopped dead.

There was a scar the size of her palm where the spike had slid in. When the quasies brought her back, the skin was smooth. Riddick left it. The physical remains of the death blow. "Oh my god," she whispered.

"Mum?" Deborah opened the door, poked her head in. Jack took a step back, almost fell into the bathtub. Deborah caught her, inhumanly fast. 

"Jesus. You startled me."


"Yeah. Riddick's fantasy woman," Jack muttered, yanking the dress over her head. "Sorry. Just – not used to this body yet."

Deborah nodded, seeming to get her equilibrium back. Jack found a hairbrush and started yanking at her hair. "Let me," Deborah said, gently. "It's too pretty to treat like that."

*It's my hair, Jack thought rebelliously. Riddick made it for me. But it was weirdly nice to have someone do this for her. She stood quietly. After a moment, she asked, "What's it like here?"

"In the mansion? It's my first time. Seems pretty nice."

"On this world."
The brush hesitated. "Good."

"Anyone go hungry?"

She seemed affronted. "Of course not."

"Crime?"


"Do you have prisons?"

"Of course not."

"What would you do if someone got raped?"

The brush stopped. Complicated emotions flitted across her face, reflected in the mirror. "That doesn't happen here. Not really. There are stories, of course. Persephone-" She took a deep breath. "I'm babbling. I know it happened to you. I am so sorry."

It was like ice in the stomach. "How do you know that?"

"Your story is taught in school."

"Jesus." Jack stared at Deborah's reflection in the mirror, mirroring compassion and oh shit, worship. It made Jack feel heated, edgy. "I'm over it," she said at last. "What would you do if someone did get raped?"

"I have no idea." Deborah swallowed. "If we can't rehabilitate people, we wipe them."

"Huh?"

"Take their memories. Give them a fresh start." She put down the brush, with her fingers started untangling a snarl. "I did my time in the fleet. I know it happens out there. But we're not like that here. Life is cherished."

"The Necros used to say that."

Deborah spasmed. "They killed billions. How could they -" she stopped, picked up the brush again. "I'm upsetting you. I'm sorry."

Jack snorted. "No. You're not. I need to figure this place out. What do they say about me?"

It was all worship in those grey eyes. "That you saved the universe."

Jack shook her head, looked down. "It wasn't like that. I just stole some balls . . ."

"As you say, mum," Deborah said, as if she was humoring her. She put the hair brush down, smiled serenely. "There. Beautiful. May I escort you upstairs?"

Jack did not move. "What are you supposed to protect me from anyway?"

"Any threat, mum."

"Is there something . . . specific . . . Nin's worried about?"

The woman's lips quirked slightly. "Abduction."
"Don't you guys think I'm some sort of Persephone? Doesn't Persephone get abducted?"

"Yes. But not if we can stop it." She smiled. "Mum. Breakfast awaits in the solarium. Follow me." Jack let Deborah lead her out of the bedroom. The man who had found her outside gave her a smile, fell into step behind them. Jack was glad for the guide; the mansion was like a maze. More turns than she would have thought possible took them to a dark spiral staircase.

At the top of the stairs was a frosted glass door, glowing gold like it was noon behind it. Deborah opened it. Jack stopped dead.

Ninshubar and a strange man were sitting at a large stone table, as big as the one in Crematoria. The table was loaded high with food. Above the table was a hologram of Jack's naked body.

_Oh shit. The moment Riddick brought me back. They must have had surveillance cameras following us._ She closed her eyes, heard her own voice.

"That for me?"

She heard Riddick snort. "If you want it." She opened her eyes to see Riddick handing her a green dress and shoes. She squared her shoulders and walked into the light. Nin stood, followed, a little slowly, by the other man.

"Kyra," Nin said, his voice a caress.

"Nin." She smiled at him. Deborah pulled a chair out for her. Jack sat, a little unsettled.

Nin cleared his throat. "Jack. Let me introduce you to Veles Petrov." He nodded to the dark haired, sharp featured looking man in his fifties at the other side of the table. "Veles is in charge of interior security." The man inclined his head. Guarded.

She looked pointedly at the hologram above the stone table. "So, ah, everyone's seen me naked already."

Veles snorted. Ninshubar looked guilty. "I'm sorry, Kyra. I thought it was important for Veles to see." He hit a control and the hologram disappeared. Jack stared at the space where it had been.

"Tea?"

"What? Oh, sure." Deborah poured her a cup. Jack took a sip. It was perfect. Nin smiled. She smiled back, looked around the room. Trees heavy with fruit, grape vines, berry bushes, what looked like grain, vegetables, herbs, flowers, all busy with bees and butterflies. She could count at least three sun lamps.

"Bacon? It's from my own pigs."

"You raise pigs?"

Nin smiled a little smugly, typed a few commands, and a hologram of pigs appeared. They were rooting through the forest. They seemed like happy pigs. "Yes. I even have a pig boy. You might like him. He came in last night." As if in response, the image shifted to a young dark haired man. "He's a Taurian. Studying to be a terraformer. I pay him well."

