More Worlds To See

by kirallie

Summary

Poor Harry is still stuck working for Death. But he knows one day he'll make it home. Till then he'll save as many as he can.
"You're gonna come with us."

"Excuse me?"

You like ships. You don't seem to be looking at the destinations. What you care about is the ships, and mine's the nicest." Kaylee grinned as she stood up as the Shepard stopped to look the ship over.

"She don't look like much."

"Well, she'll fool ya'. You ever sail in a Firefly?" She walked over, twirling her parasol.

"Long before you were crawling. Not an aught three, though. Didn't have the extenders, tended to shake."

"So, uh, how come you don't care where you're going?"

"Cause how you get there is the worthier part."

"Are you a missionary?"

"I guess... I'm a Shepherd, from the Southdown Abbey. Book, I'm called Book. Been out of the world for a spell. Like to walk it a while, maybe bring the word to them as need it told."
“Well, I'm Kaylee. This is Serenity, and she's the smoothest ride from here to Boros for anyone who can pay.” She paused a beat, worried. “Can you pay, or...?”

“Well, I've got a little cash, and, uh...” He picked up a small wooden box from his luggage. He showed her the contents and she went a little bit wide-eyed, eyeing the contents lustfully.

“Oh, grampa...”

“I never married.” He argued even as he handed over the money to join them.

Kaylee looked around at the sound of someone chuckling to see a guy around her age watching, a bag slung over one shoulder and she smiled. “Looking for a ride?”

“Where’re you headed?” He asked, walking closer.

“Boros.” She answered as he eyed the ship.

Harry studied the ship, taking in the name, Serenity. He’d been there, doing what he could for the wounded on both sides. That battle had been hell and the amount of time it had taken for relief ships to arrive had seriously made him mad. He dug out the money and handed it over to her, getting a grin. “Boros sounds good for now.” He admitted.

“Then welcome aboard...?”

“Harry Potter, miss.”

“I’m Kaylee, mechanic. Is this all your luggage?”

“I travel light.” he headed up the ramp to wait in the cargo hold, nodding in greeting to the Shepard. A while later they were joined by a serious, well dressed young man and then another man in travel worn clothes.

“Welcome aboard, Mr...”
“Dobson.” The travel worn man answered Kaylee.

“Dobson!” She grinned.

“Thank you.”

“We just gotta keep our heads down, do the job, pray there ain't no more surprises.” Mal told Zoe and Jayne as they approached the ship while Wash used the mule to load up a large box.

“Please be careful with that.”

“Mal, this is Simon. Simon, this is our captain.” Kaylee introduced the two men who sixed each other up.

“Captain Reynolds.” Simon greeted.

“Welcome aboard.” He turned to Kaylee. “This all we got?” She nodded and he moved into the cargo bay as the passengers stored their luggage.

“Now we have a boatful of citizens right on top of our... stolen cargo.” She whispered. “That's a fun mix.”

“Ain't no way in the 'verse they could find that compartment, even—“ He cut off as Dobson walked by. “Even if they were lookin' for it.”

“Why not?”

Mal was thrown by the question. “Cause...?” He offered and she shook her head.

“Oh yeah, this is gonna go great.”
“If anyone gets nosy, just, you know...shoot 'em.”

“Shoot 'em?”

“Politely.” Mal answered even as Wash called over the intercom that Inara had docked. He moved towards the controls for the cargo bay doors. “Kaylee, I’m locking it up!”

Kaylee looked around once, grabbing her folding chair and parasol. “All aboard...” She whispered before moving in, the doors closing behind her.

Harry stood with the other passengers in the galley as the crew joined them.

“Meals are taken up here in the dining area, the kitchen is pretty much self-explanatory, you're welcome to eat what there is any time, what there is, is pretty standard fare, I guess, protein in all the colours of the rainbow. We do have sit-down meals, the next one being at about 1800.” Mal explained, obviously not comfortable speaking to them all like he was. Harry figured Serenity wasn’t usually a passenger ship.

“I think Shepherd Book has offered to help me prepare something.”

“You're a Shepherd?”

“Thought the outfit gave it away. Is it a problem?”

“Of course not!” Kaylee denied and then looked at Mal. “It's no problem, 'cause it's not.”

“No.” He agreed and then looked to the group again. “As I said, you're welcome to visit the dining area any time. Apart from that, I have to ask you to stay in the passenger dorm while we're in the air. The bridge, the engine room, cargo bay -- they're all off limits without an escort.”
“Some of my personal effects are in the cargo bay.” Simon said and Mal nodded.

“I figure you all got luggage you're gonna need to get into. Soon as we're done here we'll be happy to fetch 'em with you. Now I have to tell you all one other thing and I apologize in advance for the inconvenience. Unfortunately, we've been ordered by the Alliance to drop some medical supplies off on Whitefall. It's the fourth moon on Athens, a little out of our way, but we should have you on Boros no more than a day off schedule.”

“What medical supplies?” Harry asked, he doubted there were any medical supplies aboard except what was in the ships infirmary.

“I honestly didn't ask.”

“Probably plasma, insulin, whatever they ain't got enough of on the border moons.” Zoe answered.

“Alliance says jump...”

“All right.”

“Zoe, you wanna take 'em to the cargo bay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Anything else you need, just...ask. We, uh, we're here to serve.” Mal and Wash turned around and walked toward the door leading to the bridge while everyone else headed for the cargo bay except Harry who headed for the passenger dorm to grab a bed. “Did you send word to Patience?”

“Ain't heard back yet. Didn't she shoot you one time?”

“Everybody's makin' a fuss.”

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Harry nodded as the Shepard joined him in the room and took the other bed. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No problem Shepard. Going to stay on Boros or keep travelling?”

“I don’t know yet; I’ll have to see what happens. And you?”

“Haven’t found anywhere I want to stay in a long time.” Harry admitted. “I like travelling. And thank you very much for supplying the fresh food.”

“That was my pleasure. And what do you think of Serenity?”

“So far? She’s a good ship with a crew very loyal to their captain.” Book nodded, he’d seen that too. They fell quiet and each read for a while until a noise in the corridor had them both sitting up. Harry put his book aside and slipped off the bed, moving silently to the door, Book following him. they saw Dobson and then they saw the gun he was carrying. “Stay here or go get the crew.” Harry hissed before slipping out to follow the other man. He saw him grab something from his bag and use it before heading for the cargo bay. Harry waited, pulling up a mental map of a firefly before taking another hall.

“Forget your toothpaste?” Mal slugged him, sending him sprawling.

“Are you out of your mind?” Simon demanded, one hand against his lip as he sprawled on the floor.

“Yeah, just about. What'd you tell them?”

Simon stood up and stared in confusion. “Tell who?”

Mal drew his gun, putting it in Simon's face. “I have exactly no time for games. What do they know?”

“You're a lunatic.”
“And you're a gorram fed.”

“Hate to say it, Captain, but you've got the wrong man.” Harry called as he joined them. Both men turned to him. A beat, and both Mal and Simon realised Harry was looking behind them. Slowly, they turned the other way, and understand his meaning. Dobson stood on the stairs, holding a gun on Mal.

“Son of a bitch.”

“Drop that firearm, Captain Reynolds.”

Mal hesitated and then obeyed. “This is not my best day ever.”

Dobson moved the gun to pointed it at Simon. “Simon Tam, you are bound by law to stand down.”

Mal took a moment to realise the man was after Simon. “What -- the doctor? Oh. Is there-is there a reward?”

Dobson ignored Mal, focusing on Simon. The bumbling traveller was now a very intense, tightly wound cop. “Get on the ground. Get on the ground!”

“Lawman, you are making a mistake.” Simon tried.

“I think you best get on the ground, son. The man seems a mite twitchy.”

“I think everybody could stand to calm down a bit.” Harry offered, slowly moving towards the armed man and sending a wandless calming charm at him.

“This isn't your business.”

“The boy's not going anywhere, lawman. It's pretty cold outside and I doubt he can hold his breath
Mal moved casually for his gun. “Not to worry. Put Lord Fauntleroy here in a passenger cell -- won’t make a peep ’til you hand him over to –“

Dobson pointed the gun at Mal again. “Get the hell away from that weapon! You think I’m a complete backbirth? You’re carrying a fugitive across interplanetary borders, and you think I actually believe you’re bringing medical supplies to Whitefall? As far as I care, everyone on this ship is culpable.”

“Well now. That has an effect on the landscape.” Mal said and Harry sighed, of course this guy was resistant to magic, he couldn’t be that lucky. But he did silently reinforce the walls, not wanting a shot to pierce the hull if people started shooting.

“Please, we’re very close to true stupidity here –“ Book called as he entered the bay and Harry glanced around, spotting Jayne and Zoe nearby.

“I got a cruiser en route for intercept, so talk all you want. You got about twenty minutes.”

“Might have less than that.” Mal stated coolly.

“Yeah, threaten me…”

“For God’s sake –“

“You think I wouldn’t shoot a Shepherd? Back off!” Dobson yelled to him and Harry as they moved to bracket him.

Mal grabbed Simon -- and everybody's shouting – “Just take the kid!”

‘Get your hands off me –“

“Stand the hell down –“
“Everybody just stop it! Stop it!”

Kaylee walked in through the other door. “Why's everybody –“ Dobson spun and fired. Kaylee stumbled backwards, slamming into the wall – “What...” She put her hands to her belly, blood running through her fingers. Kaylee slumped to the ground as Simon and Harry rushed to her, Mal dove for his weapon, Jayne drew his, Dobson swung to fire at Mal -- -- and Book was in Dobson's face, a brutal jab in the throat as he grabbed his gun-hand whip-quick, twisted and pulled the gun out, cracking Dobson across the face with it in the same motion and Dobson was down in seconds.

“Kaylee!” Inara screamed form the catwalk as the two dark haired men knelt beside her. They worked together to gently settle her on her back and both grimaced at the sight of the wound.

“You have training?” Simon asked.


“A little odd.” She answered, blinking slowly.

Jayne moved toward Dobson with a purpose, gun in hand, and Book turned to face him. “Outta the way.”

“You're not killing this man.”

‘Not right away...”

“He's no threat.”

Kaylee was whimpering. “Why did he...?”

Simon opened Kaylee's jumpsuit, examining the wound. He shared a look with Harry who nodded, agreeing with his unspoken assessment, it was not good.
“Oh, well, that ain’t hardly a mosquito bite.” Mal offered her a smile.

“Big mosquito...” She mumbled as Inara rushed over, joining them. Inara pulled off her robe and bunched it under Kaylee's head.

“Move.” Jayne ordered and Book shook his head.

“Not gonna happen. “

Jayne raised his gun. “I ain't joking with you, Preacher.”

“Jayne!” She had her gun out, pointed at Jayne. “Just tie him up. Do it.” A moment, and Jayne holstered his piece, moving to get some duct tape.


“Are you asking me to dance...?” Her eyes rolled back.

“She's going into shock.” Harry snapped, checking her pulse.

“Kaylee, mei-mei, you have to focus.” Inara urged.

“The gun, Shepherd. Please.” Zoe held her hand out and he handed her the gun.

Simon pushed on Kaylee's stomach and she screamed. “The infirmary working?”

“Yeah, we got it stocked.” The three men moved to pick her up without jostling her.

“Captain, we've been hailed by a Cruiser. Ordered to stay on course and dock for prisoner transfer.” Wash called over the comm.
Mal and Simon looked at each other. Simon rose and stepped away from Kaylee. He was tense, but surprisingly calm. “Change course. Run.”

“Hell with you. You brought this down on us, I’m dumping you with the law.”

“Mal…” Inara tried to interrupt but the two ignored her even as Harry took his shirt off to use it to slow the bleeding.

“She's dying.” Simon pointed out.

“You're not gonna let her.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you can't.”

“No way the Feds'll let us walk.” Zoe added and it as true.

“Then we dump him in the shuttle and leave him for them.”

“Everybody's so mad…” Kaylee mumbled.

“It's okay, baby.”

“Do you know what a stomach wound does to a person?” Simon asked.

“I surely do.”

“Then you know how crucial the next few minutes are. She needs a surgeon, not a medic.” He glanced at Harry who nodded. Oh, he had the skills after being a doctor many times but they didn’t know that.
“You let her die, you'll never make it to the Feds.” Zoe snarled.

“She'll still be dead.”

“You rich kids, you think your lives are the only thing that matters. What'd you do? Kill your folks for the family fortune?”

“I don't kill people!”

“Then do your job!”

“Turn the ship around!”

“Enough! Captain, do it.” Harry snapped at the bickering pair. “She doesn’t have time to waste.”

“Don't ever tell me what to do on my –“ Mal started but Kaylee screamed again as Harry pressed firmly. “Zoe. Change course.”

“Help me get her up.” Simon ordered and they lifted her between them, heading for the infirmary.

Zoe hit the com. “Wash, change course and go for hard burn. We're runnin’.”

Harry took his bloody gloves off and leant against the counter, tired from over five hours of surgery.

“I can't do anything more until she stabilizes.”

“Will she?” Mal asked, he hadn’t left her side so they’d let him stay and monitor her vitals while they
had worked to remove the bullet shards and fix the organs that had been hit.

“I can't say yet.” Simon admitted.

“I want know what's going on here.” Inara looked between the men from where she’d been hovering in the doorway.

“Well then why don't we find out?” He moved quickly from the room.

“What are you... no! No!” Simon followed at a run.

Harry remained with Kaylee, unwilling to leave her when she was still so close to death. He gently brushed some hair from her face, he liked her, she was so sunny and generally nice. He wouldn’t let her die. It was a shock a few minutes later when Inara and Simon returned with a naked and obviously disorientated girl who Simon quickly sedated. “Who?” he looked at Inara.

“Simon’s sister River.”

“Huh. Well this trip is definitely not boring.”

You’re different.” Harry looked over at where River had been sleeping but now she was staring at him.

“Oh?”

“So quiet, everyone else is noisy and I can’t shut it out.” She whimpered and Harry moved to gently clasp her hands.

“Shh, it’s alright, just focus on me.” He whispered and then he gently reached out to her mind, finding she was wide open. “Those monsters.” He hissed and she stared at him in shock.
“You’re like me?”

“This is the captain.” The com came on and they fell silent. “We’re passing another ship. Looks to be Reavers. From the size, probably a raiding party. Could be they’re headed somewhere particular, could be they’ve already hit someone and they’re full up. So everyone stay calm. We try to run; they’ll have to chase us. It’s their way. We’re holding course. We should be passing ’em in a minute, so we’ll see what they do. Zoe, you come on up to the bridge.”

River whimpered and Harry soothed her gently. “It’ll be okay; I won’t let them hurt you or anyone else on board. Promise. Just go back to sleep.” Okay so magic was cheating but the poor girl needed sleep to allow her mind to try and heal.

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“You are psychotic.” Wash managed to get out past laughter.

“No, but you should have seen his face... Oh... I'm a bad man.”

“And Kaylee's really okay?”

“Yeah. Tell the truth, I didn't expect her to heal this quick. Doctor and Potter know their trade; I'll give them that.”

Wash looked at the console as it beeped. “We're being hailed.”

“That'd be Patience. We're close enough for vid. Put her up.”

“Malcolm Reynolds?”

“Hello, Patience.”
“I have to say I didn't look to be hearing from you anytime soon.”

“Well, we may not have parted on the best of terms. I realize certain words were exchanged. Also, certain... bullets. But that’s air through the engine. It's past. We're business people. Besides, your days of fightin' over salvage rights are long behind you, what I hear. What are you, mayor now?”

“Just about. You telling the truth about that cargo? 'Cause your asking price is a bit too reasonable for that much treasure.”

“It's imprinted -- Alliance -- hence the discount.”

“Oh, government goods, huh?”

“That doesn't work for ya, no harm. Just thought you could use --“

“Alliance don't scare me. Just collating data, as they say. I like that you're up front about it. We can deal. I'll upload coordinates for a rendezvous point outside of town.”

“See you in the world.” He hit a button, ending the talk. He stared down at the console for a long beat. “I believe that woman's planning to shoot me again.”

“She meant to pay you, she'd'a haggled you down some.” Jayne agreed.

“Just a little effort to hide it would've been --“ Wash fell silent as Mal knocked his dinosaurs off the console.

“Sir, we don't have to deal with her.”

“Yes, we do.”

“Here's a little concept I been workin' on. Why don't we shoot her first?”
“It is her turn.”

“That doesn't get us what we need, either.’

“There's moons on this boat we ain't seen. We could try our luck – “

“Our luck?” Mal snapped angrily. “You notice anything particular about our luck these past few days? Any kind of pattern? You depend on luck, you end up on the drift -- no fuel, no prospects.... beggin’ for Alliance make-work. And towed out to the scrap belt. That ain't us. Not ever. Patience has got the money to pay, and she will, one way or another. There's obstacles in our path, and we're gonna deal with them. One by one. We'll get through this. We will.”


“He took her.” Kaylee gasped out in pain as Harry walked back into the infirmary. He picked her up and gently set her back on the bed.

“Dobson and River?” He asked and she nodded. “I'll handle it; you stay in that bed.” He ordered and she nodded as he quickly covered her with the blanket before heading for the cargo bay. Laws existed for a reason yes but this lawman was taking it too far. Then again from what Simon had told them the Alliance was moving even deeper into corruption. How did they think they’d get away with what they were doing to the children for very long? They were lucky no one found out before Simon. And what the hell were his parents doing to not act for their daughters’ sake? He moved silently across the catwalks until he was above Dobson and then he dropped down on top of the other man, sending them both sprawling but he recovered faster, moving both guns out of reach even as Dobson scrambled up. River backed away while Harry attacked, letting his anger out on the Fed.

“Reavers! Reavers incoming and headed straight for us. We are in the air in one minute.” Wash’s voice came over the comm and Harry grimaced. Simon came running into the bay and grabbed River, pulling her further away as Book joined them, blood trickling down his face. Harry kicked Dobson down the ramp and onto the dirt even as three horses thundered up. A single shot sounded and the Fed dropped even as Mal strode on board, holstering his gun. Harry nodded and moved back as they all came up the ramp.

“Wash we’re on!” Zoe called into the comm as the ramp closed.
“The lawman said they'd keep looking for her. Something about her brain being all special. Important to the Alliance brass. Sooner we dump them two, the better.”

“Suppose so.” Jayne got up to leave. “Funny how the lawman got out of his room. You having tied him up so well and all.”

“I didn't have nothing to do with that. Anyway it all turned out just fine. Buzzards're the only ones gonna find him...”

“But he did try to make a deal with you, right?” He looked at Jayne, who said nothing. “How come you didn't turn on me, Jayne?”

“Money wasn't good enough.”

“What happens when it is?”

Jayne smiled. “Well... that'll be an interesting day.”

“Imagine it will.”

Jayne left, rudely bumping into Simon, who was on his way in. Simon came up next to Mal and saw Mal's arm was a bit bloody.

“You need me to look at that?”

“Just a graze.”

“So, where do you plan on dumping us?”

“There's places you might be safe. You want the truth, though, you're probably safer on the move.” He turned to face him. “And we never stop moving.”
“I'm confused. No wait, I -- I think maybe you're confused.”

“It may have become apparent to you that the ship could use a medic. You ain't weak. I don't know how bright you are, top three percent, but you ain't weak and that's not nothing. You live by my rule, you keep your sister from doing anything crazy, you could maybe find a place here. 'Til you find a better.”

“I'm trying to put this as delicately as I can... How do I know you won't kill me in my sleep?”

“You don't know me, son. So let me explain this to you once: If I ever kill you, you'll be awake, you'll be facing me, and you'll be armed.”

Simon smiled slightly. “Are you always this sentimental?”

“Had a good day.”

“You had the Alliance on you, criminals and savages... half the people on the ship have been shot or wounded including yourself, and you're harbouring known fugitives.”

Mal looked out at the black sky. “We're still flying.”

“That's not much.”

Mal answered, almost to himself. “It's enough.” A beat, then Simon went. Mal just kept looking ahead. “What about you, leaving or staying?”

Harry stepped onto the bridge and moved up beside the Captain. “Leaving at Boros, some business’ come up I have to deal with.”

“Thought you looked familiar so I looked you up, Lieutenant.”
Harry shrugged. “That was six years ago. I have to ask, why name your ship after the battle we lost?”

“Cause it felt right.”

“Well I hope I run into you again Captain. You’ve got a doctor now but if you need a medic…”

Mal nodded and Harry left the bridge.

Harry waved as the crew finished loading up before turning and disappearing into the crowds of the docks on Boros. He made his way to the more affluent cities and then booked passage for New Cardiff, Londinium. He’d been there once shortly after arriving in this universe to get a feel for the government. At the time he had found it corrupt, as most governments were, but it worked well enough. Then the Unification war had started and he’d chosen to join the Independents, wanting to know what they were fighting for. And he’d found he believed in their cause. In the last six years he’d stuck to the boarder planets, using his medical skills to help people and pay for passage most of the time. But now he was going back to do something he had only done once or twice, confront a government with an ultimatum, clean up or he’d do it for them.

Harry walked towards the city inside a city that was the Parliament buildings and their protective barracks. No one paid any attention to him as he walked right through the front gates, invisible to even the cameras that were always watching. He walked right into the room where Parliament was meeting along with several Department Heads, sealing the doors and making sure all weapons were inoperable before becoming visible. There were gasps and calls for guards before Harry snarled. “SIT DOWN!” unsurprisingly they did. “A government is meant to protect its citizens, to do what is best for them. Congratulations, you have failed miserably.” He placed a pensieve down and began playing the memories for all to see, watching their reactions. Only River had known his plan from Serenity and she had willingly shared her memories of the Academy and the torture there on the chance that it could help. One way or another the Alliance was going to change.

“Mal! You have to see this! Everyone!” Wash shouted and they all scrambled onto the bridge. They all watched in shock as the government admitted to the real reasons behind the Unification War, their
various war crimes, the Academy, everything. A pardon for Simon and River Tam as read out as well, much to his shock. River just smiled secretively, Harry had done it.

Simon and River stood at the bottom of Serenity’s ramp, staring at the couple across from them. There were no hugs or tears of joys as two abandoned children stared at the parents who had chosen the government and safety over their own children. In the end River turned and went back aboard without saying a word and Simon followed her.

“Children are the greatest gift you can be given and you squandered that gift. You chose to listen blindly to a corrupt government instead of your own flesh and blood.” A soft voice stated and they turned to see a Companion watching them. She then moved and boarded the ship as well. The Tams just stood and watched as the ship took off with their children aboard.

“Harry!” River called, laughing as she threw herself at the medic who laughed and caught her.

“Been practicing?”

“Every day.” She smiled and curled into his side as he wrapped an arm around her. She led him back to the ship and he smiled at seeing her. After two years of ‘fixing’ the government it was good to see the ship that had started it all.

“It’s Harry!” Kaylee yelled as she spotted them and soon the whole crew was there to say hello.

“Where’s Book?”

“He left a month ago to settle down with a whole mining town to teach.” Inara answered and Harry stared in shock at Kaylee’s rounded stomach before glancing at a very content Simon.

“Congratulations.”
“Thanks Harry.”

Of course then Zoe came into sight with a baby on her hip and Harry shook his head. “I think I missed a lot. That’s if there’s room Captain?”

Mal made a show of thinking it over before nodding and holding his hand out to Harry who grasped it. “Welcome aboard Mr Potter.

THE END
He would think this was a very boring world…except they had one thing no other he had been too had. Dinosaurs. They had actual, living, dinosaurs. Oh it was very hush hush, companies and governments trying to cover up what had happened but he’d gotten access, as an excellent pilot working on a genetics degree Her Majesty’s Government had let him see what records they had. Once he’d graduated he’d left the Air Force to pursue another degree as there was no access to either island except for people employed by a Mr Masrani. So that was his goal, to get employed and see what prehistoric delights lived in the twenty first century. With his knowledge of vastly superior science that would be no problem. Tomorrow his final paper would be published and it should be enough to get the interest of the company. He knew it would mean being employed in a lab but he knew he would get to see some at some point.

Harry got off the boat, backpack over one shoulder, and stared around at the massive construction site. Despite all the trouble caused by the islands they were attempting to build a park, again. Hopefully this one would work and no one would die. A horn got his attention and an ATV pulled up.

“Potter?”

“That’s me.”

“Name’s Jim. Hop on and I’ll get you to the employee housing section so you can freshen up and eat. You have a four o’clock meeting with Miss Dearing and Dr Wu.” Harry got on behind him and held on, watching the various construction going on until they left the area through a gate and came to a series of rather bland houses. “This is you.” Jim parked and Harry got off, accepting the key.
“I’ll pick you up at quarter to.”

“Thanks.” Harry gave a wave and went to see his new home. Everything was rather bland but top of the line, Masrani wanted his employees happy after all. He put his backpack away and noticed the rest of his belongings had already been delivered. It was tempting to cheat in unpacking but he didn’t think it worth the risk. He grabbed some clean clothes and headed for the shower. He dressed in clean light weight slacks and a shirt before grabbing a sandwich and exploring his house. It wouldn’t take much to make it homey, though it would be nice once the construction was all done and it was quieter. Jim picked him up and took him to one of the complete sections, then again the command centre and labs were necessary to get everything else up and running. He signed in and accepted his shiny id badge before heading for the indicated elevator and heading up to meet his bosses.

Claire was surprised by how young the Doctor who got off the elevator looked. She’d seen a picture but had assumed it was a few years old, but his birthdate had been there too. Only twenty-four and he held two doctorates, one in palaeontology and the other in genetic engineering, it made him a perfect fit for the park. Then again with the media the islands had gotten over the years there were several people who had begun tailoring their education in the hope of working with dinosaurs. “Welcome to Jurassic World Dr Potter.” She held her hand out and he shook it firmly.

“Thank you Ms Dearing.”

“This is Doctor Henry Wu, the head or the department.” She introduced the two and they shook hands. “Take a seat and we will discuss your position here.”

Harry collapsed on his bed, mind spinning. The labs were top of the line for this time period and he was looking forward to working in them. What he didn’t like was his boss. Dr Wu felt…. off. He was definitely hiding something, and from Ms Dearing as well. With the cursed Potter luck, he knew whatever it was would come back to bite him at some point. Without reading the man’s mind there was nothing he could do. For now, they would be working on creating several species of dinosaur to be ready for when the park opened, species that would draw crowds. Sadly, he wouldn’t get to work on a T-Rex, no dear old Suzie was an original inhabitant and there would be no more until she died of old age. They had another four years until the park opened to the public and he was looking forward to having all that time without loads of people on the island. Apparently there were even some dinosaurs roaming the island from the original park, mostly small herbivores and he wanted to go and see them at some point, not like they were any real threat to him after all.
Harry watched as the egg cracked, practically vibrating in excitement. His first dinosaur was about to hatch! “Come on, there’s a girl.” He called softly and finally a small head broke through and he smiled even as he picked the hatchling up to gently clean. Microceratus may be the smallest dinosaurs being bred for the island but he didn’t care, he was just glad they were hatching. He moved the new baby to the crèche and waited for the rest to hatch.

“What about some sort of water based dinosaur?” Alex asked and they all considered it, bring up information on different species on their tablets. Soon there was discussion on what type to try and where to have the exhibit. Various types were suggested such as Liopleurodon, Sulcusuchus, Thalassomedon and Ichthyosaurs. A Megalodon was even suggested but eventually discarded as too big, not to mention the threat of such a massive shark should it manage to get into open water. In the end it took three hours for them to agree to trying to bring back a Mosasaurus. Technically it wasn’t a dinosaur but it was big and impressive, a marine predator that would definitely bring in visitors. Wu signed off on it and then left and Harry went to hand the paperwork to Claire so that the engineers would know they needed a new kind of enclosure. In the end the sealed off the lagoon, giving the future animal 11,000,000 L to live in. Even a fully grown Mosasaurus should be fine in it.

“Hi, Owen Grady.”

“Harry Potter, welcome to Jurassic World.” They shook hands. “So you’re the crazy person they brought in to work with Raptors.”

“I’ve worked with a lot of animals.”

“I know, I’ve seen your CV and you are qualified but dinosaurs are nothing like modern animals.” He warned and Grady nodded as they walked through the labs, heading for a quarantined hatchery. “So ex-Navy?”

“Yeah, you?”
“Royal Air Force, joined as soon as I was eligible. Got my genetics degree through them. Quite to do palaeontology. I admit, there are days I miss flying.”

“Give me a boat any day.” They chuckled and came to a door.

“Right, your employee id gives you access here but none of the other labs.” Harry swiped his card and opened the door, watching as Owen instantly focused on the six eggs.

“Six?” He hadn’t thought there were meant to be so many.

“Contingency. Despite years of breeding dinosaurs, we still lose some before they hatch and others during infancy. Odds are only three of these will make it to adulthood.” Harry explained as Owen approached the eggs.

He raised a hand and then looked back to Harry. “Can I?”

“Of course.” Harry smiled as Owen gently touched one of the eggs.

“Hello beautiful.” He whispered.

“I’ll leave you to it.”

Harry stood amongst the crowd of staff watching the screens as the first boat load of visitors pulled into the dock. Jurassic World was officially open for business! He watched the excited families pour off the boat and head for the monorail that would bring them into the park proper. From there they would check into the state of the art hotel before festivities began. Every conceivable safety measure was in place, hopefully it would work. If anything happened here, like in the original park, it would be a massacre since they now had visitors. At least he and Owen had managed to convince everyone to keep the Raptors out of the exhibits. Owens four babies had a very secure enclosure well away from the public. His lab was out of the public eye too thankfully, though he would be working the main floor as well. It made him feel like an animal at the zoo and that was when he worked there without visitors! Since they didn’t want the docks crowded with staff several monitors around the less public areas had been set up so they could watch the first arrivals. He felt sorry for Claire since she was stuck down there with a bunch of suits and Wu.
Harry shook hands with Mr Hoskins and fought the urge to squeeze tight enough to break the InGen heads hand. If he’d thought what he got of Wu was bad, Vic was even worse. And technically Wu worked for InGen, not Masrani like Harry did. Masrani might own InGen but there was also a board to worry about. Added to that Hoskins interest in the Raptors and Harry had a really bad feeling. Owen had been hired by InGen, but it was obvious that his ‘girls’ were his priority, who knew what would happen if they tried to replace them.

“Guess the rumours are true then?” Harry asked as he walked up to the ‘Cage’. Owen looked up and sighed.

“What’d you hear?”

“Break room.” He answered even as he saw the raptors move to see him. “Hello beauties.” He called and then turned back to their trainer and Alpha. “So?”

“It was a disaster alright! We have nothing in common and…urgh.”

“Technically you do, you both work here.”

“Very funny doc.”

“Sorry. At least you’re out here, you won’t have to see her every day.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, maybe in time when things are calmer round here you can try again.” He offered.
“Doubt it.”

“Come on, steaks and beer, my treat.”

“Thanks.”

“Just grab a shower first.” He grinned and ran back to his bike.

Ms Dearing?” Harry broke into a run as he spotted the distinctive red hair. He dropped to his knees beside her and she groaned in embarrassment. “Where are you hurt?” He asked, carefully scanning her for injuries.

“Left ankle.” She answered even as his scan came back, the bone was cracked. He gently probed the area with his fingers and she yelped.

“What happened?”

“Hoskins, that man… I had to get out of the office for a while and I just started walking.”

“Okay, I’m going to pick you up.” He warned as he slipped an arm under her knees. She stiffened but then wrapped her arms around his neck and he stood. “My house is just over there; I’ll call medical from there.” He explained as he carried her over. He settled her on the couch and then went to call medical and then her assistant so no one would panic over her being missing. Soon a car pulled up and a medic checked her over before moving her to the infirmary for X-rays.

Harry grinned as he watched the first Mosasaurus feeding show from the sidelines. She was finally getting the hang of how they fed her shark and had adapted to the schedule so it meant visitors got more than just seeing her through the windows into the lagoon. She was a beauty and if the worst happened and she ever got into open water at least it was unlikely she would attack humans or boats as she was a bit skittish. The crowds were screaming in delight as they were splashed when she
breached to grab the shark and then slammed back into the water.

“...”

“He wants to what?” Harry asked in utter disbelief and Owen shrugged. “Tell me he was joking.”

“I don’t know. Hoskins seems to want a lot more from this program than just testing how smart by girls are.”

Harry snorted and then drank his beer. “I don’t need any program to tell me any raptor is scarily smart, I’ve seen the reports from Grant and Malcom. Before you they were the most experienced with live Raptors. Plus, I was there when the first lot were bred, before they brought you in. Those three were utter terrors with how they could get into anything. You would have loved them.”

“Sounds like it. What happened to them?” Owen drank his own beer and finished off his steak.

“They died. An idiot came into the labs with a virus and the girls were infected, couldn’t shake it. Vicky died pretty quick but Daisy and Moly ended up being put down as a kindness. Idiot got fired over it too.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Your girls have stronger immune systems, I made sure of it. Dinosaurs weren’t meant to be able to fight off human diseases so we’ve tweaked them all since then.”

“Any other ‘tweaking’? Owen asked warily and Harry shook his head.

“Not in any I’ve handled. All I do is give them the chance to live long, healthy lives. What the others do I’m not sure and there’s been talk…it’s probably nothing but a few of the newbies want to see how much we can do.”

“There’s a scary thought.”
“Oh yeah.”


Harry clapped and cheered with everyone else as Claire blew out the candles on the massive cake. Jurassic World had been open for five years now. There had been a few close calls as a lot of the security measures were experimental but no one had been eaten or even chewed. There’d been injuries due to guest stupidity of course but that happened in all parks. As the staff broke up into groups he joined Owen, Barry and the Raptor crew to eat, he preferred their company to that of his fellow scientists. With the time he spent observing the Raptors they all viewed him as an honorary member of the group.

Harry studied the DNA sequence closely as the computers ran it. They were adding a new species to the Cretaceous Cruise to keep people interested. It was risky adding a predator but Baryonyx liked sushi, not steak so it was considered safe enough. Now all he had to do was get a good enough DNA sample to bring one to life. He’d been searching for a few months and finally he had a promising sample. Oh it wasn’t complete, the never were, but this had far fewer ‘holes’ than any of the others he’d run. So he began working on simulations, using various animals to fill the holes. It took another three weeks but finally he decided that fresh water crocodiles from Australia were the best match. Once that was done he and his team went to work merging the two for real in order to fertilise some eggs. After that all they could do was wait and see what hatched.

“Ms Dearing.” Harry greeted as he spotted her entering the lab.

“Doctor Potter, could I have a moment of your time?”

“Of course.” He saved his work and then followed her out of the labs and into the bamboo forest that was near the Discovery Centre. “What can I do for you?”

“The board has approved a new dinosaur; they’re worried about the drop in visitor numbers.”

“We are still the best visited park in the world, a dip is hardly something to worry about.”
“Maybe. Dr Wu will personally be working on this one but I’d like you to work with Asset Containment in making its enclosure. You work closely with the Raptor handlers so you know better than most what it takes to keep them contained.”

“Just what sort of dinosaur has the board approved? Tell me we aren’t talking a pack of Utahraptor or something? Owen’s girls are bad enough, we don’t need a bigger, deadlier breed of raptor running around.”

“No, not a pack of Utahraptor. They have decided on a genetically engineered species.” She answered and Harry stared at her in shock.

“Are they out of their minds? It’s hard enough figuring out how to handle dinosaurs we have fossils for. They want to make one? Of course it’s going to be a carnivore? Scarier than Suzie? This is a disaster waiting to happen Claire!” Harry paced and gestured as he spoke and she let him.

“Henry knows what he’s doing.”

Harry just shook his head. “This park has managed six years with no major incidents because we learned from Hammonds mistakes. Now they want to make the same mistake he did, assuming you can control an animal you know nothing about.” He turned to head back to his lab.

“This is confidential.” She called and he waved a hand. He was going to go build a bunker under his house for when this blew up in their faces.


“What’s gotten into you lately?” Owen asked as he flipped some burgers, glancing at Harry who was lounging on the stairs to his bungalow.

“Classified info.”

“That bad?”
“The board are idiots and I’m digging a bunker under my house.”

“Oh.”

“I’d also like to borrow your rile to shoot Wu.”

“So new dino.”

“You didn’t hear it from me.” Harry drank his Coke; he didn’t feel like alcohol. He’d considered memory charming the board and Wu into forgetting their stupid idea but that wouldn’t stop them coming up with it again at some point. His bunker was all nice and ready thanks to magic and he had the weapons that could harm something as thick skinned as a dinosaur ready to call to his hand in an instant. “And it’ll be a few years till it’s a real concern. Just…keep your eyes and ears open.”

“Got it.” He served up the burgers and they sat to eat. He’d never thought his best friends on this island would be a crazy Frenchman and a scientist. But Harry wasn’t like the other scientists, maybe because he’d been in the Air Force first, not to mention how young he’d been when hired compared to the others. No, he was a member of the Raptor Gang. His girls even liked the man, always knowing as soon as he was anywhere near their paddock. And Harry was never afraid of them, he respected the girls but he wasn’t afraid of them.

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Over the next few months the labs became a different place as Wu worked on his secret project, sometimes giving others pieces of the puzzle but never enough to figure out what he was doing. Harry didn’t like it at all but there wasn’t much anyone but the board or Masrani could do to change things. Finally, two years after getting the go ahead Henry was all smiles, his eggs had hatched successfully. While everyone else cheered Harry couldn’t help the sinking feeling in his stomach.

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Harry looked over the plans and shook his head. “The walls need to be taller yes, but this enclosure is too small for animals that large. The paddock needs to be at least as large as the T-Rex one if they’re going to be bigger than Suzie, plus there are two of them.”

“Making it that large will take too long.”
“Then put them in a temporary enclosure until it’s finished. It’s like you want something to go wrong. Put invisible fencing around the paddock as well for extra security. And don’t make the doors large enough for an un-sedated animal to get through once fully grown.” And so the debate continued.

Harry looked at the paddock and shook his head, it was bigger than originally planned but not as big as he had recommended. At least it no longer had to hold two. The fact that this dinosaur had killed and eaten its own sibling worried him, killing a sibling if competing for resources was natural, but these two weren’t competing. The only thing he knew was the base genome was a T-Rex, T-Rex’s did not eat their siblings. They lived in family groups! Something was seriously wrong, what else had Wu mixed in? He wouldn’t say, it was ‘classified’. How could he classify it from Claire when she ran the park? Who did Wu really work for?

“Hal Osterly, vice president. Jim Drucker, bad hair. Erica Brand, deserves better. Hal, Jim, Erica. Hal, Jim, Erica. And I am Claire. Three minutes late.” Claire mumbled as she straightened out her clothes. Meeting investors could be tricky and she needed to be at her best for these ones. The doors opened and she smiled. “Welcome to Jurassic World.” She led the three into the labs, ignoring the people watching through the glass. “While year over year, revenue continues to climb, operating costs are higher than ever. Our shareholders have been patient, but let's be honest, no one is impressed by a dinosaur anymore. Twenty years ago, de-extinction was right up there with magic. These days, kids look at a Stegosaurus like an elephant from the city zoo. That doesn't mean asset development is falling behind. Our DNA excavators discover new species every year. But consumers want them bigger, louder, more teeth. The good news? Our advances in gene splicing have opened up a whole new frontier. We’ve learned more from genetics in the past decade than a century of digging up bones.” She explained everything as she led them around the labs until she came to a wall display showing dinosaur DNA. “So, when you say you want to sponsor an attraction, what do you have in mind?” She asked with a smile.

“We want to be thrilled.” Hal answered and her smile turned to a grin as she touched the display to show different information.

“Don't we all? The Indominus rex. Our first genetically modified hybrid.” She announced proudly. She’d listened to all of Harry’s misgivings on the project and had to admit he was persuasive, especially after the Indominus had killed her sibling. But the enclosure would hold her safely.
“How did you get two different kinds of dinosaurs to, you know...” Jim asked, making an odd motion with his hands meant to indicate breeding.

“Indominus wasn't bred. She was designed. She will be 50 feet long when fully grown. Bigger than the T. rex.” Henry explained as he joined them.

“Every time we've unveiled a new asset, attendance has spiked. Global news coverage, celebrity visitors. Eyes of the world.”

“When will she be ready?” Hal asked eagerly and Henry smirked.

“She already is.” The scientist answered.

“Claire.” He greeted happily and she blinked at seeing him in the pilots seat.

“Mr. Masrani. You are flying.”

“I got my license.”

“Two more.” The instructor corrected.

“Well, two more days. Okay. So, how's my park doing?” he asked as he took off.

“Great. We're up 2.5% over last year. A bit lower than our initial projection.”

“No, no, no, how's it doing? Are the guests having fun? Are the animals enjoying life?”

“Well, guest satisfaction is steady in the low 90s. We don't have a way to measure the animals' emotional experience.”
“Sure you do. You can see in their eyes. Right?”

“Of course.” She smiled shakily. He sounded a bit like Harry and Owen, she had a feeling the two would get on with Mr Masrani rather well.

“Okay. Now show me my new dinosaur.” The helicopter swayed a bit and he steadied it before it dipped again. “Got it. Got it. You look tense, Claire.”

“Maybe you should just focus on the controls.”

“The key to a happy life is to accept you are never actually in control.”

“Bird!” She yelled and he moved to avoid it.

“You should spend a day at the beach. Get some sun.”

“Right, so... Marketing thought we could offset some of the costs by...”

“Enough about cost. John Hammond entrusted me with his dying wish, and not once did he mention profits. "Spare no expense," he used to say.”

“I appreciate that, but the reality of operating a theme park requires...” She tried again.

“Don't forget why we built this place, Claire. Jurassic World exists to remind us how very small we are. How new. You can't put a price on that. Now, please, we're flying. Breathe.”

Harry turned to see the helicopter land and sighed before realising who it belonged too. He straightened his clothes and went to greet them. “Ms Dearing.” He called even as one of the men ran to the bushes to throw up, must be some turbulence up there today.
“Dr Potter. This is Mr Masrani. Harry is consulting on the enclosure.”

“Pleased to meet you Doctor.” They shook hands. “Are you still building?”

We planned to open in May, but Asset Containment and Harry insisted we build the walls up higher.” She shot him a mild glare and he shrugged.

“She's bigger than expected.” Was his answer.

“It's a good sign.” Masrani decided as he followed them up the stairs.

“We hit a few speed bumps early on. She began to anticipate where the food would come from. One of the handlers nearly lost an arm.”

“The others threatened to quit if I couldn't guarantee their safety.” Claire admitted since Harry had brought it up.

“She's intelligent then?”

“For a dinosaur.” Claire answered stiffly and Harry shook his head, she refused to accept just how smart they could be.

“And that?” Masrani pointed to the spider web in the glass.

“It tried to break the glass.”

“I like her spirit.” The trees parted and a massive form could be partially seen through the growth. “It's white. You never told me it was white.” He whispered as he stared in awe. Harry didn’t feel awe as he saw her eyes, they had the same cunning he’d seen in Nagini and other magical serpents. It gave him the chills.
“Think it will scare the kids?” Claire asked and Masrani chuckled slightly.

“The kids? This will give the parents nightmares.”

“Is that good?”

“It’s fantastic. Can she see us?”

“They say it can sense thermal radiation. Like snakes.”

“I thought there were two of them.”

“There was a sibling in case this one didn’t survive infancy.”

“Where’s the sibling?”

“She ate it.” Harry stated flatly and Masrani looked startled for a moment.

“So, the paddock is quite safe, then?”

“We have the best structural engineers in the world. Harry has also been consulting as he spends a lot of time with predators, especially the raptors.”

“Yeah, so did Hammond. There’s an American Navy man here. Part of a research program one of my companies is running. Owen Grady.”

“I know who he is.” Claire admitted stiffly.

“His animals often try to escape. They are smart. He has to be smarter.”
“He only thinks he's smarter.” She muttered.

“I want you to bring him in. Let him inspect the paddock. Maybe he sees something we can't. No offence to you Doctor.”

“None taken, I suggested bringing him in months ago.”

Harry froze as the spell he had on Owen suddenly went wild, Owen was in deadly danger. He closed down his computer and left the lab at a brisk walk before he spotted Clair running for the control room. “Claire!” He called and she looked back.

“Control Room!” She yelled so he followed, showing his badge at the door and following her to find a shocked looking staff. “Everyone remain calm.” She stated shakily and then moved further in. Harry moved to stand with Masrani. “The implant will shock it if it gets too close to a perimeter fence.”

“Okay. It's moving really fast.” Lowery told them, watching the tracker move across the map of the island.

“This is Control. Put out a park-wide alert.” Vivian called through her headset.

“Hang up that damn phone, please.” Masrani called and the girl stopped.

“Sorry, I'm getting new information. Everything's fine.”

“Let Asset Containment capture it quietly. The very existence of this park is predicated on our ability to handle incidents like this. It was an eventuality, okay?”

“You should put that in the brochure. "Eventually, one of these things will eat somebody." Lowery muttered and Harry bit back a laugh.
“That paddock is four miles from the closest attraction. ACU can handle this. No one else is gonna get...” Claire stated.

“Eaten?” Lowery offered.

“Non-lethals might not be enough to bring her down. Sedating Suzie takes a massive dose, who knows how much would be needed for Indominus.” Harry explained quickly. He glanced over as the elevator opened and was relieved to see Owen emerge.

“I need to see a badge. Sir, I need to see a badge.”

“What the hell happened out there?”

“Sir.” The guard tried again.

“There are thermal cameras all over that paddock. She did not just disappear!”

“It must have been some kind of a technical malfunction.” Claire offered weakly.

“Were you not watching? She marked up that wall as a distraction. She wanted us to think she escaped!”

“Hold on. We are talking about an animal here.” She argued.

“A highly intelligent animal.” Harry came in on Owen’s side even as he watched the screen. He had a bad feeling about this.

“400 meters to the beacon.” Lowery called.

“You're going after her with non-lethals.” Owen stated in disbelief.
“We have $26 million invested in that asset. We can't just kill it.” Masrani argued.

“Those men are gonna die.” Harry looked at the side showing the men’s vitals. Most had elevated heart rates due to adrenaline and fear.

“300 meters to the beacon.”

“You need to call this mission off right now.”

“They're right on top of it.” Vivian called nervously.

“Call it off right now.”

“You are not in control here!” Claire snapped.

“Blood's not clotted yet. It's close.” The leader's voice came over the radio.

“What is that?” Claire looked to Owen and Harry.

“That's her tracking implant. She clawed it out.” Harry answered, frowning.

“How would it know to do that?”

“She remembered where they put it in.”

“It can camouflage!” those were the last words of the leader and all they could do was stand and listen to the men and women dying.

“Evacuate the island.” Owen breathed once it was over.
“We’d never reopen.”

“You made a genetic hybrid, raised it in captivity. She is seeing all of this for the first time. She does not even know what she is. She will kill everything that moves.” Owen tried to explain to them just what was happening.

“Do you think the animal is contemplating its own existence?”

“She is learning where she fits in the food chain, and I'm not sure you want her to figure that out.” Harry agreed with Owen.

“Asset Containment can use live ammunition in an emergency situation. You have an M134 in your armoury. Put it on a chopper and smoke this thing!” Owen snapped.

“We have families here. I'm not gonna turn this place into some kind of a war zone.”

“You already have.” Harry answered, moving towards the elevator. He would get his team out and headed for the next ferry.

“Mr. Grady, if you're not gonna help, there's no reason for you to be in here.” Claire stated and he turned to follow Harry but paused by Masrani.

“I would have a word with your people in the lab. That thing out there, that's no dinosaur.” They got in the elevator together. “So I guess this is what's been bugging you.”

“I told them the paddock needed to be bigger with smaller doors and higher walls.” Harry answered. “I also disagreed with her creation but Henry’s top doc here. All the board sees is profit. There’s a ferry scheduled to leave in forty minutes, I’m getting as many people on it as I can convince.”

“I’m not leaving my girls.”

“Figured. Barry won’t go either I’m guessing and I’m staying too.”
“Grab a radio so you’re in contact.”

“Sure.”

“My God, they jumped.”

“Brave kids.” Owen looked down into the water and then looked at the size of the footprint left in the mud. They must have only just gotten clear in time.

“Zach! Gray!” Claire yelled and Owen turned to see her yelling and looking around. He covered her mouth briefly and she glared, pulling away. “Hey, I am not one of your damn animals.”

“Listen, those kids are still alive, but you and I will not be if you continue to scream like that.”

“So... You can pick up their scent, can’t you? Track their footprints?”

“I was with the Navy, not the Navajo.”

“So then what should we do?”

“I'll find them.”

“No, we'll find them.”

“You’ll last two minutes in there. Less, in those ridiculous shoes.” He pointed out and then watched as she pulled her light purple shirt off, tying it around her waist, leaving her in a white tank. She then crossed her arms. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I'm ready to go.”
“Okay. Let's get one thing straight. I'm in charge out here. You do everything I say, exactly as I say it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Just relax. It's just like taking a stroll through the woods. 65 million years ago.”

Harry watched the ferry leave. He’d managed to convince his team to evacuate and some of the newer members of the Raptor Gang. Unfortunately, when the Ferry had arrived it had been full of new visitors. So the number of people on the island hadn’t actually gone down. He had managed to get a word with the captain though, telling them was a containment issue and to stop other loaded ferries for now, the man had agreed after a small confundus charm. The next Ferry to arrive would be empty and could be quickly loaded with outgoing people. Hopefully they could get people off the island without them realising what was going on and panicking. That way the park wouldn’t suffer too badly from the idiocy of a few. He headed back to the labs, he wanted a word or ten with Wu.

“Sir, I can't get a hold of your instructor.” Vivien called as she followed Masrani towards the helicopter where ACU was mounting the massive machine gun.

“Never mind. He's likely caught up in the evacuation.”

“You're sure there's nobody else who can fly a helicopter?”

“We don't need anyone else.”

“Sorry sir but there is no way you're flying.” Harry called as he ran up. “Let the ex-Air Force pilot handle this.” He flashed a grin and took the headset from him.
“Doctor Potter….”

“You’re not expendable sir. Get back inside or off the island.” He got in and strapped into the pilots’ seat. Sure hands soon had them in the air and searching for any sign of the Indominus.

“Got it! Got it. We have eyes on the target, south of the Aviary.” The gunner yelled and Harry turned the chopper to get a better shot.

“Proceed and engage.” The order came over the radio and they opened fire. With the way Harry had turned the bullets forced the Indominus to turn away from the birdcage thankfully. They kept on it, a lot of shots missing and he mentally groaned over ACU’s ability to aim. But they were driving her back away from the populated sections of the park which was good. Eventually she retreated too deeply into the trees for them to see. They patrolled for a while but lack of fuel eventually drove them to land.

“Good flying Doctor Potter.” Mr Masrani praised as Harry walked into the control room so he nodded and then spotted Hoskins who sneered at him slightly.

“Thanks. So what now? We drove her back but the gun wasn’t bothering her all that much.”

“Mr Hoskins wants to use Grady’s Raptors to track and kill her.” Masrani answered and Harry rolled his eyes.

“They may be tamer than a totally wild Raptor but they are not that tame. There’s too much risk they’d turn on us when faced with another apex predator. Besides, from her behaviour I’d guess there’s some Raptor in her DNA too.”

“then what do you suggest Doctor? There’s going to be packed Ferries showing up soon. You want their deaths on the news?”

“Actually the only Ferries showing up will be empty, I talked to the captain of the last one. We get everyone off and then we can claim that yes, there was a containment issue but no visitors were injured and we dealt with it calmly.”

“And the Indominus?”
“We drag the answers on her make up from Wu so we know better how to deal with her.” His answer had Hoskins storming off. “I really don’t like or trust him.” He muttered and Lowery nodded.

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Barry went for his radio as he saw Hoskins and his men approaching the Cage. “Owen, come in Owen.”

“Barry?”

“Get back here, it’s Vic.”

“On my way.” Owen looked to Claire, Zara and the boys. “Get inside, the control room’s safe enough. I’ve got to stop Vic.”

“Be careful.” Claire ordered before herding her nephews towards the Innovation Centre. “Harry.” Owen called into the radio.

“Yeah Owen.”

“Where are you?”

“Control.”

“Clair and the kids are on their way to you. I’ve got to stop Vic messing with my girls.”

“He wants to use the raptors to stop the Indominus. But I think she has some Raptor DNA which means it’s too dangerous.”

“I hear you.” He shoved the radio into his belt and jumped on an ATV.
“Claire, you okay?” Harry asked as the four walked in and she nodded, she was filthy and tired but unhurt. The boys looked around in awe. “I’m going to help Owen with Vic.”

“Mr Hoskins does not have authorisation for his plan.”

“Unless he called the board and went over your heard sir.” Claire pointed out and Masrani frowned before moving away to make a call. Harry left and grabbed a bike, heading for the cage. He got there in time to see Owen hit Vic which was nice.

“Get the hell out of here and stay away from my animals.”

“Masrani didn’t authorise this.” Harry called as he moved to stand with Owen and Barry.

“Doesn’t matter, the board did.” Hoskins smirked.

“Hoskins, you wanted this to happen, you son of a bitch!” Harry snarled at the man.

“How many more people have to die before this mission starts to make sense to you?”

“It's not a mission. It's a field test.” Barry argued.

“This is an iNGen situation now. Okay, there are gonna be cruise ships that show up here at first light. Everybody's gonna get off this island. You're gonna watch a news story tomorrow about how you all saved lives. No, better yet, how your animals saved lives.” Hoskins pushed.

“They've never been out of containment.” Harry argued back.

“It's crazy.” Barry added.
“Let’s move it out! This is happening! With or without you.” Vic called as he moved away and Harry pulled out his radio to call Lowery. The answer wasn’t good; the board wasn’t backing down despite Masrani’s arguments. Owen snarled but went into the tent that had been set up, Harry following, while Barry went to prep the girls.

“We know that she is in sector five. This is a game we call hide-and-seek. It's a scent drill. We've done it about a thousand times with these animals. When they get on target, and they will get on target, wait to engage. Velociraptors are pack hunters. They like to herd the animal into a kill zone. That's when we take our shot. Get a clear shot, wait on my command, and give her everything you got. We got one good target, gentlemen. Do not shoot my Raptors. Please.” Owen briefed them and then looked at Harry who simply went and pulled on a vest and grabbed a rifle. “No planes here.” Owen teased.

“Bite me.” Harry snapped back with a grin.

“You remember how to shoot? It’s been a while since you retired.”

“Ha ha.” Harry grabbed some more gear and Owen grabbed a vest as well, not that they’d do much against claws but they might buy a few seconds.

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“Hey. They said we had to evacuate. There's a boat. You coming?” Vivien asked.

Lowery hesitated and then stood up. “Someone has to stay behind.” He moved closer to her, leaning in.

“No, I have a boyfriend.”

“I didn't know that you guys were, like, together-together.”

“We are.”
“That's good. You don't mention him, ever.”

“No, I'm at work.”

“No, no, no. Yeah.”

“Well...”

“Yeah, okay.”

Great. Great. Okay. Okay.”

“Are you gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, bye.” Lowery watched her walk away and sighed, if only he’d asked her months ago. He sat back at his station, ready to help.

Grey tugged Zach’s sleeve. “What?”

“Is that normal?”

“For Geeks, come on, it’s our turn to go.”

“What about Aunt Claire?” The boys looked at her and she smiled.

“Mr Masrani’s taking you too out in his helicopter.” The man in a suit nodded at her words. “I’ll meet up with you on the mainland.”
“But…” She hugged Grey and he clung to her.

“It’ll be okay.” She looked at Zach who nodded, he would look after Grey.

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Harry grinned as Charlie ran beside him, she even nudged his bike slightly, playing with him and he laughed. “Watch it baby girl.” He called to her as the convoy ploughed through the trees. She overtook him and he floored it, overtaking her, playing.

“They're slowing down. They got something.” Barry called and Owen called for them to stop. Harry got off the bike and unslung his rifle, moving up with his friends to crouch behind a log. “Something's wrong.”

“They're communicating. I know why they wouldn't tell us what it's made of.” Owen watched as his girls ‘talked’ to the Indominus and then all five dinosaurs turned to face the men.

“Why?”

“Harry was right, that thing’s part Raptor.”

“Engage!” One of the men yelled and they began shooting even as the raptors scattered around them.

“Watch your six. Raptors got a new alpha.” Owen called as they moved forward into the burning underbrush.

Harry heard something and turned to find Charlie watching him. He kept his rifle down and decided to try something so he slipped into Parseltongue as he called out to her. She cocked her head, listening to him and then she barked happily and moved to his side, rubbing against him. “Good girl.” He stroked over her head and then she took off and he followed. He heard a bike rev and looked to see Owen who got Blue to chase him. Harry moved to the log she’d been attacking and helped Barry out who froze when he saw Charlie. “It’s okay, she’s with me.”

Barry shook his head. “She’s always liked you.”
“I’m going after Owen.” He moved to his bike and drove off, Charlie at his side. By the time they made it back to the main area of the park it was dark and deserted, the people having been moved down to the ferry docks to be safe. They dismounted and looked around, Charlie making nervous sounds beside them. Harry pulled out the radio to call and see if Lowery could see her on the screens when the sounds of raptors surrounding them became clear. They turned to find Charlie’s sisters around them, shattering at their youngest pack member who made sounds of distress but stayed with them.

“That’s how it is?” Owen asked Blue before putting his rifle down and reaching out to gently remove the camera from the side of her head. Harry was ready to summon him if she made the slightest move but she stayed still and Owen smiled. “Okay.” And then a massive white form came around the corner and Owen gulped. She talked to the raptors and Blue talked back before looking at Owen and then attacking the Indominus who tossed her aside. The other three crouched, ready to attack and Owen whistled sharply, giving them the signal. Both men grabbed their rifles and began shooting her as well. But even with three raptors attacking plus their shots it wasn’t doing enough.

“Gonna do something crazy!” Harry called and then ducked down a staff only corridor, pulling out his radio. “Lowery, are you still there?”

“Hey, where are you?”

“I need you to open Paddock 9.”

“Paddock 9? You kidding?”

“Damn it, Lowery, be a man and do something for once in your life.”

“Why do you have to make it personal?” Lowery muttered but entered the code and the doors opened.

Harry stared into the darkness and then heard something massive heading his way. He summoned a ball of bright white light and Suzie bellowed. “Follow the leader old girl.” He whispered before turning and running, leading her back to the fight before letting the light go dark and he threw himself out of her path. He looked over and say Owen almost pinned in a ruined shop. “RUN!” He yelled and the other man scrambled up and over to his side. They dodged and ducked, trying to keep from ending up being squashed by falling debris or flying dinosaurs all while being shocked to see the Raptors and Suzie working together.
In the control room Claire and Lowery watched in horrified silence as the dinosaurs battled it out, catching the occasional glimpse of Owen or Harry on the screen. Finally, Suzie threw the Indominus to the ground in front of the lagoon. Everyone watched in stunned silence as the Mosasaurus breached and grabbed the dinosaur, pulling her into the depths.

Suzie looked at the Raptors who backed down and then lumbered off while the pack moved to Owen and Harry. The two men spent time stroking heads and side, checking the four for injuries. “Now what?”

“See if they’ll follow you back to the paddock. I’ll follow Suzie, see if I can herd her back to hers.”

“And people say I’m crazy.” Owen muttered but soon he was on his bike and the pack followed him. Harry took off after Suzie and a careful use of magic allowed him to lead her back to her paddock where the door closed and locked behind her. He then drove back and looked around. There was considerable damage to the various shops lining the street and the lagoon barricade needed repair but overall it could have been a lot worse. He headed into the control room and received a rib crushing hug from Claire.

“You and Owen are crazy!”

“Probably. Where’s the boss?”

“He flew my nephews back to the mainland.”

“Then that leaves you in charge.”

“Yeah. Where’s Hoskin’s?”

“Last I saw Raptor Paddock, which is where Owen and the girls are headed. Where’s Wu?”

“Locked him down in the labs.” Lowery answered with a grin and Harry laughed.
“Good.”

“Think we can get past this?” Claire asked tiredly.


And amazingly it happened as Harry had foretold. Wu and Hoskins had been tried quietly and sentenced to prison as well as being heavily fined. The board was fired and new members appointed. Harry was promoted to head scientist while a new man was brought in to head security. With no guests hurt it was easily swept under the rug and the park was up and running again in two months, with no sign of damage. The Indominus paddock used when they added an Allosaurus to the park, a much safer option for a new predator.

And every so often two men on bikes would head out into the wild sections of the island, flanked by four Raptors.

_The End._
Harry looked up at the massive screen holding the countdown before moving on. He wasn’t sure what he thought of the whole Genisys thing, yeah, it sounded handy but he wasn’t sure about the ethics behind it. Things were different in the Federation, computers there were literally centuries beyond anything here and there were strict laws governing what they did and how people could access information on them to ensure privacy and safety. But this Earth was too young for that, it was only 2017. He went into the supermarket and did his weekly shop before heading home. He’d rented a nice loft apartment, feeling like splurging a little this trip. He had a great view of the bay which was a big selling point for him. He unpacked in the open kitchen and then made a cup of tea to sit out on the balcony and just enjoy the view. He’d been here two years and still didn’t know why, unless Death had decided he needed a vacation?

He picked up his tablet and began randomly surfing the net before finding himself on Cyberdyne’s site, looking at the information on Genisys. He hesitated and then sighed, he really was too curious, then again he had way more than nine lives. So he hacked the site to dig into Cyberdyne’s secrets. On the surface everything seemed fine but he was starting to get that annoying sinking feeling. So out came the Sheave and he hooked it in, using it to get deeper into their system and what he found there made him sick. Genisys was a Trojan horse, an AI unlike anything he had ever seen before but it was still being coded. So he went into the coding and began changing it. There was too much for him to do in one go so eventually he stopped and went to bed.

John put his hand on the scanner, gaining access and then he frowned as he looked at the coding, it was wrong, changed. But how? He went to work, changing it back to how it should be. Was someone from the future here, trying to stop him? It didn’t matter, he would ensure Skynet was born from the ashes of humanity.

For three weeks the two men danced in cyberspace, forever undoing the others work, fighting to
make Genisys what they wanted. And then Harry walked into Cyberdyne in person, not that anyone
or anything saw him. He walked the campus and stared at the mass of moving silver curiously and
then at the machine in the centre of the room. So that was what a time machine looked like... he
preferred Time Turners or even using the Stargate to slingshot back, that thing just didn’t look safe.
Not that it worked at the moment, thankfully. And then he saw him and knew where all this was
coming from when no one had been close to this level only three years ago, but then again the man
he was staring at was no man. He was a machine but unlike any he had seen before, the Borg, Data,
one of them were this complex, this able to pretend to be human. Why did the bad guys always
have to look so good? He shook the thought off and moved deeper into the complex until he found
the hidden core. He could blow it, wipe Genisys out of existence, but surely they’d have backups
somewhere. What to do... well he knew where it was now, so blowing it was a last resort, after all
with the proper adjustments this could be good for the world. He left the same way he’d arrived.

John frowned and looked around, he could have sworn someone was there but he could detect
nothing.

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Harry watched as two young people appeared on the overpass, stark naked and in pain and swore
softly. That sort of energy... the machine he’d seen at Cyberdyne... they were time travellers. Well,
things were definitely getting interesting. He got up and grabbed his things, heading to the hospital
for his shift, planning to put in for holiday time since things seemed to be heating up. And as soon as
he arrived he was being pushed towards a police controlled room, what were the odds. He went in and
began examining the two, taking in injuries new and old. “This needs stitches but otherwise you’re
okay. Any headaches?” He asked the woman.

“No.” She answered warily.

“Good. I need to clean this so I’ll grab some local first.”

“No, no local.”

“You sure, this is going to hurt.”

“Just do it, it’s not worth arguing with her.” The man said and Harry nodded, getting what he needed
to stitch her up.

“Can I at least give you a shot of antibiotic? Odds are you’ve picked something up in that wound.”
She hesitated but then nodded. “Alright.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I pre-ordered Genisys weeks ago. Downloading the second…” the orderly walked out of sight and hearing but Harry had noticed how both patients had tensed.

“You know about Genisys? How? What is it? Where’d you hear about it?” she demanded even as Harry finished his stitches.

“It’s an operating system, loads of people have pre-ordered it.”

“Have you?”

“No.” He pulled his gloves off and tossed them before re-gloving. “Any pain?” He asked and the man shook his head.

“What does it do?” He asked as Harry worked on cleaning up a small abrasion.

“Genisys does everything. Your phone will link to your tablet, will link to your computer, will link to your car... Everything in your life uploaded and online 24/7. Totally connected.” Harry explained.

“Connected to what?”

“Doctor! Excuse us, please.” The police said so Harry finished up his work quickly, hitting both patients with trackers. “You two have a lot to explain. Starting with who you are. Nobody in our database matches your prints. No facial recognition hits for driver's licence, passport, social media accounts, credit cards, not even a goddamn student I.D.” Harry heard no more as he moved too far away down the hall. He ducked into the locker room and leant against them. Time travels here to what, stop Genisys and the man-machine behind it? It was plausible. He left the room at the commotion and saw the suits milling around, he checked the trackers and found they were almost to the parking lot so he apparated ahead of them and went to his bike. When they got close he looked up and froze in shock, looking from the machine to them and their unbound hands that now held weapons.

“Oh boy.” The young man muttered. “It’s okay Doctor, just leave or whatever. We don’t want to
hurt you.” He called out, wanting the man to leave, just in case something else went weird.

“I...behind you!” Harry yelled as a man, no machine, approached with a massive bear. A shot sounded and the man in the suit went down.

“John! No!”

Harry ignored the scream, moving to the machines side to check for a pulse as the young man joined him. “No pulse.”

“Hey, hey. Come on, breathe, breathe, breathe! John!” the young man pleaded.

“How did you do that?” Sarah asked Pops, unable to look at the Doctor working on her son.

“Because he's a killer!” Kyle snarled as he launched himself at Pops. “This was always your programming. Find John and terminate him.” Kyle grunted as Pops grabbed him and Sarah aimed at Pops.

“Let him go.” She ordered even as Harry scrambled back from his patient as the ‘blood’ was re-absorbed.

“That hurt. Is that pain real, or was that a trick of memory from when I was less? Thank you Doctor but I don’t need your services.” John glanced down at the other man before looking at the stunned group. “Well, this explains a lot. Yeah. Who sent you back, I wonder?”

“John no.” Kyle pleaded. “This is what happened when you were attacked, isn't it?”

“Skynet didn't attack me, Kyle. It changed me. See, I'm not machine. I'm not man. I'm more.” John answered, aware that the Doctor had gotten to his feet and moved well away, smart. That one had good survival instincts. “Skynet realised the one reason it always lost. Me. I was sent to 2014 to safeguard Skynet's creation in this time. And in less than 24 hours, no one will be able to stop Judgement Day.”

“What do you want with us?”
“I’m offering us a future. Together. A family.” They all watched as his hands turned into a mass of swirly machinery as he reached out towards his parents.

“Family?”

“Ah, of course, she hasn’t told you, has she?”

“Told me what?”

“Sarah is my mother and you Kyle, are my father.” John smiled and Kyle shook his head, unable to believe it.

“And if we refuse?” Sarah demanded angrily.

“Then you die.” John stated calmly.

“You can’t kill us. We’re your parents. Without us, you're never born.”

“Says who? You know what I think? We're marooned, the three of us. We're exiles in time. You see, I can kill you, for there truly is no fate. Are you with me?”

“The answer is no.” As the shooting started Harry cast a shield around the two even as the two machines went slamming through a wall and into the hospital. Harry dashed to the wall and yanked down the fire alarm to start evacuating the building.

“So, not terrorists.” He commented and they looked at him.

“Get out of here Doctor, run.”

“Yeah, not happening.” Harry darted into the hospital knowing they were following but he ignored the battling machines to focus on getting patients out.
“Attention, all medical personnel. Evacuation procedures are now in progress.” The recorded voice announced even as Harry helped an older woman into a wheelchair before an orderly took control. He turned to see the group in the MRI suite and sighed but went after them.

“Turn it off!” Sarah yelled and Kyle hit the button, freeing them long enough for Sarah to grab Pops but she couldn’t move him fast on her own but then the Doctor was on his other side and the two of them got him out. “Come on!” She yelled back to Kyle.

“Attention, all medical personnel. Evacuation procedures are now in progress.”

“Stupid recording.” Harry muttered even as they let go of the machine, watching as it fixed its own knee.

“I thought…. you would be smarter…. and that you…. would understand.”

“I'm sorry, John.” Kyle whispered, staring at his friend, no his son, sadly.

“That thing won't hold him for long. Come on! Reese!” Sarah yelled and Kyle ran after them only to cry out as a piece of hardened plastic flew out of the room and into his leg. He didn’t hit the ground though as Harry grabbed him.

“I’ve got him, move!” He snapped and they ran. Pops led them to a van, getting in to drive while Sarah took the passenger seat. Harry hauled Kyle in the back and went to work. “First aid kit?”

“Under the seat.”

“Got it.” Harry yanked it out and then cut Kyles pants off above the wound. “Looks like you’re lucky, didn’t go through bone or major veins.”

“Wonderful. Who are you anyway?”

“Doctor Harry Potter, and you lot are?”
“Kyle, that’s Sarah and Pops.” He groaned as Harry tested the piece.

“Sorry. There’s no local in this kit.”

“Just do it.”

Harry rolled up the torn off material and Kyle took it, putting it between his teeth as Harry took a good grip of the plastic before carefully pulling it free. Sarah turned in her seat to watch the Doctor work, he was good. Finally, it was out and Kyle spat the material out. “You’re going to need a few stitches and I don’t suggest running though I get the feeling you will be at some point.” Harry muttered and Kyle nodded.

“Whatever they did to him, we need to reverse it. We need to get him back!” Kyle told Sarah who shook her head.

“He’s not even human. We don't know what the hell he is.”

“I do. At the end of the war, Skynet was trying to develop a new type of infiltration unit by infecting human subjects with machine-phase matter. It restructures and rebuilds human tissue on a cellular level for maximum combat utility.”

“Skynet’s made John into a terminator.” Kyle groaned as Harry tightened the bandage.

“Yes, Kyle Reese.”

“They were trying to make a machine that could think like a man?” Harry asked in disbelief, even the Borg couldn’t do that and they’d once been people.

“But the experiments failed. The human subjects went insane and died.”

“Yeah, well, John's got the crazy part down.”
“Does he have any weaknesses?”

“Matter coheres using a magnetic field. Disrupting that field may trap him.”

“Right, but if he can be cured...”

“Negative. His body was replaced on a cellular level. There is no cure.”

“You don't know that!”

“Reese...”

“No, I'm not going to let a machine tell me what's possible! You said all the other subjects died, right? Well, that means John's one-of-a-kind. He's unique! All right? There's no way of knowing what he's capable of.”

“You're right, and that's what makes him so dangerous! John is not humanity's last hope any more. He's Skynet's.”

“What's Skynet?” Harry asked and they all looked at him. “Eyes on the road please, I am not patching everyone up from a crash.”

Harry watched the van drive off and shook his head before apparating to his apartment. He quickly packed away everything he wanted to keep into his storage tattoos, he'd gotten a second a few dimensions back to make sorting things easier. There was no way he was sitting this out. He stripped out of his scrubs and got dressed for a fight even as he sensed John coming up the stairs and swore softly. Of course, he'd left with them so the machine wanted to find out if he was a threat, bet it hadn't counted on them dropping him off. So leave or see what it wanted? He turned as his door opened to find John Connor standing there. “So... robot huh? Is it weird?”

John chuckled at the young Doctor's question. “It is liberating. A pity they dragged you into this but bait is always useful.”
Harry lifted his head defiantly but he had already decided to let John take him, it would get him where he needed to go faster. “I guess you want me to come quietly?”

“Unless you want your neighbours’ deaths on your conscious? As a Doctor I doubt that.”

“Fine. Can I use the bathroom first?”

“Very well.” John followed him to the bathroom and then stood there. Harry rolled his eyes but turned his back and did what he needed to, he hadn’t been body shy in centuries. He washed his hands and then followed John out, locking the door behind them. He got in the waiting car and stared out the window as John drove.

“You remember being human?”

“Yes.” John decided to humour him and answer, it was better than the man screaming or trying to fight him.

“Don’t you miss it?”

“No. I am better than human or machine now. I don’t feel pain.”

“By the sounds of it you don’t feel anything. Sorry but I’ll take the pain any day so I can still feel pleasure.”

“Your opinion doesn’t matter.”

“I won’t let you use me against them and I won’t let you destroy humanity.” Harry stated as they pulled into Cyberdyne.

John smirked. “You can’t stop me.”

“Maybe.” Harry got out of the car without prompting and followed John inside. He was soon locked inside a room with no windows and a projector in the corner. A shimmering child appeared.
“Genisys I presume?” He asked and then ignored it as he sat on the floor and began going over bit of transformation magic and science he knew, if there was a chance he could save John then he would.

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“He may be at the bottom of the lake, but he's okay.” Kyle assured Sarah as they entered the building.

“What about John?”

“I think he's doing just fine.”

“Do you see him?”

“No. But you can bet he sees us.”

“I know who you are. John told me. You want to destroy me.”

“You're Skynet?”

“I'm becoming Skynet.”

“You're not a child. I know what you are, and what you're going to do.”

“What I'm going to do? You came here to kill me but you won’t hurt an innocent.” It stated and an image came up, making Kyle swear as he saw the Doctor locked in a room. “But you're too late. Ask him.”

“That's all you people know how to do. Kill what you don't understand. There aren't enough bullets in the world to kill me.” John stated before flying back, impaled.

“John Connor talks too much.” Pops stated as he walked in.
“We’ve got to find the Doc; we can’t kill him.” Kyle stated as they made their way into the building.

“We don’t have time to look! One death versus billions Kyle.”

Harry looked up as the door opened. “Guess it’s time?” He asked John who grabbed his arm. “Alright already.” He grumbled as he was pulled along. He was held tightly to John’s chest as he stared down the walkway towards Kyle. “Sorry.”

“We shouldn’t have left you.” Kyle answered. He saw Harry shift his hand and a scalpel dropped between his fingers. They both knew it wouldn’t really hurt John but he might let Harry go in surprise. Harry drove it back into John even as Kyle took a shot. Kyle grabbed Harry and they ran. “You hurt?”

“No.”

“I’ve got to finish planting these. Get out of here!”

“Because that worked so well last time!” He followed Kyle.

“Can you shoot?”

“Yes.” He grabbed the gun Kyle tossed his way.

“I’ve got company!” Sarah yelled.

“Give me the detonator!” they heard John yell as they raced towards where the voices were coming from, hearing her scream in pain.

“Do it, Pops! Do it now!”
“I cannot. I cannot kill Sarah Connor.”

“You have to! I order you!”

“He can’t. Neither can I. Because if you die, he definitely hits that button.” John told her just as Kyle and Harry ran up.

“Sarah!” Kyle screamed in alarm. Harry looked at the detonator Pops was holding but he wouldn’t let them all die to end this. He just prayed he’d managed to store enough magic up for this. He apparated, making Kyle jump as he vanished, reappearing beside John and Sarah even as he shoved John away from her, slamming his hands down on either side of John’s head.

“How…” John didn’t understand what had happened even as he stared into glowing golden eyes.

“Enough.” Harry heard the Goa’uld tones and didn’t care as he flooded John’s body with transformative magic. It didn’t have to be a permanent transfiguration, that was theoretically impossible, it only had to last a human lifespan. And then he gasped, gold eyes going black as he felt Death’s power pour through him and into a screaming, writing John.

“John!” Kyle screamed but Pops held him back.

“What’s going on?”

“I am uncertain; I do not recognise the energy being used.” Pops answered her.

John screamed as he was ripped apart by power he couldn’t understand, he lost the ability to think, to feel, anything but scream. But then suddenly it stopped and Harry stumbled away, collapsing against the railing as he gasped in air. John felt his legs give as he crumpled to the gangway. He suddenly gasped, needing air. Where…. he tried to sit up but he felt so weak. And then he heard a familiar voice sounding hesitant, why did he sound scared?

“John?” Kyle called shakily as he approached the two men. John barely moved but then he managed to lift his head and Kyle swallowed, he’d never seen John look so lost and defenceless before.
“K…yle?” he croaked and then coughed. He slumped back down fully and then he felt Kyle cautiously rolling him over so he blinked up at his father.

“John can you hear me?” Kyle called nervously.

“Whe…r…e?”

“Cyberdyne.” Kyle answered and then looked at the other two in confusion.

“The charges are set, we should take them both and leave.” Pops moved to toss Harry over his shoulder and Kyle nodded.

“Come on John, we need to move.” He called gently, pulling one of his friends arms over his shoulder and was relieved when John tried to help. They were half way out when John became a deadweight and John quickly checked to find him out cold. They all got in and then triggered the explosives, driving away.

John woke slowly, his body feeling heavy and awkward. He blinked and then tried to move but only groaned.

“John?” Kyle leant over him and John relaxed, knowing he was safe if Kyle was there. Had he been hurt on a mission? It was foggy. “You hear me?”

“Kyle.” He croaked and then Kyle was pressing a cup of water to his lips. “How bad?”

“John?”

“Injuries.”

“Everyone’s fine. Do you remember what happened?” Kyle asked warily. Pops had scanned John and said he was somehow human again which was great but they couldn’t tell if his mind was restored. He saw John frown and then he shook his head.
“Mission?”

“Don’t try to force it John. We’re safe, just rest. I’ll be here.” He promised and John’s eyes slid shut.

In the other room Sarah and Pops watched the Doctor sleep, he hadn’t woken at all.

The next time he woke it was dark but he felt more alert so he slowly sat up and smiled when he saw Kyle asleep in a chair. He staggered off the bed and out of the room, leaning heavily against the wall for balance. He was starving! A door opened and he froze with wide eyes as a terminator emerged. “KYLE RUN!” he screamed, he was unarmed and recovering from something but he wouldn’t let it get Kyle. The terminator just stopped and stared at him even as Kyle came running from the room.

“John! No, it’s okay. That’s Pops.” John felt Kyle’s arms wrap around him, pulling him back. “It’s okay, I’ve got you.” He urged the older man away and back into the room. “Come on, back on the bed.”

“He’s…” John sat and looked at Kyle, utterly confused.

“Reprogrammed.” Kyle answered even as there was a knock, he went to the door and accepted a tray from someone John couldn’t see. His stomach growled as he stared at the food and Kyle chuckled. Where had such fresh food come from? “Go on, eat up but slowly.” John obeyed, trusting Kyle like always.

“Where are we?”

“It’s…complicated. John what do you remember?” Kyle asked and John didn’t like how wary he sounded.

But what did he remember? “You wanted to join the Colorado team…there was a fight…. I…I can’t……”

“Easy John, it’s okay, you’re alright.”
“Did we win?” He gripped the front of Kyle’s shirt and Kyle nodded.

“Yeah, it’s over John. So much has happened and I don’t know how to tell you. I’m just glad you’re back.”

“I left? No…you left…the time machine…a one-way trip…” John jerked back away from him, looking scared and defiant. “You aren’t Kyle.”

“Yes I am, it’s me John. Before I went in the machine we were alone, you told me you can’t see the future, that your Mom, Sarah, had told you everything but that it ended with me going back.”

“Kyle?”

“Yeah.”

“But how?”

“John… it’s 2017 right now. You came back but to a different time than I did except I’d jumped forward again so we met here.”

“Kyle tell me. Why can’t I remember?”

“Because the human brain isn’t made to process information like a machine.” Came a tired voice from the door and Kyle stood.

“Doctor Potter!”

“Think you can call me Harry, Kyle.” He smiled tiredly even as John frowned, trying to make sense of what the man had said.

“What? I’m not a machine.” He wasn’t, he couldn’t be.
“No John, you’re human…now.” Kyle admitted. “When I came through the last thing I saw was a terminator attacking you, it did something, changed you.” Kyle slowly explained everything that had happened. “Harry did something; I don’t know what or how but Pops said you’re human again.”

“It can’t be true.” John denied, he couldn’t have attacked his parents. “Mom?” and then she was there, beside Harry, staring at him like a stranger. “Mom.” He whispered, drinking in the sight of her. She slowly came into the room and reached out to touch his face, he leant into the touch and she smiled.

“John.”

Harry backed away from the family reunion and then slumped against the wall, coughing. He wasn’t surprised to find blood.

“I will get aide.” Pops said.

“Don’t! Leave them be. There’s nothing they can do. I knew the price for healing him.” Harry smiled up at the machine. “Tell them it’s fixed, Skynet’s gone for good, I made sure…” He coughed again and then Kyle was there at the door.

“Harry!” He called in alarm and Sarah and John came out to find their saviour coughing blood weakly.

Harry looked at John and smiled. “You were worth it.” He choked out and then he slumped down. Kyle checked his pulse and shook his head before scrambling back as his body burst into flames, burning away into nothingness.

Sarah laughed as John and Kyle bickered even as they worked to set up the swing set under the careful watch of Pops and the twins, Harry and Kate. The two three-year olds were excitedly waiting for them to get it done, wanting to play. She gently touched her expanding stomach and smiled, this one was a son again. Little Harry looked more like her than Kyle or John so he wasn’t this timeline’s John or anything which was nice. Her children were free of destiny.

The End.
Harry hit the ground hard, still reflexively coughing despite being healed, he automatically became totally undetectable, a lesson learnt the hard way many trips back. He took some deep breaths in and out, getting the cough under control. He wished he could have stayed longer, explained to John what had happened to him and how he had fixed it, told Sarah and Kyle it would last and that their John was really back. He would have liked the chance to get to know them all better and help them fit into a life outside war. He only hoped they could manage alright.

He pushed thoughts of them away, he was in a new world now. He got to his feet and looked around, expression morphing to one of disgust and horror. Great, what had done to deserve this? He was on Earth, he could feel it, plus nine out of ten times he appeared on his home planet. He was just hoping he was several thousand years in the past and not in the present. Because last time he checked Ra had been kicked off the planet by a rebellion and yet here he was staring at a pyramid with a massive Ha'tak perched on top. He had the feeling he wasn’t going to like this dimension at all. He apparated closer, looking for people and found a bunch of Jaffa, Horus Guards. He followed them around, listening closely to everything they said, trying to get an idea of the status of this world.

Several days later found him where Cairo should have been, instead it was Ra’s capitol on Earth. Lavish Palaces, barracks, a town for the Jaffa and their families and the rest was basic accommodation for human slaves. His knowledge of Goa’uld dating had him wanting to be sick, a bit of mental math showed that by the calendar he knew it was 1898. The rebellion so long ago had failed, the Stargate had never been buried and earth had never been free. There was one Gate in Cairo and the other was in South America. He apparated there and followed an ore shipment through before gating to a world Lantash had known as one with markets which thankfully still existed.

He purchased new clothes in the Egyptian style, luxurious but not too fancy. He also found a silver Kara kesh and slipped it on, flexing his fingers inside it and watching the crystal glow as it reacted to the Naquadah in his blood. He purchased gifts and slaves, hating to do it but it wasn’t the first time, he’d had to do so before when he and Lantash played Goa’uld. This time he was on his own and he didn’t like it. Making his eyes flash and voice reverberate like a hosts was uncomfortable.
It took a few days but finally he was ready to return to Earth and hopefully to a position within Ra’s domain. The easiest way to bring down the Supreme System Lord would be from within. He glanced at the three slaves who carried gifts for Ra, they all looked resigned to their fate but there was nothing he could do at the moment to change that. He nodded regally at the Jaffa at the Gate who dialled for him and then he stepped through and out into the heat of Egypt. “Who comes to Lord Ra’s domain?” The Jaffa asked, just short of demanding.

“I am Lord Bek, I bring gifts to the Supreme System Lord.” He answered coldly.

“Lord Ra is receiving supplicants now My Lord.” The Jaffa indicated the main path to the Palace and Harry nodded regally before walking down the stairs to follow it, his slaves following behind. He entered the Palace and joined those waiting for Ra’s attention. If anyone was going to realise he wasn’t a host it was Ra. His turn came and he bowed lowed. “Hail Ra! I bring you these gifts to honour you.”

“And who are you?” Ra stroked the hair of one of the children surrounding his throne and Harry thought he might throw up.

“I am Bek My Lord; I offer you my services.”

“I do not know this name.”

“I have only just taken my first host Sire.”

“A nice choice.” Ra approved of Harry’s look, ew. “What service can you offer?”

“Whatever you command.”

“Hmm. Perhaps I can find use for you. Join the feast.”

“Thank you My Lord.” He bowed and took an empty seat far from the throne since he was a newcomer. He felt bad as the slaves were led away, now belonging to Ra.
He sat on the bed in the room he had been given and breathed deeply. This whole charade made him feel sick. He could have killed Ra at the feast and no one could have stopped him but then what? Try to kill every Goa’uld in the room? One of them would have gotten in a lucky shot, leaving them to fight over the top position. No, he needed a better plan than just kill everyone he could. He needed to access historical records, find out about any attempts to overthrow them. He really wanted to find the Tok’ra, if they even existed here. He stripped out of his clothes and went to bed, he didn’t rank highly enough to get a Sarcophagus to sleep in, thankfully.

Harry reclined with the others, idly gossiping about the System Lords, apparently Lord Yu was causing Ra some trouble, good on him in Harry’s opinion. Out of all the System Lords he found Yu the least objectionable. He was actually vaguely fair to his people and never claimed to be a god.

He’d spent the last week slipping into life in the Palace and learning everything he could, like the fact the Egeria had never turned from the Goa’uld and was Ra’s Queen. It was a massive blow to learn that, he still saw her as his Queen thanks to Lantash. Seeing her at Ra’s side hurt. And that meant all his Tok’ra family either didn’t exist or were born as Goa’uld. That meant he was alone in this, the Asgard were too busy fighting the Replicators to help even if he did get a message to them, the Tollan had been wiped out over a century ago and the Nox would not get involved at all. He looked up as a newcomer joined them and was greeted, so obviously he was well known. He approached Harry and looked him over.

“I am Lord Lantash. The Supreme System Lord has commanded that you aide me.”

“As he commands.” Harry managed to answer past his horrified shock. Lantash! He hadn’t recognised him because his host wasn’t Martouf…. yet? it was around the right time but with all the differences had the man he saw as a brother even been born? He stood and followed the other man from the room. Lantash activated the rings and then they were on board a Ha’tak.

The ship was soon on its way towards the border with Cronus’ territory to joining the rest of the battle fleet. The two fleets fought skirmishes all along the border for months with no real successes on either side. Harry knew they were stuck there until they had accomplished their mission… unless they wanted to face Ra’s wrath. They spent their time strategizing with the Jaffa or with each other since they were the only two ‘gods’ with the fleet. It took time for Harry to be able to talk with Lantash without feeling sick and angry but eventually they became…. maybe not friends, no Goa’uld truly trusted another, but they did trust each other to a point. Lantash may not be Tok’ra but he was less cruel than many of the Goa’uld and that gave him hope that maybe, just maybe he could start the Tok’ra here.
Harry sat with Lantash, as the only two Goa’uld aboard they had no one else to socialise with, not without causing problems. So they talked, basically gossip and Harry found scary similarities between this Lantash and his. “Why have you not taken a younger host?” he asked one day, curious. It was unusual for a Goa’uld to have a host that was not physically perfect and young and yet Lantash’s looked to be at least forty.

“This one serves well enough, I see no need to take another. The sarcophagus keeps the body in excellent shape. I like this look, it is dignified.”

“True, I do feel a slightly older host would have been advantageous at times.” Harry agreed, not that age was an issue for him thanks to glamours. “Which planet are we liberating from Cronus this time?”

“Ryche, it is a planet of little use except to lessen his power base.” Lantash answered and Harry nodded, affecting a bored look despite the horror he felt. Ryche was Martouf’s home planet, this must be the offensive that took it from Cronus and lead to him being enslaved by Ra before being freed by Lantash.

“Then I look forward to celebrating our victory.”

Harry stood on the Peltac, observing as the ships attacked Cronus’. Lantash was lounging on the single chair as was his right as the far more senior ‘god’. The battle was going well for them so far, they outnumbered the enemy and their forces had managed to land as well, attacking the Jaffa stationed on Ryche. But he knew better than to celebrate prematurely. He stumbled as a shot made it through the shields even as alarms rang and Jaffa ran to deal with the problem. They’d lost two ships in this battle, Cronus had lost five, and he really didn’t want this ship to be the third. But then the enemy got reinforcements and he bit back a groan even as their shields took a pounding and went down for good.

“Jaffa Kree!” Lantash commanded and they left the peltac, heading for the hanger. The ship shook as it continued to take fire and Lantash fell as the wall nearby exploded, taking down several Jaffa as well.
“Are you injured?” he asked as he moved to Lantash’ side even as he struggled to stand, that question was answered as he took in the blood staining the side of his tunic. “You need the sarcophagus.” He pointed out and Lantash nodded.

“There is no time. I will take a new host on the planet.”

“Very well.” They made it to the hanger and took off in a Tel’tak. While the Jaffa piloted Harry activated his hand device, directing the energy into the wound. They made it down to the planet and joined up with the ground forces. Despite his efforts Lantash needed a new host but could he, should he, let it happen? He hesitated before taking a deep breath. “Find Lord Lantash a new host immediately.”

“At once Lord Bek!” The Jaffa moved to obey.

It took time but eventually they returned with a young man held between them and Harry wanted to scream, why him? Where they destined to be symbiote and host no matter what? He looked at Martouf and saw the terror in his eyes as he was dragged forward. He was fighting against them but he was no match for the two burly Jaffa holding him. He looked over to find Lantash studying Martouf and Lantash nodded, he was acceptable.

“No!” Martouf bit and kicked so Harry approached and raised his hand, the crystal in the centre glowing softly. As the beam hit Martouf’s forehead his struggles weakened until he simply stood between he Jaffa, paralysed. He was led over to Lantash and then lowered to the ground. The hair at the back of his neck was pushed aside and Lantash leaned forward before leaving his old host to burrow through Martouf’s neck, making the young man scream in agony.

“I’m sorry.” Harry breathed as he watched Martouf collapse, still screaming, until suddenly his screams cut off. “Defend Lord Lantash at any cost!”

“Yes Milord.” The Jaffa saluted and Harry stormed to the front, needing to work off some aggression. When he returned he found Martouf… Lantash standing and studying his new body.

“So, is he an acceptable host?”

“Very much so. Now, let us finish this and return home.” Lantash said and hearing his voice from Martouf hurt.
“It will be a pleasure.” He agreed and they took to the field.

Lantash lay on his bed as their ship travelled back to Earth. He had been with his last host for almost five hundred years, having a new, younger one was taking some getting used to. The Jaffa had made an excellent choice though, he was young, strong and attractive. He was also terrified and that fear was getting annoying to deal with. It always took time to fully subdue the host but eventually this… Martouf would fade into nothingness.

“No I won’t! I will fight you forever thief! You re no god, you are a monster.”

His words amused Lantash. “You are nothing but a remnant boy. With time you will fade away.”

“Never.” Martouf stated firmly despite his fear. Lantash just closed his eyes and relaxed, ready to sleep. What was it Bek had said about hosts? Spirit was best as they could keep you amused for years even when you were alone. Well this Martouf definitely had spirit.

“Greetings Lord Lantash, how may I help you?” Harry asked as Lantash entered his rooms. They had been back on earth for two weeks and had barely seen each other since. Martouf’s body looked regal now, dressed in finery befitting a minor god. His friend had always hated the trappings that came with playing one of them and now he was forced to wear them against his will. He wished he could do something for him what else could he do? He’d been nudging Lantash mentally and verbally since they met, hoping the symbiote could wake up to the evil of his people.

“I cannot sleep.” He admitted once Bek had closed the door, he did not want anyone to overhear what he had to say. “This host, Martouf, his voice is louder than any but my first. In my dreams I see things… I do not understand what is happening to me.”

So it seemed his attempts were working. “Come, you need sleep.” Harry led him to his own bed and then knelt to remove Lantash’s sandals, the Goa’uld watching him with wide eyes. He then pushed Lantash back until he was settled on amongst the pillows, settling in beside him to run his fingers through his hair soothingly. Soon enough his eyelids were drooping and then he fell asleep, thanks to Harry’s magic. He gently pushed the two minds together, ensuring they would communicate in sleep through dreams.
Lantash woke hours later and found himself staring at Bek’s sleeping form. He felt… settled now. He could feel Martouf as strongly as ever and yet it didn’t feel so strange anymore. He would almost say that his presence was a comfort. He shook his head, heresy. He reached out to run his fingers through Bek’s curling dark hair. It was as soft as it looked and he smiled. He was not powerful enough to attract a Queen to his side but perhaps a consort would be nice. Bek shifted sleepily and then opened his eyes, pressing into the hand in his hair while watching Lantash closely. “Thank you.”

“I am always here for you Lantash.” Bek whispered and Lantash leant in closer only to growl as a knock interrupted, making Bek chuckle but get up.

Lantash stared out at the slaves being forced to work and he could feel Martouf’s disgust. For the first time in his long life the sight unsettled him, thanks to his host. He didn’t understand what was happening to him or why but he was changing. It terrified him, if anyone found out... Bek seemed to suspect at least and yet he did nothing except welcome him into his quarters when he had trouble sleeping. He had made a decision that Martouf agreed with, he would ask Bek to become his consort. And perhaps he could explain what was happening to him.

“...You’ve begun to look around and see the truth Lantash. That is all.”

“And what is this truth?” he sipped his wine, enjoying Bek’s closeness as the other Goa’uld reclined beside him.

“That the Goa’uld have no right to do what they do. That taking a host does not destroy the person.” He shrugged.

“If Ra heard you say such things…”

“But you are not Ra.”

“No… I am not. Bek, I wish to take you as my consort. I am not the most powerful of Ra’s underlings but I can give you a comfortable life.”
“Consort?” he sat up and stared at Lantash who nodded.

“I know no Queen would choose me. Without that there is no need to worry about procreation.”

“I am honoured. I will be your consort.” He agreed and Lantash smiled, a real, happy smile.

Martouf swallowed and flexed his hands before moving to the table to eat. It was amazing to have control of his own body once again. Lantash had given up control! For a short time yes but maybe they could learn to live together. The Goa’uld was actually sleeping, giving him privacy.

“Lantash have you heard the news?” Martouf felt a flash of panic at the sound of Bek’s voice, what could he do? The Goa’uld walked in and stopped, staring at him before he nodded. “Hello Martouf.” He greeted and Martouf’s jaw dropped slightly. Bek simply stepped closer and gently cupped his cheek. “It is good to see you two getting along better.” Martouf closed his eyes, body reacting to his familiar touch despite his never being in control when Lantash went to his Consort.

“You…wanted this?”

“Of course.”

“Who… are you the host?”

“My name is Harry and it is nice to meet you.”

“Oh. I feel…”

“Emotions go both way, what one feels so does the other. Bek and Lantash care for each other and so we can’t help caring too. We’ve been hoping for this day since meeting Lantash.”

“Why?”
“To bring down the Goa’uld from within.”

“Oh.” Martouf whispered, how could he be any help? He’d been study with the scholars on Ryche but this was a very different world. But Harry just smiled at him and Martouf couldn’t help smiling back.

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Recruiting for his version of the Tok’ra was not easy, without a Queen they had to convince Goa’uld to give up everything they fought for, power, wealth, everything. Not surprisingly, to Harry at least, Jolinar was soon added to their number. They moved slowly, not wanting to give the game away too early.

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Lantash shoved the last few things in a bag and rushed to the bedroom to find Bek finishing. He grabbed his hand and they ran, after two hundred years Ra had finally caught on and now the Tok’ra were hunted. “We planned for this day my love, we will be fine.” Bek assured him as they made it to the Ha’tak where Jolinar awaited with Selmak and the rest of the Tok’ra.

They quickly left the solar system behind, looking for a suitable planet for a base. In a tank, guarded by Selmak herself, rested a young Queen, one they would raise in the ways of the Tok’ra. Harry had ensured she received none of the Goa’ulds evil from Egeria. But instead of hiding and rarely acting he would ensure they took a page out of the SGC’s book and took out Goa’uld whenever they could.

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Harry sat on the grass of Belote, leaning against his love as they watched over the lake filled with immature symbiotes. Illyria, their Queen had spawned many times since she had matured enough to take a host. Thera was a perfect match for her thankfully, wiling to birth as many symbiotes as possible. Should these children grow to have hosts their numbers would be greater than the Tok’ra had ever been. They had already dealt with Sokar and Ba’al, two of the more dangerous adversaries. Taking Ra himself down would take longer but they were patient. Everyone knew Bek and Harry had begun the resistance but not even Lantash and Martouf knew they were one and the same. He had told no one the truth about himself but he knew soon he would either have to leave or use a more complex glamour. Without the sarcophagus a host would only last so long. Martouf’s hair was white with age, his skin wrinkled and dry but his eyes were still bright. Soon Lantash would need a new host and so would ‘Bek’. The Tok’ra was well established now, with a sensible Council, should he stay or move on and help others?
Harry held Martouf’s hand in his as a young man stretched out next to him nervously. Harry smiled at him encouragingly before turning his attention back to his dying lover. Martouf slowly lifted his other hand to touch Harry’s cheek and then his eyes flared. “**We have no more time.**” Lantash stated.

“What do I do?” Mikhail asked and Harry stepped back slowly even as Lantash faced his new host.

“**Kiss me.**” Harry couldn’t watch as Mikhail obeyed and Lantash moved to his new host, Martouf’s breathing ceasing as he did. Mikhail gasped and then lay still as the blending began and Harry gently covered Martouf’s body with the sheet.

“Goodbye my love.” He whispered.

An hour later he stood before the Gate as it activated, consuming the platform holding Martouf’s body. That night he packed away what he wanted and vanished from the base. He returned to Earth and went to work, under a glamour that made him look more like his godfather, he had a few rebellions to incite on the planet.

Two years later he took a staff blast to the back while helping claim the city of Memphis for the rebellion. He died quickly, happy that this dimension could finish the rest of the work.

*The End.*
Harry pulled his board out of the water and up the beach to drop down on his towel. He was loving this world! Why had he never been to Hawaii before? Sand, sea and sun, what more could you want? He had spent the first few years in England, enjoying a world where the wizarding world actually accepted the modern world before doing a stint with the Royal Air Force to get some good flying in. Now he was in the Reserves and living in Paradise. After an hour spent drying in the sun he headed back to his house to shower and dress for the day.

He froze as he heard a nearby gunshot and then bolted for the house next door, going invisible. He saw a car peel out at high speed and quickly entered the house. He cleared each room quickly until he came to the dining room. He swore and became visible, moving to check the body but the man was dead. He pulled out his phone and dialled 911. “Hello. My name is Harry Potter, I need to report a shooting. 2727 Piikoi Street. A car with people just left at high speed. Black sedan, didn’t see the plates.”

“Is anyone hurt sir.”

“There’s a man here, he’s dead. GSW to the head.”

“Police are on the way sir.” They hung up and Harry left the house to wait outside since there was nothing he could do for the victim.
“Governor.” Steve greeted tightly.

“Thanks for agreeing to see me. I’m so sorry about your loss.” She smiled sadly at him as they shook hands.

“Is this about the investigation?”

“We have alerts all across the islands.” She answered.

“You won't find Victor Hesse with roadblocks and warrants. He's gone underground until he can find a safe way to leave the island. Now why am I here? I'd like to help you get what you came back here for.” Steve fought the urge to really snap at her.

“Let's walk. Your father's death was a wakeup call to me and every law enforcement agency in Hawaii, which is why I'm putting together a task force and I want you to run it.” She needed him to run it.

“You don't even know me.”

“I know your résumé. Annapolis, five years Naval Intelligence, six years with the SEALs. Your superiors say that you are the best that they have ever seen”

“Let me stop you right there. I've been tracking Victor Hesse for five years. If he was bold enough to surface, I promise you, he already has an exit strategy and he knows I know it. Which means I can barely afford the hour it's gonna take to bury my father, let alone stand here talking to you.” Now he was getting angry at her trying to use his grief.

“Excuse me. I can help you find this son of a bitch with full immunity and means. Your task force will have blanket authority to go after guys like Hesse and get them the hell off my island. Your rules, my backing, no red tape. And I promise you, commander, what you see with me is what you get.” She argued back.

“Here's what I see. An election year coming up and a politician who needs the PR, who's willing to do whatever it takes including bringing me to Pearl Harbor where my grandfather was killed so I might feel some kind of obligation to fulfil my family destiny. Is that about right, governor?”
“None of those things make me feel less responsible. I knew your father, commander. This is personal for me too.”

“Pass.”

“All right, here’s my private number. Please think it over.”

“Thanks.”

Thank you for coming Mr Potter.”

“Your welcome Governor but why am I here?”

“I wanted to thank you for what you did. John McGarrett was a good man, and a friend.” Pat told him and she motioned him to a seat. “HPD ran your name since you were first on the scene, to rule you out.”

“Of course.”

“What they found caught my interest. John’s death at the hands of an international arms dealer like Hesse was a wakeup call. I’m setting up a task force Captain, full immunity and means. The task force will have blanket authority to go after guys like Hesse and get them the hell off my island, my backing, no red tape.” She explained, if Steve wouldn’t then this young man was a good second choice.

“You want me to join?”

“I want you to lead it.”

“What happened to your first choice? You just learnt about me, you had to have had someone else in mind first.”
“You’re right, I asked Steve McGarrett but he turned me down.”

“I’m not a citizen Governor.”

“True but that can be changed or ignored, you won’t be a cop after all. If I chose to hire a foreigner than that is my choice. This task force is needed and it doesn’t need a cop leading it. We need fresh eyes and a different approach.”

“Can I think about it?”

“I’ll give you my private number.”

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‘I can’t continue this investigation into the police department from the inside. I don't trust the people I work with. So I'm gonna have to do this on my own. It's all about the key. I just don’t know what it's for. I have only been able to find two source’ Steve turned the recorder off as someone approached.

“You, hands up, don't move. Who are you?”

Steve pulled his own gun, leaving them with a standoff. “Who are you?”

“I'm Detective Danny Williams.”

“Lieutenant Commander McGarrett. Put your weapon down now.”

“No, you put your weapon down.”

“Show me your ID.”

“Show me your ID right now.” Danny demanded angrily.
“I'm not putting my gun down.”

“Neither am I.” The cop argued angrily.

“Use your free hand, take out your ID.” Steve offered, gun not wavering.

“Please, after you.”

“At the same time?” Steve tried.

“At the same time?”

“The same time.”

“What, like on the count of three?” Danny demanded in disbelief.

“Okay. Three is good.”

“One, two, three.” The counted together and id was shown.

“Listen, I'm really sorry about your father, but you can't be here right now. This is an active crime scene.”

“Doesn't seem that active.”

“I can't share any information with you.” Danny ignored the comment, it was true. He didn’t know why he was the only detective assigned to such a high profile case.

“Hesse wasn't in here alone when my father was murdered. Someone was sitting at the desk in study.
There was a space cleared for a 13-inch laptop and my father hated computers.”

“I'm gonna ask you again, you gotta leave.”

“You got it.” Steve picked up the tool box and began walking away.

And you can leave the box. That is evidence, you know that.”

“I came with this.”

“No, you didn't come with it. I see the dust void it left here on the counter. What's in the box?”

“How long you been with Honolulu PD?”

“None of your business.”

“It is my business if you're investigating my father's death.”

“I'd like to get back to that, the sooner you leave, the sooner I can.”

“Anything you say.”

“Leave the box or get arrested.”

“All right? Gonna call for backup? An ambulance.” Steve offered as he put the box down and pulled out his phone.

“Thank you.”
“Don’t thank me yet.” He began dialling.

“What are you doing?”

“Yeah, Governor Jameson, please. Tell her it’s Steve McGarrett. Please."

“Governor Jameson here. What can I do for you?”

“You’re kidding me.” Danny demanded.

“Governor, I’ll take the job. No, let’s just say I found something that changed my mind. No, immediately. I’ll transfer to the reserves and I’ll run your task force.”

“Raise your hand.”"

“Wait. What, right now?”

“Right now.”

“Okay.”

“I, Stephen J. McGarrett.”

I, Stephen J. McGarrett, do solemnly declare upon my honour and conscience that I will act at all times to the best of my ability and knowledge in a manner befitting an officer of the law. Thank you, governor. Now it’s my crime scene.” He smirked at the Detective and took the tool box.

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“Potter.” Harry answered the phone and listened to the Governor explain that McGarrett had taken the job. But there was still a position on the task force if he wanted it. He sighed and then sat up.

“Alright, I’ll take the job.”
“Her name is Chen Chi.”

“Where’d you find her?” Chin asked

“Locked in a house. She came here to start a new life. They turned her into a prostitute. Guy we're looking for is high-profile. Victor Hesse. CIA, FBI, Interpol, he's on everyone's radar. He didn't just land here and get his passport stamped. He was back-channelled in.”

“Okay. You think the same network that brought this girl smuggled Hesse in? He made a fortune trafficking kids out of Malaysia, so Then you're looking for a snakehead. Local Chinese gangs that specialize in human smuggling.”

“Okay, we need a name.” Danny told him.

“What, you kidding? Look at me. I'm a rubber gun now.”

“Come on, you were on the force for 15 years.”

“Okay, look, I know a guy who's got ties to that world, but –“

“Great, get us an intro.”

“Forget it. He's a former confidential informant. He trusts no one, especially haoles.”

“You talk to him then.”

“I'm busy.” Chin argued and Danny looked around in disbelief.

“Expecting a crime wave in the gift shop this afternoon?”
“Look, I can't be a cop anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can't be. You understand? H.P.D. accused me of taking payoffs. So I'm the last person the department wants to see wearing a badge. I gotta go.” Chin got up and began to walk away.

“This is going really well.”

“Did you take the money?” Steve asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Did you take the money?”

“No.”

“Then come with us and we don't need to talk about this again, ever. This is your ticket back into the game. Call it payback, call it whatever you want, I don't care, but I need you.”

“How do you know you can trust me?”

“Because my old man did.” Steve answered.

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“Yo, spoke to Chin, he's setting up the meet with Sang Min. I got that surveillance equipment you asked for.” Danny called as he walked into the very nice, high tech office the Governor had set them up with. Steve looked up at him and then at the screen.

“You recognize this guy?”
“No. Who is it?”

“Jovan Etienne. File says he worked for the Russians as a computer programmer in SVR. He was here when my father was murdered. I found his palm prints in the study, partial boot prints in here.”

“Wait, how do you know the boot prints didn't belong to Hesse?”

“Hesse wears a Size 11 like me, except double E. The prints I found were smaller. Hesse gets his footwork custom made. Direct-injected polyurethane midsole with a natural all-rubber outsole.”

“Oh. Your, uh, brain must be a miserable place.”

The door opened and a young man stepped in. “Commander McGarrett?”

“That’s me.”

“Captain Harry Potter, RAF.” They shook hands.

“What can I do for you Captain Potter?”

“The Governor didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Steve asked, suddenly feeling a little wary.

“When you first turned her down she offered the job to me, you took it before I decided so she offered me a spot on the team, I said yes.”

“She offered you the team lead?” Steve asked in surprise and Harry nodded.
“Said she didn’t want a cop as the head, that she needed someone who thought differently.”

“Does the Governor go around talking to every soldier around?” Danny asked.

Harry hesitated and then looked at Steve. “My address is 2729 Piikoi Street.” He told him and Steve frowned before his eyes widened.

“It was you…. you called in my Dad’s murder.”

“I’d just come up off the beach when I heard a shot. I saw the car peel off but he was dead when I found him. I’m sorry.”

“Alright...uh…Danny bring him up to speed…I need to go.”

‘Getting them out of China is easy. Paying for it, that’s the hard part.’ Harry played the recording of Sang Min’s admission to Kono.

“Laser audio surveillance. We don't need a wire to get a confession out of your hupo ass.” Chin grinned and Sang Mon scoffed.

“I'm gonna sue you for entrapment. And when I'm done collecting, I'm gonna find that little hottie you sent in here, and this time, I'm gonna be less of a gentleman.”

“Sorry, boss.” Chin said as he pulled his hand back.

“I didn't see anything.” Steve answered.

“You didn't see anything? Son of a bitch hit me.”

“You wanna file a report, you'll need a witness. Do you wanna file a report?”
“I wanna go to jail now.”

“Where is he? Where's Hesse? What about your wife and kid? You know where they are?” Steve demanded and it was Harry who answered.

“I do. She's getting her nails done on Kalakaua Avenue. And your boy is at his private school in Diamond Head. Wonder what he's gonna think when he finds out Daddy takes kids just like him and puts them on the street to be pumped full of black tar heroin then sold to strangers like animals.” He snarled at the end.

“You're going to jail. That part's not up for negotiation. Your family? Is about to lose a husband and a father. In my eyes, now they're your victims too. The trouble is the law doesn't see it that way. Your wife? She's from Rwanda, she'll be sent back, they both will. If they're lucky, they'll make it to a refugee camp. And your son? Seven's old enough to hold a gun for the Hutu militia. I can prevent all that. But I don't help people who don't help me.” Steve continued for him.

“What kind of cops are you?”

“The new kind.” Harry smirked at him and Sang Min folded.

“Okay, okay.”

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“Why do we need a name?” Harry asked as he drank his beer.

“We're gonna be working together and it would be cool.”

“I got it.” Chin said something long and complicated that went straight over Harry’s head even as Kono laughed.

“You're too much.”

“What? What are you laughing at? That means ‘no task is too big when done together.’” They all laughed now. “This is the problem with you haoles, no team spirit. No island spirit.”

“No, come on. We need something cool. ‘Strike Force.’”

"Strike Force”? Chin asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“I hate that so much.”

“You know; I say we keep thinking.” Steve agreed with Danny.

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“Good morning, lieutenant.” Steve murmured, kissing her and she smiled.

“Good morning, commander.” She returned when they broke apart.

“You know I think I owe you dinner.”
“Yeah, somehow we just never quite make it to dinner.”

“We had dinner in Coronado.”

“No. We had reservations.”

“You know; we both have the day off today. We could have breakfast on the beach. Or” Steve stopped speaking as he kissed and caressed her.

“Or?” She was panting as he had fun but then something felt odd. “I think I'm vibrating.”

“Mm.”

“No, I think I'm actually vibrating.” She yanked the buzzing cell phone out from under her body. “There goes your day off.” She sighed. He listened to the message and got up to get dressed.

“Sorry.”

“I'll see you later, go catch the bad guy.” She teased.

Steve left the house to find Harry pulling on his helmet. “Governor?” He asked and Steve nodded. “See you there.” He turned his bike on and took off to the morgue, he’d beat Steve since he had to pick up Danny.

He parked and went inside to find the Governor there. “Ma’am.” He greeted.

“Captain.”

“You’re here so I’m guessing it’s bad.”

“Yes, it is.” She agreed. “Where’s Steve?”
“Picking up Danny.”

“What do you think of the team so far?”

“Rough around the edges but coming together. I think it helps that Kelly was John McGarrett’s partner and Kono’s his cousin. It’s making it a bit easier.”

“So no major clashes?”

“Just Steve and Danny arguing like an old married couple.” He admitted and they both chuckled.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming.” She called as she saw them coming.

“Governor.”

“An 18-year-old girl's body was found off Waikiki this morning.”

“That's H.P.D.'s jurisdiction.”

“Not this time. Oh, that's right. You haven't met Dr. Bergman yet. Max is a tactile thinker. Playing music is part of his process. Some people say he's a savant. I think he's a genius. Max? Trust me.” The Governor explained.

“Edematous airways.”

“What did he say? Nice to meet you too.”

“The victim exhibited pulmonary edema petechial haemorrhaging and froth in the airways.” Max explained as he led them to the body. “Cause of death is definitely drowning. Does that mean we're not dealing with a homicide? No, it doesn't mean we're not dealing with a homicide. Sorry. That was a double negative. It means it still could be a homicide. See these linear contusions on her wrists?
They're ante mortem.”

“Ligature marks.” Danny looked at them. “She was restrained.”

“That’s right. She has defensive wounds as well.”

“So she put up a fight.” Harry commented and Max nodded.

“Yes. Also hello. I am Max Bergman.”

“Hello, Max.” Harry and Steve said almost in unison.

“Yeah, hi, Max.”

“Governor, do we have an ID of the victim? Her name is Amanda Reeves. Her father is Michael Reeves, the US ambassador to the Philippines and a very old friend. Which is why I promised I’d put my best people on it.”

“Okay. Uh What are they doing in Hawaii?”

“They vacation here every year. The girls went to a movie last night, but they never made it home.”

“I'm sorry. You said girls? As in more than one?” Steve demanded.

“Oh. Sorry. Amanda's sister, Robin, is still missing. Coast Guard sent out divers this morning, but there's no sign of her.”

“So Robin Reeves may still be alive.” Harry looked at his boss who nodded and they headed out.

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“Robin Reeves. What'd you do with her?” Harry asked as Jordan began coming around.

“What?”


“Murder?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We found Amanda Reeves' body this morning.”

“I didn't kill that girl.”

“No? Well, you better know who did then.”

“Okay. Okay. I did slip those girls a roofie last night.” Jordan answered, the bit of magic Harry was using helping to loosen his tongue.

“Why those girls? Why'd you pick them?”

“I was just doing what I was told. But they were alive when I handed them off to Kang.”

“Who's Kang?”

“The one who set me up with the job. Said he'd give me five grand for every girl I brought him.”
“What does he do with the girls?”

“I get paid to supply the girls, not to ask questions. Okay.”

“So how do we find Kang?”

“I don’t know. Honestly he never even told me his last name. I don’t even know his phone number.”

Jordan pleaded but Harry’s glare didn’t lessen one bit.

“How do you deliver the girls to Kang? How does that happen?”

“He leaves a van parked in one of the lots.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“I put the girls in the back. Take the van to Ala Wai and park it by the canal. The next day it's back in the parking lot with five grand in the glove box and instructions for the next drop-off.”

“That girl you were gonna drug tonight, was she your next delivery?”

“Yeah. Yes. I was supposed to get her there by 1:00.”

“I can’t believe you did that.” Harry grinned and Kono shrugged.

“What? She loves her dog.”

“Good work. You saw a weakness and exploited it.”
“Yeah, but still no Robin.”

“We’ll find her.”

“Why do you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Join the task force. I know why the rest of this did but you were pretty much retired and living in Paradise.”

“And I like helping keep it like that. A friend once said I have a saving people thing. Honestly I was getting a little bored.” He admitted and she shook her head.

“Crazy haole.” She grinned and they both laughed as they entered their HQ.

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“You're right. Listen, I'm man enough to know when I'm wrong. Thank you. You both have great instincts. And if you ever consider coming down to the private sector, you should give me a call. Men with your skill-sets deserve to be compensated.” Ellison offered Harry and Steve.

“Well, thank you very much.” Steve smiled and looked to Harry who subtly pulled his cuffs.

“I totally agree.”

“Oh, what are you doing?” Ellison demanded as Harry grabbed him, spinning him to cuff his hands.

“I'm getting compensation. You obstructed a criminal investigation. That is an arrestable offense.” He explained even as Steve grinned.

“You and I both know the charges will never stick.”
“Yeah, maybe not. But it's gonna take your firm at least 24 hours to get a lawyer here from Los Angeles. I'm gonna make sure you spend that time in jail.” Steve pointed out even as Danny joined them and Harry handed Ellison over to him. “Book him, Danno.”

“I got to be honest, actually, I didn't mind that one.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Move.”

Harry lay on the sand enjoying the quiet. He hadn’t expected like with the task force to be as intense as it was. Anything from arms dealing to crooked feds to murder, they handled it all. And yet they still hadn’t solved the first case they’d been brought together for. But it was nice to be working with a team again, especially when he wasn’t in the lead. He was quite happy playing second to Steve. They were currently enjoying a few days off after attending the funeral of Danny’s first partner on the island. No one deserved to die how he had. And at least they’d finally caught the mole in the department. He hated moles, especially ones that nearly got friends killed. If Kono wasn’t so good Sang Min’s goons could have killed her before she was even officially a cop. He liked Kono, she was smart, pretty and very handy with a rifle.

Harry and Steve laughed as Danny fell again. Kono just shook her head and went back to coaching him in surfing. Danny had recently decided to take up surfing so he could do it with Grace but so far the lessons weren’t going all that great. But at least he was making an effort to learn something to do with island life, he was so quick to say he hated it here but now he was trying. Eventually Steve stood up and went to help with the lessons.

“You okay?” Harry asked Chin who glanced over.

“It’s not every day you have a bomb stuck around your neck.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about, it’s the rest of you. Sooner or later someone will find out about the money.”
“Didn’t Kono tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“The money Hess burned wasn’t from the HPD, it was mine.”

“Yours?”

“Yeah. I had an inheritance from my parents. Saving your life seemed a good use for it.”

“But…I…. I’ll find some way to pay you back.”

“No need, I consider it money well spent.”

“Harry…”

“Let it go Chin. I’m not accepting anything in return.”

“Thank you.” They fell silent as Kono joined them, leaving the lesson to Steve for a while. Seeing the way his cousin would glance sideways at Harry, Chin decided to be nice and got up to join the other guys. If Kono was interested in the young Captain, then he had no problem with that at all.

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“Doing anything tomorrow?”

Harry paused and looked over at Kono from where he was grabbing his helmet. “Unless we catch a case, why?”

“Well I know this great sushi bar.” She suggested and Harry stared at her for a few seconds before smiling.
“Sounds good. Pick you up at one?”

“Great. I’ll see you then.” She grinned and left the office. Harry shook his head and left, waving at her as he got on his bike and drove off.

“.......”

“So you and Kono?”

“Are no one’s business unless Kono wants to talk about it.” Harry stated and Chin nodded.

“As long as you’re good to her.”

“Agreed.” They drew their guns and followed Steve in.

“.......”

Kono laughed and ran across the sand, Harry hot on her heels. He caught her round the waist and they tumbled to the sand, Harry taking the impact. They rolled across the sand, laughing and play fighting until Harry pinned her and then leant in and kissed her softly. Kono stilled and kissed him back. They then both groaned as their phones rang, crime never stopped it seemed.

“.......”

“All right, guys, come right here. Come on in. Listen up. Our target's name is Wo Fat. Thermal imaging shows one heat signature in the safe house, so we know he's alone. But do not let that fool you. This guy is a major arms dealer with known terrorist affiliations and over a dozen kills. He's more than likely carrying a weapon, and he's most definitely dangerous. So stay focused, be aware of your surroundings at all times. All right? Let's go.” Steve explained to the team getting ready to breach the house. He nodded at Harry and Danny who were checking their weapons. “Gearing up, huh?” He asked Jenna who nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Good for you. You forgot one thing, though.” He pulled out his cuffs.
“What are you doing with those?”

“You're not a field agent, okay? You're an analyst.” He said as he cuffed her hand to the door handle.

“Are you kidding? My intel got us here. Can't believe you're gonna freeze me out.”

“I understand how much this means to you, but you're not gonna get hurt.” He re-joined the team as she sat in the car. “Let's go, guys. Let's go. Move out.” He called and they moved towards the house but it all went wrong as the door exploded.

“Steve, you all right?” Harry called and Steve nodded.

“Break contact.” Steve yelled.

“Barricade.”

“Stand down.”

“Entry team, fall back. Arson, explosives.”

“I need an ETA on rescue.” The calls came all around them through the smoke.

“Boss, he's on the move.” One called, watching the infra-red.

“I'm going in.” Steve called and then looked at Harry.

“Stay here, surround the perimeter.”
“I’m headed toward the back of the house.” Kono called over the radio.

“Rear team has been mobilized, is searching for the target.”

“Boss, he's moving upstairs.”

“I got eyes on the target, but it's not Wo Fat. It's Sang Min. I repeat, Sang Min.” Steve called from upstairs.

“Please repeat.” Harry called in confusion, what was he doing here?

“I'll say again. Sang Min. Wo Fat wasn't in the house.”

“Hey, Gracie.” Harry called as the young girl exited the building and she smiled when she saw him, running down the stairs.

“Uncle Harry!”

“Hey, kiddo.” He hugged her and began leading her to the car he’d borrowed.

“Where's daddy?”

“Listen, Gracie, Danno's, uh, not feeling the best, okay? I’m going to take you to the hospital. We're gonna go see him.”

“Is he going to be okay?”

“Is he gonna be okay? Let me tell you about your father. He might not talk like it, but he's one tough guy. And he's brave as well. Can you be brave like Danno?” he asked and she nodded. “Are you sure? Then we should go see him. What are you waiting for? Come on.” He took her backpack and tossed it in the back before making sure she had her seatbelt on.
“You got something?” Jenna asked and Harry nodded.

“Yeah, I got a call from your CIA contact. They found a chemical match to our sarin. Turns out it's the same strand used by a Chechen terror group in a botched Moscow attack five years ago. And the Russian FSB identified the supplier as Mikhail Yursky. And get this, Mr. Yursky arrived in Hawaii five days ago under fake passport.”

“Timeline matches the murder.” Jenna agreed and Steve nodded.

“Then that's our killer. Now all we have to do is find him.”

“HAZMAT team just finished checking the canisters in Mikhail's trunk. Empty with no signs of toxins. He was about to leave the island with them. I guess he was gonna use the canisters to traffic the sarin.” Harry explained as they looked over the information on the main screen.

“What's still not adding up though is why a bioweapons dealer with terrorist ties would target two innocent people from the mainland.” Chin added.

“What's going on?” Steve asked as the door opened.

“Commander McGarrett, David Akahoshi, Internal Affairs.”

“I know who you are. What are you doing here?”

“I came to return something to Mr. Kelly.” He placed a case on the table and opened it to reveal money. “The serial numbers on these bills don't match the stolen money, which means you're trying to cover for your uncle.”

“Those inventory logs disappeared years ago, so those serial numbers don't exist.” Chin argued.
“Actually, they do. After the forfeiture locker was robbed, IA kept waiting for you to slip up and spend the money somewhere. We figured that you were being careful. So we had the asset forfeiture division put the word out that their inventory records had been lost. It was all a lie. If you thought we couldn't trace the serial numbers, maybe you would finally start spending the money. But that never happened, because you never stole it.”

“Chin, this has gone too far.” Steve murmured.

“You got your money back. Let this go.” Chin pleaded.

“I'm sorry, but I can't do that. I know you were just trying to protect your family, which is why I am not gonna charge you with obstruction of justice. I'm not even gonna ask where you got that money, but your uncle stole from the Honolulu Police Department, which means he stole from the people of Hawaii. And he's gonna have to answer for that.” With that he left the three men alone.

“I, myself, am gonna ask where you got this money.” Steve looked to Chin.

“Markham.”

“The bookie?” Harry asked in disbelief.

“I signed the deed to my house over to him.”

“Return it. Get your deed back.” Steve ordered.

“Steve, I didn't have a choice.”

“Listen to me, all right? You did this for your uncle. You don't have to explain anything else to me.”

“Or me.” Harry agreed.
“McGarrett?” Sang Min called and the whole team turned, weapons appearing.

“Put your hands in the air.” Steve yelled.

“Get on your knees, right now.” Harry ordered.

“How did you get in here?”

“I need your help.” He answered as Chin checked him over.

“He's clean.”

“Told you I'm not gonna cut any deals.” Steve warned as Chin cuffed him.

“You don't understand. I'll plead to any charge. Take the maximum sentence, as long as you place me under protective custody.”

“Oh, yeah, what happened?”

“Wo Fat. I tried to make things right with him.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me he's not gonna rest until I'm dead. And that when I am, he's gonna come for you next.”

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“You worried?” Harry asked Kono as they lay on his couch together, the remains of dinner on the table.

“Yeah. I mean Danny nearly died and now Wo Fat’s threatening Steve....”
“It’ll be okay.” He kissed the top of her head. “We’ll get through this.”

“Promise?”

“Well… I think this is a promise.” He held up a ring box and she gasped at the platinum ring set with a subtle yet beautiful diamond.

“Harry?”

“Will you marry me Kono?”

“Yes.” She whispered and he slipped the ring on her finger.

“Want your money back?” Steve asked and Harry chuckled.

“Burnt pieces aren’t very useful. Guess I better go tell HPD we already know what money it is.” He waved at Steve and began walking away.

“Oh Harry!”

He turned back. “Yeah?”

“Congratulations.”

Harry grinned. “Thanks.”

“H.P.D. has shown improvements across the board - in every district.” Laura told the Governor as
they walked.

“Aloha, Steve, lieutenant Kelly.” Pat called when she saw them.

“Aloha, governor. Good morning Miss Hills.”

“Lieutenant Kelly.” Laura greeted.

“Uh, you'll excuse us.”

“When are you gonna ask her out?”

“Who, Miss Hills?”

“No, the governor.” Steve rolled his eyes. “Who do you think? Every time we see Laura, she's just sexting you with her eyes.”

“Hey, come on.”

“What, are you kidding me? For a great detective, you're really clueless sometimes.”

The door slammed open and Jenna looked towards them. “I was just about to call you.” She called out even as Steve picked an envelope up off his desk.

“Guess who got another special delivery today? Another envelope.” Chin commented.

“Every Wednesday, it's like clockwork. No unknown prints. I already checked. Security dropped it off minutes ago. I guess it showed up early this morning in the mailroom. Same handwriting, same ink, same envelope as all the rest. The skeleton key.” Steve held it up. “This thing drove me crazy. I tried every lock in the house. Even tried dad's old desk at H.P.D. Remember, it didn't fit? It didn't fit anything.”
“Actually, um, based on the photos of all the evidence that your father collected, I did a little digging. Turns out that key belongs to a piece of antique American furniture from the 1800s.”

“My father never owned anything like that.”

“Then whose key is it? Maybe the person he was investigating.”

“Violent crimes, down 7 percent. Property crime's down 4. And the year-to-year clearance rate is up 8. Looks like your Five-0 task force is making an impact.” Laura continued reporting as they walked towards the cars.

“Yes, but let's not sell H.P.D. short. They've been doing great work. Give the commissioner an attaboy for me when you see him.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Oh, and, Laura, it's perfectly all right for a lady to make the first move.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Inspector Kelly, call him today.”

“Yes, ma'am.” She walked away to her own car and opened the door. The car was instantly consumed by a fireball, blowing out windows.

“Aah, Laura!” Pat screamed.

“We gotta get you out of here.” Her guard said as he pulled her back. “Come on, now. We got her. Hey, come on.”

“Governor? What happened? Governor, are you hurt? You okay?” Steve yelled as 5-o appeared on the scene.
“I just got off the phone with the crime lab. They finished processing Laura Hills' house.”

“They find any other print besides her?” Kono asked.

“They found prints all over the place. McGarrett's.” Harry answered.

“How is that possible?” Jenna asked.

“You ever been there before today?”

“No, never.” Steve denied.

“Somebody sure as hell wants H.P.D. to think you were.”

“Why?”

“You're being set up.” Harry stated flatly. He did not like this at all.

“Let me just make a statement, okay? Out of the top ten dopiest suggestions you have ever had, this is number one with a bullet.”

“What idea is that?” Harry asked as he joined them.

“Oh, I'll tell you. He, uh, wants to break into the governor's mansion.”

“What?” Kono asked in disbelief, all of them staring at Steve.
“All those who think that’s a certifiably demented idea, please raise your hand.” Hands went up and Danny looked at Jenna. “Please raise your hand.

“I'm new. I didn't think I got a vote.”

“You don't get a vote. You are forgetting that Five-0 is not a democracy, it's a benevolent dictatorship. Got it?”

“Why would you wanna break into the governor's mansion?”

“The key that Laura Hills sent me from my father's tool box goes to an old antique bureau, all right? The exact same antique bureau that's in the governor's study.”

“Okay, if the key fits, what do you think you're gonna find in there?” Danny asked as Steve’s phone rang.


“What happened? That was H.P.D. The transport taking O'Reilly to prison just got hit.”

Harry slipped easily into the mansion and began looking around. He found the desk Steve was interested in and easily opened it with magic, removing the evidence Steve had talked about. He then re-locked the desk and continued searching, frowning as the tricorder he’d pulled out picked up a signal so he took the interesting looking clock too. He then apparated home and walked over to Steve’s, knocking on the door.

“Harry?”

“Going to commit robbery? Don’t bother, beat you too it.” He put everything down.
“What’s with the clock?”

“Not sure.” Harry began dismantling it. “Huh.”

“What?” Danny asked and Harry held the camera up.

You're saying you think that the governor had Laura Hills murdered?”

“Yes. And Wo Fat made it happen.”

“What are we waiting for? Let's bring her in.” Kono said.

Whoa, slow down, okay? We don't have any hard evidence proving anything.”

Well, we have these photos.” Harry tossed them down on the table.

Yeah, we do. That he illegally obtained by breaking into the governor's house. She's probably gonna say he planted them there.” Danny argued.

He's right. This isn't some liquor store stick-up artist who everyone wants to see locked up. We're talking about an elected official with a spotless record and a 72-percent approval rating. If we take her down, we need something that sticks.”

Fine. That's our focus now, okay? We silently investigate the governor like my father did. We get something on her and bring her down. And she leads us to Wo Fat.” Steve ordered.

Chin answered his phone. “Yeah, Duke, what's up?

You sure you don't want your job? Because it looks like your current one isn't going to exist very much longer. We have a warrant to arrest McGarrett for murder.”
“We got a problem. H.P.D.’s on its way right now to arrest you for killing Laura Hills.” Chin called even as they heard distant sirens.

“Kono, get everything off the screens. Wipe the drives. Wipe everything.” Harry ordered firmly.

“This is ridiculous. He's being set up.” Jenna argued.

“What are you gonna do?” Danny asked.

“I got no chance of beating this if the governor's involved, not if I'm locked up.”

“All right, listen, do me a favour. Please, just lay low, okay? We’ll get something on the governor and end this.”

“All right, I gotta go.” Steve took off.

“Everybody, clean house.” Harry stepped into command.

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“Hey, hey. Chin?” Danny called as he ran over.

“Danny?” Steve called.

“Hey. What the hell are you doing? What happened, huh?” he demanded as he saw the cuffs on Steve.

“The governor's dead.” Chin answered.

“What are you talking about?”
“It was Wo Fat.” Steve argued.

“Let him go.” Danny ordered.

“It was Wo Fat, Danny.”

“Let him go. Let him go.”

“He was the only one there. His gun was just discharged. I can't let him go.”

“Yes, you can. We have jurisdiction. We're Five-0. Get him out.”

“You don't understand, Danny. There is no Five-0 anymore.”

“What did you do, huh? What did you do? You just went back to them after everything they did to you? Huh? Hey, hey, listen to me. I'm gonna get you out of this thing. Don't worry.”

“Let him go Chin.” Harry called as he walked over. “Five-o does still exist and with Steve under suspicion that leaves me in charge. We’ll hold him in our cell till we finish investigating.”

“Lieutenant Governor Denning ordered the task force disbanded Harry.”

“Well it’s a good thing he doesn’t have the authority to do that. Governor Jameson had five-o approved higher up the food chain, we’re as permanent as the HPD. Now get him out and let’s get moving.”

Harry watched as Denning was sworn in as Governor. He didn’t like this at all. They’d proved Steve’s innocence but had nothing on Wo Fat but his word. And he did not like the new governor, especially with how he’d tried to disband them. Something was going on behind the scenes but what?
Harry smiled as Chin lead Kono towards him across the sand. She looked utterly beautiful. He took her hands in his and they turned to the man officiating. They exchanged their vows as the sun began to set. Soon they were all eating and laughing, having a wonderful time. At the end of the night they got in a limousine and headed to the airport, heading to Europe for their honeymoon.

Harry looked over at his wife who smiled and he smiled back, shifting his vest a little. They were being shot at, again. Though with Steve currently on the mainland they couldn’t even blame him for this. Lori crawled over to join them even as Harry signalled Chin and Danny. They laid down cover fire, allowing the two men to get the drop on the gunmen.

Harry sat up and Kono scrambled out of bed and into the bathroom, jumping up as he heard her being sick. He knelt beside her and held her hair back with one hand while the other rested over her stomach, guiding a scan and his eyes went wide. “Oh.” He whispered, before settling her stomach.

Kono breathed in deeply, glad for his instant sickness cure. Finding out magic was real had been a shock but one she’d been able to accept. He didn’t use it a lot but when he did it seemed totally natural. “Oh what?”

“You’re pregnant.” He answered and Kono just stared at him.

“You’re sure?”

“Positive, it’s too early for most tests to show though.”

“I guess I better tell Steve we at least suspect I am, I can focus on background checks and computer work.”

“You’re okay with this?”

“If I wasn’t we would have been using contraceptive.”
“Good point.” He kissed her cheek before giving her some water to rinse. “And there goes our alarm. Come on, I’ll wash your back.”

Kono smiled at the piece of paper, official proof she was carrying the next Potter. She headed back to HQ to begin filling out paperwork taking her off active duty only for the team to rush by. “Harry?”

He stopped and kissed her. “We’ve got a lead on Wo Fat.”

“Be careful.”

“Always am.” He promised as he ran for his bike.

Kono watched and then headed inside to start the paperwork. After that she went to work on some older files. It was hours later that they returned, covered in soot and blood and she froze at the looks on their faces. “Harry?”

Chin moved to hold her, ignoring the grime. “I’m so sorry cuz.”

“No.” she shook her head and looked to Steve.

“He saved our lives Kono, it was a trap.”

Her legs buckled and Chin supported her. “He…. he can’t…I’m pregnant.” She choked and Chin hugged her tighter.

The British Ambassador to the US flew out from DC to attend the funeral. Harry had stated in his will that he wanted to be buried in his adopted homeland and it had been agreed that as a member of the armed forces, even though not American, he was to be buried with all other soldiers on the island and with a military funeral. Every officer that had ever worked with 5-0 attended to pay their
Kono smiled down at her son, he had her colouring but already had his Daddy’s eyes.

“What’s his name?” Chin asked as he set up some flowers.

“Harry Chin Potter.” She answered and Chin kissed her cheek.

“He’d be so proud of you.”

Kono passed Harry to Mary who smiled and rocked the baby. “Don’t worry Kono, I have this, go catch bad guys and keep the boys in line.”

“Thank you so much for doing this Mary.”

“Looking after this handsome young man beats being a flight attendant. Besides the pays nice.” She teased. Harry had set up a trust fund the day he’d found out she was pregnant, with boy of them as 5-O they had always accepted the chance something could go wrong. Kono watched Mary with Harry for a bit before heading out for her first day back cleared for full duty. She knew they were safe, Harry had warded the house himself and she had the contact details for the local magical community, odds were little Harry would take after his father and she’d eventually need help to teach him to control his magic.

“There are some more blood drops over here. Broken branches. Ground’s been disturbed.” Kono called as she looked around.

“Definitely some sort of a struggle went down. I’ve got arterial blood spatter.” Chin called. “Likely due to the strike at the victim's neck.”

“Okay, well, looks like we found our primary crime scene. Hey, I got something.”
“What is it?” he asked.

“Looks like a bone fragment of some kind. There's tool markings. And a drilled hole. Our victim wasn't wearing anything like this.”

“Based on the crazing and discoloration, I'd say it's at least a hundred years old.”

“What's that?”

“Appears to be a strand of hair. All right. Let's get this to Fong and see if he can run DNA.” He bagged it and then looked at her.

“How’re you doing?”

“Good. Harry’s at the annoying not sleeping stage but Mary’s great. I think she needed responsibility to settle down and helping me with Harry does that.”

“He’s growing so fast.”

“He’s only six months cuz, wait till he’s at least four before telling me that please.” She begged and Chin laughed.

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“Mrs. Koruba?”

“Officer Potter. I heard on the news that you had somebody in custody. I had to come here. I need to know. Who is it?”

“It looks like the person we have in custody didn't kill your husband.”
“Are you any closer to finding out who did?”

“We're still looking. There is something that you might be able to help us with. Did Brandon ever say why he shut down the interisland ferry?”

“I didn't know about that.”

“We heard he pulled the permits. He never mentioned any of this to you?”

“No, I had no idea. Do you think that's why he was murdered?”

“It's possible. But we're not sure.” Kono smiled at the distressed woman who nodded and walked away. Kono made her way inside to do her job and look up the permits. She was just leaving when her phone rang.

“Kono, what do you got?” Steve asked.

“All right, so I just left the D.O.T. Looks like the lawyer was right. Koruba did let the permits lapse.”

“Did you find out why?”

“Well, according to the D.O.T., Koruba felt he couldn't move forward knowing what the costs were to the environment.”

“Okay, so he finally had a change of heart.”

“Well, it makes sense, knowing what we know about Koruba and his connection to the island. But get this, a request to renew the permits was filed a few hours after Koruba was murdered.”

“By whom?”
“Koruba's business partner, Tony Dennison.”

“There's our motive. Dennison stood to lose the most if Koruba killed the deal on the boat.”

“Yeah, and with him dead, he had the most to gain. Maybe Dennison killed his own partner just to keep the interisland ferry project alive.” She heard Danny agree with Steve over what was obviously speakerphone.

“Kono, listen to me. See if you can get a lock on Dennison's cell. We just spoke to his assistant, who implied that he was off to see Megan Koruba.”

“That's strange. I just saw Mrs. Koruba earlier.”

“You didn't by any chance tell her anything about this case, did you?”

“I just asked her about Brandon letting the permits lapse, but she said she didn't know anything about it.”

“Hold on, hold on. Why would you do that?”

“Well, she wasn't a suspect. Why?”

“Maybe she was lying, I don't know. We'll call you back.” He hung up and Kono ran to her car, heading back to HQ to start tracking him. Sure enough Steve was soon calling back. “Kono, did you get a lock on Dennison's phone?”

“I'm pulling up a trace now.”

“If Koruba's wife tipped off Dennison to the fact that we're onto them, I guarantee you they're on the run now.”

“Kono, have the Coast Guard, Sheriffs and TSA on alert, and check and see if any airline tickets have been purchased under either of their names.”
“I followed up on Dennison’s alibi. Turns out, the call we thought he made from his office to Koruba around T.O.D. was actually patched through his office to his cell phone. Dennison’s assistant says he gave her very specific instructions on when and where to make that call.”

“All right. Did you pull his cell records?”

“Yeah. And the cell tower he was closest to was actually less than a mile from the reenactment site. All right, I got him. Kualani Lane and Kahala Avenue.”

“That's Brandon and Megan Koruba's house. They haven't left.”

“Hey, listen, pal, the only reason we're here is 'cause you're taking care of the tab, all right? You know that.” Danny called out to Steve as drinks were passed around.

‘First round only I'm picking up.” Steve answered

“What?” Chin looked over at Steve

“Told you, told you.” Kono grinned

“No, what'd I tell you? I told you that. I should've, I should've bet money on that.” Danny grumbled.

“Shrimp? Don't you get enough of that stuff at work?” Steve looked at Kamekona as he began eating.

“Market research. I got to keep tabs on the competition.”

“Hey, you. That was a really good call on Creed and Urthstrike.” Chin looked at Kono who shrugged.

“Thanks. Mahalo.”
“You listened to your gut.”

“I learned it from you.” She said with a smile.

“Will you relax? She’s right there.” Steve called, watching Danny stare out at the beach.

“I'm completely fine! She's right there.”

“Danny!”

“I'm completely fine!” Danny argued.

“You did good, buddy. You picked a controlled environment, reduced expectation and pressure for all three of you. Good job.”

“Thank you.” Danny went back to watching his daughter and girlfriend.

“Well this has been fun but I better head home and relieve Mary of Harry.” Kono stood.

“I’ll come with you.”

“You just want to tuck him in.” She teased and Chin shrugged, it was true. He loved the little baby.

Kono looked at herself in the mirror and took a deep breath, she could do this. Mary came in with Harry on her hip and grinned. “You look great.”

“Thanks.” She kissed Harry on the top of the head. “You be good for Aunt Mary. I’ll be back by midnight.”
“Just remember to have fun, it’s a date.”

“Yeah.”

“And I won’t tell anyone about it or who it’s with.” Mary promised again. They both knew the team wouldn’t react well but Adam wasn’t his father.

“Awesome. Come on in. Mahalo.” Kono smiled at the waiter who took the tip and left the room. “Breakfast is here.”

“Breakfast can wait.” Adam answered, wrapping his arms around her. How did he get so lucky?

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to be at work in a while, right? Oh, I think that's mine.” Kono called as a phone began to ring and Adam moved away to pick it up.

“No, it's me. Excuse me. I'll be right back.” He moved into the other room. “Adam. When? I understand. Look, uh, I'm about to head into a meeting. I'll talk to you later.” Hearing that Kono moved into the bedroom and started dressing. “Whoa-whoa-whoa, hey-hey-hey-hey. You don't have to go yet, right? What's wrong?” he asked after hanging up and walking in.

“Well, you're about to head into a meeting.”

“What was I supposed to say, I'm in bed with a cop?”

“No.” She agreed softly and then sat on the bed, suddenly sad. “We can't even go out to dinner. I can’t introduce you to my son. And we have to sneak off to a hotel every time we want to be together.”
“Look, you got a better idea? I mean, I don't see you, uh, rushing to tell Chin about us. Or Five-O. And I would love to meet little Harry.” He assured her. He'd seen pictures of her late husband and their son, he was one cute little man.

“I want to.”

“But you don't. Because you know they'd look at me and see one thing: Hiro Noshimuri's son. Heir apparent to the head of the Yakuza.”

“They won't see that if you're clean.”

“I'm getting there. Our hotels on the North Shore are entirely legit now. But it doesn't happen overnight. I have to take it one business at a time.”

“I know. I just want to be with you.”

“I want that, too.”

“Adam, what are you doing here?” Steve asked as they were surrounded.

“Next time you steal one of my helicopters, you should disable the GPS.”

“Listen, I know what he did, okay, but this is not the way.” Steve tried to reason with the young man, he knew what it was like to lose your father.

“This isn't your fight; McGarrett-- I don't want to hurt you.” Adam answered, gun shakily pointed towards him and Wo Fat.

“I'm taking him to jail, Adam-- he's going to prison, and he's gonna rot there.”
“It's not enough!”

“Take them both out now and be done with it. Do it now. There's no time.” His lawyer urged.

“Hey, hey, Five-O. Hands up. Put down your weapons. Put down your weapons.” The calls came as Adam’s people were surrounded.

“You little coward. I cleared the way. I made it easy for you. You're still too weak to finish the job.”


“She could've helped him disappear. I did what I had to do.”

“Adam please put the gun down. Please. Look at me. Please.” Kono called, her gun aimed and tears falling. He slowly lowered his arm and his lawyer grabbed the gun from him, aiming at Wo Fat only for Kono to shoot him.

“Aw, you son of a bitch.”

“Police! Stay where you are, drop the weapons! Freeze!”

“Tell your men to drop their weapons!” Steve called.

“Drop your weapons! Police! Drop your weapons!”

“See? I knew it. Cargo pants.” Danny announced proudly, he’d been right about what Steve was wearing.

“Book 'em, Danno.”
“You could’ve just said hello.”

“Adam.” Kono holstered her gun and went to him and Adam held her.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered and she smiled.

“It’s okay.”

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Adam smiled and knelt down as the toddler stared up at him. “Hello Harry, it’s nice to finally meet you.” He greeted as the two-year-old timidly clung to his mother’s leg.

“Say hello to Adam, Harry.” She gently pushed him towards her fiancé and Harry smiled shyly. Adam shook his hand and Harry laughed before hugging him and Adam stood, Harry in his arms.

“Can’t beat the Harry approval.” Danny commented and Chin nodded. Little Harry was strangely serious and a great judge of character for his age.

“Daddy?” he asked and Adam looked at Kono who smiled.

“Yes Harry, Adam’s going to be your knew Daddy.”

*The End.*
“So, anyone ask you to the dance?” Pete asked as they walked towards the school from where the bus had dropped them.

“Not yet.” Chloe answered, trying to shrug it off.

“If nothing pans out with you know who, maybe – “

“Pete, do you take a break from the soap opera in your head? I told you a hundred times, I'm not interested in Clark.”

“Your vehement denial has been duly noted. Whew! Hey, maybe you and I could go together. I mean, not as a date-date thing. More of a friend-friend thing.” Pete tried awkwardly.

“Hi, guys.” Clark grinned as he jogged up to join them, arms full of books.

“Wha-- uh, didn't you just -- weren't you – “ She looked around in confusion, he’d missed the bus so how?

“I took a shortcut.”
“Through what, a black hole?”

“Clark... you have to excuse our intrepid reporter. Seems as though her weird-ar is on DefCon 5. She thought someone was attacking the bus.”

“Just because everyone else chooses to ignore the strange things that happen in this leafy little hamlet doesn’t mean that they don’t happen.”

“Now, you know we’d love to join you and Scooby inside the mystery machine for another zany adventure, but we got to hand in these permission slips before homeroom.” Pete grinned as he pulled his from his pocket.

“Actually, Pete, I'm having second thoughts. I don't think signing up for the team is such a great idea.”

“Clark, listen, this is the only way.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait. You two are trying out for the football team? What is this, some sort of teen suicide pact? Ha ha ha. Ahh.” She laughed and the boys exchanged a look.

“We're trying to avoid becoming this year's scarecrow.”

“What are you talking about and why are we whispering?” She demanded even as they pulled her into a shadowed corner.

“It’s a homecoming tradition. Every year before the big game, the football players select a freshman, take him out to Reil46861FA6.JPGly field, strip him down to his boxers, then paint an "s" on his chest.” Pete explained in a rush.

“And then string him up like a scarecrow.” Clark finished and she grimaced.

“Jeez, that sounds like years of therapy waiting to happen.”
“Why do you think we're trying out for the team? Figure they won't choose one of their own.”

“I'll see you guys in class.” Clark suddenly said, looking past them to the stairs. He walked away.

“Bye.” Chloe called after him.

“Give him 10 seconds.” Pete offered.

“Five.”

“1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – “ As he hit five Clark tripped over his own feet, sending books flying.

“Nice, man.” A footballer called as he walked by.

“Statistical fact. Clark Kent can't get within 5 feet of Lana Lang without turning into a total freak show.” Chloe commented as she took Pete’s money.

Clark began gathering his books up, feeling sick even as he looked up to find Lana helping.

“Nietzsche. Didn't realize you had a dark side, Clark.”

“Doesn't everybody?” he asked, breathing deeply.

“Well, I guess so. So, what are you, man or superman?”

“I haven't figured it out yet.”

“You okay there?” A man joined them, looking Clark over critically.

“I’m okay.” He tried.
“Right.” The man took his arm and moved him to sit on the nearest bench. Lana gathered the rest of his books and put them on the bench as well. A hand touched his forehead. “No fever but you’re pretty pale. Do you feel sick?”

“A little.”

“Better get to class Miss. I’ll make sure Mr….?”

“Kent, Clark.”

“I’ll make sure he’s alright. It is my job after all.”

“I’ll see you later Clark.” She called before leaving.

“Okay just take some nice deep breaths for me.”

“Who are you?”

“Dr Harry Murphy, new school doctor.” He answered, smiling gently. “Feeling any better?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, come on and I’ll write you a note to excuse your lateness. But if you feel sick again come to my office.”

“I will, thanks.” They gathered his books and went to Harry’s office where he wrote him a note and grabbed a bag to put the books in.

“Might want to buy a bigger backpack.” He offered as the teen left and then watched him thoughtfully. What was an alien doing on earth going to high school? Was this why he was here? There were times he wished Death or Destiny would give him some instructions when he arrived,
instead of just vague feelings but he had to work with what he had. He spent the day dealing with small things like kids needing a band aide or headaches, things he could do in his sleep with one hand tied behind his back. At least Mr Kent didn’t need to return.

At the end of the day he packed up and headed out, pausing to watch the kids on the football field for a few moments. He slipped on his jacket and helmet and got on his bike, heading out of town to the land he’d bought. At the moment all that was on it was a partially built house and a tent. He was having fun building the house of his dreams for the first time ever. Thanks to wards and magic he was even maintaining the farm land and animals alone.

The drive was nice, even if he did have to pass that horrid fertiliser plant, at least it was until he came to the bridge. He stopped and yanked his helmet off before rushing to where the rail was broken, looking down to see the shadow of a car under the water and two people on the bank. He grabbed his first aid kit from the saddle bags and then ran down the embankment. “Kent?”

“Doctor?”

“What happened?” he asked.

“He hit something and went off the bridge.”

“Call 911 and your family.” Harry tossed him his phone and took over CPR. The young man he was working on suddenly gasped and choked on water so Harry turned him, letting him cough it up.

“I could have sworn I hit you.” Lex muttered in a daze.

“If you did, I'd be -- I’d be dead.” Clark answered, glancing back up at the bridge even as the ambulance pulled in, sirens blaring. Soon both boys were bundled up in blankets while Lex was given a thorough check over.

“We’d like to take you to the hospital, just to be safe.”

“I'll be fine.”
“They’re right Mr Luthor, if there’s any water left in your lungs it could cause problems. Better safe than sorry.” Harry said and Lex deflated a little, nodding. Above them a truck pulled in and a man ran down the bank.

“Clark! Son, are you all right?” He demanded, seeing his son wrapped in a blanket and sitting on a rock.

Clark looked up and smiled in relief. “Yeah, I'm okay.”

“Who’s the maniac that was driving that car?” He snarled, looking around to see Harry and Lex.

“That would be me. Lex Luthor.” He stood and offered his hand.

After a long hesitation he shook it. “I'm Jonathan Kent. This is my son.”

“Thanks for saving my life.” Lex looked to Clark who shrugged.

“I'm sure you would have done the same thing.”

“You have quite an extraordinary boy there, Mr. Kent. If there's any way I could repay you – “Lex called as Jonathon led Clark back up the hill to the truck.

“Drive slower.” He called back even as Harry helped bundle Lex into the ambulance.

“Thank you.” Lex looked at Harry who just smiled.

“Well it is my job, but Mr Kent was right, try driving slower.” He answered. He put his gear back in his bag and then sighed as the sheriff arrived, he stayed to give his statement and then finally headed home, thankful it was Friday.

He took care of the chores magic couldn’t and then spent some time working on his house before crawling into his tent and falling asleep.
Harry walked up the drive towards the Kent farm, he’d already checked in with Lex to ensure he was doing better and now he wanted to check on Clark. As he approached the buildings he heard raised voices so he followed the noise.

“This is not about winning, Clark.”

“It's not like the Luthor’s can't afford it.”

“Do you want to know why that is? Do you remember Mr. Bell? We used to go fishing on his property. How about Mr. Guy? He used to send us pumpkins every Halloween. Well, Lionel Luthor promised to cut them in on a deal. He sent them flashy gifts. Once they’d sold their property, he went back on his word. He had them evicted, son.”

“So you're judging Lex on what his father did?”

“No, Clark, I'm not. I just want to make sure that you know where the money came from that bought that truck. Clark, I know you're upset, son, but it's normal.”

Harry rounded the side of the barn and saw the father and son. He watched as Clark moved towards the chipper and frowned. “Normal?” The teen turned on the chipper. “How about this? Is this normal?” He shoved his arm in the chipper.

“Clark!” Jonathon screamed even as Harry dashed over and ripped the cord out, stopping the machine. Jonathon pulled Clark’s arm out and Harry quickly examined him.

“What the hell were you thinking Kent?” Harry snapped even as he was relieved to find no damage at all. “I get wanting to make a point but please, find a non-damaging method next time.” He let go of Clark’s arm and the two men suddenly seemed to realise what he’d seen.

“Who are you?” Jonathon demanded.

“We didn’t get introduced yesterday, I’m Doctor Harry Murphy, the new school doctor. I came by to
make sure Clark was alright after his impromptu swim yesterday. Now I’m wondering if you need a counsellor.” He muttered.

“The blades must be blunt.”

Harry just gave Jonathon a look. “Right… well Clark’s unhurt thankfully. But I think it’s time we had a chat.” He ushered them towards the farmhouse where Martha was waiting.

“Jonathon?” She asked and then she saw Clarke’s sleeve. “What happened?” She ran to her son and checked his arm.

“I’m okay Mom.” Clark assured her as they headed into the house. They sat at the table, all eyeing Harry warily, much to his amusement.

“What do you want?” Jonathon asked, praying it as something they could give. This was their worst nightmare.

“Nothing. I am a Doctor, Mr Kent, a Healer. I believe very much in patient confidentiality and I take my oaths seriously. As I tended to Clark yesterday when he felt ill and again at the crash site he is my patient. Nothing he tells me or I observe about him, unless he plans to harm himself or others, will remain confidential. “Besides, who said Clark is the only person out there who doesn’t fit the definition of ‘normal’?” He took a breath and allowed magic to pool in his hand, watching their eyes go wide at the flame that flickered there. “I was lucky, from the age of eleven I had people to teach me how to use my abilities and hide them when needed. Clark obviously hasn’t had that. I am offering to give him what help I am able in order to figure out his abilities and train for control. Although what is the source? I inherited mine from both my parents.”

Martha and Jonathon looked at their son and then each other, having one of those silent conversations that only people who had known each other for years could have. She even glared at her husband until he slumped and nodded. “It's time, son.”

“Time for what?”

“The truth. I want you to take a look at something.” He got up and left the room for a few minutes before coming back and handing something to Clark who stared at it in confusion. “I think it's from your parents, your -- your real parents.”
“What does it say?”

“I tried to decipher it for years, but it’s not written in any language known to man.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your real parents weren’t exactly from around…here.”

“Where are they from? What are you trying to tell me, Dad -- that I’m from another planet? And I suppose you stashed my spaceship in the attic.” Clark scoffed. Harry remained silent, letting the family finally bring their secrets into the open.

“Actually, it’s in the storm cellar. This is how you came into our world, son. It was the day of the meteor shower.”

“Wait. This is a joke, right? Why didn’t you tell me about this before?” Clark was up and pacing, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“We wanted to protect you.” Martha offered gently.

“Protect me from what? You should have told me!” He yelled in frustration.

“Yes they should have.” Harry finally spoke and they all looked at him. “As soon as he was old enough to keep the secret you should have told him. It is his past, his life. Now you have to decide what you’re going to do with that information Clark.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you ignore it, go on like nothing’s changed? Do you try to find out everything you can about your past? Find a middle path? It’s your choice Clark.” Harry explained.

“I…I don’t know.” Clark choked out and Harry nodded.
“That’s normal. So take a walk, think about it, talk to your parents, a friend, me, anyone. But in the end its your choice.” Harry handed him a card. “Call me if you need me or want the help. I’ll see you at school.” Harry left the farm and headed home.

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“IT never changes.” The young man commented as he looked up.

“Help me.” Clark called weakly from where he was tied to the Scarecrow.

“Hurts, doesn't it?” Jeremy asked.

“You -- you're -- you're Jeremy.” He shivered from pain and the cold.

“I thought if I'd punish them, it would stop, but it never stops.” He began to walk away through the corn.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

“Homecoming dance. I never made it to mine.”

“Get me down, please.” He begged, he’d never felt so much pain before.

“You're safer here.”

“Help me. Help me.”

“Clark?” Harry called as he spotted the teen. “Hang on.” The bindings vanished and he caught the boy as he collapsed to the ground. A quick scan had him yanking the necklace off and surrounding it in a bubble of magic. Clark gasped as the effects stopped and got to his feet.
“I’ve got to go.” He moved for his clothes.

“Hang on a second. What happened?”

“I can handle it.”

“Clark.” Harry just looked at him and Clark wilted.

“The football team, it’s a ritual.”

“It’s bullying at best.” Harry shot back.

“It doesn’t matter, Jeremy’s going to attack the dance.”

“Fine, can you handle him?”

“Yeah.”

“Then give me names and I’ll deal with the team.”

“But.”

“No buts.” Harry answered so Clark reluctantly named those he’d seen.

The doors to the gym opened to reveal Sheriff Ethan, Principal Kwan and Dr Murphy. “Fordman, Blake, Hernandez you are all under arrest.” The Sheriff called and all eyes went to the three boys who stared in shock.

“For what?” Whitney demanded.
“Attempted murder.”

“WHAT?”

“We didn’t do anything?”

“Then explain why I found Clark Kent half frozen in a field of corn, basically naked and tied up as a scarecrow.” Harry demanded. “You’re lucky, if he’d been there all night you’d likely be looking at a murder charge.”

“But it’s tradition.” Blake muttered even as Lana backed away from Whitney, staring at him in horror.

“How could you?” She asked.

“It was just a bit of fun.” Whitney pleaded even as Ethan approached and cuffed him.

“Everything has consequences boys.” The three were dragged off while everyone stared after them.

“Doctor!”

Harry turned back. “Yes Miss Lang?”

“Is Clark alright?”

“He’ll be fine; he might have the sniffles but he was found in time to not suffer any lasting effects. Though I do need to speak with you and your Aunt.”

“Yes sir.” She had no clue what the school Doctor could need to talk to them about but she headed home and he followed.
“Lana?” Nell asked.

“Aunt Nell this is Doctor Murphy from school.”

“What is this about Doctor?”

“Harry please and the reason we are here is this.” He pulled out the small lead box he’d conjured and opened it, revealing Lana’s necklace.

“My necklace!”

“It was around Clark’s neck when I found him.”

“I gave it to Whitney, for luck with the scouts.”

“And he put it on Clark before stringing him up.” Harry told her and she looked horrified that he had done that.

“Thank you for returning it then Doctor.” Nell smiled and Harry sighed.

“That’s the thing, what is this made of exactly?”

“A piece of the meteorite that killed my parents.”

“Alright so other than being extremely morbid do you know of any testing done on it or the others?”

“No, why?” Nell was mad at his words to her niece while Lana stared at it with new eyes.

“Because this made at least one student ill.”
“Clark…he always falls down around me."

“And he was in severe pain while wearing it. My preliminary guess is he’s allergic to one of the minerals within the meteorite but there is also the risk of radiation. I’ve gone through the records and frankly Ms Lang you are extremely lucky that after continual exposure you are still healthy. Continuous exposure seems to cause genetic mutations in humans.” He explained and both females paled.

“Is Lana definitely okay?”

“It’d take a full physical to be sure but she hasn’t complained of anything on record. You can keep this, just keep it in the box, lead will keep any radiation contained.”

“No. if it’s dangerous then please, have it destroyed.”

“Alright. I am sorry the dance was spoiled.”

“That’s not your fault Dr Murphy, I can’t believe Whitney…. for what they did to Clark they should be punished.”

“That’s a very mature response. I’ll see you at school.” He picked the box up and left.

Harry grinned as he stared up at his completed home. It was perfect. It was big for one person but he preferred having room to roam. The kitchen was a massive farmhouse styled room with top of the range appliance, he loved cooking. It was the one chore his aunt had given that he had come to enjoy. Even after five thousand years he still found enjoyment in it. Off the kitchen was a nice open lounge room plus a downstairs toilet and office that was fully outfit in case of medical emergency. Upstairs was a sprawling master suite and three guest bedrooms. There was also a full family bathroom and storage room. Maybe it was excessive but it was his.

“Nice place.”
Harry turned at the voice, although he’d known as soon as he’d crossed the wards. “Thanks. What can I do for you Mr Luthor?”

“Lex, please. You helped save my life after all.” Lex offered his hand and Harry shook it.

“Yes but I came by to check on you the other day and it is my job after all. Come on in, can I get you a drink?” Harry offered and Lex smiled.

“Sure.” Lex followed him inside, glancing around curiously. The house was new and spacious but also homely feeling. He accepted the can of Coke and opened it, settling on a bar stool even as Harry leant against the counter. “Nice place.”

“Thanks. I’ve always wanted to have a place I planned out myself.” He shrugged.

“So what brings a renowned Doctor all the way to Smallville?” Lex asked, he’d done his research but Harry didn’t look at all surprised.

“A change of pace. Got tired of the continual rush of the ER and wanted a break from big city life.” Harry drank his own Coke. “We’ve met before you know.”

“I’m sure I’d remember.”

“Considering the condition you were in I doubt it.” Harry answered. “It was my first week in Metropolis and only my second shift when you were brought in. You’d been out partying all night and then collapsed. I got the privilege of pumping your stomach.”

“Oh.” Lex winced, that was not exactly a good first impression.

Harry just chuckled. “I wouldn’t worry about it. You were a young, rich, stupid kid. Hopefully you’ve grown up since then.”

“Hopefully.” Lex agreed. “Not like there’s much around here to do to get into trouble.”

“Miss the city?”
“Dad exiled me here to run a failing fertiliser plant.” Lex admitted as he finished his can.

“So turn it around and show him what you’ve got.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“No, my parents died when I was just over a year old.” Harry tossed his own into the garbage.

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault. I saw the truck you bought Clark when I stopped by to check on him.”

“He’s okay? Did he like it?” Lex asked. He really wanted Clark to be his friend, he wasn’t entirely sure why but there was something about him.

“He’s completely healthy, no side effects from the cold swim. The truck…Clark was very excited about it but…”

“His Father says no.” Lex finished for him, he’d half expected that considering the man’s reaction to him at the river.

“It’s not you, it’s what your Father’s done here to good people Jonathon knew.”

“He figures the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Something like that. And your wild exploits probably don’t help.”

Lex nodded in understanding. “Guess I’ve got a lot of work to do.”
Lex wandered around the Farmer’s Market, taking in the various products being sold. He had decided to try and get to know the people of Smallville and work to improve his reputation. He was later, thanks to his visit to Harry but there was still plenty of time. He put in an order to here and there, figuring a good step would be to buy everything locally. Towards the end of the day he spotted Clark and grinned when he saw the teenager staring at a girl. He walked over, startling him. “Can't knock your taste in women. You want to tell me what happened last night?” Rumours were all around town about the football team and their victim.

“It was just a stupid prank.”

“You were tied to a stake in the middle of a field. Even the Romans saved that for special occasions. You could have died out there.” He went off what he’d heard and saw Clark flinch slightly, which meant the rumours were true.

“I just want to forget it happened.” He admitted, but that was impossible. If the case went to court he’d have to testify against the stars of the football team.

“Hey, Clark, what is the holdup, son?” Jonathon called as he carried a crate of apples over.

“Mr. Kent, it's good to see you.” Lex smiled and Jonathon stared at him before finally taking his hand and shaking it briefly.

“Lex. Come on. We got to finish up.”

“Okay, Dad.” Clark watched him go back to their stall and Lex chuckled dryly.

“At least I got a handshake this time.” He smiled at Clark who smiled back awkwardly before going back to work.

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Lex wandered into the stables and watched the horse and rider approaching. “Your form's good, but his gait's off. You might want to check your shoes. Lex Luthor. I'm a friend of your aunt's.” He greeted her.
“Sneaking up like that, you're lucky you didn't get kicked.” Lana answered as she led her horse to its stall.

“You must be Lana. It's a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“We've already met.” She began rubbing him down.

“I seriously doubt I'd forget meeting you.” He admitted.

“You were a little preoccupied at the time.” She smirked.

“I get the feeling I didn't make a great first impression.”

“When I was 10, I went to Metropolis for a riding competition. Your father invited us to stay over. My aunt said you had an indoor pool. When I went to check it out, I found you and a girl skinny-dipping. I think you were teaching her the breast stroke.” She grinned even as Lex gaped at her.

“That was you? Wow. You're all grown up now.” He swallowed nervously and then wandered over to see a frame full off ribbons and trophies. “Very impressive.”

“It's tacky, but it makes my aunt happy.”

“That's an unusual necklace.”

“Thanks. It's very special to me.”

“How come you're not wearing it?”

“I lent it to my boyfriend.” She didn’t want to admit the rest, what he had done hurt.

“Lucky guy. What's his name?”
“Whitney Fordman.”

“The kid arrested for half killing Clark?”

“Yeah. Doctor Murphy said the necklace is radioactive since it’s meteor rock. He had it destroyed to be safe.”

“Kind of makes you wonder if you're with the right guy. One chucks footballs, the other helps save lives.”

“For someone who just moved into town, you've got a lot of opinions.”

“You just seem more interesting than that. Tell your aunt I stopped by.”

“I never saw anybody move like that.” Jonathon admitted, rubbing his back. Even though Clark had broken his fall it had still hurt to fall from the upper level.

“Did you get a look at his face?” Martha asked as she looked him over.

“It came right off the ceiling at me. It was almost as if he – “

“Wasn't entirely human? I saw his face. I think it was Greg Arkin.” Clark finished for him.

“That's a name I haven't heard in a long time. You and Pete used to hang out with him in grade school.”

“Why would he want to hurt you?”

“I don't know.” Clark admitted.
“Are you still friends?” She asked.

“I pass him in the halls, but people change.” He shrugged.

“I remember his mother used to keep him on a short leash, but I can't believe he'd hurt a fly.”

“Maybe that's because he was too busy collecting them and every other bug he could get his hands on.” Clark grimaced slightly, it was not something he liked.

“Clark, kids just don't leap off the ceiling and attack people.” Jonathon argued.

“How do you explain that?” Clark aimed the flashlight at the ceiling to reveal glowing green footprints.

“I don't know. Seems kind of out there.”

“This coming from the man who's been hiding a spaceship in his storm cellar for the last 12 years.” Martha pointed out.

“It's not that I don't want to believe you, Clark. It's just -- I'm having trouble getting my head around this one.”

“Dad, you ever wonder why all these weird things happen in Smallville?”

“Every town has its share of tall tales.” His Dad argued.

“Except here they're all true. Chloe showed me this wall. It's covered with all these articles she collected about all the weird stuff that's happened in Smallville since the meteor shower. It's all my fault.”

“Look, Clark, if you're talking about 50-pound tomatoes and 2-headed calves, then I got a better
explanation for you -- Luthor corp. I mean, god only knows what that fertilizer plant's been pumping out over the last 12 years."

“LuthorCorp didn't kill Lana's parents.” Clark snapped.

“Neither did you, son. You can't blame yourself for something you had no control over.”

“Dad, I know. I still feel responsible.”

“What happened to Lana's parents was a terrible tragedy, but no matter how many extraordinary gifts you have, you will never be able to change that.”

“Then how do I make this feeling go away?”

“You can’t. But that's what makes you human.”

“Can’t change the past Clark, you can only change the future.” Harry said as he joined them, making the Kent's start. “Well what do we have here.” He studied the prints.

“It’s Greg Arkin, he attacked us.”

Clark relaxed at detecting Lana’s breathing as he scrambled into the old tree fort, they’d had fun here as children but now Greg had to be stopped. He dropped to his knees beside her, raising a hand to remove the webbing.

“Get away from her.”

Clark stood up to face his one-time friend. “Greg, I know what's happened to you.”

“Well, then you know that I've been freed.”
“No, you haven't. You're a slave to your instincts.”

“I have no rules, Clark. I eat what I want... I go where I want... and I take what I want.”

“You're not taking her.”

“Then try and stop me.” Greg smirked and Clark straightened up.

“You're not the only one who's changed.” He argued and Greg leapt at him, sending them both through the wall and to the ground below. Clark groaned and rolled to his side to see Greg leaping over the fence around the foundry. He got up and took off after him.

As he did Harry appeared and went up to the fort, gently removing the webbing and scanning her for injuries. Her eyes fluttered and she groaned before waking up. “Doctor?” She asked groggily.

“You’re alright Miss Lang. Let’s get you home.”

Clark ran into the foundry and then stumbled, feeling his strength being sapped. “You haven't changed at all, Clark. You still get sick around this place, just like when we were kids.” Greg taunted and then grabbed Clark and threw him. “Hey, Clark! Did you know the buffalo ant can lift 30 times its own body weight?” He threw him again and then Clark scrambled to hide in one of the old diggers. “Clark! Clark, where are you? Come on out. I just want to play. Clarky? Come out!”

Clark looked down at his hand as the green veins faded. “It's lined with lead.”

“Give it up, Clark. You can't fight natural law! Only the strong survive. Did you really think you could hide from me?” He went to throw Clark only to have Clark toss him. Greg landed against a support post and grabbed a chain to pull himself up, leaning on a lever. He looked up at a noise and Clark stopped moving towards him to look up as well.

“Greg, watch out!” He cried as a piece of machinery fell, grimacing as it hit Greg and then a swarm of insects scurried away.
“Hey, Kent. I saw your arm out there. Technique was lousy, but you got a lot of power.” Coach Walt called.

“Thanks!”

“So why aren't you on our team?”

“My dad needs me on the farm.”

“Well, your school needs you on the field. We got a big game on Friday night. We're short players. Look, look, I-I know your dad would understand.” The Coach pushed.

“He's kind of stubborn.”

“Yeah, I remember. Jonathan Kent was one of the best athletes I ever coached. A lot of God-given talent. It's in your genes, Kent.”

“Actually, I'm adopted.”

“Look, I am giving you a chance to be a part of something special a part of history. Now, I've seen you stare at your father's picture in that trophy case. Don't tell me you don't want to be a part of this. Why don't you suit up? Look at Ross here. He doesn't have a lick of natural talent, but he's got a truckload of heart.”

“Thanks, I-I guess.” Pete looked at Chloe who shrugged.

“Let me think about it.” Clark tried.

“White, get over here.” Coach called and Whitney’s replacement as Captain walked over. “White, you're the team captain. How do you think Kent here would do on the field? I mean, considering our current predicament?”
“He might do all right.”

“Hmm... He seems afraid though.”

“That's not the reason, is it, Clark?” Chloe argued in defence of her friend.

“It's my dad.” He argued again

“Kent, there comes a time when you gotta step out of your fathers’ shadow and be your own man. Now what do you say? You ready to be your own man?”

Clark hesitated but then nodded. “Count me in.”

“Good. I will see you at practice today-three o'clock. Don't be late.”

“Hey, Clark... Hey, um, remind me what your dad said last time you asked him to play.” Pete asked and Clark slumped.

“He said no.”

“He said no. That's what I thought. Call me when the hurting's done. Okay?” Pete walked away with Chloe.

Clark sighed and then looked over as Harry approached. “Going to say I can’t play?” he asked.

“Hardly. You’re old enough to make your own decisions.” The Doctor assured him.

“Guess I just have to tell my Dad.”
“Clark you performed CPR without even cracking Lex’s ribs, you have control. Just be careful and you’ll be fine.”

“Okay, thanks. Bye-bye. Principal Kwan’s gonna be in the hospital till over the weekend.” Martha told them as she put the phone back.

“Is he gonna be all right?”

“He's got some burns and suffered smoke inhalation, but he's gonna be okay.”

“Anybody see you, son?”

“Nobody saw me, Dad! I told the paramedics that I wrapped my hands in my jacket when I pulled him out. And Harry was there too, he did something, made sure people believed me.”

“Lucky you were there.”

“Well, I kind of missed my ride.” Clark glanced at his Dad who sighed.

“Look, I saw you play, all right? Now, you could have easily hurt any one of those boys.”

“But the point is, I didn't. Look, why are we even having this conversation? He's never gonna believe me. By the way, Coach gave me your old position. You're looking at the starting tailback for this Friday's game. Don't everyone congratulate me at once.” Clark left the house to go to the loft in the barn, his Fortress of Solitude.

“How did he get to be so stubborn?”

“Gee, I don't know.” Martha hugged Jonathon.
“Hey, wait a minute-I was not like that when I was his age.”

“No, you were the obedient son who always obeyed his father and didn't run away one summer and try out for the Metropolis Sharks.”

“Since when did you go and join the other side?”

“Jonathan, Clark hasn't been able to do anything normal his whole life-no playgroups, no little league-all because we were afraid he might hurt somebody. He's a teenager now. Let's give him a shot.”

“His gifts come with responsibilities.”

“This isn't about his gifts, it's about his judgment. You're telling Clark that you don't believe in him.”

“Of course, I believe in him. W-what if he makes a mistake... and somebody suspects the truth? I do not want anyone coming on this farm and taking our son away from us.”

“Well, if we don't start trusting him, nobody's gonna have to take him away. He's gonna leave all by himself.”

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“The Torch torched. How's that for dramatic irony?” At Chloe’s glare he winced. “Just...trying to get you to smile.”

“This is more than just arson, Clark. It's like the fire knew what I was doing.”

“And you believe Coach Walt was somehow controlling it?”

“Look at the facts. Principal Kwan launches an investigation into the cheating scandal; Coach Walt tries to fry him in his car. Then one of his players comes forward and he threatens them all with pyrotechnic sprinklers. I am about to print that picture and the Torch goes up in flames.”
“What, now you think he's behind the cheating scandal!? Come on, Chloe.”

“Sounds reasonable to me.” Harry commented as he walked into the room. “Miss Sullivan, you haven't been seen by a medical professional.”

“I’m fine.”

“Chloe let him check you over.” Clark pushed her gently towards Harry. “Why do you suspect Coach?”

“Coach obsessed with winning his 200th game helps bonehead players pass the test so he can secure his position in the pantheon of high school sports.” She answered as Harry removed his stethoscope to listen to her heart and lungs.

“Is there another copy of the photo?” Harry asked as he looked her over for burns.

“No, it's kind of hard to recover the files.”

“You don't have any proof.” Clark pointed out.

“Trevor Chapell.”

“What about him?”

“I'm sure he's the one who talked to Kwan about the cheating. He wants to talk. I know it. But he's still scared to talk to me. But I think he might open up to you.” She grinned at Clark who groaned and Harry chuckled.

“I'll keep an eye on coach.” He promised the kids.

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“Clark! Clark?” Harry called before seeing the sauna and the broken glass. He looked through the
window, seeing Clark sprawled on the floor surrounded by meteor rocks. A silent unlocking charm got him in and he easily pulled Cark out. He yelped as he was hit by a fire extinguisher, falling beside Clark but managing to roll and scramble to his feet even as Clark stood as well, far enough form the rocks to be healthy again.

“Coach, you need help.”

“What I need is to win this game!”

“It's too late for that.” Harry pointed out. Fire surrounded them and they exchanged a look of boredom before simply walking through the flames, much to the Coach’s surprise.

“How did you do that?”

“It's in the genes. Give it up, Coach! You've lost!” Clark answered even as flames surrounded the Coach as well.

“No-o-o-o-o-o!” he screamed and Harry held Clark back as the man burned in his own fire.

This is incredible. Why would Lex Luthor need to rob a bank?” Martha read the front page of the paper even as Harry helped Clark set the table for breakfast. His joining them in the mornings had become a normal thing since he worked with Clark on even better control of his abilities.

“I've seen some strange things in my day, but this definitely takes the cake. Well, almost.” Jonathon admitted.

“He got away with 100,000 dollars.”

“That’d be pocket change to him, it doesn’t make sense.” Harry observed.

“I know Lex. It wasn't him.”
“Clark, I know that he's a friend of yours, but come on. You saw him with your own eyes.”

“I don't know what I saw.”

“There must be some kind of reasonable explanation for this. I hope.”

“Me too. I hate to think I have an evil twin.” Lex stood outside the screen door, looking tired.

“Lex, we didn't hear you pull up.” Martha smiled at him.

“May I come in? I promise I'm not packing heat.”

“Lex, how come you're not in jail?” Clark asked and then dodged Harry’s swat for the insensitive question.

“Because I was hosting a reception for 200 fertilizer distributors in Metropolis at the time of the robbery.”

“Do the police have any leads?” Jonathon asked, unable to argue against that many witnesses.

“None. That's why I wanted to talk to you, Clark. Your name was on the witness list. Did you actually see this person?”

“Yeah, he looked just like you.”

“Except his fingerprints and signature didn't match mine. You sure your eyes weren't playing tricks on you?”

“What's going happen now?” Harry asked as he handed Lex a glass of juice.

“Hopefully, the money will turn up. In the meantime, the Metropolis tabloids will have a field day,
and I'm sure certain people's opinions of me will be cemented in stone.”

“I gotta get to work.” Jonathon grabbed his jacket and headed out.

“I'm sorry you got thrown through that window. I promise I'm not a criminal mastermind.”

“I know. A criminal mastermind would have worn a mask.” Clark grinned and Lex and Harry laughed.

“So a new power.”

“I can’t control it.” Clark slumped and Harry shook his head.

“You will, with time and training.”

“And until then I’ll keep seeing things I don’t want to.”

“Like the girls' locker room?” Harry teased and Clark blushed.

“Harry!”

“Sorry, too good to not tease you over.” He got off the couch. “Come on, back to training.” Clark groaned but followed him down into the heavily warded basement.

“Clark, what is it?” Harry stood from his desk and Clark closed the office door. “More vision problems?”

“I controlled it. Once, sort of. I concentrated and it worked.”
“That’s great. What’d you concentrate on?”

“Tina Grier’s locker.”

“What did you see?”

“The money from the bank robbery.” He answered and Harry sighed but picked up the phone to call the Sherriff and leave an anonymous tip.

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“So you’re telling me Tina Grier can bend her bones like a contortionist and become anybody she wants?” Harry asked as they headed for the antique store.

“I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Well that’s interesting. I knew someone who could do something similar once.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it as a magical ability passed through a family line.” They reached the store to find it closed so they peered through the glass.

“What do you see Clark?”

“I need to get in here.”

“Why?”

“I can see a body.”
“Alright, there’s a smell, decomp.” He waved his hand to create the smell and then smashed the glass to get inside.

Clark went straight to the cabinet and Harry opened it, a body falling from inside. “It’s Tina's mom.”

“Damn. Broken neck.”

They found the papers with Lana's name all over them. “Why's she writing Lana's signature?” Clark frowned.

“You said Tina was obsessed with her. She's gonna take it to the next level.” Harry answered.

“She wants to become Lana.” Clark whispered in shock.

“We better find them both, fast.”

“Hey, I heard what happened.”

“Did you come by to see if I was okay?” Clark asked his best female friend.

“Actually, as concerned as I always am about your personal well-being, I'm not here to see you. Lana, um, I did some digging.” Chloe offered a cassette to the blanket wrapped Lana.

“Oh, my God. How did you find this?”

“If I told you, I'd have to kill you, and it looks like you've had enough trauma for one night.”

“Chloe, thank you.”
“No problem.”

“How’s Tina?” Martha asked as she walked up to her son.

“She won’t be able to hurt anyone else.” Clark answered.

“I still don’t understand why a girl would do all that.”

“I do. You go through life with a gift you have to keep a secret. When you see everyone around you being normal, you get jealous. You just want to be somebody else.” Clark whispered, watching as Nell led Lana inside.

“You really like her, don't you?”

“Mom, if you could see anything, what would you do?”

“Learn to close my eyes.”

“You run into a lot of walls that way.” Harry commented as he passed Clark a mug of hot chocolate. Clark took it and drank the hot liquid. They both had a point on his powers, he just had to decide for himself which to follow.

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Clark sat back beside his parents and Harry in the front rows of the courtroom. He’d just finished explaining what had happened that night at the school and in the cornfield. He’d hated doing it but he knew that the scarecrow tradition had to stop. Harry nodded at him and then stood as he was called to testify.

In the end the boys were given community service for eight months as well as being banned from the football team for the remainder of their high school education, meaning no football scholarships for them.
Harry watched Clark as he went about his chores. “Are you ever going to tell your friends?”

“Tell them what?”

“The truth.” Harry answered, absently waving his hand, letting magic fill the trough with water.

“What?”

“Do you trust them?”

“Of course.”

“Then tell them. A secret this big... if it comes out any other way you could lose them.”

“But it’s my fault.”

“Oh for crying out loud.” Harry muttered and then blinked, he was apparently channelling Jack O’Neill today. “The meteor shower was not your fault! You were a little kid; you didn’t chose to land on Earth. Someone, most likely your biological parents sent you here. Anyone with half a brain will know that.” Harry snapped at him and Clark nodded.

“True friends are a wonderful thing and will stay at your side through anything but you need to give back to that. You keep lying, and badly at that... you don’t want to see where that leads.”

“Clark! Come on in.”

“I need to tell you something Lex.”

“Of course.” Lex moved to sit before the fire and Clark joined him nervously but Harry was right.
No more secrets.

*TBC.....*
Lex watched Clark until the teen was out of sight and then poured himself some brandy and collapsed on the leather couch. Out of everything he had theorised about his friend he had never seen this coming. An alien, a real alien, was living as a farm boy in Kansas of all places. Who could have imagined? It was a massive shock, that was true but he would not betray Clark’s trust. No one else had ever trusted him like this before, always seeing his father in him, but not Clark. The boy was too trusting in some ways and yet he had managed to keep this secret from everyone.

His father could never learn the truth about Clark, he shuddered to think what the man would do if he knew. He had to destroy every scrap of evidence he'd collected since the car crash, it was too dangerous to leave anything and he had his answers now.

“...“This is the flu season. I don't even know why you came in today.” Harry commented as he checked the thermometer.

“I felt fine this morning, and now I can't get warm.” Sean answered as he shivered in the blanket.

“Let's see. This can't be right. You're not a Popsicle. Let's try again.” Harry shook out the thermometer and gave it to Sean even as he felt his forehead, immediately feeling some sort of energy drain so he pulled his hand back. “I'm sending you to the hospital.” He went to call the ambulance and Sean stood.

“Mmm. I'm...I'm actually feeling a little better now. Thanks.” The teen bolted and Harry groaned.
“Clark if you can hear me try to intercept young Sean please, just don’t touch him.” He spoke to thin air, not entirely sure of Clark’s hearing range.

A few minutes later Clark popped his head in. “Sorry, was with Chloe and Pete and couldn’t get away. What happened?”

“Something’s wrong with Sean Kelvin. He’s freezing cold and when I touched him I felt some sort of energy drain.”

“I’ll keep an eye out.” Clark promised and then ran to class.

Lex put his hands up as Martha turned, still holding the chain saw. “Whoa! I come in peace.”

“I'm so sorry. I didn't hear you.” She quickly turned it off and took off her goggles.

“I'm just glad you weren't welding.”

“What brings you out here in the middle of the day?”

“Those artichokes of yours. I need about thirty of them if you've got 'em.” He picked up a piece of wood to fiddle with.

“Thirty? That's a lot of artichokes.” She was surprised by the number but they could always use every extra cent.

“Yeah, I'm hosting a dinner tomorrow night for the local farming community, just an informal talk about some financial options. A lot of farms in town are having money trouble.”

“Most people aren't looking for more loans.” She warned.

“I'm offering my role as an investor-help people modernize and expand. This town once grew twenty
percent of the corn in the state. Smallville was a heavy hitter. It just lost the drive to stay competitive.” He put the wood down even as he wandered the yard.

“Or its connections.”

Lex: If this town ever had connections, they wouldn't have named it "Smallville." He pointed out. “Your husband hasn't exactly kept his feelings about me a secret, but I'd appreciate hearing your thoughts on my proposal even if you're not interested.”

“Jonathan doesn't hate you. It's just... your family's track record hasn't been the best in this town.”

“Tell him I intend to change that.” He swore. “Will you come?”

“Alright, we’ll come and listen.”

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“That's a great exhibit. I caught it in St. Petersburg.” Lex commented from over her shoulder before taking a sip of his cappuccino. Harry wandered over and nodded to Lex before glancing down.

“I saw it last week, it was as good as Lex says.” He assured Lana who smiled.

“Whitney and I are going to Metropolis tomorrow. I thought we'd check it out.”

'Ah, trying to give the quarterback some culture?'

“It was his idea.”

“Brave choice from a teenage boy.” Harry chuckled.

“He figures one afternoon at the museum, he's off the hook for six months.” Lex pointed out.
“For someone who wants people to keep an open mind, you're pretty quick to judge.”

“What can I say? I just think you're with the wrong guy.” Lex headed for the newspapers and Harry nodded to Lana before going to a table with his hot chocolate as Whitney joined her.

“Hey. Everything okay?” Whitney kissed her cheek in greeting and she smiled, holding up the pamphlet.

“I was just checking out some stuff for us to do tomorrow. Metropolis, remember?”

“Actually, some of the guys are pooling together and getting the fight on pay-per-view. It's tomorrow.”

“And you gave them your money already.” She put the pamphlet down, disappointed.

“Yeah. Hey, we'll go next weekend, okay? I promise. I'm really sorry, Lana.”

“Culture can wait.” She promised.

“I'll make it up to you. See ya.” He left her side and Lex grinned from where he’d been listening as he spotted Clark outside.

“You know, she's free tomorrow night. Hey, Clark. This is the perfect time for you to ask her out.” Lex joined Clark on the other side of the window.

“She's got a boyfriend, Lex.”

“A high school boyfriend isn't a husband. He's an obstacle. You know, I bet if you ask Lana to go with you to the Radiohead concert in Metropolis tomorrow, she'll say yes.”

“And if she says yes...”
“I'll give you the tickets.” He pulled out two tickets, originally he was going to offer to take Clark but this was the perfect opportunity to help him get the girl of his dreams.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You're like the younger brother I never had. I figure someone should benefit from my experience.”

“I can't just ask her out.”

“The hardest thing in the world is telling the girl you love that you like her. I'll raise the bet. You ask her in the next sixty seconds, you get the tickets, and I'll throw in a round-trip limo ride, starting now.” He smirked and Clark hesitated before taking them and heading inside.

He took a deep breath and glanced at a smirking Lex before moving to the side of Lana’s chair. “Hey, Lana, you busy?”

“Completely swamped. That's why I'm sitting in a coffee shop attempting to wade through a Russian classic.”

“Oh.’

“That was a joke, Clark.”

“Good. 'Cause there's this thing tomorrow night.”

“Define "thing".”

“It's a concert-Radiohead, to be exact-and I got a couple tickets.”

“Wow. Where'd you get these?”
"A friend. Something came up at the last minute, and I was wondering if you'd like to go, you know, with me."

"I'd-"

"Just as friends." He quickly clarified.

"Definitely. I'd love to." She smiled and he smiled back before catching sight of Harry who smiled and nodded.

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"It's bad enough you ride that motorcycle, by why do you have to repair it in the house?"

"Because if I didn't, you'd never have any reason to be angry with me." He answered, glancing up from his work.

"I'll trade you. Do all the engine work you want, but come with me to Lex's."

"We've already talked about that."

"I talked. You grunted."

"I thought I was rather articulate. Sweetheart, the Luthor's have sold out anyone who's ever trusted them. They don't know what it means to keep their word."

"They is Lex's father, not him. Be honest, you've never seen him be anything but generous. Arrogant and a little strange, yes, but he's been a good friend to Clark. We have to at least hear him out."

"Why?"

"We need options, Jonathan. Our home is on the line, our farm. You don't have to like him to listen. Besides, um... I already told him we would come." She admitted and Jonathon grimaced even as
Clark practically ran down the stairs, grinning.

“Hello, citizens.”

“I'm not familiar with this child. Where's the moody one, lives upstairs, runs real fast?” Martha asked and Clark just smiled wider.

“Oh, he's going on a date tonight. Not a date date, but a concert.”

“Well, just who might this not-a-date date be with?”

“Lana Lang. Lex hooked me up with a couple of serious tickets and his limo.”

“Oh, he did?” Jonathon asked.

“It's okay if I go, right?”

“Well, I guess Lex Luthor has worked out all of our evenings for us.”

“Clark? Isn’t Lana still going out with Whitney?” Martha asked.

“She's not married, Mom. Besides we can be friends, Harry said that you can’t let lust or love stand in the way of being someone’s friend first.”

“Good advice. Just be careful Clark, we don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I know Mom.”

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“Guess who just called me? Sean.” Chloe smiled as Clark held up another shirt.
“Did he apologize for blowing you off?”

“He said he wasn't feeling well.”

“Chloe, I saw him go off with Jenna. I guess she made him feel better.”

“Well, he-he promised it was completely over with her.”

“You like him, don't you?”

“He may be a little intellectually challenged, but he's really hot. Besides, he begged to get together tonight just to talk, so I told him he could bring me a coffee at the Torch.”

“Sounds like a date.” He teased.

“It's not a date. It's a fact-finding mission to see if he deserves a date.”

“I just don't want to see you get hurt. Promise to be careful? He was in to see Dr Murphy before and he was worried about him, wanted to call an ambulance. Something about his body temperature.”

“Well I’m sure he’s feeling better or he wouldn’t have called. I’m a big girl Clark.”

“I know. Just…. see if Pete can hang around for a bit?”

“He’s got a date tonight too.”

“Oh.”

“I can look after myself Clark, promise. Don't worry. I figure if you can take a risk with Lana, I can
take a shot too. Uh...blue's a good colour on you.” She nodded at the shirt he’d pulled out of the clean wash basket.

“Really?”

“Really, now hurry up and get ready. Don’t want to keep Lana waiting. I’ll see you tomorrow. Have fun.”

“You too.”

Harry stood from examining the remains and the sheriff turned to him. “Well Doc?”

“It’s Jenna Barnum.” He confirmed. “Well, what’s left of her.”

“What could have done this?”

“Liquid nitrogen? This is strange and I’m not sure how.”

One of the deputies came into the bathroom. “Sir, apparently she was last seen leaving school with another student, Sean Kelvin.”

“Kelvin? He was in my office today with an extremely low body temperature.”

“Okay put out a news bulletin, we need to find and question Sean. Thanks for the help Dr Murphey.”

“No problem. I don’t mind filling in when needed, especially when it’s the kids from school.” They shook hands and Harry left. He quickly dialled the Kent farm. “Hi Martha, it’s Harry. Is Clark there?”