She took a piece and chewed it carefully. Sweet and rich and smoky. "So this is from those pigs?"

"Yes."
She thought about reaching for another, but her stomach lurched. *Selene, begging for death after I burned her.* Jack closed her eyes.

"I can't believe you're here," Nin said, softly. Veles snorted again. Jack turned to look at him.

"You're not the only one," she said.

Veles sighed. "No offense, ma'am, but your story is pretty incredible." His voice went dark. "People just don't come back from the dead."

Jack shrugged. "Good to know."

"Veles," Nin's voice was gentle, but there was iron underneath.

"Sir, I meant no disrespect. But it would be child's play to clone her. And cameras can be fooled."

"It's okay," Jack said. "I really don't care. It'd be nice to be normal for a change. Not be the super special prisoner any more."

There was an awkward moment of silence. Finally, Nin broke it. "Kyra – mum – I tend to believe you are who you say you are. That certainly seemed to be Richard B. Riddick. You are not a prisoner. But until we . . . sort things out, you will remain my guest here."

"Oh." Jack took another drink of the tea to cover the sudden electric pang in her stomach. "Still a prisoner. Nifty."

"Just a precaution."

"Against what?"

"We're very rich," Veles said, briskly. "People have tried various types of force or fraud to get their hands on our resources."

"Huh. You notice the bag of jewels Riddick gave me?"

There was a pause. "That's what was in the pack?" Nin asked, sounding slightly strangled.

"Among other things."

Nin gazed at her for an instant. Made a gesture and a man materialized. "Take custody of the pack Kyra brought. Have the scientists analyze everything. Make sure there's nothing – dangerous – there." The man bowed, started to leave.


Nin smiled, apologetically. "I'm sorry, Kyra. Jewels that have been to the Underverse – they could be dangerous." He addressed the man. "Go."

"It's all I have." Her voice cracked. "Riddick gave it to me."

Nin's face hardened. "If Riddick had jewels, he stole them."

"Like I stole Kore's sunseed?" There was dead silence. "I was only able to do that because Riddick – Riddick loves me." *Just shut up,* something hissed within her. She rubbed her forehead. Pain was beginning to gather behind her eyes.
"Are you alright, Kyra?" Ninshubar asked, gently. "I can get you a doctor."

"I don't think it will help. You're kinda freaking me out. If I'd known you were going to lock me up, show some guy I don't know naked pictures of me, call me a liar, and take my stuff, I might have taken my chances with Riddick."

Veles snorted again. "Really. We've all seen the surveillance tapes from the Necromonger ships. No woman in her right mind would go with him. Either you're not Kyra or you need protecting from yourself."

Jack shoved back from the table. "We're done."

"Veles," Ninshubar said, gently. "While I tend to agree with you, now is not the time. Kyra, please sit. We'll work this out."

Take your chances, some treacherous part of herself whispered. Top floor. Jump. Riddick will come for you and you can start over. She took the four steps to the window. Deborah moved close. Looked like a five story drop down. Jump. And break Nin's heart. An old, wounded bull, with a broken heart. You really want to do that? She put her hand on the pane.


There was a little glass bowl of pomegranate seeds down the table. It seemed to make sense. She reached for it. Veles snorted again. She let her hand drop.

"Why is he here?" She asked, archly. "I don't think he likes me."

"Miss, I don't even know you," he said, briskly. "My job is to protect our community. You could be a threat to that community."

It was Jack's turn to snort. "Okay. Guess I sorta wrecked the last one I was a part of." Ninshubar's lips twitched. He passed her the pomegranate seeds. They were shockingly good.

Nin cleared his throat. "I spoke earlier this morning with Eris. We've agreed to keep the news of your . . . return quiet until we've come up with appropriate security."

"Eris," she murmured. "God. I'd almost forgotten about him. Vaako said you two worked out a deal?"

"Vaako died twenty five years ago," Veles said. "Miss, you can't be more than eighteen."

Jack snorted. "I was born in 4612. What year is it?"

Nin swallowed. "4699."

"So I'm 87." She rushed on. "Look. If you're a Necromonger, you don't really die when you die. You go to the Underverse. It's like a type of . . . place. I dunno. Vaako came to see me a few years ago. Said we had a kid. Susan."

Nin looked stricken. "Will I go there when I die?"

"I don't know." Something stirred in her. "I think it's up to you. How much you believe in it. Maybe not if you believe Kore. Even though she told you to kill children."

There was dead silence at the table. Ninshubar drew away from her. Veles stood. "Sir. Let's end this.
I'd like your permission to interrogate her."

Ninshubar gazed at her for entirely too long. Finally, he nodded.

"Wait, what? You're going to let him interrogate me? Like the Quasi Dead did for Riddick?" Her voice choked off.

"Of course not," Ninshubar said, softly. "They tortured – people. No matter who you are, you won't be tortured. But you know things Kyra has no business knowing."