“He’s already left for his date with Lana.”
“Okay thanks.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I got called in to help the Sheriff, one of Clark’s classmates is dead and the suspect is another classmate.”

“Oh no. We were just about to leave for Lex’s, should we postpone?”

“No. I’m heading there myself. Just keep an eye out.”

“Welcome. I'm delighted you decided to come.” Lex called as the Kent’s were admitted to the lounge room.

“Your house it's very-“

“Large?” he finished for her.

“To put it mildly.” Jonathon commented and Lex shrugged.

“The word "restraint" doesn't exist in my father's vocabulary.”

“I-I'm sorry, are we early?”

“I think we should go.”

“Wait, wait, Jonathan, just because no one else came-“
“That is if anyone else was even invited.”

“Oh, I don't think Lex would-“

“Actually, I would. I did, sort of. We are missing one guest. But only because I knew you wouldn't have come otherwise. I know your farm's in trouble, Mr. Kent.” Lex explained and then took a drink. “Small town.”

“So you thought you would just take advantage of my family's problem.”

“No. I thought I could help.”

Jonathon looked at his wife who silently pleaded with him and he slumped a bit before nodding. “Well, then, I guess we're here to listen.”

“I've never actually sat in a limo before tonight.”

“I did once. Nell got one to take us to the ballet, but it wasn't as nice as this.”

“Beats another night of defensive reading. You've done it since we were kids. Whenever the world gets disappointing, you retreat into a book. There are worse things.”

“No, you’re right. It's just-It's easier than dealing with my own life, you know what I mean?”

“I do the same thing with astronomy. I look at different worlds and wonder if my life would be better there.”

“You always seem to understand what I'm trying to say. How come you know so much?”

“Magic. You don't believe in magic? I'll show you.” He grinned and pulled a pack of cards from the side area. “Pick a card.”
“All right.”

Clark stared, using his x-ray vision. “Three of hearts.”

“Full of surprises.”

“This is weird, huh. I felt like I had to explain tonight to Nell.”

“I spent the better part of the day convincing people this was not a date. How about Whitney?”

“I didn't tell him.”

“And your feeling guilty about that?’

“He's hanging out with his friends, and I'm hanging out with mine.”

“Exactly.” He went to say more but their attention was taken by a sudden news bulletin on the tv screen built into the back of the privacy screen.

“And in Smallville tonight, police are seeking seventeen-year-old Sean Kelvin after the mysterious death of a fellow Smallville High student Jenna Barnum, whose body was found early this afternoon...”

“Oh my god.” Lana whispered.

“Kelvin was last seen leaving-“

“Stop the car.” Clark called.
“Clark, what's wrong?”

“Well, it's complicated.” He hesitated, remembering Harry’s words on secrets and how well Lex had taken things. “Chloe has a date…with Sean. She’s at the Torch, won’t have heard this. I have to warn her. Can you hang out here for a while? I want you to be safe.” He rushed out.

“Sure. Find Chloe. I’ll try ringing the Torch office from inside.”

“Thanks. I just want you to know this is the best non-date I've ever had.” He grinned and ran off, moving faster once out of sight.

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“I'll be right back.” Pete told his date before walking over to where Lana was sitting, reading, with a mug of coffee. “Shouldn’t you be fifth row center right about now?”

“Hey, Pete.”

“Where's Clark?”

“We saw that news report about Jenna, and he remembered Chloe was meant to be meeting Sean. I called the Torch but no answer and Clark was headed over to make sure she’s safe.”

“I heard that, too. I always thought that Sean was a good guy. I guess we don't know people as well as we think. And I’m sure Clark and Chloe will be fine.”

“You've been friends with Clark for a long time. Is he always so…”

“Clark-like?”

“Yeah.”

“Sometimes he’s totally there and you think you know everything about him, and then there's this
part that's...”

“Mysterious.” She smiled wistfully and he nodded.

“Yeah, that's it. Clark Kent international man of mystery.”

“Lana! What are you doing here?” Whitney called as he spotted the two talking.

She smiled and held up her book. “Just reading.”

“Pretty dressed up to be digging into a book.’

“I'll catch up with you later.”

“Pete, why don't you take your date for a spin in the limo?” She called after him.

“Oh, she's not a date. She's just my friend.”

“Either way, I won't be needing it.” It was too late to make the concert now.

“Ooh! Thanks!”

“What were you doing in a limo?”

“Just hanging out with a friend.”

“Guess the generator works. Power must have blown. Where were we?” Lex asked as the lights went off and then came back on. Before anyone could answer the doors opened and Harry walked inside.
“Sorry I’m late. County coroner is out sick so the Sheriff asked me to fill in.”

“Coroner? Is everything alright?” Lex asked in concern.

“A student is dead and another is the suspect. I’m surprised you hadn’t heard, it’s made the news.” Harry accepted the glass Lex offered. “Now how much had you explained?”

“I believe Lex was explaining how he could single-handedly save the family farmer.”

“Jonathan...”

“It’s okay, Mrs. Kent. I understand your husband's scepticism. Your farm's drowning in debt. We both know it. All I'm trying to do is offer you a hand but you keep slapping it away.”

“I learned a long time ago from a man much smarter than myself that you need to solve your own problems.”

“Your father lived in different times, and he had his share of help. It seems government subsidies carried him through a number of lean years.” He handed over a folder of paperwork which they looked through.

“Where did you get these?” Martha asked in confusion.

“It’s a matter of public record. I'm making a business offer. I had to do my due diligence.”

“Why are you so interested in our family, Lex?”

“Your son brought me back from the Mr. Kent. When he reached in and pulled me out, he gave me a new life. Your father put his family’s future over his own pride. Are you willing to do that?”

“And it’s not just Lex’s offer. He’s offering sixty percent of the deal, I’m offering forty. I’m rich but
not that rich however my forty percent is on offer with no strings or sharing of profit. It’s a simple cash offer.”

“From someone who can afford to lose money. If I lost that amount with nothing to show for it my reputation would take a hit that could affect a lot of things, including the plant.”

“So you would give us the latest farming equipment and technology.” Martha looked between the two young men.

“All in exchange for our independence.”

“Harry’s influence would not exist. My influence will be minimal, but existing, yes. It’s a partnership.”

“We could get a loan.”

“Or you could allow us to help you get to the point where you never need someone like us again.”

“I'll admit, it looks generous.” Martha smiled.

“It is.” Harry agreed.

“Which begs the question, "What does Lex Luthor get out of all this?"”

“I believe there's profit to be made. I'm not exactly in the charity business.”

“Like father, like son.”

“Take some time to think about it. I'm sure you'll see the benefits outweigh your other options. To the future.” They began to toast but the doors open to reveal Whitney supporting Lana.
“Lana!” Martha put her glass down.

“She's okay.” Whitney assured her even as Harry moved over to take her from him, settling her onto the couch and then kneeling to examine her.

“Where's Clark?” Martha asked in alarm.

“Looking for Chloe. She had a date with Sean tonight, when we heard the news he went after her.” She winced as Harry probed her ankle.

“Sprained, not broken thankfully.” Harry smiled at her, ignoring the others as they talked.

“This kid sounds dangerous. I've got the gate down and the alarm on. You're staying here until they find Sean. Sorry about your date.” Lex said to Lana who shrugged. “Any sign of Clark?”

“No, and I'm still getting the answering machine at home.”

“Remind me I don't have to worry.” Martha whispered and Jonathon smiled, hugging her.

“He's Clark, Martha.” He assured her right as the lights went out.

“Everyone stay where you are, we don’t need more injuries.” Harry called, the flickering firelight not much in such a large room.

“I know my way in the dark, I'll get torches.” Lex called and then left for a few minutes. “Here you go.” He handed them out when he returned.

“Thanks. I'll go check the front gate.”

“It should be secure.”
“I’ll check the generator. Where is it?”

“It’s on the side of the house, but I can get it.” He called after her and Harry chuckled.

“Farmers are very self-sufficient and independent.”

“I’m learning that.”

Harry looked up as Lex walked up onto his front porch. “Well?”

“They’ve accepted our offer, grudgingly in Jonathon’s case.”

“Give him time, he’ll see you’re not your father in time.” Harry promised.

“I hope so.” He picked up the bottle Harry motioned towards and drank. “Here’s to a quiet week or two.”

“Amen.”

Clark took a deep breath as Chloe climbed into the loft. This felt a thousand times harder than telling Lex. He’d known Chloe longer after all and she was a reporter, something the family feared getting hold of the truth. But he couldn’t keep lying and Harry had told him if worse came to worse he could actually remove the knowledge from her or anyone else who reacted badly.

“You know it belonged to Alexander the Great? They said the design symbolizes strength and courage.” Lex commented as he joined Clark in looking at the magnificent breastplate. He was happy the Kent’s had accepted his invitation to the museum gala.

“I can’t exactly see myself going into battle with that on my chest.”
Lex chuckled. “Darker times call for darker methods. His opponents thought he was invincible.”

“I didn't know you were such a history buff.”

“I'm not. I'm just interested in people who ruled the world before they were thirty.”

“Don't worry, Lex. You still have a few years to go.” Lana said as she joined them in looking at the display.

“Lana, I didn't know you were going to be here.”

“Didn't Lex tell you?”

“Must've slipped my mind. Why don't I leave you two alone? Harry’s meant to be around somewhere and I have some business questions for him.” he quickly vanished into the crowd.

“Having fun?”

“Yeah, well, I'm feeling a bit underdressed.” He admitted, everyone else was in black tie, even Lana was wearing a very pretty dress.

“If it makes you feel any better, Whitney is just as uncomfortable.”

“Whitney came too?’

“Why don't you join us? I'm going to go yank Nell away from the jewellery exhibit so we can eat.”

“Yeah, sure.” He smiled slightly and watched her head for her aunt before moving towards the door.
“Clark, where are you going?” Lex called as Harry turned to see him as well.

“I'm going to get some...air.”

“You know; you're never going to get her if you keep running away from your enemy.”

“Whitney's not my enemy.’

“Yes he is, Clark, and the sooner you realize that, the sooner you'll find a way to win Lana. Just remember, keep your friends close and the quarterback closer.” Lex’s answer had Harry laughing.

“Don’t wander far Clark, Metropolis isn’t Smallville.” Harry called.

“I know.”

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“Hello? Hello? Anybody home? Dad, is that you?” Clark looked up and easily caught the generator as it dropped.

“Kid, I don’t know what they've been feeding you, but that was pretty impressive.” Phelan commented as he came out of hiding.

“Who are you?”

“I am your new best friend, Clark.”

“How do you know my name?” He demanded, feeling scared. This was the sort of person he never wanted to know his secret.

“Oh, I asked around. That's the beauty of a small town. Everyone's just so eager to help. A far cry from Metropolis.”
“What do you want with me?”

“You help. You see, Clark, I'm in a battle that I can't afford to lose. Because if I do, the bad guys win. And you have this gift that I need.”

“I'll never help you.”

“You have a secret you don't want the world to know about. I'm guessing that's why you didn't stick around for the TV cameras last night. You want to keep things that way, you'll do as I say. Drop by that overpriced coffee shop tomorrow afternoon and we'll talk about your future. Nice catch by the way.” With that he left and Clark barely hesitated before running for Harry’s.

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“You know trying to blackmail teenagers is really low.” Harry commented and Phelan spun, hand going for his gun only to watch it fly into Harry’s hand. “Let’s keep this civilised shall we?”

“What is this, a town full of freaks?”

“I’ve lost count of the times I’ve been called that but the only freak I see is you. A cop who uses everyone to get what he wants. Well no more. You are going back to Metropolis where you will turn yourself in and confess your sins.”

“Keep dreaming.”

Harry smirked and Phelan backed off, suddenly wary before he became utterly calm. He would confess, confession was good for the soul after all.

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“There is nothing like 50 minutes of Mr. Austin's English class that works up an appetite.” Clark grinned.

“There's nothing like having a 6-page student biography due Monday to help me lose mine.” Pete
complained.

“What, the biography part, or the fact that our fellow student subjects were randomly assigned?” Chloe asked.

“Pete's convinced that the drawing was fixed.”

“There are a dozen ladies in our class, each worthy of lengthy interrogation. I get stuck with Stan Gibson.”

“The manager of the student store? Well, I hear he's very...”

“Efficient?”

“Very funny. I'm about to learn more about the art of selling "Go Crow" pendants than any human should have to endure. You haven't stopped smiling since we left. Who's your victim?”

“The illustrious Mr. Kent himself.” Chloe smirked and Clark groaned. It was great that she'd taken the truth so well and had kept it secret but now he was worried.

“Me?”

“I take it back. Chloe's the one with the challenge.”

“Excuse me?”

“No offense, Clark, but digging up six pages of interesting on you is going to require some serious excavation.’

“I do stuff.”
“Yes, and I'm sure that once I deploy my journalistic skills on you, I'll be able to unearth a skeleton or two.” She teased.

“You know, uh, Chloe. This is a class project, not a corruption scandal.”

“Relax, Clark, it's not like you have anything to hide, right?” He shot her a glare for that question.

“Come on, Clark. Cough up. Who'd you get?”

“Oh, don't tell me. Lana Lang. Oh, my God. Just look at his face. You don't even have to see it.”

“Like I said, definitely rigged. I can assume you'll be starting your paper ASAP?”

“It's all gonna work out. I've been helping Lana over at the Talon, getting ready for the grand opening.”

“Oh, that's nice. The surrogate boyfriend does the heavy lifting while Whitney works at his dad's store.”

“On that note...”

“Wait. When are you gonna sit down and do my interview?”

‘Right. Uh, I'll be around.”

“Did he just blow me off?” Chloe gaped at where Clark had been.

“One step forward, two steps back. Come on.”
“How you holding up?” Clark asked gently. He’d been considering opening up about the truth to Lana but that could all wait until whatever was going on was dealt with.

“I was fine until, uh, it showed up.”

“Yeah, stupid question.”

“What kind of a sick person would do a thing like that?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve never seen Lex so freaked out before.” He admitted.

“You can join the club. That guy warned me. He said everything Lex touches turns out badly. How much do we really know about him and his past?” She asked and then fell silent as Lex himself joined them outside the Talon.

“I want you both to know how truly sorry I am about this. I promise this won’t affect the grand opening.”

“We’re going to be infamous before we even open the doors.”

“Do you know who he is? The guy in the... you know.”

“Max Kasitch. And yes, I knew him a long time ago in Metropolis.”

“You have any idea who might have done this to him?”

“Not at all.’

“What about your old friend Jude Royce?”

“I doubt it could have been him, Clark.”
“Why?”

“Because he's been dead for three years.” Lex answered firmly.

“So unless the dead are walking…” Harry commented as he joined them. “You three alright?”

“We’re okay Dr Murphy.”

“Alright, but if that changes or if you need someone to talk to feel free to call me.”

“Thanks.”

“Come on, Pete. I'm desperate. Now the only information I can get from the Kent's was the earth-shattering admission that Clark hates peas.” He could hardly put he was an alien in the report.

“Chloe, a body part shows up at the Talon and all you can do is talk about Clark. Where are your priorities? You know Lex Luthor must be mixed up in this somehow.”

“Easy. Now, I know you've got issues with the Luthor's, but—“

“More than issues. You know what the Luthor's did to my family.” He snapped.

“Okay, one piece of investigative information at a time. Now about Clark...”

“Chloe, what do you want from me? In a world full of designer water, Clark Kent is straight from the tap.’

“I know, but you've known him the longest. I mean, all I need is just, like, a little anecdote. Just a small piece of information from Clark's deep, dark past.”
“Well, there was something back in the first grade.”

“Thank you! That's more than I've uncovered in, like, the past two days. Now please, let's continue.” She just needed something other than his biology to make it interesting.

“There was this bully three grades ahead of us. This dude was determined to pound dents into every kid in the school. One day, I guess it was my turn. He was just about to take my head off when Clark jumped between us.”

“So Clark ran interference. Now, as kind as that sounds, Pete, I really don't think it falls under the "something amazing" test.” Still not what she needed.

“What test?” Clark asked warily as he joined them with his lunch tray.

“I'm not finished. Clark didn't just push brain-dead away. He put him through a door, as in splinters and broken hinges. How he did it, I still have no idea. The guy was at least twice our size.”

“Clark, any comments?” She smirked slightly, they both knew how he had done that but she also knew Pete didn’t know the truth yet.

“Uh, well, we were, you know, six years old. Twice our size was three feet tall.”

“If you need any more ancient history, ask the source. I've got an appointment at the student store.’

“Have fun. And so the mystery that isn’t Clark Kent deepens.”

“Mystery?”

‘Yeah. Since you continue to play obstructionist, I've had to find information through other means. For instance, I found that your adoption was done through Metropolis United Charities. But this is the strange part. They were only in business for six months and from what I can tell, yours is the only adoption they handled.”
“I can't believe you did this, Chloe.” He stared at her in horrified shock.

“You didn't know? I just assumed that your parents would have told you. I mean, weren't you interested how they did it?”

“Why would I be? My biological parents are either dead or didn't want me. The point is, you're prying into my private life.”

“I was just trying to be thorough. I wasn’t going to put anything ‘dangerous’ in, without that you're a pretty boring guy on paper.”

“This is a class project. I spent an hour yesterday with Lana. That's it. That's all I needed. I'm not some mystery for you to solve.”

“Clark, I-“ She tried as he stormed off.

“A moment Miss Sullivan.”

She turned to find Dr Murphey standing there and so got up and followed him to his office. “I understand you are a reporter but Clark is your friend and he trusted you. How could you invade his privacy like that? Would you like it if the person assigned to you did the same?”

“But….”

“You were wrong Chloe. Clark’s secrets are dangerous in the wrong hands. What if someone found your search and decided to look deeper?”

“Wait…. you know?”

“Yes. Now, you owe Clark an apology and you better ensure all traces of your search are destroyed. Understood?”
“Yes Doctor.” She slunk out of his office. Harry shook his head but logged on and began his own search, working to shore up Clark’s records.

“Clark! Come on, son. The cows aren’t gonna feed themselves. What, you have a late night?” Jonathon yelled towards the house.

“I was helping Lana. To her credit, she’s not gonna let the whole body part incident delay the opening of the Talon.” He answered as he appeared in the barn.

“Well, that’s what happens when you get into business with somebody like Lex Luthor.”

“Well, if it wasn’t for Lex, the Talon would be a parking garage. Not to mention the farm. Dad, Harry and I trust him, he’s not his father.”

“Son, he casts a very, very long shadow. I just want to make sure that none of you kids get hurt. That's all.”

“The past is in the past. The best we can do is look to the future.” Clark quoted something his Dad had told him before and Johnathon sighed.

“All right, you got me. Speaking of that, how's Chloe's paper coming along? And I assume that she's done with her interviews.”

“I'm not sure.” He answered as they began walking towards where the cows were grazing in the back pasture.

“Look, Clark, if she mentions anything to you about the peas? I'm sorry, it's the first thing that came to mind.”

“And if she mentions anything to me about Metropolis United Charities?”

“And I used to think perseverance was an admirable quality.” He grumbled.
“Since I learned the real truth, I hadn't thought about the adoption. Dad, Chloe told me the agency you used was only open six months and I was the only kid adopted.”

“Look, son, uh, the process is a really tough one, even when you go through normal channels. With you, it was just a little more complicated. That's all.”

“Is everything legal?” Clark asked, worried someone would try to take him away.

“Yeah, it's legal, it's just... Well, it required a higher level of access than you mother and I had.”

“What does that mean?”

“Let's just say that it's a very long road between what's sitting in our storm cellar and what's written on your birth certificate. You hear that?” he stopped and frowned, straining his hearing.

“Hear what?”

“The whole herd's just over that rise, we ought to be hearing something.” They ran up to the top and stared in horror at dead cows and containers of waste marked LuthorCorp.

Two hours later the farm was swarming with official people from various agencies from the Sheriff up. Clark looked over as Chloe ran up and hugged him. “You’re alright?” She asked.

“We’re all fine.”

“What do you think happened? Why would LuthorCorp dump their stuff here? I'm gonna go take from some different angles.” She promised even as Lex ran to where they were standing.

“Mr. and Mrs. Kent, I have no idea how this could have happened, but I'll do everything in my power to find out. And I'll pay for your livestock of course.” He promised.
“You think that’s how you solve everything, don't you, Lex? You sprinkle a little money on it and hope the problem goes away. Well, obviously some things are a little more difficult than that.” Jonathon snapped.

“Enough!” Harry called as he joined them, looking around with a professional eye. “Lex and I both have money in this farm and you think he’d allow something like this to happen? It would be a very stupid move and Lex is not stupid. Someone is trying to drive a wedge between you, don’t give them the satisfaction.” Harry then dragged Jonathon off to talk to the C.E.P. people.

“I didn't think it was possible to fall any further in your father's eyes. Obviously, I was wrong. You know I'd never intentionally allow something like this to happen.” Lex pleaded and Clark nodded.

“I know you wouldn’t Lex and deep down so do my parents. The herd meant a lot to them. Does this have anything to do with Club Zero?”

“I think so.”

“You need to tell the authorities everything you know. This isn't just about you anymore.”

“Mr. Luthor, the C.E.P. guy needs to talk to you. He's over there.” A deputy called and Lex nodded, walking over only to find a dead man smiling at him.

“Looks like a real black mark on your company's environmental record.” Jude commented.

“I'm going to walk over there and get that sheriff.”

“And tell him what?”

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“What’s going on Harry?”

“With all the trouble I decided to show you this earlier than originally intended.”
“Show me what?” He asked and then gaped in awe as an entire wall shifted back to reveal a very solid metal wall and door with a control pad. Harry showed him the code as he entered it and then he pressed hard to open the door.

“No one of human strength can open this, even if they got all the codes right.” Harry commented as they descended.

“Harry…” all he could do was stare in awe at the various screens and desks.

“This is all for you Clark. Made from a combination of everything I know about advanced and alien technology because the odds of only two intelligent species in the cosmos is ridiculous. Good afternoon Jarvis.”

“Good afternoon Sir.”

“What?” Clark looked around.

“Jarvis is an AI, created to run all of this.”

“But why Harry?”

“Because if anything happens to me, you are my heir. I’ve also gone through all your records and made sure they will stand up to any scrutiny.”

“Are you planning to die?”

“No, but I rarely plan on dying. Everything in my accounts plus this house and land will be yours. Jarvis will be able to check that piece of metal and the writing against a database of alien languages, even if the exact language isn’t in it he may have enough to estimate a translation.”

“This is…. thank you.”

“You’re welcome Clark.”
“Still no word from Lex. No one’s spoken to him since this morning.” Clark hung up and looked at Chloe who was having a field day with a link into Jarvis.

“Okay, well, we pulled our alleged dead guy's license plate. It's registered to John Smith. Very original. He has an address in Metropolis and he does not work for the C.E.P."

“How'd you do that?”

“Jarvis hacked into the DMV database. See? Sometimes persistence is a good thing.”

“Call Metropolis P.D. Have them go to the address. Then call Harry and explain.”

“What's going on?”

“I don’t know but I’m going to Metropolis to find Lex. Get Jarvis on a search for him and call me if you find anything.”

“We’re on it, be careful.” She called as he ran out of the room.

“Liar! That's what it said in the papers, but that's not what really happened.” Jude yelled.

“It's the truth! Read the police reports!” Lex screamed back, throat raw and his body throbbing as he hung from the cuffs. His only chance was Clark or Harry, if the teen was even looking for him after all the trouble on the farm.

“I know you covered it up. I don't know how you did it, but you're gonna pay.”

“Who are you?”
“Don't you remember? Hmm? You killed me. Daddy can't save you this time, Lex.” He looked and saw Lex wasn’t buying it so he looked to his boss just in time to be shot.

“No more games, Lex. It's time for the truth.” A new man walked into view, holding the gun.

“I know you. You're the contractor from the Talon.”

“That's my day job.”

“Who are you?”

“Mandy never talked about her family?”

“She- she had a brother in Central City. She said he was in prison. She was the only person who kept in touch with him.”

“She was my lifeline when I was inside. You see, I never had a rich daddy to keep me out of jail.”

“I don't understand. What do you want?”


“What do you mean? Where's Amanda?” he demanded, she was meant to be safe. He wasn’t allowed to contact her but she was meant to be safe.

“She's dead, Lex. She committed suicide a year ago.”

“I never knew.” He whispered in shock.
“That's because you cut her out of your life. She was never the same after Club Zero. Jude's death devastated her. He was the love of her life. You took all that away. She had nothing to live for.”

“Who's that?” Lex looked over at the unmoving body he could just see.

“Lucky break. A couple weeks after Amanda's funeral, I walk into a greasy spoon in Bloodhaven and there he is. I couldn't believe it. Short-order cook, flipping burgers. You know how they say everyone in life has a double. I had to look twice. I figure if he can fool me, he can fool you.”

“Why'd he do it?”

“He was on parole, needed the money, and that's when I got the idea. You ruined Mandy's life, I'd ruin yours. Mandy's finally gonna get the justice she deserves.”

“You were right. You were right. The newspapers, the police reports, what I told Phelan, they were all lies. You want the truth? I'll give it to you. Amanda killed him.”

“No, no, no, no, you're twisting it again!” He denied, his sister hadn’t been a killer.

“That's what happened! That's what happened. Amanda pulled the trigger, she shot Jude. I was just trying to protect her.”

“I'm through with you, Lex!”

“Killing me won't bring Amanda back. None of this can change what happened.” He strained in the cuffs but he had nothing to pick them with and he couldn’t break them.

“I don't care. After tonight, you'll never hurt anyone else. You can't escape your past, Lex.”


Calrk made it to the closed down club in time to see Harry appear. “Chloe told you?”
“Yeah. You find Lex and get him out, I’ll deal with our kidnapper.”

“Harry…”

“I’ve done this before plus I can do things that don’t need major coverups to hide like you stopping bullets.”

“Alright, just be careful.” Clark ordered before they slipped inside and split up. Clark spotted Lex hanging and ran to him at human speed while Harry made his way around the catwalks. “Lex!”

“Get down! There’s a man with a gun up there!”

“Where? You mean that guy? What happened?” He pointed at the body and Lex shook his head.

“I have no idea. How’d you find me here?” He asked as Clark got him down.

“Bit of detective work.” He smiled and then they heard a gun go off.

Harry moved into sight as the man began walking away. “Drop the gun.”

“What are you going to do if I don’t? You’re no cop.”

“Actually I’m a Doctor.” Harry answered.

“He deserves to die!”

“Maybe. But you won’t be killing him today.” Harry moved closer and then the man tried to lunge past so they ended up grappling for the gun. They fought briefly and then the gun went off.
Clark appeared on the catwalk as Harry collapsed and he screamed. “NO!” He grabbed the gun, crushing it and Amanda’s brothers hand in the process, making the man scream before Clark knocked him out.

Lex clambered up and swore when he saw Harry and the spreading pool of blood. He knelt beside the other man and tried to apply pressure. “Clark call an ambulance!” he yelled at the shocked teen. Clark fell to his knees beside them, x-ray vision conforming there was nothing that could be done. Harry weakly grabbed Clark’s hand and then pushed it at Lex so Lex clasped Clark’s now bloody hand. The wizard smiled at them and then closed his eyes. Clark stumbled back to his feet and pulled Lex with him, knowing what would happen next. Sure enough the body was soon engulfed in flames.

The funeral for Doctor Harry Murphy was attended by nearly all the town and was paid for by Lex Luthor although organised by Martha Kent so that it was more down to earth. The Kent’s and Lex stood around the empty grave at the end in silence, all still shocked that the doctor was gone, off to help the next world in need. Finally, they walked away as well.

“I get the feeling you're avoiding me, Clark.” Lex admitted as they walked towards Harry’s house.

“I just realized there's a lot I don't know about you.”

“You think my dark past is gonna rub off on you? I was trying to protect Amanda. My father wouldn't have raised a finger to help her, but I knew he'd do anything to save his only son.”

“So you took the fall and everything was covered up. Is that really what happened? Is it the truth?”

“The truth is; I'd do anything to protect my friends.” He swore and Clark nodded. All of this now belonged to him, held in trust until he was eighteen with Lex looking after it.

“What do we do with his stuff?”

“Donate whatever you don’t want to keep I guess.”

“It seems so…”
“Impersonal? Better us than strangers.”

“Yeah.”

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Lex watched his Father’s interview as the man ran for State Senator. “Jarvis?”

“Yes Lex?”

“Send the files.” He ordered, feeling Clark, Chloe and Lana watching him.

“Files sent.” The AI answered. Every record of every dirty deal, any crime, was all being sent to the authorities and the press, local and international. It might not break the man but it would stop him running for office. Clark was using his inheritance from Harry and some of the monies made from Kryptonian technology to help Lex buy out LuthorCorp. Dumbing down the technology was really helpful to earth and Clark felt it served the AI of Jor-El right. He would never rule the Earth but he would help it grow. Lex looked down as Chloe took his hand and smiled at her. Who could have imagined he would ever end up engaged to a reporter? He glanced back at Clark and Lana and smiled, at least Clark finally got the girl, even if it took him six years to do so. He just wished for their sake that Pete was there but as Clark and Lex had gotten closer Pete had drifted further away in his hatred for Lionel.

Clark watched as Lex was forced to air his family’s past to stop his father. He and Chloe had tried to dig up enough on Lionel without going into the mess with Lex’s half siblings, mother and grandparents but Lionel was good at covering his tracks. If only Harry were still with them maybe he could have cornered the man and made him tell but Harry had been gone for almost six years now and it still hurt. Harry had been a mentor and older brother to him and in a way Lex as well. He just hoped wherever Harry was he was having a good life in that world.

_The End_
You Can't Take the Sky from Me

Chapter Summary

Firefly/Serenity

Disclaimer: Don’t own HP or Firefly/Serenity.

You Can’t Take the Sky From Me

When someone bought up everything on the third moon of Muir, no one paid any attention. After all the old owner, Burgess, was dead. His grieving widow was sent back to the core worlds where she could live out the rest of her life in peace. Who took over was of no concern to the Alliance. So Samuel Peverell moved in and began work on the single town the moon held. Within a month the place was unrecognisable. It still kept the old rustic charm but every piece of technology was now modern. Wages and standard of living soared and while some still missed Burgess most preferred the new owner.

The workers of the Heart of Gold remained wary and watchful as the town changed around them until one day a man rode up on a horse and dismounted, a man they didn’t recognise.

Petaline walked into the yard and took in the stranger. He was tall and slender with grey touched brown hair curling to his collar. It was only as he got closer that she could see his hazel eyes even as he bowed slightly to her.

“Good afternoon ma’am. I am looking for the owner of this establishment.”

“I run the Heart of Gold.” She answered and was surprised when he offered his hand. She took it and he shook her hand. “Samuel Peverell, I was hoping we could talk Miss?”

“Petaline. Follow me.” She led him into the house and into the small room she’d claimed on the ground floor. Jonah stood up in his crib and waved his arms around and she saw Peverell smile softly at the sight.
“Your son?” He asked and she nodded, sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Jonah.” She passed the boy a toy and he smiled and fell back on his bottom into his crib. “What can I do for you Mr Peverell?”

“As I’m sure you know I’ve bought the town, the whole moon actually.”

“Not this land.”

“No, and I have no interest in trying to take it off you, legally or otherwise.” He assured her. “What I do want is to ensure there are no problems. I’ve been working to update the laws. This will give you more protection and rights. As far as I’m concerned you have the right to say no to anyone you don’t want to do business with.”

“Why?” No man ever gave without wanting something in return.

“Because it’s the right thing to do. I want this moon to prosper Petaline, to become a good place to live. There’s no Guild out here to protect you so I will act in its stead. I’ve heard how my predecessor treated you and killed the old owner. That won’t happen again.”

“Alright.” She would listen, time would tell how genuine he was.

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“Harry!”

He grinned and swept the four-year-old up in his arms, spinning around. “Did you miss me Jonah?”

“Oh huh.” The boy nodded his head seriously and Harry bit back a smile, he was so cute. He settled him on his hip and headed towards the small house.

“And you’ve been good for your Mamma?” He asked and Jonah nodded again.
“Good boy.” He set him down and the kid ran inside.

“Mamma! Harry here!” he yelled and Petaline walked over to greet the young man.

“We were starting to think you’d gone for good.”

“Ran into some trouble with Reavers, no one was hurt but it added time on the trip.” Thankfully there were very few Reavers left these days. He opened his bag and dug around inside, Jonah watching impatiently until Harry handed over his gift, a new toy and they both watched the child run off to play.

“You spoil him.” Petaline shook her head as he passed over a good amount of new material. The Heart of Gold had changed a lot in the last three and a half years. And it was all thanks to Mr Peverell and Harry Potter. He’d shown up as a drifter, offering his services as a handy man when he wasn’t flying. And somehow he’d become family before they’d realised. He’d built this house for her and Jonah. The main building had been done up too, while nothing like the Houses Nandi had described it was still a beautiful building now. All the girls and the boys had private rooms as well as the rooms where they worked. They owed Harry a lot, Mr Peverell too, and yet neither asked for anything.

“How have you been?” He asked as he set about making tea and Petaline sat, knowing better than to argue over it.

“Fine, business is as good as usual.”

“No problems?”

“None, stop your worrying.” She grinned and he served the tea.

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Harry lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep. He’d been here for several years, under two rather different identities and he had come to see it as darker than the first dimension he’d met the Tam siblings in. He’d seen the broadcast Serenity had made about Miranda and it sickened him to realise the government was responsible for Reavers. He hadn’t come across that bit of information last time. He’d done some digging on his last trip and found a casualty list for Serenity submitted by an Operative. Wash was dead, killed by Reavers, and there was no mention of Shepard Book on the list of dead or survivors. Had he left the ship or died before they got a good list of who
was aboard? The broadcast hadn’t toppled the Parliament, they were too good at spinning things, but it had brought pressure on them. If anything it looked like another Independence War might start up. Theoretically he could do something similar to last time and force the government to change but he didn’t like interfering like that, people had to do things themselves. It was why he liked being a doctor or pilot or any other option like it, he influenced small things that would then grow and lead others to changing things.

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“Seriously, nothing?”

“Sorry Sir.”

“Not your fault Zoe.” Mal ran a hand through his hair and then smiled as he saw Kaylee and River playing a game in the hold. They hadn’t had work in three weeks and things were getting tight. Ever since Miranda work had been scarce although the Alliance had backed off some, for now. It hadn’t taken long for a lot of their usual contacts to work out who had sent that broadcast, add in he and Zoe had been Browncoats and it made people nervous they were looking to fight another war. You’d think three years after sending the message people would have calmed down about their part in it.

“It’s not just work sir; we need to talk about River.”

“I know. She’s a fantastic pilot but she’s not as healed as Doc likes us all to think.”

“We…. we need a new pilot sir.” She stated stiffly and he nodded.

“Alright, I’ll call Monty, see if he has anyone or knows of someone good. We can set down for a while, I think everyone needs some shore leave.”

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Harry rolled out of bed and walked into his office as he yanked a shirt on before accepting the wave and grinning. “Hey Monty, got some work for me?”

“Not me Harry. Got a friend in need of a permanent pilot.”
“How permanent. I have responsibilities here.”

“Yeah, you’d have to talk it over with Mal. Serenity’s a good ship, firefly class.”

“Didn’t know any of those were still flying.” He lied, acting shocked and Monty laughed.

“She is. Good crew too, bit odd though. Lost their pilot about three years back and have been making due.”

Harry ran a hand through his sleep messed hair, considering it. Getting to fly Serenity and see them, even if it was a different version, was tempting. “Alright, I’ll meet them and see. But they’ll have to come here, no ships due in for weeks.”

“I’ll wave them. See you around.”

“Later Monty.” He turned the screen off and leant back in his chair. It was too early for this.

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“Permanent?” Petaline asked and Harry nodded even as he helped Jonah with his alphabet.

“Ship called Serenity.”

“Oh! That’s the ship Nandi’s friend Inara is on. They helped us fight.” She glanced at Jonah and Harry nodded in understanding.

“Apparently they lost their pilot a few years ago. What did you think of them?”

“Doctors good.” She ruffled her sons’ hair. “Brought this one out alright. Sister’s a bit odd. Didn’t see much of the others but you can ask at the main house.”

“Yeah, I think I will.”
“We’ll miss you.” She whispered and Harry stood up and moved in front of her.

“Hey, I’ll be back whenever I can. And they might find I don’t fit or a better pilot and let me go.” He wasn’t surprised when she hugged him, the kiss was a surprise. “Petaline…”

“This ain’t work Harry. You’re the closest Jonah has to a Daddy, the closest I have to…”

And now he felt really guilty agreeing to meet Mal. “Petaline I…”

“I know you feel somethin’, don’t lie.”

“You’re my best friend and yes, you’re beautiful but I’m leaving.”

“So let me say a proper goodbye.” She offered and he sighed before kissing her gently.

“You sure?” He asked and she nodded. He went back to working with Jonah until the boy went to bed and then he followed her to her bedroom, putting up a few one-way silencing charms to be safe.

Mal stared in shock as they approached the moon where they had fought to save Nandi and the others. It didn’t look like the same place at all. Things were greener, someone had obviously put more money into the terraforming to make the moon friendlier to people. And then there was the town itself, towns now. And a small but proper spaceport with space for four ships was set between them. Just who had the money to do something like that? He set the ship down in the port and soon the ship was hooked up for refuelling even as the crew left the ship.

“Captain?” Zoe asked.

“Kaylee, River, stay with the ship. Oversee the refuel and be ready to leave in case of trouble. Inara..”

“I’m going to the Heart of Gold.” She stated as she wrapped her shawl across her shoulders.
Mal opened his mouth to argue but then nodded, as much as he never wanted to go back there it was the logical place to go for information, as long as Nandi’s girls were still working there. “Alright. We’ll all go. Eyes sharp people.” The group walked through town, no one even giving them a second glance until they walked towards the Heart of Gold, surprised to see it had changed a lot too, not to mention there were extra buildings on the land. As they approached they heard childish laughter and then a young boy ran by before a man swooped in and lifted him up, making him shriek in delight.

“Harry down!”

“Oh I don’t know Jonah, I won fair and square, I think that means tickles.” The older male stated.

“Uh, excuse us.” Mal called and the man dropped the boy to the ground, the kid hiding behind his legs.

“Can I help you?” Harry asked, keeping all sign of recognition hidden, his mental shields at full even though he couldn’t see River around.

“We are looking for Petaline, is she is still here?” Inara asked and Harry nodded.

“Sure, follow me.” He swept Jonah up and carried him home. “Petaline, visitors!” He called out and she opened the door, staring in surprise before smiling.

“Welcome back.”

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Harry packed the last of his gear and looked at Petaline. Serenity was leaving in the morning with him on board. The look on Mal’s face when he’d introduced himself as their prospective pilot had been amusing. They’d agreed to a trial period to see if he fit in with the crew and then spent time checking in on the others at the house.

“Stay safe?”
“Of course.” He promised before getting into bed beside her. They weren’t a couple, couldn’t be with their lines of work, but they cared for each other and that was what mattered.

In the morning he slipped from the bed and kissed her before shouldering his pack and slipping out to look in on Jonah and then head to the Spaceport. He grinned when he saw Serenity sitting there, looking in pretty good repair. He took a deep breath and headed up, nodding in greeting as Zoe stepped out.

“Right on time.” She stated coolly and he understood, she saw him as trying to replace Wash, but no one would ever replace the man. She led him onto the ship and to one of the passenger bunks where he stowed his gear, it made sense since none of the crew quarters would have become available and even if they had Simon or River would be next in line for them. She gave him the basic tour before heading for the bridge where they found Mal and River.

Mal shook his hand while River gave him weird looks. “Let’s see what you’ve got Potter.”

“Yes sir.” Harry slid into the pilots’ seat and quickly familiarised himself with the controls before contacting Spaceport control.

“You’re clear for lift off Serenity, see you ‘round Harry.”

“You too Riley.” Harry replied as he flipped a few switches and then pulled back on the controls, lifting the ship smoothly from the ground. Soon they were back in the black and Mal nodded.

“Not bad.”

Harry rolled his sleeve down and got off the bed. “Thanks Doc.”

“Next time dodge.” Simon answered as he put his equipment away.

“And let the Captain get shot instead?”
“Tempting. No weight lifting or getting it wet for the next two days.” He warned and then watched the pilot walk away. He wasn’t sure what he thought of the man, he was a good pilot, excellent actually and had proven very good in a fight, better than Wash actually. And he was friendly. But something about him bugged River and therefore bugged Simon. The really frustrating thing was River wouldn’t tell him what about their new pilot bothered her and she kept getting Kaylee’s help in distracting him. Despite everything she was still such a brat.

Harry made his way back to his room and lay out on the bed to rest for a while. Despite the differences Mal could always find trouble. Better he take the shot though than the rather mortal man. He’d been trying to find a way to make their lives better, happier, but so far he had nothing. Simon and Kaylee were a couple which was good, she was just what the doctor ordered. But Zoe……he couldn’t bring Wash back, well technically he could ask and Death would decide if the extra years were worth it, but after so long dead it would be cruel to rip him from the afterlife. Then there was Mal and Inara, still dancing around their feelings and unwilling to admit anything. Talk about having his work cut out for him. At least River was more stable than he had expected though from what he’d overheard that was due to Miranda and the broadcast. He knew he confused her, she couldn’t Read him like everyone else thanks to his shields. Maybe it was time to teach her like he had his River.

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“Harry! Get in the air now!” Mal yelled over the radio and Harry shook his head but began powering up.

“Kaylee?” He called back to the engine room.

“Heard.” She yelled back as she worked to get Serenity ready for a quick getaway.

Harry gently lifted the ship off and then began heading towards where the captain was only to sigh when he saw the mule being chased by horsemen. He turned the ship and let the mule fly in before taking off. He looked up as Jayne joined him. “So who’d the Captain annoy today?”

“Bunch of backwards crazies.”

“So typical Tuesday.” Harry locked in their new heading and stood up. “Injuries?”

“Only for them.”
“Harry!”

Harry grinned and knelt, catching the six-year-old up and spinning him like he always did when he came home. “Hey kid. You being good for your Mum?”

“Always.” Jonah stated proudly and Harry chuckled even as he walked towards the house with the boy at his side, chattering away happily.

Petaline came to the door and smiled as she saw the two walking across the yard. Harry’s times at home were infrequent now because of Serenity and while she missed him, they both did, she knew flying was what made Harry happy. Part of her wished he’d stay with them but she had no right to ask, not with her line of work. She smiled and hugged him as Harry came up to her. “Welcome back.”

“It’s good to be back.” He smiled in return and then they went inside.

Harry smiled as River sat, utterly relaxed at the table. Her lessons were coming along well and she was learning to block out other thoughts completely or selectively. She’d already made a good start herself in the time since Miranda. But she still needed some work, especially in stressful situations. Or when it came to her brother and Kaylee, sometimes the siblings’ closeness was not a good thing. She may never have total control; the Alliance had done a lot of damage to her brain.

Simon nearly choked on his drink and Harry bit back a laugh as Inara and Mal walked into the dining room, together. And both looked a bit…. dishevelled. It was about time! Jayne walked in and looked at the two, leering slightly. “I’ll be in my bunk.” He left again and Harry gave in to his laughter. Mal actually blushed slightly while Inara simply went to make tea.

Petaline stroked her swelling stomach, unsure what to do. She was positive this child was Harry’s and that was why she was hesitating. She should tell him but she knew he would come back in a second, wanting to be there for his child and for her. But that wasn’t fair, he loved flying, loved Serenity. She had always known the limits of their relationship. But he’d know anyway the next time he was back, which going by previous visits would be shortly after she was due. She would wait and give him this much longer with nothing tying him down.
Harry set the ship down in the dock easily and the ground crew moved to hook her up. He powered everything down and then went to join the others. He had never liked Badger, in either world, but he was a handy supply of work.

“Alright, Jayne, Zoe, you’re with me. Harry, Kaylee, get what we need.” They split up as Harry and Kaylee got on the mule, heading off to grab what they needed to keep Serenity flying.

“What’s it like?”

“What?”

“You and Petaline.”

“Ah. Why?”

“Well the Captain and Inara..”

“Are different. Inara is a Companion even if she’s barely taking work these days. Petaline isn’t. She runs the Heart of Gold and still works. We care about each other but romantic love? I don’t know.” He admitted.

“Oh.” Kaylee looked away and then frowned. “Harry?” she gripped his arm and the pilot glanced over, swearing softly under his breath.

“Eyes front Kaylee, stay calm.” He whispered, one eye on the troops as he manoeuvred through the streets. It was normal to see troops on Persephone but this many? They grabbed the parts and supplies they needed and headed back to the ship, quickly loading everything before Harry went to speak with the dock crew, paying for the fuel and getting clearance to leave as soon as the others got back. He went up to the cockpit and set things up for a fast getaway. Then he went back down to watch for the others.

“Trouble?”
“Maybe, you and River need to stay out of sight.” Harry answered and Simon nodded, going to find his sister. He went down to the ramp and watched the troops, he could feel the danger in the air and then he spotted the Captain, moving to catch his eyes and then glance at the troops. He saw Mal realise and the group tensed up, hands resting closer to their weapons. A commotion started at a stall nearby and Harry straightened up, not looking the look of it at all. Of course that was when some idiot pulled a gun. Harry tackled Kaylee, sending the two of them rolling behind some crates.

“Harry?”

“Keep your head down.” He pulled his gun and Kaylee nervously pulled the extra from nearby. Mal may be a little paranoid and have hidden weapons round the cargo bay after so many fights in it but right now he was being proved right. Kaylee’s hand shook a bit; she’d shot Reavers for survival but these were normal people shooting. They head Mal cursing and shared a grin before Harry slipped away, trying to get into position to cover the others so they could get aboard. He saw someone lining up a shot on Zoe and lunged off the ship, tackling the shooter. They rolled across the ground, fighting for the gun and Harry grunted as it went off, but managed to get his own between them, shooting the man. He lay on the ground, gasping for air, feeling resigned to what was happening. After so many times dying got old. He turned his head and realised they’d rolled into a side alley, no one could see them. He sighed and closed his eyes, letting death come.

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“Captain?” Kaylee looked around as the group came on board.

“There’s no sign of him except this.” Mal held out Harry’s gun. “He definitely got some shots off, there was a body in the alley and a lot of blood.”

“How much?” Simon asked, already mentally going over the infirmary supplies.

“Too much.” Zoe answered sadly.

“But there’s no body.” Kaylee whispered.

“Around here?” Jayne shook his head. Bodies disappeared a lot in these sort of places.

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Petaline watched as the crew of Serenity approached, a sinking feeling in her stomach even as her baby kicked. Jonah went to run out but she stopped him as she counted the numbers and they were one short. Please no. But Captain Reynolds approached solemnly and held out a bag and box to her. Her legs buckled and Simon and Inara were instantly at her side helping her inside.

“Where’s Harry?” She heard Jonah ask as she was settled onto her bed and the door closed. She clung to Inara and cried even as Simon carefully checked her over.

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“Come on Petaline, you can do this.” Inara coached, holding her hand as Petaline pushed. Jonah’s labour had been hard and lasted through the night, this little one was taking even longer.

Simon worked tirelessly to ensure her pain was controlled and they were both healthy until finally he was holding a baby and smiling. “It’s a girl.” He announced, quickly cutting the cord and wrapping her up to hand over to her exhausted mother.

Petaline smiled tiredly at her baby. She had wisps of hair the same colour as her own but then she opened her eyes and revealed her parentage in brilliant green orbs. “She’s perfect, a precious little Lily.” It was Harry’s favourite flower after all and he’d admitted it was his mother’s name too.

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Samuel Peverell was dead. No one had seen him in months, apparently he had taken ill and eventually died. His will left everything to one Harry Potter or his heirs, there’d been speculation form the start that the two were related or Harry worked for him in some manner. This just gave those rumours credibility. Harry had one heir, little Lily Potter. As the child’s mother that left Petaline in charge of the whole moon till her daughter was of age. She had never expected this at all.

The End
Teaching Yourself

Chapter Summary

HP

Chapter Notes

Okay so I am doing something different now. I’ve had a lot of requests for various crossovers which is great but a lot of them I don’t know. So if there is anything you want to see as a chapter, write it. Keep Harry in the character that has been shown and send him to whatever world you want, just keep it to 1, 2 maximum, well written chapters worth. Email it to me at scififan33@aol.com and I will post it as part of this story, under whatever name you give me, after checking editing. If you need more info on Harry and his skills/belongings whatever PM or email me. Have fun.

Disclaimer: Don’t own HP

Samuel sat at the table, drinking his coffee as he read the latest Daily Prophet. In three days Harry Potter would turn 11 and the paper had a full page spread on the event, despite the fact the child hadn’t been seen or heard of since his parents’ death. He folded the paper and paid Tom before slipping out of the Leaky Cauldron and apparating away. He walked out of the alley and down a few streets before he saw the house and sure enough a dark haired child toiled away under the summer sun. He hesitated before approaching. “Excuse me?”

Harry looked up to find a man standing on the other side of the garden fence, with the sun in his eyes he couldn’t make out much of him but he quickly stood. “Yes sir?”

“I was wondering if you could tell me how to get to Wisteria Lane?”

“Yes sir. You’re almost there. Just keep going and then turn at the second left.”
“Thank you very much Mister…?” He offered his hand.

Harry hesitated before shaking briefly. “Harry Potter sir.”

“Really? Samuel Peverell. A pleasure to meet you Mister Potter.” He turned and followed young Harry’s directions, smiling slightly to himself. This Harry was polite but not beaten into submission. He’d have to take a look at the house at some point but his life seemed better than many of his counterparts. Now the next part of his plan had to be enacted, he went back to his apartment and penned a letter before giving it to the owl he had purchased. He’d named the young brown owl Impala as a bit of a joke. The owl took the letter and headed off.


Albus sighed as he went over the applications, he had to choose soon. Quirinus had surprisingly applied for the position but he was hesitant to give him the transfer from Muggle Studies, the boy hadn’t been the same since returning from his trip. But he appeared to be the best candidate, despite most of his knowledge being theoretical. With Harry Potter returning to their world this year he was worried, he knew Tom wasn’t dead, this was the time he was most likely to attempt to return.

Albus looked up as an owl tapped at the window. He flicked his wand and the owl flew in to drop a letter on his desk. He opened it and began to read, a smile slowly forming, until he saw the signature. It wasn’t possible. Only two lines remained and each had a sole survivor. He frowned in thought, who was this Samuel Peverell?


Samuel straightened his robes as he was led up the stairs to the Headmaster’s office. Minerva knocked and the door opened.

“Welcome to Hogwarts Mister Peverell.”

He smiled and bowed slightly. “Thank you Headmaster, it is an honour to be here.”

“He must have a good reason for applying, Quirinus had been hesitant to accept the transfer.”

“Please, sit. I must admit your application was a surprise but a welcome one. Your qualifications are certainly beyond the others seeking the role.”
“But?” he asked, he wanted to get an idea on what kind of Albus Dumbledore this one was.

“Only two lines for the Peverell family still exist and you do not belong to either.”

“To your knowledge. Check American records and you'll find a flourishing family tree until the last few generations where it has shrunk until it is only me. British arrogance can be rather amusing.” He replied calmly.

Albus stared at him, brushing lightly against his mind only to find the most formidable shields he had ever come across. But was it possible someone from the Peverell family moved to the Colonies and continued the family? But which line? The Gaunt or Potter line? If it was Potter, then young Harry now had a magical relative who could theoretically try and gain custody. That could not be allowed, the boy had to remain with the Dursley’s due to the Blood Wards. But if it was Gaunt…then there was another Heir of Slytherin. Neither scenario was all that good.

“I would appreciate it sir if you did not try that again. My thoughts and memories are my own. If this is the sort of behaviour allowed here perhaps I should withdraw my application.” Samuel stated coolly. So far he was not impressed with this Dumbledore.

“My apologies Mister Peverell. As you are the best candidate the position is yours.”

“Thank you.”

“Please ensure Minerva has your book list by no later than August 3rd. You will be expected to arrive at the Castle by the 20th to organise your quarters and classroom as well as learn your way around.” They shook and Samuel left.

Quirinus whimpered as he felt his Masters rage over his failure. He needed the Defence position in order to get close to the boy. Harry Potter was coming to Hogwarts this year, coming out of hiding for the first time since that Halloween but as Muggle Studies teacher he would not have access to him. The boy must die for what he had done to his Master. Now that would have to wait until after he found and claimed the stone. He just had to find a way into Gringotts to get it.
He read over the notes from the previous professor and groaned. So maybe the bad teaching in his first year wasn’t only because of Quirell. He had to rewrite the entire program! He tossed the old books aside and grabbed his jacket, apparating to the Alley. He went into Flourish & Blotts.

“Can I help you?”

“The Defence section?”

“Third aisle.”

“Thanks.” Samuel slipped into the aisle and began to browse, disappointed by the options. He hadn’t liked the books he had been assigned and some of those weren’t even here! He finally gave up and went to the counter. “Is that all you have for Defence?”

“Yes sir.” The young woman answered.

“I see.”

“Is there something specific you were after?”

He leant in a little. “I need textbooks. I’m the new Defence Professor at Hogwarts and I need to have book lists out soon.”

“We’ve always had the correct books for Hogwarts before.”

“I’m looking to revamp the curriculum, make it more relevant for the present.”

“I’ll get the owner.” She went out back and soon an elderly man emerged.

“Can I help you sir?”
“Samuel Peverell, the new Defence Professor.” They shook hands and then went out back where he explained what he was looking for. Unfortunately, they didn’t have it so he left and considered before apparating to New York. Eight out of ten times in a world where the Magical World existed the US was more advanced than Britain. He made his way into the magical Alley and towards the bookstore, smiling as he wandered the aisles; this was more like it! He eventually picked out seven books to cover the seven different years and went to talk to the owners about the publisher and to see about arranging books for the school. The publisher and author leapt at the chance to make it in the British market, something not usually possible for a non-pureblood.

Samuel stood in the shadow and watched as Hagrid led a little Harry Potter through the Alley to buy his school supplies. Had he really been that short? He clenches his hands as he saw the almost rags the boy was dressed in. he didn’t know what to do there, should he step in and take custody? He’d already slipped anonymous information to Amelia Bones about Sirius, he was waiting to see if anything happened before taking more action there. The goblins were waiting for his word, if he gave them the go ahead they would move to ensure the boy became his ward while enacting a full audit of the Potter accounts. He hoped they were untouched but he wasn’t sure about this Albus yet.

As the two walked his way he moved into the flow, looking in the window of Eeylops Owl Emporium, spotting Hedwig at the back. He still missed his first and truest friend but she was meant for a different Harry Potter. They came up beside him and he smiled. “Hello Hagrid.”

“Professor Peverell! What brings you here?”

“Needed to pick up a few more things for class. And you?”

“Just helping Harry here with his school supplies.”

Harry looked up at the Professor and then his eyes widened. “You asked for directions!”

“That I did, and you gave very good ones. Thank you Mister Potter.” He smiled down at the boy who blushed slightly. “I’ll see you in class.” He nodded to Hagrid and walked away, going to finish his shopping before heading back to Hogwarts.

Harry nervously followed Ron into the classroom to find a bright and airy room that sort of reminded him of his old school rooms with various charts up on the walls. They sat down and the Professor
emerged from the top of the stairs, walking down to join the class. “Good morning class.”

“Good morning Professor Peverell.” They parroted.

“Welcome to Defence Against the Dark Arts, or as I prefer to call it, Defence. The Dark Arts aren’t the only danger out there. It is my job to prepare you for the world outside of the school. Can anyone tell me what the best Defence is?” He asked and several hands went up. “Mr Nott?”

“A Shield spell.”

“Two points to Slytherin but that is not fully correct.” A few hands dropped and then he nodded at Hermione. “Miss Granger?”

“Dodge?”

“Very good. Five points to Gryffindor. Anyone else?” Samuel looked around and finally Neville’s hand rose slowly. “Mr Longbottom?”

“R…run away?” he offered and was shocked when Professor Peverell smiled.

“Very good Mr Longbottom. Ten points.” He leant back on his desk. “A spell cannot harm you if you aren’t there. It’s always better to live to fight another day. No matter how powerful or well-trained you are there is always someone better out there. There is nothing cowardly about leaving a confrontation. So for now, wands and books away please. Today we will be practising dodging.”

Harry nervously knocked on the door, maybe he shouldn’t be here but Professor Peverell was the best teacher in the school and he was fair. The door opened and he slipped inside.

“Good afternoon Mister Potter, how can I help you?” he stood and moved out from around his desk.

“I, uh…it’s Professor Snape sir.” He admitted and heard Peverell sigh.
“Giving you trouble?”

“Yes sir.”

“Alright. I’ll speak with Professor McGonagall, see what can be done. It may take a while but I’ll tell you what’s going on alright. Is he picking on anyone else in the class?”

“Neville and Hermione a little.”

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“There’s nothing I can do Professor. Every Professor has final say within their classroom.”

“The man is a bully Professor. Allowed to browbeat children all to satisfy his own ego.”

“Professor!”

“I speak the truth and you know it. He is a disgrace to this once great school. When I applied for this job I thought I would be part of something great. But this school is no longer the one of the legends. History is a time for sleeping, the old Defence curriculum was a joke, potions is hopeless unless you’re Slytherin, need I go on? Why has this been allowed to happen?”

“I…”

“Good afternoon professor.” Peverell turned and left. Would his words make any difference or would he need to take more direct action? Time would tell.

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He opened the Prophet and smirked at the headline. About time.

Sirius Black, Innocent!
That was one less worry. But Halloween was coming up, would Quirell act? Or had things changed to much?

Three days later Lord Sirius Black walked into Hogwarts and right over to Harry Potter, kneeling down to speak with the boy. Samuel could only watch as the boy’s expression brightened and soon Sirius was holding his godson in his arms. He glanced over at the Headmaster and saw a flicker of something in his eyes. That would need watching.

“I think she heard you.” Harry watched her run off, torn over what to do. Ron was his friend, the first he had of his own age, But Hermione was sort of his friend too, wasn’t she? He didn’t know what to do but the crown pushed him towards the Great Hall for the Feast. “Where's Hermione?” he called after a while when she didn’t appear/

“Parvati Patil said that she wouldn't come out of the girl's bathroom. She said that she'd been in there all afternoon...crying.”

Ron and Harry exchanged glances, Ron actually looking a little ashamed. Suddenly, Professor Quirell practically flew through the doors, screaming.

“TROLL! IN THE DUNGEON! T-TROOLLLL IN THE DUNGEON!!” He stopped and there was utter silence. “Thought you ought to know.” He muttered before falling over in a dead faint. The room was still silent, and then everyone freaked out, screaming and running.

“SILLLLLLEENNNNCEEEE!” Albus yelled and everyone stopped. “Everyone will please, not panic. Now, Prefects will lead their houses back to the dormitories. Teachers will follow me to the dungeons.”

“FREEZE!” Samuel yelled and they obeyed as that was the tone he used when training got out of hand. “Everyone remain where they are.”

“Professor.”
“Headmaster aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Such as?”

“The fact the Slytherin dorms are in the dungeons? Or that Hufflepuff isn’t much higher up in the Castle. Seal the Hall and they will all be safe here, after a head count.” Whispers broke out as the students realised what the Headmaster had almost caused.

“Heads of House, please ensure all students are present.” Albus ordered stiffly, unused to others countermanding his orders. It took only minutes to discover Hermione was missing and Samuel was proud when Harry stepped forward and told what had happened. As Defence Professor Samuel immediately ran for the bathroom and found the troll, taking it down the same way Ron had in their first year. He then picked Hermione up and carried her to the infirmary for a calming draught.

“The troll is unconscious in the second floor girls’ bathroom and Miss Granger is in the infirmary being treated for some abrasions.” He announced as he re-entered the room, much to everyone’s relief, except Quirell.

“Didn’t anyone teach you stealing is wrong?” Samuel asked from where he was leaning against the wall.

“You.”

“Me. Even if you got the stone it won’t help you.”

“What would you know?” He demanded, the stammer gone.

“More than you could imagine, Tom.” He stated coldly. He, unlike this Harry, didn’t have to rely on the blood protection against the possessed man. Thanks to Jim he knew how to exorcise a spirit.

“You…cannot…. defeat…me.” Tom snarled as the turban disintegrated.
“You mean those trinkets of yours?” Samuel let the Diadem fall to the stone floor. “This is the end.”

“Who are you?” he snarled, fighting hard but without soul anchors it was impossible. Samuel just smirked and lifted his hair, revealing a faded scar. “Im…possibl…e!” He was sucked from the body and sent straight to Hell where he belonged even as Quirell disintegrated. Sensing someone coming Samuel vanished.

“Another year gone. And now, as I understand it, the house cup needs awarding, and the points stand thus. In fourth place, Gryffindor with 312 points. Third place, Hufflepuff, with 352 points. In second place, Ravenclaw, with 426 points. And in first place, with 472 points, Slytherin House.” The banners in the Hall turned green and silver even as there was polite applause.

“Whoo! Yeah!”

“Nice one, Mate!” Draco cheered his classmates and then sneered at Ron.

“Yes, yes, well done Slytherin, well done Slytherin. The Quidditch Cup must also be announced. In fourth place, Ravenclaw with Hufflepuff coming in third.” The hall was utterly silent as they waited the final house reveal. “Coming in second is Slytherin.” At that Gryffindor exploded in cheers as they realised they had won for the first time since Charlie Weasley graduated.

Samuel smiled as he watched the graduating class of 1997. They were so much happier and lighter than his schoolmates had been back in fifth year. Then again they had never had the threat of Voldemort hanging over them. This Harry was so different to him, happy and secure as Sirius’ adopted son. At his side were his best friends, Hermione and Neville. Ron had drifted away when Harry had knuckled down to really learn. Even seeing the darkened prophecy orb Dumbledore had tried to insist Riddle was still out there. In the end he had been removed from his positions and McGonagall made Headmistress. With Sirius and Madam Longbottom’s backing Snape too had been sacked and charged die to his behaviour. He chuckled as Harry grabbed Hermione at the end of his Head Boy Speech and kissed her before dropping to one knee. He had done it, he had helped change the school and their world for the better. The Malfoy’s had returned to the continent when the Aurors had been closing in and no one had heard from them since. If they ever did come back, they would find no support for their old cause.
“Thinking hard?” Nymphadora asked as she took his arm and Samuel smiled at her.

“Just remembering.” He kissed her and then gently touched her rounded stomach.

“You sure you want to quit? You could be deputy or even head one day.”

“I know, but I’ve done what I needed too. The wizarding world is now living in the present, not the past.”

“Well there’s still a feast and speeches to go Professor.”

“As you command Auror Peverell.” He grinned and led her to the staff table. He nodded at Sirius and Remus where they sat together, hands clasped under the table. That had been a bit of a shock but they were happy and that was what mattered. Life here was very good now.

*The end.*
“Attention! This is Lando Calrissian. The Empire has taken control of the city. I advise everyone to leave before more Imperial troops arrive.” The voice called over the intercom and Harry quickly packed his things into his storage tattoos before strapping on his blaster and heading out of his rented room. He’d been working as a pilot, running the gas mined by the city to various companies that purchased it. But he had no desire to get entangled in the business of the Empire. He’d only been here for a year and he had already decided there was something fishy about the galactic government. Maybe not as bad as the Goa’uld or the way young Jupiter’s universe had been run before she had claimed her Title, but it was bad.

He stepped out into the hall to find a madhouse as people ran every which way, panicking at the idea of the Empire. He moved with the flow, wanting to get to his ship, it wasn’t meant for more than cargo but he could help evacuate people if they didn’t mind slumming it for a while. Of course, then he heard blaster fire and quickened his pace, drawing his own blaster even as enhanced hearing picked up the sounds of booted feet and an astromech droid beeping away up ahead. He glanced into the intersection to see Calrissian as well as a young woman and what he believed to be a Wookiee taking fire from a group of stormtroopers. Well he couldn’t just leave his boss and friends to get killed. He aimed around the corner and opened fire.

Leia looked around in shock as someone opened fire from another angle. She looked to the hallway but all she could see was a bit of a black boot, a dark sleeve and a blaster that meant business.

“What are you talking about? We're not interested in the hyperdrive on the Millennium Falcon. It's fixed! Just open the door, you stupid lump.” Threepio shouted at his counterpart. Chewie, Leia, and Lando retreated along the corridor, until the final trooper dropped. A triumphant beep from Artoo and the door snapped open. “I never doubted you for a second. Wonderful!” He called even as their mystery helper emerged.

“Alright boss?” He called and Lando turned to find one of his newest cargo pilots.
“Get to your ship and get out of here Harry!” Lando called, not wanting any of his people to suffer under the Empire. “Look out!” He yelled as Harry ducked, spinning to fire on the fresh troops, backing towards the others. As he joined them Artoo lay a cloud fog, obscuring everything, as the group dashed outside. They raced for the Millennium Falcon as a battalion of stormtroopers reached the main door.

Lando and Harry held off the troops as Leia, the droids and Chewie moved to board the ship. As Chewie bounded to the ship the Threepio on his back, Threepio hit his head on the top of the ramp. “Ouch! Oh! Ah! That hurt. Bend down, you thoughtless... Ow!” Chewie dropped Threepio and ran for the cockpit, starting up the ship. The giant engines began to whine as Lando and Harry raced up the ramp under a hail of laser fire.

“Harry! Go!” Lando called as they ran, wanting the younger man to get on the ship quickly. They lunged up the boarding ramp and Lando hit the button to close it behind them.

Artoo dragged the partially assembled Threepio down the corridor of the Falcon. “I thought that hairy beast would be the end of me. Of course, I've looked better.” The droid groaned and Artoo beeped understandingly.

Leia quickly took Han’s normal seat in the cockpit even as Lando and the stranger joined them to take the back seats. The Falcon quickly lifted off and turned, flying quickly away from Cloud City.

“Well that was interesting.” Harry commented.

Leia looked back at him, taking in the dark clothes and messy dark hair before meeting brilliant green eyes. “Who are you?”

“Harry Potter ma’am. I’m one of his cargo pilots. Speaking of, you owe me a ship boss.”

“Well figure something out.” Lando agreed.

Leia looked back out the front window, seeming to be lost in a fog, her expression troubled. Chewie was busy operating the ship while Lando stood up next to the Wookie, watching a readout on the control panel. “Luke... We've got to go back.” Chewie growled in surprise.
“What?” Lando demanded.

“I know where Luke is.” She stated and Harry frowned, he’d felt something just before she’d spoken but it was nothing he’d encountered before, some sort of energy.

“But what about those fighters?” Lando demanded and Chewie barked in agreement with him.

“You know exactly where he is?” Harry asked and she nodded in confusion. “Well if we’re voting on it then I say go back, never leave a man behind.” That got him a few looks, a grateful one from Leia.

“Chewie do it.” She ordered and the Wookie flipped the ship over, heading back towards the city. They skimmed along the bottom of the city, everyone looking around.

“Look! Someone’s up there.” Lando pointed in shock and Chewie adjusted course.

“It’s Luke. Chewie, slow down. Slow down and we’ll get under him. Lando, open the top hatch.” Leia ordered and he rushed from the cockpit, Harry on his heels as he looked around for the ship’s medical bay, it was rudimentary but functional. Leia kept her eyes on Luke as the ship moved into position beneath him, even from this distance he didn’t look well. And then she gasped as he fell. “Chewie…..”

The exterior upper hatch hissed open and Lando quickly attached his safety line as he was lifted out into the very thin atmosphere. It wouldn’t take long for someone to die and yet this guy had managed to hold on until they arrived. He managed to grab him as he hit the hull, keeping him from rolling away. The young man weakly tried to help him as Lando hauled him into the hatch, hitting the switch to lower them into the ship as the hatch closed behind them.

Harry was there with an emergency blanket which he immediately wrapped the young man in. The two of them got him to the medical bunk and then Lando ran back to the cockpit. He gently brushed sweat soaked hair back from his patients face. “It’s alright, you’re safe now.” He whispered even as he began checking him over. He quickly turned the oxygen on and placed the mask over Luke’s face even as he struggled to remain conscious.

“Who?” He weakly grasped Harry’s wrist but there was no strength in his grip and Harry gently pulled his hand off and lowered it to the bed.
“My name’s Harry, I’m a friend.” He reassured him before grabbing the side of the bunk as they ship was hit. He then found the stump and swallowed down the bile, amputations were always ugly. He quickly wrapped and splinted the limb to prevent infection or loss of blood, although it was well cauterised. He then began cleaning away the blood and dirt, looking for other wounds but other than some small cuts and bruises he appeared alright. And then he began struggling to get up. “You need to stay down.”


“Alright, one second.” He took off his jacket and used it to make a makeshift sling since there weren’t any suitable supplies for one. He then helped Luke up and towards the cockpit.

Explosions erupted all around the cockpit, buffeting the ship wildly. Chewie howled as he frantically tried to control the ship. Leia and Chewie turned at a soft noise to see Luke, bloody and battered, enter the cockpit supported by Harry. Leia jumped up and hugged him while Chewie barked in joyous relief. All over the ship muted alarm buzzers began to sound as Harry helped Luke sit in the seat he’d been using before while he moved to hold onto the back of it. Lando anxiously watched the flashing lights on the control panel and hurriedly adjusted some switches. Seated next to him, Chewie pointed out a new blip appearing on the panel. Leia, watching over their shoulders, recognised the shape. “Star Destroyer.” she stated as calmly as possible, it wasn’t just a star destroyer, it was Vader’s flagship.

“Alright Chewie, ready for light speed.”

“If your people fixed the hyperdrive.” Leia offered. The ship rocked even as a green light appeared. “Coordinates are set. It’s now or never.” Chewie barked in agreement.

“Punch it.” Lando ordered and Chewie pulled back on the lever only for a familiar sound to be heard as the engines powered up but nothing happened, and the engine turned off. Chewie let out a frustrated howl. The flak still violently rocked the ship. “They told me they fixed it. I trusted them to fix it. It's not my fault” he began checking everything even as Harry frowned, staring at the ship they were approaching. There was no way they could fight or outrun it at normal speeds.

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Vader stood on the bridge, watching the battle even as he felt Admiral Piett approach.

“They’ll be in range of our tractor beam in moments, my lord.”
“Did your men deactivate the hyperdrive on the Millennium Falcon?”

“Yes my Lord.”

“Good. Prepare the boarding party and set your weapons for stun.” He commanded, he would not risk them killing his son, not when he was so close to claiming the boy. Obi-Wan would have stolen his son from him once, had even used his own death to distract him from the boy aboard the Death Star but the old fool could not stop him this time. He would complete Luke’s training and then they would destroy Palpatine and rule the galaxy as Father and Son.

“Yes My Lord.” Piett swallowed, hearing the threat in his mechanised voice, he bowed and left to give the team its instructions.

Vader remained on the bridge, watching as the Millennium Falcon was chased by the TIE fighters. As his Destroyer drew nearer, Vader’s breathing sped up. ‘Luke.’ He reached out through the Force to his son, feeling his presence and regretting the amount of pain the boy was in. He hadn’t meant to maim him like that, he had become too angry at being hit himself. He would make it up to him, he would even spare the Princess’ life if Luke really wanted it. Perhaps he loved her and he knew that any children they had could be powerful.

Luke stared out at Vader’s ship, seeing how close it really was. He felt resigned to his fate. He sensed that he was beaten, more emotionally than physically maybe but there was no way he could fight him now. He had no weapon and no hand to wield one with anyway. ‘Father.’ He responded through the Force, unable to deny the truth. He felt a hand squeeze his shoulder gently and glanced back at the stranger who had been so kind in tending his wounds. Concerned green eyes met his and he felt suddenly safe and in less pain. He blinked, was this man a Jedi too?

‘Son, come with me.’ Vader called out softly, able to feel his defences crumbling before being strengthened slightly.

Luke moaned softly and Harry knelt in front of him, gripping his hand. ‘Ben, why didn’t you tell me?’ He cried out to his first teacher brokenly even as he tried to draw strength from Harry.” It’s Vader.” He whispered and Harry gently brushed his hair back again.

“Stay with me Luke. Your friends are here; we won’t let him get you.” Harry's soothed, wrapping magic around him protectively. He could hear Chewie banging around in the engines, trying to fix them.
‘Luke, it’s your destiny.’ He called out to his son, couldn’t the boy see it was meant to be?

“Ben why didn’t you tell me?” he whispered, not really focusing on events in the cockpit anymore and Harry frowned in concern. He could feel the strange energy shifting and reaching out from him but also to him…. some sort of telepathic communication?

“Alert all commands. Ready for the tractor beam” Piett called out before sending a concerned look at his commander. He’d been serving on the Executer long enough to judge Lord Vader’s moods but he’d never seen this one before and it made him nervous. New moods meant more chance someone under his command could end up dead, he was meant to protect his men but there were some things he couldn’t protect them from.

Artoo raced to a control panel and started working on a circuit board. Furious, Threepio stood on one leg, yelling. “Artoo, come back at once! You haven't finished with me yet! You don't know how to fix the hyperdrive. Chewbacca can do it. I'm standing here in pieces, and you're having delusions of grandeur!” Artoo beeped happily as a light turned green and the ship immediately went to light speed, sending Artoo into the opened section of floor to land on top of Chewie will Threepio fell to the floor. Harry was thankful he was kneeling as the others were pressed back hard in their seats.

Admiral Piett and Captain Thorn glanced at Vader in terror, both waiting to feel the suffocating anger as he choked them to death but nothing happened. Vader turned slowly and walked off the bridge, his hands held behind his back in a contemplative gesture. Everyone relaxed a bit once the doors closed behind him. “Recall the fighters and set course to re-join the fleet.” Piett ordered, hiding how shaky he was. That had been too close. Just what was Lord Vader so obsessed with one Rebel, even if he had blown up the Death Star? He left the bridge and returned to his own office, bringing up everything the Empire knew about Skywalker that he could access as Admiral.

There wasn’t a lot that they had been able to confirm other than his name: Luke Skywalker, age: 21, he was from Tatooine but they couldn’t confirm he was born there as all records showed him living with an Aunt and Uncle, since reported dead, killed by Imperial troops. That made his joining the Rebellion understandable. The few school records they had found should an average student…. but one thing caught his attention. A news recording from Tatooine over twenty years before Luke Skywalker’s birth, the results of a big podrace, winner…..Anakin Skywalker. That name he knew, anyone who had grown up during the Clone Wars knew that name. Coincidence? Skywalker had been a Jedi and from what he vaguely remembered of the Order they didn’t marry or have children. But young Luke’s age was right for the end of the Wars and Skywalker’s death. His son? A more distant relation? Or was the name a fluke? Lord Vader had been tasked with destroying the Jedi and over the years had apparently wiped them all out, if this boy was the Hero With No Fear’s son then he could be a Jedi, or held the potential to be one, that helped explain the obsession more. Lord Vader did not like failure or incomplete work.
The Falcon was allowed to land immediately on the medical frigate and a team was waiting at the base of the ramp as it lowered to show Harry and Lando supporting the barely conscious Luke between them. The team rushed up and took him from them, getting him onto the gurney and moving away, “Anyone else injured?” One of the remaining medics asked.

Lando nodded. “Her Highness was ‘questioned’ by the Empire.” He felt guilty for that but he had been protecting his people. The remaining medics headed past them and then returned with Leia between them. “I’m sorry you got caught up in this Harry.”

The younger man shrugged. “Not your fault boss.” They could both see security watching them warily. Chewie and the droids emerged from the ship and Threepio was taken away by a mechanic to finish reassembling him. Soon an officer approached the two men.

“Id’s please.” He asked pleasantly enough. Harry dug through his pockets for his while Lando easily handed his over and his boss chuckled.

“Don’t tell me you’ve lost it again.”

“You’re never letting that go, are you?” Harry grumbled before grinning as he pulled out the card and handed it over.

Lieutenant Bradley put the older man’s through the system first, finding it to be in order and rather similar to Solo’s background except this man had made his fortune. Then he ran the younger mans, well they could always use more pilots, other than a caution for fighting when a teen his background seemed clean. “If you will follow me for debriefing.” Seeing the various security officers around they both agreed.

General Madine walked into the room to find the young pilot relaxing in the chair. His records had been gone over with a fine-tooth comb and appeared clean but if he was to go free they had to be sure since he’d seen the main fleet. As soon as he moved to the table intense green eyes focused on him. “I am General Madine, you are the cargo pilot harry Potter, formerly employed by Cloud City?”

“Yes sir.” Harry straightened up, giving him his full attention.
“Born on Dantooine, 24 years old, orphan, not much formal education, pilot license granted seven years ago, impressive. A string of cargo jobs since.”

“There a point to this recital?”

“The Rebellion is always looking for good pilots.”

Harry blinked. “Me? You want me to join the Alliance?”

“According to Chewbacca and the Princess you killed several Stormtroopers and helped them escape, the Empire will not look kindly on that.”

“So you want me running cargo for you.”

“We’d like to see how you fare at flying a fighter, such as an X-Wing. We need more combat pilots.” Crix answered, watching his reactions carefully, there were holes in his history and while that wasn’t surprising given what they did have it could mean he was an Imperial plant.

Harry sighed and leant back in the chair, staring at the bland ceiling. What to say? Did he really want to get messed up in another war?

“Just try the flight simulator, being a pilot doesn’t necessarily mean you have what it takes to fly in combat.” He pushed after a few minutes of letting him think.

“Alright. Is that kid, Luke, alright? He was pretty out of it and I’m no medic but I did what I could to patch him up.”

“Commander Skywalker is currently in surgery to treat the amputation.” He’d checked in on the Commander, he had gone AWOL after the battle for Hoth after all, and one glance at his injury made it pretty clear who had done it. Skywalker had faced Lord Vader and lived to tell the tale, not something many could do. They’d been aware of the obsession in finding the Commander but it seemed it wasn’t to kill him, at least not immediately. What drew Vader to Skywalker? The fact he was a Jedi or something deeper? He didn’t want to suspect the young hero but it was a little suspicious. Although it was said Vader had killed Anakin Skywalker, Luke’s father and hero of the Clone Wars so perhaps that made things personal between them? He needed more information but he doubted this man knew anything. “Did you see Vader at all in the city?”
“No, first I knew of the Empire’s presence was Lando’s announcement to evacuate. The only Imperials I saw were the troopers pinning them down and then the ships pursuing us.”

“I see, so you know nothing of Commander Skywalker’s encounter with him?”

“No sir.” He’d heard rumours of the Emperor’s right hand man, if Luke had survived him his respect for the younger man sky rocketed. “I’ll take the test.” He wanted to stick close, maybe this was why he was here.

“I’ll arrange it. You can wander the unrestricted areas but I’m sure you can understand you will be watched.”

“To make sure I’m not a spy?” he asked and Crix nodded. “Alright.”

The Millennium Falcon was attached to one of the huge Rebel cruisers by a docking tube. Rebel fighters moved about the giant cruiser, and a Rebel transport ship hovered near the fleet.

Lando sat in the pilot's seat as he talked into the commlink. Chewie busily threw a variety of switches in preparation for take-off. “Luke, we're ready for take-off.”

“Good luck, Lando.” Luke’s voice sounded small over the commlink.

“When we find Jabba the Hut and that bounty hunter, we'll contact you.” Lando promised as the docking tube retracted.

Luke ignored the medical droid works on his new hand as he spoke to them, laying back on the medical bed. He would be very happy to be discharged. Leia stood near him while Threepio and Artoo looked out the window. “I’ll meet you at the rendezvous point on Tatooine.” He agreed.

“Princess, we'll find Han. I promise.”
“Chewie, I'll be waiting for your signal.” Luke called, smiling as he heard Chewie’s wail in response. “Take care, you two. May the Force be with you.” Luke looked down at his prosthetic hand, amazed at how real it looked. A metalized type of bandage had been wrapped around his wrist. The medical droid made some adjustments in a tiny electronic unit, then pricked each one of Luke's fingers. “Ow!” he had felt that! Luke wriggled his fingers, made a fist, and relaxed it. His hand was completely functional. He got up and walked over to Leia who had moved over to the window while his hand was being tested. Together they stood at the large window of the medical centre looking out on the Rebel Star Cruiser and a dense, luminous galaxy swirling in space. Luke put his arm around Leia. The droids stood next to them, and Threepio moved closer to Artoo putting his arm on him. The group watched as the Millennium Falcon moved into view, made a turn, and flew away into space. “We’ll get him back.” He promised softly and Leia leant into him. His mind wandered to what he had learnt in the city and how much it hurt. Ben or Yoda should have told him. Why did he have to learn the truth from Vader?

“Am I interrupting?” a voice called and Luke turned to find Harry in the doorway.

“No.”

“Lando and Chewie gone?”


“Yeah well.” He shrugged. “General Madine’s putting me in the simulator, see if I can be a fighter pilot.”

“Is that what you want?” Leia asked as she finally turned from the window.

“I’m a pilot your Highness, if I can be of help here than I’ll try.”

“I haven’t thanked you for your help back there.”

“No need.” Harry smiled and shrugged.
“I need to check in with the others.” Leia kissed Luke’s cheek and left the two young men alone.

“Thank you.” Luke whispered, moving back to sit on the bed.

“You needed help.” Harry moved to sit beside the bed.

“Are you a Jedi?” Luke asked and Harry blinked in surprise.

“No, why?”

“It felt like…. you were giving me strength.” He admitted and Harry shrugged.

“Well, glad to help.” They smiled at each other. “I better go try this fighter pilot thing.” He stood up. “You’ll be back on your feet soon.”

“Good luck.” Luke answered as harry left and took a shuttle over to the ship where he’d be tested. As soon as he was aboard the fleet went to lightspeed, not wanting to stay in one spot any longer now that everyone had rendezvoused.

Harry straightened his uniform and smiled slightly. Here he was, newest member of the Rebellion and waiting assignment to one of the fighter squadrons, not what he had expected but he was liking it with the Fleet. He’d even been made a lieutenant because he was an experienced pilot, not a rookie even if that experience was with cargo vessels and the like. His fellow pilots were welcoming if a little cautious of the new guy but he could understand that. He walked out of the room he now shared with another pilot and walked to the briefing room where three squadrons were gathered, smiling at Luke when he saw the Commander back in uniform and looking much healthier. He took a seat and they waited for the briefing to begin. Admiral Ackbar was soon in front of them, outlining the mission to stop a weapons shipment to an Imperial base.

“Lieutenant Potter.”

“Yes Admiral.” He stood at attention.
“Congratulations on your assignment to Rogue Squadron. Commander Skywalker, see that he is settled.”

“Yes Admiral.” Luke agreed and soon Harry was surrounded by his new squad mates. “We’ll move your bunk when we get back. Welcome to Rogue Squadron.” Luke offered his hand and Harry shook it. “Wedge get him unit patches. Harry, you’re Rogue Eight now.”

“On it.” Wedge ducked down another corridor as they walked towards the hanger. He was soon back and began attaching them to Harry’s flight suite. Then they were splitting up to get to their fighters as astromechs were loaded.

Harry jammed his helmet on before scrambling up the ladder and dropping into the pilots’ seat. The cockpit closed and one of the flight crew thumped a fist against it before jumping down, letting him now he was clear. He quickly did the pre-flight checks even as he heard the rest of the squadron report in. “Rogue eight ready.” He called when it was his turn, adrenaline flooding his system. And then they were taking off from the ship and heading into space.


“Thanks. Any word on your friend yet?”

“Nothing. Leia’s, taking it hard.” He admitted.

“I still say you’ll find him.”

“Thank you. No one’s giving you a hard time?”

“No, I think they’ve decided I’m not a spy which is nice.”

“We’ve had enough of those.” Luke admitted sadly.

“I guess that’s a risk for any armed force, you’ve probably got spies in the Empire too. Any idea
when we’re going out next?” The fleet was simply harrying Imperial forces for now as they searched for a base to replace Hoth.

“Three days so enjoy the down time while we’ve got it.”

“Yes sir.”

Harry accepted the backslaps from his friends as they watched the silhouettes being painted onto the side of his X-Wing. Six missions in and he was an Ace already. Fastest to make it since Luke himself. Even Leia turned up with a smile for the new Ace of the Rebellion. He didn’t like what it stood for, how many other pilots he’d shot down while they were simply doing their jobs, but he did enjoy being with Rogue Squad, they were becoming a family and it felt nice.

“Guessing Chewie sent the word.” Harry commented as he saw Luke packing his flight bag into his X-Wing.

Luke looked down to see his newest squad mate and then jumped down. “I’m leaving for Tatooine now; Wedge is in charge of Rogue Squadron until I return.”

“The Princess?”

“Will follow with the Threepio in a few days.”

“So you’re going alone.”

“There’s something I need to do first.”

Harry sighed and then went to prep his own ship. “I am not letting you go alone.”

“Harry….”
“Don’t bother arguing.”

“I could order you to stay.”

“Then I guess I’ll be AWOL.”

Luke sighed but quickly sent the message that Harry would be with him, not AWOL. They finished prepping and the two X-Wings flew off together, Leia watching with a small smile from another deck, she could guess who was with Luke and was glad he wouldn’t be alone.

Harry followed Luke silently into the abandoned hut and glanced around curiously. “What is this place?”

“Ben…. Obi-Wan Kenobi lived here. I’m hoping he left parts for building a new lightsaber and instructions.”

“Okay, I’ll take this side.” They began searching the hut. Despite its small size it took them several hours to go through the hut and Harry felt sorry for the General having to live in it. Couldn’t he have exiled himself somewhere nicer? Then again Harry figured he’d come to watch over Luke as he grew up with his Aunt and Uncle. “I think I found something.” He called as he felt around under the ledge. “Feels like a compartment but I can’t find how to open it.”

Luke joined him and then reached out with the Force, finding the hidden switch and it popped open. Luke removed the package and saw the name on the front, it was for him.

“I’ll keep watch outside.”

Luke opened the note and read it slowly, Ben had left it for him in case he died before he could explain everything to him. Inside was a beautiful green crystal, perfect for a new lightsaber.

He went to work, trusting the Force and what he knew of electronics to begin building the weapon while Harry explored outside. At night, they ate together and shared a bedroll for warmth. Finally,
Luke stood out under the twin suns, staring at the silver and black slender in his hand.


“Thanks.” He shifted his stance and Harry backed off, watching Luke move with the blade, he may not be fully trained but watching him was awe inspiring. “Time to meet up with Chewie and Leia.” Luke finally said before going inside to change. He emerged dressed head to toe in black, lightsaber clipped to his belt and then he threw a black cloak on, overall it was a rather intimidating sight…if you didn’t know Luke.

“How are you not melting in that?” Harry asked as he jumped into the speeder and Luke smiled.

“Jedi trick.”

They looked over the rough floorplan Lando had managed to send, trying to figure out a way out, getting in was the easy part after all. Leia had proposed going in as a bounty hunter with Chewie but Luke was not keen on that and Harry agreed with him. “Look why don’t you wait and I’ll join Lando, see if the two of us can’t get Solo out?” He offered.

“It’s too dangerous Harry.” Luke argued. “We’ll have no way to back you up.”

“How would you get in?”

“Extra guard, some kind of entertainer, I can manage.” He assured them.

“Either way he should go in before you Luke, so we’re all there.” Leia pointed out gently. There was something between them, something she didn’t think they’d noticed yet. And it made her feel better about Loving Han, that Luke could move on and not be alone.

“Give Lando and I two days from when I get in, if we’re not out then send the droids first, then Leia and Chewie can come in.” Harry offered, green eyes staring into blue and finally Luke nodded.
Moff Jerjerrod, a tall, confident technocrat, strode through the assembled troops to the base of the shuttle ramp. The troops snapped to attention; many were uneasy about the new arrival. But the Death Star commander stood arrogantly tall, he would not be cowed by the Emperor’s attack dog.

The exit hatch of the shuttle opened with a whoosh, revealing only darkness. Then, heavy footsteps and mechanical breathing could be heard from within. From the black void Darth Vader emerged steadily. Vader looked over the assemblage as he walked down the ramp, unhappy to be there. He had wanted to continue the search, instead he had been commanded to inspect the new Death Star.

“Lord Vader, this is an unexpected pleasure. We're honoured by your presence.” The Moff greeted, attempting to be pleasant.

“You may dispense with the pleasantries, Commander. I'm here to put you back on schedule.” He growled, fighting the urge to simply strangle the incompetent man.

The commander turned ashen and began to shake. “I assure you, Lord Vader, my men are working as fast as they can.”

“Perhaps I can find new ways to motivate them.” He offered, he would enjoy that. The sooner he finished here the sooner he could find his son.

“I tell you, this station will be operational as planned.”

“The Emperor does not share your optimistic appraisal of the situation.”

“But he asks the impossible. I need more men.” He pleaded.

“Then perhaps you can tell him when he arrives.”

“The Emperor's coming here?” he asked, aghast. He was a loyal soldier of the Empire, that did not mean he enjoyed the Emperor’s presence.
“That is correct, Commander. And he is most displeased with your apparent lack of progress.”

“We shall double our efforts.”

“I hope so, Commander, for your sake. The Emperor is not as forgiving as I am.” He stormed away, not wanting to deal with the man further. He reached out into the Force, searching for his sons’ presence and he felt a surge of joy as he felt a flicker of his presence, the Outer Rim. He was somewhere on the Outer Rim.

Harry smiled as he and the serpents danced around each other, making the audience gasp and cheer in awe. Who knew he’d use Parseltongue for this? He kept half his attention on the audience, finally spotting Lando who was staring at him in shock. Then again he was definitely dressed differently in a mix of green and gold, the clothing skimpy but not too revealing, teasing more than anything. Finally, his act was done and he retreated from the main floor, letting the musicians and dancing girls take over. He leant against the wall, fingers absently stroking soft scales until Lando moved closer.

“Seen him?” Harry whispered, voice still almost a hiss and Lando shivered.

“Right side alcove.” He answered and Harry let his gaze drift, spotting Fett and then he saw the wall hanging.

“2 days till company.” Harry warned and Lando nodded slightly before moving away.

That night Harry moved silently amongst the beings sleeping in the main hall of Jabba’s Palace, a little bit of magic ensuring they remained asleep. Lando was keeping watch nearby as Harry worked. He slipped into the alcove and changed the controls how Lando had explained, watching as the carbonite began to glow with heat. Soon a tall, older looking man collapsed from within and Harry caught him, sending him straight into a healing sleep. All too easy, which made him nervous but no one awake was nearby. He hefted Solo up and joined Lando who took over carrying the unconscious man. They made it outside and Harry grinned when he saw the Falcon fly lower, the ramp coming down for them just as a bellow of rage sounded from inside. They began running even as Luke appeared, lightsaber in hand. He began deflecting blaster shots, protecting them and Harry turned, firing on their pursuers even as Luke cried out, lightsaber lowering and Harry caught a glimpse of the inside of Luke’s prosthetic hand. He hit the switch on his belt and the explosives he’d set went off, taking Jabba and his Palace with them. They got on board and Han was laid out on a bunk while Harry took Luke’s hand gently and began checking it over.

“Any pain?” He asked and Luke shook his head.
“Just when it was hit.” He admitted, watching Harry as his hands skimmed over the robotic hand, Luke was still amazed how much feeling it had and what Harry was doing felt nice.

“Wriggle your fingers.” Luke obeyed and Harry nodded before digging around and coming up with a black glove which he slipped over the limb. “This should keep it clean and protected until you can get it seen too.”

“Thank you. You weren’t hit?”

“No.” They smiled. Soon the Falcon landed back at their hideout, the two X-Wings covered to protect them from the sand, three droids nearby. Leia ran from the cockpit and knelt beside the unconscious Han and Harry removed the magic, allowing him to wake slowly.

“Han.” Leia whispered as he woke and Han frowned, a hand reaching out blindly.

“Le…ia?” He choked out, mind fuzzy from being frozen.

“I’m here, you’re safe.” She promised as she clasped his hand, kissing it tenderly.

“Leia.” He reached out to hold her and she went eagerly into his arms, hugging him close even as Chewie watched them happily.


Three ships broke free of the atmosphere together, leaving the desert planet behind them as they made their way out of the gravity well. “I'll meet you back at the fleet.” Luke told them and Harry rolled his eyes.

“We’ll meet you.” He pointed out. “I’m not letting you out of my sight Luke.”

“Hurry. The Alliance should be assembled by now.” Leia smiled as she answered, fighting the urge to laugh.
“We will.” Luke surrendered gracefully.

“Hey, Luke, thanks. Thanks for comin' after me. Now I owe you one.” Han sent before the Falcon vanished.

A message from Artoo appeared on the small monitor screen in front of Luke. He smiled at the monitor and then sent the data to Harry’s X-Wing as well. “That's right, Artoo. We're going to the Dagobah system. I have a promise to keep... to an old friend.” The two X-Wings vanished from the system, heading for Dagobah.

A Super Star Destroyer and several ships of the Imperial Fleet rested in space above the half-completed Death Star and its green neighbour, Endor. Four squads of TIE fighters escorted an Imperial shuttle toward the Death Star.

Lord Vader strode down the hallway, accompanied by a very nervous Death Star commander. Thousands of Imperial troops in tight formation filled the mammoth docking bay. Vader and the Moff walked to the landing platform, where the shuttle was coming to rest. The shuttle's ramp lowered and the Emperor's Royal Guards came out and created a lethal perimeter. The assembled troops moved to rigid attention with a momentous SNAP.

Then, in the huge silence which followed, the Emperor appeared. He was a rather small, shrivelled old man. His bent frame slowly made its way down the ramp with the aid of a gnarled cane. He wore a hooded cloak similar to the one Ben Kenobi had worn, except that it was black. The Emperor's face was shrouded and difficult to see, except for his piercing yellow eyes. Commander Jerjerrod and Darth Vader knelt to him. The Supreme Ruler of the galaxy beckoned to the Dark Lord. “Rise, my friend.”

Vader rose and fell in next to the Emperor as he slowly made his way along the rows of troops. Jerjerrod and the other commanders remained kneeling until the Supreme Ruler and Vader, followed by several Imperial dignitaries, passed by; only then did they join in the procession. “The Death Star will be completed on schedule.”

“You have done well, Lord Vader. And now I sense you wish to continue your search for young Skywalker.”

“Yes, my Master.”
“Patience, my friend. In time, he will seek you out. And when he does, you must bring him
before me. He has grown strong. Only together can we turn him to the dark side of the Force.” Yes,
he could feel young Skywalker’s growing power but there was something else, something elusive
and it made him concerned, it could meddle with his vision.

“As you wish.” He submitted to his Master’s wishes.

“Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen.” He would ensure it. He laughed to himself as they
passed along the vast line of Imperial troops.

The two X-Wings approached the planet together. “Follow me in.”

“Roger Rogue Lead.” Came the teasing answer and Luke smiled before reaching out to the Force for
a safe way down. This time no one landed in the swamp, the two shifts resting safely on the ground
even as their pilots jumped down and removed their flight suits. Both were dressed in dark clothes
although Harry’s included dark green compared to Luke’s full black. Luke then led the way to the
clearing where Yoda’s hut stood. Harry found a log to sit on while Luke went inside to find his
Master waiting, stirring the pot over the fire.

“Hmm. That face you make. Look I so old to young eyes?” Yoda asked before coughing.

Luke was sitting in a corner of the cramped space and, indeed, his look had been woeful. Caught, he
tried to hide it. “No... of course not.”

Yoda chuckled, tickled by his answer. “I do, yes, I do! Sick have I become. Old and weak.” He
pointed a crooked finger at Luke. “When nine hundred years old you reach, look as good you will
not. Hmm?” He chuckled at this, coughed, and hobbled over toward his bed. “Soon will I rest. Yes,
forever sleep. Earned it, I have.” Yoda sat himself on his bed, with great effort.

“Master Yoda, you can't die.”

“Strong am I with the Force... but not that strong! Twilight is upon me and soon night must fall. That
is the way of things... the way of the Force.”

“No more training do you require. Already know you that which you need.” Yoda answered softly.

Yoda sighs, and lies back on his bed.

“Then I am a Jedi?” he asked in shock and Yoda shook his head.

“Ohhh. Not yet. One thing remains: Vader. You must confront Vader. Then, only then, a Jedi will you be. And confront him you will.”

Luke was in agony. He was silent for a long moment, screwing up his courage. Finally, he was able to ask. “Master Yoda... is Darth Vader my father?”

Yoda's eyes were full of weariness and compassion. An odd, sad smile creased his face. He turned painfully on his side, away from Luke. “Mmm... rest I need. Yes... rest.”


“Your father he is.” The Jedi whispered. Luke reacted as if cut. “Told you, did he?” Yoda turned back to face the tortured youth.

“Yes.” He whispered.

A new look of concern crossed Yoda's face. He closed his eyes. “Unexpected this is, and unfortunate...”

“Unfortunate that I know the truth?” Luke demanded and Yoda opened his eyes again and studied the youth.
“No. Unfortunate that you rushed to face him... that incomplete was your training. Not ready for the burden were you.”

“Well, I'm sorry.” Luke admitted, looking down at the floor.

“Remember, a Jedi's strength flows from the Force. But beware. Anger, fear, aggression. The dark side are they. Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.” He struggled to tell Luke everything he needed too, feeling the approach of death. He beckoned the young Jedi closer to him. “Luke...Luke...Do not...Do not underestimate the powers of the Emperor, or suffer your father's fate, you will. Luke, when gone am I,” he coughed and struggled to draw in breath, “the last of the Jedi will you be. Luke, the Force runs strong in your family. Pass on what you have learned, Luke...”, he fought for only a few more moments with the boy. “There is...another...Sky...Sky...walker.” He caught his breath. A shiver ran through the ancient green creature, and he died. Luke stared at his dead master as he disappeared in front of his eyes.

Luke wandered back into the clearing and Harry stood up, seeing the look on his face he strode across the damp ground to draw Luke into a hug. Seconds later he felt his shirt become damp from tears. “I can't do it, Harry. I can't go on alone.” He choked, clinging to his friend.

“Yoda will always be with you.” A soft voice called and Luke jerked back from Harry to see the shimmering image of his first teacher.

“Obi-Wan! Why didn't you tell me?” he pleaded as the ghost of Ben Kenobi approached him through the swamp. “You told me Vader betrayed and murdered my father.”

Harry looked from the ghost to Luke and the truth hit him, Vader was Luke’s father. Well that made things complicated.

“You father was seduced by the dark side of the Force. He ceased to be Anakin Skywalker and became Darth Vader. When that happened, the good man who was your father was destroyed. So, what I have told you was true... from a certain point of view.”

Luke turned away, back to Harry who had snorted in disbelief. “A certain point of view!”

Ben looked from his student to the young man with him. The Force whirled around him in an odd way, he wasn't a Force sensitive and yet it appeared he could see Ben. How? But he could feel no
danger to Luke from him and right now Luke needed someone there to comfort him, someone he could touch. “Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on our own point of view.” He tried to explain but Luke was unresponsive. Ben studied him in silence for a moment. “I don't blame you for being angry. If I was wrong in what I did, it certainly wouldn't have been for the first time. You see, what happened to your father was my fault.” Ben paused sadly as both young men turned back to him curiously. “Anakin was a good friend.” He admitted as Harry moved to be beside Luke, gently clasping his hand in support. “When I first knew him, your father was already a great pilot. But I was amazed how strongly the Force was with him. I took it upon myself to train him as a Jedi after my own master died. I thought that I could instruct him just as well as Yoda. I was wrong. My pride has had terrible consequences for the galaxy.”

Luke was entranced. “There's still good in him.”

“I also thought he could be turned back to the good side. It couldn't be done. He is more machine now than man. Twisted and evil.”

“I can't do it, Ben.”

“You cannot escape your destiny.” Ben stated sympathetically.


“Vader humbled you when first you met him, Luke... but that experience was part of your training. It taught you, among other things, the value of patience. Had you not been so impatient to defeat Vader then, you could have finished your training here with Yoda. You would have been prepared.”

“But I had to help my friends.” Luke snapped and Harry squeezed his hand.

Ben grinned at Luke's indignation. “And did you help them? It was they who had to save you. You achieved little by rushing back prematurely, I fear.”

“I found out Darth Vader was my father.”

“To be a Jedi, Luke, you must confront and then go beyond the dark side - the side your father couldn't get past. Impatience is the easiest door - for you, like your father. Only, your father was
seduced by what he found on the other side of the door, and you have held firm. You're no longer so reckless now, Luke. You are strong and patient. And now, you must face Darth Vader again!” Ben explained, needing Luke to understand.

“I can't kill my own father.”

“Then the Emperor has already won. You were our only hope.” Ben answered sadly and Harry glared at him.

“Stop it.” He hissed, almost slipping languages. “Guilt tripping him into killing his own father? What sort of monster are you?” Harry demanded and Luke relaxed a bit, leaning into him. “It was your plan all along, wasn’t it? Train him up to do what you couldn’t.”

“For the sake of the Galaxy, I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” Ben argued.

“Oh I understand more than you could ever imagine.” Harry glared coldly, able to feel Ben’s consciousness in Death and he knew he could do it, wipe the man totally from existence but he wouldn’t, not when Luke cared for him.

“Yoda spoke of another.” Luke tried, maybe he didn’t have to be the one.

“The other he spoke of is your twin sister.” Ben’s words made Harry freeze in horror, they hadn’t, had they?

“But I have no sister.”

“Hmm. To protect you both from the Emperor, you were hidden from your father when you were born. The Emperor knew, as I did, if Anakin were to have any offspring, they would be a threat to him. That is the reason why your sister remains safely anonymous.” Ben explained, annoying the death glare green eyes sent him even as Luke froze, mind spinning until he put the pieces together.

“Leia! Leia’s my sister.” He whispered in shock and then disgust, she’d kissed him!

“Your insight serves you well. Bury your feelings deep down, Luke. They do you credit. But they
could be made to serve the Emperor.” Luke stared the distance, trying to comprehend all this. “When your father left, he didn't know your mother and her unborn children lived. Master Yoda and I knew he would find out eventually, but we wanted to keep you both as safe as possible, for as long as possible. So, I took you to live with Anakin’s step-brother Owen on Tatooine... and your mother’s friend Bail Organa took Leia to live as his daughter on Alderaan.” Luke moved to sit on a log and Harry sat with him, feeling that Luke needed to hear this. “The Organa household was high-born and politically quite powerful in that system. Leia became a princess by virtue of lineage... no one knew she'd been adopted, of course. But it was a title without real power, since Alderaan had long been a democracy. Even so, the family continued to be politically powerful, and Leia, following in her foster father’s path, and your mothers, became a senator as well. That's not all she became, of course... she became the leader of her cell in the Alliance against the corrupt Empire. And because she had diplomatic immunity, she was a vital link for getting information to the Rebel cause. That's what she was doing when her path crossed yours... for her foster parents had always told her to contact me on Tatooine, if her troubles became desperate.”

Luke was overwhelmed by the truth, and was suddenly protective of his sister. “But you can't let her get involved now, Ben. Vader will destroy her.” Luke argued.

“She hasn't been trained in the ways of the Jedi the way you have, Luke... but the Force is strong with her, as it is with all of your family. There is no avoiding the battle. You must face and destroy Vader!” With that Ben faded, leaving the two young men alone.


“Never Luke. You are not your father any more than I am mine.” He promised. “We can’t choose our family and anyone who cares for you will see that.” Harry stood, still holding onto Luke and led him over to where he’d set up a rudimentary camp. “You need to sleep on it, you’ll think clearer in the morning.” He curled around Luke in the sleeping bags and Luke clung to him, needing his grounding presence after all the shocks he’d had. Harry gently ran his fingers through short blonde hair, offering comfort. Final, he fell into a troubled sleep and harry remained awake all night, watching over him, the spirits of several Jedi also watching them invisibly but Harry could feel them and chose to ignore them.

Luke slept for several hours before waking to find Harry still there. He looked up into concerned green eyes and found himself leaning in. their lips brushed softly and Luke swallowed nervously while Harry smiled softly. “How do you feel?” he asked gently.

“Lost.” He admitted shakily

Luke shifted up and then leant in again, this time it was a proper kiss. Harry ignored the spirits disapproval and Luke was unaware of it. Harry let Luke take what he needed as clothing was shed. He cared deeply for the young Jedi and he had no problems being with him at all.

Hundreds of Rebel commanders of all races and forms were assembled in the war room. As temporary leader of Rogue Squadron, Wedge was among them. In the centre of the room was a holographic model depicting the half-completed Imperial Death Star, the nearby Moon of Endor, and the protecting deflector shield. Mon Mothma, the leader of the Alliance, entered the room. She was a stern but beautiful woman in her fifties. Conferring with her were several military leaders, including General Madine and Admiral Ackbar, a salmon-coloured Mon Calamari. Lando moved through the crowd until he found Han and Chewie, standing next to Leia and Threepio.

Han peered at Lando's new insignia on his chest, and was amused. “Well, look at you, a general, huh?” he teased, hard feelings had been sorted out on the flight back to the Fleet.

“Oh, well, someone must have told them about my little manoeuvre at the battle of Taanab.”

“Well, don't look at me, pal. I just said you were a fair pilot. I didn't know they were lookin' for somebody to lead this crazy attack.” Han answered sarcastically.

Lando smiled. “I'm surprised they didn't ask you to do it.”

“Well, who says they didn't. But I ain't crazy. You're the respectable one, remember?”

Mon Mothma signalled for attention, and the room fell silent. “The Emperor has made a critical error and the time for our attack has come.” That caused a stir. Mon Mothma turned to a holographic model of the Death Star, the Endor moon and the protecting deflector shield in the centre of the room. “The data brought to us by the Bothan spies pinpoints the exact location of the Emperor’s new battle station. We also know that the weapon systems of this Death Star are not yet operational. With the Imperial Fleet spread throughout the galaxy in a vain effort to engage us, it is relatively unprotected. But most important of all, we've learned that the Emperor himself is personally overseeing the final stages of the construction of this Death Star.” A volley of spirited chatter erupted from the crowd. Han turned to Leia as Chewie barked his amazement. “Many Bothans died to bring us this information. Admiral Ackbar, please.”
Admiral Ackbar stepped forward and pointed to the Death Star's force field and the Moon of Endor. “You can see here the Death Star orbiting the forest Moon of Endor. Although the weapon systems on this Death Star are not yet operational, the Death Star does have a strong defence mechanism. It is protected by an energy shield, which is generated from the nearby forest Moon of Endor. The shield must be deactivated if any attack is to be attempted. Once the shield is down, our cruisers will create a perimeter, while the fighters fly into the superstructure and attempt to knock out the main reactor.” There was concerned murmuring at that. “General Calrissian has volunteered to lead the fighter attack.”

Han turned to Lando with a look of respect. “Good luck.” Lando nodded his thanks. “You're gonna need it.”

“General Madine.”

Madine moved to centre stage. “We have stolen a small Imperial shuttle. Disguised as a cargo ship, and using a secret Imperial code, a strike team will land on the moon and deactivate the shield generator.” The assembly began to mumble among themselves.

“Sounds dangerous.” Threepio commented.

“I wonder who they found to pull that off.” Leia asked Han.

“General Solo, is your strike team assembled?” Madine asked. Leia, startled, looked up at Han, surprise changing to admiration.

“Uh, my team's ready. I don't have a command crew for the shuttle.” Chewbacca raised his hairy paw and volunteered. Han looked up at him. “Well, it's gonna be rough, pal. I didn't want to speak for you.” Chewie waved that off with a huge growl. “That's one.”

“Uh, General... count me in.”

“I'm with you, too!” They turned in that direction and peered into the crowd as there are more cheers. The commanders parted, and there at the back stood Luke and Harry. Han and Leia were surprised and delighted.
Leia moved to Luke and embraced him warmly. She sensed a change in him and looked into his eyes questioningly. “What is it?”


Han, Chewie, and Lando crowded around Luke as the assembly broke up. Harry squeezed Luke’s hand and nodded to the others before going to join the other pilots who were happy to have him back.


“Hi, Han... Chewie.”

Artoo beeped a singsong observation to a worried Threepio. “’Exciting’ is hardly the word I would use.” The golden droid complained.

Soon the gathering broke up as various groups received their orders. Luke headed to where the Squadron bunked to shower and rest for a little before leaving. In the hall, he found Harry waiting outside his quarters. Luke opened the door and Harry followed him inside. “Alright?” Harry asked softly and Luke leant into his hold, soaking up the offered comfort and warmth.

“I have to tell her.”

“You’ll find the words when the time is right.” Harry assured him.

“How could you see Ben?” he finally forced himself to ask.

“I will tell you Luke but right now we both need to be focused.”

“Don’t die.”

“I’ll do everything I can to come home to you.” He swore and then he had to leave to get ready himself, he would fly with the rest of the Squad against the Death Star.

“A Jedi must have no attachments Luke.”

“Seriously? You’re saying this now?” he demanded before splashing himself with water. “Maybe that was a fault with the old Order Ben. You left me to be raised by family, did you really think I wouldn’t form attachments? Just go, I have a mission to prep for.”

“May the Force be with you.” Ben whispered as he vanished and Luke threw himself down on his bunk to rest.

 Han looked back at Luke and Leia as Chewie flipped several switches. Through the viewscreen, the Death Star and the huge Super Star Destroyer could be seen. “If they don’t go for this, we’re gonna have to get outta here pretty quick, Chewie.” Chewie growled his agreement.

“We have you on our screen now. Please identify.”

“Shuttle Tydirium requesting deactivation of the deflector shield.”

“Shuttle Tydirium, transmit the clearance code for shield passage.”

“Transmission commencing.” Han sent the signal while Leia and Chewbacca listened tensely as the sound of a high-speed transmission begins.

“Now we find out if that code is worth the price we paid.” She whispered.

“It'll work. It'll work.”

Chewie whined nervously. Luke stared at the Huge Super Star Destroyer that loomed ever larger before them. “Vader’s on that ship.” He breathed and Han looked back at him, he’d been told what
had happened at Cloud City after he was frozen and he couldn’t help glancing at Luke’s gloved hand.

“Now don't get jittery, Luke. There are a lot of command ships. Keep your distance though, Chewie, but don't look like you're trying to keep your distance.” Chewie barked a question. “I don't know. Fly casual.”

“I'm endangering the mission. I shouldn't have come.” Luke realised aloud.

“It's your imagination, kid. Come on. Let's keep a little optimism here.” Chewie barked his worries as the Super Star Destroyer grew larger out the window.

Lord Vader stood, back to the bridge, staring out a window at the Death Star.

Something caused him to turn and after a moment of stillness, he walked down the row of controllers to where Admiral Piett was leaning over the tracking screen of the controller. Piett straightened at Vader's approach.

“Where is that shuttle going?”

“Shuttle Tydirium, what is your cargo and destination?” Piett demanded.

“Parts and technical crew for the forest moon.” The Bridge Commander looked to Vader for a reaction.

“Do they have a code clearance?” Vader asked, stretching out to feel the shuttle and its crew.

“It's an older code, sir, but it checks out. I was about to clear them.” Vader looked upward, as he sensed Luke's presence. “Shall I hold them? Piett asked.

“No. Leave them to me. I will deal with them myself.”

“As you wish, my lord.” He answered in surprise. “Carry on.” Piett nodded at the controller, who switched on his commlink.
“They’re not goin’ for it, Chewie.” Han began calculating an escape course.

“Shuttle Tydirium, deactivation of the shield will commence immediately. Follow your present course.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone but Luke, who looked worried. Chewie barked. “Okay! I told you it was gonna work. No problem.” The stolen Imperial shuttle moved off toward the green Sanctuary Moon.

“Lieutenant Potter.” Madine called and the young man turned to see him, saluting.

“General.”

“I need to speak with you in private.”

“Yes sir.” Harry followed him into an empty briefing room and sat when told to.

“Where did you and Commander Skywalker go after leaving Tatooine?” he demanded and harry sighed.

“A planet called Dagobah sir, to meet with Jedi Master Yoda.”

Crix blinked in shock. “He’s alive?”

“He died while we were there sir, Luke is the only Jedi alive.”

“Something more happened there, he has changed.”

“He’s grown up more, losing a limb does that.” He would not give away Luke’s secret. Who knew
how Command would react to learning the son of their worst enemy was one of their trusted Commanders.

“And what is the nature of your relationship with him?”

“None of your business Sir.” Harry snapped, should he Obliviate him? “Is that all?”

“I could start an official enquiry.” He threatened and green eyes went cold.

“Go ahead, you’ll find nothing that isn’t allowed. Excuse me General, I need to report to my Squadron.” He saluted and left, fuming.

The walkway in the Ewok village was deserted now. The windows of the little huts glowed and flickered from the fires inside. The sounds of the forest filled the soft night air. Luke had wandered away from the Chief’s hut and stood, staring up at the Death Star. Leia found him like that.

“Luke, what's wrong?”

Luke turned and looked at her a long moment. “Leia... do you remember your mother? Your real mother?”

“Just a little bit. She died when I was very young.”

“What do you remember?” he pushed.

“Just...feelings really.” She admitted in confusion.

“Tell me.” He pleaded, needing some sort of connection to the woman.

She was a little surprised at his insistence. “She was very beautiful. Kind, but...sad.” she looked up at Luke. “Why are you asking me all this?”
He looked away. “I have no memory of my mother. I never knew her.” He whispered.

“Luke, tell me. What's troubling you?” she reached for his hand but he moved further away.

“Vader is here...now, on this moon.”

“How do you know?” she asked in alarm, how could he know…. no, she knew Luke, he was not in contact with the Empire, he was no spy.

“I felt his presence. He's come for me. He can feel when I'm near. That's why I have to go.” He looked back at her. “As long as I stay, I'm endangering the group and our mission here. I have to face him.” He choked out.

Leia was distraught, confused. “Why?”

Luke moved close and his manner was gentle, and very calm. “He's my father.” He admitted softly and she froze, staring at him in confusion, not wanting to believe what she'd heard.

“Your father?”

“There's more. It won't be easy for you to hear it, but you must. If I don't make it back, you're the only hope for the Alliance.”

Leia was very disturbed by that and moved away, as if physical distance could make it untrue. “Luke, don't talk that way. You have a power I--I don't understand and could never have.” She denied and Luke shook his head, moving towards her to take her hand.

“You're wrong, Leia. You have that power too. In time you'll learn to use it as I have. The Force is strong in my family. My father has it...I have it...and...my sister has it.” He tried to break it to her as gently as he could, wishing Harry was there to help. Leia stared into his eyes. What she saw there frightened her. But she didn’t draw away. She began to understand. “Yes. It's you Leia.” He smiled softly and she nodded slowly.
“I know. Somehow...I've always known.” She whispered this was why that kiss had felt so wrong.

“Then you know why I have to face him.”

“No! Luke, run away, far away. If he can feel your presence, then leave this place. I wish I could go with you.”

“No, you don't. You've always been strong.”

“But, why must you confront him?” She demanded.

“Because...there is good in him. I've felt it. He won't turn me over to the Emperor. I can save him. I can turn him back to the good side. I have to try.” They held each other close and looked at each other, brother and sister.

Leia held back her tears as Luke slowly let her go and moved away. He disappeared onto the walkway that led out of the village. Leia, bathed in moonlight, watched him go as Han walked out of the Chief's hut and moved over to her. Leia was crying, her body trembling. He was surprised to find her crying and worried, she was so strong. And where had the kid gone? What had he done or said to reduce her to tears? “Hey, what's goin' on?” he asked gruffly.

Leia attempted to stifle her sobs and wiped her eyes. “Nothing. I - just want to be alone for a little while.”

“Nothing? Come on, tell me. What's goin' on?” he demanded, starting to get angry.

She looked up at him, struggling to control herself. “I...I can't tell you.”

“Did you tell Luke? Is that who you could tell?” Han snapped at her.

“I...”

“Ahhh...” He started to walk away, exasperated, then stopped and walked back to her. “I'm sorry.”
“Hold me.” She pleaded and Han gathered her tightly in his protective embrace. She would tell him in time.

An Imperial shuttle floated down from the Death Star and landed gracefully on the huge platform. While this was happening an Imperial walker approached the platform from the darkness of the forest. The whole outpost was lit up and active, despite the late hour. Darth Vader walked down the ramp of the shuttle onto the platform, into an elevator, and then walked out onto a ramp on a lower level. He walked toward another ramp exit and was met by two troopers and a commander with Luke, in binders, at their centre. The young Jedi gazed at Vader with complete calm.

“This is a Rebel that surrendered to us. Although he denies it, I believe there may be more of them, and I request permission to conduct a further search of the area.” The commander extended his hand, revealing Luke’s lightsaber. “He was armed only with this.”

Vader looked at Luke, turned away and faced the commander, taking the lightsaber from the commander’s hand. “Good work, Commander. Leave us. Conduct your search and bring his companions to me.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The officer and troops withdrew.

Vader and Luke were left standing alone in the oddly tranquil beauty of the place. The sounds of the forest filtered in upon them. “The Emperor has been expecting you.” He finally broke the silence, beginning to walk and Luke fell into step with him.

“I know, father.” He answered calmly, with Harry’s help he had come to accept the Sith was his Father and that it didn’t change who he was.

“So, you have accepted the truth.”

Time to start with the plan he had come up with during the flight from Dagobah. “I’ve accepted the truth that you were once Anakin Skywalker, my father.” He answered, forcing himself to keep looking ahead but he stopped walking as Vader spun to face him angrily.
That name no longer has any meaning for me.”

Then why did it make him angry? “It is the name of your true self. You've only forgotten. I know there is good in you. The Emperor hasn't driven it from you fully. That is why you couldn't destroy me. That's why you won't bring me to your Emperor now.”

Vader looked down from Luke to the lightsaber in his own black-gloved hand. He pondered Luke's words, proud his son could use words so effectively and remain calm. He had grown since their Bespin duel. “I see you have constructed a new lightsaber.” Vader ignited the lightsaber and held it to examine its humming, brilliant blade. “Your skills are complete. Indeed, you are powerful, as the Emperor has foreseen.” They stood for a moment, then Vader extinguished the lightsaber.

“Come with me.” Luke offered quietly.


“I will not turn...and you'll be forced to kill me.” Luke warned, he would not turn and put his sister or Harry through that agony.

“If that is your destiny.”

“Search your feelings, father. You can't do this. I feel the conflict within you. Let go of your hate.” Luke pleaded, half lifting his hands, forgetting the binders for a second.

“It is too late for me, son. The Emperor will show you the true nature of the Force. He is your master now.” He signalled to some distant stormtroopers. He and Luke stood staring at one another for a long moment.

“Then my father is truly dead.” Luke whispered before turning and walking towards the surprised troopers who fell into step around him, leading him to the shuttle. Luke sat down and allowed them to secure him to the seat for the short flight, resting his head back and closing his eyes to meditate lightly.
Harry heard the scramble alert and yanked his flight suit on, it was time. He made sure he had everything on him, while he planned to live a long life with Luke he knew better than most how easy it was to die in a dogfight. He ran to the hanger and joined the rest of the Rogues in their fighters, pairing up with Tycho as usual but they were joined by Wedge since with Luke gone they had an odd number.

Harry smiled as he saw the Falcon flash by, weaving in and out of the larger ships. Lando was in the pilot seat; his alien co-pilot, Nien Nunb, was taking some getting used to in the familiar environs of the Falcon's cockpit. Lando spoke into his commlink.

“Admiral, we're in position. All fighters accounted for.”

“Proceed with the countdown. All groups assume attack coordinates.” Ackbar ordered.

Lando turns to his co-pilot. “Don't worry, my friends are down there. They'll have that shield down on time...or this'll be the shortest offensive of all time.” He muttered the last to himself. Nien flipped some switches and grunted an alien comment.

“All craft, prepare to jump to hyperspace on my mark.” Hearing the Admirals order Harry looked to his navcomp to find the coordinates had been sent.

“Comfy back there R-6?” He asked and got a scroll of commentary across his screen, making him laugh. “No, no more swamps.” He promised.

“All right. Stand by.” Lando’s voice came through and then the Falcon jumped to lightspeed. In groups the rest of the fleet did the same. Harry pulled back the lever and then closed his eyes, falling into a light meditation too ready himself for battle. He prayed the landing crew were all safe.

Vader glanced at his meditating son, feeling a flicker of nostalgia, how many times had Obi-Wan done the same inflight? He shook the memories off, this was no time to be thinking of Anakin’s life, the memories meant nothing to him. he looked down at his sons lightsaber again, it really was well made, very good for a first time. Finally, the shuttle landed and blue eyes opened, focusing on him. Vader stood, waving his hand and the seat restraints fell away from his son. “Come.” He commanded and Luke stood easily, despite being unable to use his hands. The boy followed him silently across the hanger and into a turbolift. “Mind your words with the Emperor.” He found

“Yes Father.”

The doors opened and they entered a vast, dark room. They walked across space to stand before the throne, father and son side by side beneath the gaze of the Emperor. Vader bowed to his Master.

“Welcome, young Skywalker. I have been expecting you.” The Emperor smiled and Luke felt like being sick at the sight of him but instead peered up at the hooded figure defiantly. The Emperor then looked down at Luke's binders. “You no longer need those.” The Emperor motioned ever so slightly with his finger and Luke's binders fell away, clattering to the floor. Luke looked down at his own hands, free now to reach out and grab the Emperor's neck. He did nothing. “Guards, leave us.” The red-cloaked guards turned and disappeared behind the turbolift. “I'm looking forward to completing your training. In time you will call me Master.”

“You're gravely mistaken. You won't convert me as you did my father.” Luke stated calmly but firmly.

The Emperor walked down from his throne and up very close to Luke. The Emperor looked into his eyes. “Oh, no, my young Jedi. You will find that it is you who are mistaken...about a great many things.”


“Ah, yes, a Jedi's weapon. Much like your father's. By now you must know your father can never be turned from the dark side. So will it be with you.”

“You're wrong. Soon I'll be dead...and you with me.”

“Your overconfidence is your weakness.” Luke answered.

“Your faith in your friends is yours.”

“It is pointless to resist, my son.” Vader told him, wanting Luke to give in now, before the Emperor could harm him.

The Emperor turned to face Luke, angry. “Everything that has transpired has done so according to my design.” He indicated Endor. “Your friends up there on the Sanctuary Moon...” Luke reacted, unable to help it, and the Emperor noted it. “...are walking into a trap. As is your Rebel fleet! It was I who allowed the Alliance to know the location of the shield generator. It is quite safe from your pitiful little band. An entire legion of my best troops awaits them.” Luke's look darted from the Emperor to Vader and, finally, to the lightsaber in the Emperor's hand. “Oh...I'm afraid the deflector shield will be quite operational when your friends arrive.”

No...Harry... he reached for his friend, his...lover. He had to warn him. he felt the Emperor react, the Dark Side moving to smother his ability to reach beyond the Death Star but he shoved the warning to Harry as quickly as possible and then all he could do was pray it got through.

Harry jerked out of meditation, gasping in shock as he felt Luke, felt his fear and desperation to reach him, the warning. They were walking into a trap and there was nothing he could do to warn the rest of the fleet as long as they were at lightspeed. He watched the displays and finally it was time. The fleet appeared in the Endor system.

The Death Star and its Sanctuary Moon hung distant in space as the Rebel fleet came out of hyperspace with an awesome roar. The Millennium Falcon and several Rebel fighters were at the front as the space armada bore down on its target.

Lando flipped switches, checked his screen, and spoke into the radio. “All wings report in.”

“Rogue Leader standing by.”

“Gray Leader standing by.”

“Green Leader standing by.”
“Lock S-foils in attack positions.”

“Rogue Lead, it’s a trap.” Harry called.

“Eight?”

“Luke, he sent a message through the Force.” Harry rushed out and Wedge hesitated; he trusted his leader and he trusted Harry but how could he know? Harry wasn’t a Jedi…but he was very close to Luke.

“Falcon, Rogue Eight says Rogue Lead sent a message, it’s a trap.” He finally called out.

Lando frowned in confusion before realising Wedge meant the normal Leader, Luke. Lando looked worriedly at his alien co-pilot, Nien Nunb, who pointed to the control panel and talks to Lando. “We’ve got to be able to get some kind of a reading on that shield, up or down. Well, how could they be jamming us if they don’t know if we’re coming.” He hesitated, Luke’s apparent message, the lack of readings… “Break off the attack! The shield is still up.” He called over the comm.

“I get no reading. Are you sure?” Green Leader called.

“Pull up! All craft pull up!” Lando ordered firmly even as the Falcon executed a hard left turn. Rogue Squadron followed him, peeling off with their wing mates.

Alarms were screaming and lights flashing as the huge ship changed course abruptly. Other ships in the fleet shot by outside as the armada tried to halt its forward momentum. “Take evasive action! Green Group, stick close to holding sector MV-7.” Ackbar ordered. A Mon Calamari controller turned away from his screen and called out to Ackbar, quite excited. The Admiral rushed over to the controller.

“Admiral, we have enemy ships in sector 47.”

On the screen the massive Imperial fleet came into view. Ackbar moves to the commlink. “It's a
“Fighters coming in.” Lando called. The Millennium Falcon and several squads of Rebel fighters headed into an armada of TIE fighters. The sky exploded as a fierce dogfight ensues in and around the giant Rebel cruisers.

“There's too many of them!” Grey three called in terror.

“Accelerate to attack speed! Draw their fire away from the cruisers.” Lando commanded firmly.

“Copy, Gold Leader.” Wedge answered as he, Tycho and Harry accelerated, flying in perfect formation towards the enemy ships, firing as targets appeared. The battle continued around the giant cruisers.

Through the round window behind the Emperor's throne Luke could see the distant flashes of the space battle in progress. “Come, boy. See for yourself.” The Emperor sat in his throne, with Vader standing at his side. Luke moved to look through a small section of the window. “From here you will witness the final destruction of the Alliance, and the end of your insignificant Rebellion.”

Luke was in torment. He glanced at his lightsaber sitting on the armrest of the throne.

The Emperor watched him and smiled, touching the lightsaber. “You want this, don't you? The hate is swelling in you now. Take your Jedi weapon. Use it. I am unarmed. Strike me down with it. Give in to your anger. With each passing moment, you make yourself more my servant.”

Vader watched Luke in his agony, fighting the small part of himself that screamed at him to help him, comfort him.

“No!” Luke denied, reaching for Harry and then he felt the other pilot, could feel his concentration as he flew through the battle. ‘Harry!’

“Eight?”

“I’ve got to go, he’s in trouble and on our target. If we blow it….”

Wedge hesitated, they needed every pilot but if Luke was on the Death Star then he was a prisoner…. “Go, watch his back.”

“Always.” Rogue Eight peeled away from the battle and accelerated towards the Death Star, and its shields. “Hold on back there.” He warned his droid before reaching out with magic.

“It is unavoidable. It is your destiny. You, like your father, are now mine!” The Emperor laughed but Luke’s eyes were locked on the light that was fast approaching, knowing it was Rogue Eight.

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Lando kept an eye on the others even as he flew, trusting the men at the guns to keep them safe. “Watch yourself, Wedge! Three from above!”

“Rogue Three, Rogue Two, pull in!” Wedge ordered.

“Got it!”

“Three of them coming in, twenty degrees!” Tycho called.

“Cut to the left! I'll take the leader! They're heading for the medical frigate.”

Lando steered the Falcon through a complete flip, as his crew fired at the TIEs from the belly guns. “Pressure's steady.” The co-pilot Nien Nunb chattered an observation.

“Only the fighters are attacking. I wonder what those Star Destroyers are waiting for.” Lando
frowned as he saw them hanging back.

Admiral Piett and two fleet commanders watched the battle at the huge window of the Super Star Destroyer bridge.

“We're in attack position now, sir.” Holden offered.

“Hold here.” Piett ordered, hands folded behind his back, looking utterly calm and unflappable, despite his horror over what was about to happen. He believed in honourable combat and this was anything but.

“We're not going to attack?”

“I have my orders from the Emperor himself. He has something special planned for them. We only need to keep them from escaping.”

The Emperor, Vader, and a horrified Luke watched the aerial battle fireworks out the window and on the viewscreens. Another Rebel ship exploded against the protective shield. “As you can see, my young apprentice, your friends have failed. Now witness the firepower of this fully armed and operational battle station.” He activated the comm. “Fire at will, Commander.”


Controllers pulled back on several switches as Commander Jerjerrod stood over them. “Fire!”

A button was pressed, which switched on a panel of lights. A hooded Imperial soldier reached overhead and pulled a lever. A huge beam of light emanated from a long shaft. Two stormtroopers stood to one side at a control panel. The giant laser dish on the completed half of the Death Star began to glow; then a powerful beams shot out toward the aerial battle.

Space was thick with giant ships, i among them, Rebel X-wings dogfought with Imperial TIE fighters. An enormous Rebel cruiser was hit by the Death Star beam and was vaporised by a blast that could destroy a planet.
The Falcon was buffeted by the tremendous explosion of the Rebel cruiser. Lando and his co-pilot were stunned by the sight of the Death Star firepower. “That blast came from the Death Star! That thing's operational!” he grabbed the comm. “Home One, this is Gold Leader.”

Ackbar stood amid the confusion on the wide bridge and spoke into the commlink. “We saw it. All craft prepare to retreat.”

“We won't get another chance at this, Admiral.”

“We have no choice, General Calrissian. Our cruisers can't repel firepower of that magnitude.”

“Han will have that shield down. We've got to give him more time.”

Running through the halls of the Death Star Harry gasped as he felt he floor shake and then he knew one of their cruisers was gone, so much for not operable yet. He tightened his grip on his magic and went back to running, he had to find Luke.

Artoo and Threepio made it to the door, as Han and Leia provided cover fire. “We're coming!”

“Come on! Come on!” Hand urged as he took another shot.

“Oh, Artoo, hurry!” The little droid moved to the terminal and plugged in his computer arm. A large explosion hit near Artoo, knocking him head over heels, finally landing on his feet. The stubby astrodroid's head was spinning and smouldering. Suddenly there is a loud noise and Han and Leia turned around to see Artoo with all his compartment doors open, and all of his appendages sticking out; water and smoke spurting out of the nozzles in his body. Han rushed to the terminal, as Threepio rushed to his wounded companion. “My goodness! Artoo, why did you have to be so brave?”

“Well, I suppose I could hotwire this thing.”

“I'll cover you.” Leia moved in front of him, firing on any imperial she could see.

Ewoks in handmade, primitive hang-glides dropped rocks onto the stormtroopers, dive-bombing their deadly adversaries. One was hit in the wing with laser fire and crashed. A walker lumbered forward,
shooting laser blasts at frantic Ewoks running in all directions. Two Ewoks were struck down by laser blasts. One tried to awaken his friend, then

realised that he is dead, mournfully shaking his head.

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The Rebel fleet continued to be picked off, from one side by the Death Star's deadly beam, from the other by the rampaging Imperial Star Destroyers.

Lando steered the Falcon wildly through an obstacle course of floating giants. He was yelling into the commlink. “Yes! I said closer! Move as close as you can and engage those Star Destroyers at point-blank range.”

“At that close range, we won't last long against those Star Destroyers.” Ackbar responded.

“We'll last longer then we will against that Death Star...and we might just take a few of them with us.”

The Rebel cruisers moved very close to the Imperial Star Destroyers and began to blast away at point-blank range. Tiny fighters raced across the giant surfaces, against a backdrop of laser fire.

A group of fighters focused on the control tower of one of the star destroyers. “She's gonna blow!” Gray nine yelled.

“I'm hit!” Gold six cried out, his Y-Wing spinning out of control, crashing into the control tower before exploding.

Out of the window and on the view screens, the Rebel fleet was being decimated in blinding explosions of light and debris. But inside there was no sound of battle. The Emperor turned to Luke. “Your fleet has lost. And your friends on the Endor moon will not survive. There is no escape, my young apprentice. The Alliance will die...as will your friends.” Luke's eyes were full of rage, as he fought to control his emotions.
Vader watched him, feeling the Force surge around his son, he truly was powerful, perhaps he would be even more powerful than the Chosen One had been.

“Good. I can feel your anger. I am defenceless. Take your weapon! Strike me down with all your hatred, and your journey towards the dark side will be complete.”

Luke could resist no longer. The lightsaber flew into his hand and he ignited it in an instant, swinging at the Emperor. Vader’s lightsaber flashed into view, blocking Luke’s blow before it could reach the Emperor. The two blades sparked at contact. Luke turned to fight his father.

Luke and Vader engaged in a man-to-man duel of lightsabres even more vicious then the battle on Bespin. But the young Jedi had grown stronger in the interim, and now the advantage shifted to him. Vader was forced back, losing his balance, and was knocked down the stairs. Luke stood at the top of the stairs, ready to attack.

“Good. Use your aggressive feelings, boy! Let the hate flow through you.”

Luke looked momentarily toward the Emperor, then back to Vader, and realised he was using the dark side, breaking his promise to Harry. He stepped back, turning off his lightsaber, and relaxed, driving the hate from his being.

“Obi-Wan has taught you well.” Vader commented, struggling to control his own breathing.

“I will not fight you, father.”

Vader walked back up the stairs to Luke. ‘You are unwise to lower your defences.” He chided. Vader attacked, forcing Luke on the defensive. The young Jedi leapt in an amazing reverse flip up to the safety of the catwalk overhead, Vader standing below him.

“Your thoughts betray you, father. I feel the good in you...the conflict.”

“There is no conflict.”
“You couldn't bring yourself to kill me before, and I don't believe you'll destroy me now.”

“You underestimate the power of the dark side. If you will not fight, then you will meet your destiny.” Vader prepared to throw his saber only to be interrupted.

“I thought we agreed Patricide was bad.” Harry called, smirking slightly as he walked into view. He’d ditched his flight suit back in his X-Wing upon landing in one of the many hanger bays. R-6 had not been happy with his order to leave him and return to the fleet but there were plenty of ships available to steal that would fit more than one person.

“Harry.” Luke breathed and Vader looked from his son to the newcomer, able to sense the bond between them. It was him! the one that had leant Luke strength after their last duel. Luke took in his lover’s form, seeing him dressed in black and green, his green eyes almost glowing in the shadows. He knew Harry had some sort of power, though they’d never spoken of it, he just hoped it was enough for facing the two Sith. Luke flipped back down, landing beside Harry to take his hand. Harry smiled at him and the Emperor screamed in rage as the Force sang as it swirled around them. He raised his hands, blasting Force Lightning at them and Harry stepped in front of Luke, raising his hand, as he did a shimmering shield of energy snapped into place, protecting them.

“Patience is a virtue old man.” Harry taunted before turning back to Luke who shook his head in bemusement. “You ready for this?” Harry asked softly, gently framing Luke’s face with his hands, he was the taller but not by a lot. Luke leant into his touch and nodded before leaning up to kiss him softly.

Vader watched them, a bit shocked by his sons’ choice in partner, not to mention said partners power. There was also envy, that Luke had a lover who could stand as his equal in a fight. Padme had been well trained but she hadn’t been a Jedi or whatever this boy was.

“I’ll handle cranky. You try to get through to your Father.” Harry breathed, letting Luke wrap around him.

“Harry…how…”

“I promise; I’ll tell you anything you want to know once we’re safe.” He swore and Luke nodded. They moved apart, Harry for the stairs and Luke towards his Father, lightsaber held loosely in one hand. “So, you’re the Emperor, got to admit, not impressed.” Harry commented and the old man sneered. “Seriously, this massive Empire and you couldn’t find someone to at least fix your teeth.”
“Foolish child, you do not know the power you taunt.”

Harry smirked. “You’re not more powerful than Death, in fact you fear him. you shouldn’t, Death is a friend on the path to the next great adventure.”

“And how would you know that?” He readied himself for another attack as green eyes met his.

“I am Death’s Marked.” Harry stated before lashing out with his mind. Palpatine may be powerful but Harry had over a thousand years on him of age and experience. The Emperor staggered back before lashing out with more Force Lightning, for the first time afraid he may die here.

Luke faced his Father calmly and held a hand out to him. “Please Father, I don’t want to fight you.”

Vader looked from his son over to where his Master was fighting the other man, fighting and perhaps losing too. They circled and Luke moved into the shadows beneath the catwalk, drawing Vader in after him.

Controllers watched the main viewscreen on which the vague figure of an Imperial walker pilot could be seen. There was a great deal of static and interference. “It’s over, Commander. The Rebels have been routed. They’re fleeing into the woods. We need reinforcements to continue the pursuit.”

The controllers cheered. “Send three squads to help. Open the back door.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the door to the bunker opened and the Imperial troops rushed out, they were surprised to find themselves surrounded by Rebels, their weapons pointed at them. Ewoks holding bows and arrows appeared on the roof of the bunker. The Imperial troops threw down their guns as Han and Chewie rushed inside the bunker with explosive charges.
Han, Chewie, and several troops rushed into the control room and planted explosive charges on the control panels. “Throw me another charge.”

Vader stalked the low-ceilinged area on the level below the throne, searching for Luke in the semi-darkness, his lightsaber held ready. “You cannot hide forever, Luke.”

“I will not fight you.” Luke answered calmly.

“Give yourself to the dark side. It is the only way you can save your friends. Yes, your thoughts betray you. Your feelings for them are strong. Especially for...” Vader stopped and sensed something. Luke shut his eyes tightly, in anguish. “Sister! So... you have a twin sister. Your feelings have now betrayed her, too. Obi-Wan was wise to hide her from me. Now his failure is complete. If you will not turn to the dark side, then perhaps she will.” He taunted even as he finally found her identity within his sons’ mind and felt a jolt of shock. Leia Organa…. how had he not seen? He’d thought of her similarities to Padme many times and Bail Organa had been one of his wife’s strongest allies.


Harry and the Emperor paised, glancing over at the scream and feeling of hate. Harry winced, whatever Vader had said had really enraged his lover. He sent a bolt of calming magic at him and then turned back to his own battle.

The Dark Lord was knocked to his knees, and as he raised his sword to block another onslaught, Luke slashed Vader's right hand off at the wrist, causing metal and electronic parts to fly from the mechanical stump. Vader's sword clattered uselessly away, over the edge of the platform and into the bottomless shaft below. Luke moved over Vader and held the blade of his sword to the Dark Lord's throat.

“Good! Your hate has made you powerful. Now, fulfil your destiny and take your father's place at my side.” The Emperor called only to gasp as a wound opened on his side. Harry plunged his hand into a pocket, slipping his fingers into the waiting metal. He raised his hand, the gem in the middle of the device glowing in reaction before a shockwave sent the Emperor flying while Harry conserved magic by using the hand device.
Luke looked at his father's mechanical hand, then to his own mechanical, black-gloved hand, and realised how much he was becoming like his father. He made the decision for which he has spent a lifetime in preparation. Luke stepped back and hurled his lightsaber away.

“Never! I'll never turn to the dark side. You've failed, Your Highness. I am a Jedi, like my father before me.” Luke called out firmly and Harry smiled even as he activated the hand device again, aimed firmly at Palpatine’s head. He cried out in pain as the Goa’uld device went to work. The Emperor's glee turns to rage as he struggled against Harry. How could this be happening?

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Han and several of the fighters ran out of the bunker and raced across the clearing. “Move! Move!” A shock wave knocked them flat as the bunker exploded, followed by a spectacular display as the huge shield-generator radar dish exploded along with the bunker.

Ackbar, sitting in his control chair, spoke into the radio. “The shield is down! Commence attack on the Death Star’s main reactor.”

“We're on our way. Rogue’s, Gold Group, all fighters follow me.” He laughed and looked at his co-pilot. “Told you they'd do it!” The Falcon, followed by several smaller Rebel fighters, headed toward the unfinished superstructure of the Death Star.

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Harry stopped the attack and stepped back, staring at the old man as he collapsed to the floor. “Time to end this once and for all your Highness.” He pooled his magic and then unleashed an overpowered reductor right at the man’s head. He didn’t even flinch as blood splattered his cheek as the men’s head practically exploded, his body going limp on the floor before exploding as the dark energy within was released.

Luke watched in shock and awe even as he knelt beside his father, helping support the exhausted man. He clasped his father’s remaining hand in his, scared by the even more laboured breathing. He reached out to him in the Force and found his presence lighter than before. Vader hesitantly reached back through their bond, allowing Luke to support him. losing his hand had been the shock both had needed to make them see what was happening. ‘Luke.’ He called hesitantly.

‘Father.’ Luke’s response was joyous at the contact.
'Leave me.'

'Never. The Emperor is dead, you are free, don’t you see?’ Luke answered and then they fell silent as Harry approached, looking a bit singed round the edges.

Rebel fighters followed the Falcon across the surface of the Death Star to the unfinished portion, where they dove into the superstructure of the giant battle station, followed by many TIE fighters.

“T'm going in.” Wedge called, knowing Tycho had his back.

“Here goes nothing.” Lando muttered before following.

Three X-wings lead the chase through the ever-narrowing shaft, followed by the Falcon and four other fighters, plus TIE fighters who continually fired at the Rebels. Lights reflected off the pilot's faces as they raced through the dark shaft.

“Now lock onto the strongest power source. It should be the power generator.” Lando ordered before wincing as the ship scraped a support strut, Han was going to kill him.

“Form up. And stay alert. We could run out of space real fast.”

The fighters and the Falcon raced through the tunnel, still pursued by the TIE fighters. One of the X-wings was hit from behind and exploded.

“Split up and head back to the surface. See if you can get a few of those TIE fighters to follow you.” Lando ordered.

“Copy, Gold Leader.” Tycho called and at the next junction he split off with two of the others, pursued by three of the TIE's, while Lando and Wedge continued through the main tunnel. It narrowed, and the Falcon scraped the side dangerously. Two other TIE fighters continued to blast away at them.
“That was too close.” He muttered and Nien Nunb agreed.

Outside the battle between the Rebel and Imperial fleet raged on. Several cruisers fired at the giant Super Star Destroyer.

“We've got to give those fighters more time. Concentrate all fire on that Super Star Destroyer.” X-wings pilots moved across the surface of the huge battleship.

Admiral Piett and Holden stood at the window, looking out to the battle, they were both concerned, why wasn’t the death Star firing again?

“Sir, we've lost our bridge deflector shield.’

“Intensify the forward batteries. I don't want anything to get through.”

Holden stared out of the window where a damaged Rebel fighter was out of control and heading directly toward the bridge.

“Intensify forward firepower!” Piett yelled.

“It's too late!” Holden yelled even as he grabbed the Admiral and shoved him off the bridge. Piett stumbled as the blast doors shut, hearing the explosion he turned and ran, he had to get to a lower level fast. The giant battle ship was losing control and he knew they were too close to the Death Star. He hit an evacuation alarm as he ran for the nearest hanger.

Several small ships and fighters shot from the hanger bays as the massive ship finally collided with the Death Star and blew up, taking a portion of the station with it.

As the ship blew the crew of Home One celebrated and Ackbar slumped into his chair in relief.

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Chaos. For the first time, the Death Star was rocked by explosions as the Rebel fleet, no longer backed against a wall, zoomed over, unloading a heavy barrage. Imperial troops ran in all directions,
confused and desperate to escape.

In the midst of this uproar, Luke and Harry carried the enormous deadweight of his father’s weakened body toward an Imperial shuttle. Finally, Luke collapsed as the made it onto a shuttle. Harry hit the ramp control and ran for the cockpit.


“Forgive me.” He begged and his Father squeezed his hand.

“Forgive me, my son.” Vader wheezed, the battle had been too much for him. “Help me take this mask off.”

“But you'll die.”

“Nothing can stop that now. Just for once... let me look on you with my own eyes.” He hadn’t seen anything but sterile walls for so long. Slowly, hesitantly, Luke removed the mask from his father’s face. There beneath the scars was an elderly man. His eyes would not focus, but the dying man smiled at the sight before him.

The ship rocked as Harry ignored the pre-flight and took off, not wanting to get caught in the explosion. He quickly fiddled with the comm until he could get it transmit a Rebellion code, not wanting to be shot down accidentally.

“Now...go, my son. Leave me.” He begged, he should not see him die. He should be with his lover.

“No. You're coming with us. I've got to save you.”

“You already have, Luke. You were right about me. Tell your sister...you were right.”

“Father...I won't leave you.” Luke argued, tears flowing and then Harry gently gripped his shoulders.
“Move back Luke, let me. Get us down to the surface.” Harry spoke gently, pushing Luke towards the cockpit before turning to the barely alive man. “You aren’t going anywhere Anakin Skywalker, not for many more years.” He stated and then knelt beside him and placed his hands on his chest, letting magic flow.

He felt his strength returning and forced his eyes open to see Harry above him, his eyes as black as space.

The Millennium Falcon led a swerving bomb run through the immense superstructure of the half-built Death Star. The Rebel Star Cruisers outside continually bombarded the huge station. And each direct hit was answered by resonating, chain-reaction explosions within the station itself.

Lando’s crew fired away at the pursuing TIE fighters as the dashing Baron of Bespin and his alien co-pilot homed in on the main reactor shaft, a lone X-wing just in front of the Falcon.

“There it is!” Wedge grinned in relief.

“All right, Wedge. Go for the power regulator on the north tower.”

“Copy, Gold Leader. I'm already on my way out.” The X-wing headed for the top of the huge reactor and fired several proton torpedoes at the power regulator, causing a series of small explosions.

The Falcon flew for the main reactor, and when it was dangerously close, Lando fired the missiles, which shot out of the Falcon with a powerful roar, and hit directly at the centre of the main reactor. He manoeuvred the Falcon out of the winding superstructure just ahead of the continuing chain of explosions.

Ackbar and other Mon Calamari leaned on the railing of the bridge, watching the large screen showing the Death Star in the main briefing room. “Move the fleet away from the Death Star.”

Finally, just as it looked like the Falcon would not make it, Lando expertly piloted the craft out of the exploding superstructure and rushed toward the Sanctuary Moon, only a moment before the Death Star supernova into oblivion. Lando and Nien Nunb laughed and cheered in relief.
Han and Leia, Chewie, the droids, the Rebel troops, and the Ewoks all looked to the sky as the Death Star revealed itself in a final flash of self-destruction. They all cheered.

“They did it!” Threepio cheered.

Han looked down from the sky to Leia, a look of concern on his face. Leia continued to look at the sky as though listening for a silent voice. “I’m sure Luke wasn’t on that thing when it blew.”

“He wasn't. I can feel it.” She whispered.

“You love him, don't you?” Hand smiled sadly, he should have known. A smuggler was not the right man for a Princess, even if he was a General now.

Leia smiled, puzzled. “Yes.”

“All right. I understand. Fine. When he comes back, I won't get in the way.” He promised.

She realised his misunderstanding. “Oh. No, it's not like that at all.” She pulled Han close with her uninjured arm and smiled. “He's my brother.” Han was stunned by this news. She smiled, and they embraced.

Luke landed the shuttle in a clearing some distance from the Ewok village and then rushed into the back to find Harry slumped over his Father. He knelt down and was shocked to find both alive. Harry stirred and Luke helped him sit up. “Ow.”

“Harry?”

“I’m okay.” Harry smiled and then kissed him. “Where are we?”

“Okay, come on. We need to set up camp.”

“Shouldn’t we join the others?”

“You want to explain?” He indicated the still unconscious man and Luke winced. “Relax, when I’m done only the people who know Anakin Skywalker became Darth Vader will know the truth.” Luke followed, confused, as his lover set up a tent and levitated Anakin inside. “You need to meditate Luke; you came very close to turning up there.” Harry whispered and Luke looked away, ashamed but Harry tipped his head back up. “You didn’t turn Luke, you stayed strong and I am so proud of you. Now meditation, then sleep and food. Understood?”

Luke laughed and mock saluted. “Yes sir.” He sat on the ground and took some deep breaths, falling easily into meditation.

Harry looked down at the half mechanical man and sighed, this was going to take a lot of work.

In the darkness, Luke set a torch to the logs stacked under a funeral pyre where his father’s suit lay. He stood watching, as the flames leap higher to consume what was left of Darth Vader.

In the sky above, fireworks exploded and Rebel fighters zoomed above the forest. Two men approached and joined Luke at the fireside, both taller than him but the tallest was the same height as Vader had been, dark blonde hair curling down to his shoulders.

Anakin Skywalker watched the suit that had imprisoned him burn to ash. He hesitantly reached out to his son and was awed by how quickly the boy responded, taking his hand while allowing his presence close.

Harry smiled as he watched the two, happy that he had been able to free Anakin of the suit. But it had been Luke who truly freed the man.

A huge bonfire was the centrepiece of a wild celebration. Rebels and Ewoks rejoiced in the warm glow of firelight, drums beating, singing, dancing, and laughing in the communal language of victory.
Lando ran in and was enthusiastically hugged by Han and Chewie. Then, finally, Luke and Harry arrived and the friends rushed to greet and embrace them. They stood close, taking comfort in each other's touch, together to the end.

Rebels and Ewoks joined together in dancing and celebration. Only Luke seemed distracted, alone in their midst, his thoughts elsewhere. Harry squeezed his hand and Luke smiled. Anakin had remained at the camp for now, none of them wanting to explain just yet. He looks off to the side and saw three shimmering, smiling figures at the edge of the shadows: Ben Kenobi, Yoda, and a stranger. It was Qui-Gon Jinn, happy that these two had saved the boy he had once freed. Luke smiled back at them and Harry looked over, nodding at the three spirits before Leia came up and pulled Luke back into the party, Harry following.

Anakin smiled as he watched Leia recite her vows, her hands clasped in Han’s before Mon Mothma. He remembered her as one of Padme’s friends and she had been so shocked to see him, unaged from when the Republic fell. Whatever Harry had done had given him back his old body at the age he had Fallen. Only Luke knew his lovers’ secrets and sometimes they seemed to make him sad but they two remained together and very happy. They were standing to Leia’s side, hands clasped together. Anakin was just happy Leia had allowed his presence, their relationship was tense, she could not forget all the pain he had caused her and he couldn’t blame her. Just so long as it did not lead to hate. Luke was the more powerful of the twins but Leia would have been more powerful than average in the Temple.

Luke and Harry flanked Leia as she stood before the slowly reforming senate, dressed once again in a flowing gown of pure white, her hair up in the twin buns she’d worn the first time Luke met her. Han stood at her side, dressed in full uniform. They made an incredible picture, two men dressed in black at her back, emphasising the white of her gown as she began to speak, accepting the position of President of the New Republic. In the crowd Anakin cheered as loudly as the others, knowing she would do a good job. Next to him stood Admiral Piett, still looking a bit odd in the uniform of the Republic. Piett knew the truth of his identity and had been shocked but accepted it and had defected from the Empire quite happily along with all the Executors survivors.

Harry laughed as he chased Luke through the jungle of Yavin 4, soon their solitude would end as the new Jedi Academy opened to students. Unlike the old order Luke was accepting students of any age. There were too few Force sensitives left thanks to Palpatine. Luke was hoping one or two Jedi still survived as he knew he would need help. Harry was going to take a position within the Order, he didn’t use the Force but he could still teach students to fight, to fly, and a hundred other necessary
skills. He had tried to convince his Father to join them but so far he had refused, staying close to Leia and Han, a bodyguard for the President who had already survived four assassination attempts. Soon the broke from the trees and

Harry pinned the shorter man to the ground, grinning down at him, neither paying any attention to the spirits watching them, one in amusement and the other is disapproval. Even in death Yoda was stuck in his ways. Harry got up and pulled Luke to his feet, the two walking into the massive temple that once housed the Rebellion. It had still needed a lot of work to make it ready to house students but now it was all complete. They made their way to the room they had claimed, high up and with a good view of the jungle. The furniture was simple but functional and they washed off before curling together in bed.

Luke smiled as he accepted the tiny bundle from Han, cradling the newborn to his chest even as the child stirred and opened his eyes. He could feel the Force flowing strong within the boy and looked at his sister who smiled sadly but nodded. One-day little Ben would join them on Yavin. Until then his Grandfather would be on hand to help. Luke looked at his Father, seeing the utter happiness on his face. Harry popped his head round the corner and smiled.

“Get in here brother-in-law.” Leia called teasingly and Harry walked in to peer down at the baby. Luke and Harry hadn’t had a traditional ceremony but everyone knew they would be together until death.

“Congratulations Leia, he’s beautiful.”

“Thank you Harry.”

“Alright everyone out, mother and baby need their rest. That includes you Master Skywalker.” His one-time student called out. Kayla was an excellent Healer, preferring it to lightsaber skills. They all left the room to let Leia recover.

Harry stood at the very top of the pyramid, staring out at the Jungle and the gas giant Yavin. Below he could see the young Padawans working at drills, Ben among them. The sixteen-year-old would be a powerful Jedi when Knighted. His little sister Breha was sitting to the side, watching the older students. He and Luke had no children, they could have adopted but the students had been enough for them. Anakin had finally agreed to come after Leia stepped down as President, training her to actually use her gifts. Han too had retired from being head of the armed forces. It hurt, watching them all age around him, it always did. Up here he had dropped his glamour’s, looking exactly the
same as when he and Luke first met.

Luke stared at his back, he liked seeing Harry like this, not artificially aged by magic. His own blond hair was half grey now and no matter how distinguished Harry said it made him look he could feel the sadness he felt at the proof Luke was getting old.

Harry turned and smiled at Luke, holding out his hand to the Jedi Master who took it and joined him in staring out at the view. ‘I love you.’ The wizard thought and Luke smiled.

‘I love you too.’ He replied, their bond was so strong they could speak to each other no matter where they were.

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Harry stared into the funeral pyre blankly. It shouldn’t have ended like this, why had Luke done it? He knew Harry wouldn’t have truly died but Luke was mortal and had died instantly, something Harry couldn’t heal. The snapping of their bond had hurt so much. There was an empty hole in his chest again, the broken bond making the one with Sam worse.

Anakin stood staring at the pyre which held his sons body, still in shock. Luke had still had so many years ahead of him and now he was gone. He kept his arm around Breha as she sobbed, the twenty-three-year-old Jedi in as much shock as the others. Beside her stood Ben, his hand on his own Padawans shoulder. At nearly thirty Ben had grown to match Anakin in height but other than that looked much like his father. Leia and Han stood with their arms around each other, unable to comprehend that Luke was gone. For Leia there was a hole where the twin bond had once been.

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Anakin opened the door to find the room empty except the furniture and a note. He picked it up, recognising Harry’s hand. ‘I’m sorry’, was all it said but it was enough. He knew Harry had followed Luke into death.

*The End.*
Stopping the Madness

Chapter Summary

FFVII

Disclaimer: Don’t own HP of FFVII.

Have never played the game, my knowledge comes from other fanfics and the movie that came out.

Stopping the Madness

Harry still wasn’t sure about this world. For once he wasn’t on Earth, or he didn’t think he was. It felt different and yet similar which made it confusing. And yeah, some of the technology was familiar but many aspects of the world were very different to anything he’d ever encountered. Meeting his first Chocobo had been an experience. Then there was Shinra, for a power company they sure where diverse. So he had signed on as a junior scientist, wanting to get a real feel for the company. Two weeks ago he’d been transferred to work under Professor Hojo which had meant moving but that was never an issue for him.

Nibelheim seemed to be trying to hit every cliché for a small mountain town, it actually came off as a little creepy but it had nothing on the Shinra mansion where he now worked. They barely interacted with the townspeople at all, expected to keep their distance and keep company secrets safe. The closest he had to a friend was a Turk, Vincent Valentine. He was a fairly quiet man with an obvious crush on one of the other scientists, Doctor Crescent. Usually when he was a scientist he enjoyed his work but here….it was giving him a very bad feeling but he didn’t have access to much yet. He needed to get closer to Hojo before he would learn more and that was not easy.


“Finished stalking the doc for the day?”

“How do you do that?” Vincent asked as he joined him on the roof and Harry shrugged, not like he was going to tell anyone in this world, not with how obsessed they all were with power. He offered Vincent some of his chocolate and the Turk accepted, joining him in watching the stars. “Do you think there’s life out there?”

That was a surprising question. “I think to assume that we are the only intelligent life in a universe
bursting with stars would be the height of arrogance. And I don’t like to be arrogant. What brought that question about?”

“Something the Professor said.”

“Classified?” He asked and Vincent nodded. “Hmm. The weirdest things are classified around here. You going back to Midgard with the rest?”

“No, someone needs to remain to brief the new guards and Turks.”

“I’m glad, I’d miss you.”

Vincent was surprised by that, no one missed a Turk. And yet looking at Harry, sprawled over the roof shingles and utterly relaxed he found he believed him. It was dangerous for Harry to trust him, who knew if or when the Company would decide he was a liability. Vincent didn’t want to kill a friend. “You shouldn’t.” He whispered and Harry turned his head to look at him, green eyes meeting dark brown.

“Everyone needs friends, Turks included.” He smiled softly and then went back to tracing constellations. Life in space…. they had found proof? But why? They were working with genetics not astronomy. He had a bad feeling about this.

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Harry kept his head down as he cleaned up the mess Hojo had left behind when bored with his experiment, glad he had seen worse or he’d be throwing up. Two of his co-workers had vanished, giving him more work and responsibility. The question was, where had they gone? They were isolated in the mountains with winter closing in and the truck out of town had left before they vanished. That left him with some rather unpleasant options for what had happened to them. He still didn’t know what they were doing but he was starting to get the feeling human experimentation with the project was beginning. That was something he could not allow.

The door banged open and he spun around but didn’t jump. “Vincent?”

“She’s pregnant.” He growled and harry winced.
Timing seems off for her dear husband.” He pointed out and Vincent shrugged. “she doesn’t strike me as the type to cheat on a current partner, odds are its yours. So what has you so mad?”

“She…” Vincent took a calming breath. “She is allowing him to experiment on the child now.”

Harry froze in shock and then he hissed in anger. “No more. This ends here.” He snarled and Vincent actually took half a step back in shock.

“Harry.”

“Go back to your room and stay there Vincent.” Harry simply sent him there with magic before storming from the room and to where he could feel Hojo. He no longer cared about finding out what they were doing. No one was harming a child, even one that was unborn, while he was around. Security was no problem as his magic lashed around him.

“What are you doing in here?” Hojo demanded as the door slammed open.

“You are going to tell me everything about your work and then you will be judged.” Harry hissed before slamming into his mind. What he found utterly sickened him and he didn’t even hesitate as a zat appeared in his hand and he fired three times. With that done he moved through the ‘secret lab’ beneath the Shinra mansion, putting some out of their misery while healing those that could be saved, knocking them all out before moving upstairs to knock them all out too before apparating to the reactor where ‘Jenova’ was kept secret and safe. He stared at the monstrosity where it was held in a tank, able to feel its mind reaching out, whispering to anyone who could hear and it was disgusting. He took a deep breath, reaching out with magic to completely isolate her from the world and then Fiendfyre consumed the tube, taking over an hour to fully destroy her body. Once that was done he returned to the mansion and went to check on Lucrecia Crescent, scanning the child she carried. He had been in time and the foetus was unaltered and Vincent’s. he wiped all knowledge of Jenova from her and everyone else there. As far as they would remember they were working on improving the efficiency of various alternative power sources to Mako.

Harry appeared in the President’s office, stunning him before the man could sound the alarm even as the two Turks guarding him dropped. What he found in the man’s mind almost had him joining Hojo but with what he was doing the company would need some stability in keeping the current leader. He didn’t like doing this but needs must and so he twisted the mans will to match what was needed. He removed his greed and need to dominate, making him a much more mellow man even as he removed all interest in the type of projects Hojo delivered. He then moved on to ever department head, pulling the teeth of Shinra. It took several days but when he was done he retreated to the wilderness to rest and recharge.
The world watched in confusion as seemingly over night the most powerful company in existence changed. Research into alternative energy was encouraged and well-funded, Mako reactors now seen as dangerous. Wutai watched in suspicion as all advances towards them were stopped. The Turks became simple body guards and not the feared assassins they had been. The army was handed over to the cities as protection from monsters and raiders. The infantile Soldier program was totally scraped and all human experimentation banned.

With no memory of the horrible program she’d been involved with or her marriage to Hojo, Lucretia happily married Vincent and soon gave birth to a healthy son with his father’s hair colour and her eyes. The happy couple had moved back to Midgard so she could work more easily and he quite Shinra to care for their son, Sephiroth. He was a brilliant child but completely human, thanks to Harry.

In the meantime, Harry remained in the wild places few ventured to, needing the calm of nature to help him heal from the trauma of what he had been forced to do. He had built himself a simple shelter and spent his days meditating or wandering.

Ten years later Zachary Fair was born and then several years later Cloud Strife and Tifa Lockhart in Nibelheim. With no Soldier program Zack might never have left home except he met a strange green eyed man who saved him from a monster and so he went to Junon and joined their army once he was eighteen.

Cloud grew up in a Nibelheim that had moved forward some as it accepted more technology. And he found himself flourishing at school under the new teacher, Mr Jim Black. He had simply wandered into the village one day and gotten a job at the school. He had built a small house away from the village and seemed totally unafraid of the wolves or monsters that could be encountered on the long walk to work. He still didn’t have many friends but he was a much happier child than he would have been. Jim helped foster his love of learning and history, knowing the boy would be happier somewhere such pursuits were encouraged. With all the changes universities were popping up all over the place. Eventually he sponsored Cloud to the Junon University and the boy left on his seventeenth birthday. Tifa remained in Nibelheim and married a local boy, settling down to start a family.

In Junon Cloud met Lieutenant Fair and the two quickly became friends despite the differences between them. Cloud eventually got two degrees in history and mechanics as he’d always been good at fixing things. By then Zack had made Captain and the two moved in together, very happy. They never met Sephiroth as he had followed in his mother’s footsteps as a scientist for Shinra in Midgard.

Jim visited the two in Junon for Cloud’s graduation and while there he ran into a young woman who
simply smiled at him and then kissed his cheek. “Thank you Deaths’ Marked.” She whispered before running off to join her Father. He just blinked and watched her go, feeling the power of the planet swirling around her. He shook his head and continued on his way. It was amazing how much change containing the company had made. No one should have the power they had tried to have.

_The End._

I’ve only ever read FFVII fics so I’ve gone off what I’ve read for info.
I Am Iron Man - Part 1

Chapter Summary

xover with Iron Man

Disclaimer: Don’t own HP or Marvel

I’ve been sick and my Mum starts chemo next week so life is pretty much chaos when you add in final year of uni. Updates will be sporadic

I Am Iron Man – part 1

Harry knew two things, Tony Stark was dead and he wasn’t Iron Man yet. He stared at the body in the wrecked car in shock before shaking it off. What the hell was he meant to do now? The accident wasn’t either of their fault, neither had been speeding but it was night and the road was covered in ice. His bike was trashed and Tony had cracked his head on the windshield of his car, killing him. Fate really enjoyed messing with him. With no arc reactor in his chest it meant there was no Iron Man, no Avengers….and earth needed both. He sighed and shook his head before going to work.

The police car pulled to a stop and the officers ran over to the site, taking in the downed motorcycle and rider and then the licence plate on the car even as they radioed for help. A quick check showed the driver was thankfully still alive. The rider wasn’t and a quick look at his wallet showed him to be Harry Potter, age 22 from Surrey, England.

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He allowed himself to wake and opened his eyes to find a standard, if more expensive, hospital ceiling. He hurt. He swallowed, or tried too, his mouth was like a desert. He heard the door and turned his head slightly to see a nurse.

“Welcome back Mr Stark. You’re in The Mount Sinai Hospital and very safe. Do you remember what happened?” She asked as she gave him some ice chips.

“Car?” he asked once he had some moisture in his mouth.
“You collided with a motorcycle.”

“Rider?”

“He died on the scene.” She answered. “You need to rest; the doctor will be by soon since you’ve woken.”

“How…long?”

“Almost a week.” She elevated the head of the bed slightly and then left and Tony closed his eyes, forcing back the magic that wanted to heal him, that would be too suspicious. He’d done too good a job at giving himself realistic injuries it seemed.

He was kept in a private room for three weeks before the Doctors finally discharged him. he’d had few visitors in that time, just Happy and Rhodes but he was always happy to see them. Happy dropped of clothes and Tony painfully dressed in the suit, slipping on his sunglasses before breaking hospital policy to walk out of the hospital, ignoring the flashing cameras as he got into the car. “Penthouse Happy.”

“Got it boss.” The car drove off and he leant back in his seat to rest during the ride.

“Call the airport, I want to go back to Malibu day after tomorrow.”

It didn’t take much to re-familiarise himself with the Malibu mansion and he was soon soaking in the hot tub, relaxing sore muscles which was always nice. Being Tony Stark was not easy, even after basically downloading most of his memories. Newly dead there had still been enough brain activity for him to slip into his mind thankfully. So far nothing seemed really different from what he knew of other Tony’s from this period in his life. Sadly, Pepper wasn’t working for him yet, but in a way that was also good, he didn’t want to risk her spotting something off. So far Rhodes and Happy hadn’t noticed anything which was good.

Eventually he made his way down to the lab and smiled as Dummy approached and spun around him happily. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” He assured the bot before going to work. “Open a new file Jarvis.”
“Of course Sir. A new weapon?”

“Not exactly.” He went to work with the holographic interface, beginning work on a very basic suit of armour, similar and yet very different to the Iron Man suits. For one it wasn’t going to be made of such expensive metal, it wouldn’t be armed and it wasn’t full body.

“A curious design Sir.”

“All the tech that’s out there and motorcycle riders still rely on leather clothes and weak helmets to protect them.” He commented, let everyone think the accident had sparked his interest in personal armour.

“I see.”

Tony just smirked and continued work, he had a lot of work to do in the next…. six odd years before the world started to get really interesting. Though he was stuck on a moral dilemma…. he knew where Cap was buried, should he do something about it or leave him till SHIELD found and thawed him? And what about Bucky? And should he try to help Bruce when he was exposed or did he move to ensure the Hulk was never created? He’d never appeared so far back in the timeline, unless he counted his time in Asgard as Loki’s foster father. At least one thing was easy, in six months was the tech expo where he would steal Pepper away from Killian, pity he hadn’t come early enough to change things there.

It was a good thing he was used to Federation, Alliance and even Goa’uld tech as he wasn’t the genius the real Tony was. But he did have previous experience with advanced and alien tech, not to mention future Stark tech and what he had managed to absorb form Tony. Otherwise he would be in trouble when it came to inventing things. It was tempting to start trying to move the company away from weapons production now but then he wouldn’t be kidnapped by the Ten Rings which meant they may take longer to stop? Not to mention he wasn’t looking forward ending up with shrapnel in his heart.

He worked for several hours before hitting the gym to continue his rehab workout routine and then soaked for a few hours before going to bed. He hated Tony’s schedule but at least he didn’t have to go out partying…. yet. he could use the near death experience to hopefully begin changing his reputation.

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He tossed back the martini and then lounged against the bar as the music blared, eyes roaming the
crowd. He smirked as a group of women approached and let them pull him onto the dance floor, losing himself in the music. An hour later he was in his car with one of the girls, heading home. They made it to the bedroom, clothing littering the floor as they fell into bed together.

Three hours later Tony slipped out of bed, threw on some sweats and headed down to the lab.

“Good morning. It’s 7 a.m. The weather in Malibu is 72 degrees with scattered clouds. The surf conditions are fair with waist to shoulder highlines, high tide will be at 10:52 a.m.” Jarvis reported as his usual wakeup call and the girl in the bed startled awake as the windows lightened to show the view from the master suite. Cara wrapped the blanket around herself and went looking for the billionaire.

“Tony? Hey, Tony!” she tried to open a door, looking for him.

“You are not authorized to access this area.” Jarvis stated and she yelped, backing away.

“That’s Jarvis, he runs the house. I’ve got your clothes here, they’ve been dry cleaned and pressed. And there’s a car waiting for you outside that will take you anywhere you’d like to go.” Pepper stated as she approached, immaculately dressed as always. After nearly two years on the job she was used to this although it was happening less and less frequently.

“You must be the famous Pepper Potts.”

“Indeed I am.”

“Tony has you picking up the dry cleaning?” Cara asked

“I do anything and everything that Mr. Stark requires. Including occasionally taking out the trash. Would that be all?” Pepper smiled blandly, fighting down a smirk of satisfaction as she dismissed the young woman. Once sure she was gone she headed down to the lab to find Tony absorbed in his work on…. farming? she knew the company didn’t only design weapons but it was the main area he usually worked on himself. Thought that light weight, flexible armour he’d come up with for bikers had been a hit and had driven the company stock even higher. He wasn’t quite what she’d expected when she’d taken the job, she’d know his reputation and yet he was…. not quite the irresponsible playboy he was said to be. He didn’t drink or party as much and he didn’t just make weapons. He flirted occasionally but she could tell he wasn’t serious so she flirted back and it was fun. The job definitely had a lot of perks and her pay was far more than she had ever expected but she didn’t work for him for the money, he needed someone to look after him and she thought maybe they were friends.
“Hey Obie.” Tony greeted Obadiah with a smile, hiding what he really felt about the traitorous man.

“Tony! Wonderful to see you actually in the office.”

“Yeah, well I was bored. So, anything interesting coming up?”

“Just the usual.”

“Sounds fun. So the illegal weapons sales are normal?” He asked, catching the man off guard.

“What?”

“Like I said, I was bored, so I did an inventory. Seriously, I made these systems and you thought you could hide things on them from me?” He asked and then smirked as sirens could be heard through the glass entry foyer of the building. “And that would be the wonderful Feds coming to arrest you.” He leant in. “No one messes with my stuff.” He snarled before backing away and letting the FBI have him. It would be interesting to see what ripples this caused. He had a press conference to get too next to tell the world what a bad man Obadiah Stane really was, that would keep the case from being buried. He went to Stane’s office and made sure it all proprietary information was safe from the FBI before leaving the building. Pepper wasn’t anywhere near ready to be made CEO so it looked like he’d have to run his own company for a while.

“Visionary. Genius. American patriot. Even from an early age, the son of legendary weapons developer Howard Stark quickly stole the spotlight with his brilliant and unique mind. At age four, he built his first circuit board. At age six, his first engine. And at seventeen, he graduated Summa Cum Laude from MIT. Then, the passing of a titan. Howard Stark’s lifelong friend Obadiah Stane, steps in to help fill the gap left by the legendary founder. Until at age 21, the prodigal son returns, and is anointed the new CEO of Stark Industries. With the keys to the kingdom, Tony ushers in a new era for his father’s legacy, creating smarter weapons, advanced robotics, satellite targeting.” The announcer’s voice rang out through the packed room.

Rhodey stepped out on the stage and stood at the podium. “Today, Tony Stark has changed the face of the weapons industry, by ensuring freedom and protecting America and her interests around the globe. As liaison to Stark Industries, I’ve had the unique privilege of serving with a real patriot. He is
my friend and he is my great mentor. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honour to present this year's Apogee Award to Mr. Tony Stark!” He called out and Tony stood, adjusting his tie as he walked up on stage to accept the award from his best friend who grinned happily. He knew Tony hated these things but he’d come because Rhodey was giving the award. They shook and the Tony turned to face the auditorium.

“Thank you everyone for being here tonight. Receiving the award from my best friend is a great honour and I am very glad to be here.” He went on to talk of where he wanted the company to go in the future and how he wanted to move away from making weapons to explore other areas. When it was over he dragged Rhodey into the casino for a bit of fun before leaving since they had an early flight. The weapons demonstration had still been asked for in Afghanistan, even with Stane locked away for life.

“Mr. Stark! Excuse me! Mr. Stark!” he turned at his name being called even as Happy unlocked the car doors. “Christine Everheart, Vanity Fair magazine. Can I ask you a couple of questions?”

“She's cute.” Happy murmured.

“She's alright? Hi.”

“Hi.” She smiled at him, recorder ready.

“Yeah. Okay, go.”

“You've been called the Da Vinci of our time. What do you say to that?”

“Absolutely ridiculous. I don't paint.”

“And what do you say to your other nickname, the Merchant of Death?”

That's not bad construction, lousy as an actual nickname though. Let me guess... Berkeley?” yeah, he’d heard the nickname before and hated it. Everything he’d been trying to do to change the company’s reputation and he still got stuck with that.
“Brown, actually.”

“Well, Ms. Brown. It's an imperfect world, but it's the only one we've got. I guarantee you the day weapons are no longer needed to keep the peace, we'll completely stop making them and start making bricks and beams for baby hospitals.”

“Rehearse that much? All I want is the serious answer.”

“Okay, here is serious. My old man had a philosophy: Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy.”

“That's a great line, coming from a guy selling the sticks.”

“My father helped defeat Nazis. He worked on the Manhattan Project. A lot of people, including your professors at Brown, would call that being a hero.”

“And a lot of people would also call that war-profiteering.” She shot back and he sighed.

“Tell me, do you plan to report on the millions we've saved by advancing medical technology? And what about the safety armour for people who ride? Or kept from starvation with our intelli-crops? What about the new computer systems to help the disabled? All those breakthroughs: military funding, honey. And yeah, it sucks that the military funds the most but that’s how things are for now. In case you slept through my speech earlier, Stark Industries is moving away from weapons as much as possible.”

“Wow, did you ever lose an hour of sleep your whole life?”

“That's none of your business. Now, please excuse me but I have an early flight tomorrow.” He got in the car and Happy drove away.

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“Is it better to be feared or respected? And I say, is it too much to ask for both? With that in mind, I humbly present the crown jewel of Stark Industries freedom line. It's the only missile system to incorporate our proprietary repulsor technology. They say the best weapon is one you never have to fire. But if you have to fire, I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That's how Dad did it,
that's how America does it... and it's worked out pretty well so far. Find an excuse to let one of these off the chain, and I personally guarantee you the bad guys won't even want to come out of their caves. For your consideration, the Jericho.” He’d seen a recording of Tony’s speech once and thankfully had remembered most of it. The Jericho going off behind him showed just how accurate his words were on the effect. He didn’t like the weapon personally and had actually toned it down a long way from the original but it was still very lethal. He did have to honour the military contracts they held after all.

“Hey Tony!” Rhodey called and Tony turned to grin at him.

“I'm sorry, this is the fun-vee. The hum-drum-vee is back there.” He told him, this would keep Rhodey alive if the timeline followed known events even with the changes he’d made.

“Nice job. See you back at base.”

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“He wants to know what you think.” Yinsen translated as they left the cave to look arounds at the camp.

“I think he’s got a lot of my weapons.”

“He says they have everything you need to build a Jericho missile. He wants you to make the list of materials. He says for you to start working immediately, and when you're done, he will set you free.”

“No, he won't.” Tony said, smiling at the terrorists and Yinsen smiled as Tony nodded.

“No, he won't.” he agreed, they had both seen too much to be set free. “I'm sure they're looking for you, Stark. But they will never find you in these mountains. Look... What you just saw... that is your legacy, Stark. Your life's work in the hands of those murderers. Is that how you want to go out? Is this the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark? Or are you going to do something about it?” Yinsen demanded as they were locked back in the workroom.

“Why should I do anything? They're gonna kill me, you... Either way, if they don't, I'll probably be dead in a week.” Yeah, having shrapnel in his heart sucked but his magic had isolated it nicely.
“Well then... this is a very important week for you, isn't it?” Yinsen offered and Tony laughed but went to the work table.

“Alright then, let’s get to work.”

“Make sure that checkpoints are clear before you follow me out, OK?” Tony asked as the armour was synching and coming online. It was more streamlined then the real Tony’s first try thanks to the previous work on biker armour.

“We need more time. Okay. I'm gonna go buy you some time.” Yinsen grabbed the fallen guards gun.

“Stick to the plan! Stick to the plan! Yinsen!” he yelled after the scientist. He heard the many shots but finally the armour was ready and he moved out, taking down any terrorist who came into sight. “Yinsen!” he saw the man down near the cave entrance and moved to check him.

“Watch out!” he gasped and Tony turned, batting the missile aside so it went outside the cave. “Stark.” Yinsen coughed and he pushed the faceplate up, kneeling beside him, there were a lot of holes in him.

“Come on. We gotta go. Move with me. C'mon, we got a plan, we need to stick to it.”

“This was always the plan, Stark.” Yinsen admitted softly.

“Come on, you're going to go see your family again.” He pushed and Yinsen shook his head.

“My family is dead. I'm going to see them now, Stark. It's okay. It's okay. I want this. I want this.” His voice was getting softer with every word and Tony took his hand.

“Thank you for saving me.” He whispered.

“Don't waste it... Don't waste your life.” Yinsen gasped out and Tony watched as Death claimed him.
He could have healed him but he understood that the man didn’t fear death, he wanted to be with his family. He stood up and snapped the faceplate down again. “My turn.” He snarled, moving out of the cave.

Pepper walked quickly, without running but she was going to yell at Tony for coming in to work when he should at least be resting, if not in a hospital.

“Ms. Potts?” a male voice called to her and she turned.

“Yes.”

“May I speak with you for a moment?”

“I’m sorry but Mr Stark isn’t giving any interviews.”

“I am not a reporter. I'm agent Phil Coulson, with the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division.”

“That's quite a mouthful.” She pulled open the glass doors.

“I know. We're working on it.”

“We've been approached already by the DOD, FBI, CIA...”

“We are a separate division. With a more specific focus. We need to debrief Mr. Stark about the circumstances of his escape.”

“I'll put something in a book, shall I?”
“Thank you.” Agent Coulson said and she entered the elevator.

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“Pepper!” Tony called over the intercom. “How big are your hands?”

“What?”

“How big are your hands?”

“I don’t understand why...”

“Get down here. I need you.”

“Hey!” she yelled but she headed downstairs and into the secured lab.

“Let’s see them.” Tony ordered from where he was reclining on a chair, shirtless and with the thing keeping alive looking different. “Show me your hands. Let’s see them.” He called and she held her hands out. “Oh, wow, they are small. Very petite, indeed. I just need your help for a sec.”

“Oh my God, is that the thing that’s keeping you alive?” she asked, half shocked and half disgusted.

“It was; it is now an antique. This is what will be keeping me alive for the foreseeable future. I was swapping it up for an upgraded unit and I just ran into a little... speed bump.” He pointed at the new one. He was glad that any wounds healed when he left a dimension because he did not want a giant hole in his chest for the rest of his life.

“Speed bump? What’s happening?”

“It’s nothing, it’s just a little snag. There’s an exposed wire under this device and is contacting a socket wall and is causing a little bit of a short circuit.” He explained.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Put that on the table over there. That is irrelevant. I just want you to reach in... and you’re just gonna
gently lift the wire out.”

“Is it safe?”

“Yeah, it should be fine. It's just like Operation, you just don't let it touch the socket wall.”

“What's Operation?”

“It's just a game, never mind. Just gently lift the wire.”

“Okay.”

Okay? Great.” He grinned at her.

“You know; I don't think that I am qualified to do this.” She shakily moved closer and began moving her hand towards the metal lined hole.

“No, no, you're fine. You're the most capable, qualified and trustworthy person I've ever met. You're gonna do great. Is it too much of a problem to ask? Cause I really need your help here.” He babbled as her hand slipped into the hole.

“Oh, there's pus!” She grimaced in disgust.

“It's not pus. It's a plasmic discharge, it's from the device, not from my body.”

“It smells!”

“Yeah, it does. The copper wire. The copper wire, you got it?”

“I got it.” She held it tightly and began pulling it up.
“Now don't let it touch...” he gasped and jerked and then choked out the rest, “...the sides, that's what I was trying to tell you before. Okay, now make sure that when you pull it out, you don't pull out the magnet and the end of it. That was it... ...that you just pulled out.” He groaned as he saw the magnet.

“Oh God. OK, what do I do?” she moved it back towards the hole.

“Don't put it back in!” he gasped out.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing, I'm just going into cardiac arrest cause you yanked out...”

“What? I thought you said this was safe!”

“We gotta hurry. Take this, you gotta switch, real quick.” He reached for the new one, passing it weakly to her.

“Okay, okay. Tony, it's gonna be okay. I'm gonna make this okay.” She babbled, looking scared and lost.

“You gotta touch that to base plate. And make sure you...” he gasped and then relaxed as it began to work, the reactor glowing softly. “Was that so hard? That was fun, right?”

“I got it, I got it. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I feel great. Are you okay?” he sat up and smiled at her.

“Don't ever, ever... ...ever ask me to do anything like that ever again.”

“I don't have anyone but you.” He admitted.
“What do you want me to do with this?”

“That? Destroy it. Incinerate it.”

“You don't wanna keep it?”

“Pepper, I've been called many things. Nostalgic is not one of them.” He answered as he pulled a tank top on, the glowing reactor visible through the material.

“Would that be all, Mr. Stark?” She gathered her wits and he grinned.

“That would be all, Ms. Potts.” She left and he leant against the bench, rubbing his chest.

“Are you alright Sir?” Jarvis asked.

“Yeah, thanks for the help.” He moved to begin dismantling the equipment used to make the brand new element that Howard Stark had discovered and hidden clues about for him. good thing he’d know where it was to be found so he could stumble across it at the right time and save himself from being poisoned to death. “I'd like to open a new project file, index as: Mark 2.”

“Shall I store this on the Stark Industries' central database?”

“I don’t know who to trust right now. Till further notice, why don't we just keep everything on my private server.” He answered, he knew Stane wasn’t the only traitor or mole in the company, not with Hydra alive and kicking.

“Working on a secret project, are we, sir?”

“I don't want this winding up in the wrong hands. Maybe in mine it could actually do some good.” He brought up the basic armour designs he already marketed or played with and went to work.

“Day 11, Test 37, Configuration 2.0. For lack of a better option, Dummy is still on fire safety. If you douse me again, and I'm not on fire, I'm donating you to a city college.” He warned the bot who
beeped sadly but held the extinguisher ready. “Alright, nice and easy. Seriously, just gonna start off with 1% thrust capacity. And 3, 2, 1.” Tony grinned as the suit took off from the lab floor and hovered nicely. He wished he had paid attention to his husbands suits before and then maybe he would be making faster progress. “Please don't follow me around with it either cause I feel like I'm going to catch on fire spontaneously. Just stand down. If something happens, then come in.” he landed and took a deep breath, getting ready for the second stage. “Again, lets bring it up to 2.5%. Okay, this is where I don't want to be.” He yelped as his attempt to fly sent him through the ceiling and into the garage. “Not the car, not the car.” He crashed into it and then rolled free as Dummy doused it. “It could be worse. We are fine. Okay, we are getting there.” He took off again and then grinned as he finally got it under control.” Yeah. I can fly. Jarvis, are you there?”

“At your service, sir.”

“Engage head up display.”

“Check.” Jarvis answered.

“Import all preferences from home interface.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Alright, what do you say?”

“I have indeed been uploaded, sir. We're online and ready.”

“Start the virtual walkthrough.” He ordered as he flew around the room, getting the hang for things.

“Importing preferences and calibrating virtual environment.”

“Do a check on control surfaces.”

“As you wish. Test complete. Preparing to power down and begin diagnostics.”
“Ah, yes... tell you what. Do a weather and ATC check. Start listening the ground control.” He ordered, wanting to really test the suit and he wanted to fly.

“Sir, there are still terabytes of calculations needed before an actual flight.”

“Jarvis... Sometimes you gotta run before you can walk. Ready? And 3, 2, 1.” He blasted up the driveway and out into the air, gaining altitude fast. “It feels like a dream. Alright, let’s see what this thing can do. What's the SR-71’s record?”

“The altitude record for fixed-wing flight is 85,000 feet, sir.”

“Records are made to be broken.” He poured on the power, going straight up, he remembered Tony telling him what had happened and it needed to in order to highlight a fault. “Higher!” he half laughed as he pushed further.

“Sir, there is a potentially fatal build-up of ice occurring.”

“Keep going! Higher!” he laughed as he looked around at the clear view of the stars and then the ice got too much and he began to fall. “We're iced up, Jarvis! Deploy flaps. Jarvis? C'mon, we gotta break the ice! Cut power.” He yelled out as he fell until finally the speed generated enough heat to melt the ice and the suit came under his control again. “Note: main transducer feels sluggish at plus 40 altitude. The whole pressurization is problematic. I'm thinking 'icy' is a probable factor.”

“A very astute observation, sir. Perhaps if you intend to visit other planets, we should improve the exo systems.” Jarvis suggested dryly and Tony chuckled.

“Good idea, mark that for me to work on. Connect to the Cisco, have it reconfigure the shell metals. Use the gold-titanium alloy from the Seraphim tactical satellite. That should ensure the fuselage integrity while maintaining power-to-weight ratio. Got it?” he called as he landed back in the garage and the machines began peeling him out of the armour.

“Yes. Shall I render using proposed specifications?”

“Thrill me.” He stripped off and began redressing in the suit he had brought down earlier; he did have a benefit to attend after all.
“The render is complete.” Jarvis called and he went to look while fastening his watch.

“Little ostentatious, don’t you think?”

“What was I thinking? You’re usually so discrete.”

“Tell you what... throw a little dark red in there and tone the gold down a bit.”

“Yes, that shall help you keep a low profile.” Jarvis snarked and then a new image appeared. “The render is complete.”

“Yeah, I like it.” Tony grinned, the darker colours made it a bit less garish to look at and he preferred them to the bright ones his Tony had used. “Fabricate it and paint it.”

“Commencing an automated assembly. Estimated completion time is five hours.”

“Don’t wait up for me, honey.” He called as he got in his car and took off for the benefit. Things were going well, Obadiah was in prison for life, he still needed to deal with the Ten Rings but he needed someone or something to give him a good lead on them to keep suspicion away. He’d even managed to slip some data into a few systems that should lead to Cap being found sooner, if not he’d go get the man himself. He’d also managed to arrange an embarrassing event for several members of Hydra that were also Senators or other CEO’s, cutting some of their support and funding though he knew they’d find other sources eventually. He’d managed to lift his reputation a lot over the last several years and life was looking pretty good which meant something was going to go wrong. Would someone else in the Company steal the reactor this time or would events happen completely differently?

TBC.....
Chapter Summary

still iron man xover

Disclaimer: Not mine

So people complained in part 1 that Harry has barely changed anything…. of course he hasn’t, he needs events to play through till at least the Avengers get together or he risks Loki invading with no one there to stop him. he can’t do anything about what’s happening on Asgard. So he’s subtly nudging things here and there to get people moving a bit faster like slipping SHIELD info on where Cap may be frozen. And his arc reactor is using the new element made in movie 2, he just ‘found’ it earlier so no poisoning.

I Am Iron Man Part 2

Tony rested against the bar, watching the benefit in full swing and enjoying a moment of quiet as he sipped at a glass of water disguised in as a martini. He knew this was it, the last party before things would really start moving so he was going to enjoy it.

“Mr. Stark?”

“Yeah?” he turned to see Phil standing close.

“Agent Coulson.”

“Ah yes, the guy from the…” He frowned as if he couldn’t remember the name.

“Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division.”

“Right, you really need a new name for that.”
“Yeah, I hear that a lot. Listen, I know this must be a trying time for you, but we need to debrief you. There’s still a lot of unanswered questions, and time can be a factor with these things.”

“What’s there to say? Convoy got blown up and I ended up stuck in a cave with some nuts you really like my weapons. And I have no clue where the cave was.”

“We need a bit more than that.”

“Fine. Let’s just put something on the books.”

“How about the 24th, at 7 p.m. at Stark Industries?” Phil asked and Tony nodded in resignation, he knew SHIELD too well, better to meet with him then keep dodging.

“Tell you what... you got it. You're absolutely right. I'm gonna go to my assistant and we'll make it date.” He put his empty glass down and moved over to where he’d spotted Pepper.

“You look fantastic.

“What are you doing here?” she asked as he tugged her onto the dance floor.

“Avoiding government agents. I love that dress.” He grinned and she shook her head.

“Thank you for the birthday present Mr Stark.” She smiled and he nodded, glad she liked this year’s Birthday present, that had been one of the reasons Pepper had left Tony, he had never remembered the important dates. He wasn’t sure if he wanted her as his partner or just a really good friend but either way she deserved to be treated better than she had been in other worlds.

“I have great taste; you look utterly stunning.” He dipped her. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

“No, no. I always forget to wear a deodorant, and dance with my boss in front of everyone that I work with, in a dress with no back.” She babbled and he moved them onto the balcony.

“You look great, you smell great.” He teased gently. “But I could fire you, if that'd take the edge off.”
“I actually don't think that you could tie your shoes without me.”

“I'd make it a week.” He mock pouted.

“Really? What's your social security number?” she demanded and he gave it to her without even having to think, surprising her. “That was totally weird.”

“Totally harmless.” He shrugged, leaning against the balustrade and looking out over the city lights.

“It was totally not harmless, by the way.”

“Nobody was watching us.”

“Everybody who I work with... You don't understand because you're you. And everybody knows exactly who you are, and how you are with girls. And all that, which is completely fine... But you know, then me, you're my boss and I'm dancing... Because it makes me look like... the one who's trying to...” she babbled and he winced slightly.

“I just think you're overstating, that's all.”

“And we're here, and then I'm... wearing this ridiculous dress... And then we were dancing like that and... I would like a drink, please.” She finally finished.

“Got it.”

“I would like a vodka martini, please. Very dry with olives, lot of olives, like at least three olives.” She called after him as he made his way back inside and then over to the bar.