She jerked away from the table. "Jesus Christ. Your fucking grandmother put things in my head. You don't think I'm me, fine – I'll get out of your hair. Give me back my bag, let me call Riddick - " Deborah moved between her and the door, her hand on her weapon. Jack sagged.

"No, child." Nin looked at Veles. "We need to settle this. Have the interrogation room prepared." Veles inclined his head, spoke softly into a communicator. "But don't worry. I am going to watch that too."
Chapter 40. The Penultimate Lover.

Kore was beautiful. The people were happy and healthy. It was like paradise.

It had been six months since she'd seen Riddick. Except for that one dark night, Nin treated her like a goddess. Everyone did. Especially when she put on the outfits.

At first, she felt ridiculous. That was a lie, she always felt ridiculous. But when she put on the costume, people got this look in their eyes. Like she mattered to them. When she went through with the ceremonies, playing Kore, she felt it too. It was heady. It was meaningful. It was distracting.

She missed Riddick. She wrote him every week. He wrote back, doggedly, earnestly. His letters broke her heart, if she let herself think too hard about them. He was trying so hard to be a good guy, have a regular life. He'd taken a job at the Furyan Academy, teaching hand to hand combat. Seemed like he was actually hanging out with people. Maybe even dating.

She missed him. Another thing she couldn't let herself think too hard about.

Nin kept trying to fix her up with his grandchildren. Sometimes, they were hers too. The Omphalos, who designed all their children in a lab, thought differently about these things. She'd gotten drunk with one of them once, and confessed, earnestly, tearfully that she missed Riddick, wanted to see him again soon. He pulled her into the bathroom, turned on the shower and whispered, low and urgent, "wait. Keep quiet. He blames Riddick for the evil he did in that evil place. Grandfather is an old man. Just indulge him for the rest of his days. Or it could go bad."

He wouldn't tell her how it could be bad, but she had some dark ideas. "Good man? I saw him kill children," Riddick told her once, and reading the history of the Omphalos, ancient and modern, she could believe.

Nin loved her. Or something. He hated that she wrote Riddick every week. She knew he was reading her letters. She suspected he was editing them. And editing Riddick's letters back. After hinting she didn't like it, she finally confronted him. It hadn't gone well. He told her, softly, he needed her to be safe and he would do what he had to do to see to that. "Just like Riddick," she'd snapped at the same, soft voice he asked what possible secrets she could have with "that man I saw rape you." She'd nodded and fled into his little orchard – shadowed by her bodyguards - and curled into a ball and sobbed and sobbed until Deborah wrapped her arms around her and rocked her in her arms. When she cried herself out, Deborah had carried her back to Nin's house like she was a baby and no one left her alone for days and days.

At some ceremonies, always at night, someone who looked like a doctor would give her a cup, silently. It was always filled with something that tasted like the thing Neith had given her that first morning in the Underverse. She'd drink, and feel herself overwhelmed by something dark and wonderful and she'd babble words that might have been wise. She resented it afterwards, sometimes,
no one ever asked her if she wanted to be overshadowed by something glorious. But when they
handed her that cup, she always drank deep.

Riddick looked down at Eve tenderly. He didn't love her. But he liked her. She liked him. And the
sex had been amazing. Woman was insatiable. Not at all like Jack.

Jack. Damn it. He hadn't meant to think of her, not now. Life moved on, and he was going to be a
fucking grown up about it. Nine months after he brought her back from the dead and given her
nearly all his earthly possessions, she was, at best, a pen pal. An Omphalos cult hero with no time to
see him. At least, every attempt he made to see her had been evaded.

He focused fiercely on the woman next to him. Nothing like Jack. Not fragile, not soft, not young,
very strong. Eve was a rich widow, from a people bioengineered generations ago to live in a heavy
gravity environment. Eris had recruited her parents because the terraformers thought they had shared
genes with the Furyans. Meaning she wasn't his kid, or Jack's, or anyone else he knew. Another
thing Riddick liked about her.

And unlike, apparently, Jack, Eve wanted him. She'd pursued him relentlessly. Given him presents.
Taken him on adventures. Today, they'd gone deer hunting. They'd run the deer down themselves
and broke their necks by hand. Aside from one bad moment, remembering the deer that became Jack
under those same hands, it had been exhilarating.

Eve was asleep. She seemed to be a heavy sleeper.

Eve was dreaming. He could see her eyes moving under closed eyelids. Feeling slightly guilty, he
rested his hand on her forehead. Blinked, and she was dark red and silver. Pressed down, and he was
in her dreams.

An eternity later, he pulled himself out, swallowing hard.

There's an assassin in my bed.

Why the fuck hasn't she killed me?

She rolled away from him. He took a deep, steadying breath, trying to make sense of the dream
images. Him, dead. Him, on a throne. Her, rising triumphant over his corpse. The two of them sitting

She wants to be the Lord Marshal. She wants to restart the Necromongers. Only better. She thinks if
she kills me in front of everyone, she'll get to. Just like I did.