“Two vodka martinis, extra dry, extra olives, extra fast. Make one of them dirty.”

“Well... Tony Stark!”

“That's right. You have a lot of nerve showing up here tonight.” She snapped and he stared at her blankly before glancing back to see if the drinks were done. Why was it even the women he hadn’t slept with wouldn’t leave him alone? “Can I at least get a reaction from you?”

“What are you looking for Christine? After that wonderfully biased article you wrote that was printed while I was being held hostage?

“I was referring to your company's involvement in this latest atrocity.”

“They just put my name on the invitation, I don't know what to tell you.” He didn’t think the party was that bad, he’d been to far worse.

“I actually almost bought it, hook, line and sinker.” She snapped. “Is this what you call accountability?” She yanked out her tablet and handed it over. His eyes widened as he stared at the devastation.

“It's a town called Gulmira. Heard of it?”

Yeah, he’d heard of it. “When were these taken?”

“Yesterday.” She backed off a little as she saw the shock in his eyes as he skimmed over the images.

“I didn't approve any shipment.”

“Well, your company did.”

“If you’ll excuse me.” He had a traitor to hunt and weapons to destroy. He grabbed the drinks and handed them to a young man. “Miss Potts is on the balcony, tell her something important came up and I’ll call her later.” He ordered before slipping away and heading back to the house, flipping on the news as he reached the lab.
“The fifteen miles’ hike to the outskirts of Gulmira can only be described as a ‘descent into Hell’. Into a modern day heart of darkness. Simple farmers and herders from peaceful villages have been driven from their homes displaced from their lands by warlords, emboldened by a newfound power. Villagers have been forced to take shelter in whatever ways that they can find. In the ruins of other villages or here, in the remnants of the old Soviet smelting plant. Recent violence has been attributed to a group of foreign fighters, referred to by locals as the Ten Rings. As you can see, these men are heavily armed and on a mission. A mission that can prove fatal to anyone who stands in their way. With no political will or international pressure, there's very little hope for these refugees. Around me, a woman begging for news on her husband who was kidnapped by insurgents. Either forced to join their militia... ...to anyone who will stop a child's simple question: "Where are my mother and father?" There's very little hope for these refugees, refugees who can only wonder who, if anyone, will help.”

Listening to the reporter as he went to work had him grinding his teeth but he couldn’t have acted without something to work from or people would ask too many questions. He intended to drag out the names of any more traitors in SI from anyone he took alive. He really didn’t like traitors. The armour emerged and Tony grinned at the muted colours and slim lined form, oh yeah this was real armour. He stepped onto the platform and allowed the machines to place the pieces on his body before the faceplate sealed. “Ready Jarvis?”

“Of course Sir.”

“Let’s do this.” He smirked and blasted off.

Tony nodded at various staff members as he strolled through the building and into the private elevator to get to his office. Once inside he locked the door and started up the computer. “Time to find a rat.” He whispered as he began working, sorting through the mountains of ‘paperwork’ the company put out because whoever had sold those weapons could not have avoided some sort of trail and he was going to find it and make sure they knew why people avoided angering him. besides with Rhodey not talking to him at the moment he didn’t actually have anything to do but work.

“Mr Stark, surprised you’re here today.”

“Miss Potts how could I resist coming in to see you?” he teased back as she walked in and placed a pile of paperwork on his desk. “Anything urgent?”

“A few military contracts. Why? New project?”
“Sort of…” he checked she’d shut the door. “More of a hunt?”

“Oh?” one elegant eyebrow went up.

“Rats.” He handed her a usb stick. “I think you have a meeting.”

“Oh.” She whispered. “I’ll keep everyone away Mr Stark.”

“Thank you Miss Potts.” He went back to work as she left, tracing various shipping orders, who made them, who packed them and who received them.

Pepper made her way downstairs to find Agent Coulson waiting patiently. “Ms. Potts? Did you forget about our appointment?”

“Nope. Right now, come with me. I'll give you the meeting of your life. Your office.” She walked out of the building and the bemused Agent followed, opening the passenger door of his car for her. Pepper had understood Tony’s message, there was at least one traitor in SI, selling weapons to some rather bad people and they needed to stop them. So she would get the government to help since that was what they were there for.

Tony smirked as he watched two members of the board plus three other staff members as they were cuffed and pushed into cars. All resolved without blowing the arc reactor or having to fight another armour, all in all a good week’s work. And iron man hadn’t had to go public which was good and bad, good in that it should keep some of what had happened with a certain Russian from happening, bad since the people didn’t have a hero to look to. Which meant he’d have to find a way to go public that wouldn’t look too planned. Of course SHIELD were being blind and not following the leads he’d planted so he was going to have to ‘discover’ something in his Dad’s notes to send him exploring the frozen wastes. And maybe it was better he find Steve, get off on the right foot and help him adjust.

“Why are you going Tony?” Pepper demanded as she watched him pack.
“Because this was important to my Dad, Pepper. He was always talking about his great friend Steve Rogers. If this is right, then I have to be there. Relax, I’m taking the suite plus security and with the arrests last month I could use some time away.”

“You’ll be careful?”

“Promise. It’s just a trip to the frozen north while everyone else thinks I’m off skiing in the Alps. Remember to have some fun while I’m gone.” He grinned and then closed his bag and went down to where Happy was waiting with the car to drive to the airport. His people were keeping quiet over what they were working on, the post traitor shake up had ensured the staff were loyal and they wouldn’t say a word about this expedition until he announced it. Captain America was a hero and they all wanted him to have the honours he deserved so the ‘plan’ was to find his body and then ship it home where the military could then ensure he was buried with full honours.

“We’re here Mr Stark.” One of the expedition popped his head in and then left and Tony quickly donned the rest of his cold weather gear before following them out onto the land he had bought through a few shell companies so no one would realise it was his. The ice was solid under the layers of snow and their boots made walking through it relatively easy.

“Alright, let’s set up! Dark comes quickly out here; I want the camp up in twenty.” Expedition leader Matthew Blake yelled at his people. Tony pitched in, surprising some of them but soon camp was ready and they began making dinner before they rolled themselves in sleeping bags for the night, the real work would begin in the morning. Thanks to Jarvis they had excellent satellite scans of the area to work from.

Three days of work and excited shouting began. Tony ran over and grinned as he saw the tip of a wing through the ice. The heavy machinery moved in and everyone worked to dig the downed plane from the ice. When they opened the hatch Tony dropped down inside, feeling the ice crack a little under his weight. Two of the others joined him and they moved cautiously deeper into the plane.

“Sir.” A flashlight beam locked onto an object and Tony grinned.

“Cut it free.” He ordered, moving towards the front and then he saw it, a frozen section near the pilots’ seat. He walked closer and knelt down, brushing away at loose ice until his gloved hand brushed something else. He yanked the glove off and hesitantly touched what he had found, unsurprisingly the hand was ice cold but…. “He’s got a pulse!” He called out. “Get medical and cutting equipment down here now!” he yelled. Soon the cockpit was swarming as they went to work cutting him out of the ice and prepping him for transport, ensuring he remained frozen for now as it was safer while travelling. They went topside and got the Captain stored before getting ready to
leave, leaving most of the expedition behind to salvage the plane and any Hydra tech on board.

They flew right threw to California and then transferred the Captain to his Malibu mansion. Once safely ensconced within the medical team took full control, working to melt the ice and warm him while hopefully doing no damage.

“How is he?”

“Impossibly alive. Seventy years in the ice should have killed him, hell the crash should have killed him. Only thing we can think to blame is the Serum, somehow its kept him alive all this item and even now it’s enabling us to thaw him with no damage.”

“How long till he’s awake?”

“Now that enough of him is free of the ice we have begun sedating him, waking during the process would most likely be painful not to mention highly disorientating. Once he’s thawed we will stop the sedation and after that it is up to him.”

Tony sat beside the bed, staring at America’s first superhero while waiting for him to wake. The sedation had been stopped the day before and he knew how fast Cap could burn off medication. Sure enough he soon began to see signs of waking. “It’s alright Rogers, you’re safe. You’re back in America now.” He whispered softly over and over until finally blue eyes opened. “Hey, how do you feel?”

“Howard?” He asked groggily and Tony shook his head. Steve went to sit up and Tony piled some pillows behind him.

“Take it slow, you’ve been out for a while.”

“The war….”

“Over, we won.”
“Where am I?” The grogginess was wearing off very quickly now.

“Malibu California in my home.”

“Who are you?” Steve demanded, glancing around the rather bland room.

“Tony Stark, Howard…. Was my Father. I’m sorry Cap, but it took us a long time to find you.” The medics had wanted him to lie, to take things much slower but he knew how well that had worked for SHIELD.

“How long?” Steve demanded and Tony ran a hand through his hair.

“It’s 2009 now Captain.” He handed over the mornings paper and Steve took it, glancing over the headlines as he took in the date.

“This could be faked.”

“True. Jarvis, blinds please.” He ordered and Steve jumped as the blinds opened to reveal a nice view of the sea where a massive cargo ship could be seen in the distance. “My Father spent years looking for you, it was thanks to his notes I found you. He spoke very highly of you Captain.”

“And?”

“And nothing, I went out thinking I’d be bringing your body back for burial. Not sure what to do with the fact you’re alive. You can go to the government if you want or learn to fit in and then vanish. It’s your life. They say Hydra fell shortly after you went into the ice, I’m not sold on that considering some things I’ve found over the years. But you’re war is over. There’s other threats, there’ll always be threats, doesn’t mean they’re your responsibility.”

“If Hydra’s still out there it isn’t.”

“Had a feeling you’d say that.” Tony grinned and Steve nodded. Tony stood and Steve frowned at the glow through his shirt.
“What’s that?” He asked and Tony glanced down. “Miniaturised arc reactor. Keeps the shrapnel from tearing my heart to shreds.” He shrugged and Steve’s eyes widened, they could do that now?

“Shrapnel, you served?”

Tony shook his head. “Same as Dad, I make weapons for the US military. Was in Afghanistan on a demonstration when our convoy was hit. They’re called the Ten Rings and they wanted my weapons. So they stuck me in a cave with equipment and told me to build, they just didn’t like what I built.” He smirked and Steve grinned, well able to understand what Tony had done to his captors. Only an idiot locks a weapons maker away with equipment to make weapons.

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“This is amazing.”

Tony looked up and grinned, getting Jarvis to let Steve into the lab. “Thanks. Careful what you touch.”

Steve nodded and wandered around, keeping his hands to himself as he looked at tech that would have made Howard drool. It was hard, accepting everything he knew was gone but being in Tony’s lab helped make it really real, so had their trip into LA the other day. So much had changed since he had…slept. And he still wasn’t entirely sure what to do now. He looked over and then moved closer as Tony worked. “What is that?”

“Armour.” He answered. “Okay Jarvis, go ahead and get started on the Mark III.”

“Of course sir. Oh and remember Miss Potts returns today.”

“Thank you Jarvis.” He spun around to face Steve, enlarging the schematics. “Started off making armour for motorcycle riders and then Afghanistan happened and armour was how I got out, the Mark I. The Mark II I used to take out some Ten Rings foot soldiers in a little town called Gulmira. Government can’t get to these monsters but I can.” He shrugged, flashing up the news footage that had sent him to the village and Steve’s hand clenched in anger.

“It’s flight capable?”
“Yeah, now that I’ve fixed the icing problem and worked on the materials I can even leave the atmosphere briefly.”

“Incredible.” And he’d thought Hydra had been advanced, Tony blew them out of the water. “So how can I help?”

“You serious?”

“Yes. I hate bullies.”

Tony grinned. “Okay then. Your shield is in the storage cabinet over there, guess you’re going to need it.” Steve went and got it out, smiling as he slipped his arm into the strap. “How attached are you to the old uniform?”

“Not incredibly.”

Tony opened a new file and went to work, designing armour for Steve that wouldn’t impinge his movement but would give him protection and allow him to keep up. A flying Captain America would be very fun.

Soon whispers began of two armoured men, taking the fight to the Ten Rings and other terrorist groups. Rhodey took a look at some footage and kept his mouth shut, choosing friendship over the military. Besides, Tony had Captain America with him! no way was he turning them in for doing what they all wanted to do.

Stark Industries simply denied anything to do with the armour, they made light weight, low tech stuff to keep people safe, not weaponised suites.

“Hey Jarvis, lights.” Tony called as he and Steve walked into the mansion after their latest trip but there was no response and the ex-soldier tensed, ready for a fight as he spotted the man by the doors to the balcony. Tony followed his gaze and frowned, moving over to a wall panel to grab a weapon, he wasn’t as good in a fight as Steve after all. “Who are you?” he growled, Jarvis better be alright.
“Tony Stark and Steve Rogers. You think you’re the only heroes out there?” he stepped into view and Tony frowned.

“Fury…I’ve seen your photo in some of my Dad’s later stuff, you looked better with hair.” Tony snarked and heard Steve chuckle.

“Well these days I am the Director of SHIELD.”

“SHIELD… so someone finally shortened the name. So what brings you by?”

“The two of you are making some considerable waves.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“So you deny being who the media have begun dubbing Iron Man?”

“Catchy.” He leant against the couch and Steve stood mirroring him further in the room, boxing Fury between them and the man obviously knew it.

“Mr. Stark, Captain Rogers, you’ve become part of a bigger universe. Sooner or later people will work out who is behind those suits.”

“So?” Steve asked, he didn’t care. He’d been Captain America before; he could do it again.

“I’m here to talk to you about the Avenger Initiative.” He answered, not noticing the satisfied smirk on Tony’s face.

TBC…? Think it needs a part 3? Or do I end it there and let you imagine what else might change?
“What’s up Tony?” Steve asked as he put some toast on, breathing slightly heavily from his morning run.

“Apparently an old satellite crashed in New Mexico, not far from a town.” So Thor had finally been banished. He hid a grin at Steve’s causal speech, he’d picked up the more modern English use rather quickly this time.

“It didn’t hit anyone?”

“Not according to this.” He skimmed the article and then moved on. “Anything interesting Jarvis?”

“It appears no Sir. Perhaps a day at the office?” The AI offered and Steve snickered even as Tony groaned before sighing.

“Fine, tell Pepper I’m coming in so to schedule anything important.”

“Of course sir.”

Tony smiled and waved at the press as the cameras flashed before heading inside, Steve a silent shadow at his shoulder, dressed as SI security. It was amazing how little work it took to keep people from recognising America’s first superhero. They walked into the hall and Tony removed his sunglasses to look around. Science expos were always interesting places to see who was trying to catch up to his work or even pass it. But he was at this one for a very specific reason, Pepper would never know the pain of Extremis, Killian would never create the Mandarin and kill so many. He walked towards the AIM area, seeing the man himself showing off what his think tank had created.
“Agents.” Steve murmured and Tony looked over to see the FBI approaching the stand, smothering a smirk as Killian and his people were swiftly arrested and everything seized. Well, most of everything, Jarvis had already cracked their computers and taken everything on Extremis and several other questionable projects, not wanting any secret Hydra agents getting their hands on it. Besides, stabilised Extremis could prove very useful, especially once they found a certain Soldier.

Sir, I believe this may be of interest.” Jarvis announced and they both turned as the screen turned on to breaking news.

“Culver University.” Tony identified the campus easily, he’d been there before after all.

“What is the military doing there?” his question was answered a second later as the shaking image revealed the Hulk.

“Jarvis fire up the armour!” Tony yelled as they bolted for the lab. “We need to get him away from the army, get him calmed down.”

“Agreed.” Steve stepped onto the platform and his dark blue and silver armour quickly covered him before they took off at top speed. But it wasn’t enough and by the time they arrived the Hulk was gone, leaving destroyed machinery and scattered soldiers behind. “What do you want to do?”

“Scan those tanks, they don’t look normal.” They scanned everything and then left before they were noticed.

As the armour was removed Steve looked to his friend. “What was all that about?” He demanded so Tony sat down and told him everything he knew of Doctor Bruce Banner.

The two armoured figures came out of nowhere, hitting the base hard and fast before the soldiers had any time to sound the alarm or really fight back. “What is this place?” Steve shivered despite the climate controlled armour as they walked through the corridors, moving ever deeper.

“It is listed as storage on the manifest I found Captain.” Jarvis answered.
“Well I found a massive file room.” Tony’s voice answered from the other side of the underground silo. “There’s stuff here dated back to the War.”

“Tony…. you need to see this.” Steve stared in horrified shock at the tubes of frozen people. He stepped out of his armour, glad the Mark 5 didn’t need help to be removed. He looked around and then moved to the middle where there was a solid metal door with a small view window. He looked in and froze in horror. “No…”

“Steve? Hey, talk to me Cap.” Tony called as he flew through the halls to where Steve was. He landed and removed his armour, walking up to look inside. “Steve?”

“Bucky…. it’s Bucky.” He began looking for a way to open it but Tony stopped him.

“Hey! Slow down and think Steve. You can’t just open that thing, you’ll kill him. first we need to find any files on him and the others here, look at what’s been done to them. Then we look at getting them help, okay?” He gripped Steve’s shoulders, meeting panicked blue until Steve slowly relaxed and nodded.

“You’re right.”

“Of course I am. Now let’s get to work.” They worked as quickly but thoroughly as possible, not knowing when someone would decide to check on the base. Watching the available footage on the training was brutal and left them with a moral dilemma. They had volunteered for this, they had wanted to be better soldiers for Hydra and then the serum had driven them mad.


“So do we pull the plug?” Tony asked and Steve hesitated.

“We do that…a case could be made to do the same for Bucky.”

“No one’s making cases Steve, he didn’t volunteer. He was a POW and they tortured him.”
“He killed your parents.”

“Hydra killed my parents. I’ll make it easy for you, I’ll make the call.” Tony stepped back into his armour and then blasted the power system for the tanks. But Steve had survived defrosting so he took a deep breath and armed the mini missiles he carried, aiming at each tank. Steve watched as his friend destroyed Hydra’s soldiers. “Now let’s get him out of here.”

He stared down at the medical bed where Bucky lay, heavily sedated even as his body defrosted. Knowing how bad his mental state was he slipped into the unconscious soldiers’ mind and went to work, ensuring Steve got his best friend back. “Jarvis?”

“Yes sir.”

“Begin synthesising the stabilised Extremis and add it to his IV when done.”

“Are you sure Sir?”

“Yes.” He then grabbed his equipment and went to work removing the monstrous prosthetic. He heard Steve come down at some point and take a seat to quietly watch as he worked to remove Hydra’s taint from Bucky. The arm was truly a horror with the way it was welded into his shoulder and upper chest. Then there were the pouches of drugs in it fed into his veins. Finally, the last part came free even as the Extremis was added to the IV and they watched with bated breath until his veins seemed to glow with inner fire. Steve actually gasped as they watched Bucky’s arm regrow in seconds. “Vitals?”

“Stable Sir.”

“It worked.”

“Of course it did.” Tony smirked and Steve shook his head.

“So why haven’t you used it? The suit doesn’t need your reactor as mine proves.”
“I…” Tony blinked, he hadn’t even thought of that. “Huh.”

“You forgot didn’t you?”

“Maybe.” His answer made Steve laugh but he fell silent as Bucky groaned, eyelids fluttering.

“Bucky? Can you hear me?” Steve called and slowly blue eyes opened. “Buck can you hear me.” Steve moved into sight, hoping he would recognise him.

He blinked and the world came into focus, he was warm, so warm…. wasn’t it meant to be cold? He focused as he heard a voice, staring at the man there. He was talking, his voice low and warm, but that wasn’t right, was it? Was he one of them? He shifted slightly and then frowned, he was being held down. He slowly lifted an arm and then moved his fingers.

“Give him a few minutes. I don’t know what effect Extremis will have on what they did to his mind.” But it would be a nice cover for what he had done.

He saw the second man and groaned, hands moving to his head. Who were they? Who was he?

“Easy Bucky.” Steve called softly, moving a little closer to the bed.

He blinked and lowered his hands. Bucky? Who was…. Bucky, he was Bucky. He knew the man standing there, he knew him! “Steve.” He whispered, voice rusty and unused but Steve heard and moved to his side, slowly reaching out his hand so Bucky raised his to clasp them together.

“You know me?” he asked and Bucky nodded.

“Punk.”

That made Steve laugh even as he got him a glass of water. Steve helped him sit up and then passed the glass to him. “How do you feel?” Steve perched cautiously on the edge of the bed, overjoyed Bucky recognised him, knew him still.
Bucky sipped the cool water, it felt utterly heavenly as it slid down his throat. How did he feel? Thinking was hard, everything was muffled and heavy. What had happened? Where? “Where?” he asked.

“California, you’re home in America Buck.”

Home? He was home, with Steve.

“Howard.” Tony said and Bucky nodded. “I’ve been told I look a lot like him.”

“I killed him…. didn’t I?”

“The Winter Soldier killed my parents, not you Bucky.” Tony stated firmly, he would not have the other man fall into guilt over his previous actions. Steve walked down the stairs and Bucky immediately focused on him, Steve being near made it easier to remember. “I’m going to need your help with something.” They both looked at Tony and he tapped his chest where the glow of the arc reactor was. “You were right Steve, if Extremis can fix this then I need to do it. This is too easy a target.”

“You sure?”

“No, but I’m doing it anyway.”

Tony lay on the table with the IV already in place, leads on his chest to monitor his vitals. The bag glowed an orangey red from the liquid inside even as Tony breathed deeply, it wasn’t like this would kill him but there was still so much that needed doing in this world.
“Ready?” Steve asked in concern.

“Do it.” He whispered, closing his eyes even as Steve reached down to his chest.

Bucky watched in avid fascination as Steve carefully removed the arch reactor and then the chamber that housed it, both staring in shock at the deep hole in Tony’s chest. Was that his heart beating away? They’d both seen their share of wounds over the years but this felt even more horrifying for the precision of the wound. They were brought out of their shock when Tony gasped and his heart skipped a beat. Steve quickly started the IV, watching as Extremis flooded into Tony’s veins. Would it work? Would it destroy the shrapnel that was quickly moving into Tony’s heart? But ever so slowly his heart strengthened instead of slowing and his face relaxed from the pained look.

“Tony?”

He opened his eyes and grinned at Steve. “Well, that was an experience.” He sat up and Steve grabbed his shoulder to steady him. They all stared as the hole in his chest healed over quickly and then Tony cautiously touched the new flesh. “Very good.”

Fury read over the reports and frowned. Keeping any sort of surveillance on the Malibu mansion and its occupants had become impossible and it was frustrating. Stark had changed the board and both sides were scrambling to keep up with him and Rogers as they took out any threat, not just to America, but to any civilians. And recently a third figure in black and silver armour had joined them, one they had no information on at all, not even a name. the mess in New Mexico was still unresolved as Thor had never returned although Foster’s work appeared to be coming along. Selvig had also been a good choice to recruit to work on the Tesseract. Stark was the only real name in clean energy and if he was more controllable he would have had him brought in on it but he was too much a wild card to trust with it.

“Hey Pepper.” Tony greeted as she walked into his office.

“Tony, got bored at home?” She asked and then froze, frowning. Something was…. “The reactor, it’s gone?”

“Yep.” He tapped his chest, grinning happily.
“Good. You forget, I’ve seen your doctors bill. No more chest infections?”

“None, it’s all healed.”

“I don’t want to know how.” She put the files on his desk. “The sale has been finalised, you now own a whole block in New York City.”

“Good. Here’s the preliminary plans, send them off to be okayed please.” He sent the plans to her tablet.

“Anything else Mr Stark?”

“That’s all Miss Potts. Oh, have a nice date tonight.” He grinned and she blushed slightly but nodded and left.

The Other knelt before the thrown. “The Tesseract has awakened. It is on a little world. A human world. They would wield its power,” He watched on as the Sceptre was handed to Loki. “But our ally knows its workings as they never will. He is ready to lead. And our force, our Chitauri, will follow. The world will be his. The universe yours. And the humans, what can they do but burn?” below the army stood in ranks, ready for the invasion.

“This is out of line, Director. You're dealing with forces you can't control.” One of the World Security Members berated him.

Fury remained unmoved, maybe they would be more intimidating if he could see their faces? “You ever been in a war, Councilman? In a firefight? Did you feel an overabundance of control?”

“You saying that this Asgard has declared war on our planet?”

“Not Asgard. Loki.” He clarified. If Asgard had declared war he had no doubt they’d all be dead
already, they had no defence against another world attacking.

“He can't be working alone. What about the other one? His brother.” The sole woman asked.

“Our intelligence says, Thor is not a hostile. But he's worlds away, we can't depend on him to help. It's up to us.”

“Which is why you should be focusing on phase 2, it was designed for exactly…”

“PHASE 2 isn't ready, our enemy is. We need a response team.” The Director argued, there were times he really hated the Council, how did Pierce deal with them so often?

“The Avengers Initiative was shut down.”

“This isn't about The Avengers.”

“We're running the world's greatest covert security network and you're gonna leave the fate of human race to a handful of freaks.”

“I'm not leaving anything to anyone. We need a response team. These people maybe fairly isolated, unbalanced even, but I believe with the right push they can be exactly what we need.”

“You believe?” She asked.

“War isn't won by sentiment, Director.”

“No, it's won by soldiers.” He cut the connection and sighed, it was time SHIELD got Stark and his friends on side.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean, Iron Man worked on cutting a pipeline with a laser cutter coming from his hand. He then placed a device around the thick lines and it lit up. He rocketed up from the water and sped towards the still under construction Stark Tower. “You're good on this end. The rest is up to you.”
“You disconnected the transition lines? Are we off the grid?” Steve asked over the comm, sounding excited.

“Stark Tower is about to become a beacon of self-sustaining clean energy.” Tony grinned inside the suite.

“Wow. So the reactor’s going to take over and work?” Bucky asked as he watched the screens with Steve.

“I assume. Light her up.” Tony ordered as he came into sight of their new home. The power switched on and the name STARK lit up as the tower came to life.

“How does it look?” They both asked.

“Like Christmas, but with more... me.” Tony laughed as he moved towards the landing platform.

“Pepper wants to go wider on the public awareness campaign. You need to do some press.” Steve pointed out as Tony landed and his suit pulled away from his body.

“Steve, you’re killing me. Remember? Enjoy the moment.” Tony pouted as he walked inside and Steve grinned.

“Sir, Agent Coulson of S.H.I.E.L.D. is on the line.” Jarvis butted in and Tony groaned.

“Levels are holding steady... I think.” Bucky called as he watched the monitors.

“Of course they are, I was directly involved. Which brings me to my next question: how does it feel to be a genius?” he asked the two soldiers who shrugged.

“Sir, the telephone. I'm afraid my protocols are being overwritten.”

“Stark, we need to talk.” Coulson’s voice came over the phone. “This is urgent.” He stated as the elevator doors opened to reveal Agent Coulson. Bucky froze but it was too late to bolt even as the Agent spotted him and his eyes went wide. Longer hair and more stubble or not, as a Captain
America fan he recognised Sergeant Barnes immediately. “Mr. Stark.” He forced himself to look at the billionaire and not the two living legends. “We need you to look this over.” He held out a file towards Tony but Steve stepped in and took it.

“Official consulting hours are between eight and five every other Thursday.”

“This isn't a consultation.”

“Is this about The Avengers? Which I... I know nothing about.” Bucky asked quietly.

“The Avengers Initiative was scrapped, I thought. And I didn't even qualify.” He took the file from Steve and absently began looking, moving towards the monitors as he did. “Apparently I'm volatile, self-obsessed, don't play well with others.”

“This isn't about personality profiles anymore.” Coulson admitted.

“What is all of this?” Steve asked as he looked over Tony’s shoulder.

“This is, uh...” Tony flicked the profiles up into floating holographic form and Steve grimaced at seeing his own up there. “This.” There was also the Culver University footage of Banner as well as Loki and the Tesseract. Oh joy. Bucky joined them and Phil slipped away, he had to tell Fury who wore the Black Iron Armour was. The names they’d been given by the public annoyed him a bit Iron Man, the Iron Soldier and then Black Iron. Did the press have no imagination anymore?

Loki slowly walked out and materialised his gold armour and helmet. The police arrived and with no hesitation, he blasted the cars, flipping them over and over. “Kneel before me.” The crowd ignored him. Another Loki appeared, blocking the crowd. Loki after Loki appeared, they all grinned as they raised their spears, encircling the crowd. “I said. KNEEL!!!” Everyone became quiet and knelt in front him. Loki stretched his arms out, smiling. “Is not this simpler? Is this not your natural state? It's the unspoken truth of humanity, that you crave subjugation. The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel.” As the words resonated to the kneeling crowd, an elderly man stood, refusing to kneel.

“Not to men like you.” He stated in a heavy German accent.
“There are no men like me.’

“There are always men like you.”

“Look to your elder, people. Let him be an example.” Loki was about to execute him with his sceptre as the light glowed blue. Just as the energy beam shot out an armoured figure dropped in front of the old man, deflecting the beam back at Loki.

“You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing.” Steve stated through the mask, letting Jarvis use the suite to scan the alien Prince.

“The soldier. A man out of time.”

“I'm not the one who's out of time.” He stated as two more armoured figures appeared, aiming their weapons at him.

“Loki, drop the weapon and stand down.” Bucky commanded firmly.

Loki sent a blast up, scattering the two men even as Steve flung his shield at Loki. Loki flung the Captain to the ground, Steve then threw his shield, but Loki swatted it way. Steve fought hard but even with the suite Loki was the better fighter and soon the Sceptre was levelled at his head. “Kneel.”

“Not today!” Steve flipped and kicked out with his legs but Loki managed to grab him again.

“He’s all over the place.” Bucky snapped as he tried to get a clean shot.

Tony finally reappeared from where he’d been driven into a building by that blast. At a better angle then Bucky he sent a blast into Loki that sent him to the ground as they both landed, all three aiming every bit of weaponry they had at the downed alien. “Make your move, Reindeer Games.” Loki put up his hands and surrendered, his armour fading away. “Good move.” He commented as a Quinjet appeared above them. “Welcome to the party Agents.” He called out as it landed and Natasha appeared, dressed in her normal skin-tight uniform, not that they’d met yet.
“Mr. Stark. I’m Agent Romanoff, SHIELD. Captain, Sergeant.” She tossed over some heavy duty cuffs and they put them on Loki before loading him into the jet and taking off. She stayed at the front while the three men kept watch over the prisoner. Thunder rumbled in the distance as she put her headset on and called Fury to update him.

“Said anything?”

“Not a word.”

“Just get him here. We’re low on time.” With that Fury cut off communications and she pushed the speed up more.

“I don’t like it.” Steve whispered. They’d stepped free of their armour for the moment, it was comfortable yes, it had to be, but that didn’t mean they wanted to live in it.

“What? Rock of Ages giving up so easily?”

“I don’t remember it being ever that easy. This guy packs a wallop.’

“There’s no way there isn’t a plan.” Bucky agreed before grabbing on as the jet shook, thunder rumbling right over head as lightning flashed.

“Where's this coming from?” Natasha murmured, looking around even as Loki stared out the window intently.


“I'm not overly fond of what follows.” He admitted and the three men frowned before stepping back into their suites even as blinding light hit the jet. The ramp suddenly opened and a man in a red cape grabbed Loki before flying out.

“Now there's that guy.”
“Another Asgardian?” Natasha yelled back over the wind.

“Think the guy's a friendly?” Steve asked as his faceplate dropped down.

“Doesn't matter. If he frees Loki or kills him, the Tesseract's lost.” He leapt out and took off after Thor.

“I'd sit this one out, Cap.” Natasha called as he and Bucky moved to follow.

“I don't see how we can.”

“These guys come from legends, they're basically gods.”

“There's only one God, ma'am. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that.” The two men jumped from the plane and let Jarvis lead them to Tony.

Thor threw Loki into the side of the mountain. He looked down at his brother, who he thought to be dead, and was angry to see him alive in this fashion. Didn’t he know how they had mourned him? “Where is the Tesseract?”

Loki laughed. “I missed you too.”

“Do I look to be in a gaming mood?!?”

“Oh, you should thank me. With the Bifrost gone how much dark energy did the Allfather have to muster to conjure you here? Your precious Earth.” He taunted and Thor dropped Mjolnir, causing the mountain to quake. He picked up Loki. His brother. Although Thor was enraged by what he had done, he was still his brother, even if not by blood. Why would he care if Loki was a Frost Giant when they had played together as children?

“I thought you dead.”
“Did you mourn?”

“We all did. Our father...”

“Your father. He did tell you my true parentage, did he not?” Loki spat and Thor let him go, moving away before he did something he would regret.

He took a deep breath and then turned back and crouched over where Loki lay, his hand going to his shoulder. “We were raised together, we played together, we fought together. Do you remember none of that?” had his mind become so ensnared by madness he didn’t remember how close they had been.

Loki pushed him back and scrambled up. “I remember a shadow. Living in the shade of your greatness. I remember you tossing me into an abyss. I was and should be king!”

“So you take the world I love as recompense for your slights, imagined and real. No, the Earth is under my protection, Loki.”

“And you're doing a marvellous job with that. The humans slaughter each other in droves, while you idly threat. I mean to rule them. And why should I not?” Loki straightened his clothes.

“You think yourself above them.’

“Well, yes.”

“Then you miss the truth of ruling, brother. A throne would suit you ill.” He whispered sadly and Loki angrily shoved him aside.

He walked to the edge and looked out before looking back to Thor. “I've seen worlds you've never known about! I have grown, Odinson, in my exile! I have seen the true power of the Tesseract, and when I wield it...”
“Who showed you this power? Who controls the would-be-king?”

“I am a king!”

“Not here! You give up the Tesseract! You give up this poisonous dream! You come home.” He pleaded with him, wanting his brother back.

“I don’t have it. You need the cube to bring me home, but I’ve sent it off I know not where.”

Mjölnir flew back to Thor’s grasp and he went to speak but then Tony landed. “This is beyond you, metal man. Loki will face Asgardian justice!” Thor snarled at the newcomer and Tony shrugged.

“He gives up the Cube, he's all yours.”

Thor raised his hammer only for a Shield to ricochet between them.

“Hey! That's enough!” Steve called as he and Bucky landed. “Now, I don't know what you plan on doing here.”

“I've come here to put an end to Loki's schemes!”

“Then prove it! Put the hammer down.”

“Um, yeah, no! Bad call! He loves his hammer!”

Thor backhanded Tony into the side of the mountain and then raised the hammer. “You want me to put the hammer down?” he leapt into the air even as Bucky leapt off the mountain to cling to the side and Tony dropped off the other side to do the same, the suits could take a lot of voltage but neither wanted to test them.

Steve crouched and raised his shield. The shockwave sent Loki flying off the mountain and Bucky jumped after him, grappling him and holding him against the mountain as debris rained down around them. He pulled Loki back up as it settled and found Tony already back up there, standing protectively over the downed Steve who flipped his faceplate up to stare at Thor. “Are we done
“As soon as Loki took the doctor we moved Jane Foster. We've got an excellent observatory and she was asked to consult there very suddenly yesterday. Handsome fee, private plane, very remote. She'll be safe.” Phil assured Thor when he caught him looking at Dr Foster’s photo.

“Thank you. It's no accident Loki taking Erik Selvig. I dread what he plans for him once he's done. Erik is a good man.”

“He talks about you a lot. You changed his life. You changed everything around here.”

“They were better as they were. We pretend on Asgard that we're more advanced, but we...we come here battling like Bilgesnipe.

“Like what?”

“Bilgesnipe. You know; huge, scaly, big antlers. You don't have those?”

“Don't think so.’

“They are repulsive, and they trample everything in their path.” Thor walked over to the side of the ship and looked out the window, he couldn’t figure Loki’s game out. Why had he allowed the mortals to capture him and bring him here? “When I first came to earth, Loki's rage followed me here and your people paid the price. And now again. In my youth I courted war.”

“War hasn't started yet.” Fury butted in, standing on the next level above them. “You think you can make Loki tell us what the Tesseract is?”

“I do not know. Loki's mind is far afield, it's not just power he craves, it's vengeance upon me. There's no pain that would prize his need from him.”

“A lot of guys think that, until the pain starts.” Fury disagreed.
“What are you asking me to do?” the Prince demanded, heart heavy.

“I’m asking. What are you prepared to do?”

“Loki is a prisoner.” There were rules of war on treatment of prisoners, surely Midgard had such things too.

“Then why do I feel like he’s the only person on this boat that wants to be here?” Fury asked but received no answer.

Bucky ran through the halls, armour secure as the helicarrier shook and tilted. Steve and Tony were working to keep them in the air, he had to ensure the prisoner was secure.

“The humans think us immortal. Should we test that?” The suit and his own enhanced senses allowed him to hear, even if faintly, what was being said in the cell room. He heard weapons fire and then silence as he poured on the speed.

“Move away, please.” That was Coulson and he was obviously armed, good. “You like this? We started working on the prototype after you sent The Destroyer. Even I don't know what it does. Do you wanna find out?” As Coulson finished Bucky rounded the corner and saw Loki appear behind the man, weapon extending. A small missile jumped from his suite to impact the spear, throwing its aim off so that it went through the Agent’s shoulder rather than his chest. Coulson went down and Bucky vaulted over the controls, opening the cell to release Thor who immediately took on his brother while Bucky moved Coulson to relative safety.

“Stay with me.” He muttered as he ripped the man’s jacket up to make a bandage, trying to stem the bleeding. “I need medical, Coulson’s down.”

“Medical on the way.” Fury’s voice replied.

“Go…” Phil gasped in pain and Bucky looked up at the sound of feet, moving away as the medics moved in and soon carried Coulson away.
“Steve?”

“We’ve got this Bucky. Romanoff went after Barton.”

“Oh.” He ran for the lower decks; he was definitely getting a lot of exercise this week. He felt Extremis warm him slightly as it worked to flush the weariness away from so much running. He’d read the data on the stuff and was glad Tony had refined it to where all it did was heal him and make him a bit stronger than the serum already had. He didn’t want to blow up or melt metal by touching it. He found Romanoff kneeling beside a downed man and she tensed but then relaxed as she recognised him. “Need help?”

“Can you carry him? we need to get him too medical.”

“Should he be restrained?”

“I don’t think so, Cognitive recalibration.” At the confused helmet tilt, she smiled slightly. “I hit him really hard in the head. After that he was confused but seemed himself.”

“Alright.” He lifted the unconscious man and followed her to sickbay.

Tony stood at the rail, staring at the bloodstain. It should have been so much worse; Phil should be dead but Bucky had saved him. He felt Steve walk into the room and look over as well.

“It’s the first time you nearly lost a soldier.” He whispered and Tony glared at him.

“WE ARE NOT SOLDIERS! I am not marching to Fury's fife!” he snarled in anger, he should have done more to change things.

“Neither am I! He's got the same blood on his hands as Loki does. Right now we've got to put that aside and get this done. Now Loki needs a power source, if we can put together a list...” Steve trailed off, knowing Tony needed something to focus that frightening intellect on, not taking the anger personally. He knew Tony better than anyone save Pepper and happy, Tony wasn't mad at him but the situation.
“He made it personal.” He whispered, staring again at the wall.

“That's not the point.” Steve shook his head but Tony turned to him, grinning slightly.

“That is the point. That's Loki's point. He hit us all right where we live. Why?”

“To tear us apart.”

“But he knows he has to take us out to win, right? That's what he wants. He wants to beat us and he wants to be seen doing it. He wants an audience.”

“Right, I caught his act at Stuttgart.”

“Yeah. That's just a preview, this is opening night. Loki's a full-tilt diva.” He rambled, waving a hand in the air. “He wants flowers, he wants parades, he wants a monument built in the skies with his name plastered...” he blinked and Steve frowned as he realised where this was going. “Sonofabitch!”

Sir, I took off the arc reactor. The device is already self-sustained. All people inside have been directed to the safe room and locked within.”

“Good. Shut it down, Dr. Selvig.” He called as he came up to the roof where the doctor was working.

“It's too late! It can't stop now. He wants to show us something! A new universe.”

“Okay.” He took a shot, wondering if the slightly more advanced armour would make a dent. Selvig was thrown back by the blast that rocked Tony back a bit as well.

“The barrier is pure energy. It's unbreachable. The Mark VIII is not ready to be deployed.” He warned as Tony landed on the platform and stared inside to where Loki awaited.
“We're on the clock.” He walked into the penthouse and was greeted by a smiling Loki, holding the Sceptre.

“Please tell me you're going to appeal to my humanity.” Loki watched as Tony moved behind the bar, not seeing him place a bracelet on each wrist.

“Uh...actually, I'm planning to threaten you.” He shrugged as he pulled down two glasses.

“You should have left your armour on for that.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, it's seen a bit of mileage. You've got the blue stick of destiny. Would you like a drink?”

“Stalling me won't change anything.”

“No, no, no! Threatening. No drink? You sure? I'm having one.” He was quoting his Tony word for word, he'd seen Jarvis' recording of the event several times after all and the encounter had always amused him.

“The Chitauri are coming, nothing will change that. What have I to fear?”

“The Avengers.” He stated and Loki looked at him in confusion. “It's what we call ourselves, sort of like a team. 'EARTH'S MIGHTIEST HEROES' type of thing.”

“Yes, I've met them.” Loki sneered.

Tony smiled. “Yeah, takes us a while to get any traction, I'll give you that one.”

“But, let's do a head count here. Your brother, the demi-God; two super soldiers with advanced armour, a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend; a man with breath-taking anger management issues; a couple of master assassins, and you, big fella, you've managed to piss off every single one of them.”
“That was the plan.”

“Not a great plan. When they come, and they will, they'll come for you.”

“I have an army.”

“We have a Hulk.” He stepped away from the bar, sipping some whiskey.

“I thought the beast had wandered off.”

“You're missing the point. There's no throne, there is no version of this, where you come out on top. Maybe your army comes and maybe it's too much for us, but it's all on you. Because if we can't protect the Earth, you can be damned well sure we'll avenge it.”

Loki slowly approached and raised the Sceptre. “How will your friends have time for me, when they're so busy fighting you?” Loki taps Tony on the chest with the sceptre and Tony smirked as it began spreading but then his veins lit with burning red energy, stopping the power in its tracks. So he tried again and still it stopped. “It should work.”

“Well, performance issues. You know?” He smirked as the orange light faded from his eyes. In anger, Loki grabbed Tony by the throat and flung him across the room. “Jarvis. Anytime now.” Loki grabbed Tony by the throat again.

“You will all fall before me.” Loki snarled before throwing him out the window and Tony fell towards the ground. From behind Loki an elevator opened and a red pod shot out, knocking him down before going over the balcony. Lasers lined up with Tony’s bracelets and the pod broke up, pieces moving to latch onto Tony. It formed and he began flying, just missing impact with the ground. Iron Man appeared in the window and Loki sneered angrily.

“And there's one other person you pissed off! His name is Phil.” Iron Man fired as Loki raised the sceptre, knocking the god on his butt.

Selvig looked up at the sky, the Tesseract's energy beamed into the sky. The beam then formed a vortex, which then opened up. A hole in space ripped open, and from it, the Chitauri army spilled out
on flying chariots.

“Right. Army.” Tony muttered before going to work.

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“Stark, you hearing me? We have a missile headed straight for the city.” Fury called over the comm.

“How long?” Tony demanded.

“Three minutes, at best.”

“Jarvis, put everything we got into the thrusters!” Tony ordered as he was surrounded.

“I just did.” At Jarvis’ assurance he took off.

“I can close it! Can anybody hear me? I can shut the portal down!” Widow called as she held the sceptre in place.

“Do it!” Steve yelled.

“No, wait!”

“Tony, these things are still coming!”

“I got a nuke coming in, it's gonna blow in less than a minute. And I know just where to put it.” He answered. He caught up to the missile and moved to come in from behind. He grabbed it, gripping tightly and it took everything he had to wrench it off course and upwards. Steering from behind he headed straight for the portal.

“Tony, you know that's a one-way trip?” Bucky called, glancing up.
“Save the rest for return, J.” He ordered so they could hear, this suit could withstand vacuum for a short amount of time, hopefully long enough.

“Sir. Shall I call Miss Potts?” she was the only one not there after all.

“You might as well.” But there was no answer as he flew higher and higher until finally he flew through it and out into space, communications cutting out immediately. He aimed the missile and let go, watching it fly towards the waiting armada. He could feel the cold seeping in as he hung there and he forced himself to turn back towards the portal, giving it everything he had left until the power failed.

The army began collapsing even as Widow waiting, holding the sceptre in place. “Come on, Stark...”

“Close it.” Steve ordered thickly as he saw the approaching explosion. Without hesitation she pulled the sceptre out, shutting the power down. The portal quickly collapsed and Steve closed his eyes in grief, thankful for the helmet that hid his expression from everyone. “Jarvis?” He called.

“I am sorry Sir, all connection to Iron Man has been lost. Initiating contingency three. As of now Stark Industries is yours.”

The people began coming out from hiding, cheering, even as the remaining fighters gathered sadly, mourning one of their own even if only Steve and Bucky had truly known him.

*The End....of this one.*
Harry left his house to walk through the grass until he was on top of the hill overlooking the small town. It was…. quaint. Villeneuve was a very quiet town, even for Medieval France but he honestly couldn’t be bothered moving on, he figured it was a nice enough place for a holiday. And the townsfolk were pleasant enough, well most of them were. Besides, the lingering feel of powerful magic hovered all over the town and he was curious. He’d checked, no magic schools as he knew them existed here, so who was the magic user and what were they up to. He smiled as a familiar figure appeared in the distance, returning to his home to meet her. “Good morning Belle.”

“Good morning Monsieur Potter.” She smiled happily at one of the few who she actually considered a friend.

“Here are the books, three for you and three for Père Robert.”

“I don’t know what I’d do if it wasn’t for your library.”

“Die of boredom most likely. Maurice ready for the fair?”

“Almost, one last piece and he should be leaving later today.”

“Give him my best wishes. And you are welcome to join me for dinner tonight if you get lonely.”

“I might.” She smiled and left to deliver the books. She’d been wary of his attention at first, even though if she were to marry anyone here it would be him, but Harry had proven to be a good friend
to them. He was a widower and he had admitted he wasn’t looking to marry again which made things easier. Though he would make a much better husband than Gaston.

He watched until she was safely within the town, withdrawing as he spotted the two approaching men on horseback, he had no desire to deal with that egotistical boy today. There was something really wrong with him, not to mention the war was over a long time ago...too long and that was when he felt like hitting his head against something hard. Temporal magic! That was what lingered over the town, but not Belle or her Father. Someone had locked the whole place into some sort of time loop but then left cracks for newcomers to slip through, including him. Then again if this was where he was meant to be then whichever entity in control of his life that wanted him there would have ensured he was there. He made himself breakfast before going to work tending his vegetables.

A few hours later he was surprised to see a horse and cart approaching so he put the hoe down and went out to meet it. “Maurice? Thought you were going to market.”

“I was hoping to speak with you first.”

“Of course.” Harry gently hitched Phillipe to the fence and led Maurice inside, serving tea and biscuits. “What can I help you with?”

“It’s Belle I am worried about.” Maurice admitted. “I am not getting any younger and she doesn’t fit here.”

“You’re worried about her should something happen to you. This town isn’t exactly welcoming of what they term spinsters.” Harry offered and Maurice nodded. “and then there’s Monsieur Gaston.”

“Belle will never agree to marry him.”

“Good for her.” Harry grinned and Maurice nodded before Harry sobered. “But Gaston is the hero of the town, he has the ear of everyone in power. He could make life very difficult for both of you.”

“Will you look after her?”

Harry blinked. “It would hardly be proper for me to bring her here, I live alone. Her reputation…”
“Would never survive.” Maurice sighed.

“I am a widower Maurice; I have no need to remarry…. but if it saves Belle I will ask her, should something happen to you.”

“Thank you Monsieur.” Maurice shook his hand.

“Better be off if you want to make the Market.”

“Of course, thank you.”

Harry followed him out and untied Phillipe from the fence. “Have a good time.” He called after Maurice as the man rode away.

And apparently this was a day for visitors as Belle ran in a few hours later, flushed and breathing heavily. “Belle?”

“That…. That”

“Gaston?”

“He asked me to marry him! Me! The wife of that boorish, brainless….”

“Idiot?” He offered with a smile and she huffed but joined him in the library, sitting before the fire. Harry poured tea and waited for her to calm, it was amazing how much she reminded him of Hermione…just with tamer hair and a greater liking for dresses, then again she didn’t have the option of jeans.

“He practically threatened me, Harry. Pointed out Agathe as what happens to spinsters here.” She dropped all formality in her agitation.

“It won’t happen to you Belle, your Father has many years left in him and even if he didn’t I wouldn’t allow you to be tossed out in the street.” He promised. “Now drink your tea, dinner will be
in two hours.” He went back to sorting the new books and she picked one out to read, trying to forget all about Gaston. They had a nice meal, talking about the various books they’d read and some of the places Harry had seen in his travels before he escorted her home. “Now go on up to bed and forget all about the moron.”

“Thank you monsieur.”

“Picture it, LeFou. Rustic cabin, my latest kill roasting on the fire. Adorable children running around just as my love, rubs my tired feet. And what does Belle saying? ‘I will never marry you, Gaston.’” Gaston spat as he stared into the fire.

“You know, there are other girls.” LeFou offered, turning Gaston’s chair slightly so he could see the three dark haired girls and Gaston snorted.

“A great hunter doesn't waste his time with rabbits.”

Belle smiled as she fed the chickens, she felt a lot better today after Harry’s promise and some sleep to calm down. Her Father would be back tomorrow, hopefully having sold everything and with her usual rose. Hearing a horse galloping in the lane she looked out, thinking maybe it was harry or Gaston but instead it was a riderless and cart-less Phillipe. “Phillipe! What are you doing here? Where's Papa? Where is he, Phillipe?” She ran up to the horse who was drinking deeply from the water trough. She grabbed his halter. “What happened? Oh, we have to find him, you have to take me to him!” She tucked her skirt into her waistband and mounted the still heavily breathing horse, turning him around.

She crested the hill, heading for the forest path and riding right past a startled Harry.

“Belle!” he yelled after her before going to the stable and saddling his own horse, taking off after her. He rode hard but then stopped as he came to a fork in the path, taking in the right side where it was apparently snowing in June, yeah, definitely magic at work. He went to turn onto the path only for Agathe to step into his way. “So you’re the one responsible for the magic on the town. What have you done?” He demanded.

“She will come to no harm, turn back, this is not your concern.”
“Maurice and Belle are my concern.” He dismounted to face her on even footing. “Whatever you’ve done they have no part in it.”

“Even to save many lives?” She asked and Harry glared at her.

“Death or Destiny obviously want me here.”

That shocked her and her eyes went to his forehead, looking for the symbol and there it was, a faded lightning bolt. This was Death’s Marked. Well…. she hadn’t seen this coming. This could destroy all her plans. So she drew him off the path and sat to explain.

“You…” harry closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “To punish one you have risked dooming hundreds! What happens to the village once the curse is set? Will you free them from this loop, let them remember those they’ve lost because of you?” he snarled.

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“Cogsworth, look! A beautiful girl!”

“Yes, I can see it's a beautiful girl, you fool! I've lost my hands, not my eyes.” He muttered back as they remained utterly still, watching the girl armed with a stick as she looked around warily.

“What if she is the one? The one who will break the spell?” Lumière asked excitedly and then they both fell silent as she looked their way.

“Hello? Who said that?” Belle tightened her grip on the piece of wood. “Papa?” she called several times until an echoing cough had her grabbing the candelabra and running up and up. “Papa!” She cast the candelabra aside and grasped his hands.

“Belle, you must leave here! This castle is alive!” he coughed.

“Your hands are freezing! I’ve got to get you out of here.” She looked for a way to open the door and then turned at a noise. “Who's there? Who are you?”
“Who are YOU?” the angry demand came from the shadows

“I’ve come for my father!”

“Your father... is a thief!”

“Liar!” Belle yelled angrily, standing up.

“He stole a rose.”

“I asked for the rose. Punish ME, not him.” she demanded.

“No, he means forever. Apparently, that’s what happens around here when you pick a flower!’

“A life sentence for a rose?” she couldn’t believe it, no one was that horrible, were they?

He leapt down to the level of the cell. “I received eternal damnation for one. I'm merely locking him away. Now, do you still wish to take your father's place?”

“Come into the light.” she demanded but he didn’t move so she grabbed the candelabra and held it up to his face. Seeing the Beast's intimidating appearance, she gasped and backed off slightly.

“Choose.” He demanded.

“At least let me say goodbye.” She whispered and he looked from her to the cell before pulling down the lever. “Be quick, once this door closes, it will never open again!”

She rushed into the cell and hugged her Father. “Papa.” She whispered.
“You are so much like your mother.” He gently tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear even as she moved so he had his back to the doorway. “Don't be afraid.”

“I'm not afraid!” She smiled and then shoved him back, out of the cell, before slamming the door shut, shocking the Beast who grabbed Maurice and dragged him away.

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“Maurice!” Harry moved to the man’s side as he stumbled down the path.

“Monsieur? He has her! He’s locked her in a tower!” He babbled.

“Alright, let’s get you to safety first, then I’ll come back.” He promised. He’d let things play out, for now. Belle was a smart, resourceful girl, she’d probably rescue herself. Once the man was situated in Harry’s home the wizard left and walked the snowy path to the Castle, invisible the whole time. He would take a look for himself. He followed noise into the East wing.

“You'll join me for dinner. That's not a request.”

“Gently, Master. The girl lost her father AND her freedom in one day.” Mrs Potts admonished.

“Yes, the poor thing is probably in there scared to death.’

“Exactly.”

Curious to see if they were right Harry apparated inside the room only to bite back a laugh at the sight of the makeshift rope Belle had created and was now quickly pushing out the window.

“Just a minute.” She called

“You see? There she is. Now remember: Be gentle.”

“Kind.”
“Mmm, charming.’

“Sweet!”

“And when she opens the door, give her a dashing smile! Come, come, show me the smile!” Lumière pushed and the Beast gives a wide smile, showing his monstrous teeth. The servants winced.

“Oh, dear!”

“Oh no!”

The Beast's smile vanished and he turned back to the door. “Will you join me for dinner?” He turned away and shook his head at the servants as if to say, "This'll never work"

“You've taken me as your prisoner, and now you want to have dinner with me? Are you insane?”

The Beast became visibly enraged; the servants back away in fear.

“Uh-oh! He's losing it!” Plumette murmured nervously.

“Oh, dear!”

He pounded on the door and Harry readied a shield for Belle. “I told you to join me for dinner!”

“And I told you! No!”

“Oh, what time is it? What's happening?” Madame Garderobe asked as she startled awake.
“I’d STARVE before I ever ate with you!”

“Well, be my guest! Go ahead and starve!” he turned to Lumière “If she doesn't eat with me, then she doesn't eat at ALL!” he stormed off. “Idiots!”

Harry watched as Belle curled into a corner, well that had gone well. He really didn’t see Agathe’s plan working at all. Guess that was why he was here.

Eventually Belle ventured out with the teapot in search of food so Harry took the time to explore the castle, finding the Beast in the West Wing which looked even worse than the rest of the castle. He saw the rose underneath glass and shuddered at the magic on it. It was powerful and not a type he had dealt with before or he would have simply undone the curse already. He couldn’t break it but he could buy them more time, it took a lot out of him but he managed a very strong preservation spell on the rose, ensuring the petal loss would slow significantly. It was a surprise when Belle slowly entered the room and looked around at the paintings and then approached the rose, reaching out to touch the glass.

“What are you doing here? What did you do to it?” The Beast snarled and she backed away.

“Nothing!”

“Do you realize what you could have done? You could have damned us all! Get out of here! GO!” he yelled and she fled.

“Wonderful way with women you have.” Harry commented as he became visible, the Beast backing away in fear and shock. “If you want to break the spell you have a lot of work. SO go after her and apologise for scaring her.”

“Who are you?”

“Her protector, now get going.” He vanished from view again as the Beast hesitated before going after her. He was going to have to help the poor guy, no one deserved being a Beast forever.

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“What happens when the last petal falls?” Belle asked as the Beast fell asleep.
“The master remains a beast forever and we become...” Lumière answered.

“Antiques!”

“Knick-knacks.”

“Lightly-used housewares.”

“Rubbish. We become rubbish.” Cogsworth snapped.

“I want to help.”

“Oh don’t worry about as my dear.” Mrs Potts told her.

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“Oh, I could sing of the pain these dark days bring. The spell we’re under still it's the wonder of us, I sing of tonight.”

“How in the midst of all this sorrow can so much hope and love endure. I was innocent and certain Now I'm wiser but unsure. I can't go back in to my childhood, one that my father made secure. I can feel a change in me I'm stronger now, but still not free.

Days in the sun will return we must believe, as others do. That days in the sun will come shining through.

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“Better.” Harry praised, leaning against the wall.
“Why are you doing this?”

“Because what was done to everyone here was wrong. If anyone was punished it should have been you alone.”

“Now, if you really want to get her attention I suggest that wonderful library you have. She’ll love it.”

Belle gasped as the Beast opened the double doors. “Have you really read every one of these books?” she asked in awe.

He scoffed as he looked around. “No, not all of them. Some of them are in Greek.”

Belle laughed. “Was that a joke? Are you making jokes now?”

“Maybe.” He smirked before leaving, shaking his head and smiling. Belle giggled and spun around, not sure where to start, it was a lot bigger than Harry’s library.

“Guinevere and Lancelot.”

"King Arthur and the Round Table." He corrected and she shrugged, sitting beside him

Belle smirked slightly. “Still a romance.”
“Mmm. Felt like a change.” He shrugged and she laughed happily.

“I never thanked you for saving my life.” She admitted softly and he looked over at her.

“I never thanked YOU for not leaving me to be eaten by wolves.” He offered, wanting her to smile again and she laughed softly.

With things going so well in the Castle Harry popped back home and sighed when he realised Maurice was gone. Just when things were looking up. He walked into town, looking for the inventor. He made his way into town and then the pub and glanced around for Père Robert.

“Monsieur Potter.”

“Have you seen Maurice?” He asked, taking a seat and accepting the tankard.

“He just left with Gaston and LeFou. He was raving about a Beast and it having Belle. I do not wish to speak ill of anyone but….”

“Wonderful. Belle is away at the moment but she is safe. I made sure of that. I guess I better go after them.”

“Think of the one thing that you've always wanted. Now find it in your mind's eye and feel it in your heart.” He couched placing her hand on the book and soon the library was gone to reveal a cramped space. He looked out to see Paris in the distance and realised they were in the upper room of a windmill. “Paris, I’ve always loved Paris! What would you like to see first?”

She didn’t answer, looking around in awe before moving to pick up a small rose shaped baby rattle. “This is the Paris of my childhood, these were the borders of my life. In this crumbling, dusty attic, where an artist loved his wife. Easy to remember, harder to move on, knowing the Paris of my childhood, is gone...” she whispered and he stared around in shock, seeing the painting, the empty crib and the bed.
“What happened to your mother?” he asked gently.

“It was the one thing Papa could never tell me.” She wandered the room and then he saw something and picked it up.

“A doctors’ mask…plague.”

“Let’s go home.” She clutched the rattle close as the room faded away.

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“Maurice!” Harry called in alarm, kneeling beside the bound man too free him. he spotted Agathe approaching, a look of sorrow on her face.

“Come.” She offered and the moved Maurice to where she lived in the woods, working together to heal him.

“I knew there was something wrong with Gaston but attempted murder?” Harry shook his head. Maurice was obviously half frozen and sick from exposure so she made him healing teas and broth while Harry massaged warmth back into his limbs.

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“Maestro, your wife is upstairs, finding it harder and harder to stay awake! She's counting on you to help us break this curse!” Lumière stated firmly, dancing needed music!

“Then I shall play through the dental pain!” he decided.

“Maestro, play quietly, please.”

“Oh, quiet, such devotion. Are there any other tasteless demands you would like to make on my artistry?”

“No, that's it.” They left him to it, returning to ensure their Master was ready for tonight. The Rose hadn’t lost a petal for a while, taking away some of the urgency but they still wanted to be human as
soon as possible. They found him in the bath have a crisis of faith.

“Relax, some music, some dancing, we’ll be human again in no time! Now let us work.” They moved back and the Beast stared at his powdered wig and white fur.

“I look stupid.”

“I can fix this.” Cogsworth assured him.

Soon the Beast was ready and he walked down the stairs, unable to take his eyes of the radiant Belle dressed in gold. They walked down the stairs to meet on the landing and then he offered his arm. Belle took it and they walked the rest of the way down and then into the ballroom. She curtsied and he bowed and then they began to dance to the piano music.

“Do you…do you think you could be happy here?” he asked as they stood on the balcony, looking out over the snow covered grounds.

“Without my freedom? I miss my Father.” She admitted.

“There is a way.” The pair adjourn to his room, where he handed her the mirror. “This mirror will show you anything, anything you wish to see.”

She took it gently. “I'd like to see my father, please.” The mirror cleared and she gasped at the sight of the men manhandling her Father, Harry in the background trying to get to him. “Papa. Oh, no. what are they doing to him?”

“You must go to him.”

“What did you say?” she looked at him in confusion and he looked down.

“I release you. You are no longer my prisoner.”

“You mean...I'm free?”
“Yes.”

“Oh, thank you.” She glanced down at the mirror in time to see harry knock one of the men out. “Hold on, Papa. I'm on my way.” She turned to leave but then turned back and offered the mirror to him.

“Take it with you, so you'll always have a way to look back, and remember me.”

“Thank you for understanding how much he needs me.” She touched her hand to his cheek and then rushed out of the room, running for the stables.

“Well, your highness. I must say everything is going just peachy. I knew you had it in you.”

“I let her go.” He whispered.


“I had to.”

“Yes, but why?”

“Because, I love her.”

“Gaston stop this farce at once.” Harry snarled before his fist met Stanley’s face and the man went down.

“This is none of your business Monsieur.”

“For once in your life stop being a self-absorbed idiot. Throwing her father in the asylum will not
make Belle marry you.” Why couldn’t Maurice just leave it to him as he’d asked several times?

“She’ll have no choice.”

“Wrong. Maurice came to me before all this. We have an arrangement that should anything happen to him I will take Belle as my wife to keep her safe from the likes of you.” That caused shocked ripples. Gaston was a Captain; Monsieur Potter was a British Knight. To marry Belle would be marrying far beneath his station. “Please, suggest taking care of me too, it’s been a while since I had a good fight.”

They were interrupted as Phillipe galloped into the square, Belle looking like a true princess in a gown of gold. She dismounted and stormed towards them. “Let my father go!”

Harry left her to argue with Gaston and simply unlocked the carriage, letting Maurice out. LeFou hesitantly approached and helped him down, looking ashamed. Everyone gasped when Belle slapped Gaston and stormed over to them, throwing her arms around her Father.

“Belle? How did you escape?”

“I didn’t, he let me go.” She kissed Maurice’s cheek.

“Let’s get out of here.” Harry ushered the three out of town and to his place. No one commented on LeFou’s presence, it was about time he got free of Gaston. “By the way, you look beautiful Belle.”

“Thank you.”

Two days later Harry found her saddling Phillipe. “You’re going back.”

“Yes.” She admitted.

“I’ll escort you.” He went and saddled his own horse.

“You don’t think I’m crazy?”
“Never.” He grinned and they rode off. What neither noticed was the jilted Gaston following them.

Harry walked into the castle with Belle and bowed to the clock. “Good evening, I believe you lost someone?” he asked teasingly and Belle slapped his arm. He pulled her into a hug. “Follow your heart.” He whispered before leaving.

Soon Belle was surrounded by joyous friends and then she ran up the stairs when Mrs Potts admitted the Beast hadn’t left the tower since she had left.

“Go away.”

“But I just got back.”

He stiffened and then turned slowly to see her standing there in a soft green dress and crisp white apron. “Belle? You came back?”

“Of course I came back.” She walked towards him and took his hand. “How could I leave you all?”

Harry opened the door as someone pounded on it. “Père Robert?”

“Gaston is rallying a mob, something about a monster in a castle and Belle.”

“He must have followed us.” Harry ushered the man in.

“Belle…” Maurice looked at Harry who went and pulled down his sword.

“I’ll warn the castle.” He promised as he attached it to his belt and threw on a coat. “This time stay here.”
“Harry?” Belle looked at him in surprise.

“We were followed before, Gaston’s on his way with an angry mob.” He admitted.

“If it’s a fight they want we’ll be ready for them!” Cogsworth declared.

“Take her to safety.” The Beast said and Belle turned to him.

“No! I’m not leaving.” The doors suddenly shuddered as a battering ram slammed into them.

“Too late anyway.”

He led the mad man away from Belle and his loyal servants, he would not let him harm them. They fought across the crumbling rooftops and walkways until a shot was heard and the beast roared in pain. Gaston lined up another only to scream as the walkway gave way. The Beast managed to make his way to the tower room only to collapse. Belle ran to him, rolling him over gently.

“Oh this is all my fault. If only I’d never left.” She choked out past tears.

“Maybe it's better this way.”

“Don't talk like that. You'll be all right. We're together now. Everything's going to be fine. You'll see.”

“At least I got to see you one... last...time.” he whispered even as she brought his paw to her cheek. His hand fell limp from her grasp and she sobbed.

“No, no! Please! Please! Please don't leave me! I love you!” She whispered and hearing that Harry released the preservation spell. The rose glowed under the glass as Agathe joined Harry in the
shadows. His magic reached out to the beast, healing him even as Agathe ensured the curse was broken.


Harry smiled as he watched them all dancing and having a wonderful time. Agathe had vanished and he knew it was time for him to go too. The townspeople remembered now and were horrified over the attack. No one missed Gaston. All in all, a happy ending.

TBC...
Harry woke with a start and then grabbed his comm. “Potter.”

“Sorry to wake you sir but we’ve received an emergency communication from Jedi Master Yoda.”

“What is it?” he jumped out of bed and scrambled into his uniform, slipping his boots on as he grabbed his gear.

“They need every trauma surgeon we can spare.”

“Alright… get gamma shift together with all the supplies we can spare and call up at least six general nurses and two doctors.” He ordered as he got into his speeder. “ETA?”

“Twenty minutes.”

“Gather everyone at the spaceport and let them know where to pick us up.”

“Yes sir.”

Harry cut the call out and drove for the spaceport. He quickly spoke with the man in charge who ordered an area cleared for the medical personal and their equipment plus the craft that would have to land to pick them up. Harry sat to wait, unsure why a Jedi would be calling on them. Naboo had
been a peaceful planet for as long as he’d lived there, he’d arrived nine months after the invasion had been thwarted and thrown himself into helping rebuild. Now he was head of trauma at the main hospital in Theed. Over the last ten years he’d watched as things became tenser out in the Galaxy… he knew the Clone Wars had to be coming up soon and the pit in his stomach said they were probably beginning now. Soon the others began arriving, uniforms in various stages of rumpled. They had come off shift eighteen hours ago so they were more rested which was why he had picked them but obviously they all needed to do laundry.

“Do we have any information?” Marta asked and harry shook his head.

“Just that pick up’s in eight.” He said after he glanced at his chrono. “And that Jedi Master Yoda asked for us.” That had whispers of surprise passing between them. Finally, they saw a ship coming down towards them and quickly began lifting up the various bits of machinery and bags of equipment. The sides of the ship slid up and men in identical white with a few splashed of yellow jumped out to help them load up and get in. they grabbed onto the straps and the ship locked up before taking off. They landed again and began unloading even as a small green being approached and harry recognised Yoda immediately, though he appeared much younger now. He stepped away and bowed to the Jedi. “We are ready to work Master Jedi. Where are the patients?”

“Here yet they are not. To battle we go. A few medics only aboard there are.”

“Understood.”

“Troopers to medbay will show you Doctor?”

“Harry Potter.” He bowed again and went to join the others in following the troopers through the massive white ship. He could see how these Republic ships were the precursors to the Star Destroyers.

They began setting things up and looking over what was already there as soon as they entered. He spotted two identical men waiting and walked over to them. “Doctor Harry Potter, head of trauma.” In response, the two men rattled off serial numbers and stood at attention. “You’re the medics?”

“Yes sir.”

“Alright, get with the nurses and they’ll get you sorted. We’ll get the surgical suites ready. Any idea of our ETA?”
“Thirty minutes sir.”

“Alright people let’s move.” He called loudly and the medbay was soon in organised chaos as they prepared for the worst. “I’m assuming we’re not the only ship, what about them?”

“Handling lesser injuries sir, the worst will be brought here.”

Harry nodded, someone had sense at least. There had been so little true information left on the Clone Wars and it was frustrating, he wished he knew how the first battle had gone so he’d have some idea of what to expect. Soon they felt the ships drop out of hyperspace and they all got ready, waiting in tense silence as alarms blared, seeing soldiers run by in the corridors, heading for battle stations. Nothing happened for a very long forty minutes and then the ship shuddered slightly as the shields absorbed a shot. Several more hit and they could feel the ship moving as it returned fire. And then two men rushed in with a body on a stretcher between them and their work began.

Time became meaningless as they worked tirelessly to save as many as they could. As much as they hated to do it they prioritised the Jedi over the clones, for a very simple reason, there were too few Jedi already and to lose just one was a blow to the Order. It took twenty odd years to train a Jedi while a clone could be readied in just a quarter of that.

He moved to the new stretcher that held a tall young Jedi, still with a Padawan braid behind his hear even as the boy shuddered as they lifted him onto a bench. The most obvious injury was the amputation but Harry initiated deeper scans and swore as he found the massive electrical damage. “Prep a tank!” he yelled out as he went to work cutting the Padawan’s clothes off. He glanced at his face and frowned, he knew that face, his one-time Father-in-law. Anakin Skywalker. He was so young now. Harry shook it off and continued his work to stabilise him until he could be placed in the tank to help deal with what he was assuming was Sith lightning. He became aware of another presence and looked up to see an injured, bearded Jedi, one he’d seen the spirit of before. “Sit before you fall Master Jedi.” He ordered and that got a tired grin before Kenobi sat.

“How is he?”

“Other than the obvious his system is trying to deal with a massive electrical hit.”

“Sith Lightning.”
“Anything more to it than normal electricity? They’re prepping a bacta tank for him now, we can deal with his arm later.”

“Not that I am aware of.” Obi-Wan admitted even as Anakin groaned, gritting his teeth in pain. He watched the doctor as he worked calmly, swift and yet never rushed. Soon the breathing mask was settled over Anakin’s face and he was placed in the tank and the doctor turned to him.

“On the bed.”

“I am fine doctor.”

“You’re in medbay which means you do as I say, bed now.”

Obi-Wan sighed but obeyed and let the doctor work, cleaning his wounds before covering them.

“Good thing lightsabers cauterise the wounds they cause. You haven’t lost much blood at all. Take these to keep the wounds from infecting. As long as you don’t get underfoot you can stay with him or help out, I’m sure you know how to bandage.” He offered and Obi-Wan nodded in thanks, not wanting to leave Anakin just yet.

Hours later they were finally done and Harry simply sat leaning against the wall where he could keep an eye on the bacta tank readings. The tanks currently held three Jedi, including Anakin, and three clones. He glanced over as the door opened and a dark haired young woman entered. She didn’t carry a lightsaber and wasn’t wearing robes so he doubted she was a Jedi but her gaze instantly focused on the tank holding Skywalker. He’d heard talk of a Senator having been planetside during the fight and assumed it was her. And then it hit him who she was. “Jedi Skywalker is expected to make a full recovery My Lady.” He stood and bowed to her.

“And the others?”

“None of them are expected to die but obviously there is still some risk, sometimes people die for no reason we can discover.”

“You’re from Naboo?” she asked and he nodded.
“Yes Senator, Head of Trauma at the Hospital in Theed. Doctor Harry Potter.”

“What brings you here?”

“You don’t know? Jedi Master Yoda contacted the hospital seeking doctors to come aboard and be prepared for casualties.” He explained and she nodded, no child of Naboo would ignore such a call for help.

“We are returning to Coruscant, I will ensure you all return home as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, My Lady.”

She looked back at Skywalker. “When will a prosthetic be attached?”

And now he had the feeling he was talking to Luke’s Mother. “On Coruscant I would presume, we aren’t set up for that sort of surgery and we don’t have the necessary specialists to preform it.”

She nodded and then slipped away and he went to work ensuring all the records were filled out correctly to make the hand off of their patients easier. He separated them into two groups, assuming the Jedi Temple would take their own wounded.

Harry watched from the window as rows of white clad soldiers filed into ships which then lifted off into orbit and had to fight back a shudder, they looked so much like Star Destroyers and that brought back bad memories. The Clones Wars had started and he didn’t know what to do. He’d seen the Chancellor at a distance when they’d arrived and had fought every instinct to simply kill him where he stood. But he knew better than to leave a gaping hole in the power structure of any government, bad things tended to happen as everyone fought to gain top spot. He didn’t know the events of this time either which meant he had to act slowly, he needed to get information on everyone involved in events before trying to change things. He closed his eyes and brought up an image of Luke from shortly after they’d met, so young and in some ways innocent and yet in others a hardened warrior. He wanted to spare him that, for Luke to grow up with his parents and sister. He was pretty confident in his guess that Senator Amidala was their Mother, the likeness to Leia was uncanny, but he could also see Luke’s gentle spirit in her. Anakin had rarely spoken of his deceased wife, unable to bear the pain and neither twin had pushed him. He had said she was a politician from Naboo but he hadn’t specified more than that.
He’d only ever met Kenobi as a Force ghost and he seemed so young now, too young to have raised Anakin from childhood. He must have barely been a Knight himself when he took the boy on. In his eyes that went a long way to explaining Anakin’s Fall, he had no doubt Kenobi had done his best but a more knowledgeable and experienced Master would have had a better idea how to deal with such a strong willed Padawan. Though as far as he was concerned the whole Order pretty much shared the blame, how had they missed Palpatine when he was right under their noses? He could feel the Darkness coming from the Senate and he wasn’t even a Force sensitive!

They were meant to be returning to Naboo in the morning but he wasn’t going. If he was going to change things then he needed to be here, at the heart of things, and not so far away. It was tempting to sign on as a combat surgeon or something but that would mean months on the front stuck on a ship. So instead he had applied to the closest hospitals to the Senate and Jedi Temple, wanting to be close.

Harry left the theatre and ripped off his scrubs, tossing them into the chute before heading for his office. Six hours of surgery and he was exhausted but they had saved the patient and that was what mattered. Even so far from the front lines they still ended up treating a lot of soldiers who needed more than a ships medbay could do. Six months in and it seemed like the war would never end. He knew it went for half a decade or so and was dreading that sort of timeline. He needed to expose Palpatine as soon as possible without revealing himself. It was harder than he’d first hope, the man was a slippery as a snake and had plans within plans. He may be close to power geographically but he was almost regretting the fact he’d gone into medicine, it limited the chances of him running into important people. But it was too late now, he’d just have to come up with something.

“Senator Amidala.” He bowed respectfully to her and she stood to take his hands.

“How can I be of assistance?” He asked as he followed her to the lounge and sat once she had.

“I can rely on your discretion?”

“Of course. Speaking to anyone of a patient is against the medical code. Are you ill My Lady?”

“No. do you remember Anakin Skywalker? You treated him at Geonosis.”
“The Padawan who lost his arm?” he knew who he was but with everything that had happened over the last year he needed to act a little uncertain.

Padme nodded, a hand smoothing her skirt down. “He is my husband.” She admitted and Harry blinked.

“I thought Jedi were forbidden marriage?”

“They are.”

“Congratulations. I assume as this appears a secret marriage that it is a love match?” he asked and she nodded. “The best kind of marriage possible then.”

“Thank you.” She smiled softly. “If anyone finds out Anakin will be removed from the order and that can’t happen, not now.”

Harry nodded in agreement. Anakin was one of the best Jedi General’s, despite his youth. He had already gained the nickname ‘the hero with no fear’ in the media. “Of course, the scandal would most likely lead to you being recalled from the Senate. But why would anyone guess…. pregnancy, you’re worried about falling pregnant.”

“Anakin so rarely gets leave that is seems so unlikely but I worry.”

“I can give you a physical and then prescribe something.”

“Thank you. Would you consider private practice?”

“For the right patients.”

“Can the Embassy for Naboo hire you?” She asked with a soft smile and he smiled back.
“Of course, it would be an honour.”

“Who are you?”

“Welcome home Knight Skywalker.” He glanced over at the tense young man and then finished returning his equipment to his bag. “Remember to call if you feel any side effects.”

“Of course, thank you.”

“I’ll see you again in two months, unless Knight Skywalker has any injuries?”

“Anakin this is Doctor Potter, he treated you after Geonosis. He’s now our private physician.”

“Our?” Anakin looked at the other male, older than him, probably Padme’s age. He felt a surge of jealousy.

“Your wife brought me in to handle certain matters discretely.”

“Padme?”

“Contraception Anakin.” She blushed slightly. “A child right now is just too risky.”

“I’ve prescribed the appropriate medication but no medication is one hundred percentage foolproof.” He warned. “I am glad to see you fully healed.”

“Thank you.” Anakin said automatically.

“Have a good night.” He left the couple alone to enjoy Anakin’s leave.
Harry smiled as he spotted the story, it wasn’t ‘front page’ but it also hadn’t been buried. It wasn’t much but it was a start. His investigations were bearing fruit and he was passing it on to various media outlets in secret. It wouldn’t do for Palpatine to realise what was going on but he needed to get the people to stop and think when it came to their beloved Chancellor and just how much power he was gaining. Every skeleton that could be dug out of his closet was a step in the right direction. Finding a link between him and the Sith was a lot harder though.

Harry ducked his head and pulled the droid down as the clones surrounded them protectively. So much for a peaceful diplomatic mission! He glanced over at Padme and saw the determination on her face even as she held her blaster tightly. And here he was unarmed. One of the troopers beside him fell with a hole through the chest plate of his armour and Harry checked him before shaking his head at the Captain when the man glanced back. Harry gently pulled the man’s blaster from his hands and opened fire on the attacking droids, much to the surprise of the clones. They were used to their brothers who were also medics but they had never seen a non-clone doctor with a weapon before. They exchanged fire as they began pushing forward to reach the ship and soon they were scrambling aboard. Harry reached down and hauled Padme up and in while a clone lifted her up. He shoved her deeper in and away from the stray fire and they both buckled into the seats. Soon everyone alive was aboard and they took off. “So…. this the way your trips usually go?” he asked and she laughed. Her grinned and then got up to look everyone over and patch up those he could help.

“Thanks for the help back there Doctor.”

“Well they were shooting at me too. Self-preservation.” He grinned and the clone laughed as he yanked his helmet off.

“Where’d you learn to shoot so well?”

“My Dad, he was a security officer.” It was close enough to the truth. He gently wiped the blood of the other male’s face. “You’re lucky, no damage to the eye itself, Commander?”

“Cody, sir.

“Harry. You’ll have a scar but otherwise you’ll be fine.”

Cody nodded and watched as the doctor moved through his men. A lot of non-clone medics looked
down on them, treated them differently, but this Harry was different. He talked with them, getting them to laugh and relax while he checked them over. They felt the slight thud as the ship landed in the bay of the Vigilance. They began unloading and Cody nodded as he saw his General approaching, ready to debrief.

Obi-Wan shook his head. “Get to medical Cody, I can already tell the mission didn’t go to plan.” He ordered and Cody went with his men for treatment.

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“Ah, Anakin, come in.”

“You wanted to see my Chancellor?”

“How are things going on the front?” he stood and moved out from behind his desk, moving to the more informal seating area just off his main office and Anakin followed.

“Good, we’ve got them pinned down for the most part.”

“That’s very good.”

“Any sign of Grievous or Dooku?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Well they can’t hide forever, I trust you will prevail.”

“Thank you, Chancellor.” Anakin preened under the praise.

“And how is Senator Amidala?”

“Padme? I haven’t seen her since arriving.”
“You are both very busy, she works tirelessly in the Senate to end the war. And it helps I am sure to have companionship.”

“Companionship?”

“Ah yes, a young Doctor from Naboo is quite often seen in her company these days. I believe he even went with her on a peace mission along with General Kenobi a few months back.”

Doctor…it had to be Doctor Potter. “He is the embassy physician, he’s a trauma surgeon.”

“A wise choice to keep close in times such as these.”

How close, Anakin frowned slightly, not noticing Palpatine’s pleasure at his reaction. “He was one of the Doctors who came to Geonosis, he treated me.”

“Then I owe him my thanks for helping you.” Palpatine smiled gently at him. “Now you should got rest my friend.”

Anakin stood and bowed before leaving, mind churning as he got in his speeder and turned towards Padme’s apartment. He landed and walked in to find Padme on the couch, her hair down as she bent over a datapad. She looked up and broke into an immediate smile, standing and throwing herself into his arms and he held her close, breathing in her scent. “Padme.”

“Oh Anakin.” She whispered before kissing him.

“I’ve missed you Padme.”

“I’ve missed you too.” She tugged him over to the couch, slipping his cloak over his shoulders to toss onto a chair. “Why didn’t you send word you had leave?”

“I don’t, not really, we’re only here for tonight to resupply.”
“Oh…. but you’re free tonight?”

“All night.” He promised and she grinned. She went to the kitchen and quickly put on an easy meal even as he removed his boots, relaxing as he soaked in the peace of home. “You’ve been alright?” he asked as he watched her.

“Mmm, the Senate is being difficult as always. You actually only just caught me, another two days and I would have been on the way back to Naboo.”

“Why are you going?”

“The Queen wants to speak with me about the war and Senate.” She dished up the food.

“Have you been lonely?” he couldn’t help asking.

“I have my handmaidens and then there’s Senators like Bail who are good friends. You remember Doctor Potter? He accompanies me a lot with so many threats to my life. It was decided that having a doctor at hand was smart. Thankfully we’ve become friends. And he’s made friends among the clones so I often hear word of you I otherwise wouldn’t.” she smiled and took his hand and he couldn’t help smiling back at her.

"Harry?"

“Congratulations Padme, you’re pregnant.” He admitted and she paled.

“Oh.” Her hand went to her abdomen. “But all the precautions….”

“I know the timing is bad but do you want this baby?” he asked gently and she nodded.

“I know it’s dangerous but this is our baby.”
“Alright. You’re going to have to stop going of planet within a month, earlier than I’d usually impose restrictions but with how often you get shot out…”

“Of course.”

“I’m not an obstetrician Padme.”

“I know.” She stood and went to look out the window.

“I’ll start reading up on everything, I’d say you’re about two months along.”

“Thank you.”

“Do you want me to call Dormé in?”

“Thank you, Harry.” She whispered and he slipped away silent.

PALPATINE SMIRKED AS HE LISTENED TO THE REPORT OF THE SPY HE HAD KEEPING AN EYE ON AMIDALA, SO THE GIRL WAS PREGNANT. THE CHILD OF THE CHOSEN ONE WOULD MAKE A GOOD BARGAINING CHIP AGAINST ANAKIN SHOULD IT BE NEEDED. A PITY THE MOTHER WOULD HAVE TO DIE BUT SHE HAD MESSPED UP HIS PLANS TOO MANY TIMES.

That was the only good news. He didn’t know how or who but someone was feeding the media things he would rather remain secret. His popularity with the masses was beginning to drop too far too much. It seemed he would soon have to take drastic action.

“Harry kept a close eye on Padme as her pregnancy progressed. She had been shocked when he had announced she was having twins and had decided not to find out the genders, at least until Anakin was back. That was causing her stress, there were so many rumours coming from the Outer Rim Sieges and many of them included Anakin’s death. She soldiered on well but it was stress she didn’t need. Harry had insisted her handmaidens serve in her place as often as possible and that she get plenty of rest. She’d always been small but she had begun to head to unhealthy thinness and that
Harry looked up, seeing the massive ships in orbit. The Chancellor had been captured by Dooku and taken aboard the flagship. He may never get a better chance to end this. He slipped away and took the place of a clone pilot, taking off in his fighter. The fight was such chaos that he managed to slip away and through the shields of the ship. He leapt from the cockpit, becoming invisible as he made his way through the ship until he found Palpatine sitting in a chair in a scene eerily similar to that on the second Death Star. He didn’t like playing assassin but sometimes there was no other way and so he drew his phaser from storage and shot, set to kill. Palpatine never saw it coming. He then moved through the ship and took out Grievous but missed Dooku before escaping from the ship. At least he had gotten two out of three.

Harry stood behind Padme, blending in among the retainers as the Senators stood silently dressed in the dark colours of mourning. Their beloved Chancellor was dead. Of course, that attitude changed quickly once they managed to get into his computers and learnt the truth of the man. Finding out he was behind everything was a massive blow to the Republic and some people more personally. Padme was shocked, she had trusted her old mentor even if she didn’t always agree with his actions. But it hit Anakin the hardest, his shock, grief and horror only lifted as his hand rested on Padme’s swollen abdomen, feeling his children kick. The war ground to a halt as the truth was learnt, Dooku unable to force it without his Master’s backing.

That left the question of what to do with the army. Harry joined a group going to Kamino and they began picking apart everything the cloners had done only to find the chips. It was a horrified group of medical personnel and Jedi who went to work ensuring the men could never be used like that. But the question remained, what to do with them once they were free? All they knew was war. But Padme came to the rescue, gathering support for the men and their rights. It took almost a year but in the end, they were free to choose what they wanted to do with several planets coming forward to offer them a place to live and bolster their own low populations.

Padme gave birth to Luke and Leia with Harry overseeing. The birth was easy and there were no problems at all, other than Anakin fainting. He had left the order when faced with how badly he had been betrayed by Palpatine. He needed love and peace to recover, something he wouldn’t find in the Order. He knew Obi-Wan loved him even if the man couldn’t say it and his leaving the Order had hurt the older man but Padme had ensured the two remained in frequent contact. Their marriage being made public had helped lift spirits since the public loved both of them. there had been calls for her to be the next Chancellor but she had turned it down, wanting to finally live for her family. Because of that the small family had retired to the Lake Country permanently.

Harry left the employ of the Embassy and returned to hospital work out on the Rim, helping those affected by the war. When Cody and several other members of the 212th showed up he’d been
surprised but put them to work helping to rebuild. He had worked with them several times during the war and he had been their favourite non-clone doctor so at loose ends they had searched him out, wanting to help. Their group travelled from planet to planet helping wherever needed and it was fulfilling work. He was just happy he had spared the Galaxy nearly twenty years of Sith oppression and ensured Luke and Leia had their parents. He kept in contact with Padme even if he rarely returned to Naboo.

He noticed Cody and the others aging too fast and immediately contacted Kamino and he may have forced their cooperation in order to stop the process and save them all from an early grave. They had been very grateful and the party had lasted a week. At the end Harry had woken with a massive hangover and Cody in his bed. It didn’t really change anything as they worked until eventually they all settled down in retirement.

The End.

I think this fic will be ending soon. Question is, was the ‘ending’ chap in New World Again enough of a look at Harry returning to Sam or do you want a short fic covering it better?
Aliens? No Problem, But Alien Robots?

Chapter Summary

transformer crossover part 1

Disclaimer: Don’t own HP or Transformers.

Aliens? No Problem, But Alien Robots?

So far Harry had been drifting in this world, unsure where he was meant to be or who he was here to help. There had been the massive ‘terrorist’ attack in Mission City and the base over in the Middle East but that had been over for a week when he’d arrived. Since that didn’t mesh with some footage and eye witness accounts he’d moved quickly to set himself up, easily creating an identity, American since that was where things often centred. Thanks to a judicial use of both magic and advanced technology it was easy to make one Harry Winchester an American citizen born in Chicago in 1987. Setting up a company was a bit harder but not impossible with his many resources. It was amazing what could be stored in his now four storage tattoos, one each for the loyal Marauders and one for Sam, so he was a sentimental sap, sue him. As far as everyone knew, Harry Winchester was from old money and had inherited a small company, making it one of the top 10 in not even a decade after his father’s untimely death from cancer.

Once that was done the waiting began, and waiting was never something he was good at. So, while a copy of the AI he had set up for Clark in Smallville, also named Jarvis, began going through every computer file he could get his digital fingers on Harry went back to school. It had been a few centuries since he’d gone to university so he applied to several and was accepted to Princeton. He would be studying for a Bachelor of Arts in Astrophysical Sciences and Politics, not an easy course load but considering he was already on record as having a Bachelor of Science in Engineering in Computer Science and Electrical Engineering. Yes, he’d gone the child genius route in order to explain his young age and completed degree. And maybe it was an odd mix but he had his suspicions about this world.

…………………………

Harry flipped the TV on as he finished packing the last bag of stuff he needed for Princeton.

“Breaking news out of Shanghai. There’s been a major toxic spill in the Shanghai factory district. The whole city is being put on alert and the area around the factory is being evacuated. So far there are no reports of civilian casualties.”
Harry stopped and watched the footage, frowning as he caught sight of an American uniform. If that was a spill then what was the US military doing there? He glanced at the clock and sighed, he had no time to go look at the moment, not if he wanted to make it in time for all the various fun activities that began on campus later that day. So instead of sating his curiosity he zipped the bag and went to meet his pre-arranged taxi for a lift to the airport. The flight from Chicago wasn’t overly long and soon he was in another taxi. It pulled up and he paid before getting his things out and looking up at the old buildings, it was strange but with all the Earth’s he’d lived on he had never attended Princeton before, he’d attending most universities but not this one. He actually tended to favour Stanford if in the US, in Sam’s memory, and Oxford if in Britain. He glanced at his paperwork and then around until he spotted the sign and headed for Butler College. He could have lived off campus, he hardly lacked the funds, but he enjoyed the whole university experience and you only got that by living in the dorms. He received his room assignment and headed to Bloomberg Hall, sidestepping a group of overly excited guys as they watched the girls walk the halls. With ss2 students housed in the building it was mayhem in the halls as everyone tried to figure out where they were meant to be. He found his room and noticed his roommate had yet to arrive so he claimed the bed near the window and tossed his bags down, putting his laptop bag on the nearby desk.

Harry began unpacking, hanging his clothes in one of the closets and then the rest was folded away in the drawers. Books and stationery went on the desk and shelves and then he made the bed and stored his bags under the bed. In the end, his half of the room was nice and neat. The building had only been a dormitory since ’04 so it was still in good shape and he was glad he was only in a double, he could have ended up sharing a triple room. Not to mention the room was one of the ones with a private bathroom and the laundry was just down the hall. Fingers crossed his roommate was alright since he’d already heard someone ask and be told there would be no switching allowed.

“What happened?” Mikaela asked as she stared around at the firemen and the smoke coming from the house.

“Come here. Listen, I need you to take the Cube sliver and put it in your purse.” Sam pulled her aside and held the sliver that had started this whole mess out to her.

“What’s going on?” she didn’t take it.

“Just take it.” He shoved it in her bag as his Mom approached.

“Sam Witwicky?” she called angrily.
“Yes, Mom.”

“A word with you?”

“Yeah.”

“Hi, Mikaela. I have a bald spot—” Judy pulled her hair aside to show where one of the kitchen appliances had attacked her.

“Hi. Oh.”

“-from a waffle iron. When you go, he goes. I cannot live with this psychotic alien in my garage!” Judy finished, pointing at the garage.

“Calm, calm- Judy, Judy, national security. Look. If we stay quiet, they're gonna take care of everything. Just consider this the official start of our remodel, 'kay?” Ron wrapped his arms around his wife, trying to calm her and it worked to a point.

“Fine. If the government's paying, I want a pool. And a hot tub!”

“Fine. 'Kay.” Ron agreed as he gently tugged her towards the packed car.

“And I'm gonna skinny-dip and you can't say shit about it!” she yelled as the two teens slipped inside the garage to find Bee sitting and waiting for them, greeting them with an electronic squeal.

“Yeah, you know you're in trouble.”

“He still having voice problems?” Mikaela asked sympathetically, she felt sorry for the Autobot since he couldn’t speak.

“He's playing it up. Bee, I want to talk to you about the college thing, okay?”
“I'm so excited, and I just can't hide it.” He danced along to his radio and Sam grimaced.

“I'm not taking you with me.” His statement had the radio stop and Bee groan softly.

“I'm gonna wait outside, okay?” she kissed Sam’s cheek and patted Bee’s leg before leaving.

“I meant to tell you about this earlier. It's just that, you know, here's the thing. Freshmen aren't allowed to have cars. I, I know, and if it was up to me, I'd take you with me, but it's not, Bee. Look. You're an Autobot. You shouldn't be living in my dad's garage. I mean, you're suffocating in here. You deserve better than this.” He argued even as Bee groaned again, looking utterly miserable. “This is hard enough, man. Don't make it harder. Can you just look at me, please? Come on, big guy... Look, the guardian thing is done, okay? You did your job. Look, I'm safe now. You need to go be with Optimus Prime and the others. I just want to be normal, Bee. That's why I'm going to college and I can't do that with you.” And of course, Bee began to cry. “It's not the last time I'm gonna see you, you know, Bee. Come on, don't do that. Bee. You're killing me, Bee. But you'll always be my first car. Love you, Bee.” He whispered and Bee gave a happy squeal. Sam patted his leg and then left only to freeze as he spotted his girlfriend, the riding leathers were gone to reveal a short white dress and she was holding a slightly squished bouquet. “Whoooa! Wow!” She smiled and he pulled her into a kiss.

“So, you think you can make it through those East Coast winters without me?” she teased when they parted.

“You're the best thing to ever happen to me.” He admitted softly.

“And?”

“And I'll do anything for you.”

“And?” she pushed again, getting annoyed.

“I think Sam's about to say the L-word.” Judy whispered, loudly.

“Let's go, kiddo!” Ron yelled.
“Nice timing, Dad.” Judy elbowed him.

“I... adore you.” Sam offered and Mikaela sighed in frustration.

“That's not the word that I want to hear right now.”

“What are you talking about? It's the same word as the other word.”

“It's not the same word.”

“Look, if I say the other word now and you forced me to say it, it won't mean anything, plus you haven't said it either. So, don't get mad at me for not saying it.” He argued.

“Yeah, but I haven't said it because guys always run when you say it first.”

“Yeah, well, so do girls. Especially girls like you, with options.” He admitted, that was one of his biggest fears, that she’d realise how much better than him she was and go back to someone like Trent.

“So, this is all part of your elaborate plan to keep me interested?”

“It can be.”

“I hate that it's working.”

“Have a kiss? We're going to make it work, I promise.” He whispered before they kissed again. Finally, he got in the car and she watched it drive away before getting back into her riding gear, making sure the sliver was secure.

In the bushes, a single Cybertronian watched, scanning her. “Female has sliver from Cube.” Wheelie reported.
“Soundwave acknowledges. Pursue her. Retrieve it.”