Only she's started to fall for me. Now she's thinking about us taking over the galaxy.

I could do that. Do it right. Only reason I'm not is that I Jack promised she'd give me a chance, and
fuck lot of good that's done me.

And once I'm the Lord Marshal again, I could just take her. He closed his eyes. Realized his heart
was hammering. It was so tempting it hurt.

And what about this woman? I decide to turn, she gonna be my Dame Vaako? He snorted, softly.
She moved, eyelashes fluttering. "Hey," she whispered, her voice soft and loving.

He leaned down and kissed her cheek, gently. "Gotta take a piss."
"Okay, killer," she whispered, eyes closing. He pulled himself out of bed and stumbled to the small restroom. Sat on the toilet, listening to her breathing relax into the rhythms of sleep.

What the fuck do I do about this?

His clothes were on the floor, scattered carelessly, mixed with hers. They'd ripped each other's clothes off, so eager to get into the shower and fuck. He sorted his out, dressed slowly.

I could kill her. Make sure everybody knows what happens to people who fuck with me.

I kill her, Nin will tell Jack that I kill my girlfriends. He rubbed his head.

I could be wrong. People have wacky dreams.

Could wake her up and rip it out of her brain.

Then Nin will tell Jack I torture my girlfriends.

The only door out of the bathroom went back into the bedroom. But on the other side of the mirrored wall was a hallway. He put his hands on the mirror, remembered that he was the Lord Marshal, and pushed through. Went to find Eris. Decided to let him work it out.

Nine months and two weeks after she'd come to live with Nin, Jack came down to breakfast, yawning. Nin was already there, reading from a datapad. "What's with all the flowers?"

His head jerked up, almost guiltily. "I didn't hear you. Good morning."

She sat down, poured herself some tea. Smiled at him. "They're beautiful."

He smiled back, wistfully. "I thought so too." He seemed to shake himself. "I need to talk to you."

It came out before she could stop it. "Is Riddick okay?"

His face stiffened. "Why do you ask?"

"You've got your Riddick face on. Like you bit something you didn't like."

He picked up a piece of bread, turned it over in his hands again and again. Finally, pulled it into two pieces, put both on his plate deliberately. "As far as I know, Riddick is alive and well on Susan Vaako's ship, touring the fleet. But . . ." He picked up one of the pieces of bread. "I have . . . been keeping things from you. Things you may need to know."

"What?"

He ripped the bread in two. "The reception at the Taurian Embassy last week."

She thought back. It'd been fun, in a surreal way, dancing with the grandson of the ambassador who had had breakfast with her in Riddick's room, once upon a time. She grinned. "I really liked that."

He nodded solemnly. "I am glad. There was a kidnapping attempt."

"Huh?"

"There was a plot to take you." He picked up another piece of bread, ripped off a small piece.
Dropped it to his plate. "It was stopped."

"Oh. Wow. I had no idea."

He sighed, broke eye contact. "You were never in any danger. We knew . . . days before the reception."

She stared down at the broken bread on his plate. "And you didn't tell me."

"I'm telling you now." He used his table knife to spear another roll. Brought it close and started dismantling it.

"I was bait."

"Yes. There . . . have been other attempts. We have been looking for the source."

It took her a moment to untangle that. "You thought Riddick was behind it?"

"Not that one," he said softly.

"He'd come himself," she said, harsher than she meant to. *And he would never, ever use me as bait.* She closed her eyes.

Ninshubbar made an irritated sound. Bread crumbled. "You could be right. At any rate, we have . . . him to thank for cracking this particular plot."

"What?"

"He foiled an attempt on him. The woman in question revealed the larger plot. Implicated a man here." There was something very dark in his voice.

"When did this happen? Was Riddick okay?"

"I already told you he was."

"And he didn't tell me? Or did you edit that out of his letters too?" Her voice cracked.

Again, Nin's voice was soft. "It was not safe for you to know. It was irresponsible of him to try to tell you."

She wanted to snap at him, but instead she took a deep breath. "So it's all good? You catch the bad guys?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Veles."

"Veles what?"

"Veles – was the bad guy."

"Oh my god. He's chief of security."

Nin's voice darkened. The bread crumbled into smaller pieces. "He was."
"Why?"

Nin wouldn't look at her. "Remember that day he interrogated you about who you were and how you came back to life?"

Jack stared at him. Looked away abruptly. "Yeah."

"He became a believer. In the Necromonger dream of defeating death. He thought – he thought if he could use you to lure Riddick somewhere, he could kill him and become the Lord Marshal. Do it right this time. Keep his family safe. He found like minded people."

Shit. "That doesn't make sense. Being the Grand Poobah of the army of darkness wouldn't bring his family back. They wouldn't be in the Underverse."

"A new family could be."

"Christ."

"Not exactly."

"What?"

"Nothing." Ninshubar finally met her eyes, yearningly, over a plate of bread crumbs. "Jack. I'm so sorry."