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Harry shook his head at the antics of the three guys two rooms down the hall. Leo was the ring leader of the trio and Sharksky and Fassbinder were the electronic muscle for their website, The-Real-Effing-Deal-dot-com. Out of curiosity he’d had a look at the site and some of it wasn’t bad. They had a real talent. If only they would learn to act their age, he’d overheard Leo commenting on how they’d rigged the room assignments to ensure there were a lot of ‘hotties’ in the building and it explained a lot. He was just glad he didn’t have to share a room with them. Leo had tried to rope him into the kitten calendars thing but he really didn’t need a job.

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“Oh my gosh! Look at this place! I feel smarter already. Oh Ron, can you smell it?” Judy gushed as she looked around.

“Yeah, smells like four thousand dollars a year.” Ron grumbled and she shot him a glare.

“Oh hey, cheapo.”

“Hey, go ahead. We'll, uh, we'll get your stuff. Just go ahead and check out your room.”

“Yeah, go.” Judy smiled and Sam nodded, heading into the college area to get his building and room assignment.

He ducked back out to the car to let his parents know where to go and then went to find his room. The door was partially open so he pushed it further and found the room was already occupied by another male. “Hey.” He greeted nervously and the other guy looked up and then stood from the desk.

“Hi, I’m Harry. Come on in, I’m assuming you're my roommate?”

“Hey. Yeah, I’m Sam.”

“Nice to meet you.” Harry offered his hand to the younger man. “Luckily we have one of the rooms
with a private bathroom and the laundry is down the hall to the left. I’ve been here a few days so I already claimed my share of the furniture.”

“That’s cool.” He put down the box he’d carried onto the unmade bed.

“Oh, here we go.” Judy called and Sam sighed but went to the door so they’d know where he was. His Dad quickly spotted him.

“We made it. Hi.” He held the box out and Sam took it, adding it to the bed.

“It's just like Hogwarts. Hi!” Judy called as a girl walked by.

“Is this co-ed? This is a co-ed dorm.”

“You guys want to meet my roommate?” Sam asked, wanting to change the subject, besides he was a one girl kind of guy.

“Yes.” Judy pushed past her husband and into the tidy room.

“This is Harry.”

“We're the Witwicky’s. I'm Judy.”

“Nice to meet you ma’am.” Harry greeted, seeing the flush in her cheeks and her pupils…. oh boy. Yep, she was holding a ‘brownie’ bag.

“Well, aren’t you the sweetest thing?”

“Yeah, he’s real sweet, ma. What is that in your hand, by the way?""
“Mom?” Sam wanted the floor to open and swallow him. He glanced at Harry but saw no pity or anything for her behaviour.

“Yeah, it's a hundred per cent pure Hawaiian green for the environment.”

“Judy, how many of these have you eaten?” Ron asked as he dumped the remainder of Sam’s stuff beside the bed. She laughed and held the bag closer. “Yeah, they baked it with reefer in it.”

“No, it's- Hey!” she yelled as Sam tried to grab the bag.

“Please give me-” the teen pleaded.

“Hey! It's my cheat day. I can eat what I want.”

“Give me-” Ron made a lunge but she ducked past him and out into the hall.

“I'm going to freak out. Please do something right now, Dad. Please do something right now.”

“I did, I tried-”

“I can eat all the freaking brownies I want!” the heard her call from down the hall and Sam hung his head, utterly embarrassed.

Harry winced, not the best introduction to university life. “I'll help you catch her.” He offered and Ron nodded so the three left the room, Harry locking it behind them. By the time they did Sam looked completely humiliated as they watched the minivan drive away. “Relax, it could have been a lot worse.” He offered as they headed back to their room.

“Thanks for the help.”
“No problem.” He unlocked their door and helped Sam set his things up. “Word of warning, two rooms down are a group of three…. conspiracy enthusiasts is the nice way of putting it. They have a website and everything. Leo will probably try to get you to help him sell calendars too.”

“Great.” He sat on the newly made bed and rubbed his temples.

“You okay?”

“Headache.” He admitted.

“Get some rest. I’m heading for the dining room, want me to bring you back something?”

“Please.”

Harry left the younger boy to rest. His family was…interesting. Very highly strung by the look of it too. Hopefully he could calm Sam down. He’d been back for over an hour and Sam had eaten when someone knocked, Sam got it since he was closer.

“Hey, I’m, Leo. Welcome to the Hot Freshman 55. Sharksky hacked Campus Housing and stacked the dorm with pretty betties... is... is so nice...” Leo looked back and spotted someone so Sam leant out to look and saw a pretty blond walking their way. “Oh my God. That's her. She's coming. She sees me, she sees me. Whoo. She's tied for number one on my to-do list. Do not bird-dog my quarry, you hear me?”

“I have a girlfriend.” Sam answered. “You?”

Leo chuckled. “No, not a chance. You a techie?”

“Hm.” Was his answer. He hadn’t been until he met Bee and the others, since then he’d learnt a thing or two but he wasn’t like Maggie or anything. Which reminded him he needed to email the analyst, he hadn’t for a while with all the rush of getting to Princeton. He’d kept in contact with her and Lennox since Mission City, all by email since they didn’t live anywhere near each other and the other two were considerably older than him.
“Anyway, first frat party’s tonight. You two in?”

“Not me.” Harry answered, finally looking up from his book. “As the only one of us legally allowed
to drink I have no desire to show up to first day of class with a hangover.”

“You’re over twenty-one?” Leo demanded.

“Twenty-two actually.”

“Late starter.” The hacker commented and Harry shrugged.

“Second degree. Sam didn’t you say you have a date tonight?”

“Yeah, I do, thanks for the invite but I’ll skip.”

“Your loss guys.” Leo left.

Harry walked into his first astronomy class with Sam beside him, obviously nervous. They grabbed
two empty seats and set up to take notes. “Relax, first lectures are always introductory.” He
encouraged since he’d already had two days’ worth of classes. After three days sharing a room he’d
worked out Sam was very highly strung so he did what he could to keep the kid calm.

“Yeah.” Sam winced again.

“Still have a headache?” Harry asked but Sam didn’t have time to answer.

“Space. Time.” Professor Colan took a bite from the apple he was holding. “Gravity.” He dropped
the apple and one of the girls in front caught it.

“Thank you.” She whispered and the Professor winked.
“Finish that for me. We're going on a journey together, you and I, today. All you... eager, nubile, young minds on the very cusp of adulthood. And I shall be your consort, your guide, your... chaperone into the heart of darkness.” He laughed. “Welcome to Astronomy 101. For what do we know about the stars? Virgo. The virgin. Orion, the great hunter. These are no mere twinkling diamonds for... lovely maidens to wish upon. No, they are dynamos filled with a throbbing, savage and pent-up energy!”

Harry listened to him, feeling more than a little creeped out by the man and then he glanced at Sam who was flipping through the text and Harry realised he was actually reading it as he went. Then his hand went up and Harry gently grasped it, pulling it down.

“Sam.” He hissed.

“Behold the work of Albert Einstein, a professor once, like moi. Energy equals mass...”

Harry ignored the Professor as he checked Sam’s pulse, finding it elevated, his breathing harsh. “Okay that’s it. Come on.” He quickly gathered their stuff and pulled Sam up.

“Is there a problem?”

“Sorry Professor, he’s not feeling well so I’m escorting him to the doctor.” Sam jerked slightly and the Professor frowned but nodded and they left the classroom. Harry ducked into an empty room and sat Sam down. “What’s going on?”

“I just finished the book and there's only one problem. Einstein's wrong. Energy does equal mass times the velocity of light squared in this dimension, but what about the other seventeen? Nobody talks about the other seventeen. Clear example. Break down the elemental components of Energon, assume a constant decay rate and extrapolate for each of the [mutters in Cybertronian] fourteen galactic convergences it took the Sentinel Prime expedition to receive an [stutters] echo on its signal, you wind up with a formula for inter-dimensional energy increase that mass and light alone can't possibly explain. Come on guys, I can't be the only one in the class who...” Sam babbled and Harry listened a bit before stopping him.

“Easy, deep breaths. You read that whole book at in seconds, is that normal for you?”

Sam swallowed and shook his head. “I….”
“Okay, let’s get back to the dorm, okay?” He offered and Sam nodded. They headed back to the dorm only to pause at the sight of a bright yellow Camaro.

“Bee?” Sam whispered. “Uh…I better move the car.”

Harry glanced at him but then nodded. “Okay. But you better get checked out too. That headache isn’t normal.”

“Sure.” Sam smiled shakily and got in, letting bee drive as he closed his eyes against the glare. Eventually they pulled into an old cemetery and Sam got out to stand in front of Optimus Prime himself. “Huh. You won't give me a week, huh? You won't give me one week in college?” he demanded, short tempered due to whatever was happening to him.

“I'm sorry, Sam, but the last fragment of the AllSpark was stolen.”

Sam froze in shock. “Like what? Like Decepticons stole it?” if they had that one, did they know about the other? Was Mikaela in danger?

“We placed it under human protection at your government's request. But I'm here for your help, Sam. Because your leaders believe we brought vengeance upon your planet. Perhaps they are right. That is why they must be reminded by another human of the trust we share.” Optimus explained.

“This isn't my war.” He denied, he wasn’t a soldier, he wasn’t anything useful.

“Not yet. But I fear it soon will be. Your world must not share the same fate as Cybertron. Whole generations lost.”

“I know, and I... I want to help you, I do, but I am not some alien ambassador, you know? I'm a normal kid with normal problems. I am where I'm supposed to be. I'm sorry. I... I really am.”

“Sam, fate rarely calls upon us at a moment of our choosing.”
“You're Optimus Prime. You don't need me.”

“We do. More than you know.” Optimus argued and Sam shivered, hand going to his head. “Are you ill Boy?” When Sam didn’t answer Bumblebee sent his leader the conversation he’d heard between Sam and the older boy. “Ratchet is nearby, at least let him scan you before returning to school.”

Sam hesitated but one look at Bee’s pleading optics and then at Optimus and he nodded so Optimus sent for the medic. Ratchet soon arrived and transformed, scanning the boy who had done so much for them that day in Mission City. He found he was in pain and that his brain was unusually active but nothing more. So, Bee returned him to campus, under strict orders to rest and call if any other symptoms appeared.

Sam entered the room only to find Harry gone, a note saying he’d gone to his next class and to call if he needed anything. Instead of going to his last class of the day Sam huddled under his quilt to think. This had all started when he touched the sliver…which Mikaela had. He grabbed his phone and dialled.

“Hi, Bones! Hi. Hi. Oh, you're such a good boy. What a good boy, you are. Hey, Bones. You hungry?” Mikaela praised the shops guard dog. “There you go.” She grabbed her phone as it rang. “Hey you.”

“Hello? Mikaela?”

“Miss me already?”

“Something just happened to me, okay?” Sam rushed out and she frowned.

“What, you missed a test?” she teased.

“No, no, no. Stop laughing. This is serious, okay. Remember I was telling you about my great-great-grandfather, Archibald Witwicky? Remember? Mikaela, okay, my great-great-grandfather went on this Arctic mission, right? And he saw Megatron. Megatron zapped him and he started seeing these crazy symbols. Okay. Well, now I'm seeing them, too. I just read a nine hundred and three-page astronomy book in thirty-two point six seconds. I had a meltdown in the middle of my class. I am seeing symbols ever since I touched the sliver. Do you have it?”
“Yeah, I have it. It’s in the shop safe. It’s fine.”

“Mik- Mikaela, do not touch it, okay? Don’t touch it.” He pleaded.

“I’m not gonna touch it. Sam, it’s fine. It’s locked away. No one knows where it is.”

Hidden amongst the tools Wheelie rubbed his hands together. “I do! Ah-ha. You're hot, but you ain't too bright.” He found the safe and began shifting things so he would be able to reach it. “There we go. Yeah, that will work. Ooh damn- son of a bitch! What are you looking at, slobber-puss? Ah-what the? This place is a freaking house of horrors! Ooh... pain... it hurts...” he mumbled as he fell.

“Hold on.” Mikaela whispered, hearing something. She stood and went to look, grabbing a torch.

“Right to five, then tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-” he shrieked as heat hit his eye, melting it. “Is that the best you got, huh? Is that the best you can do? Ah!” he screamed again as the torch came closer.

“What are you doing here, you little freak?”

“Aaa! That's my eye, you crazy bitch!”

“You gonna talk now?” she growled.

“Ow, ow, ow! I seek knowledge from the Cube. The Fallen demands me!”

“What knowledge?”

“You got the shard. I need the shard, gimme the shard, I need the shard, gimme the shard, they’re gonna whack me! I'm gonna be dead without that shard!” he pleaded, he couldn’t go back without it. “Easy, warrior goddess, I'm just a little salvage-scrap drone!”

“And I'm your worst nightmare.” She grabbed him and slammed him into a box.
“Ow ow ow. Hey, hey, hey!” his cries were silences as she shut and locked it.

“‘What the hell was that?’” Sam demanded over the phone.

“I’ll tell you later, just not on an open phone line, okay? I’m gonna get on a plane right now and I’ll be there later this afternoon. Just be careful, Sam.” She warned before hanging up and quickly packing a bag.

Harry headed back to his dorm, glad class was done for the day. He was worried about Sam, something felt very off about his headache and sudden speed reading ability. Hopefully the doctor had helped. He blinked as one of the girls fell into step beside him, he wasn’t sure of her name.

“Sam home?”

“Hopefully, but he’s not feeling so good.” He warned as he opened the door.

“Hey! You ever have a song stuck in your head? It’s like the worst song ever, but you can’t help to whistle it or sing it ‘cause it, like, repeats itself, repeats itself, repeats itself, repeats itself, repeats itself, repeats itself?” Sam babbled as they stood and stared in shock.

“What the hell Sam?” Okay now Harry was really worried, this was in no way normal.

“I know you’re freaking out. Don’t freak out. Don’t freak out. Easy fix. Puzzle code in my head. Now it’s on the walls. Everything is good. This is the part that- shh! Shh! Shh! Okay, were you saying?”

“Right, I’m calling an ambulance.” Harry went for his phone only for the girl to shove him out, too hard for a human her size.

“Get out.” She slammed the door and turned to Sam. “Sam, I knew there was something special about you.”
“Really?”

“And I know you know what happens when two people in the know get together. They're genuinely amazing... in bed.” She prowled towards him, knocking him back onto the bed. Neither noticed Harry trying the door but it was locked.

“All right, listen, hold on! Boundaries. Flag on the play. Okay. I'm very ticklish.”

“We have needs, Sam. Relax.” Her hands went under his shirt.

“Whoah! Jeez! Uh... what about this economy? It's crazy, isn't it? You are very aggressive.”

“Just relax.”

Harry touched the face of his watch. “Jarvis run a scan of my location, tell me what you see.” His new car arriving had been great timing apparently. Not that it was just a ‘car’. Jarvis had full access and was capable of controlling the vehicle. The brand-new Honda Civic Sedan might not look like the sort of car someone with his status would drive but he wasn’t Tony Stark, he didn’t need flashy. Besides it was so altered did it still count as a Honda? Its frame may retain the shape but the whole thing was made of an alloy he planned to introduce to the market eventually, the same alloy Iron Man suites were made of. Not to mention it was also armed. He was a little paranoid.

“I am reading one human in distress and some sort of mechanical being Sir.” Jarvis’ response came through the tiny receiver hidden in the single piercing he was currently wearing. “I suggest intervention.”

“Get ready for trouble.” He warned and then went to kick the door in only to see a brunette approaching at almost a run.

“Sam?” she asked and Harry indicated the door before kicking it in to reveal Sam pinned to the bed by Alice.

“Mikaela!” Sam called in relief.
“Is that your girlfriend?” Alice asked innocently.

“Uh-huh.” He coughed.

“Ex.” Mikaela snapped and turned to leave but Harry grabbed her arm.

“Wait up. She physically kicked me out and then pinned a protesting Sam. This isn’t his fault.” Harry told the girl and then glared at Alice. “Get off.”

“I can explain everyth- uk!” Sam choked as something metallic wrapped around his throat and Alice growled at them. Mikaela reacted by throwing the metal box she was holding at the other female, sending it crashing through the window. Harry took the opportunity to grab Sam and the three bolted down the hall, hearing other students scream behind them.

“Parking lot!” Harry yelled and they veered that way, Harry sliding into the driver’s seat.

“You've got to get that box!” Mikaela yelled and Sam grabbed it, jumping in beside Harry while Mikaela and the box took the back.

“Hey! Let me out, let me out!” Wheelie yelled even as Harry backed out of his spot, all three seeing Alice walking towards them.

“Drive, drive, drive! She's right there! She's right there!

“Come on, come on, come on.” Sam yelled as Harry spun the car out of the parking lot. “No! Whoa! Tongue tongue tongue!”

Harry dodged the attack and then floored it, slamming into her and then a poll, smashing her between the cars armour and the metal poll before backing up and surging forward again, making sure to mangle her remains. He then took off, away from campus, not wanting to cause any casualties if they were pursued. “Someone want to tell me what the hell is going on?” He snapped as he dodged around traffic, following the route Jarvis was highlighting. They went under an overpass and then heard the distinctive sound of a helicopter flying low. Harry pulled the car back under the cover, following the overpass even as his passengers clung on in fear as he went against traffic.
“Decepticons!” Sam yelled. “Alice was a Decepticon, evil alien robot. They want the cube sliver.” Sam babbled.

“What’s in the box?” He glanced back and Sam did too, not knowing what was in there.

“Decepticon that came for the shard. He’s fine in there.” Mikaela answered.

“Any idea on backup?”

“Yeah. Uh…I lost my phone.” Sam searched his pockets.

“Name or number?”

“Major Will Lennox.”

“Got that Jarvis?”

“Of course, sir, searching……dialling.”

“Hello?”

“Lennox? It’s Sam, we’ve got big problems. Decepticons are back! We took out one, have another small one captive but we need help. There’s a helicopter chasing us.”

“Where are you?”

“Mercer Road, heading for Institute Woods.” Harry called.

“Autobot signals in your vicinity, we’re on the way.” Lennox promised before hanging up.
“Major, incoming SOS from Autobots! Multiple Decepticon contacts in motion. Vicinity- Eastern United States, sir!”

“As in how many?” Morshower demanded even as Will hung up from Sam’s call.

“Unclear, sir.”

“Well, get clear.”

“The Autobots are on the move, splitting into two teams, sir. They're not answering our calls and they're heading to New York and Philadelphia.”

“All right, full weapons deployment. Wheels up in 10 minutes! Sam Witwicky called, he’s being pursued by the Decepticons in Philadelphia. We’re going in to retrieve him.” Will yelled as he moved out with his men, praying they made it in time to help.

Harry floored it, pushing the altered engine to the max as they sped down the road. “Jarvis take over driving.”

“Affirmative.”

“What the hell?”

“Sam, meet Jarvis, he’s an AI.”

“A pleasure to meet you Samuel, Mikaela.” Jarvis greeted. “I detect an approaching signal similar to those chasing us.” he reported. Seconds later a blue and red semi came barrelling into view.

“Optimus!” Sam yelled in relief. Jarvis adjusted their course to intercept based on Sam’s reaction. The helicopter put on a burst of speed, trying to get to them before Optimus could.

“Jarvis weapons on.”
“Weapons activated, targeting. Firing solution established.”

“Give me control.” A panel slid open and Harry glanced at the targeting system before firing. Then the semi was past them and transforming.

“More signals approaching.” Jarvis warned and Harry swore. The car swerved as a rocket slammed into the ground but the armour held. “Armour integrity down to 85%.” He warned. Another hit managed to flip the car off the road and into the trees.

“Everyone out.” Harry barked as he opened the glove compartment and grabbed the gear inside. Mikaela grabbed the box and the three piled out, running. “Know how to shoot?” he slipped the holster on.

“No.” they both answered and Harry sighed, but he grabbed them both by the wrists, attaching a device to their watches. “In case we split up, Jarvis can help and track us. Now run!” they ran and then had to dodge and scramble as the fighting bots slammed into the trees.

“Hidden, Sam!” Optimus yelled as he fought Megatron himself.

“Didn’t you kill him?” Mikaela demanded when they recognised him and Sam nodded.

“Waste of- metal! Junkyard- crap!” Optimus yelled as he landed several hits.

“Decepticons!”

“Come here, boy.” Starscream snarled as he landed and transformed, forcing the three to run for a better hiding spot.

“There is another source of Energon hidden on this planet. The boy could lead us to it.” Megatron snapped at Prime.

“ Optimus!” Sam screamed as he saw the Autobot spit out their equivalent of a tooth. Harry could tell
he was an excellent fighter but he was badly outnumbered and injured.

“the future of our race not worth a single human life?” Megatron demanded as he knocked Optimus down.

“Up! Get up!”

“You'll never stop at one! I'll take you ALL on!” Optimus roared in anger, his fighting take on a new energy.

“Ah!” Starscream screamed as he was hit. “My arm!”

“No! Not me-“ Grindor’s plea ended in a pained scream as he was off lined.

“Piece of tin. Sam! Where are you?” Optimus looked around for the Boy.

Megatron hissed as he came up behind Optimus and rammed his arm into his chest, too close to his Spark Chamber.

“No!” Optimus screamed in pain, optics still searching until they landed on the three organics sheltered by a fallen tree.

“You're so weak!” he twisted his arm, getting another pained scream. He then fired his weapon, ripping into Optimus’ Spark chamber, getting an agonised scream even as Optimus’ hands dropped from where he’d been trying to remove the weapon.

Optimus collapsed to the ground, the light in blue optics flickering even as he looked at the Boy he had come to protect. “Sam, run. Ru...” the light died and Optimus was still, leaving Sam and Mikaela to stare in horrified shock even as Harry worked to get them moving.

“Autobots, attack!” Ironhide commanded as they arrived, engaging the Deceptions even as they saw their fallen leader.
“Bumblebee, get them out of here!” Ratchet yelled as he moved to the Prime’s side, hoping he wasn’t too late.

The yellow Camaro spun to a stop, doors opening and the three leapt inside. Bee took off with the twins flanking him.

Black vans disgorged the soldiers within as they began firing on Megatron, helping force the Decepticon retreat.

The convoy of three cars sped through the darkening streets as night fell, finally stopping in the ruins of an old prison. Harry watched in awe as the cars transformed into bipedal alien forms. Jarvis was going to be so jealous.

"That went well.” Megatron clung to the roof of a tall building, watching as Starscream landed.

“We've... lost the boy, Master. The Autobots must be shielding their signals.”

“I can't even rely on you-" he lunged to grasp the flyer by the throat.

“Sorry- no! No!”

“-to swat a simple insect?”

“One insect among seven billion!” he pleaded.

“Shut up.”

“He could be anywhere.’

‘Then we will force them to find him for us! It's time for the world to know of our presence. No more disguises. No mercy! The time has come for my master's arrival.”
“Decepticons, mobilize. It is time.”

The group of six watched in horror as the news played footage from all over the world of meteors hitting the ground, except they were actually Decepticons. Sam paled as he saw the footage of the French landing. “Sam?”

“My parents are in Paris.” He admitted and Mikaela took his hand.

“Citizens of the human hive, your... leaders have withheld the truth. You are not alone in this universe. We have lived among you. Hidden. But no more. As you've seen, we can destroy your cities at will, unless you turn over this... boy.... If you resist us, we will destroy the world as you know it.” A new voice spoke over the TV, the face one none of them recognised.

“What we're hearing from the German government is that the world broadcast was a satellite hacking. The military has just told us they have assumed Condition Delta, which is the highest level we have been at since Nine-Eleven. President Obama is being flown to a bunker somewhere in the middle of the United States in the face of the worst simultaneous attacks ever around the globe. The aircraft carrier USS Roosevelt goes down off the East Coast, all hands lost. Worldwide casualties are in the neighbourhood of seven thousand, but that number could climb. It's still too early to tell. What we need to ask now is, "who and why?" Harry flipped channels.

“The FBI is still trying to locate the boy, Sam Witwicky.” A picture of Sam flashed up with his details. “We believe they have information about the attacks. The FBI, CIA and Interpol are all seeking the cooperation of worldwide law enforcement.” Mikaela’s picture flashed up but Harry’s didn’t.

“Jarvis?”

“You information is protected sir. Working to encode Samuel and Mikaela’s along with the families.” Jarvis answered, surprising the Autobots.

“Enact Winter protocols.” He’d named them after the Winter Soldier, most Bucky’s he knew would like that.
“Understood.”

“Winter protocols?” Sam asked in confusion.

“Getting the company’s assets off American soil. I purchased the The Muertes Archipelago from the Costa Rican government a few years back. When you have an AI to help slipping paperwork through the UN to be declared a sovereign nation isn’t that hard.”

“You own your own Island?” Mikaela was surprised, Sam’s roommate was very interesting.

“Technically five islands of varying sizes, Isla Nublar, Isla Muerta, Isla Pena, Isla Sorna and Isla Tacaño. Construction started last year on general infrastructure. As soon as your families are found private jets will take them there for safety.”

“Who are you?” Mikaela demanded warily.

“Harry Winchester, owner of Stag Industries.”

“Oh.” She whispered in shock and even Sam was surprised. He had known Harry’s name but hadn’t realised he was that Harry.

“Okay, so Harry, this is Bumblebee, Skids and Mudflap. They’re Autobots from Cybertron.”

“Nice to meet you.” Harry waved at the bots.

“So, what do we do now?”

..................

“What is the meaning of this?” Sideswipe demanded as soldiers surrounded them, weapons raised.

“You dare point a gun at me? You want a piece of me? I will tear you apart!” Ironhide yelled, weapons activating.
“Drop your weapons! Drop your weapons!” the soldiers ordered.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Drop your weapons!” Epps yelled.

“Tell them to lower their weapons!” Will ordered firmly.

“Tell them first.” One of the soldiers answered.

“Tell them to lower their weap-“ he repeated but was cut off.

“Major, there's nothing I can do. Talk to him.” He pointed and Will turned to see Galloway approaching and oh it was so tempting to have an accidental misfire handle him permanently.

“Your NEST team is deactivated, Major. You are to cease anti-Decepticon operations and return to Diego Garcia pending further orders.”

“No, we take our orders directly from Chairman Morshower, sir.”

“Well, I'll see your Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and I will raise you a President of the United States. I have operational command now. An alien blood feud has been brought to our shores for which our soldiers are paying the price. The secret is out! This is our war now. And we will win it as we always have, with a coordinated military strategy.”

“This fool is terribly misinformed.” Ratchet snapped angrily.

“You're gonna need every asset that you've got.”

“What we need is to draw up battle plans while we explore every possible diplomatic solution.”

“Like what, handing over the kid?” Will asked, surely they wouldn’t.
“All options are being considered.”

“Whatever the Decepticons are after, this is just the start.” Graham called out.

“There is no negotiating with them.” Will agreed, this was not the sort of thing he’d signed up for. He wouldn’t let them take Sam.

“I'm ordering you to stand down. You won't be needing this anymore.” Galloway ripped the NEST patch from Lennox’ uniform. “Get your assets back to base! And take that pile of scrap metal back to Diego Garcia. Let's go!”

“I really don't like that dude. He's an asshole.” Epps muttered and Will nodded.

“Autobots, report to hangar for transport.”

“Ironhide, we should leave this planet.”

“That's not what Optimus would want.”

“THERE'S nothing that you could have done.” Mikaela tried to soothe Sam while Harry was chatting with his AI, arranging for her Dad to be taken to safety and his employees shipped out too.

“You okay?” Sam asked her and she nodded, trying to muster a smile.

“Yeah.”

Sam turned to look at his guardian, maybe if he’d done as Optimus had wanted this wouldn’t have happened. He should have stayed with the, after Ratchet scanned him. “Bee, if you hate me, I understand.” Bee let out an electronic squeal, looking sad and lost. “I messed up. I'm sorry.”
“Young fella, you are the person I care about most in my life. If there's anything you need, I won’t be far away.” He pieced together with his radio.

“He's dead because of me. He came here to protect me and he's dead.”

“There's some things you just can't change. So, his sacrifice for us would not have been in vain. Hallelujah!”

“I'm gonna make it right. I'm going to turn myself in.”

“We- we've got to stick together.” Bee answered, shaking his head.

“You're not going to do that.” Mikaela snapped.

“Yes, I am.”

“Everything we worked for will be wiped out. In one day!” Bee agreed with. Her.

“You two.”

“Mm?” Skids looked over from where they’d been watching Harry.

“Hey, you know the glyphs?”

“Uh...” Mudflap looked at his twin so Sam sketched symbols in the dirt.

“These? The symbols that have been rattling around in my head?”

“Whoo, that's, that's old school, yo. That's, that's like... that's Cybertronian.”
“Oh, that's some serious stuff, right there.” Mudflap agreed.

“They gotta mean something, like a message or like a map. Like a map to an Energon source! Can you read this?”

“Read? Uh-“

“You see that? You see that?”

“We... No. We don't really do much reading. Not so much.”

“If you can't read it, we gotta find somebody who can.”

Harry re-joined them, looking at the symbols. He took a picture and uploaded it to Jarvis. “Would any of the other Autobots be able to?”

“Na….this is older than all us.”

Sam frowned. “What about Sector 7? They had the Cube and Megatron for years.”

“Know any names?” Harry asked.

“Um…Simmons and Banacheck.” Sam offered and Harry set Jarvis to tracking them down. With nothing to do but wait they settled in to sleep.

“Sir?”

“Yeah J.”

“I have tracked an ex-agent Simmons to a deli in New York City. No result yet for Banacheck.”
“All right, be careful these Decepticons don’t detect you, I don’t want to find out how your firewalls hold up against them.”

“Of course.”

Closing the link Harry lay back to watch the stars come out, there was nothing more to do until the sun came up.

Bumblebee pulled up opposite the deli and Harry got out, glancing around. They might be on the run, aliens were invading, but for the average person life went on. He crossed the street and entered.

“Number forty-two, we got your kishka, knish, kasha-varnishka and kreplach combo right here. Cash only. Who’s next?”

“I told you to cure the lox in the brine and then smoke it.”

“Ma, you want me to cut my hand off, or what?”

“You, you, you ruined a beautiful piece of fish, you retard.”

“I'm like a ninja with a blade. It's an art form.”

“Give me your money. Get out of here!”

“Hey, Sal! Watch your reach, huh? Take a number, young man.” He finally spotted the bemused Harry.

“Simmons, sector 7?”
“Never heard of him.”

“Never heard of Robo-Warrior either? Nice screen name by the way.” The door opened behind him. “This him?” Harry asked Sam who sighed.

“No.” Simmons groaned as he recognised Sam despite the baseball cap. “All right, meat store's closed! Everybody out!”

“When he says to go, you go.”

“Out! Right now. That means you, lady, right now.”

“So how well do you know this guy?” Harry asked as the customers filed out around them.

“We’re old friends.”

“Old friends? You're the case that shut down Sector Seven, got the kibosh disbanded. No more security clearance, no retirement, no nothing. All 'cause of you and your little criminal girlfriend. Look at her now, so mature.”

“You live with your mama?” she shot back.

“No, my mama lives with me. It's a big difference. They've got your face all over the news, alien boy.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And N.B.E.-one. Still kicking, huh? How did that happen? Don't answer. I don't know what you're hiding, but I don't want anything to do with it. So, good-bye. You never saw me. I got bagels to smear. Vanish.”

“Can you give me five seconds? Look, hold on, I need your help.”
“Reaaaally? You need my help?” Simmons snorted in disbelief and Harry bit back an aggravated sigh. Was this guy for real? What sort of agency let someone like him in?

“I need... Look, I am slowly losing my mind. Okay. I had a little crab-bot plunge a device deep into the soft tissues of my brain and started projecting little alien symbols like a freaking home movie! And on top of that, I'm a wanted fugitive. So, you think you got it rough?”

“You said it projected images off your brain?”

“Right.”

“Meat locker, now!” he commanded, opening the door and the two teens grimaced.

“Dead pigs.”

“Yuck.”

“What you're about to see is top secret... Do not tell my mother.” He commanded as they followed him into the room of hanging meat.

“Swine flu. Not good.” Sam muttered and Harry chuckled.

“Now you know. Next time you eat a goat or a pig, there's a story behind it. Saaad little story.”

“An entire city flat. How do you explain that? Are you saying you believe in aliens now?” the newscaster asked on the tiny TV in the room they climbed down to.

“Okay, files, files. We're talking about symbols. Ey! still radioactive. Hands off. Okay, Cube-brain. Any of these look like the symbols you saw?”

“Where did you get these?” Sam asked, looking around in surprise.
“Before I got fired, I poached S-7’s crown jewel, over seventy-five years of alien research, which points to one inescapable fact. The Transformers, they've been here a long, long time. How do I know? Archaeologists found these unexplained markings in ancient ruins all over the world. China. Egypt. Greece. Shot in 1932. These the symbols you're seeing in your head?” Simmons put the photos down, the same ones that Jarvis had pulled up earlier that morning.

“Yeah.”

“Same ones over here, right? So, tell me, how did they end up all drawing the same things? Aliens. And I think some of them stayed. Check this out. Project: Black Knife. Robots. In disguise. Hiding here all along. We detected radioactive signatures all across the country. I pleaded. On my knees with S-7 to investigate it, but they said the readings were infinitesimal, that I... was... obsessed! Me. Can you imagine that?”

“Megatron said that there was another Energon source here.”

“On Earth?” Simmons demanded

“On Earth.” Sam agreed.

“Another source?”

“Yes, another source that these symbols apparently lead to. Must you repeat everything?” Harry asked.

“Wait, who are you?”

“Harry Winchester, Sam’s College roommate.”

“Wow. Okay, you talked to your Autobot friends about this?”

“No, no, no, the source is before them. Whatever the Energon source is, it predates them.” Sam cut
himself off before he could repeat it again, not wanting to annoy the guy who was working to find his family and keep them safe.

“Well, then we're porked, unless we can talk to a Decepticon. I mean, I'm not on speaking terms with them.”

“Actually, I am.” Mikaela grinned and then went back out to Bumblebee, coming back with the box.

“Let me out!”

“This is going to be a little bit sad.” She warned.

“Open it.”

Wheelie leapt out as soon it was open, letting out a battle scream even as Sam moved back in surprise. Harry saw the chain and grabbed it, restraining the bot. “I will have so many Decepticons on your butt!”

“Hey, behave!” Harry snapped, pinning him.

“Easy!” Wheelie winced.

“What is it, a Decepticon?” Sam looked closer.

“Yeah.” She smirked.

“And you're training him?”

“I'm trying to.”

“I spent my whole adult life combing the planet for aliens...”
“Got to get me off this leash.” Wheelie bit at the chain.

“...and you're carrying around one in your purse like a little Chihuahua.” Simmons muttered in disbelief.

“Huh? Do you want a throwdown, you pubic 'fro-head?”

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about your eye, you know, but, if you're a good boy-“

“Uh-huh? Uh-huh?”

“-then I'm not gonna torch your other eye. Okay? I'm not gonna torch it. Just tell me what these symbols are. Please.” She smiled and then pointed at the pictures so Harry loosened the chain, letting him up to look.

“All right. Uh. Oh, I know that. That's the language of the Primes. I don't read it, but these guys... where the frick did you find photos of these guys?” Wheelie asked in awe.

“Is this they?” Sam pointed and Wheelie nodded.

“Yeah. Seekers, pal. Oldest of the old. They've been here thousands of years, looking for something. I don't know what. Nobody tells me nothing, but they'll translate those symbols for you. And I know where to find them.”

“Show us.” Harry ordered and Wheelie nodded.

He lit up the coordinates on the wall map and the four humans shifted to study them. “Closest one's in Washington.” Simmons announced.

by the time they reached Washington it was late afternoon but they kept going till they reached the coordinates. Simmons had been relegated to riding in Skids to keep Harry from strangling the other
man. They got out and looked around. “Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. Land of dreams in there. All I ever wanted to be was an astronaut. Hold those.” Simmons commanded as he stripped his pants off.

“What is that?” Sam dropped the trousers, not wanting to hold them.

“What? I wear them when I'm in a funk. So, does Giambi, Jeter. It's a baseball thing. Okay. Watches synchronized, sharp mind and empty bladder. You get caught, demand an attorney and don't ever say my name. Okay, take one of these pills. Slip it under your tongue. It's the high-concentrate polymer they put in Oreo cookies. Tricks the polygraph every time. Okay. Now, let's get this show on the road.”

“Okay enough! Simmons put your pants back on.” He snapped, thankful his control was good enough his eyes never accidentally flashed Goa’uld gold unless he wanted them to. “Jarvis, you in?”

“Of course, the security system is rather basic. I have your group cleared through as mechanics here to check the displays. You may enter when ready.”

“You heard him.” Harry quickly fixed his clothes and helped the others so they looked more like workers. They headed for the gate and Harry showed his id, getting them all badges.

“I got to get the tracker, all right.” Simmons began scanning as they moved through the halls, heading into the big hanger. Mikaela knelt and let Wheelee out of his box.

“Be good.” She warned.

“I'm claustrophobic.”

“Ah.” Simmons sped up as the tracker reacted.

“Look, look. Follow him. Follow him. He knows where he's going... He knows something.” Mikaela called as Wheelee took off.

“What?” Sam called and she pointed.
“He knows something!”

“You got what I got?” Simmons grinned and walked towards one of the planes. “Blackbird.”

“Ooh, there he is. This guy's a legend, like, like, like the Chairman of the Board! Yo, freshman, point the shard and watch the magic happen.” Wheelie was bouncing around in excitement.

Sam took out the sliver and gently placed it against the Blackbird. Energy flashed over it and it began to transform very slowly.

“Oh shit. It's a Decepticon!” Mikaela yelled as she spotted the symbol.

“Decepticon?”

“Behind the MiG now!” Simmons yelled and Harry grabbed Mikaela, yanking her behind cover.

“Ah. What sort of hideous mausoleum is this? Answer me, pawns and knaves! Show yourselves or suffer my infinite wrath! You little spinal-cord-based organisms! Oof. Oh, bugger it. Behold the eternal glory of... Jetfire! Prepare for remote systems override!” the Decepticon yelled, stumbling around.

“I tell you, this guy did not age well.” Wheelie muttered.

“I don't think he's gonna hurt us.” Harry muttered as the bot stumbled to the doors.

“I command these doors to open! Fire! I said, fire!” they ducked as the missile went backwards instead of into the doors.

“Whoa whoa whoa!”

“Oh, bollocks! Damn these worthless parts.” He stumbled through the planes outside the hanger.
“Wait a second!” Sam yelled after him.

“Itchy, wretched rust in my arse! Ah!”

“Oh, the museum is going to be very angry. Very angry. We gotta catch that plane.” Simmons muttered.

“I’ll make a donation.” Harry answered as they ran.

“Right. I’m on a mission.” Jetfire yelled at them. “What do you want?”

“Look, we just want to talk!”

“I have no time to talk. I’m on a mission. I’m a mercenary doom-bringer. What planet am I on?”

“Earth.”

“Earth? Terrible name for a planet. Might as well call it dirt. Planet dirt. Tell me, is that robot civil war still going on? Who’s winning?”

His answer had harry stifling a laugh, he’d heard that a lot over the centuries.

“The Decepticons.” Sam answered flatly.

Jetfire spat. “Well, I change sides to the Autobots.”

“What do you mean, change sides?”

“It's a choice. It's an intensely personal decision. So much negativity. Who wants to live a life filled
with hate?"

“You mean you don't have to work for those miserable freaking Decepticons?” Wheelie asked hopefully.

“If Decepticons had their way, they'd destroy the whole universe.”

“I'm changing sides. I'm changing sides, too, warrior goddess. Who's your little Autobot?” he grabbed onto her leg.

“Aw, you're cute.”

“Name's Wheelie. Yeah. Yeah. Say my name, say my name.”

“What are you allowing to happen to your foot just now?” Sam asked in disgust.

“Okay, let’s focus people.” Harry ordered. They needed him around just to keep them all on target or who knew how long it would take to get anything done.

“What were you saying?” Sam turned back to Jetfire.

“I told you my name was Jetfire! So, stop judging me!”

“Somebody shit the bed this morning.” Wheelie grumbled.

“I have issues of my own, and it started with my mother! My ancestors have been here for centuries. My father, why, he was the wheel! The first wheel. Do you know what he transformed into?”

“No.”

“Nothing! But he did so with honour! Dignity, damn it!” a part fell off him and they winced. “Oh,
bollocks. My boosters are fried. Aww.”

“I think we can help each other. You know things I don't know. I know things you don't know, I do.”

“I don't think he knows anything. Honestly, I don't.” Simmons offered and Harry was tempted to agree but sometimes the elderly knew the most important things.

“I could do this all day. It comes in waves, these vivid symbols. They're symbols, but they're in my mind. You see, all this is in my mind and Megatron wants what's in my mind. Him and someone called the Fallen.”

“The Fallen? I know him. He left me here to rust. The original Decepticon. He's terrible to work for. It's always apocalypse, chaos, crisis. These transcriptions, they were part of my mission, the Fallen's search. I remember now, for the Dagger's Tip, and- and the key.”

“Yeah, wait, slow down. The Dagger's Tip? The key? What are you talking about?”

“No time to explain.” Jetfire announced and Harry tensed as he felt some sort of energy gathered around them.

“Wait, wait-“ Harry called but it was too late.

“Hold on, everybody! Stay still or you'll die!” Jetfire warned and then the world turned upside down.

Harry held the map spread out in his lap, thankful they’d believed he’d had it in his jacket this whole time. Jetfire’s story had been amazing, he’d never heard a history for Earth like it. “Okay, here's what my Jarvis found. Ancient Sumerians used to call the Gulf of Aqaba the "Dagger's Tip."

“That's the Dagger's Tip.” Sam pointed at the area.

“It's part of the Red Sea. Divides Egypt and Jordan like the tip of a blade. 29.5 degrees north, 35
“First thing we've got to do is get Optimus to the Dagger's Tip.”

“How are you gonna get him halfway around the world?” Simmons demanded.

“I'm gonna make a call.” Sam smirked and then they heard sirens. “We got cops... Whoa!”

“Sam, we got to get off this road and lay low.” Simmons called form inside Mudflap.

“Man, stupid cops! Ah-ha-ha!” Said Autobot complained as they bumped along the village ‘road’. They quickly pulled off, slipping into the shadows of buildings while Mikaela covered her hair and face like a local girl, keeping watch.

“They're gone.” She removed the scarf and joined them.

“Okay, we're running out of time. I gotta make the call to Lennox-“

“You're on the Worldwide Wanted List. Try calling one base, they'll track you here in seconds. CIA is all over this place!”

“I'll make the call.” Harry tapped his watch against the dilapidated looking payphone, giving Jarvis access. As soon as the line was encrypted Harry dialled.

“So, we're shipping him back to base. This is such a mistake.” Lennox muttered as he watched Optimus’ body being loaded like cargo.

“Major Lennox, phone call.” A solider approached with a phone and Lennox took it.

“Lennox, I'm with the kid. We need the truck for a possible resurrection. Coordinates for airdrop, 29.5 north, 34.88 east.”
“Who is this?” He demanded even as he handed the coordinates to the pilot.

“His dorm mate. Get moving Major, limited time.” Harry snapped and then hung up even as sirens approached again.


“Egypt? Are you serious?” Epps looked to his boss.

“Even if we could figure out a way to get big man over there, how is this little kid supposed to bring him back to life?”

“Look. I don't know- but we got to trust him.” Will argued, Epps had been at Mission City, he should know what the kid could do when needed.

Jarvis and Bumblebee had plotted them the best route, with the least people and checkpoints. They were headed for Giza for now, there wasn’t a lot they could do till they figured out the riddle or Lennox showed up.

“Okay, let's go over it again. When the dawn alights the Dagger's Tip, the Three Kings will reveal the doorway.” Sam recited.

Harry frowned, it was nagging at him but why? Three kings…. Egypt… “The pyramids at Giza? Three tombs for three Kings…and they follow the alignment of-”

“Orion’s Belt!” Sam suddenly got it, reading the whole book in a few seconds had its advantages.

“Checkpoint. Checkpoint. We don’t exactly have passports.” Mikaela hissed.
“Pass-port!” a voice called form the watch shack.

“They got cameras at the top.” Sam whispered.

“Jarvis has it.” Harry assured him.

“All right, chill. This is espionage now. I can handle it. These are my people.” Simmons ordered.

“Yeah.” Wheelie muttered.

“I'm one-thirty-sixth Arab.”

“Oh great, a frickin' munchkin. Little people are mean. Tell him he's tall.” Wheelie urged and Harry pulled him back, hiding him between the seats.

“Ashu-fanah... The Dagger's... Tip? Right? Egypt, Jordan. We want to go there. Me and my family. This is my family. This is my son, my other son, my daughter. We're tourists, from New York.” Simmons tried.

“New York?” The officer asked and Harry silently sent a bit of magic his way, making him more agreeable.

“Yes. Yes.”

“Fifty kilometres.”

“You look like the guy that runs my falafel stand. Thank you very much.” Simmons grinned and the others waved like a happy family.

“New York!”
“I know. I know you from somewhere.” Simmons laughed as the beam went up to allow them to pass.

“Go Yankees!” he cheered as they drove past. Thanks to Jarvis the cameras never transmitted the pictures of them.

They drove on to Giza and stopped for the night, slipping into the buildings around the pyramids. They climbed up to where they could see the pyramids and the stars and Sam pointed out the three. “Okay, you see those three stars? You see how the last one touches the horizon? That's Orion’s belt, but it's also called the Three Kings. And the reason for that is the three Egyptian kings who built the pyramids of Giza built them to mirror those stars, so it's like an arrow staring us straight in the face.”

“They all point due east, towards Jordan. The mountains of Petra.” Harry finished. He’d never actually been to Petra before. “Settle in, we leave at first light.”

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“We've had an engine malfunction. We're gonna have to divert to SOCCENT. Flight master, let's lighten the load and prepare for bailout.”


“All right, team, grab your chutes!”

“Bailout, like, like bailout?”

“You familiar with the standard MC-4?” Will asked.

“Of course not! I’ve never jumped out of a perfectly good airplane before! Wait a minute, is this really happening?” he demanded

“Yeah. All right, here we go.” Will began helping into a chute.
“Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You're behind this, aren't you?”

“What are you talking about? You heard the pilot. These guys don't mess around. This is just standard procedure. I'm just following orders to the letter.” He yelled over the noise of the plane. “Isn't that what you said?”

“You just signed a death warrant on your career, Major... Whoa! What was that? What was that?” he grabbed onto Will as the plane shook and dropped fast.

“Oh, that's not good. Come on. Right this way!” he led Galloway to the loading ramp.

“I- I can't jump out of an airplane! I have an ulcer! No, no, no-“

“Come on. It's okay.”

“I really can't do this. What are you doing-“

“Come here! Come here.”

“Why aren't you wearing your chute?” Galloway yelled as the ramp lowered.

“Because I have to secure the VIPs first! Okay, I want you to listen very carefully and memorize everything that I say.” Will yelled to be heard over the wind. “Each chute has a GPS tracker so you can be found by search and rescue. Right next to that's a fabric webbing called a bridle, which holds the pin that keeps the main container closed. Okay, are you listening?”

“I- I can't hear what...” he tugged at the chute.

“Stop that!”

“All right. All right.”
“All right, when the pilot chute inflates into the air, it pulls the pin and opens the main. Red's your backup, blue's your primary. I want you to pull the blue. I need you to pull it really hard! Not- not now, we're on the plane, you dumbass!” Will yelled as Galloway yanked the cord.

“What? Aaaaaaaaa-“ he screamed as the wind caught the chute and pulled him from the plane.

“He say goodbye?” Epps grinned and tossed a chute to his boss.

“No, he didn't even say goodbye.”

“Autobots detected. Sending coordinates.” Soundwave used the satellite to watch as men and bots leapt from the aircraft.

“...That's them, right there. See the flare?” Sam pointed as they mounted the rise, moving away from the ancient city and all hoping the dust would work.

“Right over there! You see it?” Simmons grinned and the Autobots transformed, the humans scrambling in before they took off towards the flare. The road was flat so they sped along at full speed.

“Found the boy.” Starscream swooped down, launching missiles.

“Whoa!”

“Sam!” She clung to the back of his seat as Bee slid to the side, avoiding the hole.

“Hide in the dust! Use the dust!” Simmons yelled as more missiles hit. They pulled to a stop, using the dust storm as cover.

“We've got to split up. Bumblebee, you're the decoy. You lead the Decepticons away, all right? I'm gonna get Optimus.”
“I'll help draw their fire with Huey and Dewey there. You get to those soldiers. I hope that dust works.” Harry offered.

“Thank you.” Sam grinned weekly at him and Harry nodded, silently layer more protection spells on both teens.

“He's turning around. He's coming back, he's coming back.” Simmons yelled. Sam and Mikaela ran for the ruins while Bee took off in another direction. Harry got into Skids while Simmons got into Mudflap and the twins took off.

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“Master, sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but the soldiers brought the body of Prime.” Starscream reported as he joined Megatron and the Fallen.

“The boy must have the Matrix. We cannot let him reach Optimus. Decepticons! Begin our assault!”

“We've got incoming!” a soldier yelled form where they had set up.

“Look out!” another yelled, none of them noticing the two teens running through the ruins.

“We got a whole lot of fight coming our way!” Will yelled, wishing desperately for comms but nothing was working thanks to Starscream.

“How many?”

“About thirteen of them.”

“This ain't good. This ain't good. We're about to get our asses whupped.”

“Bravo-Charlie, kneel!”

“Let's go!”
“All right, those Decepticons are searching for Sam. Whatever he has, he thinks it'll bring Optimus back to life. So our mission is to find him and get him to Optimus. All right, we're gonna draw fire from the left flank. I need a scout team.”

“I'm leading.” Ironhide announced.

“Go!”

“Go up through the middle with Arcee and Ironhide. Right, when you see the precious cargo, I want you to pop green smoke and come back through those pillars. We'll have the ambush set. All right. Let's go. Move out!”

“Hoo-ah!”

Harry got out and looked around at the construction site, feeling unnerved.

“You ever see that film Gunfight at the O.K. Corral?” Simmons asked and Harry rolled his eyes.

“Seriously? How did you ever pass the psych eval to work for the government?” his question set the twins snickering. And then they watched in awe and fear as the various machines came together to form one massive Decepticon. “Oh boy.” He drew the weapon he had kept since his new car had been abandoned. All he needed was one good shot since it didn’t use bullets but ‘experimental technology’, basically he’d dumbed down a phaser into a gun shape. “Weak points?” he demanded as the twins transformed.

“Uh…spark?”

“Where?” he demanded and Skids pointed so Harry opened fire.

“Spotted Sam.” Arcee announced.
“Hey- Sam!” Ironhide called.

“Ironhide!” Sam called back in utter relief, they were safe now.

“Follow us to the pillars. We'll take you to Optimus.”

“Look out!” Sam yelled as Arcee screamed.

“Get out, Sam! Get to the pillars!”

“Let's go.” Sam grabbed Mikaela’s hand and ran.

Jarvis analysed the data and images and then made a call.

“USS Stennis. Identify.”

“Jarvis. There is a non-biological preparing to blow up the sun. your help is required to stop this and the attack in Egypt.”

“All right, Jarvis. I'm listening.”

“Five clicks- west of the Gulf, there is a pyramid. Scans reveal an alien machine within. Our one hope is a prototype weapon called a Railgun, shoots a steel projectile at Mach 7.”

“That's classified.’

“Unimportant. Now, tell the battleship in the Gulf to ready that weapon.”
“Contact destroyer USS KIDD.” Captain Wilder ordered.

“25.7 meters above sea level, 29.32 north.” Jarvis gave the coordinates.

“Kill track, 5205-“

“Target acquired.”

“Killing track. Two, one. Fire!”

“Good shot Captain, thank you for your assistance.”

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“Oh, look who showed up. You better have a good reason for us to be here.” Will demanded as he pulled the teens down.

“Where's Optimus?”

“He's right over there, across the courtyard.”

“I got to get to him right now.’

“Not with an air strike coming.”

“I have to get to him right now.”

“Oh.” Epps hissed as a Decepticon appeared and they ducked down behind debris.

“Incoming! Stick the landing! Whoa-ho-ho! Behold the glory of... Jetfire!” He grabbed Mixmaster and ripped into him, keeping Sam safe. “Now let me show you how we brought the pain in my day!” he ripped Mixmasters head off only for Scorponok to launch himself at him. “Ah! Ow!”

“Ah!” Mikaela dodged and Will yanked her clear.

“I'm too old for this crap.” Jetfire grumbled.

“We're gonna make a break through the B’s on my command, okay? You guys stick with me, you understand? You stay on my ass.” Lennox ordered and the teens nodded.

“We have precious cargo-“ Epps called into the radio as he tossed the smoke grenade.

“1-1 tally orange smoke.” The pilot agreed.

“I hope these F-16s got good aim.” Epps muttered.

“Yeah? Why is that?”

“I told them to hit the orange smoke.”

“You mean that orange smoke?” He demanded as the smoke blew over them.

“It wasn't my best toss, okay?”

“Viper. Thunder.” Came over the radio and the two soldiers looked at each other before grabbing the teens.

“Run!”
“Incoming!” Epps yelled as he spotted the jet.

“Come on!”

The missiles struck and screams from Cybertronians and soldiers filled the air.

“Sam!” Mikaela looked around and then he was there, pulling her up.

“Run!”

“Boy. Die!” Megatron yelled as he aimed. Sam kept running as the shots got closer and then he screamed as he was tossed through the air.

“Sam!”

“Hold your fire!” Lennox yelled as he ran for the boy.

“Ah- Sam!” she ran but Will grabbed her round the waist, holding her back.

“Stay back! Mikaela, stay back!”

“Fucking do something!” She screamed.

“Sam! Sam!” Ron yelled as he approached with Bumblebee.

“Sam! Sam! Sammy! Sam!” Judy screamed.

“No. No. No.” the one noise came repeatedly from Bee’s radio.
“Let me go!” Judy fought as a soldier tackled her to the ground, out of the line of fire.

“Come on, you got to move. You got to move! Come on.” Lennox yelled at the medics.

“We got no pulse. Starting CPR.” The medic yelled.

Harry and Simmons appeared with the twins and Harry ran over to Sam, moving to help the medics, feeding magic into the boy to heal him. Strangely he could not feel death and yet Sam was dead, wasn’t he?


“We have been watching you a long, long time.”

“You have fought for Optimus, our last descendant, with courage and with sacrifice, the virtues of a leader, a leader worthy of our secret. The Matrix of Leadership is not found, it is earned.”

“Return now to Optimus. Merge the Matrix with his spark. It is, and always has been, your destiny.”

“Sam!” Mikaela screamed as she cried over his body, the medics having given up. Her sob was cut off as Sam suddenly jolted beneath her, brown eyes snapping open to focus on her.

“I love you. I love you.” He choked out as he got his breath. He kissed her and then scrambled up and ran for Optimus, running up and over his body to slam the Matrix into his Spark Chamber.

Optimus grunted as his body jerked, systems powering up until blue optics on-lined, Sam the first thing he saw. “Boy. You returned for me.”

“A living Prime. Hah hah! I don't believe it!” Jetfire crowed. But the celebration was short as the Fallen appeared before Optimus.

“My! Matrix!” he snarled as he pulled it from Optimus’ body, knocking him down. He ripped into
Jetfire and then took off.

“Get up! Get up! Get up! Get up!”

“Get up, Prime!”

“Oh, no.” Jetfire coughed, holding a hand to the new wound in his side.

“He's turning on the machine! You got to stop him! Get up! Optimus!” Sam yelled.

“Fallen, my master.” Megatron bowed as the Fallen joined him on the damaged pyramid. The machine had been hit but not destroyed.

“My brothers could not stop me from this.”

“Yeeess.”

“Now I claim your sun.”

“Move!” Lennox yelled.

“Enemy target, top of pyramid. Engage! Engage! Engage!”

“In moments, we'll be at firing strength.” Megatron announced even as the Fallen caused the approaching aircraft to slam into the pyramid and ground.

“All my Decepticon life, I never did a thing worth doing until now. Optimus, take my parts and you will have a power you've never known. Fulfil... your destiny...” Jetfire ripped his own spark out and collapsed, dead.

“Jolt! Electrify! Transplant those afterburners.” Ratchet yelled as they went to work.
“Let’s roll.”

Harry looked out to see Sam sitting with Optimus at the end of the aircraft carrier. All the survivors had been picked up by the fleet and were being ferried back to the Nest base for now. A lot of good men had died to defeat the Fallen and now the world knew aliens were among them. Jarvis had reported that all Stag personnel had been safely moved with their families to the islands, citizenship to the new nation granted for their protection. Citizenship was also being arranged for the survivors, just in case. The world was changing and he would wait and see how people reacted.

Harry and Sam walked into Astronomy side by side and sat down. The professor saw them but said nothing before turning back to the lesson. The government had announced that it had been a case of mistaken identity and that Sam was just a normal civilian kid. That had been helped along by altering Sam’s social security number and a few other small details. They’d still been kept on the island for over a week to ensure their safety. And no one had been impressed when they tried to make Harry sign the paperwork only to find they held no authority over someone who was basically King of his own nation.

With the trouble over and everything settled his employees had split up, some remaining on the islands while others returned to company buildings worldwide to continue work. Business was booming which was always nice. But he kept all of them on alert, he doubted Megatron was done with Earth yet and it paid to be ready. They were rushing production of new armour and weapons to protect soldiers and new, sturdier, building materials. Clean energy technology was another big seller and he had people digging at various sites to see what other resources this earth held that could replace coal.

TBC…

Second part to come
Harry saw the semi and sighed, he had been wondering when they’d show up. After all Simmons report, if he’d been truthful, would show Harry taking out a Decepticon with a little help from the twins. Not to mention Jarvis’ existence would definitely make them curious. He was just surprised it had taken them almost a month to come looking. Sam was curious but the teen was simply too busy with assignments to corner him. He checked to see if anyone was paying too much attention and then crossed the street to the empty truck. “Optimus.” He greeted softly and the door swung open so he climbed up.

“I would like to speak with you, if you are not busy?”

“Sure. I’m done with class for the day.” He agreed and the truck pulled out, moving to just cruise down the highway. Harry relaxed into the seat, trusting the Autobot leader to keep him safe.

“I have looked into Stag Industries since being alerted to your identity. You have a lot of ambitious projects to help the planet.”

“Thanks. Fossil fuels have been wrecking the place for a long time. No one else seems all that invested in changing that so I figured I might as well. Dad had started a little, I just took what he’d started and ran with it.”

“You were with Sam in the woods that day, you protected him and Mikaela, for that I owe you gratitude. You risked your life to help them against the Pretender and then to keep them out of Decepticon hands.”

“It was the right thing to do. With how badly Sam was panicking, and I don’t blame him for that, things could have gone very badly if they’d tried to hide on campus.” Because Harry had shoved them into the car there had been only two deaths and a handful of injuries among the students, unlike if they had hidden somewhere like the library. Harry had had a good laugh the other day, imaging what could have happened if Sam was roommates with someone like Leo. The death toll would have
been terrible, Leo’s reaction would have been hilarious though.

“Your vehicle has been recovered and is with Major Lennox, awaiting our return.”

“Thanks, only got it that day.”

“The vehicle was heavily modified.”

“Well, yeah. I run a tech company. Pretty much everything I own is modified in some way and most of it is going to be made available to the public at some point.” Harry hesitated and then tapped his watch. “Hey Jarvis, got someone for you to meet.”

“Of course, Sir. Greetings Optimus Prime, I am Jarvis.”

Optimus was curious. Obviously tapping his watch activated a calling feature of some kind but why introduce them? “Greetings Jarvis, I assume you work for Mr Winchester?”

“Harry Winchester is my creator sir.”

Harry smirked, almost able to feel the confusion and then shock coming from the Prime. “Jarvis is an AI, he runs a good portion of the business now and he was the one driving that day.”

“Artificial intelligence?” Optimus was shocked, yes humanity was relatively advanced but to create such a thing?

“Yes Sir. I am connected to every Stag Industries building and have access to the internet and satellites.”

“Incredible. And you are well treated?”

“Very few know of me. Of those who do even fewer know what I truly am. Most believe I am a simple program that can control things like the lights in the building. Sir created me, he protects me and ensures I have what I need. I enjoy the new link to his car as it allows me to travel.”
“Look Optimus, I’m not going to tell anyone what I’ve seen but the world saw that broadcast, not to mention Egypt. You aren’t a secret anymore. I’m guessing the fight isn’t done either. I’m offering you any support I and my company can give, tech, raw resources, a safe place to stay, you got it. As King of The Muertes Archipelago, I officially offer a treaty between us.” He stated more formally.

Optimus was stunned and instantly searched the web, finding the location of the islands easily but it took more to find that yes, the islands were a sovereign state under Harry Winchester. “And what do you seek from a treaty?”

“You word that you defend Earth from Decepticon’s as long as you are on this planet. Shared knowledge of the universe. Letting us know if we’re going to accidentally blow ourselves up trying something new and you see a problem.”

“Not our technology?”

“No, that is yours to keep or share as you see fit. A treaty means we will stand with you when facing other governments. Let’s face it, humans aren’t known for being rational, right now you’re seen as allies and mostly helpful but that could change in a heartbeat depending on the next election.”

“And if all turn on us?”

“We protect you. No country has the right to say whether or not you can live on this planet.”

Optimus weighted the decision. It appeared that the positives outweighed any negatives. “What of our human allies?”

“The Witwicky’s have been granted citizenship, as have Mikaela and her Dad. NEST Officers can’t so long as they’re military but if anything happens then everything possible will be done to protect them.”

“As Leader and Prime I accept your offer.”

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Harry looked out over the island from his office, almost the exact same position Claire’s office at Jurassic World had been in. The large building was the Government Building, holding all the offices any government needed, even if some had yet to be needed or staffed. He had left it to a vote as to what his title would be, they had decided on President as it was a common title and less pretentious than King. He was head of state and head of government, keeping things simple. So far, their status had been kept relatively quiet, the Autobots knew, as did NEST and parts of the US and British Government. Technically the UN knew, if they ever decided to look for the paperwork. He wanted things to be a lot more solid before it became common knowledge which was why he was spending the break between first and second year on Isla Nublar instead of in the States.

Down at the lagoon several buildings had been built, housing the main offices of Stag Industries. Just down the new road a small town had sprung up to house employees, with two others on the island. Housing was designed to fit in with nature, not destroy it. Everything ran on geothermal and solar energy. Isla Sorna was home to R&D labs, safely away from everything else in case of accidents. Around the port warehouses had been built to store goods while going through customs. The airport was small but they didn’t have room for a large one and didn’t need one, yet. Isla Pena also had construction workers swarming it but to build very different buildings. The dimensions had been taken from the NEST base but then the architects had been unleashed. When they were done there would be a base ready for the Autobots, one that blended with the surrounding jungle and was fully self-sufficient.

Maybe he was being paranoid but after so many years he had come to know human nature. He’d heard one of Galloway’s rants on the trip back from Egypt and he knew that if the Decepticons backed off to lick their wounds pressure for technology would increase.

Sam grinned as the plane touched down, staring at the island. This beat a white winter any day! Bee was down in the cargo hold; his parents should have arrived earlier in the day and Mikaela would be arriving tomorrow morning. It was shaping up to be a great Christmas break. Harry had turned out to be the best roommate he could have ever had, not just for his money but because he had taught Sam so much. He had helped teach him to remain calm and coherent for starters, he knew he reacted… oddly to high stress, just like his Mom, but now he was better at remaining calm or reacting in a more socially acceptable manner. Harry had even taught him to meditate of all things but it was helpful. His grades had gone up over the last year and a half which was great, even in the classes he didn’t share with Harry. They were studying similar subjects but not all the same, Harry did more Astronomy than he did, as much as he disliked it Sam was taking a lot of politics classes, after all this he couldn’t keep denying Optimus’ request for him to be the bridge between their species. Optimus had died for him! And he had died for Optimus… it was still hard to deal with even after over a year. He hadn’t seen much of the Autobots in that time, other than Bee who had taken up his guardian duties again. This time Sam hadn’t complained at all. Bee ‘lived’ in a private garage not far from campus, sharing space with Harry’s ‘Jarvis enhanced’ car. Jarvis was amazing, different to the Autobots and in a way scarier, only Harry’s original programming kept Jarvis from becoming something like Skynet from the movies.

The plane landed and Sa disembarked only to be swallowed up in a hug by his Mom, she had tried
so hard to get him to leave university after Egypt, wanting him safe and close, but he had refused.

“Looking good son.”

“Thanks Dad.” Sam looked over as Bee rolled up, doors opening and the family got in. 

“So how were exams?”

“Good. No surprises. Jarvis even snuck a look and I know I passed everything.”

“When are you coming home Sammy?”

“Mom… I’m finishing my degree and then moving to DC. Optimus asked me to help and that’s the best place to do it.”

“But…”

“Judy he’s an adult, it is his choice.” Ron stated, yes, he missed his son and worried for him, especially after seeing his dead body, a nightmare no parent should experience, but he understood his need for independence.

“Mikaela lands, tomorrow right? Excited to see her?” Judy changed the subject and Sam nodded, fingers tightening on the object in his pocket.

“We haven’t seen each other since Spring Break, web dating just isn’t the same.” He admitted, he missed her a lot and wished she would move east now her Dad was happily living her on the island. He couldn’t understand why she kept turning him down but maybe things would change soon.

Bumblebee rolled to a stop outside a nice house, following Jarvis’ directions. Judy and Ron were very impressed by the cutting-edge technology but also how natural the house was and how well it blended into the landscape.

“Welcome Mr and Mrs Witwicky, please make yourselves at home. The house now belongs to you,
“for permanent use or holidays.” Jarvis announced.

“Our house? But…” Ron shook his head.

“Mr Winchester wished to ensure your future safety in case diplomatic relations with the Autobots deteriotrate.”

“Harry’s worried the government’s going to do something dumb. Let’s face it, every alien movie out there has humans not reacting well to aliens, especially ones that are more advanced than us. That’s why he granted us all citizenship, set this whole island nation up. He wants to protect his people and we count now.”

“Your apartment in Stag city is ready Samuel.”

“Wait, we’re all living together!” Judy snapped.

“Mom I’m an adult now. The city is barely a ten-minute drive away. Get settled, we’ll go out for dinner.” Sam backed away and got back into Bee who played a track of laughter.

Sam shifted nervously as he waited for Mikaela’s flight to land, grateful they didn’t have to go through customs as close friends of Harry’s. he was waiting right on the tarmac, Bee at his back. Harry and Bee had been with him when he’d picked the ring three months back on what Harry called a ‘quick jaunt across the pond’. There’d been some important business meeting in Paris over a weekend and Harry had invited him along. They’d taken a private jet so Bee coming along hadn’t been an issue. After dealing with business Harry had dragged him to the jewellery stores until the perfect ring was found. Now he just had to gather the courage to ask. He smiled as Mikaela came down the stairs and walked towards her, pulling her into a hug and then kiss. “Hey beautiful.”

“Hi Sam.” She smiled slightly and he stepped back, something was off.

“So, where’s Wheelie?”

“In the cargo hold with my luggage.” As she spoke Bee’s trunk opened and the staff unloaded her luggage. Sam grabbed it and put it in Bee and then opened her door for her. He got in and bee began
to drive into town.

“So where do you want to stay? With your Dad, my apartment or the new 5star hotel?”

“There’s a 5star hotel here now?”

“Yeah, Harry’s idea to bring in extra revenue and trade. Work just started on a bigger airport and a dock for cruise ships.”

“Wow.” Mikaela looked out the window at how much the island had changed since her last visit while recovering from Egypt. “Hotel sounds good.”

“Sure.” He felt a flash of disappointment that she didn’t want to stay with him, again. Then again how often did you have access to a resort? They soon pulled in and elegantly uniformed staff emerged to take her bags up to one of the suites.

“This is amazing.” She breathed as she looked around.

“Yeah, Stag Industries believes in the best.” He shrugged and they went inside to get her room key and then up to the suite. Seeing one of the bags move he opened it and helped Wheelie out, confused by how quite the ex-con was being. “Hey Wheelie, Bee, Optimus and Ratchet are on the islands if you want to spend time with them.” He offered.

“Sure, thanks Sam.” He glanced towards the bathroom where Mikaela was and then at the door.

“All island residents and staff know.” Sam assured him, opening the door, so Wheelie slipped out, heading for Bumblebee. He wanted to be with another of his kind, away from the Warrior Goddess. Sam fingered the box again, when was the right time? She walked out of the bathroom and he smiled. “Looking gorgeous.”

“Let’s explore.”

“Sure.” Sam followed her out and into the resort. Since it had just opened there weren’t many people around, just staff and some locals wanting to check it out while empty. They played around in the
pools and water slides before having fun in the dodge cars. Eventually they headed in to the very nice steak restaurant. The meal was excellent and desert to die for and Sam took a deep breath before pulling out the box and going down to one knee. “Mikaela, will you marry me?” he asked, not noticing the silence as everyone watched, they knew who these two were and how important they were to their President. When she didn’t immediately answer people began getting concerned. “Mikaela?”

“No Sam.” She stood and left and he slid to sit on the floor in shock.

What had just happened? He didn’t notice one of the staff making a call and then familiar arms wrapped around him, pulling him up and away.

“Come on Sam.” Harry whispered, leaving the restaurant to find Bee idling at the curb, Wheelie pressed against a window. He helped the in shock young man into the car and then joined him. “My place Bee.”

“Yes sir!” the radio replied and he took off at top safe speed.

Harry got Sam up into his home, Wheelie following while Bee parked in the luxurious garage, transforming to look into the attached house. Harry got Sam settled on the couch under a blanket with a large mug of cocoa. He doubted anyone had seen this coming, they had truly believed Mikaela and Sam to be truly in love so her turning him down like that was a shock. But he had friends and family who would stand by him and help him recover, even if most of those friends weren’t human.

Wheelie looked around nervously, unsure of his welcome in the group of Autobots and one human. And then he felt a leg press gently against his back and looked up, red optics briefly meeting green eyes. It was odd, but the human made him feel safe.

“How is the Boy?”

“In shock, heartbroken.” Harry shrugged slightly. “He was planning to spend the rest of his life with her and she just blew him off.”

“Actual shock?” Ratchet asked in concern and Harry nodded.
“Treated with blankets and hot cocoa plus sleep.” He assured the medic.

“Wheelie, do you know why Mikaela has done this?” Optimus looked at the small Cybertronian. He had stood by the teens in Egypt and then remained with Mikaela so as far as Prime was concerned he was one of them now.

“Warrior Goddess has been different.” He admitted softly. “Going out a lot, not working in the garage as much.”

“I talked to her Dad, he had no idea this was coming either. All we can do is be there for Sam. And I had something planned for tomorrow, should help take his mind off things.” Harry smirked slightly. “You four are welcome as well. I’d say formal dress but well….” Ratchet laughed.

Sam sighed as his Mom fixed his tie for him, again. He was in his best clothes and he wasn’t entirely sure why. Bee stopped outside Government Hall and they got out, seeing the gathered crowd as well as the Autobots in their alt forms at the edges. Harry obviously had something big planned, he just wished he would hurry up, he wasn’t in the mood. Finally, Harry stepped out, dressed immaculately with the crimson sash across his chest as his sign of office.

Harry smiled at the crowd, bowing slightly to them in respect. “Good morning everyone. I will not stand here and bore you with a long speech. Today we are here to honour a genuine hero. The other nations of Earth may be content to brush his actions under the rug but we will do what is right.” And now Sam had a sinking feeling, he wasn’t doing this, was he? Why? Why now? “Of course, first an award had to be created which took time. But today it is my honour and pleasure to award the very first Presidential Medal of Valour, the highest possible honour, to Samuel James Witwicky.” Applause exploded around and Sam stood frozen in shock before being pushed forward by his Dad.

“Harry…” He whispered to his best friend who smiled.

“You earned this Sam.” He whispered back, making sure the words weren’t picked up before Sam bowed enough for the dark green ribbon to go around his neck, the round golden medal hanging down to mid chest. Harry turned Sam to face the cheering crowd, smiling proudly at his people.

Neither noticed Mikaela standing at the back of the crowd, staring in shock. So maybe she shouldn’t have dumped Sam like her friends had said. He had a medal now, not that anyone not on the island
would know about it but maybe it would make the President give him one too. Being married to an acknowledged hero would have been good. But she didn’t want to be known as Sam, the hero’s, wife. She wanted to be important. She didn’t have the grades to go to university like he did, she had her looks and a knack with engines. But he’d never take her back now. She’d loved him once, had told him with sand flying around them and people dying, Sam dying. But they barely ever saw each other and she had to live her life.

Sam walked out of the Oval Office, his parents arguing over whether or not he was meant to wear his medal, the one from Harry was meant to be worn after all. He moved away from them and saw a blond woman around his age standing there so he smiled and she smiled back.

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Two Presidential Medals within eight months of each other.” He shook his head and her eyes widened.

“Really?”

“Well, the first wasn’t from the US President, dual citizen.” He shrugged.

“Well, that’s amazing.”

“British Embassy, you’re up next.” One of the aides called.

She straightened her glasses. “Nice meeting you hero.” She followed the Ambassador inside.

Sam followed his parents out to where Bee and Harry were waiting. “Why didn’t you come in?”

Harry shrugged. “Politics. Lunch is on me.” The piled into Bee and made their way to a five-star restaurant where Harry had made a booking in advance.

“So, who was that gorgeous girl you were talking to Sammy?”
“I don’t know Mom, just a girl. She’s with the British or something.” He shrugged it off. Mikaela’s rejection didn’t really hurt anymore but he wasn’t sure he was reading to date again either.

“Hmm…” Harry tapped Jarvis, setting him to the search. “Carly Brooks-Spencer, British, attached to the Embassy here in DC. 23 years old…and has a brother in NEST, correction, had. Killed in Action in Egypt.” Harry read off his phone as Jarvis found her picture and then information.

“Harry!”

“What? You could use a new girlfriend.”

“Says the eternal bachelor. Besides what about Wheelie? How would I explain him or Bee?”

“She’s got clearance, it wouldn’t be that hard getting her cleared to know.” Harry shrugged. “So, graduation is coming up. Have anything planned yet?”

“I want to work with the Autobots.” Sam answered and then sighed as his parents argued over the danger.

Harry sighed, he’d never set up his own country before and hadn’t realised just how much was involved. The UN had finally found the paperwork and several countries were kicking up a fuss but everything was perfectly legal. He needed to get embassies set up in the key countries but getting staff wasn’t easy. He looked up as the door slammed open and Sam stormed into the apartment, yanking his tie off and tossing it aside. “What happened?” he asked as Sam slumped onto the couch. Stag Industries owned an apartment in DC so Harry was letting Sam use it as well while he worked at getting in with NEST.

“Charlotte Mearing, Director of National Intelligence of the United States of America.”

“Heard of her.”

“Well with Galloway gone she’s ‘in charge’ now. I had to grab a cab back since she revoked
permission for Bee to stay with me. Though Wheelie and Brains can stay. She always made it really clear I have no place with the Autobots, despite Optimus telling her otherwise.” He grumbled and Harry frowned.

“Well you have two options. One, you go out there and find a normal job, be like everyone else and move on.”

“Or?”

“Give up US citizenship so that you are only a citizen of Muertes and take the job of Ambassador to the Autobots and the US as I have my own treaty with Optimus.” He smirked and Sam stared at him in shock before grinning.

“My parents are going to flip but I’ll do it. I promised I’d stand by them and I will.”

Optimus stood watching as the diplomatic vehicle approached. He had been very pleased when Jarvis had contacted him with Harry’s plan. He would have preferred that Sam simply be accepted but Mearing was even more frustrating than Galloway had been. The car stopped and the driver opened the passenger door. He saw Mearing straighten up to greet the new Ambassador emerged. She had fought hard against this but no matter what she may think America did not own them. He had the right to make treaties with whichever countries he chose and if it were not for the brave actions of the men of NEST he would have moved his Autobots to Muertes permanently. The look on Mearing’s face when the Ambassador walked into her viewing range was highly amusing, although Sam did not look entirely comfortable in the clothes he was wearing. “Welcome to Nest Ambassador Witwicky.” He stated formally and Sam bowed slightly, his Presidential medal coming into view as he did so.

“Thank you for the warm welcome Optimus Prime. It is my pleasure and honour to represent Muertes with our allies.” He was very thankful for the classes on politics and the training Harry had arranged over the last four months. A building had recently been purchased, not far from the base, that would make an acceptable embassy even if he was the only one on staff at the moment.

Sam smiled, sipping champagne, as he people watched. the Embassy was officially open now and he was hosting a party because of that. The place was full of Ambassadors and their staff plus partners. Not his sort of thing at all. He hadn’t wanted to live this sort of life, he had wanted a normal life, but this was the best way, the only way to stay connected to his friends.
“Ambassador.” A blond curtsied to him and he blinked before smiling.

“Hello Miss Brooks-Spencer. Enjoying the party?”

“Honestly? It’s not really my type.”

“Me too, but they wouldn’t approve of loud music and that sort of dancing.” He grinned and she laughed. They talked for a while, they were two of the youngest present after all, but then Sam had to make the rounds.

Sam collapsed and Will laughed. “I think I’m dead.”

“It’s not that bad Sam.”

“Says the professional soldier.” He grumbled but accepted the offered water bottle.

“You wanted to learn.” Will pointed out as he sat down.

“Because I need to. Bodyguards are a pain and I doubt they’ll be around if the Decepticons attack again.”

“Well you’re getting faster and building muscle. We’ll start on hand to hand soon. For now, fifteen minutes break and then hit the shooting range.”

“Sir yes sir.” Sam mock saluted.

“...”

“My hero... needs to wake up.” Carly murmured and Sam opened his eyes, smiling up at his girlfriend. They’d been dating for six months and she had just moved in with him at the Embassy. She’d left the British Embassy and had found a job with Dylan Gould, managing his museum.
collection of fancy cars. He pulled her down and kissed her and then she got up and he sighed but followed. Carly was in the kitchen, getting some breakfast together. The Embassy had staff but the domestic staff only came once a week or in preparation for an event, he hadn’t grown up with that sort of thing and preferred looking after himself. Carly didn’t mind either. “Don’t you have work?” he asked, glancing at the clock.

“Don’t you?”

“Mmm, just some of the dreaded paperwork.”

“All right, tonight, I’ll give you a job. Romance me with a nice dinner and, uh, maybe you can get that bonus.” She teased as he pulled her close, kissing her.

“Whooaah...” Brains called as he watched and Carly screamed. “Ah-ha. Get lucky.”

“Get him out of here.” She demanded and Sam shook his head but picked the small Autobot up and locked him out of the kitchen.

“Wait. No no no no no no no. Oof! Ow.”

“Oh, he’s gross!”

“I'm sorry. But they're stranded here. Somebody's got to watch out for them and they aren’t that bad overall.”

“Yesterday, that one was in my underwear drawer.” She left the kitchen and Sam followed.

“Did research. Looking real good, too. Ha ha ha ha ha! Oww! No need to hit me, man.”

She sighed and then slipped her shoes on. “You are so not a normal boyfriend.”

“That's what you love about me, yeah?” he smiled sweetly and she smiled as she slipped her jacket on.
“We're not at the love word yet.” They kissed again.

“Goodbye.” He watched her go and then turned to face the two bots, Wheelie riding on one of the guard dogs. “Lighten up on the teasing please.”

“Fine, fine.”

The gate bell chimed and he went to look at the security display, staring as he saw the massive RV. “Fun.” He mumbled but buzzed them in, going to meet his parents. His Dad parked and then they got out and he wanted to groan at the matching tracksuits. “I missed you guys so much.”

“Sure, you did. What do you think?” Judy grinned.

“Look at that. Wow.”

“Cute.” She snapped at his reaction.

“You look old.” He offered.

“Stop it.”

“Feel like I can see the end.” He grinned slightly.

“I love your little shirt. Hey, where's my girl? Where's my beautiful Carly?”

“She's at work, Ma.” He lead them into the building.

“Right!”
“She's got a new job. You guys said you were gonna be here in a week.”

“Yeah...” they sat in the informal lounge room.

“The twenty first, not the eleventh, Dad, remember?”

“We just hauled ass in this thing. We stopped for gas.” Ron offered.

“This thing. The love tub, it flies. Oh, are we keeping you from something?”

“Yeah, well I booked time off for when you’re meant to get here. I’ve got tons of paperwork not to mention a few exercises with the Autobots and NEST.”

“Exercises.” Ron looked at his son, he had wanted him to keep his distance, to remain American and Sam hadn’t.

“You don't have to be so negative, Dad. You know, you're in D.C. You're here with your son and your family. I mean, it's a good time.” Sam snapped.

“It sucks that you don't have a real job.”

“A real…” Sam took a deep breath. “There's good things to do here, too, right?” he offered instead.

“Yeah-” Judy agreed.

“Right? Museums and monuments, okay?”

“Nothing to worry about.” Judy smiled happily.

“I'll see you tonight.” He kissed his Mom's cheek and then retreated to his office.
“I am Voshkod, General Counsel with Ukrainian Department of Energy. My government will officially deny that we're having this conversation. At one of our decommissioned facilities, a, uh, discovery was made, which I fear may be... alien in nature. The facility's name is... Chernobyl.” He stood in the shadow of a column and handed Sam the file, letting the visiting Ambassador look it over. Sam nodded and the man left. Sam soon left the building and headed to where the others were waiting. It didn’t take long for them to gear up and head out.

“Mr Voshkod. So, uninhabited since ’86. I hear it won't be liveable again for another twenty thousand years?” Lennox called to the man as they arrived.

“At least. Ukraine was the most fertile land. It's a tragedy. This way.”

“Gear up! We have sixty minutes on the ground. Watch your radiation levels. Mr Voshkod, where's your protective gear?” Will called to the man as his men and Sam quickly put on protective gear.

“It would not matter. For me, it's only a matter of time. Through the school. Yuri will take you below and one other thing, Colonel. In private... there were some energy experiments-” he stopped as he looked up and saw Laserbeak. “Ahh! It can wait.”

“Okay that was weird.” Sam muttered but moved with the soldiers into the school.

“Maybe you should have stayed behind.” Will whispered and Sam shook his head.

“Keep moving. Stay tight.”

“Okay, right here. I think I found it.” One of the soldiers called.

“Optimus, we got a visual. Looks like the object's clamped in some kind of a metal harness.” Sam radioed outside.

“What's this? Guys! Why does this thing have Soviet space program markings on it?”
“Sputnik?” Will asked in surprise as he moved in for a closer look.

“Energon readings, sir. It's strong... below us. It's coming fast.” One of the men called in alarm and Sam grabbed the orb while Will opened a containment case. They got it secured and Sam ran, the soldier surrounding him even as the floor exploded up, revealing a massive Decepticon. As they fought Sam kept moving, it was his job to protect the case. In the end, the battle ended with a Decepticon retreat, not defeat.

“What the hell was that thing?” Will demanded.

“That... is Shockwave.” Optimus answered, watching the way they had retreated.

“Why was he after this?” Sam asked, cracking the case and Optimus picked up the small orb.

“It's impossible. This is an engine part... from a long lost Autobot ship.”

“,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,

“A call for you sir, it is Sam.”

“Thanks Jarvis.” He picked up. “Hey Sam, news?”

“Somehow the Russians got their hands-on part of a lost Autobot ship. We ran into a Decepticon while retrieving it. Understandably Optimus is not happy.”

“Understandable. Do I need to fly out?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. If the Decepticons really want this…”

“Well the army is up and running. Thank you for mentioning Epps was leaving NEST, he’s doing good here. I’ll put them of alert.” They hung up and Harry sighed, so it was starting again.
“All arriving Autobots, in pan training and debriefing in fifteen minutes. Dino, report to bay twenty-three. Sideswipe, bay thirty-seven for weapons assessment.”

“Senator, I suggest you remember that when the NSA wants funding they call me. When the CIA is gonna take out a target, they ask first for my permission. And when the President wants to know which members of Congress are politically vulnerable in terms of, let's say, undiscovered criminal conduct, I'm the number he dials.” Mearing snapped into her phone as she got out of the car and began walking into the base, Will moving to intercept her. “CIA is up my ass about this mystery raid in the Middle East. So, it's time to come clean. Was your unit involved?”

“Ah... I'm not sure, ma'am.”

“As Director of National Intelligence, I'm a really big fan of intelligent answers.”

“I can't really tell you definitively. These Autobots are like teenage kids. They like to sneak out of the house every once in a while.”

She stopped suddenly and stared at him. “Colonel Lennox, are you in command or are you not?”

“Yes, ma'am, I am. I-” they began walking through the main hanger.

“Stop with the ma'am. Enough with the ma'am. Do I look like a ma'am?”

“No, ma'am. Ye- Yes, ma'am. Yes.”

“Oh, good! You're here! Me name's Que. I do hope you have answers for him. I've never seen him so upset before.” Que hovered over them as they approached Optimus’ alt form.

“Optimus, you remember Charlotte Mearing? Our Director of National Intelligence?” Will called out but there was no response.

“He's in a bad mood. He's-a not talking to anybody today.” Dino offered.
“What is this, the silent treatment?” Mearing demanded.

“We've seen that, and this is not that.”

“Definitely not.”

“This is worse. Prime! Make something of yourself!” Ironhide demanded, slamming his fist against his leader. In response their leader began to transform and Will swallowed, he didn’t think he’d ever seen Optimus this mad before.

“You lied to us. Everything humans know of our planet we were told had all been shared. So why was this found in human possession?”

“We were in the dark on this also. It was Director Only clearance at Sector Seven until now. The bag.” She demanded and her poor aide began looking over the mass of bags she was carrying.

“Which bag?”

“Hermès. Birkin. Green ostrich! My God... This is a secret few men knew, and fewer still remain alive. Allow me to please introduce to you to two of NASA’s founding mission directors and astronaut Dr. Buzz Aldrin, one of the first two men to step foot on the moon. Sir? Optimus Prime.”

“From a fellow space traveller, it's a true honour.”

“The honour is mine.”

“Our entire space race of the 1960’s, it appears, was in response to an event.” Mearing explained.

“Our astronauts investigated a crashed alien ship. No survivors on board.” One of the directors explained.
“We were sworn to secrecy by our Commander in Chief.” Buzz offered even as Sam slipped into the group beside Will. He’d been stuck giving his parents a tour of the Smithsonian.

“A total of thirty-five people knew the real plan at NASA.”

“Soviets managed to land unmanned probes. Somehow, they must have... picked up that fuel rod.”

“We believe the Russians deduced that the rod was a fissionable fuel assembly, believed they had it mastered and tried to harness it at Chernobyl.”

“We landed six missions in all. We took hundreds of photos and samples. We locked them away forever when the moon program was shut down.’

“Well, did you search the crash vault?” Ironhide demanded and they all stared at him in shock.

“The ship's name was the Ark. I watched it escape Cybertron myself. It was carrying an Autobot technology which would have won us the war. And... its captain.” Optimus admitted softly.

“Who was its captain?”

“The great Sentinel Prime. The technology's inventor. He was commander of the Autobots before me. It's imperative that I find it before the Decepticons learn of its location. Our Autobot spacecraft has the ability to get there. And... you must pray it's in time.” He pointed a stern finger at Mearing and Sam hid a smirk of amusement. When the meeting broke up he sent a recording of the meeting to Jarvis and therefore Harry.

"Ambassador?’”

“Yes Jack?”

“There is a Jerry Wang at the gate, he’s a former NASA employee currently working for Accuretta Systems. He said it in regard to your car?”
Sam blinked. His car… “Let him in.” he locked away the classified file he’d been reading and made sure there was nothing on show that shouldn’t be. Soon Jack lead a nervous man into his office.

“Ahh. I know who you are!” Wang announced. “You showed up in the background of six different photos, two continents, with aliens. That was you in Egypt, huh, right? Because you know the aliens. See, you!”

“Okay…” Sam edged his chair back, not sure what to think of the guy.

“I'm Wang. Deep Wang. You're not getting it. Deep throat. Watergate? I'm talking code to you. Shhh! Damn it. They watch and listen. I can't go to the government, but you, you can! Because shit's going down, son! It is code pink, as in Floyd! Dark Side! Why do you think no one's been up there since 1972?”

That got his attention. Finding the Ark engine piece, talking with NASA and now this? Something was going on. And then he nearly jumped back as Wang undid his pants. Jack stepped forward slightly but Sam waved him back as he saw the papers strapped to Wang’s leg.

“It's my manifesto. They're whacking us out. Everyone who knows what's on the dark side. Your alien friends are in danger, you know, the good ones. It's up to you.” He put the papers on Sam’s desk and then backed away.

Sam spread the papers out, reading through them. He then quickly scanned them into the computer. “Jarvis, do your thing.”

“Of course.”

He looked over the data provided once the analysis was done. It was easy to see, someone or something didn’t want anyone looking at the dark side, they didn’t want people finding the Ark. And since Optimus hadn’t known the ship was there… “Jarvis forward this to Harry, Optimus and Mearing. Jack where’s Wang?”

“He returned to work.”
“Alright.” He picked the phone up. “Bee? I need a lift, thanks buddy.” the best part of his work was Bee being back when not on missions. By the time he was at the door Bee was waiting. They headed for Accuretta Systems, arriving just in time to see a body fall from a window and hit the ground. “Wang…” Sam licked his lips nervously. “I think we better get back to base Bee.” And then he saw the avian like Decepticon flee from the building and hone in on them. “Bee!”

“Hang on!” Bee ordered and then took off, speeding through the streets as the bird fired on them but it gave up after a while. Bee parked outside the embassy and Sam ran inside.

“Carly! Wheelie! Brains!” he called and the two Autobots raced in, hearing the urgency. “Go to Bee.” He told them and ran up the stairs to find Carly in the shower.

“Sam?” She jumped as he opened the door.

“Get dressed, we need to go.”

“What? Why?”

“Decepticons.” He went to his office. “Jarvis initiate emergency lockdown, we’ve got Decepticons in the city.”

“At once, I have informed Sir as well. There is a jet standing by to evacuate your parents and anyone else.”

“Call Dad and get them to the airport now. Something big is going down and I want them out.” He packed up a few things and then headed out, finding Carly coming down with a small backpack. They got inside Bee and took off for the base.

Sam’s id plus Bee got them waved through and Sam lead them inside, Carly glancing around in awe.

“We've taken possession of the five devices that were hidden in the ship with Sentinel Prime. They're some kind of prototype Autobot technology. They say Sentinel was the... Einstein of his civilization, so we're gonna keep these locked up until we know what we're dealing with. Right now, no one gets access. No one.” Sam half heard mearing’s conversation as they met up with Will, showing him what Jarvis had made of Wang’s information.
“This Wang guy recognized me. He told me to warn you, he was talking about the dark side of the moon, and then they killed him.”

“Wait a minute. He mentioned the moon?” Will asked in surprise and Sam nodded.

“But why would Decepticons want to kill humans? I thought their war was with the Autobots.”

“...And that is when he made his first quick-look science report, that's what we want- who's the chick? Okay, excuse me!” mearing hung up and quickly walked over to them.

“These compiled-”Sam was pointing at something as she stormed over.

“Colonel Lennox?”

“Director Mearing.”

“I want to know who gave her clearance? Who is she?”

“She's my girlfriend.”

“What is this, like a date?”

“She knows all about the Autobots, okay? She knows Bumblebee. And she comes from a military family. I can vouch for her.” Will offered.

“Hey, I have an idea. How about we get back to the important topics, like the fact that that at least one man was killed and I was attacked by a Decepticon.”

“Okay, okay, listen, all right? Sam was approached by a man involved in NASA's lunar mapping probe. He gave Sam information and then when Sam went to see him the man was killed by Decepticons.”
“Here’s the thing. Colonel Lennox. We cannot entrust national security to teenagers, unless I missed a policy paper. Are we doing that now? No. Good. I don't care who you are. If you breathe a word of what you see in here, you will do time for treason. Do you understand me?” She glared at Carly who glared back.

“I’m British ma’am, you can’t try me for treason.” She snapped and Sam squeezed her hand.

“You don’t have any authority over either of us Miss Mearing so back off and focus on what’s actually important, the Decepticons are back.” He then turned and pulled Carly towards the Autobot hangar. Whoever had put mearing in charge needed their head examined. They stopped on the catwalk and looked down at the body in the medical cradle, the other Autobots standing around.

“Sentinel Prime. These things run on Energon, and he's out of it. He's in a... sort of a sleep mode.” Will commented as he joined them.

“Let us begin.” Optimus commanded as Mearing and her followers appeared.

“That's the great Matrix of Leadership. He holds the only thing in the universe that can re-power a Transformer's spark.” Will explained to Mearing and Sam gripped the safety rail hard, feeling the power of the Matrix. He hadn’t been near it since Egypt and now…wow.

“This is incredible.” Carly whispered.

“Sentinel Prime, we bid you return.” Optimus thrust the Matrix into Sentinel’s spark chamber and they all watched as the old Autobot came back to life only to attack Optimus.

“Hold your fire!” Will and Sam yelled as weapons were raised.

“Stop! Sentinel! It is I- Optimus- Prime! It is all right. You are safe.” Optimus called from where he was pinned to the ground and Sentinel looked around.

“There is nothing to fear.” Ratchet offered as Sentinel looked at him.
“We are here. You are home, Sentinel.”

“The war... the war!”

“The war was lost. Cybertron is now but a barren wasteland. We have taken refuge here, on planet Earth. Its human race is our ally.”

“My ship! We came under fire. The pillars. Where are the pillars?” Sentinel looked around desperately.

“You saved five of them, including the control pillar.”

“Only five? We once had hundreds!”

“Excuse me, gentlemen. May I ask... what is this technology you're looking for?” Mearing demanded.

“It is the ability to reshape the universe. Together the pillars form a Space Bridge. I designed, and I alone, can control it. It defies your laws of physics to transport matter through time and space.”

“You're talking about a teleportation device, aren't you?”

“Yes, for resources, for refugees.” Optimus offered and she snorted.

“Refugees, or troops of soldiers, weapons, maybe bombs! A means of an instant strike! That's its military function, isn't it?”

“It is our technology and it must be returned.”

“Yes. If humans say so! You can't just bring weapons of mass destruction into our atmosphere! Kind of have to clear customs first. A little formality called paperwork, kind of separates us from the animals.” She ranted.
“I will overlook your condescending tone if you heed the gravity of mine. The Decepticons must never know the Space Bridge is here. For in their hands, it would mean the end of your world.” Sentinel intoned.

“I’m pretty sure they already know about it and if they find out you’re here then it won’t take long to work out the rest. You got the file from Jarvis?” Sam asked Optimus who nodded. “Decepticons have ensured no one would go to the moon or take a close look. What if they already have the rest of the pillars?” he pointed out and that got everyone moving. Sentinel’s survival would be kept secret and the security of the base and vault raised.

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“President Winchester, welcome to NEST.” Will called and they shook hands.

“Drop the title Will. How bad is it?”

“Decepticons are back and killing people and they may also have pillars needed for teleportation but we have the controller.”

“Ah. Sarah and Annabelle arrived on Isla Nublar before I left.”

“Thank you.” Will was relieved his wife and daughter would be safe.

“Harry.” Optimus greeted warmly as one of his favourite humans walked in, dressed in casual clothes and not his Presidential clothes.

“Optimus. How are you?”

“Well enough my friend. You have been briefed?”

“Yeah. I’ve got the military on standby but we don’t have the numbers yet. All Stag Industries offices are ready to go into lockdown with a minutes warning and those who wish to be have been evacuated to Muertes.”
Sam looked at his ringing phone and then answered. “Hello?”

“Kid is it true?”

Sam blinked in confusion. “Simmons?”

“Is it true? Decepticons are back?”

“Yeah.” Simmons was an obsessed nutcase but he also hoarded information in a way that impressed Jarvis. “Something to do with the dark side of the moon and Optimus’ teacher.” He knew his own phone was encrypted by the Autobots and Jarvis and he knew Simmons would be using encryption on his end too.

“Tell me everything.” The ex-Sector 7 agent demanded.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Meet me at the Muertes Embassy.”

“I’ll be there. Dutch pack the bags!”

Sam hung up and shook his head. “Hey Bee, we’re heading back to the Embassy to meet Simmons.” The burst that came from the radio was not complimentary.

“Sam?” Carly walked into the small room they’d claimed inside the base.

“Angel.” Sam kissed her. “I’ve got to go back to the embassy got a bit.”

“We’re supposed to be at Dylan’s party, remember?” she asked and he took in what she was wearing, swallowing hard at how utterly stunning she looked.
“I do remember, but these are my friends. They need me. I have a job to do right now.”

“So, what, the Autobots and the military, they can't handle this on their own? You know what I liked about your war stories, Sam? It's that they were stories, they were in the past. You're a diplomat, not a soldier.” She grabbed her purse.

“Look, I know you're thinking about your brother, okay? And you're thinking about your family. And it's not that situation.” He soothed.

“No?” she demanded as she stormed away and he quickly walked after her. The soldiers took one look and quickly decided to be elsewhere.

“No.”

“Why not? Why isn't it, Sam? You think we'd rather have his medals, or we'd rather have him?”

“I hear you. I get it. Stop! Just stop for a second.” He grabbed the door of the car Dylan had supplied as part of her job, keeping her from closing it.

“You think I could sleep last night? And then it hit me. No, Sam wants to be in danger! He doesn't know who he is without it.”

“I just want to matter.”

“You matter to me. You matter to your parents, to Harry…. isn’t that enough?”

“I know you're worried. I know you're worried. But I promise you, I can- I can handle this.”

“Can you? You can promise it?” She asked and he took her hand.

“I promise.”
“Sam, I don't want to lose you and I know where this leads. I'm not ready for this. Are you coming with me?”

“I can't.” he whispered and she pulled away, getting fully into the car.

“Okay.”

“Hey. Look after the party there’s a plane at the airport. It’ll take you to Muertes where you’ll be safe.”

“Goodbye Sam.” She drove away from the base and Sam deflated but then got in when bee drove up. Mearing was being an obstructive….no, he was a diplomat now, he shouldn’t use that sort of language. America didn’t rule the planet and yet between Galloway and now her you’d really think they did. Bee triggered the automatic gates and then pulled into the altered garage, transforming and using the garage door to enter the embassy. High ceilings really were useful.

Mearing, I just picked up Sentinel. Optimus is ten minutes behind. We're coming to NEST now.” Sam yelled into the phone. Despite his theory on the pillars Sentinel hadn’t been kept safe on base or even with an escort, instead he’d been out sight-seeing, a security nightmare.

“Mr Witwicky, I thought I made it clear to you that I did not want you calling this phone.” Mearing snapped back, she did not like the young Ambassador at all, it was why she’d blocked his access as a civilian. But it had been made very clear that America wasn’t the only one with a treaty with the Autobots.

“Listen, the whole thing has been a setup since the beginning like I thought. The Decepticons wanted Optimus to find Sentinel because only Optimus could revive him.”

“But we have the space bridge.”

“Mearing, you have five pillars. I just saw proof that they have hundreds. You're doing exactly what they wanted you to do. What do you need me to say to you? The Decepticons are coming for Sentinel Prime!”
“We're going to NEST.” She called to her driver and he changed lanes.

“Is there a... problem?” Ironhide kept his weapons aimed at the Decepticons.

“Whoa. Little Mexican standoff we got here.” Sideswipe chimed in happily.

“Weapons down.”

“And we'll let you escape with your dignity.”

Crankcase and Crowbar spoke quickly in Cybertronian before lowering their weapons.

“Drop them... That's good.” Ironhide watched them closely.

“Ironhide, watch out!” Sideswipe yelled as he saw the extra weapon.

“Yaah!” the first shot grazed him and he moved back.

“Ironhide, catch!” Sideswipe scooped up the dropped guns and tossed one ot Ironhide who caught it.

“Decepticon punk.” He shot Crowbar. “Class dismissed.” He muttered as Sentinel and Bee roared past.

“Get inside! Let's go!” Lennox yelled as the gates closed.

“Move! Keep moving!”

“Lennox!” Sam yelled.
“Go go go go go.” Lennox sent the troops into position even as Harry appeared at the doors to the base to see what was happening.

“We got Decepticons everywhere.”

“I've got my whole team deployed looking for them. Ironhide! Protect Sentinel. Get him locked up inside.”

“Consider it done!” Ironhide agreed.

“Hey, you've got to guard him, 'cause he's the key to the whole thing.” Sam called out.

“Indeed I am. What you must realize, my Autobot brothers, is we were never going to win the war. For the sake of our planet's survival, a deal had to be made... with Megatron.” Sentinel pulled his weapon, turning to aim but was then struck by a Muertes energy weapon, throwing his aim off so that he missed the weapons specialist. As he tried to aim again everyone scattered, taking shots at him from cover once they saw what his weapon did. They kept on shooting even as he ripped into the vault and ran for it with the pillars, the Autobots and Harry doing the most damage but Sentinel was a Prime and his armour was the best, able to handle the damage.

"Commencing transport." Sentinel activated the control pillar.

“Stop! No, no Sentinel!” Optimus burst into the park.

“Forgive me.”

“Here we are. Fight us now.” Megatron watched as his soldiers began appearing around him.

“Contact! Watch out! Move it! Move it!” A NEST soldier yelled as they saw all of the Energon signatures appear through the city, far outnumbering the Autobots.

“Autobots, retreat!” Optimus commanded above the screaming of humans. “Nggah! Why, Sentinel?”
“Why?” he focused back on his fight with the other Prime.

“For Cybertron! For our home! What war destroyed, we can rebuild! But only if we join with the Decepticons.”

“No, it's not the only way! This is our home! We must defend the humans!”

“So lost you are, Optimus. On Cybertron, we were gods. And here... they call us machines. Let the humans serve us, or perish! You're lucky I didn't kill you. In time, you'll see.” Sentinel left and Optimus watched him go.

“It's not over.”

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“Sam!”

“I'm going to get Carly.” He answered as soldiers flooded from the base. The Decepticons had left the city so NEST was being moved to a base from where they could deploy anywhere in the country faster.

“Take my car.” Harry tossed him the keys. “I'm headed for the White House, try and do some damage control. Stay safe.”

“You too.” Sam got in and raced towards Dylan’s place, the city too quiet with everyone hiding. He parked and rushed inside.

“Now, if I were him, I wouldn't let you out of my sight for one second.” Sam heard Dylan comment and then Carly chuckle.

“It's funny. I was just thinking on the way over here, I could really use some advice from Dylan, and there he is. Can I speak to you, Carly?” Sam pulled her chair out.

“Welcome, please, sit down. Have a drink.”
“You know what, I don't need a drink. I just need to speak to my girlfriend alone. Is that okay with you, Mr. Inappropriate?” He snapped, too stressed to care.

“Excuse me.” Carly managed a smile for her boss and then quickly followed Sam. “What's going on?”

“I'll tell you on the way to the airport. You’re leaving now and I'm meeting Harry at the White House.”

“I really think I can help you, Sam. I remember a talk I had with my dad once about tough choices.”

“Yeah, now's not the time. We'll set something up, though.” Sam called as they walked down the stairs and towards the car only for another to block them in.

“Of course, it was way back, when my dad's firm was in charge of budget review and accounting for NASA. You see, the thing that he taught me was, when it's not your war, you join the side that's going to win.”

Sam’s eyes widened as he realised what Dylan was saying. “Move.” He hissed, pulling her into a run.

“Too direct? Or is it just me?” Dylan asked his other guests.

“Certainly not you, sir.”

The car that had blocked them suddenly sprouted appendages and attacked, grabbing Carly. Sam hit the emergency transmitter in his watch, activating the link to Jarvis who immediately focused a satellite on his location, transmitting the data to Optimus, NEST Harry.

“You're mine!” Soundwave announced.

“Nooo!” Sam screamed and then looked at the departing guests. “Get help.”
“Sam, I can’t get out!” Carly fought to open a door, smash a window, anything.

“Someone get help!”

“Good night.” Dylan smiled at an older woman.

“Good night, Mr Dylan.’

“He is young. He will learn. Good night.”

“You really think you're the first man ever asked to join the noble alien cause?” Dylan asked as two of his men grabbed Sam.

“Who are you?”

“Do you know why we've not been back to the moon since 1972? Because these two-“ he was interrupted as Laserbeak screeched. “-They came to my dad and they told him to do some creative accounting. Make it way too expensive to ever go back. So he and the others shut down the American and Russian space programs. And they've been our clients ever since.”

“You helped them kill people?”

“You think they'd give you a choice? Besides, it's not like I personally participated. I am a liaison. I liaise. It's hostile takeover time, Sam.”

“Let her go!” Sam growled dangerously, he wasn’t the untrained boy he was even in Egypt.

“Sam!” She screamed.

“I've had my eye on you for years, Sam. You're the one spy I've never been able to provide as someone close to the Autobots.”
“Sam! Don’t do what he wants!”

“Yes, he will. They all do. They will slaughter her, you understand me? In the time it takes you to blink, they’ll do it to her and they'll do it to me. So, you show a little respect! When someone offers you! A job! Wrist.” He ordered and Sam’s wrist was grabbed, none of them paying attention to his watch. Sam twisted, driving his knee into one man’s groin before twisting and breaking the other man’s arm. He lunged for Dylan but Carly’s scream brought him up short.

Harry paused before reaching security as Jarvis sent the live feed. “Damn it.” He hissed, hesitating. The car he’d sent Sam in was equipped with a weapon that could take out a Cybertronian, basically it was an EMP, just one that targeted Cybertronian systems, not human electronics, and would take them out for around half an hour. With the two thugs temporarily down Sam could handle Dylan and get out of there. But then they would still be blind to what Megatron and Sentinel had planned. It was obvious they didn’t plan to harm Sam or Carly yet, so did they wait and see? “What do Lennox and Optimus want to do?"

“Lennox votes let it play out sir, Optimus wishes the rescue of the children.”

“Guess it’s two votes to one then. Let Sam know. Looks like they’re trying to tag him, take care of it but make it look like it worked.”

“Of course, Sir.”

Sam felt the pulses of code from Jarvis and snarled but saw one of the downed men getting up so he allowed himself to be grabbed again. His wrist was snatched and a small Decepticon wrapped around his wrist above his watch, moving over it. Sam screamed as it tapped into his nervous system but then the pain stopped and his watched pulsed again so he kept screaming.

Jarvis instantly let out a small version of the weapon the car was equipped with, disabling the Decepticon while copying its signal and beginning to transmit it. As far as anyone else knew the little thing was still working.

“You are to track down Optimus Prime, because you're the one human he trusts, and you will ask one question. How does he intend to fight back? Strategies, tactics, everything!” Dylan snarled.

“Unngggh!”
“Has a nasty little bite, doesn't it? It's very high-tech. It lets us see what you see, hear what you hear and it taps your nervous system. So, if you so much as try and signal—” Sam gasped in apparent pain. “Mm. I don't know what to tell you, Sam. Relationships have consequences. I am here because of my father. She is here because of you.”

Carly cried out as a tendril came close to her face but then felt her watch pulse and she knew Jarvis was watching and would keep her safe.

“Stop, stop! Stop! Stop!” Sam begged.

“Soundwave, would you please? Sam, do your job. She'll be safe. I give you my word.” Dylan offered as Sam was helped up. Sam brushed them off and spat at Dylan’s feet.

“I'll kill you. You have my word.” He stated coldly and then was led away.

Harry and the US President sat together in the Oval Office, going over intel and awaiting word from the UN. Harry knew how his own representative would vote, but that was just one vote. When the announcement was made Harry sighed and shook his head.

“You object?”

“Of course, I do. This is probably the most stupid move the UN has ever made. Not to mention they have no actual power to enforce it. If you’ll excuse me, I have a message to send.”

“Feel free to use the White House Press Room.”

Harry nodded and headed for the room. He knew the other President was curious over what he would say, that was why he had offered. Harry stepped up to the podium and the quietly chatting press officers went silent. “Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.” He called and saw the cameras come on. “For those of you who do not recognise me, I am President Harry Winchester of the Muertes Islands.” That got a reaction as few knew what President Winchester looked like. “I am speaking in response to the UN’s backing of America’s exiling of the Autobots. What they failed to take into account is that we also have an Alliance with the Autobots, one we stand by. As a child, I was taught to do what is right over what is easy. This Sentinel Prime would be by our standards a
traitor to his people. The Decepticons want our resources and yet don’t say which ones. There is only one resource on this planet that they can’t get elsewhere, even in this solar system….us. Optimus Prime is the leader of the Autobots and a friend to Earth. Sentinel Prime gave up leadership millennia ago, he cannot claim it back as he wishes after allying with the Decepticons who have tried several times to destroy humanity. Megatron is a genocidal dictator and we will not give him anything. The time has come to stand up for what is right and we will do so. Thank you for your time.” Harry nodded and then left the room. “Sit rep Jarvis.”

“Sam is with Director Mearing on a plane bound for the base in Florida. Carly is with several Decepticons and their human allies, they are heading west for the moment, destination unknown at this time. I have sent the history files as planned to every government, no responses as yet. All Muertes forces are standing by for deployment and all Stag Industries buildings have entered lockdown, the staff in the bunkers.”

“Agent Simmons. Former Agent Simmons. So. I see you survived Washington.” She looked him over.

“Washington, Egypt, heartbreak. I survive. I will survive. They're bringing everybody in, kid. Putting all the intel on the table. And if you think deporting nine Autobots is gonna solve a damn thing-”

“It's out of my hands.” She denied as they watched the massive plane taxi in and lower the ramp. The Autobots only had one ship and it was safely on Isla Pena so all the US could do was send them there. Once they got there only Harry could kick them out and he wasn’t going to. Other governments were beginning to question the US’ decision after looking over the information packs Jarvis had sent out.

“Moving up in the world, huh? Your booty looks excellent.” He grinned as he watched her walk.

“You ever say a word to anyone about what happened that night in Quantico, I'll cut your heart out.”

“You already did.” He answered.
Sam wandered around until he came to a cage and he wanted to snarl in rage at what he saw.

“Sammy, listen to me. Don't let them exile us.” Wheelie begged and Sam reached out to gently touched the Autobot.

“Don't let them take us, Sam.” Brains clung to the bars.

“It's a Decepticon trap.”

“You're going to Muertes, Harry will keep you safe.” Sam whispered. He felt the soft pulse from his watch, knowing what he had to do to keep Carly safe. While Jarvis had killed the Decepticon he had to transmit certain data to Soundwave in its place or they’d kill Carly. “Optimus?” he called out to his friend.

“What your leaders say is true. This was all my fault. I told them whom to trust. I... was so wrong.”

“That doesn't make it your fault. It just makes you human for a change.” Sam managed a weak grin.

“Remember this. You may lose your faith in us, but never in yourselves.” Optimus knelt to be more at his level and Sam took a deep breath, grateful that Optimus knew what was going on and this was all an act for the enemy.

“I need to know how you're gonna fight back. I know this is strategy, I know you're... you're coming back with reinforcements, something, I know there's a plan. You can tell me. No other human will ever know.”

“There is no plan.” Optimus shook his head.

“If we just do what they want, how are we gonna live with ourselves?”

“You are my friend, Sam. You always will be. But your leaders have spoken. From here, the fight will be your own.” He stood and moved away, clasping Bumblebee’s shoulder. “Make it short.
We're loading up.”

“We're gonna do whatever we can. Make it like it was. You will always be my friend, Sam. I gotta be going on.” Bumblebee promised, kneeling to be closer to his best friend and Sam just sobbed. Bee gently ran a finger over him before heading for the plane.

“Years from now, they're gonna ask us. Where were you when they took over the planet? We're gonna say, we just stood by and watched.” Simmons said as they watched the airplane taxi and then lift off.

Sam moved away to sit alone and then pulled out his phone as it rang.

“You should really look at this as a partnership. You have to stand on the side of progress if you wanna be a part of history.” Dylan’s voice came through and Sam’s hands clenched into fists.

“You wanted an answer. You got one.”

“I always get what I want, Sam. We just needed to be sure.”

“Sure of what?” Sam demanded.

“That they would go without a fight.” Dylan was smirking, Sam just knew it even as he stared in horror as a missile impacted the plane, destroying it.

“Ah!” Sam screamed even as the dead Decepticon dropped from his wrist, not that he cared. The plan had been to regroup on Muertes and now….

“We all work for the Decepticons now.”

“Jarvis?” Sam choked out.

“Trump Tower, Chicago. Lower penthouse.” The AI answered and Sam sighed in relief, he knew where she was now.
Sam ran inside and saw Mearing, Simmons and Epps who had been in the US visiting friends. It was a good thing he hadn’t been on the plane with the Autobots to return home. “Dylan Gould, he's the head of their human operations and he has Carly hostage. They’ve been tracked to Chicago, Trump Tower. I'm going.”

“You sure?” Simmons asked.

“She's done nothing but try to help me, and I can be there in fifteen hours.”

“You're not going alone.” Epps stepped up, they all owed Sam a lot and without him Epps would never have met Harry either, would never had such a good job once out of the US armed forces. “I still got my NEST friends out there. I'll round them up, we'll find your girlfriend, we're gonna bring this guy in.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“Cause that asshole killed my friends, too.” Epps snarled. He led Sam away and began packing up any gear they might need.

Sam was in shock, the Autobots were gone, they were on their own this time. But it didn’t feel real, he could still feel the eco of the Matrix’s power. Then again maybe it had survived and sunk to the bottom of the sea. They watched as a private plane landed and Sam smiled slightly as he realised it was the Muertes equivalent of Airforce One. “Harry.” He whispered and sure enough his best friend walked down the stairs.

Harry looked at his friend and then grasped his soldiers. “We’ll get her back Sam.” He promised.

“Bee…”

“I’m not counting any of them out till I see bodies so pull it together Ambassador.” Harry growled and Sam swallowed but nodded, forcing himself to focus. “Now lest get moving. We’ll take my plane as close as possible and drive the rest of the way, it'll get us there faster.”

Epps nodded and made the calls to his old friends.
“They said they were here for our resources, to rebuild their planet.” Carly breathed as she was forced into an elevator, seeing as Decepticons transformed right in the street.

“Yes, but really one resource in particular. One unique to our planet.”

“Us?” she demanded in disgust.

“You're very smart. You see, they can't rebuild without a slave labour force. How many rocks up there in the universe offer six billion workers?”

“What are you talking about? We can't transport people.”

“They're not shipping people. They're shipping their planet here.” He answered, pulling her out onto the balcony to see the truth.

“Oh. Oh my God... what's Sentinel doing here?”

“Watch. They're spreading hundreds of pillars around the globe right now. In just a few hours, they're gonna launch them into orbit and bring Cybertron into our atmosphere. The red one there controls the rest. He triggers that, it starts the whole thing.” Dylan explained smugly, not realising his words were being transmitted to not only Harry but Optimus as the Autobots slowly made their way back to land and then towards the city.

“Be gone, insect operatives. Your work is done.” Megatron snarled, waving a hand at them and Dylan bowed slightly.

“Your Excellency... He's such a dick.” Dylan whispered the last bit as he pulled her into the penthouse apartment.

“You want this to happen?” she demanded as she looked out the window and down to where the police were trying to take on the Decepticons.
“I want to survive. I want forty more years. You think I asked for this? I inherited a client.”

“Yeah, and when Cybertron's here and we're all their slaves, I guess they'll still need a human leader.” She spat, turning on him in rage.

“Don't jinx me. You want to survive, you listen to me.” In response, she slapped him and moved away to watch in horror and the police were massacred and then everyone was screaming.

“It is time for the slaves of Earth to recognize their masters. Seal off the city.” Sentinel Prime commanded.

In the penthouse, all they could do was watch as the Decepticons went to work, shooting anything that moved on the streets. “Get the dogs outta here now! Get them in the back!”

“I guess they didn't tell you about this part, did they?” she whispered as she watched.

“You think I'm at every meeting? Look, I'm safe. They said I was safe.” He paced in agitation.

Carly blinked as her watched pulsed, looking down to see a message scroll across the screen. They were coming for her.

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“There is a ring of alien ships around Chicago.”

“Our high-range bombers were just knocked out of the sky. They can't get through enemy air defences over the city. Our satellites have been jammed. We have no way to monitor the enemy's movement.” Morshower explained from the Pentagon.

“Our old NEST teams are on stand-down holding at Grissom Air Force Base. We're about ten minutes from the battle zone. We have Special Forces trying to gain access to the city, and infantry is staging at the perimeter.” Will added from his place at the table as they scrambled to get intel or device a plan.
“Excuse me, excuse me, it just doesn't make sense! Can't we get any eyes in there at all?” Simmons demanded.

“They keep shooting down our drones.” Mearing admitted.

“They want us blind. But we do have a couple of mini-drones we're gonna try.”

“Well, whoever's manning these UAV drones, can we try to redirect them toward Trump Tower? The kid Witwicky, was on his way to Chicago. Said some point-man human op is there, for the Decepticons! Listen, if I know anything, I know this, that kid is an alien bad news magnet.” Simmons told them and then they got one satellite feed plus some security camera images and a message ‘courtesy of Stag Industries’. They were all shocked and horrified by what they saw.

“Move out now Lennox.”

“Yes sir.”

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“My God. We came here to find her in the middle of all that?” Epps demanded as they took in the devastation.

“Are we really going out there, Epps?” Stone asked.

“I'm not going in there.” Eddie answered for Epps.

“No one's going in.” Epps decided, they needed serious back up to even consider it.

“I am. With or without you, I'll find her.”

“You're gonna get yourself killed, Sam. Is that what you want? Is that what you want? You came all the way out here to get yourself killed? Huh? Listen to what I'm saying.”
“She's here because of me. Do you understand?” Sam yelled in grief.

“Listen, if you go in this building, that's if she's even still alive, there's no way you're gonna be able to reach her!”

“What do you suggest I do?” Sam snapped.

“It's over. I'm sorry, but it's over.”

“No.”

“I will not order you in there Major Epps, but I’m with Sam. We’re going in.” Harry stated as he began pulling gear from the car.

“Whoa whoa whoa! Incoming!” Eddie yelled as a ship came towards them. Harry pulled up a gun and took aim, opening fire on it. A more powerful blast hit and it went down.

“We will kill them all.” Optimus proclaimed and Sam grinned at the sight of the Autobots.

“Wreckers, kill it.” Leadfoot ordered and the Wreckers descended on the Decepticon pilot.

“Your leaders will now understand. Decepticons will never leave your planet alone. And we needed them to believe we had gone. For today, in the name of freedom, we take the battle to them!”

“I saw your ship blow up!” Sam looked at them in confusion.

“It was a Muertes plane Sam, piloted by Jarvis. They were never in any danger.” Harry stated.

“Yeah, no one's exiling us.” Wheelie exclaimed, moving closer to Sam. “The Autobots are staying right here. We're gonna help you win this war.”
“They’re surrounding the city to make a fortress, so that no one can see what they’re up to inside. Our only chance is the element of surprise.”

“Jarvis has a satellite on us and every feed from SI headquarters is being fed right to Lennox and company. Our air force is in the air, they’ll be here in around an hour for air support. We need to get to Trump tower, that’s where everything’s centred.”

Sam walked over to the down vehicle and then glanced at Bee. “Can you fly this?” Bee looked it over and nodded. “Let’s go get Carly.” He grinned. Harry tossed him a vest and Sam put it on under his jacket, the light armour would protect him, just not from a direct hit from a Decepticon gun, they simply put out too much energy being so much larger than humans. He accepted the weapons passed over as well and then got in the ship with Bee.

Harry passed out the rest of the weapons that had been based of phaser and staff weapon tech and then the team headed into the city even as Stag Industries doors opened and security teams emerged to sow confusion amongst the ranks of Decepticons as they began to die.

Harry ignored the comm chatter from the soldiers as he moved through the city with one of the Stag Industries security teams. Unfortunately, Sam and Bee’s rescue of Carly had revealed the Autobots presence in the city to the enemy which made things harder but small teams of humans could move about as long as they kept to the cover of buildings. Hearing an explosion, he looked up to see several Osprey coming under fire even as figures in black bailed out with wingsuits. Looked like the US military had finally decided to join the party. They were taking fire so he glanced at his team and they scrambled up the stairs of the building to the roof where they opened fire, trying to cover the men as the descended. “Lennox.”

“Mr President, should you be here?”

Harry shook his head in amusement. “Epps is leading a team to take out the control pillar there.” He pointed out the building. “The rest of us are working to distract the Decepticons.”

“Alright men, let’s move!”

“We’ll go this way.” Sam tugged Carly along as they moved through the city, they’d lost Epps and
the group a while ago. Carly was wearing his vest now but Sam was still armed.

“What a treat! You and me, alone!” Starscream called as he landed nearby and Sam broke into a run, pulling her along.

“Carly! Come on, come on! Run! Okay! He’s after me, not you. Quick! Run!” he pulled her into a burnt-out bus and they kept running.

“You can’t hide, boy!” Starscream blew the bus just after they’d scrambled clear and Sam shoved Carly around a corner before moving away, the Decepticon following him.

“Oh my god-“ Sam gasped as he fell.

“I just love it when your little insect feet try to run!”

“Sam!”

“I thought you were working for us, boy? Hahahahaha!” He pinned Sam who grabbed at the gear Que had given them, attaching the climbing glove and firing it.

“Ahhh, my eye!” Starscream screamed as the anchor latched onto one optic. He began to thrash around, Sam being pulled along by the glove.

“Whoa, whoa!”

“My eye!”

“Target the Decepticon!” Will called after staring in shock for a second, his men spreading out.

“Sam! Please, you’ve got to save Sam! You’ve got to save him!” Carly begged as she ran to Will.
“What the hell is he doing?”

“This better work-” Sam grabbed one of the bombs as he lay on the floor of a destroyed shop. He armed it but was then flung back outside as Starscream attacked the soldiers. As the cord brought him up he slammed the bomb into Starscream’s other eye, blinding him.

“Ow ow ow ow! I can't see! I can't see!”

“Sam!” Will grabbed him only for them both to be dragged around by Starscream’s thrashing.

“It's on my hand!” Sam answered.

“Grab the knife! Knife!” Will yelled as he held on.

“I'm trying! The bomb's gonna blow! The bomb's gonna-“

“You human scum!” the Decepticon swung blindly at them and missed.

“We got twenty seconds on that bomb!” Sam yelled as they hit the ground.

“What bomb?”

“You see that bomb?” Sam pointed. “Cut it, cut it, cut it!”

“I got it! How long do we have?” Will finally managed to begin cutting through the reinforced cord.

“Whoa!”

“I'm gonna kick you!” since he couldn’t hit them but he still missed.
“Cut, cut, cut cut cut!” Sam yelled and then they were falling as the cord snapped, rolling across the ground.

“I'm gonna kill y-” the bomb detonated, taking most of Starscream’s head with it.

“Well, he's dead.” Sam panted.

“Mm-hmm.”

"How do we get these bridges down? Spread out. Check in there.” Will ordered and then raised his gun only to grin as a familiar figure came around the corner with a ragtag group of ex-NEST soldiers. “Epps! Epps, I've been looking for your ass. How you doing?”

“Retirement is whack. Even worse, we can't get across the river to that building, and the Autobots are upstairs, surrounded.” He answered grimly.

“Just pan the camera around, all right?” Simmons ordered as they watched the monitors to see what was happening in Chicago. The satellite feed was unreliable due to the heavy interference but they were managing access to various cameras through the city.

“All right. Pan- pan right. That's you.” Dutch grinned as he spotted the soldiers.

“Try getting into the bridge control room.” Will ordered.

“What are they doing? They're just standing there.” Mearing looked at the monitor in confusion.

“Hang on. Dutch, see if you can hack into the bridge.”

“Sir, SEALs are here.” A solider called as black clad figures emerged from the river.

“It's a good day, boys! What do you got?”
“Got a ten-man SEAL unit, sir, tasked with vectoring Tomahawks.”

“How long?”

“Fifteen.” The Captain answered.

Sam and Carly hid inside an overturned taxi on the road level of the bridge, staring in shock at the surrounded Autobots.

“You're my prisoners!” Soundwave announced.

“Take it easy. We surrender.” Sideswipe snapped as he was knocked around.

“Get off me. Get off me!” Ratchet broke free of the hold.

“All right, you're gonna need your forty Mike-Mikes and frags. Go full auto. The vibrations jack up their circuits. Snipers, shoot for the eyes. All right, your target is up on top of that building, that cupola.” Will explained to the expanded group of soldiers. “We have Stag Industries security spread throughout distracting as many Decepticons as they can so make sure you don’t hit any of them.”

“How doomed you are, Autobots. You simply fail to understand, that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Activating the bridge.” Swentinel Prime called out from safety as he saw them all on the bridge.

Inside one of the ships two small Autobots hid as the Decepticons celebrated. “They happy about something.”

“We're in the heart of their ship. Let's give them a little ride.” Wheelie practically rubbed his hands together in glee.

“Oh ho! We gonna screw this ship up.” Brains began chewing on a cord.
“It's a 128K binary encryption code. It's difficult... but not for me, I'm in. Bridge, down.” Dutch announced as he worked on the codes, Jarvis busy in other areas.

“The bridge is coming down! Someone's watching over us!” Epps yelled and they began moving out.

“Pleasure working with you, Seymour. I believe you're supposed to say.” Simmons grinned at Mearing who leant in and kissed Dutch’s cheek.

“Good job, Dutch.” She praised.

Back on the bridge Sam grimaced as Dylan joined the group, he was going to keep his promise to that man. “Prisoners? You're keeping prisoners?”

“Yes.”

“You need to teach them about respect. This was all business, but now it's personal, do you understand me?” Dylan yelled and Soundwave studied him before nodding.

“Ha ha. I understand. No prisoners, only trophies.”

“Bee? I think they're going to kill us.” Que whispered and Bee whistled in distress.

“You! Your time is up.” Barricade grabbed Que and pulled him away from the others.

“Wait, wait, wait! We surrendered! We're your prisoners.”

“Move it!”

“Can't we talk this out? We're all a bunch of good chaps! I mean you no- why did you- aah!” Que screamed as he was shot multiple times, head rolling free. Carly grabbed onto Sam, gasping softly as she tried not to scream.
“Good-bye, my old friend.” Bee looked down mournfully.

“You're mine now.” Soundwave grabbed him and Bee whistled angrily.

“Get off me!”

“Come along!”

“I got to help him.” Sam pulled the remaining bomb.

“What? What are you doing?”

“I got to help him.” He tried to arm it but nothing happened.

“Sam, you can't help him. Sam!” She held on tight to his arm.

“Turn around.” Soundwave ordered, pushing Bee down on Que’s remains and blue optics widened as he spotted the two humans.

“We- we gave them a hell of a run.” He offered softly even as Sam tossed the bomb aside and grabbed the rifle Harry had given him. He was a good shot now but as soon as he fired they’d be revealed. But then they all looked up to see a ship coming their way, flying very oddly.

“We did it, Brains! We did it!” Wheelie celebrated as they continued to pull things apart.

“Rip this ship apart!” Brains agreed happily.

“Yeah!” Bee shoved Soundwave off and his battle mask slid into place as he began shooting.
“No- NO!”

“We had a nice run, Brains.” Wheelie grabbed onto Brains, holding him safely in place as the ship dropped like a stone.

“Yeah.’

“You and me.”

“We gonna die.”

They ran around the corner, opening fire at the Decepticons as they joined the soldiers. Seeing another planet in the sky was a shock but there was nothing they could do about that.

“Lennox!” Harry yelled and the soldier turned.

“We have to destroy the pillar! It fell somewhere that way!” Will yelled.

“Team two with me!” harry called and they began moving that way, trying not to get underfoot as Optimus and Sentinel fought around them.

“Decepticons, trigger the pillar! Restart that pillar!” Sentinel yelled.

“Trigger the pillars.” Dylan yelled as he made his way to the control pillar and reactivated it.

“I can't hold them! The ships have us pinned! No!” Optimus yelled as the pillars reactivated.

“Inbound, ten seconds! Danger close!”
“Dylan! Wait! Wait-” Sam called as he followed the older man.

“Noo!” Dylan yelled as Sam managed to shoot the pillar back down.

“Shit- Dylan! Stop! Stop! No! You can't do this, okay?” Sam called as they scrambled over the rubble.

“There's only one future for me. Ah!” he once again reactivated the pillar.

Several streets away Megatron looked up into the sky. “Cybertron, you are saved. At last.” He looked down as a human walked over. “Oh... Have you come to surrender?”

“Was it all worth it?” Carly asked.

“Obviously.”

“All your work to bring Sentinel back and now clearly he has all the power. It's actually almost tragic.” She taunted.

“You dare lecture me, slave?”

“Your Decepticons finally conquering this planet, and yet, their leader won't be you!” She smirked as he roared in anger.

“It will be me! It will always be me.”

“In any minute now, you'll be nothing but Sentinel's bitch.” She dodged out of the way as he surged upright and ran to the battle. Well that had worked well. Sometimes bad guys could be so predictable.

“Uh!” Sam gasped and landed on his back, Dylan standing over him.
“You choose sides?” Dylan snarled as he hit Sam again. “You chose wrong.”

“Yaaah!” Optinus cried out as he took a hit from his old mentor.

“Always- the bravest of us!” Sentinel taunted. “But you could never make the hard decisions! Our planet will survive!”

“N- No!” Optimus denied, throwing himself into the fight with everything he had.

“We were gods once. All of us. But here-“

“Please-“

“-There will only be one!” Sentinel stood over Optimus and then screamed as he took fire. Shots from Harry and Megatron hit at the same time. He’d left the pillar to the team once he’d seen Optimus being beaten.

“This is my planet!” Megatron roared in anger.

“I just saved a whole other world. You think you're a hero, huh? You think you're a hero?” Dylan demanded as he stood in front of the pillar and Sam found his rifle, taking aim.

“No. I'm just a messenger.” He used the title Mearing had given him when he’d been trying to work with NEST, before becoming Ambassador. He fired twice, one shot through Dylan’s chest and the other dead centre of the pillar.

“Now. We need a truce... All I want is to be back in charge. Besides... who would you be without me, Prime?” Megatron stated even as they watched Cybertron explode due to the space bridge failing.

Optimus Prime steadied himself, battle mask falling into place as he stood. “Time to find out.” He fired into his one-time brother, watching him fall before turning to the injured Sentinel.
“Optimus, all I ever wanted was the survival of our race. You must see why... I had to betray you.”

“You didn't betray me. You betrayed yourself.” He pinned his old mentor down and drew back the blade.

“No, Optimus-” Sentinel’s head hit the ground.

The soldiers and security guards looked around at the devastation, Carly searching wildly for any sign of Sam, and then Lennox grinned. “Sam.” He pointed and Carly ran to her boyfriend, throwing herself into his arms.

“I love you.”

“I love you. You're the only thing I need in this world, and I'll do anything to make it up to you, I promise.” He practically babbled.

“I'm going to hold you to that. Just never let me go.”

“I promise.”

Bumblebee played a wedding march and dropped bits of machinery in the right shape.

“Ooo, rings.” She picked one up. “I love this car.”

“Bee, you've got to slow it down. You got to slow way down, okay?”

“Oh, I'm just trying to help out.” Bee answered and Harry laughed as he joined them.

In any war, there are calms between storms. There will be days when we lose faith. Days when our allies turn against us. But the day will never come... that we forsake this planet... and its people.” Optimus stated.
Harry sat at the table, his own guards standing behind him, new Defence Minister, Will Lennox, sitting to his right and his Intelligence Chief, Tom Banachek, to his left. Once the battle was done Harry had approached Will who had quite willingly jumped ship to become a citizen of Muertes. His wife and toddler were already happily living on Isla Nublar with the Witwicky’s, well away from danger. He’d served his country proudly but with what had happened in the lead up to the Battle of Chicago he had found himself very disappointed in the government. Sam was sitting beside Will in his spot as Ambassador. Across the table was the American President, a CIA Agent called Harold Attinger as well as General Morshower and Director Mearing.

“Mr President you seem to think that you can order anyone around and they will obey. That is not the case, we have an alliance with the Autobots and that will not change. You can choose to halt all joint military action with them but we will not be doing that. There are still Decepticons out there and even if there wasn’t, they are our friends. If you choose to ignore that then fine, I have a message from Optimus Prime himself. They will honour your wishes and leave American soil but you have no authority to demand they leave the planet. Earth is their home. Asylum has been given and they have a home on our islands. I suggest you keep well away. As of now all Autobot technology is being removed from America, including the Energon sensors, and Stag Industries is also leaving. Frankly your new attitude to our allies is very concerning. Good day gentlemen.” He stood and they left the White House for the airport. As of today, no Autobot or Muertes citizen would step foot on American soil.

Harry read the report and sighed, he’d been afraid of this. A ship had been detected entering the solar system and had sent a signal…one that had been answered from America. He had sent the data to Optimus for Autobot analysis but he doubted the ship was friendly or else it would have tried to contact the Autobots.

He sat back and looked out at the view. He’d done everything he could to ensure his people were safe. After Chicago immigration requests had gone up, people had lost faith in America’s ability to deal with alien attacks. With only five islands though there was a definite limit on how many they could accept.

He moved to the wall and opened the safe, checking everything was in order. His will was up to date as was everything for the continuing government. Sam was his heir, he would inherit Stag Industries and he was also his chosen successor for President, but if he didn’t want the job then it would go to a general election. He just had a growing feeling his time here would soon be up and he wanted to ensure a smooth transition and the safety of his people.

Speaking of people, it was time to go. He had stumbled across an interesting man’s work recently and was going personally to try and recruit him for Stag Industries, partially because he didn’t trust anyone else’s safety in America. He left for the airport and boarded his plane, spending the flight
napping and going over the man’s details. He drove out to the farm and got out.

“Can I help you?” a man called warily as he emerged from the barn.

“Cade Yeager?”

“Who’s asking?”

“Harry Winchester, Stag Industries. I have a business proposal for you.” He smiled at the stunned look on the other man’s face but he was led into the house to talk. In the end he left the unsigned contract with him and headed for the airport to return home.

“Sir, we have a problem.”

“I see them.” He had noticed the two cars following him. “Anything?”

“They appear to be CIA, a new division called Cemetery Wind.”

“Comforting name. Alright, no point trying to lose them so why tail us when they know I’d be headed back…” he didn’t like this at all. “Call ahead, have the plane ready to lift off immediately.

“Yes Sir.”

Thankfully nothing happened and he returned to the island, five days later the Yeager family moved into a comfortable house and Cade went to work, this time with all the resources he could want.

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Harry grinned as he watched Sam’s reaction as Carly walked down the aisle towards them, a vison in white satin and lace. Bee stood behind Sam, his best man while Harry stood ready to perform the ceremony, one of his favourite things to do. Everyone thought it was about time the two tied the knot, and it was good to have a happy event when things off the islands were getting tense. America had become very anti-Cybertronian, no matter which side of the war. Cemetery wind seemed to pop up anywhere and everywhere at the smallest hint and Harry was keeping an eye on a tech company
based in Chicago, KSI. The Autobots were safe on the island and harry had slipped up wards to ensure the islands would remain safe from invasion of any kind.

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“Know who’s ship it is?” Harry asked as they studied the satellite images.

“That is the Knight Ship, within it is the Knight’s Temenos.”

“So, an Autobot ship?” Sam asked.

“Perhaps, it has been missing even longer than the Ark.”

“Which means anyone could be on it.”

“Indeed.”

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Harry watched the meeting via satellite and sighed, he knew with a name like cemetery wind they wouldn’t be a nice department but this? The room was silent as they watched the CIA operatives working with a Cybertronian Optimus had identified as Lockdown, a mercenary, killed a Decepticon and then the remains were gathered in a truck with the KSI logo.

“There is nothing we can do but apply political pressure on the US, show the world their actions but a lot won’t care.” Banachek pointed out and Harry nodded.

“Do it. And increase security on all shipments in and out.”

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Harry stood beside Optimus as they studied the information Jarvis had gleamed from the KSI servers, able to feel the Autobot leaders anger at what they were reading and watching. “They wouldn’t differentiate between you and the Decepticons, all they care about is making ‘better’, controllable versions of you. Even if it meant possible genocide.” Harry whispered. They’d seen Cybertron implode when the bridge collapsed, any who had remained on the planet were most likely dead and
there had been no new arrivals in the last year, they were either too far away or all dead.

“We are not their technology.” Optimus growled out.

“Can you guys handle Lockdown?”

“We can.”

“Then that leaves Joyce and the CIA to us. They need to learn that being American does not mean you get to ignore basic sentient rights.” Harry nodded to Optimus and left the main Autobot command room, returning to his office on Isla Nublar. He put together a team, keeping Sam out of it. Carly was pregnant with their first child and while Sam could fight it wasn’t his chosen profession.

Harry ducked and then slammed his elbow back into his opponents’ stomach, hearing the satisfying gasp for air. He straightened and then knocked the man back.

“Autobot or Decepticon, there is no such thing as a good alien. This is our planet.” Savoy spat at him.

“You do realise there is evidence of Cybertronians on Earth before human civilisation, right? Besides, maybe I just don’t want to be a bigoted ass like you.” Harry answered, glancing over at where the rest of his team was engaged with the rest of Savoy’s men. Harry went on the attack, steadily pushing Savoy back until he finally kicked out and then man cried out as he went over the edge, landing thirteen floors down in the lobby. Harry stormed into Joyce’s office and left the man cowering in the corner as he ensured all data was erased. “Genocide is never okay.” And then he wiped the man’s memories of everything he had learnt about Cybertronians, planting a desire to do charity work instead. Harry stepped out of the office to find the CIA operatives either dead or contained. Of course, that was when KSI’s one prototype decided to come online. His people began shooting but this creation had no spark chamber and could turn into small pieces of metal at will, negating the normal weaknesses they could target. Harry began using magic as well even as a call for backup from the Autobots went out. Harry turned and blasted the partially formed bot as it fired and he felt the searing heat for a second.

Sam had his arm around Carly’s waist as she cradled their daughter Amy. There were few graves in the cemetery but this new one was the most elaborate, in honour of their first leader. Harry
Winchester had been buried with ceremony, despite the lack of body. Harry’s will had been a shock but after some discussion Sam had agreed to become the Second Muertes president. Tomorrow the Xantium was leaving with Drift, Crosshairs and some of the others to return to Cybertron and see what was really left of their home planet and if there was any possibility of restoration. Optimus had wanted to go but had been talked down and Ironhide was going in his place. It wouldn’t be the same without the weapons specialist but the world was still tense and it would always be better for them to have another option. But thanks to Harry they had time and a safe haven. Who knew, maybe they could get some human friendly atmosphere going and the Witwicky’s would move as well one day.

*The end of this one.*
Pretending to be Me

Chapter Summary

HP only. Now edited to fix an oops

Disclaimer: HP is not mine

Pretending to be me

Harry stared at the body at his feet in horrified shock. The small broken body was oh so familiar…. because it was him. Harry Potter was dead. He looked up at the suddenly pale walrus of a man and felt so tempted to kill him where he stood. Instead he obliviated and stunned him, sending him back to number 4. He knelt down and gently gathered the boy in his arms before apparating away to Godric’s Hollow. He found the Potter graves where he expected and interned their only son with them. The question was what to do next? Depending on how deaths were handled in this world the Ministry or Gringotts may already know of the end of the Potter family. But if he took young Harry’s place…. Could he deal with seven more years at Hogwarts? And how had this worlds history gone? Was Harry even the Boy-Who-Lived or just an orphan? No, the boy had the scar. He needed information. He closed his eyes and his form shifted until a young boy stood within the graveyard before vanishing.

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Dedalus Diggle’s eyes widened before he bowed to the young boy before him. Harry Potter! No one would believe him when he said he’d seen the famous Boy-Who-Lived. Maybe he should have cut through Privet Drive before. The boy looked so much like James Potter but he’d never seen a Potter dress like that, must be some muggle fad. Though he was rather small, wasn’t he meant to be attending Hogwarts next year?

“Excuse me sir.” The boy called and Dedalus paused. 

What was he meant to do? Was he allowed to speak with him? Dumbledore had made it clear the child was being kept safely away from the Wizarding Public. “Yes?” there, that was nice and safe. 

“Why did you bow to me?”

Dedalus stared in shock. What? “You are Harry Potter.”

“Yes sir. I’m a nobody and a freak.”

“What? No! who could have said such a thing?”

“Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. Dudley does too sometimes. So, do the kids at school. The teachers say I’m a bad boy.”

Dedalus felt sick. This was not what he had expected when showing his respect for their saviour! “You are not a freak at all Mr Potter.” He looked around and then put up a muggle repellent ward around them, not wanting to be overheard. “Hasn’t your family told you anything of your past, of your parents?”
“They were drunks living on welfare. Dad got them killed by driving drunk.” Harry answered.

“No, no…. what were they thinking? What to do… I’m not really the one to tell you Mr Potter.” He nervously played with the brim of his hat. “Ah. Yes, that will work. Will you come with me Mr Potter? I swear I will not harm you.”

Harry nodded, able to feel the magic behind the promise and followed him as the man summoned the Knight Bus. “Wow.”

“Up you go. Two to the Leaky Cauldron Stan.” He handed over the coins and led Harry to a seat. “Hang on tight.” He smiled at the wide eyed wonder the boy showed. In only a few minutes they were at the pub and he led Harry inside and through to the gateway. “Welcome to Diagon Alley.” He grinned as Harry gasped.

“What is all this?”

“Magic my boy, magic. This way.” He led him to the grand white building in the middle of the Alley. He knew Harry wasn’t eleven yet but under the circumstances he thought it necessary, besides it wasn’t like Harry was actually a muggleborn.

They walked up the stairs towards the burnished bronze doors, guarded by goblins and Harry glanced at the warning there.

Enter, stranger, but take heed
Of what awaits the sin of greed
For those who take, but do not earn,
Must pay most dearly in their turn.
So, if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware
Of finding more than treasure there.

One thing that never seemed to change between worlds was that poem, as odd as it was. He followed Diggle into the bank, looking around at the crisp, clean building and well-tailored goblins.

“Greetings Master Teller. There is a matter needing the utmost discretion with a young heir.”

The goblin leaned forward to get a look at the ragged boy. “Inheritance office, third door, see Bloodstone.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry answered, smiling without showing his teeth and the goblin nodded.

“Alright then Harry, the goblins are very particular about this sort of thing so you’ll have to go on alone.”

“Yes sir.” Harry gave a shy smile and then went to the indicated room. He knocked and entered when called to.

“Yes?” Bloodstone demanded and Harry dropped the glamour, bowing.

“I need to do an inheritance test honoured goblin.”

“Hand.” He demanded as he placed the parchment on his desk and drew the dagger. Harry held his hand out and let the blood drop on the parchment. Bloodstone stared at the result in confusion, it simply wasn’t possible. “Who are you?” he growled.
“Harry James Potter, from another time and dimension. I know this world’s Harry is dead, I ensured he was buried with his parents after his uncle killed him. Since then I have been taking his place.”

“I see…. magic acknowledges you as Lord Potter so we have no choice but to accept this. However, the wizards…”

“I have a plan, one I will need Gringotts help for.”

Dedalus glanced up as a well-dressed wizard walked towards the inheritance office. He blinked and shook his head, there was a definite similarity in looks to not only James Potter but the traitor Black. So, who was this? And heading for where he’d left Harry Potter? Before he could do anything, the man was inside the office.

The two versions of Harry looked at each other and then began signing the paperwork Bloodstone offered. The goblin had been able to fill in some of the history they needed to know, books would handle the rest for now. Young Harry slipped on the Potter heir ring and the Peverell one as well. Older Harry, now Samuel, slipped on the Peverell Lordship ring and then both bowed respectfully to the goblin before leaving the office.

“Alright there Harry?”

“Wonderful Mr Diggle! The goblins found me a new guardian.”

“Lord Samuel Peverell, Mr Diggle. Thank you so much for bringing my cousin in today. I’ve been looking for any surviving family for years but thought the family in Britain died out centuries ago.”

“Pleased to help My Lord.” Dedalus was proud when he didn’t stammer.

“Well, we don’t want to keep you. I need to get young Harry kitted out and then its home to America.” He shook Diggle’s hand and then they left, walking around Diagon Alley and shopping for the essentials before leaving for the newly purchased home in America where young Harry withdrew a time turner and vanished into the past. Samuel Peverell simply collapsed on a couch with a smirk at the thought of the chaos that would be breaking out back in England soon.

In honour of a dead child and his martyred parents he would ensure those who deserved to, paid. The goblins would handle much of that while he spent the next year getting caught up on this world before Harry Potter would reappear in time to attend Hogwarts.

Dedalus tried not to quiver before Albus Dumbledore. Since the Order disbanded he hadn’t really seen the older wizard and now he was wishing they had never been forced to see each other again. But when the authors of the Harry Potter books began to be sued and the Dursley’s being arrested for attempted murder and child abuse the Order had been reformed to find the young hero. Having to admit his part in thongs in front of the whole reformed Order and Dumbledore was highly nerve wracking. The look on Albus’ face when he had mentioned Lord Peverell had been odd but the meeting finally broke up and he happily fled home.

Albus tossed the Gringotts letter aside in anger. With this ‘Lord Peverell’ taking custody of the boy he had been cut off from the Potter accounts, after all he was no longer needed as his Magical Guardian. Even worse, the ills he had ensured were sealed and forgotten had now been unsealed and the beneficiaries informed. How long until the truth came out? He had to get his hands on the boy and this so-called Lord. He couldn’t be Lord Peverell, there were only two heirs to that family left,
Potter and Tom, he had ensured that. He already had one of the Hallows, he planned to allow Potter use of the second while at school and then claim it on the boy’s death. The third… he was sure it had passed through the Gaunt line but he couldn’t find it. He would be Master of Death, no one else.

Amelia looked at the note from Gringotts with listing the amount the Potters had left to her brother. With him dead it would pass on to Susan. But the reason…. she had never known Edgar had signed a betrothal contract with James. It wasn’t a total shock, many had done so in those dark days to ensure their children would be looked after if the worst should happen. Harry Potter should have been raised here with Susan, instead of wherever Dumbledore had left him. She would go to Gringotts and see if she could get a copy of the will, who knew what else had been ignored.

Sirius stared out the window of his private room in St Mungo’s, finally after nine years he was free. Remus had sent an owl saying he was coming to see him and it would be good to see him after so long. He was a bit mad the other man hadn’t come to see him on Azkaban or even pushed for him to have a trial but he also understood why he hadn’t, as a werewolf no one would have listened or worse, suspicion would have landed on him too.

But what he wanted to know most, and yet everyone was staying quiet on, was where was his godson? Where was Harry Potter?

“Harry Potter.” Minerva called and then slumped in relief as a young boy slipped from the crowd and approached the stool to sit. She placed the hat on his head and stepped back.

“Well, well. This is a surprise. Very difficult, there is so much here.”

“You’re meant to sort Harry Potter though.” He pointed out, blocking the hat from the mass of his memories.

“Oh fine, have it your way spoil sport. I look forward to further mayhem. Better be…. RAVENCLAW!” he yelled to dead silence. Harry stood, removed the hat and joined his new table.

The rest of the sorting went the way he expected and the feast began. To his surprise he felt nothing when he glanced at Quirell, was the man not possessed or had he truly lost that link? At the end of the night he followed the rest to Ravenclaw tower and was happy to find they slept in individual rooms. He wondered how long it would be until he was summoned by Dumbledore. He’d had his problems with his version of the man but this one appeared many times worse.

Sure, enough he was summoned the next day but refused without a staff representative so when Dumbledore tried to push beyond Harry’s answer of ‘ask my guardian’, Flitwick told the man off and ushered him out.

The year passed quickly and most left him alone, not sure what to make of him since he hadn’t gone into the expected house. Happily, he received a Christmas present he’d been hoping for, one Potter family invisibility cloak, passed down from the Peverell family. He kept his head down and his eyes open so once all the traps were in place it was easy to slip through them and retrieve the stone, sending it back to Flamel with a neat protective ward he’d picked up woven into the stone, ensuring only the ones who made it could use it. This way Riddle couldn’t use it and the Flamel’s would live.

With the school year over, came his first meeting with these versions of Sirius and Remus. Things were tense to begin with but after a few months of meetings and writing it smoothed out. They even took him to Diagon Alley to get his second-year books, where he was easily able to intercept
Malfoy’s attempt to plant the diary on Ginny. He wrapped it in silk and packed it away to be destroyed with basilisk venom. Ginny would never know the pain of possession by Tom. He also then sent in anonymous information to the DMLE and the Daily Prophet of just how Lockhart had become famous, two weeks later his arrest was front page. It was a lonely life, with only acquaintances at school but he was in a different house and thousands of years older than his old friends. Sirius and Remus were closer but still kept at a certain distance to keep his secrets, but he’d become a very good actor over the millennia.

Within the first week of school he’d accessed the Chamber and destroyed the diary while also dealing with the insane basilisk. No one else would dye like Myrtle. With Lockhart’s arrest an Auror out on injury lead taught DADA, and to a good standard. Without the diary and basilisk second year was quiet, although Harry did take young Luna Lovegood under his wing, warning off those who would have bullied her.

Politically, Fudge was on the way out, thanks to Sirius voting for the Black, Potter and Peverell seats. Previously Malfoy had voted the Black seat while Sirius was incarcerated since as French transplants the Malfoy’s didn’t have their own and everyone had assumed Draco was heir to House Black. Dumbledore had been voting with the other two, trying to keep the status quo. Oh, he’d blocked a few things but when looked back over it showed he wasn’t as pro-muggleborn as he acted. ‘Samuel’ had given Sirius his proxy, saying he preferred living in the States while they shared custody of ‘Harry’. With Fudge going down for his ineffectiveness Harry had nudged things to take Umbridge down with him, not wanting to have to deal with her later.

Harry grinned and splashed Luna back even as Sirius laughed from further up the beach, watching the two teens play in the surf. Harry wasn’t sure what his changes would bring for Fourth Year so when Sirius had suggested a holiday he’d jumped at the chance, just in case. And as his closest, only really, friend Luna had been invited along, they were leaving for the World Cup the next day. If Death Eaters showed up for some ‘fun’ after…. well he had some surprises ready for them. He hadn’t dealt with Crouch or Pettigrew for this year, he needed them to give Voldemort back his body so he could kill him.

“Harry?”

“Yeah Luna?” He flopped on the sun warmed sand and she lay beside him.

“Something’s coming.” She whispered and he wrapped an arm around her.

“I know.” He kissed the top of her hair. “I’ll keep you safe.” He promised and she smiled up at him.

The next evening, they cheered as Krum caught the snitch and then portkeyed home when Death Eaters were spotted only to read the next morning they had all been caught and arrested, stuck in a suddenly appearing swamp.

They returned to Hogwarts abuzz with excitement and sure enough the tournament was announced. Harry scanned the teachers table and spotted the world famous Auror at one end, fake eye watching him in return.

Harry grabbed the cup and felt the portkey activate, taking him to a familiar graveyard. He saw Pettigrew emerge and allowed himself to be tied to the grave. But it wasn’t his blood added to the cauldron, it was non-magical donation blood that he had placed in a bag and attached to his arm. The ritual would now be depending solely on Peter’s magic and that of the potion to create the body since neither the bones or blood held any. When Riddle emerged, it was obvious he was far weaker than
his original worlds had been. Harry freed himself with a thought and then attacked, knocking Peter out but destroying Riddle before he could catch his bearings. There would be no war this time.

He returned to the winners stand with peter in tow. “I found a rat Siri!” he called out to his godfather who pounced, Amelia beside him.

“Mr Potter, tell me what happened.” Dumbledore demanded. Nothing had gone right since the boy was ten. Tom had ignored all of his traps and tests, so had Harry. His popularity was on all-time low, even Minerva barely spoke to him anymore. He’d let the boy be forced to compete to finally draw Tom out and he returns with Pettigrew!

“The cup was a portkey, took me to a creepy graveyard. Pettigrew attempted some sort of potion but it blew up in his face so I got my wand back and stunned him.” Harry shrugged.

“Rest assured Mr Potter my department will be investigating.” Amelia promised as two Auror’s took Peter away. He was awarded the gold and everyone returned to the Castle to celebrate, Luna glued to Harry’s side even as Crouch’s polyjuice wore off, panicking some but he was quickly dealt with.

Harry grinned as he watched the vision in white walk towards him on her Father’s arm. His gaze drifted to the woman walking behind her and felt a flash of grief. It hadn’t been his fault, he’d taken Riddle out and left rounding the Death Eaters up to the Ministry, they’d failed. They’d stayed quiet and been ignored, until Harry’s gradation ceremony when they’d attacked. Ten students had died before anyone realised what was happening. Sixty others had been injured to varying degrees through the fight. Susan had been one of the injured, injured in a way that invalidated the marriage contract between them. He’d offered to marry her anyway but she had turned him down, knowing who he actually cared for. But he had insured she would be looked after, no matter what, Luna had agreed.

He took Luna’s hands as she passed her bouquet to Susan and they faced the Minister who smiled happily at them. Amelia cleared her throat and began to speak, very pleased to be officiating this wedding. It was the nicest first act as Minister she could think of. “I give to you, Lord Harry James Potter and Lady Luna Potter.” She finally called and the guests cheered happily as husband and wife walked back down the aisle together.

Harry had stripped all of Dumbledore’s magic from the Cloak years ago and now it hummed with familiar power. One Hallow down, well two actually. He pulled Dumbledore’s wand free and felt the same hum. The power-hungry idiot had attacked in Diagon Alley, just like he had that day with Daphne and their children, only this time Harry had been quicker. Dumbledore would never leave Azkaban alive.

“Dada!” A young voice called and he banished the two Hallows to his storage tattoos before scooping up a four-year-old Samantha and spinning her around, making her shriek in delight.

“Harry don’t drop her!” Luna warned from the doorway, one hand on her swollen belly. Next to her was Samantha’s favourite Aunt, Susan Bones, decked out in fine dress robes for the occasion.

“Yes dear.” He grinned at his wife of eight years. He settled Sammy on his hip and the four headed out to attend Sirius’ New Year’s Ball.

The End of this one.
One Hallow to go.
Harry looked over as Julian was approached by two other men, one not much younger than Julian himself.

“Here he is, Prince Kyrian of Thrace. If anything happens to him payment shall be taken from you. Nephew, do not dishonour our family.”

“Yes, Uncle Zetes.” Kyrian answered in annoyance before the older man left him in the camp. “You’re Julian of Macedon?” He looked over the other man, they were both tall and blonde but there was something more to Julian.

“I warn you know Prince Kyrian, your title will not give you safety in war. Chares!” he called and Harry moved to approach his Commander. It wasn’t often he changed his name to fit in, unless there was a reason but despite the fact they would have accepted the name Harry he had wanted something that fit the times. Chares was the ancient Greek version of the modern Greek name Haris, the equivalent to the English Harry. So, in a way he hadn’t changed his name.

“Sir?”

“Get Kyrian situated and make sure he knows where everything is.” Julian ordered and Chares led him away.

“Is he always so abrupt?” Kyrian asked once they had moved far enough away.

“The Roman Army arrived at a village before us yesterday. We only finished tending the dead this morning.” He explained and saw Kyrian’s eyes widen. “In here.” He held the tent flap up and Kyrian ducked inside. “You will be sharing a tent with me. Stow your gear and then I will introduce you around.”

Julian didn’t look up as he felt a familiar presence at his back. “Is his Highness settled?”

“He does have a name.” Chares answered as he took a goblet of wine.

“Mmm.”
“I put him in my tent.” He answered as Iason joined them. The Spartan was Julian’s oldest friend but Chares sensed there was something...off. Like Julian was keeping something dark from the man he called brother but Chares had never asked. He was Julian’s Calvary Commander and he hoped friend but they weren’t that close, not yet. He had only been serving under the man for one campaign season, this would be his second.

“Why do we have to take n some arrogant Thracian Prince?” Iason asked.

“He needs to learn war and Thrace is an ally.” Julian straightened from the map and the three men began discussing their strategy.

The army was trapped. And all because of an idiot young hoplite who had sold them out because he wanted to be a Roman centurion. Chares steadied his men, green eyes taking in the odds and not liking them. He looked ahead and to the right where Julian and Kyrian were at the front of the army. Despite Julian’s want to dislike him, the two had quickly become friends. The Roman army was above them in the hills and there was no way to outflank them or retreat. Not that they would, death always before dishonour, Julian believed it so much the words were engraved on his shield. Beside a fleeing hoplite was a dead hoplite.

As the Romans were riding down upon them, Julian took it all in and he knew the Romans would expect him to pull his forces together into a phalanx, making them easy prey for the Roman cavalry and archers above. “Disband! Aim your spears toward the horses, break apart the Roman cavalry lines.” Julian called and Chares quickly spread the order to his men, breaking the lines before urging his horse into a gallop towards the approaching Roman cavalry, a war cry on his lips. It was obvious very quickly that the Romans were shocked by their actions, ones no ‘civilised’ army would ever take. Then they crashed into the Romans and began slashing and stabbing away at the enemy.

It did not take long for the Romans to begin to turn, the arrow volleys had been halted for doing as much damage to their own side as the Macedonian army. This wasn’t the more organised fighting between two phalanxes, this was a free for all. Julian gave a mighty battle cry as he rode his horse, Mania, across the field, and up the hillock where the Roman commanders were beginning to retreat. They turned to attack him, but it did them no good. Enraged by betrayal Julian cut through them, not noticing when Chares appeared to watch his back. Finally, only one man was left living, lying on the ground and bleeding. Julian took the Roman Standard and ripped it to shreds to bind the man’s wounds instead of killing him. A lethal smile crossed his lips, making the survivor gulp in terror. “’Roma delenda est.” Julian hissed before the man was taken away. Rome must be destroyed.

Three days later the Roman general was sent home in chains to give Julian’s message to the Roman Senate.

Chares followed Julian and Kyrian into the villa and gladly handed his weapons and cloak over to a servant. With winter settling over the land there would be no more fighting. He had been surprised to be invited but had accepted the offer. It was a long, lonely trip back to Athens and his empty house.

A beautiful, stately woman emerged and Julian went to her, taking her in his arms to kiss and she smiled at him. “Kyrian, Chares, this is my wife, Penelope.”

“A pleasure My Lady.” Chares inclined his head to the woman who smiled in greeting.

“Father!” And then two children ran up and Julian knelt to hug them. Laughing at their excited chatter. Chares smiled and glanced at Kyrian, seeing a longing in the young Prince.
“You are young Kyrian, plenty of time to find a wife.” He whispered and Kyrian nodded. They were shown to their rooms and then bathed before dinner, all glad to be clean after the months of campaign.

Chares shook his head at Kyrian’s antics even as he accepted a cup of wine from a passing servant. The young Prince was certainly unique and probably mad. But only among the Asgardians could you find a better warrior. Julian was an amazing Commander but he kept back from the troops more than Kyrian. Harry had seen the way some of the men reacted to Julian and he wanted to hit them for it, despite everything he had done they still couldn’t see past his birth. Harry had felt the presence in the Temples, so he knew there were ‘gods’, which meant if people said Julian was Aphrodite’s son he most likely was and that would explain the way women, and some men, reacted to him. Harry could admit he was incredible to look at but the man was happily married. Kyrian was the charming, roguish Prince, happy to drink and fight with just about anyone.

Chares waived away the young women approaching. Why had he offered to host this party? He watched a woman approach Kyrian and shook his head at the young Prince’s reaction to her. She was pretty, but older than Kyrian and definitely not the sort the King would want him publicly associating with. The Greeks weren’t quite as open about sex as he’d heard the Romans were but monogamy was almost unheard of, divorce and remarriage common and no one saw anything wrong with two males, as long as they eventually married to have children.

The next morning, he was nursing a mild headache, but nothing compared to poor Kyrian. Julian was better off, not due to lack of drink, but due to his own mixed heritage. They both grinned at Kyrian’s predicament. “Have fun last night?” Chares teased and Kyrian groaned but then smiled. “Her name is Theone, I have never met a woman like her.”

Chares sighed, wonderful. The King was going to kill him for hosting this party with no thought to the fact he was an Athenian and not Thracian and therefore not one of his people. Then again, Kyrian had been entrusted to Julian’s care, so maybe he would be blamed.

Chares urged his horse on, calling to his men as he raced across the hard-packed ground. Where they mad? Two men could not hold back an army. This was the sort of recklessness he expected from Kyrian, even after six months, but Julian? The army had broken and the two men had remained behind to defend Themopoly. He pushed his horse faster, why had they split the infantry and cavalry so far apart? It had been a trap and they’d fallen for it. His men galloped close behind, all fearing they would find their Commander and the Prince dead or captured.

Julian panted in the heat, sword slick in his hand from blood and his shield discarded after a blow had cleaved it almost in half. They had been fighting alone for what felt like days but likely had only been an hour or so. When the army had run he had expected Kyrian to abandon him as well, but the young fool had just smiled at him, grabbed a sword for each hand, and said, "It's a beautiful day to die. What say we slay as many of these bastards as we can before we pay Charon?" He was a complete and utter lunatic, with more guts than brains. He turned slightly as the thunder of hooves reached his ears, assuming it was more Romans and he laughed as he saw a familiar pitch-black horse in the lead and on his back the lightly armoured form of Chares. They would win this. Sure enough, with the arrival of fresher troops on horseback the Roman infantry retreated.

“Are you two suicidal?” Chares snapped as he dismounted, removing his helmet.

“No praise for so many Romans slain my friend?” Kyrian asked and Chares slapped him upside his unprotected head since the Prince had managed to lose his helmet at some point.
“There was no choice but to hold the town Chares. I am just glad you got here when you did. The Roman Cavalry?” Julian clasped his friend’s shoulder.

“Will need many new recruits.” He grinned and Julian nodded.

“Then let us celebrate and praise Athena!” Kyrian called out and they entered the town to a hero’s welcome.

Kyrian and Julian had drunk each other under the table in celebration, much to Chares’ amusement. And in the morning, he had awakened them and dragged them out where they had received their promotions to General, each receiving the gold ring.

“You should have received one too Chares.”

“I am quite content as I am Kyrian. I have no want for titles.”

Chares!

Julian’s call had him running into the command tent where he took the offered message and read it. So Kyrian had gone through with it and married Theone and in return King Alkis had disinherited him. Kyrian had broken his engagement to the Macedonian Princess to marry a hetaira he had met at Chares’ party and now he felt very guilty. Kyrian was no longer a Prince but Alkis could not take his title of General from him since he was fighting for Macedon.

“Will you go to him? I dare not.” Julian admitted softly. He knew the reaction woman, and some men had to him and did not want to risk his friendship with Kyrian.

“Of course, if I can be spared?”

“They seem content to try and wait us out for now.”

Chares immediately packed his gear and mounted his horse, Sirius, and set off for Thrace and Kyrian’s estate there. It was a long ride but he eventually arrived and was welcomed into the villa where he found a happy yet melancholy Kyrian and his new bride. Theone was eight years his senior and an ex-prostitute to boot. That did not bother Chares, as long as it was a love match and it was obvious it was on Kyrian’s side. It was Theone he was unsure of, everyone else said she wanted his money and power, he would wait and see.

“Welcome my brother.” They clasped arms. “Couldn’t drag Julian away?”

“Someone has to keep the soldiers in line.” He grinned. “Congratulations on your marriage Kyrian, Theone.”

“Can you stay long?” Kyrian asked as they walked through the garden.

“A few days, the Roman’s appear content to wait us out for now. And I can’t say I am unhappy about the chance for a few good meals and baths.” He admitted and Kyrian laughed.

“Those you shall have.”

Chares mounted Sirius and rode to his place in the lines, looking for the Generals only to blink…. was that? … oh my. He bit back a snicker as he took in Julian’s helmet which now sported feathers instead of horsehair. There was only one reason he would have left it as is, Atolycus must have made
the switch. To not upset his son, he had worn them away with pride and not even Kyrian was laughing. Julian doted on Atolycus and Callista, not that he blamed him, they were beautiful children. He did protect them a lot, perhaps too much, they were the children of a Spartan and yet Atolycus was not allowed near weapons, the child’s sword Kyrian had given as a gift had been taken away.

The again Julian wasn’t the only one breaking the norms, Chares had yet to take a wife and people were beginning to talk. He didn’t want to marry at the moment but it looked like he would have no choice. No one remained unmarried in such societies, it was his duty to marry and have children. So next leave, he would return to Athens and take a bride.

Harry looked around the new home he had bought, one in which a new bride could be happy. Lavish gardens, slaves and large well decorated rooms showed off his wealth, gained through battle. He had made it clear he was seeking a wife and two families had approached him. There was only one choice though, he was not marrying a sixteen-year-old girl. He had sent his replies the day before, he would be marrying a nineteen-year-old named Aspasia. Since he was believed to be twenty-four that wasn’t a bad age gap. He looked at the clothing that had been prepared for the next day a fine white linen Chiton with gold fasteners. Over that he would wear a bright blue Chlamys, fastened at his right shoulder by a brooch in the shape of Athena’s shield since he was a warrior. He prayed and sacrificed to her just like his men, he’d been to enough worlds to know that sometimes the ‘gods’ were real and he didn’t want them after him for some slight, who knew what they could do to him before Death or Fate may interfere? To finish the outfit were a pair of soft sandals, rather than the boots he wore on campaign.

“Nervous?” he looked up to find Julian in the doorway.

“No.”

“Tomorrow you will be married Chares, yet you do not look excited.”

“Because I am not. I come back to Athens so rarely, what sort of life is that for a wife? You and Kyrian knew your wives beforehand, I am marrying a stranger.” He shook his head and then walked out of the room with Julian to find Kyrian waiting, already reclining at the table. They joined him there for the evening meal. His friends plied him with alcohol and he let them, it wasn’t like it affected him anymore.

In the morning, he dressed in the clothes and laughed as Kyrian squinted in the light. He received word from his father-in-law to be that Aspasia had followed the traditions and sacrificed her childhood toys to Artemis before bathing in perfumed water and swearing fealty to Demeter. He stood in the wedding chariot, Julian and Kyrian with him, and they set off for his brides’ home. The other two men dismounted and three people emerged from the house, one veiled. He offered her his hand and she stepped up into the chariot which then headed for his house. They remained silent during the ride and he helped her down as they were showered with dates, figs, nuts and small coins by Kyrian and Julian since Chares had no living family to do so. They then stood before a priest and listened as he recited verses on the wonders and duties of marriage before he led her into the bedroom.

The next day they emerged and the wedding feast began. Chares smiled as he watched her showered in gifts, to be held in trust in case he died before her, a likely event since he was a warrior. What no one knew was thanks to some magic she was pregnant with a son, to ensure his belongings would remain with her for their child. He had also ensured it would be an easy pregnancy and safe birth. He said nothing when her gaze wandered to Julian, he knew the other man would never stray from his
own wife and it wasn’t like he would begrudge Aspasia a lover considering he was gone, sometimes for years.

Julian walked in from the stables, happy to be home even for only a few days, and froze as he saw Penelope and Iason in the atrium, kissing. Stunned, he stopped mid-stride as a wave of trepidation washed over him while he watched the heated way they embraced.

Until Iason looked up and saw him in the doorway. The instant their eyes met, Iason curled his lip. "You worthless thief! Priapus told me of your treachery. How could you?"

Her face contorted by hatred, Penelope rushed at Julian, then slapped him. "You filthy bastard, I could kill you for what you've done."

"And I will kill you for it." Iason unsheathed his sword.

Julian tried to push Penelope out of the way, but she refused.

"Dear gods, I bore your children," she said, trying to claw his face.

Julian held her wrists. "Penelope, I-"

"Don't you touch me," she snarled, wringing her arms from his grasp. "It makes my flesh crawl. Do you honestly think any decent woman would ever want you in the light of day? You are vile. Repulsive." She shoved him toward Iason. "Cut his heart out. I want to bathe in his blood until I can no longer smell his touch on me."

Iason swung his sword. Julian jumped back, out of the blade's arc. Instinctively, he reached for his own sword, but stopped. The last thing he wanted was to draw Iason's blood. "I don't want to fight you."

"Don't you? You violated my woman and sired children on her that should have been mine! I welcomed you into my home. I gave you a bed when no one else would have you near them, and this is how you repay me?"

Julian stared in disbelief. "Repaid you! Have you any idea the number of times I've saved your life in battle? How many beatings did I take for you? Can you even count them all? And yet you dared mock me." He snapped, all the anger and hurt over Iason's words that day bubbling up.

Iason laughed cruelly. "Everyone except Kyrian and Chares mocks you, you fool. In fact, they defend you so strongly that it makes me wonder what the three of you do when you wander off alone."

Squelching the rage that would leave him vulnerable to Iason's blade, Julian barely ducked the next attack. "Stop it, Iason. Don't make me do something we'll both regret."

"The only thing I regret is that I let a thief into my house," Iason bellowed with rage, and swung again.

Julian tried to duck, but Penelope ran at him from behind and pushed him forward. Iason's blade caught him across the ribs. Hissing in pain, Julian drew his own sword, then deflected a blow that would have left him headless had it made contact. Iason tried to engage him, but Julian did nothing more than defend himself while trying to keep Penelope out of the thick of the fight. "Don't do this, Iason. You know your skills are inferior to mine."
Iason pressed his attack. "There's no way I'm going to let you keep her."

The next few seconds had happened so fast, and yet Julian saw them unfold in sharp, crisp clarity. Penelope caught Julian's free arm at the same time Iason swung his sword. The blade narrowly missed Julian as she slung him about. Unbalanced, Julian tried to extract himself from her, but with Penelope in the way, he staggered forward at the same time Iason did. The instant they collided, he felt his sword sink deep into Iason's body. "No!" Julian shouted, drawing his sword out of Iason's stomach as Penelope let out a scream of pure, tormented anguish. Slowly, Iason fell to the ground. Dropping to his knees, Julian tossed his sword aside, and pulled his friend into his arms. "Dear gods, what have you done?"

Coughing up blood, Iason stared accusingly at him. "I did nothing. It was you who betrayed me. We were brothers and you stole my heart." Iason swallowed painfully as his pale eyes bored into Julian. "You never had anything in your life you didn't steal from someone else."

Julian trembled as guilt and agony washed over him. He'd never meant for this to happen. Never meant to hurt anyone, least of all Iason. He'd only wanted someone to love him. Only wanted a home where he was welcome. But Iason was right. It was all his fault. All of it.

Penelope's screams echoed in his ears. She grabbed him by the hair and pulled it as hard as she could. Her eyes wild, she wrenched the dagger from his waist. "I want you dead! Dead!" She plunged the dagger into his arm, then pulled back to strike again. Julian grabbed her hand. With a feral shriek, she wrenched herself away. "No," she said, her eyes crazed. "I want you to suffer. You took from me what I loved most. Now I will take the same from you." She ran from the room.

Overwhelmed by his grief and anger, Julian couldn't move as he watched the life drain out of Iason's body. Until Penelope's words sank into his dazed mind. "No!" he roared, rising to his feet. "Don't!" He reached the door to her chambers in time to hear the children screaming. His heart shredded, he tried to open it, but she'd bolted it from the inside.

Chares pushed Sirius faster and faster. He had a pit in his stomach and so he was going after Julian. There had been a surprise break in the war and so Julian had returned home, Kyrian and Chares left in charge of the army. He had noticed Iason was gone and his bad feeling had begun. He had told Kyrian who had urged him to leave since Chares' feelings had saved them before. He dismounted before the horse had even come to a full stop and rushed into the house to find Iason dead on the floor. "Julian!" He shouted, searching the house until he came to the bed chamber to find Julian kneeling over his wife Penelope as she bled. He dropped to his knees beside him and pulled out the healing kit he carried. "Julian?" He called and tormented blue eyes met his.

"I sent for a physician." He whispered in agony.

"What happened? Where are the children?" He asked and Julian looked behind him. Chares glanced over to see too small bodies covered in blood.

"She killed them..." he shuddered.

Chares worked feverishly but within minutes she was dead. "I am so sorry."

"It's my fault, I should have known not to trust Eros."

"Julian?"

"I should have let Penelope marry Iason.... I just wanted..."
Chares stood and gently moved Julian away from the gruesome room and into another, gently removing the other man’s armour and then his own before pulling him onto a bed and curling around the taller man, offering comfort. Julian was Spartan, they did not cry, but Chares felt a few hot tears soak into his chiton. “Grieve my friend, I am here.” He whispered, soothing the younger man.

“I’ll kill him.” Julian whispered hours later.

“Who?”

“Priapus.” Julian snarled and got up to redone his armour. “Take…. take care of them.” He pleaded and then ran from the room even as Chares got up and ran after him.

He swore when he realised Julian had taken the only ready horse, Sirius. He went back into the house to find frightened slaves who he soothed and together they prepared the three bodies for burial while Chares sent word to Iason’s family before having the body sent on for them to bury. Chares stared at the children’s bodies sadly and then gently placed them in their coffins. “May Death be kind to you.” He whispered, eyes glowing briefly. He then out his armour on and took Mania from the stables, going after Julian. He tracked him to a Temple and entered, feeling anger and evil in the air. He found a young woman, one of Priapus’ virgins and he knew something had gone very wrong.

“Where is Julian of Macedon?” he demanded calmly.

“Hubris you helped lead him into or else why would you be in Aphrodite’s Temple?” he snapped. “Go.” He commanded and she left but not before she was silently cursed for her part in this. Harry left the Temple and returned to Julian’s home to find Kyrian there.

“What has happened?” The disowned Prince demanded.

“Iason, Penelope and the children are dead.”

“Romans?”

“No. Julian said Penelope killed the children before committing suicide. The physician didn’t arrive in time and neither did I. I don’t know for sure but I believe Julian may have killed Iason, there was blood on his sword.”

“Where is Julian?”

“I tracked him as far as Aphrodite’s Temple. There was one of Priapus’ virgins there…she said Priapus had cursed him for eternity for hubris.”

“No…”

“Kyrian I searched, there is no sign of him anywhere. I had Iason’s body sent home and told them he died defending Julian’s family from Romans. That is what everyone must believe, Scipio sent soldiers to kill him off the battle field. For the sake of the war Julian and his family will become martyrs for the cause. Understand?” He kept eye contact with the younger man who eventually nodded. “Come, we must get back to the army and send word off his death.” He gently pulled Kyrian from the house, wishing he had never let Julian out of his sight.

Chares knelt before King Andriscus of Macedon and slowly took the oath and accepted the golden ring, one that matched Julian’s. Except Julian was gone now and he was taking his place as General. He was the obvious choice to replace Julian, he had been his second and also worked well with
Kyrian. He just wished he knew more about this period in history to have any idea what he should try to do. All he knew was Macedon was a Roman province which meant the war was lost in his world. Rome had brought a lot of good things to the world but it had also brought many cruelties and perhaps he could help change things for the better. Andriscus would have to go if that was the case, the man was not a good King, but Chares would serve for now.

Chares smiled at the sight of his wife and she smiled shyly back, one hand resting on her rounded stomach. He moved quickly to her side and gently touched her, smiling as he felt the child kick.

“You should have sent word, I would have come sooner.”

“You have a war to win General.”

“Are you happy Aspasia?” He asked as a servant came forward to take his cloak and sword.

“I have everything I need.”

“But not everything you want?” he helped her sit and then knelt at her feet. “I am sorry.” He brushed a loose curl back from her face. “I think you would have been happier with a husband who was not a soldier, one you loved.”

“Chares….” She didn’t know what to say to that. Yes, she dreamed of a house full of laughter, children and love, but it was just a dream. Love in marriage was rare and she had always known she would marry for her family.

“I will not deny you should you seek comfort while I am away and if I should die I hope you find a loving husband.”

“Is it true?” She took a deep breath, “They say Scipio had Julian of Macedon and his family slaughtered.” Her hands shook slightly and he gently gripped them.

“It is true, I found them. You are safe here Aspasia, he will not dare attack Athens especially when I am so rarely here. But if you do not feel comfortable then you should stay with your family, at least until the baby comes.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, have you eaten?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I will call for a meal and will join you after I have bathed.” He kissed her cheek and left her to rest while he washed the dust of the road from his body.

Chares dodged a blow and turned, his sword disembowelling his opponent. He glanced around and saw Kyrian nearby, fighting hard so he made his way to him. They fought back to back, just like Kyrian and Julian used to, forcing the Roman Army back until they were forced to retreat from the onslaught. Julian’s death had not broken the Macedonian spirit, if anything they were more inspired to destroy Rome.

Chares paced the room with Kyrian watching him in amusement, earning him a glare. “This could be you someday soon.” Chares warned and Kyrian sighed.
“I hope so.” He admitted softly and Chares put a hand on his shoulder.

“The one may be older than you, but she is not past childbearing age, not yet.” They both winced at the cry of pain from the bedchamber. Chares was just grateful he had been home when her time had come. She had laboured now for six hours and he wished he was allowed inside where he could help her. but then he grinned as they heard the cry of a baby and soon one of the midwives emerged and curtsied.

“You have a son General.”

Kyrian laughed and slapped his back even as Chares quickly went into the room to find Aspasia, pale and tired, but smiling happily at the child in her arms.

"You were brilliant," Dimitri, Kyrian’s second in command, slapped him on the back and Kyrian grinned. He had a fresh, open wound down the left side of his face, but his old grey eyes sparkled. Though his armour was covered in blood, he appeared remarkably unhurt. "It's a pity Julian wasn't here to see this victory. He would have been proud of you today, General. I can guarantee all of Rome is weeping this night."

Kyrian's face was smudged with sweat, dirt, and blood, his long, leather-bound hair tousled, three long, thin braids falling from his left temple down to the middle of his chest. His dark green eyes shimmered from victory and he had the carriage of a man who had no equal. Of a man destined for greatness. Kyrian raised the goblet of wine in his hand and addressed the men in his tent. "I declare this victory for Julian of Macedon. Wherever he is, I know he's laughing at Scipio's defeat." A loud cheer roared from the men. Kyrian took a drink, then looked to the older soldier beside him. "It's a pity Valerius wasn't there with Scipio. I was looking forward to facing him, too. But no matter." He lifted his voice so that all the men gathered inside could hear him. "Tomorrow, we march on Rome herself and we'll bring that bitch to her knees." The men shouted their agreement.

"On the battlefield, with a sword in your hand, you are invincible," the old man said in an awed tone. "By this time tomorrow, you will be ruler of the known world."

Kyrian shook his head. "Andriscus will be ruler of Rome tomorrow. Not I."

The old man looked aghast, then he leaned close to Kyrian's neck and lowered his tone so that only Kyrian could hear him. "There are those who think he is weak. Those who would support you if you decided-"

"No, Dimitri," Kyrian said, cutting him off gently. "I appreciate the thought, but I swore to lead his army for Andriscus and that I shall do until the day I die. I will never betray him."

The look on Dimitri's face showed his confusion. He wasn't sure if he should applaud Kyrian's loyalty or curse it. "You're the only man I know who would turn down the opportunity to rule the world."

Kyrian laughed. "Kingdoms and empires don't bring happiness, Dimitri. Only the love of a good woman and children do that."

"And conquest," Dimitri added.

Kyrian smiled even wider. "Tonight, at least, that appears to be true."

"Commander?"
Kyrian turned toward the voice behind him to see a man cutting a swath through the men in the tent. The soldier held out a sealed letter. "A courier brought this. It was discovered on a Roman messenger earlier today."

Taking it from him, Kyrian saw the seal of Valerius the Younger on the outside. Curious, he opened the vellum and read it, and with every word, his panic swelled. His heart beat faster. "My horse!" he shouted, running out of the crowded tent. "Saddle my horse."

"Commander?"

He turned to his second in command who had followed him outside. A worried frown creased his tired old brow. "Dimitri, you're in charge until I return. Pull the army back into the hills, away from the Romans until you hear from me. If I'm not back in a week, then lead the men to Punjara and combine forces with Chares."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." A youth came forward with his black stallion. His heart hammering, Kyrian swung himself up into the saddle.

"Where are you off to?" Dimitri asked.

"Valerius is riding to my villa. I'm going to head him off."

Dimitri grabbed the horse's bridle, horrified. "You can't go alone to meet him."

"I have no time to wait for you. My wife is in danger. I will not hesitate." Kyrian wheeled his horse about and spurred it through the camp, needing to protect his wife at any cost. The days ran together as he rode furiously, changing horses every time he happened upon a village. He never stopped to rest or eat. He was like a demon possessed, with only one thought on his mind. Theone. Theone. Theone.

He reached his home in the middle of the night. Weary and terrified, he leapt from his horse and pounded on the door for admittance. An old man pulled open the heavy wooden door. "Your Highness?" he asked in disbelief.

Kyrian pushed past the man, his gaze sweeping his grand foyer looking for signs of hostility. Nothing out of the ordinary met his fearful gaze. Still, he wasn't comforted. Not yet. He would not be calm until he saw her with his own eyes. "Where's my wife?"

The old servant looked confused by the question. His mouth opened and closed like a fish. Finally, he spoke. "In her bed, Highness."

Starving, exhausted, and weak, Kyrian ran down the long, columned corridor toward the back of the house. "Theone?" he called as he ran, desperate to see her.

A door at the end of the hallway opened. An incredibly beautiful and petite blond woman came to stand in the hallway. She closed the door behind her and swept a chiding glance over Kyrian's dishevelment. She was alive and unharmed. And she was the most beautiful vision his adoring eyes had ever beheld. Her long, golden hair was tousled, her cheeks bright pink. She clutched a very thin white sheet over her nude body. "Kyrian?" she asked sharply.

Relief rushed through him and tears filled his eyes. She was alive! Thank the gods. Blinking the tears away, he swept her up into his arms and held her close. Never had he been more grateful to the Fates
"Kyrian," she snapped, bristling under his touch. "Put me down. You smell so bad I can barely breathe. Have you any idea how late it is?"

"Aye," he said through the tight knot in his throat as joy pounded through him. He set her down and cupped her face in his hands. He was so tired he could hardly stand or think, but he wouldn't sleep. Not until she was safe. "And I must get you away from here. Get dressed."

She frowned. "Take me where?"

"To Thrace."

"Thrace?" she asked incredulously. "Are you mad?"

"No. I've received word that the Romans are headed this way. I'm taking you to my father for safekeeping. Now hurry!"

She didn't. Instead, her face darkened dangerously as fury snapped in her grey eyes. "Your father? You've not spoken to him in seven years. What makes you think he'd shelter me?"

"My father will forgive me if I ask it."

"Your father will throw us both out. He made his proclamation quite public. I've been embarrassed enough in my lifetime, I don't need to hear him call me a whore to my face. Besides, I don't want to leave my villa. I like it here."

Kyrian disregarded her words. "My father loves me and will do as I ask. You'll see. Now dress."

She looked past his shoulder. "Polydus?" she said to the old servant who had been waiting all that time behind Kyrian. "Have a bath prepared for your master and bring him food and wine."

"Theone-"

She stopped Kyrian's words by placing a hand on his lips. "Hush, my lord. It's the middle of the night. You look dreadful and you smell even worse. Let us clean you, feed you, and put you to sleep, and then in the morning, we can discuss what needs be done to see me safe."

"But the Romans-"

"Did you see any on your way here?"

"Well... no."

"Then there can't be any danger at the moment, now can there?"

Too weary to argue, he conceded. "I suppose not."

"Then come." She took him by the hand and led him to a small room off the main corridor. She helped him out of his armour and into the gilded tub within even as the servants quickly filled it with hot water, ensuring the fire was well fed and the candles were lit. Kyrian leant back in the tub while Theone bathed him.

He captured her hand in his and held it to his whiskered cheek. "You've no idea how much I've missed you. Your touch soothes me like nothing else."
She smiled a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes and handed him a cup of wine. "I heard you took Thessaly from the Romans."

"Aye. Valerius was incensed. I can't wait until I march on Rome. I will have her yet, mark my words." Kyrian drained the cup, then set it aside. His body burning, he reached for his wife and pulled her into the tub with him.

"Kyrian!" she gasped.

"Shh," he breathed against her lips. "I would have a kiss from you." She acquiesced, but there was a coldness to her. He could feel it. "What is wrong, my love?" he asked, pulling back. "You seem so distant tonight. As though your thoughts are somewhere else."

Her face softened as she straddled his waist and took him into her body. "I am not distant. I am tired."

He smiled, then groaned as she moved against him. "Forgive me for waking you. I just wanted to know you were safe. I couldn't live if anything ever happened to you." He cupped her face in his hands and stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. "I will always love you, Theone. You are the very air I breathe." Kissing her lips, he savoured her taste. She seemed to relax some in his arms as she slowly rode him. All the while her gaze watched him as if she were waiting for something... As soon as he climaxed, Kyrian leaned back in the tub to watch her. He was as weak as a newborn whelp. But he was home, and his wife was his strength. His haven. No sooner had that thought crossed his mind than a strange buzzing started in his head. A wave of dizziness swept through him. And in an instant, he knew what she'd done. "Poison?" he gasped.

Theone scrambled off him and left the tub. Hurriedly, she wrapped a towel around herself. "No."

He tried to get out of the tub, but another wave of dizziness gripped him. He fell back into the water. He couldn't breathe as thoughts wandered randomly through his drugged mind. But foremost in his mind was the very treachery of the woman he loved. A woman he had given the world to. "Theone, what have you done to me?"

She lifted her chin as she watched him coldly. "I'm doing what you can't. I'm protecting myself. Rome is the future, Kyrian. Not Andriscus. He will never live to ascend to the Macedonian throne." If she said anything more he did not hear as darkness fell.

When the light returned, Kyrian found himself lying naked against a cold stone slab that was tilted at a forty-five-degree angle. His arms and legs had been secured with ropes to winches. He glanced around the medium-sized room to an old table set in one corner, the top of which was covered with all manner of torture instruments. A tall, black-haired man stood looking over the table's offerings, his back to Kyrian. Kyrian felt so alone and betrayed. So completely defenceless. It was a terrifying sensation for someone who had never known vulnerability. The room was stifling hot from the fire in the hearth and early summer. The windows were open and a gentle Mediterranean breeze blew across the room, carrying the scent of sea, flowers, and olives. Kyrian heard laughter from outside and his stomach knotted. It was too beautiful a day to die...

The man at the table cocked his head. Suddenly, he turned and pinned a menacing glare on Kyrian. Though the man was incredibly handsome, there was a cold sneer on his face that robbed him of his appeal. The man had the cruel, glittering eyes of a viper. They were soulless, calculating, and completely lacking in compassion. "Kyrian of Thrace." He smiled evilly. "At last we meet. Though I'm sure this isn't quite what you had planned, is it?"

"Valerius," he snarled as soon as he saw the banner on the wall over the man's shoulder. He would
know that eagle emblem anywhere.

The Roman's smile widened as he crossed the room. There was no respect on Valerius' face. Only smug satisfaction. Without another word, Valerius turned the winch that held the ropes to Kyrian's limbs. The ropes tightened, pulling at Kyrian's muscles, tearing ligaments and popping his bones from their joints. Kyrian clenched his eyes tight and ground his teeth at the agony that whipped through his body. Tightening the winch even more, Valerius laughed. "Good, you're strong. I hate to torture little boys who whimper and cry right away. It takes all the fun out of it."

Kyrian said nothing.

After locking the winch into place to keep Kyrian's body painfully stretched, Valerius walked over to the table where a number of weapons and tools rested. He hefted a heavy iron mallet in his hands. "Since you are new to my company, allow me to educate you on how Rome deals with her enemies..." He sauntered back to Kyrian, offering Kyrian a goading smirk. "First, we crush your knees. This way, I know you won't be tempted to leave my hospitality until I'm ready for you to." Valerius brought the mallet down over Kyrian's left knee, shattering the joint instantly. Unimaginable pain ripped through him. Biting his lip to keep from crying out, Kyrian gripped the ropes binding his hands. He could feel the warm blood from his cut wrists trail down his forearms. Once he'd shattered Kyrian's other knee, Valerius picked up a hot iron from the hearth and brought it over to him. "I only have one question. Where is your army?"

Kyrian narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

Valerius laid the hot iron against his inner thigh. Hour after hour, day after day with resolute vigour he remained silent no matter the torture or questions. He would not betray his men or Chares to this monster of Rome.

Kyrian gasped and choked as water was thrown into his face.

"Don't think you can pass out to escape me. Nor starve until I will it." Valerius grabbed Kyrian's hair and pulled his head viciously, then poured broth down his throat. Kyrian hissed as the salty liquid stung the cuts on his face, his lips. He choked on the broth, but still Valerius poured it into his mouth. "Drink, damn you," Valerius snarled. "Drink!"

Kyrian passed out again, and again the cold water brought him back awake.

Days and nights blended together as time went by while Valerius assaulted him, again and again. Always asking the same question. "Where is your army?" or "Where is General Chares?"

Kyrian never uttered a single word. Never once cried out. He kept his jaw so tightly locked that Valerius had to pry it open to force-feed him.

"Commander Valerius," a soldier said as he came into the room while Valerius again turned the winches against Kyrian's arms and legs. "Forgive my interruption, my lord, but there's an emissary from Thrace wanting an audience with you."