She rolled her eyes. "Jesus, Nin, he tied me to a chair, drugged me, and asked me obnoxiously personal questions. He was a control freak." She let that sit in the air for several seconds. Ninshubar seemed unaffected. "And, oh yeah, he was planning to use me as bait so he could kill my best friend. No, I didn't like him."

Nin's expression darkened. He ripped another piece of bread in half. There was an awkward silence.

"You going to feed the ducks?"

"What?"

"All those bread crumbs." Nin looked down.

"Ah. No. Just in case I need to find my way."

"Huh?"

He smiled, gently. "Nothing."

"I hate it when you do that."

"What?"

"Say something significant, then say it doesn't matter when I don't understand it."

His lips quirked. "I'm sorry, Kyra," he said, formally. "I'll instruct your tutors to add it to your lessons."

"I want you to stop editing Riddick's letters."

"Hm." He gazed at her. "I will consider it."
Jack leaned back. *That means no.* It hurt. She cast around for something to say. "A woman tried to kill Riddick?"

Nin got a distant look on his face. "She says she never got to that point, though she confesses that was her plan."

"You've talked to her?"

Nin's face went dark. "For some reason, the Furyans chose to exile her, rather than ki-" He stopped abruptly. "We detained her on her way out of the system."

"Did you question her like Veles questioned me?" Her voice was arch again.

"Oh no." Nin returned to ripping bread. "I would not let Veles hurt you."

"Shit. You're telling me you hurt her?"

Nin's eyes were cool. "She sought to destroy the world I built on the corpse of the girl I loved." Jack closed her eyes. "She deserves to die slowly."

"What about mercy?"

He made a soft noise. "I will consider it." There was a long silence. "Jack. Don't fight me. I just wanted you to know why I will be increasing your security. We also need to talk about my impending death."
Chapter 41. I Never Could Get the Hang of Thursdays

The Omphalos had rebuilt the civilized galaxy. Rebuilt what the Necromongers had destroyed. Ninshubar Osiris Arkhipov, Kore Arkhipov's grandson, continued her good work. Everyone knew his name. For nearly sixty years, he led the people who built reasonably priced utopias nestled in the darkness.

Everyone knew his name. When Ninshubar was thirty three years old, he had become a Necromonger. When he was forty five, he had taken them down. One spring day, fifty six years later, a girl he loved walked out of the Underverse. He had grandchildren by her who had lived longer. Now he was dead at one hundred and three. The number made no sense to Riddick. No one lived that long.

Everyone knew his name. Not everyone liked him.

Riddick strapped a holster to his upper arm, tucked in another shiv. Ran a hand over it. Ninshubar may have saved the universe, but there was nostalgia for the Necromongers. Many were deluded fanboys and girls who ritually hated Ninshubar and Jack both. Riddick had decided, grudgingly, they were mostly harmless. More dangerous were the men and women who really believed in what they thought the Necromongers were trying to achieve. Riddick decided some were not so harmless. Eris insisted they had the problem under control.

Riddick pulled on his shirt, slowly. Smoothed it down, eyed the effect critically in the mirror. No weapons stood out.

People also had silly beliefs about the Necromongers. Riddick had been ambushed more than once by out-of-system news crews, determined to prove that the Necromongers had been nothing more than a front for the Omphalos; that the Necromonger armada existed simply to create business for terraformers. Riddick had shattered the jaw of the first man to ask him if that was true. That got him a note from Ninshubar, asking him with exquisite politeness to ignore these "poor, deluded souls."

Riddick had taken to grinning at the conspiracy buffs and fingering a shiv that had been to the Underverse. Seemed to get the job done. Ninshubar never wrote again.

Riddick picked up the two "traditional Furyan weapons" Eris had picked out for him. Two curved blades, good for close work, not good for throwing. "If you draw these," Eris had said seriously, "you will probably be shot. But you can wear them if they make you feel better." Riddick had rolled his eyes. He strapped them on, very visibly. Eris was right. They did make him feel better.

Aside from that one punch, he'd been a very good boy. Was nice to his kids, nice to his grandkids, even the ones older than him. Escorted a few Omphalos crews, though he hated to get that far away. Spent most of the time either at the Academy, teaching young Furyans and Necromongers hand to hand combat and strategy, or on the old Necromonger fleet. Even asked – asked! – Eris to be
merciful to the woman who was planning to kill him.

There were still Necromongers. For a given value of Necromongers. They called themselves Prytania, allegedly because so many of those Eris had chosen were from that last people the Necromongers had destroyed. Riddick had his suspicions. The name conveniently fit the myths the fuckers had made up. The Omphalos were the creators. The Furyans were the defenders. And the Prytania were the destroyers, if needed. They mostly lived on old Necromonger ships. Strangely, the old Necromongers had built their ships to last. They made sure the terraformers got paid. He'd spent some time on those ships, with their commander, Susan Vaako. Jack and Vaako's daughter, born in a uterine replicator soon after the fall. A serious, thoughtful woman in her fifties. She called him uncle and had children older than him.

Jack's daughter.

Jack. He tried to move on. But it was hard in a world where everywhere he looked, he saw absolutely stunning women who were his kids. And Jack's.


Eris claimed they weren't really Jack's children in any meaningful sense; that they simply used her eggs since they were already full of his mitochondria. Furyan mitochondria. For some reason, the Quasies had used that instead of whatever she had before. The stuff you usually got from mama. But they had a piece of Jack in them. A piece of him. And that made him feel itchy. Drawn and repelled.

Jack sent him a letter every Saturday morning. Diligently. Sometimes more often. Like it was her job. He couldn't quite figure out what her real job was, but she was on the news all the time. Their special snowflake. He wrote her back, wherever he was. She never responded to his invitations. She never responded to a lot of things. Pissed him off, but he decided to be patient. Especially when it became clear Nin was really heading into that good night.

Ninshubar was going to get a hero's funeral, of course. They had to invite the Furyans. And no one was more Furyan than Riddick Balder Riddick. He was going.

Sleep well, sweet prince, Riddick grunted. And don't come back. Checked himself one last time in the mirror, wishing he wasn't wearing quite as much. He looked better in less.

"You look good," Eris said. Riddick looked at him sardonically. Why the hell does he know me so well anyway?

"Thanks, old man."

Eris smiled at him, silver haired but not so old. Rebirth had been good for him. "You're nervous."

Riddick shrugged. "Omphalos don't want me there. Think I might hog the canapés. I'm guessin'."

"You're a cult hero there too," Eris said, lightly. "Among most. There are heroic statues of you everywhere."

"Then why have they been makin' sure I couldn't visit all legal like?" Riddick's voice turned darker than he meant.

"We have been through this. Ninshubar had a great deal of influence."

"Probably still does."
Eris shrugged. "So do we. I think you made the right decision to stay away. But things will be different now."

Riddick grunted. "God I hope so. It's been really fucking hard."

"Well. Let's go make a good impression."

They were burying Ninshubar at the bottom of a valley. Probably been built for it. The green slopes were full of people, mostly sitting on the ground. Ninshubar's body was already there, wrapped in cloth, seemingly on a magic carpet. The grave was dug, the dirt neatly pyramided near by. Riddick shoved through to the front, dragging a bemused Eris behind him. At some invisible perimeter, Eris dug in his heels.

"Front row seat, Riddick," Eris said, easily. "Sit."

Unwillingly, he did. "This is weird," Riddick hissed.

Eris nodded. Spoke softly. "Most of their ceremonies are done. We were only invited to the actual burial. It is deeply rooted in their religious traditions."

"How the fuck do they have deeply rooted religious traditions? There was like twelve of 'em 60 years ago? And he's just lying there. Anyone could go up and give him a kick."

"Ah, no. There is a forcefield. Right in front of us."


She looked strange. Her clothes had an artificial, ritual look that made him itchy. Like she was in a play. Like they were going to slit her throat and toss her into Nin's grave. She was barefoot and as far as he could tell, unarmed. She'd lost some of the muscle she'd had when she came back. She seemed softer.

She scanned the crowd, stopping when she saw him. Their eyes locked. He nodded. Something like a smile flickered for an instant, then she nodded and turned away, kneeling besides Nin's body, bowing her head as if lost in a private grief. The man in golden armor stood behind her and drew a knife so long it had to be a sword. Making Riddick very tense. Riddick blinked at him and he was gold and green, just like Ninshubar. Jack was a pale green. Some pretentious twit stood up and started talking. When he finally stopped, a woman took his place.

The speeches were boring. Blah blah blah darkness. Blah blah blah light. Blah blah blah Necromongers. Blah blah blah Kore. Almost everyone looked at Jack whenever the word "Kore" was mentioned with soft eyes. She must be tired of it.

After far too long, the speeches stopped and Jack stood up. Six people used the magic carpet to lower Nin into his grave. Then Jack looked over the audience again.

"Our brother's life has ended," she said in a voice that carried easily. "But life prevails." She turned to the golden boy and held out her hand. He pulled a knife from his belt and handed it to her. Riddick went very tense. Once again, she looked over the audience, stopping when she got to him. She shook her head slightly.

"Blood binds us," she said, clearly. Sliced the knife across her right palm, turned her hand over, and let the blood drip into the grave. "The blood that flowed through his veins, still flows through ours." There was a sigh from the audience.
"What the fuck is she doing?" Riddick hissed to Eris.

"It's their religion, Riddick," he whispered back. "It's none of our business."

Golden boy went to his knees. Jack touched her bleeding palm to his head. He stood, picked up a handful of dirt, and tossed into the grave.

"It's freaky," Riddick hissed again. A woman knelt. Jack touched her head too. The woman stood and tossed another handful of dirt into the grave and walked away.

Eris snorted, softly. "Did you notice what the Necromongers believed?"

"If she goes in that hole, I'm gonna kill every mother fucker here."

"Then they definitely won't let you near any canapés. Shall we get in line?" Riddick snorted. Stood, and started forward. "Riddick, it's the only way around the force-" Eris started.

"Wanna check something." Riddick reached out and touched the forcefield. Closed his eyes and pushed. There was a slight tingle, then he was through. He grinned at the noise Eris made. "Not much for queues," he called, striding towards the grave, enjoying the sudden flurry of activity behind him. Jack rolled her eyes at him.

Riddick drew up short a little more than arm's reach away. "You're bleeding," he said, low and rumbly. Like she liked it. Once upon a time.

Jack raised her hand, palm up. "You here for a taste?"

You offering? He started to say. Managed to cut it off. He rubbed his forehead, frustrated. "No, Ja—Kyra. Just wanna make sure you're okay. That this – this is okay."

One of the mourners touched her arm. She turned to him abruptly. The man dropped to his knees. She gazed down at him for a moment, then very carefully placed her hand on his forehead, held it there for a few seconds. As she took it off, he stood. Bowed slightly, gave Riddick a nod, then added another handful of dirt to the grave.

"We're making this up," she said, lightly. "Mostly." A woman dropped to her knees. Jack touched her the same way she had the man.

"You're losing a lot of blood," he said, feeling inane.

She sighed. "My special talent," she said, softly. Looked up at the golden boy. "Gwydion, can you take over?"

Golden boy nodded. "Absolutely."

Jack looked up at Riddick, a strange look in her eye. Took a step towards him. "Walk me to the nurse?"

"You bet." He offered her his arm. She almost didn't hesitate before she took it with her uncut hand. They walked in silence through the graveyard. Riddick was very aware of her bare feet, picking their careful way through the grass, very aware of all the eyes on them. "I'm sorry . . . about Nin."

She sighed again. "Yeah. He was a good guy, all things said and done. Saved the galaxy and all that."

He snorted. "All things said and done?"
She withdrew slightly. Frustrating. "It was a wacky time," she said, distantly.

"Missed you," he said, softly. They arrived at a small table. The nurse used some piece of equipment Riddick didn't recognize to clean and seal the cut. There was an awkward pause.

"Got time for a walk?" Riddick asked.

"Mum-" the nurse started. Jack quelled her with a look.

"Sure."

They walked quietly for a while. Riddick was acutely aware that people were following them. "So, golden boy, what's up with him?"

"Huh?"

"The guy standing behind you with a big old knife in his hand?"

"Oh. Gwydion. He's Nin's . . . heir, I guess."

"Don't look like any son of Nin's."

"They do things differently here." She hesitated. "Nin wants me to marry him."
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_No fuckin' way_, Riddick thought. Almost without his intent, his other hand found hers, pressed it into his arm. "You fall for him?"

She snorted. "Just met him. He won a contest or something."

"For you?"

She snorted again. Didn't exactly answer. "Nin spent sixty years turning me into a goddess." She shrugged elaborately. "Into the living symbol of their civilization. Of-" she stopped, abruptly. "Of what they needed, he thought. Dion's cool. He could have – could have taken advantage. He didn't. I like him."

He grunted. "You gonna do it?"

She shrugged again. "I'm – I'm kinda tired of fulfilling other people's fantasies." He squeezed her fingers. "Last time I did something I really wanted to do was stab Zhylaw."

"Liked that." That got him a grin.

"Ever since – ever since then, other people have been pulling my strings. Zhylaw. You. Nin . . ." Her voice wandered off.

"Now?"

She shrugged. After a long time, he cleared his throat. "None of my business, but you and Nin . . . were you . . ."

"Were we what?" she said, guilelessly.

"You know. Together. Fu – having sex."

She laughed. "No." Something dark passed over her face. "No, I haven't - we never did."

"He was really old," he said, not unhappily.

"Yeah. Not just that. I mean, it's not like I'm young. I counted. I think I'm 33."

"That's not old."

She shivered. "Older than I thought I'd get." She looked at the grave. "I wasn't – I wasn't a real person to him. Maybe a little when we were in your rooms. But even then – even then, I think I was a symbol. Something alive. Something he thought he could love. I kissed him once, that time you drugged me so I'd 'relax.'" She shot him a look. "That's still-" She stopped abruptly. "He thought you
were going to kill me." Riddick grunted. "Then he knew I was dead. He spent decades turning me into a cult hero. Then I was here and . . . " her voice wandered off. "Kore's his grandmother, you know, sort of? I'm not really Kore Risen, but to him. . . " she shuddered slightly. "I can't imagine how weird it was for him, seeing me again. I think it took a lot for him not to just lock me up in a tower somewhere." She shivered again.

Riddick took off his jacket, draped it around her shoulders. Took the opportunity to squeeze them. "Yeah," he said, softly. "So what's with all the body guards? All for me?"

"They're always around."

"Hard being a little goddess?"

Something dark passed over her face. "Yeah. Sometimes."

"Anyone try anything?"

She snorted. "Yeah. They usually don't get close."

_Usually? "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Ah." She looked at him sideways. "Yeah. I did. But . . . Nin was editing our letters."

He felt his jaw twitch. "What happened to the folks who tried stuff?"

She swallowed. "Nin wouldn't tell me. I don't think it was nice."

He stared into the sky. "Huh." There was an awkward silence. "Whyda think Nin let them turn _me_ into a hero?"

She made a grateful sound. "Yeah. He thought all those kids Eris made from you raping my corpse needed to have a hero as a father. Plus, it sorts slid into the mythology. Me as this redemptive heroine, leading people out of darkness. You as the legendary dark warrior, the man who killed death itself and stole his throne, redeemed by your love for the dead girl."

Riddick grunted again. They walked quietly. She looked at him sideways. "You ever tempted?"

_All the time, babe. "What do you mean?"

"To be the dark legend again?"

He chuckled. "Yeah. A few times."

She nodded, thoughtfully. "You know, I never even finished high school? I mean, I was the Death Goddess of the Underverse. They call me Kore's Emissary here. I helped kill the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers. I carried the sun." She looked up at the sky with a strange smile. "I've got tutors now. They almost manage to not show how fucking shocked they are at what I don't know. What I have trouble learning. They're all so much smarter than me here. Everyone's nice, but man . . ."

Riddick snorted. "Why don't you leave?"

"Nin said no."

"You're a grown up, Jack."

"I don't think that's the problem." She looked back at the blond boy who had stood over her at the
grave. He raised the sword in a type of salute. "Dunno if they'll let me leave," she said lightly. "Goddess mascot. Still locked up. Just a bigger cage."

"So not a problem."

"Huh?"

"Kid. I am – I was the Lord Marshal of the Necromongers. I can take you anywhere." He wrapped an arm around her and pushed and they were a half mile away.

"Jesus!" she laughed. "Oh man. They're gonna freak."

"Come with me."

She had a strange look on her face. "Riddick . . . I've been locked up for most of my life. What are you offering?"

"What do you want?"

She didn't answer directly. "If I go with you, am I just exchanging the prettiest, biggest, most comfortable prison any girl could want, aside from occasional terrifying interludes, for being effectively locked in a colder and smaller one with you?"

He grunted. "Look. I'm not talkin' forever. Just – just wanna have some time to catch up. I miss you. Bring a couple of your bodyguards if you want. I'm not – you can have your own room and everything. Hell, I can get you your own Furyan bodyguards; turns out that's what we were genetically engineered for in the first place. They love fightin' me. Guess takin' down your father's a big deal to them."

Once again, she didn't answer directly. "You guys were designed as bodyguards?"

"Yeah. Old empire. Turns out we took them down too."

She laughed. "Huh. I didn't know that."

"It's all a rich tapestry."

She could hear shouting. With a sigh she hit the communicator on her wrist. "I'm fine, Nin."

"Nin?"

"Head of security today. Nin's son. And," she hesitated, "and mine."

He grunted. "You meet any of our kids?"

"A few of our grandkids. But most of ours aren't on Kore. Nin used your genes . . . sparingly."

"All your kids are mine, you know. That mitochondria thing."

"Yeah. Guess that's true. Sort of. You're everyone's other grandmother." Their eyes met. She swallowed. "Look. I love you. I'll always love you. But you did some fuckin' scary shit to me."

"I know." He hesitated. "Do you want me to disappear?"

Her adrenaline spiked. "Oh god." She stared at the sky. "That'd be a hell of an ending."
"Is it the one you want?"

"I don't think so. I think it would make me crazy. It did make me crazy, last time. Turned me into something I don't want to be."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Just – just don't do it again. Don't disappear. And just don't . . . don't be a dick."

"Kid, you blew up all my stuff last time. I'm not gonna piss you off."

She snorted. "I did, didn't I?"

"Yeah. I'm not a complete idiot, you know. I don't make the same mistakes twice. Come with me and I'll be . . ." he dropped his voice suggestively. "Nice."

"I'm not your girlfriend."

There was a long silence. He drew back slightly. "I know." He stared at the sky. "You're probably too old for me anyway."

She laughed, chokingly, half turned so they were facing. Ran a hand over his forearm. Her eyes softened. "But – look. The official mourning period for Nin is three months. I've got stuff I gotta – stuff I'm going to – do."

He nodded. Her fingers on his arm felt right.


_Something?_ "Do you want me too?"

She looked at the sky. She looked at the grave. She looked at him. Her fingers tightened on his arm again. "$I do. Are you – are you with me this time?"

He put an arm around her waist, letting his palm rest on the sweet spot. He could feel the scar through the thin fabric, and for an instant, it felt like it was burning. Her face turned up to his, a little hopeful, a little afraid. Like she had just remembered all he had to do was push. He let his hand slip off the sweet spot and down to her hip. She relaxed slightly.

He nodded. Leaned very close to her face, close enough to breathe her breath. It felt right.

"I was always with you."

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