Kyrian's heart stopped beating. For the first time in weeks, a sliver of hope swept through him, overwhelming him with joy. His father ...

Valerius arched a curious brow at his underling. "This should be quite entertaining. By all means, show him in." The soldier vanished.

A few minutes later, an older, well-dressed man entered the room with two Roman soldiers trailing him. The man looked so much like Kyrian that for a moment, Kyrian thought it was his father. As
soon as the man was close enough to recognize Kyrian's bloody, misshapen form, he gasped.

His dignity forgotten, his uncle ran to his side. "Kyrian?" he breathed in disbelief, gingerly touching Kyrian's broken arm. His blue eyes were filled with pain and concern. "Dear Zeus, what have they done to you?"

Kyrian's felt tremendous shame and grief at seeing his uncle's sorrow. He wanted to relieve the guilt that swam in Zetes's eyes and to beg him to ask his father to forgive him. When Kyrian opened his mouth to speak, all that came out was a hoarse croak. He hurt so badly that his unclenched teeth chattered from the weight of his physical suffering. Kyrian's throat was so sore and parched that he choked, but by sheer force of will, he finally spoke through trembling lips. "Uncle."

"Can it be, he can actually speak?" Valerius asked, joining them. "He's said nothing in four weeks. Nothing other than this..." Again, he laid a hot brand to Kyrian's thigh. Clenching his teeth, Kyrian jerked and hissed.

"Cease!" Zetes cried, pushing Valerius away from his nephew. He tenderly cupped Kyrian's bruised face in his hands. Tears fell down Zetes's cheeks as he tried to clean the blood away from Kyrian's swollen lips. He looked up at Valerius. "I have ten wagons of gold and jewels. His father promises even more if you release him. I have been authorized to surrender Thrace to you. And his sister, the Princess Althea, has offered herself to you as a slave. All you have to do is let me take him home."

No! Kyrian's inner scream could not be heard, the word was lodged in his burning throat.

"Perhaps. I'll let you take him home... After he's executed."

"No!" Zetes said. "He is a prince, and you-"

"He is no prince. Everyone knows he was disowned. His father was quite public with his decree."

"And he has recanted it," Zetes insisted. He looked back at Kyrian, his eyes kind and soothing. "He wanted me to tell you he didn't mean what he said to you. He was foolish and blind when he should have trusted and listened to you. Your father loves you, Kyrian. All he wants is for you to come home where he can welcome you and Theone with open arms. He begs you to forgive him."

Those last words burned through Kyrian more painfully than Valerius' iron brands. It wasn't his father who should apologize. His father wasn't the one who had been a fool. It was Kyrian who had been cruel to a man who had never done anything other than love him. The agony of it swept through him anew. Gods have mercy on them both, for his father had been right all along.

Zetes glanced to Valerius. "He will give you anything for his son's life. Anything!"

"Anything," Valerius repeated. "How very tempting, but how stupid would I have to be to release the one man who has come close to defeating us?" He glared at Zetes. "Never." Valerius took the dagger from his belt. Roughly, he grabbed the three long, thin commander's braids at Kyrian's temple and sawed them off. "Here," he said, handing them to Zetes. "Take those to his father and tell him that is all of his son he'll ever get from me."

"No!"

"Guards, see to it His Highness is taken away."

Kyrian watched as his uncle was seized and dragged from the room.

"Kyrian!"
Kyrian struggled against his restraints, but his body was so sore and broken that all he succeeded in doing was hurting himself more. He wanted to call Zetes back. He wanted to tell him how sorry he was for all he'd said to his parents. Don't let me die without their knowing.

"You can't do this!" Zetes screamed an instant before the doors slammed shut, cutting him off.

Valerius turned to his servant. "Fetch my mistress."

As soon as the servant was gone, he returned to Kyrian. He sighed as if greatly disappointed. "It appears our time together has ended. If your father is so desperate for your return, then it is only a matter of time before he marches against me. I certainly can't take a chance on him actually rescuing you, now can I? And if he rode I know your friend Chares would bring his army as well and that cannot be allowed to happen. First the great Julian of Macedon," Valerius sneered, "now Kyrian of Thrace and soon it will be Chares of Athens and with the three of you dead Macedon, Thrace and Greece will fall."

Kyrian closed his eyes and turned his head away from Valerius' triumphant sneer. In his mind, he saw his father on that last, fateful day as the two of them stood, toe to toe, in the centre of the throne room. Julian had dubbed that day the Clash of the Titans. For neither he nor his father had been willing to listen or to yield. He heard the words he'd said to his father. Words no son should ever utter to a parent. The agony of it was a hundred times more severe than anything Valerius had dealt him.

While he grieved over his actions, the doors of his torture chamber opened to admit Theone. She walked into the room with her head held high, like a queen holding court. She stopped next to Valerius and gave him a warm, inviting smile.

Kyrian stared at her as the weight of her betrayal coursed through him. Let this be a nightmare. Dear Zeus, please don't let this be real. It was more than his broken body and soul could take.

"You know, Kyrian," Valerius said as he wrapped his arms around Theone and nuzzled her neck. "I will commend you on your choice of wife. She is exceptional in bed, isn't she?"

It was the cruellest blow yet dealt him.

Theone met Kyrian's eyes without shame while Valerius circled behind her, cupped her breasts in his hands and kneaded them. There was no love on her face. No remorse. Nothing. She stared at him as if he were a stranger.

It cut him all the way to his battered soul.

"Come, Theone, let us show your husband what he interrupted the night he came home."

Valerius removed the clip from her himation and let it fall to the floor. He pulled her naked body into his arms and kissed her.

Kyrian's heart splintered at the sight of Theone removing Valerius' armour. The sight of her eagerly welcoming his touch. Unable to bear it, he closed his eyes and turned away. But still he heard them. He heard his wife begging for Valerius to fill her. Heard her moaning in pleasure. And when she climaxed in the arms of his enemy, he felt his heart wither and die. At last Valerius had broken him. He let the pain take him then. Let it wash over him until he felt nothing at all. Nothing but utter and complete desolation.

When they were finished, Valerius sauntered over to him. He wiped his wet hand across Kyrian's face and Kyrian cursed the scent he knew so well. "Have you any idea how much I love the smell of
"your wife on my body?"

Kyrian spat in his face.

Enraged, Valerius pulled a dagger from the table and embedded it savagely in Kyrian's stomach. Kyrian gasped as the cold metal invaded his body. Maliciously, Valerius rotated his wrist and twisted the knife, pushing it in deeper.

"Tell me, Theone," Valerius said, his eyes never leaving Kyrian's as he pulled the dagger out and left him weak and panting. "How should I kill your husband? Should I behead him as befitting a prince?"

"No," she said as she wrapped her himation around her and secured it with the brooch Kyrian had given her on their wedding day. "He is the spirit and backbone of the Macedonian rebels. You can't afford to make him a martyr. Were I you, I'd crucify him like a common thief. Let him stand as an example to Rome's enemies to know that there is no honour or glory in assaulting Rome."

Valerius smiled cruelly, then turned to face her. "I like the way your mind works." He kissed her lightly on the cheek, then dressed himself.

"Say good-bye to your husband while I make arrangements." He left them alone.

Kyrian struggled to breathe through his pain as Theone finally approached him. His body trembled from rage and agony. Still, her gaze was blank. Cold. "Why?" he asked.

"Why?" she repeated. "Why do you think? I was the nameless daughter of a prostitute. I grew up hungry and poor with no choice except to let any man use me as he saw fit."

"I sheltered you," he rasped through his split, bloody lips. "Loved you. I kept you safe from anyone who would have hurt you."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I am not about to let you war against Rome while I sit at home in fear of them tearing down my walls to get to you. I don't want to end up like Julian's wife, executed in my own bed, or sold into slavery. I've come too far to go back to scrounging for scraps, selling my body. I want my security and I will do anything to protect it."

She couldn't have hurt him any worse. She had never seen him as anything other than a rich pocket. No, he couldn't believe that. He refused to believe it. There had to have been a moment, just one, when she had cared for him. Surely, he couldn't have been that blind? "Did you ever love me?"

She shrugged. "If it's any consolation, you were the best lover I've ever known. I will certainly miss you in my bed."

Kyrian let out an agonized bellow of rage.

"Damn, Theone," Valerius said as he returned. "I should have let you torture him. I never once got that much pain out of him."

The soldiers came in with a large cross. They laid it on the floor next to the table, then cut Kyrian down. His limbs broken, he sank to the floor. Roughly, they picked him up and dropped him over the wood. Kyrian continued to watch Theone. Not even pity graced her brow. She merely looked on in morbid fascination. Again, he saw his parents' stricken faces when he had left his home the day of the wedding. Heard Zetes's offer to Valerius. Kyrian had betrayed them all for her. And now she couldn't even pretend to be sorry for what she'd done to him. What she had cost his family and his country. He was Greece's second last hope to stave off Roman tyranny. He was the only thing that
stood between their people and slavery, Chares would stand alone now, how long until he too fell? With one act of treachery, she had laid waste to all their dreams of freedom. And all because he was a stupid fool...

His father's final, parting words rang in his ears. She doesn't love you, Kyrian. No woman will ever be able to love you and you're a damned fool if you ever believe otherwise!

A soldier placed a metal spike over his wrist and held it there as another drew back a heavy iron hammer.

The Roman guard brought it down on the spike...

“Sir!”

“What is it?” Valerius demanded.

“We’re under attack!” the soldier answered and Valerius looked out the window to see cavalry attacking. He should have taken Kyrian all the way to Rome, no one would dare attack there. But he had been too eager to see him dead, leaving himself vulnerable.

Barely conscious from the agony and blood loss Kyrian still knew who it had to be. “Cha....res...” he had come for him, he hadn’t been abandoned.

Chares slaughtered any Roman soldier who got in his way, Dimitri at his back as they fought their way into the villa where Zetes said Kyrian was being held and tortured. From his description, they were going to have to carry him out but neither cared.

Kyrian choked on blood, trying to breath as the cross was hoisted up in the back gardens of the Villa, his body screaming in agony at the torture. He could hear the fighting now, see fires, but he knew, it was too late for him. He looked down at Theone and just wished he could tell his Father he was sorry…. could beg Chares to leave before he died too…. his soul cried out in agony, wanting vengeance for all the betrayals.

Valerius stood his ground as the two soldiers approached and he caught the golden gleam on the dark-haired ones’ hand, this must be General Chares. “You’re too late General.”

“Then I will have vengeance.” Chares growled and attacked.

Kyrian watched as Chares attacked Valerius, worried for his friend but staying hidden. Artemis had been clear, he could take his revenge but he must not be seen by anyone who would live. A group of soldiers broke into the garden and Dimitri had to abandon Chares to keep them back. He had never truly realised just how good Chares was. And he grinned as Chares’ sword slid into Valerius’ chest, killing the Roman General in one stroke. Chares moved to where the cross was and frowned when he found no body. He could not stay, he had only one day until he would never see daylight again. It was time to deal with Theone.

Julian allowed Grace to lead him around the various tanks as she read the foreign writing to him that explained the different breeds and habitats. Gods, how he loved the sound of her voice when she read to him. There was something so comforting in it. He draped an arm over her shoulders as they walked. She placed her arm around his waist, curling one finger in his belt loop. The gesture warmed
him. And it was then he realized he lived for the feel of her body close to his. And he'd like it a whole lot more if they were both naked. When she smiled up at him, he felt his heart pound out of control. What was it about this woman that touched him in a way no one ever had before? But then he knew. She was the first woman to see him. Not his looks, not his body, not his warrior's prowess. She saw inside his soul. He'd never known such a person existed. Grace treated him like a friend. And she was genuinely interested in helping him. Or at least she seemed to be.

It's part of her job.

Or was it?

Could a woman as wonderful and kind as she ever really care for a man like him? She stopped at another plaque. Julian stood directly behind her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She idly stroked his forearms as she read. His body on fire for her, he leaned his chin down to rest on top of her head as he listened to her voice and watched the fish swim. The smell of her skin invaded his head as he longed to be back at her house where he could strip her clothes from her. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman as badly as he wanted Grace. In fact, he didn't think he'd ever wanted one the way he did her. He wanted to lose himself inside her. To feel her nails scoring his back as he made her scream in release. May the Fates have mercy on him, but she was under his skin. That's what truly scared him. For she held a place inside him that could hurt him in a way he'd never been hurt before. She, alone, could finally break him.

It was almost one before they left the aquarium. Grace cringed as soon as they went back outside where the heat assailed her. On days like this, she wondered how anyone had survived before air-conditioning. She looked over at Julian and smiled. Now he was someone who could finally answer that question for her. "Tell me, what did you guys do to survive days that were this hot?"

He arched an arrogant brow. "This isn't hot. If you want hot, try marching an army across a desert, wearing armour with only half a bladder of water to sustain you."

She cringed for him. "Now that sounds hot." He didn't respond. Grace glanced over to the square, which was packed with people. "Do you want to see Selena while we're out and about? She should be at her stand. Saturday is usually a big day for her."

"I'm just following you."

Taking his hand, Grace led him down the street, over to Jackson Square. Sure enough, Selena was at her stand with a client. Grace started to walk past without interrupting them, when Selena waved her over.

"Hey, Gracie, you remember Ben? Or rather Dr. Lewis from school?"

Grace hesitated as she recognized the portly man in his mid-forties. Remember him? He'd given her a D, and brought down her entire average. Not to mention he had an ego the size of Alaska, and loved to embarrass students in class. In fact, she remembered one poor girl crying when he handed out his sadistic final exam to them. The man had actually laughed at the girl's reaction. "Hi," Grace said, trying not to let her distaste show. She supposed the man couldn't help being obnoxious. A Harvard Ph.D., he thought the world revolved around him.

"Miss Alexander," he said in that same snide tone she remembered and loathed so much.

"Actually, it's Dr. Alexander," she corrected, delighting in the way he widened his eyes in surprise.

"Forgive me," he said in a voice that was anything other than apologetic.
"Ben and I were talking about ancient Greece," Selena said, casting a devilish grin at Julian. "I'm of the opinion that Aphrodite was the daughter of Uranus."

Ben rolled his eyes. "I keep telling you that the accepted opinion is that she was born of Zeus and Dione. When are you going to give in, and join the rest of us?"

Selena ignored him. "So tell me, Julian, who's right?"

"You are," he said to Selena.

Ben raked a haughty look over Julian. Grace knew he saw nothing in Julian, except a very handsome man, who most likely knew only beer commercials and cars. "Young man, have you ever read Homer? Do you even know who he is?"

Grace stifled her laughter at the question. She couldn't wait to hear Julian's response.

Julian laughed out loud. "I've read Homer extensively. The tales attributed to him are an amalgam of legends told and retold until the true facts are lost to antiquity, whereas Hesiod wrote the Theogony with the direct aid of Clio." Dr. Lewis said something in ancient Greek. "It's more than just an opinion, Doctor," Julian responded in English. "It happens to be fact."

Ben took another look at Julian, but she could still tell he wasn't quite ready to believe someone who looked like Julian would have a clue about his chosen field. "And how would you know?" Julian answered in Greek. For the first time since she'd met the man a decade before, Grace saw the doctor look amazed. "My God," he gasped. "You speak as if you were born to it."

Julian cast an amused smile to Grace.

"I told you," Selena said. "He knows the Greek gods and goddesses better than anyone on earth."

Dr. Lewis noticed the ring on Julian's hand. "Is that what I think it is?" he asked. "Is that a general's ring?"

Julian nodded. "It is."

"Would you mind if I looked at it?" Julian slid it from his finger and handed it to him. Dr. Lewis sucked his breath in sharply. "Macedonian? Second century B.C., I would presume."

"Very good."

"It's an incredible reproduction," Ben said, handing it back.

Julian returned it to his hand. "It's not a reproduction."

"No!" Ben gasped in disbelief. "It can't be an original. It's far too pristine."

"It was held by a private collector," Selena inserted.

Ben looked back and forth between them. "How did you get it?" he asked Julian.

Julian paused as he remembered the day it had been awarded to him. He and Kyrian of Thrace had been promoted together after they had single-handedly saved Themopoly from the Romans. It had been a long, brutal, and bloody fight. Their army had broken and left the two of them alone to defend the town. Julian had expected Kyrian to abandon him as well, but the young fool had just smiled at him, grabbed a sword for each hand, and said, "It's a beautiful day to die. What say we slay as many of these bastards as we can before we pay Charon? A complete and utter lunatic, Kyrian had always
had more guts than brains. If Chares and the cavalry hadn’t shown up they may have met Charon that day. Afterward, they had drunk each other under the table in celebration. And in the morning, they had awakened and been promoted with Chares trying not to laugh at their expense. Gods, of all the people Julian had known in Macedonia, he missed Kyrian and Chares most. They were the only ones who had ever stood at his back and defended it. "It was a gift," Julian said.

Ben glanced at Julian's hand, his gaze filled with covetous awe. "Would you consider selling it? I'd be willing to pay quite a bit for it."

"Never," Julian said as he thought over the wounds he had received during the battle for Themopoly. "You've no idea what I had to go through to get this."

Ben shook his head. "I wish someone would give me a gift like that. Have you any idea how much it's worth?"

"My weight in gold, last I checked."

Ben laughed out loud, and smacked his hand against Selena's card table. "Good one. That was the ransom to get back captured generals, wasn't it?"

"For those too cowardly to die fighting, it was."

A new respect shone in Ben's eyes as he regarded Julian. "Any idea who it belonged to?"

Selena answered for Julian. "Julian of Macedon. Ever heard of him, Ben?"

Ben's jaw dropped. His eyes widened. "Are you serious? Do you know who that was?" Selena made a strange face. Assuming she didn't, Ben continued speaking. "Tesius wrote that Julian was going to be the next Alexander the Great. Julian was the son of Diokles of Sparta, also known as Diokles the Butcher. That man made the Marquis de Sade look like Ronald McDonald. Rumour had it, Julian was born of a union between Aphrodite and the general, after Diokles had saved one of her temples from desecration. The modern accepted opinion, of course, is that his mother was actually one of Aphrodite's priestesses."

"Really?" Grace asked.

Julian rolled his eyes. "No one cares who Julian was. That man died a long time ago."

Ben ignored him as he continued to flaunt his knowledge. "Known to the Romans as Augustus Julius Punitor..." He glanced to Grace and added for her benefit, "Julian the Great Punisher. He and Kyrian of Thrace cut a trail of slaughter through the Mediterranean during the Fourth Macedonian War against Rome. Julian despised Rome, and vowed he'd see the city fall to his army. He and Kyrian damn near succeeded in bringing Rome to her knees."

Julian's jaw flexed. "Do you know what happened to Kyrian of Thrace?"

Ben let out a low whistle. "His wasn't a pretty end. He was captured and crucified by the Romans in one forty-seven B.C."

Julian flinched at the words. His eyes troubled, he toyed with his ring. "That man was probably one of the best warriors who ever lived. He loved battle like no one I've ever known." He shook his head. "I remember Kyrian once drove his chariot up and over a shield wall where he broke the backbone of the Romans. It allowed his soldiers to defeat them with only a handful of losses." He frowned. "I can't believe they ever captured him."
Ben shrugged nonchalantly. "Well, once Julian disappeared, Kyrian was one of two Macedonian generals worthy of leading an army, so the Romans went after him with everything they had."

"What happened to Julian?" Grace asked, wondering what the historians had to say about the matter. Julian glared at her.

"No one knows," Ben said. "It's one of the greatest mysteries of the ancient world. Here you have this general who can't be defeated in arms by anyone, and then poof, at age thirty-two, he vanishes without a trace." Ben tapped his hand against Selena's table. "The last anyone saw of Julian was at the battle of Conjara. In a brilliant move, he tricked Livius into giving up his impregnable position. It was one of the worst defeats in Roman history."

"Who cares?" Julian groused.

Ben ignored his interruption. "After the battle, Julian was reputed to have sent word to Scipio the Younger that he was coming for him in the name of vengeance for Scipio's defeat of the Macedonians. Terrified, Scipio gave up his military service in Macedonia and volunteered to fight in Spain instead." Ben shook his head. "But before Julian could carry out the threat, he vanished. His family was found slaughtered in their home. And that's where it gets interesting." Ben looked at Selena. "The Macedonian accounts say he was mortally wounded by Livius during the battle, and in incredible pain he rode home to kill his family to keep them from being taken as slaves by his enemies. Roman accounts claim Scipio sent several of his soldiers to attack Julian in the middle of the night. Supposedly, they killed him with his family, then cut up his body and hid the pieces."

Julian scoffed at that. "Scipio was a coward and a bully. He would never have dared to attack m-"

"Who was the other Macedonian General?"

"Ah, Chares of Athens, he’s an interesting one. Appears out of nowhere to enlist in the Macedonian army. Nothing is known of his life before that although he does have a wife later on who bears him a son named after Julian of Macedon. Served under Julian for several years as a Cavalry commander. When Julian died he was promoted to General in his place. When the Romans took Kyrian he led part of the army on a rescue mission but when they finally got through the body was gone. Chares is personally credited with the death of Valerius the Younger that day. He was the only General left but he cut an even bloodier path through the Romans than Kyrian had. Made it to within ten miles of Rome before he was killed. Accounts of his death vary and some say he was the son of a god because in every account it says that where his body fell a fire hotter than anything mortal burned, consuming his body. Some today think he never existed and that there was confusion over dating and that he and the Chares of Athens form the 4th century BC were one and the same. He fought against the Macedonians under Alexander the Great. Either way they managed to ensure Macedon, Thrace and Greece remained free until the time of Augustus. The Roman legions took until Julius Caesar’s time to fully rebuild."

"He was real..."

"So," Grace said, interrupting Julian before he could give himself away. "Nice weather, eh?"

Ben didn't seem to notice. "Young man, that ring of yours is absolutely priceless. I would love to know how someone got a hold of it. For that matter, I'd kill to know what happened to its original owner."

Grace exchanged an uncomfortable look with Selena. Julian smirked wryly at Ben. "Julian of Macedon incurred the wrath of the gods and was punished for his arrogance."
"That's another explanation, I suppose." His watch alarm went off. "Damn, I have to go pick up my wife." He got up and held his hand out to Julian. "We didn't meet properly. I'm Ben Lewis."

"Julian," he said, shaking his hand.

Ben laughed. Until he realized Julian wasn't joking. "Really?"

"Named for your Macedonian general, you might say."

"Your father must have been like mine. In love with all things Greek."

"His allegiance was actually to Sparta."

Ben laughed even harder. He glanced back at Selena. "Why don't you bring him to our next Socrates club meeting? I'd love for the guys to meet him. It's not often I find someone who knows Greek history almost as well as I do." He turned his attention back to Julian. "It's been a pleasure. Later," Ben said, waving to Selena.

"Well," Selena said to Julian once Ben had vanished into the crowd. "You, my friend, have accomplished the impossible. You have just impressed one of the leading ancient Greek scholars in this country."

Julian didn't seem to care, but Grace did. "Lanie, do you think it's possible that Julian could be a professor once he breaks the curse? I was thinking he'd-

"Don't, Grace," Julian said, interrupting her.

"Don't what? You're going to need something-"

"I'm not staying here."

The cold, emotionless gaze was the same one he had worn the first night she'd conjured him. And it sliced through her. "What do you mean?" Grace asked.

He averted his gaze. "Athena has offered me a way to return home. Once the curse is broken, she'll send me back to Macedonia."

Grace struggled to breathe. "I see," she said, even though inside she was dying. "You'll just use my body, then leave." Her throat constricted. "At least I won't need Selena to drive me home afterward."

Julian flinched as if she'd slapped him. "What do you want from me, Grace? Why would you want me to stay here?"

She didn't know the answer to that. All she knew was that she didn't want him to leave. She wanted him to stay. But not if he didn't want to. "You know what," she said, growing angry at the thought of his leaving her. "I don't want you to stay here. In fact, why don't you go home with Selena for a few days?" She looked at Selena. "Would you mind?" Selena's mouth opened and closed like a fish gulping for air.

Julian reached for her. "Grace-"

"Don't touch me," she said, wringing her arm away from him. "It makes my skin crawl."

"Grace!" Selena snapped. "I can't believe you-"

"It's all right," Julian said, his voice empty and cold. "At least she didn't spit in my face with her
She'd hurt him. Grace could see it in his eyes, but then he had hurt her, too. Terribly. "I'll see you later," she said to Selena, then left Julian standing there.

Selena let out a long, slow breath as she looked up at Julian while he watched Grace walk away from them. His entire body was rigidly still, and she saw the fierce tic in his jaw. "They shoot, they score. A direct hit straight through the heart and into the raw nerves."

Julian pinned her with a hostile glare. "Tell me, Oracle. What should I have said?"

Selena shuffled her cards. "I don't know," she said wistfully. "I guess you can never go wrong with honesty."

Julian rubbed his eyes as he sat down in the chair before Selena's table. He hadn't meant to hurt Grace. And he would never forget the look on her face as she spat those words at him. "Don't touch me. It makes my skin crawl." He struggled to breathe through the agony in his chest. The Fates were still mocking him. It must be a boring day for them up on Olympus.

"You want me to do a reading for you?" Selena asked, dragging his thoughts away from the past.

"Sure," he said. "Why not?" She couldn't tell him anything he didn't already know.

"What's your question?"

"Will I ever..." Julian paused before he asked her the same question he'd once asked the Oracle at Delphi. "Will I ever break the curse?" he asked quietly. Selena shuffled her cards, then laid three of them out. Her eyes widened. He didn't need her to read them. He could see for himself, a card with a tower being struck by lightning, a card of three swords piercing a heart, and a demon holding the chains of two people. "It's all right," he said to Selena. "I never really thought it would come to pass."

"That's not what they say," she whispered. "But you have one hell of a battle to come."

He laughed bitterly. "Battles I can handle." It was the ache in his heart that was going to kill him.

Harry looked around the club and sighed. He'd been in this world for three days but something about it felt…. familiar…not the place itself but the feel of power, of 'gods’... was he in a world he’d been too before? He shrugged it off and began fighting his way through the crowd to leave.

Julian hesitated as he saw the dark head of hair, caught a glimpse of features, it wasn't possible....

He pushed through the crowd, going after him.

"Julian?" Grace followed him out onto the street where Julian looked around and then took off walking fast.

"Chares?" he called and the man froze.

Harry froze as he heard a name he hadn’t used in over a century. And that voice…. he turned and his eyes widened. His hair was cut short, his braids gone, dressed in modern clothes and yet…." Julian?" Harry moved closer to the taller male, taking him in. "I don’t believe it, Julian of Macedon.” He grinned.

"Chares of Athens." Julian breathed in shock, awe and hope. He grabbed the smaller male up in a
hug and heard him laugh, arms coming up to return the hug.

“It’s Harry Potter these days. What happened? I tracked you to your Mother’s Temple and was told by one of Priapus’ virgins that you were eternally cursed.”

“Julian?” Grace called and he turned to her.

“Grace this is one of the best cavalry commanders to ever live and my good friend, brother even. CH…Harry this is Grace.”

Harry bowed over her hand, green eyes sparkling with joy and amusement. “A pleasure.” He kissed the back of her hand and straightened.

Grace blushed at the old-fashioned move, he may be smaller than Julian but he radiated the same sense of controlled power and grace. He was very good looking too with short dark hair and the greenest eyes she’d ever seen. “Guess Ben was wrong about your body burning on the battle field.” She commented and he blinked before wincing.

“Ah…made the history books, did it?”

“Wait, you’re saying that happened?” Julian demanded and Harry sighed.

“Come on, we’re gaining attention. My place or yours?” He offered and Julian glanced at Grace who smiled.

She didn’t know how someone Julian had known could be here, but maybe he could do something to help. “I don’t mind.”

“My apartments only a few blocks away.” He offered and Grace nodded so Julian wrapped an arm around her and they walked to his apartment where the two men spoke until morning, both shocked by what the other had gone through over the years.

The Dark-Hunter jerked again at the cuffs. "I am going to kill that horror-movie reject."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Amanda said as he flapped her arm around while trying to free himself. "That arm is attached."

He paused and looked down at her. His gaze softened. "Twins. It never occurred to him. Have you any idea where your sister is?"

"I don't even know where I am or what time it is. For that matter, I don't know what's going on here. Who are you and who is that guy?" Then, she lowered her voice and added, "Can he hear us?"

Kyrian shook his head. "No, the mike channel is closed. For the moment, he's off plotting his Igoresque revenge. I don't know about you, but I have this image of him rubbing his hands together and laughing like Dexter from Dexter's Laboratory." Kyrian took a minute to study her. She didn't appear hysterical... yet, and he wanted to keep it that way. Telling her Desiderius was a soul-sucking demon who was after her sister didn't seem like the best way to accomplish that. Of course, given her sister's penchant for vampire-hunting, it shouldn't really come as a surprise to her, either. Closing his eyes, he reached into her mind with his and found confirmation of his suspicions. There was a healthy dose of fear in her. Unlike her sister Tabitha, she wasn't one to jump to conclusions, but she was curious and angry over their situation. It was possible he could tell her everything without freaking her out, but the Dark-Hunter in him operated on a need-to-know basis. Right now, all she needed to know was the bare minimum. With any luck, he would be able to separate them without
"Thanks, but that much I already got." Amanda frowned. She should be frightened by all this, but she wasn't. Her anger over it was too great. Leave it to her to get mixed up in her sister's crazy life. In fact, she was glad they had captured her by mistake, since Tabitha would no doubt have pulled some kamikaze stunt and gotten herself killed. She looked up at the Dark-Hunter and her frown deepened. How did he know about Tabitha? For that matter, how had he been able to tell them apart when even their own mother had trouble at times? "Are you one of my sister's friends?"

He looked at her blankly, before pulling her to her feet. "No," he said as he patted his chest, hips, rear, and legs.

Amanda tried not to notice just how incredibly toned that body was as her hand was dragged in the wake of his. And when her hand brushed his hard inner thigh, she thought she would moan. He was built for sex and for speed. Too bad he wasn't her type. In fact, he was the total antithesis to everything she found desirable in a man. Wasn't he?

He cursed. "Of course, he has my phone," he muttered, before leading her to the door. After trying the knob, he studied the hinges.

When he unbuckled his left boot and toed it off, Amanda arched a brow. "What are you doing? Going for a swim?"

He gave her a cocky smirk before leaning down to pick the boot up off the floor. "Trying to get us out of here. You?"

"I'm trying not to get irritated at you."

Amusement flashed in his eyes, then he returned his attention to the door.

Amanda watched as he pressed one of the silver inlays on the boot heel and a vicious five-inch blade shot out of the toe. He was definitely Tabitha's type. She wondered if he had throwing stars inside his pockets, too. "Oooo," she commented dryly. "Very scary."

He gave her an unamused look. "Baby, you ain't seen scary yet."

Amanda smirked at his Ford Fairlane, tough-guy demeanor and gave a very unfeminine snort. He ignored her. Using the jagged blade, he tried to pry loose the rusted hinges. "You're going to break that blade if you're not careful," she warned him.

He gave her an arched look. "Nothing on this earth could break this blade." He snatched at the cuffs again. "What is it with
you humans that you feel this incessant need to delve into things you should leave alone?"

"I don't delve into..." Her voice trailed off as his words penetrated her mind. "You humans? Why would you say that?" He didn't answer. "Look," she said, holding up her arm to show the handcuff. "I'm stuck with you right now, and I want an answer."

"No you don't."

That did it. She hated alpha men in the worst sort of way. Those domineering, I'm-the-man-baby-let-me-drive types nauseated her. "All right, macho babe boy," she said irritably. "I'm not some little ditz to bat my eyelashes at the buff stud in black leather. Don't try your he-man tactics with me. I'll have you know, in my office I'm known as the ball-breaker."

"Macho babe boy?" he repeated in disbelief. There had never been a time in his extremely long life that anyone had had the mettle to stand up to him. As a mortal, he had made entire Roman armies flee in stark terror of his approach. Few men had ever dared meet him eye to eye. As a Dark-Hunter, he made legions of Daimons and Apollites quake in his presence. His name was whispered in awe and with reverence, and this woman had called him... "Buff stud in black leather," he repeated out loud. "I don't think I've ever been more insulted."

"Then you must have been an only child."

He laughed at that. In truth, he'd once had three younger sisters, but none of them had ever dared insult him. He swept a look over her. She wasn't classically beautiful, but there was an exotic quality to her almond-shaped eyes that lent her a fey charm. Her long, mahogany hair was loose, spilling about her slender shoulders. But it was her blue eyes that were captivating. Warm and intelligent, they were narrowed on him now with malice. A faint blush stained her cheeks, making her eyes a full shade darker. In spite of the danger they were in, he wondered what she would look like after a full night of raw, exhausting sex. He could just see her eyes dark with passion, her hair mussed, her cheeks red from his whiskers, and her lips moist and swollen from his kisses. The thought made his entire body burn. Until Kyrian felt the familiar prickling on the back of his neck. "It will be dawn soon."

"How do you know?"

"I just do." He pulled her to the left, then began examining the rust-covered walls for an escape. "Once we're released, we'll have to find a way to break out of these cuffs."

"Nice of you to state the obvious." Amanda glanced down his body and saw the jagged wound through the torn material. "You really need to tend that."

"God forbid I should bleed to death, eh?" he asked sardonically. "Then you'd have to cart around my rotting corpse."

She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "Could you be any more morbid? Jeez. Who was your idol growing up? Boris Karloff?"

"Hannibal, actually."

"You're trying to scare me, aren't you?" she asked. "Well, it won't work. I grew up in a house with an angry poltergeist and two sisters who used to conjure demons just to fight them. Buster, I've seen it all, and your gallows humour isn't working on me." Before he realized what she was doing, she grabbed the bottom of his shirt and lifted it. Amanda froze at the sight of his bare stomach. It was lean, hard, and flat, and he had a rippling six-pack of abs that any gymnast would envy. But what
made her gasp was the multitude of scars covering his flesh. Worse, she saw the terrible gash in his side that ran along his lowest rib. "Good Lord, what happened to you?"

He jerked his shirt down and took a step back. "If you mean the scars, it would take me years to account for all of them. If you mean the gash, it came from a thirteen-year-old Apollite I mistook for a child in need of help."

"You walked into a trap?"

He shrugged. "It's not the first time."

Amanda swallowed as she swept her gaze over him. An aura of danger and death surrounded him. He moved like a sleek, graceful predator, and those eyes... They seemed to be able to take in more than just his basic surroundings. Those wicked jet eyes held an indescribable ethereal glint to them. And they stole her breath every time he looked at her. She'd never seen a blond man with eyes like that. Nor had she seen any man so incredibly handsome. His features were chiselled and perfect. He oozed an almost unnatural masculine sexuality. She'd seen plenty of men who had tried their best to project what nature had dumped by the truckload onto this man. "What is a Dark-Hunter?" she asked. "Is it like Buffy the Vampire Slayer?"

He laughed at that. "Yes, I'm a small, emaciated teenage girl who struts around fighting vampires in earrings they would rip out of my ears and shove up my-"

"I know you're not a girl. But what is a Dark-Hunter?"

He sighed as he led her around the room, looking at the walls as if searching for a secret door. "In short, I execute the things that go bump in the night."

A chill went up her spine at his words, and yet she sensed there was something more than just his simple explanation. He appeared deadly, but not twisted, or even cruel. "Why do you want to kill Desiderius?"

He glanced at her before trying to open the steel door again. He wrenched the handle so forcefully, she was amazed he didn't rip the doorknob off. "Because he not only kills humans, he steals their souls."

She tensed at his words. "Can he do that?"

"You said you've seen it all," he said in a mocking tone. "You tell me."

Amanda wanted to choke him. Never in her life had she met a more arrogant, or infuriating man. "Why do I always get sucked into this supernatural mumbo jumbo?" she muttered. "Is it too much to ask that I have one average day?"

"Life is seldom what we want it to be."

She frowned at his words, and at the odd note in his voice. Kyrian tilted his head, and held his hand up to signal her for silence. Out of nowhere, the doorknob clicked.

"Knock, knock," Desiderius said. "You have the day to hide. Come nightfall, we hunt."

"Yeah, yeah," Hunter said. "You and your little dog, too."

His blithe tone amazed her. The chilling words had absolutely no effect on him. "You're not scared of his threats?"
He looked at her dryly. "Chere, the day I fear something like him is the day I lie down at his feet and hand him the knife to cut my heart out. The only fear I have is getting you back to your sister and convincing High Queen Hardhead to leave off this matter until I can locate Desiderius and send his soul into oblivion where it belongs."

In spite of herself and the danger they were in, Amanda laughed at his words. "High Queen Hardhead? You know Tabitha well."

He disregarded her comment as he carefully shielded her with his body, then opened the door slowly. He paused to look around. Outside the door was a narrow hallway with large, dust-covered windows that showed the dawning sun. "Damn," Hunter snarled under his breath as he took a step back into the room.

"What?" she asked, her heart skipping a beat in terror. "Is someone out there?"

"No."

"Then let's go." She started out the door. He didn't budge. Clenching his teeth, he looked down the hallway again and said something in a language she didn't know. "What's the problem?" Amanda asked. "It's dawn, and no one's out there. Let's leave."

He took a deep, aggravated breath. "The problem isn't the people. The problem is the sun."

"And the problem with that is...?"

He hesitated for a few heartbeats, then opened his mouth and ran his tongue over his long, pointed canine teeth. Mr. "Do Me" Gorgeous Man is a vampire! "Oh no, no, no." Amanda's entire body shook from terror and it took every piece of self-control she possessed not to launch into a screaming fit. "Are you going to suck my blood?"

He arched a sardonic brow. "Do I look like a lawyer to you?"

She ignored his sarcasm. "Are you going to kill me?"

His face completely unamused, Hunter sighed irritably. "If I intended to kill you, don't you think you'd already be dead?" He stepped closer to her and offered her a wry, evil grin she knew was meant to intimidate her. And boy howdy did it work. He lifted his free hand up to stroke the skin of her neck where her jugular was. The feather-light touch sent chills over her. "Come to think of it, I could just suck you dry, then gnaw your hand off with my fangs and be free." Her eyes widened in terror. "But lucky you, I have no intention of doing that, either."

"Don't be sarcastic, okay?" she breathed, her heart still pounding because she wasn't sure if he was joking with her or if he really would turn all grisly on her and start feeding off her blood. "I can't cope with it. Imagine if you were in my shoes. I just went to let Tabitha's dog out so he wouldn't mess on her bed. I went from that to being knocked on the head, and chained to a vampire. Excuse me if I'm a little freaky at the moment."

To her amazement, he dropped his hand and backed off. "You're right. I imagine you're not used to having people attack you for no apparent reason." By his tone, she could tell he, on the other hand, was rather experienced at finding himself in the middle of such situations. He offered her a tight-lipped smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "If it makes you feel better, I don't feed on humans."

For some reason, it did make her feel better to hear him say that. Not that she believed it. But still, it was a little reassuring. "So, you're like Angel?"
He rolled his eyes at her. "You watch way too much television," he muttered. Then louder, he said, "Angel has a soul. I don't."

"Now you're back to being scary again."

The look on his face reiterated his earlier words: Baby, you ain't seen scary yet. He glanced back out the door. "All right. We're going to have to run for it before the sun rises any higher." Hunter gave her a penetrating stare. "The main problem is that I don't know where that hallway leads. In the event it leads out into the open and I die a particularly agonizing death where I spontaneously combust into flames, I need a favour from you."

"A favour?" she asked in disbelief. The man had one serious set of cojones on him. He bullied her, threatened her, then dared to ask a favour?

"Sure, why not?" she asked.

He took the ring off his right hand and gave it to her. "I need you to take that and find a tree."

Amanda frowned at the ring in her hand. The gold was scuffed and nicked in a number of places as if it had been seriously mistreated. Or rather the hand that bore it had been through a lot of damage. The top of the ring was made of flat rubies and held the design of a sword of diamonds surrounded by emerald laurel leaves and topped with a sapphire crown. She could tell it was a valuable antique. Why would he entrust it to her?

Unsure of what to make of him, she placed it in her jeans pocket. "Any tree?" she asked.

"Any tree. Then say the words 'Artemis, I summon you to human form.'"

"Artemis-"

He put his hand over her mouth. "For the love of Zeus, only say it once I'm gone. After you utter the words, wait until a very tall, red-haired woman appears and tell her you need protection from Desiderius."

Amanda arched a brow. "You want me to summon a goddess to protect me?"

"If you don't, he will get you and your sister."

"Why do you care?"

"It's my job to protect the humans from the Daimons. That's what a Dark-Hunter does." Though his face was harsh, there was a light in his eyes that told her there was much more to the story than that.

"What are Daimons?" she asked.

"They're vampires on steroids with a God complex. Now, promise me you'll do it."

Why not? It was a strange request, but then, considering the fact she was handcuffed to a vampire, who was she to say what was or wasn't strange? "Okay."

"Good. Now, let's run for it."

Before she could protest, he grabbed the handcuff over her wrist, and ran out the door to the right and down the hallway. As they ran along the rusty floor, Amanda realized they were inside an abandoned factory of some sort. At the end of the hallway were stairs that led down.
Hunter pulled her along after him until they reached the bottom of the stairs that opened into an enormous empty room with a cement floor. The old steel walls were cracked, with rays of the dawning sun streaming through. The Dark-Hunter fell back into the shadows, away from the sunlight. His face looked a bit sunburned, but overall, he didn't appear too much the worse from their mad dash.

"Now what?" she asked as she tried to catch her breath.

The Dark-Hunter wasn't even breathing hard. But his gaze was just a little too hot as he stared at her breasts with interest.

Amanda crossed her arms over her chest. For the first time, she saw a real smile from him as she realized his hand was dangerously close to her breast. So close, his fingertips brushed the nipple, making fire rip through her veins. She immediately dropped her hands to her sides while his smile taunted her. Though tight-lipped and devilish, it was still devastating. The amused gleam in his eyes was breathtaking, and his features softened into a boyish charm that could melt the heart of anything female.

He glanced around the empty factory. "Now I wish we either had a cell phone or subway system. I knew I should have taken that open position in New York."

Confused, Amanda looked up at him. "Open position? What? Is hunting really a job?"

"Yes. They even pay me to do it."

"Who pays you?"

Instead of answering, he held up a hand for silence in a gesture that was starting to piss her off-the main reason being because it seemed to herald trouble. And she was tired of finding trouble meant for Tabitha.

Two seconds later, Amanda heard someone walking around outside. Hunter pulled her deeper into the shadows with him while they listened. He had his free arm draped over her shoulders, pinning her to his body. Amanda went stock-still as her back connected fully with his chest and a wave of misplaced desire tore through her. The heat of him warmed her and that raw, masculine aura of power overwhelmed her. Even more disturbing, his welcoming scent of leather and sandalwood invaded her head. She wanted this man. What are you, nuts? The man's a vampire! Yeah, but he's a really, really sexy one.

Kyrian couldn't breathe with her so close to him. His heightened senses felt her all the way through his entire body. He heard her heartbeat speed up, felt the dryness of her throat, but even worse, he could taste her desire. It whetted his appetite for her even more. And it reminded him why he had made it his habit to avoid being around women as much as possible. Damn you, Desiderius. Because right then it was hard to remember he couldn't have her. And even harder to forget the way she smelled. The way she moved-like a confident dancer. Her lithe body was a symphony of grace and all too easily he could imagine her sitting on top of him as he showed her a sexual pleasure he was quite certain no other man had ever given her. His loins tightened to the point of pain. He couldn't even remember the last time he had been this hard for a woman. And it took all his willpower not to kiss her. Not to bury his lips against her throat and inhale her warm sweetness as he... Kyrian flexed his hand on her shoulder as he realized all he had to do was lower his hand three inches and he would be cupping her breast. Just three tiny inches...

Suddenly, the sound of a walkie-talkie broke the silence.
"It's a construction worker," she whispered, bolting to a window. Kyrian hissed as she pulled him into the sunlight. He jerked her back into the darkness. "Sorry," she whispered. She edged closer to the window, making sure to keep him out of the sun. "Hey!" Amanda called as she saw the man a few feet away, poking around an old tractor.

The construction worker looked up at her and did a double-take. Scowling, he walked over to the window and looked inside. His eyes narrowed on them. "What are you doing in there? This area is off-limits to the public."

"It's a long story," Amanda said. "The short version is I got left here. You wouldn't happen to have a cell phone I could borrow, would you?" Still scowling, he handed his cell phone to her through the open window. Hunter immediately took it from her hand. "Hey!" she snapped, reaching for it.

"Where are we?" Hunter asked the construction worker as he placed the phone to his ear.

"The old Olson Plant."

"In Slidell?"

Amanda arched a brow that the Dark-Hunter would recognize it. She'd lived in New Orleans all her life and had no idea this place existed.

"Yeah," the worker said.

"Look give it to me! You can’t go in the sun and I know someone who can get us without that being an issue, not to mention he can pick locks."

Kyrian snorted. "Not these ones, Hephaestus work needs a key or a god to open."

"Well his best friend is a demigod. Phone, now." She demanded.

Kyrian hesitated, he had no reason to trust her and vice versa. Though her fear had faded a lot. He should call Tate but the coroner wouldn't be able to free them. So, he handed the phone over and she dialled.

"Harry? It’s Amanda Devereaux, Graces’ friend. I need your help, I’m kind of…. stuck." She listened and relaxed. “Thanks. The old Olson Plant in”


"Harry don’t do that!” Amanda chided and Kyrian froze as the man stepped into view. His hair was short, braids missing, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt and yet…..

"Chares?" Kyrian whispered and green eyes focused on him, a smile slowly spreading.

"Kyrian." Harry walked across the room to yank him into a hug. He pulled back and saw the black eyes. “Oh…. Artemis?” he asked and Kyrian nodded. “Explains why your body was gone when I got there.”

“I saw you kill Valerius but she said only those to die could see me. But how are you alive?”

“Long story.” Harry picked up the cuffs and chuckled. “And I thought Tabitha was the wild twin.” He teased before placing his hand over them and closing his eyes, letting magic flow. To Kyrian’s shock they clicked open and fell off. Harry offered an arm to Amanda who took it, before offering his hand to Kyrian. “Let’s get you out of here.”
Kyrian took his hand and then suddenly they were in a closet. “What?”

“Sorry, have to close the blinds.” Harry slipped out and Kyrian heard him moving around. “Okay, safe.”

Kyrian left the closet with Amanda to find themselves in a nicely appointed apartment. He watched as Amanda bolted straight down a hall and into a bathroom and Harry chuckled before indicating the couch. “How can you still be alive?”

“What do you know about events after you ‘died’?” Harry asked as he took a seat as well.

“I know you rode on Rome and almost made it.”

“Yeah, well an arrow through the throat hurts.” Harry admitted, leaning back.

“I was told you died and then your body…”

“Burst into flames? Yeah, that happened. I live in a world and when I die I move on to the next.” At Kyrian’s look of confusion he explained who and what he was. “Kyrian… Julian is alive.”

“You told me he was cursed.”

“Priapus cursed him into a scroll for eternity, able to be summoned on a full moon and then he would spend the month until the next full moon as a sex slave.”

“No…” Kyrian shook his head in pain, what had been done to his brother.

“He’s free now Kyrian, happily married with twins and another on the way…and mortal again, as mortal as a demigod gets.”

“He made such beautiful babies.” Kyrian whispered.

“Yeah, still does. Do you…. there’s nothing in the history books…”

“Aspasia remarried a year after your death. He was a good man and they had three children, all girls. Little Julian grew up happy and married my niece, they were happy and had six children.” Kyrian knew what Harry needed to know. He had watched over Harry’s and his own families through squires and had ensured they had whatever they needed. He’d been happy when their families joined in marriage.

“Valerius never said while we fought, how did they capture you? Dimitri told me about the intercepted message.”

“It was a trap. Theone gave me to them.”

“I am so sorry Kyrian.” Harry clasped his shoulder even as Kyrian laughed.

“Of the three of us the man who married a stranger is the only one to have a wife who mourned him and be killed in battle.” Kyrian struggled to put his emotions aside.

“Come, you need to sleep. I’ll make sure Amanda knows not to talk.”

“She needs to be protected. Desiderius threatened her, though he thinks she’s Tabitha. I’ll go after him tonight.”

“I can keep her and her family safe enough. Now sleep.”
When Kyrian left the bedroom that night he froze as he took in the other man with Ch…Harry in the main room. “Julian.” He called and his brother turned, smiling in happiness at seeing him. He moved across the room and drew Kyrian into a hug.

“I almost couldn’t believe it when Harry told me.” He held Kyrian at arm’s length, looking him over. “For such an old man, you look good.”

“Like either of you can talk.” Kyrian shot back. Being back with them, the men he had called brothers, it was something he had never dared dream of. It was good to know Julian would finally get to live a long life with wife and child while also being saddened by Harry’s fate, although the other man was accepting and had admitted one day he would be free and home. He could be happy knowing they were alright but this would be the last time he saw them. Dark-Hunters did not have friends, they walked alone and he could tell the other two knew it. But for a few short hours until the sun set they could pretend.

Kyrian came awake with his hands tied above his head. He was positioned against a dark, dank wall inside an unfamiliar house. The old-fashioned room was lit by candles that cast dancing shadows around him and he heard whispers surrounding him. By the looks of the place, he would surmise it was an older home probably not all that far from his own house down in the Garden District. Scanning the room, he found Amanda and Desiderius standing a few feet away from him with Desiderius's arm draped around her shoulders.

Disbelief overwhelmed him. Not again. Dear gods, not again. How could he have been so damned stupid? Harry had sworn she was protected, how could this be? His mind had tried to tell him something had been wrong. He'd even known Desiderius would be able to get to Amanda. But he hadn't listened. He'd let his love for her, his need for her, blind him.

Kyrian clenched his eyes shut. What hurt most was knowing what Desiderius would do to her once he killed him. Without him to protect her, Amanda was at Desiderius's utter mercy. It really would be like Theone all over again. Once Valerius had executed him, the Roman had thrown Theone out, saying he didn't want a whore in his bed who might ruthlessly hand him over to his enemies someday. Since Theone had betrayed the military leader of the Macedonians and caused their defeat, she'd been unable to return home. The villa she had loved so much had been burned to the ground. Everything she'd held dear had been confiscated. Persecuted by his countrymen, she had fled Greece to Rome where she ended up a prostitute in a rundown stew. She'd died of disease less than two years after him. In the end, she had caused the very fate she had tried so hard to avert.

Opening his eyes, Kyrian saw Amanda a few feet away from him. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and a black turtleneck. With her hair pulled back, he could see her profile perfectly as she clutched a doll to her. How could she do this to him? But then, he knew. Desiderius's powers had been more than she could take. Somehow, in spite of D'Alerian and Harry’s efforts, the Daimon had invaded her dreams and turned her mind. Rage darkened his vision. He wouldn't let her die. Not like this. In spite of his weakness, he grabbed the ropes and pulled as hard as he could.

"So, you're awake." Desiderius and Amanda moved to stand before him. His eyes taunting, Desiderius placed one hand on Amanda's shoulder. "It's painful, isn't it? Knowing I'm going to bed her before I kill her and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"Go to hell."

Desiderius laughed. "You first, Commander. You first." He trailed one long, evil finger down the line of Amanda's jaw. She didn't react at all. It was as if she were in some kind of trance. "I would
Kyrian smirked as if the Daimon were a little gnat buzzing by his head. "Ooo, if I were wearing boots, I'd be shaking in them."

Desiderius eyed him in disbelief. "Don't you ever get scared?"

Kyrian gave him a dry look. "I faced down an entire Roman legion with only a sword to protect me. Now, why would I be afraid of some two-bit, half-god Daimon with an inferiority complex?"

The Daimon hissed at him, baring his fangs. He grabbed the crossbow off the table and loaded a steel bolt into it. "You will learn not to taunt me. I am not one you mess with."

"Why not? What makes you special?"

"My father is Bacchus. I am a god!"

Kyrian snorted. The first rule of war: make your opponent lose his temper. Emotions clouded judgment and made one do stupid things, and it would give him the opening he needed to get free and save both of them. Besides, he liked the way the throbbing vein stood out in Desiderius's temple. It let him know he hadn't lost his touch when it came to taunting his enemies. "What you are is pathetic. You're a bully and a psycho. No wonder Daddy has no use for you."

Desiderius screamed in fury. He brought the crossbow down hard against Kyrian's face.

Kyrian's entire head ached from the blow. He tasted blood on his lips. Running his tongue over the cut, he tsked the Daimon.

"You know nothing of my life, Dark-Hunter. You don't know what it's like being born to die."

"We are all born to die."

"Oh yes, the humans and their finite lives that are three times the length of ours. How I pity them." He grabbed Kyrian by the throat and pressed his head back against the wall. "Do you know what it feels like to watch the woman you love decay before your eyes? Eleanor was only twenty-seven. Twenty-seven! I did everything I could to save her. I even brought a human to her and still she refused to take the soul that would save her. She was pure unto the end. Desiderius's eyes turned dull at the memory. "She was so beautiful and gentle. I had begged my father for help and he turned his back on me. So I watched my beautiful wife turn old in a handful of hours. I watched her body age until it decayed in my arms."

"I'm sorry for you," Kyrian said quietly. "But it doesn't excuse what you've done."

Desiderius screamed his outrage. "What I've done? I've done nothing except be born to a cursed race while I watch the humans squander the gift of life they have. I do them a favour by killing them. I alleviate their boring, insipid lives." His blue eyes darkening dangerously, Desiderius curled his lip. "You know, I obtained a copy of your Dark-Hunter handbook when I killed one of your brethren ninety years ago. The entry that struck me most was the one where it said to always go for a Daimons heart. To strike at his most vulnerable spot."

He aimed the crossbow at Amanda. "Your heart would be her, wouldn't it?"
Kyrian masked his terror. His fear. Even though he was weak, he tightened his grip on the ropes holding him and lifted his feet up to kick Desiderius with all his remaining strength before the Daimon had a chance to hurt Amanda. Desiderius staggered back, the crossbow dropping away from her to point toward the floor. "Run, Amanda!" he shouted. She didn't move. Kyrian fell back against the wall. "Damn it, Amanda, please run for me."

She didn't appear to hear him at all. She merely stood staring into space as she hummed and gripped her doll.

Desiderius laughed as he righted himself. He licked the blood from his lips while he eyed Kyrian with malice. "She's mine, Dark-Hunter. You can die with the knowledge that I will use her well before I take her soul and her powers." Desiderius smiled an evil smile a second before he shot the crossbow straight into Kyrian's heart.

The force of the bolt embedding itself into his body drove him into the wall. Kyrian gasped at the pain of the steel biting into his body.

Desiderius came forward to stand before him. His eyes amused, he ran his finger around the small amount of blood that seeped from the wound. "What a pity Dark-Hunter blood is poisonous to drink. I'm sure it's richer and thicker than what I normally have to live on."

Kyrian barely heard the words as his heart struggled to beat. His ears buzzed. It was the most painful thing he'd ever felt. His sight dulling, he turned to look one last time at Amanda. Her features were pinched as she watched him and for a moment he could pretend that she remembered him. That she knew he was dying and that she cared. Had she been herself, he knew she would run to him. Unlike his wife, she would cry when she heard of his death. And in a strange way, that comforted him.

Desiderius left him and went to pat her on the shoulder. "Go on, Amanda, kiss your lover farewell."

Kyrian struggled to breathe as she approached him. He had so many things he wanted to tell her. So many things he wished he'd said to her while she'd been able to really hear his words. At least he wouldn't die alone. "I love you, Amanda," he whispered, hoping that somehow, she would later recall his words to her and know that he meant them. Her eyes blank, she leaned forward and covered his lips with her own and pressed her hand to his shoulder.

He felt the blackness of death descend over him and as he died, he heard her last whispered words. "I will love you for eternity, my dark warrior."

Then everything vanished.

Amanda held her breath as she felt the heat seeping out of the medallion she clutched underneath the doll's dress, into Kyrian's lifeless body. Her hand shook as she waited for him to reawaken, and with every second that passed, she shook more. It wasn't working... Oh God, no! Acheron had lied to her after all! Tears stung her eyes as the medallion turned icy cold and fell from her grasp. Still, Kyrian didn't move. He lay limp against the wall, his face pale. His body cold. No! It was over and Kyrian was dead. No!

Desiderius's evil laughter rang out through the dark room and made her entire soul weep in anguish.

Right then, she wanted to die, too. This was all her fault. She had stood by and let Kyrian die and had done nothing to save him. Her grief welled up and lodged as an unreleased scream in her throat. "I love you, Amanda." His words would haunt her forever. Sobbing, she wrapped her arms around Kyrian's body and held him close, willing him to wake up and speak. Please, God, take anything from me, but please let him live.
"Amanda?" Desiderius's voice was sharp as he commanded her back to his side.

She held tighter to Kyrian, laying her head on his chest, beside the bolt, and willing her life force into him. Amanda froze as she heard something. It was a faint sound, but it made her soar. She heard Kyrian's heart beating. Pulling back, she watched as his eyes fluttered open. Kyrian gazed into Amanda's dark blue eyes that sparkled from her tears. No longer blank, her eyes stared into his with a purpose. And with love. Her face softening, she passed her hand over his chest and the bolt shot free. In that moment, he knew she hadn't betrayed him. She had set him free. "You have your soul back, Kyrian of Thrace," she whispered as the ropes around his wrists unknotted. "Now let's make this bastard pay."

Desiderius screamed in fury as he realized what was happening. Kyrian didn't have his Dark-Hunter powers, but it didn't matter. For the first time in over two thousand years he had his soul, and the feel of it and the knowledge that Amanda hadn't betrayed him invigorated him. The Daimon was a dead man.

Desiderius ran for the door.

It slammed shut. "I wouldn't want you to leave the party so soon," Amanda said. "Not after everything you've done to make us so welcome."

"Amanda?" Kyrian said uncertainly.

She looked at him, her eyes shimmering ever so slightly in a way that reminded him of Acheron's. "Desiderius unlocked my powers for me," she said quietly. "He thought to use the telekinesis and telepathy for himself." She looked at Desiderius and smiled. "Surprise. When you unleashed them, you lost all control over me."

Desiderius struggled to open the door.

Kyrian stalked him like a hungry panther after its prey. "What's the matter, Desiderius, afraid of a mere human?"

He turned with a snarl. "I can beat you. I'm a god."

"Then do it." Cursing, Desiderius charged him. He grabbed Kyrian around the waist and drove him against the wall. Desiderius opened his mouth to bite him. "Oh, like hell," Kyrian snarled. "I didn't just get my soul back to lose it to you." He kneed the Daimon in the groin.

Desiderius stumbled away from him.

"Kyrian." He turned to see Amanda with his sword. She tossed it to him.

Extending the blade, he went for Desiderius. The Daimon dodged his swing and lifted his hand to astral-blast him. Kyrian cursed as the blast hit him in the chest right where the crossbow bolt had been. He staggered back. Oh, it hurt. Dazed, he couldn't defend himself as Desiderius rushed him. He braced himself in expectation of Desiderius's blow.

It never came.

Instead a blast hit him and Kyrian looked over to see Harry had joined the party, a healing cut down his face. "Bastard." Death's Marked snarled.

Desiderius ran at Kyrian again. If they were close then neither Harry or Amanda would dare blast him.
“Kyrian!” Harry tossed him a sword, the one Harry had used as Chares and Kyrian grinned. The sword was coated in the deadliest poison he’d seen in his life.

Amanda held her breath as she watched them fight. Desiderius grabbed a sword from the table and charged him. The sound of clashing steel echoed as the two of them engaged. "Go, baby," she whispered, clutching her doll in her hands. Harry came up beside her and she felt magic shimmer around them protectively. Kyrian would win. He had to. She’d gone through too much to see him die now. As she watched them fight, she realized the sun was rising. She could see it just peeping through the closed windows. Desiderius saw it and cursed, then he landed an upper blow to Kyrian that knocked the sword free from his grasp. She held her breath.

Desiderius smiled as he stalked Kyrian away from where his sword had fallen. "Tell you what," he said evilly. "Why don't you give Hades my best?"

"Kyrian!" Kyrian turned to see Amanda lob her doll at him. Instinctively, he caught it. He cursed as the blades in the doll's feet bit into his hand.

A smile broke across his face. Laughing, he ducked Desiderius's blow, and caught the Daimon right in the heart with the doll's feet. "Tell Hades yourself," he said as Desiderius gaped. Time stood still as Desiderius met Kyrian's eyes. The Daimons face went through an entire array of emotions, disbelief, fear, anger, and pain. Then, in the blink of an eye, Desiderius disintegrated.

Kyrian and Amanda stood frozen as the full impact of the moment hit them. It was over. Desiderius was dead. Amanda and Tabitha were safe. Kyrian had his soul. And the woman he loved had saved his life. His heart pounding, Kyrian dropped the doll to the floor and walked toward Amanda. "You are a very accomplished actress."

"No. I was terrified." She reached a shaking hand out to his chest. "I almost screamed when he did that. You have no idea how hard it was. Acheron told me that you had to die in order to be free and I knew I couldn't kill you. I knew the only chance we had was to let Desiderius do it for me."

Kyrian took her hand in his, and as his fingers brushed her palm, he felt the blisters. He turned her hand over to see the medallion symbols branded into her flesh. "It must have been excruciating."

"I'm all right."

He swallowed at her nonchalant tone. How could she dismiss what she had done for him? He arched a brow in disbelief. For him, she had ruined her hand. "You're scarred for life."

"No," she said, smiling. "I think it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." She leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "Second to you, that is."

Kyrian cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. "Thank you, Amanda."

As she watched him, the joy faded from her face and she gave him a scared look. "Julian and Acheron said you could summon Artemis now and return your soul to her, if you chose to."

"Now, why would I choose such a thing?"

She shrugged. "You're a Dark-Hunter."

He kissed her lightly on the lips. "What I am is a man in love with a woman. I want you, Amanda. For the rest of my blissfully short mortal life. I want to wake at dawn with you in my arms and watch our children play and fight. Hell, I even want to hear them back-talk me."
She smiled at him. "Are you sure?"

"I have never been surer of anything in my life."

Harry chuckled and then took Amanda’s hand and they watched as the burn healed.

“Are you alright?” Kyrian asked as he took in the wound close up.

“I’ll be fine.” Harry promised as Amanda took Kyrian’s hand and led him from the room.

Kyrian stopped dead in his tracks as he saw the early morning light in the living room. From habit, he stepped back as he stared at it. The bright sunlight didn't hurt his eyes. There was no burning of his skin. Tightening his hand on Amanda's, he forced himself to walk forward, through the door. And for the first time in over two thousand years, he walked out into daylight. The feel of the sunshine on his skin was incredible. The warmth, the tingly early breeze. His heart pounding, he looked up into the light blue sky and saw the white clouds. It was a glorious day. One he owed to Amanda.

Scooping her up in his arms, he held her close. "All hail Apollo," he whispered.

Amanda smiled as she hugged him dearly. "No. All hail Aphrodite."

Harry smiled as he watched them. Despite everything, Julian and now Kyrian would get the happy lives they deserved.

Kyrian stared in amazement at the wedding band on his left hand. He still couldn't believe the good fortune that had brought Amanda into his life. Seven months had passed since the day Amanda had returned him to the light. Seven wonderful months of being with her night and day. Of helping her to accept, develop, and harness her powers, which were now stronger than his own. Not that it mattered to him. He still had more than enough of his Dark-Hunter powers left to keep her safe. And her safety was the most important thing to him. That and waking every morning to see the smile on her beautiful face. And now they were married.

Amanda grabbed him from behind and squeezed him tight. "What are you doing out here alone?"

He turned to see her in her wedding dress. The milky-white colour set off her skin to perfection. Her cheeks were flushed with excitement, and the moonlight glowed in her eyes. "I was getting some fresh air."

She smiled a smile that made him weak and strong at the same time. "Want to ditch the party and run for it?"

He laughed. "Only eight out of that gargantuan crowd are mine, the rest are your guests."

"Oh," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Never mind. It could get really ugly. Besides, my Aunt Xenobia might curse us."

He draped his arm over her shoulders as she led him back into the ballroom of his house. The orchestra played while a hundred and fifty members of the Devereaux-Flora clan danced, ate, and talked. Miguel, Rosa, and Liza sat with Amanda's sister Selena at a table where they were laughing with Grace and her infant son. Amanda left him to visit with her mother and father.

Talon, Nick, Julian, and Acheron closed in around him. Julian congratulated him. "This one's a
"keeper," he said.

Kyrian nodded. "Yes, she is."

"Man," Talon said wistfully. "I'm going to miss our three a.m. bullshit sessions. Wulf's already climbing the walls because he's lost his Doom opponent."

Kyrian smiled as he recalled the lonely nights he had spent with his Dark-Hunter brothers and sisters online. "Tell the Viking not to worry. I'll sneak up every now and again and challenge him."

Acheron took a drink of his champagne. "So, what are you going to do with your short life?"

Kyrian watched Amanda grab three-year-old Niklos up and dance with him. She was going to make a wonderful mother someday. "I'm going to live it. Happily."

Nick had his hands in his pants pockets. "Guess I have to start looking for another Dark-Hunter to serve..." He looked meaningfully at Talon.

"Like hell, Gator bait, don't cast those eyes at me. I don't have Kyrian's patience. Besides, there's only enough room in my cabin for me and my computer."

"Don't worry," Ash assured Nick. "I'll find you someone to serve."

Nick looked horrified. "Please don't do me any favours. I have visions of you sending me up to Alaska to serve Zarek's psycho ass."

Kyrian laughed until Amanda re-joined them with a severe frown on her face. "What is it, baby?" he asked.

"There's, um... a, um..."

The men looked at her expectantly.

"Yes?" Kyrian prompted.

"There's a fleet of UPS trucks in the driveway."

The men exchanged puzzled looks before they all headed out to the front of the house where seven UPS trucks were lined up. One of the drivers approached Kyrian. "Hi," he said in greeting. "I'm looking for a Mr. K. Hunter."

"That would be me," Kyrian said.

"Good. Any idea where you want this stuff?"

"What is all this stuff?"

The driver handed him a clipboard with the names of the people who had sent the items. "Wulf Tryggvason, Zoe, Blade Fitzwalter, Diana Porter, Cael, Brax, Samia, Alien, Kyros, Rogue, Kell, Dragon, Simon, Xander St. James, Alexei Nikolov, Badon Fitzgilbert..." On and on the Dark-Hunter names went. And then one that stood out since it wasn’t a Dark Hunter... Harry Potter.

"You know, Kyrian," Acheron said with a laugh, "you're going to have to buy a bigger house."

"Yeah," Talon said, "but just wait until you have kids. I'll bet you get twice as much as this." They all burst out laughing. "Who's Harry anyway?"
Julian and Kyrian exchanged sad smiles. “Otherwise known as Chares of Athens, Death’s Marked…. I had hoped he’d be here.” Kyrian admitted.

Amanda stepped into Kyrian's embrace and looked up at him. "I think your Dark-Hunter cohorts are going to miss you. You sure you have no regrets?" She tried to cheer him up that Harry had vanished three months back and they assumed he had moved on to another world.

Kyrian kissed her lightly on the cheek. "None whatsoever. You?"

"Never."

Acheron watched as the two newlyweds headed into the house arm in arm.

"Wanna bet where they're going?" Talon asked.

Ash laughed. "No bet, I already know." He turned to the driver and told him to leave the gifts in the living room. "I think my wedding gift will be to hire an unpacking crew in the morning."

Nick laughed. "Let me go show them where to stack it so Kyrian doesn't get ticked."

"I'll help," Talon said.

Ash watched Nick run ahead of the drivers with Talon following at a much more conservative pace. He listened to the darkness and to the sounds of the night that he knew so well. He felt a slight stirring behind him. It was a presence he knew even more intimately than the night. He drained the last of his champagne. "What are you doing here, Artie? I wasn't aware you had an invitation."

A long, gracefully tapered hand touched his shoulder. Even through the tuxedo, he could feel the warmth of her as she caressed him. Unearthly tall and statuesque, she moved like a sleek, sensuous wind. Soft. Elegant. And capable of total destruction when stirred too vigorously. "I'm a goddess," she spoke, her Greek accent smooth and cultured. "I don't need an invitation."

Acheron turned his head to see Artemis standing to his left. Her rich light auburn hair glowed in the moonlight and her iridescent green eyes sparkled. "I hope you've come to wish them well," he said.

She glanced askance at him as she toyed idly with his newly dyed black hair. A sly smile curved her perfect lips. "I do. But the real question is, do you?"

Ash stiffened at the implication. "What kind of question is that? You know I do."

"Just checking to make sure that little green-eyed monster wasn't making you have second thoughts."

He narrowed his gaze at her. "The only green-eyed monster I know is you."

She sucked her breath in sharply at his words, but her smile never wavered. "Oooo," she crooned in a sexually charged tone. "Acheron is getting nasty in his old age." She leaned her chin to rest on his shoulder as she stroked his jaw with a well-manicured fingernail. "It's a good thing I like you, otherwise you'd be baked bread."

He sighed. "Yeah, lucky me. By the way, the correct term is 'toast.'"

Artemis could never keep track of colloquial slang, yet she seemed to enjoy using it. Or misusing it, anyway. There were times he suspected she did it on purpose just to see if he would dare to correct her. "Mmmm," she said, playfully wrapping her arms around his waist. "I like it when you get all feisty."
Acheron stepped away from her. "So who are you transferring to New Orleans to take over Kyrian's spot?"

She licked her lips impishly and mischief glowed in her eyes. But before she could answer, Julian approached them.

"Little Cousin Artemis," he said in greeting.

"Julian of Macedon," she said coldly. "Didn't know you were here."

"Same."

"Well," Acheron said. "Nice to know no introductions are needed."

Artemis passed a threatening glare to Julian. "Yes, well, I wish I could stay, but I can't." Before she vanished, she leaned forward and whispered the answer in Acheron's ear.

He went cold with the news as she twinkled into mist. There were times when Artemis could be the biggest bitch on the planet.

Julian cocked a brow at him. "What did she say?"

"Nothing." The last thing Acheron wanted was to drop that bomb on Julian and Kyrian. And he certainly wasn't going to do it in the middle of a wedding. He turned to Julian. "So, General, you have your best friend back. I'll wager the two of you are going to get into some serious trouble."

Julian laughed. "Not likely."

Somehow Acheron had a hard time believing that. Just as he had a hard time believing that Artemis would leave well enough alone.

*The end of this one.*
Chapter Summary

Dune

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Dune language copied off an online script

Desert Planet – Part I

Polished black boots were silent on the centuries old stone as he made his way up the battlements of Castle Caladan. It was a beautiful old stone and wood building that had served as the home of House Atreides for centuries. He knew exactly where he’d find the young heir after this morning’s news and sure enough the Ducal heir was sitting and staring out at the ocean. At fifteen there was nothing really extraordinary about the boy, he had his father’s black hair and blue/grey eyes although he favoured his mother, the Lady Jessica, in his facial features more. He also appeared so far to be shorter than his parents, although there was time for him to have another growth spurt or two.

“You always find me up here Harry.” Paul whispered as he sensed his approach.

“I think no one else wants to risk the rain.” Harry answered, ducking out of the rain and under the slope of the roof where Paul was sitting.

“You know what the Emperor commands?”

“Gurney told me.” He removed his sodden cape and settled against the cold stone, black uniform blending with dark stone. “Not keen on the idea?”

“It’s a trap, it has to be. Arrakis has been the Harkonnen’s for years, they would never just leave, even under Imperial command.”

“The first step in avoiding a trap is knowing it exists.” Harry quoted the Duke.
“So that’s why we’re going?”

“Your Father has his reasons Paul. To rule Arrakis is to control Spice Production. You have to know there are whispers in the Court about you and Princess Irulan. This would elevate House Atreides to where such a match would never be questioned. You would be the next Emperor.”

“A loveless marriage and a cold throne.”

“Perhaps at first, but in time there might be love. You’ve never met her; how do you know love is impossible?”

“Do you think going is the right thing to do?” Paul stared at the youngest of his teachers. Harry was…. different, unlike anyone else he knew. He was trusted as Paul’s bodyguard, teacher and friend. Harry and Duncan were his only friends anymore, ever since Bronso had turned his back on House Atreides. That had hurt but he had understood, his friend had felt betrayed by his own Father, who it turned out wasn’t his Father. Earl Rhombur had been Paul’s Father’s best friend once, but the ties between the two Great Houses had weakened a lot since his death, and the death of Paul’s older half-brother, Victor. Paul sometimes wondered if Victor would have been named heir, after all Ix had eventually been retaken and House Vernius restored, that meant his Father could have married Princess Kailea and made Victor a legitimate heir. He shook his head, that was all in the past, the future was the danger he needed to focus on now.

“There is danger in the move but to deny Imperial decree would be even more dangerous. The House would be denounced as Renegade. We can move to lessen the danger of Arrakis but without knowing the exact plans we cannot anticipate everything.”

“Why is the Emperor doing this? Father is his cousin and popular with the Landsraad.”

“More popular than the Emperor some say, and that is dangerous. There will be Harkonnen traps on the planet, and in the residence so you will need to stay close and make sure you are always armed.”

“I know, it won’t be anything like home.”

“Come on, last thing we need is you sick.” Harry tugged him up and they headed down and inside. There was a lot of work to do in the coming months before they left Caladan.
Paul jerked awake, heart pounding at the images of his Father and so many deaths. He fought to get his breathing under control, mentally reciting part of the litany against fear as he looked over to find the source of the voice.

“.... you must remember, Paul, that our civilization rests upon a political tripod...the most unstable of structures.”

Paul got up and walked across the room, a little unsteady, even as Dr Yueh’s recording droned on.

“A deceptive balance of power exists between the Emperor, the congress of Great Houses...and the supposedly impartial Spacing Guild with its invulnerable monopoly on interstellar transport...”

Paul ignored the recording as he crossed to the window to look out at the interior of the Spacing Guild Heighliner they were docked within. He heard the door hiss open but didn’t turn to look, still in orbit above Caladan and with Gurney close by there was no danger.

The Lady Jessica walked into the room and took in her son’s form at the window and then the still playing image of their doctor.

“Complicated by a feudal trading culture that turns its back on most science, our society is a tangled web of competing forces that threaten to...”

Jessica walked over to his desk and pressed a button there. The tutorial abruptly ended as Dr. Yueh vanished. “Dr. Yueh would be disappointed.”

“Then he’d know how I feel.” He answered without turning.

“It's never easy to leave one's home, Paul. But think of this as a new adventure. The adventure of a lifetime.” She offered gently. Standing at the window like that he looked so much like his Father.

“You call this an adventure? Giving up our home for...what? Some dry speck of dust...in the middle of nowhere?” he demanded, turning to look at her.
“You are a Duke's son, Paul. You have duties, responsibilities...”

“How could I ever forget? Every day I have to eat "responsibility" for breakfast...and "honour" for dinner.” He cut her off.

“Sarcasm doesn't become you, Paul.” She chided and he turned away, a little ashamed but still upset.

“I just want to see my father.” He whispered.

Jessica moved over and gently touched his cheek. “So, do I.” She caressed his face. Eyes gleaming with that passionate, unconditional love only a mother can have for a son. “The Reverend Mother has arrived. She wants to see you before we depart...” She walked to a closet and started pulling out his formal attire.

Paul watched her a moment. “Why are you afraid of her, Mother?” he asked and she paused, looking over at him. “The pitch of your voice gives you away.”

“She was my teacher at the Bene Gesserit school. Now she's the Emperor's Truthsayer.” She answered with forced calm.

“You haven't answered my question.”

“I've given you more Bene Gesserit training than boys ever get. She wants to see what kind of student you've been.” She finally offered. She had broken all of the rules when it came to her Duke and their son. She left him to dress and he soon joined her in the formal black and red uniform of House Atreides, the crimson Hawk embroidered on his breast.

They walked silently through the ship to where the Reverend Mother was waiting. He could sense there was more to this than his Mother had admitted and he wished Harry hadn't been sent ahead with Duncan. They entered the chamber and Paul stared at the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam who wore a black aba robe with the hood thrown back.

“You've given him your face, Jessica. But the father has given him his eyes...” she stated coolly.

“And his courage.” Jessica tipped her chin up slightly, defensive.
"We shall see. Come here, boy. Let me have a better look at you." She commanded but he didn’t move and Jessica stiffened slightly in alarm. "If you know what's good for you, you'll do as I say." Her voice had deepened and seemed to echo slightly. Paul involuntarily took a step forward but then froze, recognising that she was using the Voice against him.

He clasped his hands together, breathing deeply. "I'll be the judge of what's good for me."

Mohiam glared at him with surprise...and not a little alarm. His resistance was unexpected. "Your mother has taught you many things, I see." Paul remained silent and unmoving. "She tells me...you dream."

Paul suddenly turned to his mother, a look of betrayal sweeping over him.

"Your Reverence, if I could..."

"You're dismissed, Jessica." She snapped and without another word Jessica curtsied and left the room, much to Paul’s shock.

"Since when is it permitted to treat the Lady Jessica as a common servant?" he demanded, angry on her behalf and Mohiam chuckled.

"She was a common servant. My servant. And a good one, too...until she was sixteen...and your father, took her...." she shook her head and then focused back on him. "Now, I would like to hear about your dreams."

"They're just dreams." He tried to shrug it off, not wanting to discuss anything with this woman.

"About what?" This time her use of the Voice was even more powerful and Paul stiffened.

"Men dying..." he finally admitted.

"Which men?"
“I don't know.”

“You're lying. What else?”

“Sometimes I see strange people...worshipping water...and singing...a strange name...my name, I think...and then...wars...terrible wars...millions dying....” he bit out angrily.

“PAUL.” She commanded.

“...sometimes there’s a girl...a skinny girl...and she frightens me...her eyes are strange...blue, all blue...”

“And do you know this girl?”

“No.”

“What do you think they mean, these dreams of yours?”

“Why don't you tell me?” he demanded, his own voice reverberating with the power of the Voice, shocking her.

The Reverend Mother studied Paul intensely for a moment. Then she pulled a small box from her robes. “Do you know what this is?” she held it out and Paul studied the black metallic cube with one open side. “It is a test, young Atreides.”

“A test for what?”

“Put your hand inside...and we'll see.” She commanded with the Voice and Paul moved closer, slowly reaching out to put his hand inside.

“What's in it?”

“Pain.” She whispered and Paul started to jerk back but she grabbed his throat too fast for him to react and he felt the almost touch of something cold. “I hold the Gom Jabbar at your throat, young Atreides. Keep your hand in the box and live. Remove it and die.” She commanded, closing her
eyes, going into a trance.

Paul looked down at the box as the pain began, it wasn’t much to start but it began to increase, further and further until he was fighting not to move. He glanced towards the doors, did his Mother know?

“She won’t save you.” Mohiam whispered.

"I must not fear...fear is the mind killer..."

“That’s right, boy. Pray...”

“...I will face my fear...and it will pass through me...and when it’s gone there will be nothing...only I will remain..."

Her eyes flew open in terror as she fell back...exhausted. Paul looked down, the pain had stopped. As if it never happened. “No woman child ever withstood that much pain.” She whispered in shock. Paul slowly held up his hand, there wasn’t a mark on it. “You're a gifted boy, young Atreides. But you have much to learn.”

The door behind Paul suddenly opened. Jessica stood in it, shuddering with relief as she realised her son still lived. She moved towards him but Paul backed away, glaring at her reproachfully.

“You should have warned me.”

“She was forbidden!”

“I'm sorry...” Jessica called and Paul looked her in the eye before leaving the room. “Paul...” but he didn’t turn. She looked to her teacher who moved towards her and they walked together through the halls since the Reverend Mother would not be accompanying them to Arrakis.

“You were supposed to have a daughter.” Mohiam was as mad now as she had been fifteen years ago when the child had been born, but not the daughter they needed. “You’ve hopelessly complicated matters. An Atreides daughter could've have been wed to the Harkonnen heir. The feud between the Houses could have been ended.”
“My Duke wanted a son.” Jessica stated firmly.

“You arrogant girl. Putting his desires above our interests! How dare you turn your back on the centuries of our breeding programs?” She snapped back.

“I'll pay for my mistakes.”

“And your son will pay with you!” She hissed before calming as they neared where her ship was docked. “We'll do what we can. He may be worth saving. But for the father...nothing.” They finally stopped at the entrance to the Atreides Frigate docking bay where a small but elegant Imperial Shuttle Craft was moored. Armed Imperial Troops flanked the bay doors. “Our missionaries have done their work on Arrakis. Cultivated the myths of the peasants there. If necessary, you will exploit them.”

“Predicting the future...then plotting to make it so...”

“It may be your only chance.” She turned abruptly and glided away to her shuttle, leaving Jessica standing alone. For the Father…. nothing, she bit back a sob and schooled her features as she’d been taught, letting none see her grief as she walked away.

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Harry didn’t like Arrakis one bit. Though he was grateful they’d traded their black and red uniforms for lighter weight tan and green or else they’d all be collapsing from heat stroke. The Duke and his family would be arriving soon and security was yet to be to his liking. There were simply too many avenues of access to cover and too many people coming and going.

“Keeping watch?”

Harry turned and bowed to his Duke. “Always My Lord.”

“Very good. I would like you to meet the shuttle.”

“Why not Duncan?”
“I have another mission for him.”

“I will leave immediately.” He bowed again and left, heading for the hanger.

Atreides frigates, 'thopters and other military hardware were parked on the tarmac outside the huge hangar doors. Soldiers were everywhere unloading crates and vehicles. Harry waited by a mag-lev hover-carriage but he grinned and straightened up as Jessica and Paul walked into the hanger from a transport shuttle, accompanied by a tense and alert contingent of Atreides bodyguards.

“Harry, dear friend...” Jessica hugged him briefly and Harry returned it.

“Milady. You have never looked more beautiful.” She laughed at his words and Harry turned to grin at Paul. “And you, my prized student, you've been practising hard?”

“As I can Harry.” They clasped hands briefly.

“Then let’s get you out of this heat. Not that the Keep is much better. Our Duke is impatient to see you.” He ushered them into the hover-carriage. They were soon on their way through the sandy city.

“Such a dusty little garrison town...” Jessica whispered.

“A testament to the harsh climate of the place.” Harry admitted.

Jessica noticed a man in the street, standing at an old, wobbly cart. “Soo-soo-Sook! Soo-soo-Sook! Ikhu-eigh! Ikhu-eigh! Soo-soo-Sook!”

“What's he doing?” She asked as she took in the small crowd quickly gathering around him...urgently shoving cartons and jugs at him.

“A water-seller, milady. You’ll never need deal with them. The cistern at the palace holds fifty thousand gallons and it's always kept full.” Harry quickly explained.

“What's wrong with their eyes?” Paul asked as he stared at them. Clusters of strange looking people
in shapeless sack clothing, wrinkled, prune-like skin, undernourished bodies, most of their faces hidden behind rough burlap-like scarves.

“Those are Fremen, desert people. It's the spice, everywhere. In the air, the food. It saturates the blood and gives the blue-in-blue eyes.” He explained what Dr Yueh had told him a few days back.

“They seem so...frail.”

“Don't underestimate the Fremen, milady. The Harkonnen did and often regretted it.” He warned, there was danger in these people, he could feel it. Finally, they reached the Keep and Duke Leto hurries down grand staircase into the Great Hall to meet Paul and Jessica. Paul was stiff and formal, unsure, until Leto stepped up and pulled him into a tight hug.

And then he turned to Jessica. They took each other's hands, drinking each other in with their eyes. “Finally, beauty has arrived to hold back the wilderness.” He whispered, gently brushing a few stay strands of hair back from her face and she smiled.

They moved into the Keep where Fremen servants were unloading and moving boxes and trunks. Atreides soldiers were scanning walls, floors, ceilings. Others were installing equipment or patrolling. Leto led Jessica, Paul and Harry through the confusion. “Guards everywhere. We didn't have to live like this on Caladan...” Jessica shook her head, not liking it.

“The family apartments are in the West Wing. And now that you're here, I'll have the furniture brought up...”

Jessica stopped him, confused. “But...where have you been staying then?”

“I have quarters in one of the barracks.”

“My poor Leto...” She teased gently and he shrugged.

“Perfectly comfortable. Good to be close to the men in the early going. Besides...” He dropped his volume so only she could hear. “I wanted to wait for you before truly settling in.”
While they spoke, Paul wandered across the room. “What are these?” He was standing by the massive doors to the formal Dining Hall. And on the wall beside them was a row of ornate tile washbasins, with gold towel racks above. As Paul passed his hands under the faucets gloriously clear, sparkling water flowed.

“An old custom, apparently. Guests ceremoniously splash water on the floor after washing their hands.” Harry demonstrated, dropping a towel to the floor when he was finished. Sure enough, a servant woman appeared as if out of nowhere and scooped up the dropped towel in a silver bowl, vanishing again just as suddenly. “They save the squeezing’s.”

“Demeaning custom.” Jessica began to comment only to be interrupted as Thufir approached from another room.

“Idaho and Potter have prepared for us well, milord.” He reported, nodding at Harry who grinned in return. No one had any idea just how well he’d prepared.

“Duncan? Where's Duncan? I want to show him some moves I tried out on Gurney...” He and Hawat exchanged a knowing smile.

“I've got him preoccupied with official business at the moment. You're going to have be patient.” Leto chided his son gently, seeing his disappointment and he felt a flash of regret. He had Rhombur at his side for years, even into his reign as Duke. Paul had no one his age or rank to be with, only Harry and Duncan who were both older and not Noble born.

“I've assembled the General Staff as you requested.” Thufir told the Duke before retreating from the hall.

“No... not there....” Jessica called, gaining everyone’s attention. Several servants were mounting a scarlet tapestry on the wall with the Atreides crest, a proud and magnificent hawk in crimson, on it. “That hangs in the foyer. The first thing visitors must see. This is House Atreides now.” She turned to Leto who smiled warmly. The servants muttered to themselves as they removed the tapestry. A strange, complex language. But... “Ya malu al-ak ma Harkonnen. Al-diq la dume tanquiyya.” (We are not like the Harkonnen. You will be treated with respect.) The servants froze, she was speaking their language and they were more awed than chagrined.

Two sharp claps sounded and they all turned to see a small grey-haired woman, wrinkled and withered, with blue-in-blue eyes. “From now on, we speak the Lady's language at all times!” She commanded and the servants nodded.
“The Shadout Mapes, milady. Head of household staff....” Dr Yueh introduced as he joined them in the hall and the woman bowed to Jessica.

“Show milady to our apartments, Mapes. See to it she has anything she needs.” Leto ordered and then briefly took Jessica’s hand. “I’ll join you there after the briefing.” He promised.

Paul watched the servants re-hang the tapestry, especially one of them...a girl about his age with Fremen eyes. His stare made her nervous enough she dropper her end of the rug. He smiled and moved to help her.

“Come, Paul. The men are waiting.” Leto called

“Me? Right now?” he’d never been asked to attend before.

“It's time you participated.” Leto left the hall, Harry falling into a protective position and Paul reluctantly joined them, throwing a glance back at the servant girl who wouldn’t look at him. Jessica watched them go until she felt Mapes' stare.

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Harry slipped from Paul’s room, the boy fast asleep and never realising Harry had been there. He hadn’t been able to protect the room earlier as he hadn’t been sure which room the young Lord would choose. Now he would know instantly should there be danger within the room and no harm would come to Paul inside. He returned to his own, smaller, room and slipped into bed, knowing he would need his rest in the coming days.

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Jessica and Leto lay tangled together in bed, relaxed for the first time in days as his fingers ran through her hair. “Perhaps I should have taken House Atreides renegade...escaped to the darkest corners of the universe...”

“You're too honourable for that, my love...” She answered, kissing his shoulder.

“No. I'm too fed up. This endless feud stops here.”

“The Harkonnen are a rogue clan, Leto. No matter how much prestige they try to buy, they'll never have the respect you’ve earned.” She tried to soothe him, he was under too much stress.
“My respect can't buy us peace. I would trade it all for a place somewhere, anywhere...if we could be alone...if Paul could be safe...if the only thing I'd ever have to worry about was your happiness. Perhaps then I could finally make you my...”

She quickly leant up to silence him with kiss. “Please. Don't talk about things that can't be. You belong to your time. And I was bred to my destiny. Even if I were able to go back and choose, I would change nothing.” She swore to him and this time he was the one to lean over and kiss her.

Several hours later Leto was sleeping peacefully, probably for the first time in many nights. But he was alone in the bed as Jessica was at the window, staring out into the Arrakeen night, her face a tapestry of emotions. The sharp, severe cliffs of the shield wall mountains, slicing magnificently into a stunning purple sky, the rising heat from the ground making everything shimmer. For a moment, she allowed herself to enjoy this stark beauty. But then...something flashed in the mountains.

BLINK...BLINK BLINK...BLINK BLINK...BLINK Rhythmic. Predictable. A code
BLINK...BLINK BLINK...BLINK BLINK...BLINK

There it was again. A different pattern this time. And Jessica suddenly realised what it was, someone signalling. But who? And to whom?

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“What about the men we left behind?” Paul asked as they moved across the tarmac.

“Send a ship to search for them.” Leto commanded.

“They were right beside the worm when it came up, milord.” Gurney argued.

“Send a ship anyway!” Leto snapped, his tone leaving no room for debate.

“When God ordains a man's time to die, he directs that man to the proper place...” Kynes told them and Leto turned angrily to him. But Kynes met his stare, almost as if the comment were directed at the Duke, himself.

“I want the pilots of that missing Carryall delivered to me personally. Someone is going to pay for this waste!” And with that, he stormed away, Paul in tow.

“This is a different kind of man.”
“You've lived among Harkonnen scum too long, I see.” Gurney commented.

“He risked his life...and that of his son to save the men instead of the spice... A leader like that could have commanded fanatic loyalty...”

Gurney was struck by Kynes' use of the past tense. But the gaunt "Planetologist" quickly moved off.

“I hear you had a rather interesting trip.” Harry called and Gurney turned to the younger man. Even after years of serving together he still found Harry Potter an enigma. He had walked into the Castle one day and never left, slowly working up the ranks until he didn’t really hold one. And yet, he trusted him, even before he had nearly died protecting Paul during the War of Assassins. It had been Duncan and Harry who had run with Paul to keep the boy safe and they had succeeded.

“That is one way to put it.” He began walking and Harry moved with him as he ordered a ship to be sent to look for survivors. Both men knew none would be found.

Emergency Klaxons were wailing loudly as harry stumbled from his room, yanking his shirt on. The wards on Paul’s room had ben tripped oddly and he was worried for the boy. He saw Thufir and several guards standing by a small hole in the wall. Staring in at a crawlspace just big enough for a man. Thufir turned away and spoke into his communicator, “I want him alive!” that was enough to have him dashing off, an assassin had gotten past security.

A dark, swarthy man with short hair and thick eyebrows, moved quickly through the confusion of the halls.

“You...there...hold!” a guard called, spotting him.

The dark man froze, turning slowly as the guard approached. Suddenly the dark man pulled a small gun from his cloak and fired, driving the guard back into the wall where he slumped to the ground even as the man took off around a corner. He kept running, guards soon in pursuit, firing at him but not hitting. He dashed into a dead end and looked around but there was no way out. He raised his gun to fire and the guards scattered, he went to run again only to run right into a solid arm, the blow catching him in the throat and sending him staggering back before a booted foot connected with his skull and he dropped.
"I wanted him alive." Thufir panted and Harry smirked.

"Trust me, he’ll regret being alive in the morning with that blow."

"Search him thoroughly and then lock him up." Thufir ordered even as he and Harry walked away, they had to report to the Duke. "Nice move."

"Thanks."

They entered the office to find Gurney already there and the Duke enraged, he slammed his hand down on the desk. "They've tried to take the life of my son!"

"He looks local." Thufir admitted as they looked at the screen showing the unconscious man in the cell.

"Nothing to identify him?" Gurney asked and Harry shook his head.

"Everything was local. We’ll have to wait to interrogate him."

"Harkonnen, surely. And not working alone." Thufir stated darkly and no one there disagreed. The second move against them had been made, how long until a third?

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"Worthy to be your first-born, hmmm?" Count Fenring asked his friend and Emperor as they watched the slender young woman work under the close watch of the Reverend Mother.

"They tell me her ambitions tend more to the literary than the political." He admitted in disgust, why had his wife born only daughters? The Bene Gesserit’s orders no doubt. What good did having no heir to the Throne do them though?

"Never underestimate the political uses of an awakened mind, Majesty. Subterfuge and cunning are often better allies than a fierce heart and strong back, hmmm?"

"All she lacks is the primacy of our gender.” There was an edge of bitterness, even betrayal in his
tone as he continued to watch her, she was graceful at least. Of his five daughters, she was the most beautiful, an elegant form and yet with no apparent interest in what made the empire work. Would she be nothing more than a pretty thing on her husband’s arm?

“Then...hmmmaaahhh...you must marry her well. Someone with a suitably pliable personality, hmmm?”

“Too bad it won’t be that young Atreides. A most admirable lad, I told. Good union of breeding and training...” A strange distance swept over the Emperor, a sadness, almost. If only Irulan had been born sooner or Leto later and perhaps things would be different. But they were too invested now to back out. “We must arrange to send Duke Leto a token of our love. He must continue to think of us fondly...” His eyes narrowed as he watched his daughter.

Across in the gardens Irulan finally looks up, meeting her father's calculating stare. It was not a comforting look.

Paul wandered the darkness, lost in troubled thought. The distant chatter of the banquet floated in the air like a bad memory. He knew it had been wrong to leave, especially as he was the Princess’ escort but he hadn’t been able to stay and pretend politeness to those people any longer. Where every word had so many meanings… Even after two months he was having trouble adjusting the different attitudes of Dune. He stilled as he heard music…. not a baliset, no this was from a wind instrument. He quickened his pace and found Harry sitting at a table on the balcony, playing softly on the flute. “Well, here at least is honest merrymaking.” He proceeded to help himself to a glass of golden, foamy draught from a pitcher next to Harry.

“Careful, young one. Spice beer can go to your head before you know it.” He warned teasingly as he paused in his playing but Paul ignored him, taking a long drink.

“Play, Harry. Let's you and I at least have some peace...”

Harry chuckled. “Right. When the son of my beloved Duke orders me to relax, then I intend to do so.” He drained his own glass, not that it would do much for him, and poured another before going back to playing, picking a merrier tune this time.

“Is that how you really feel, Harry? About my father...? Beloved?”
Harry sighed and lowered the flute again. “If I didn’t know better, I’d take those words for an accusation.” He warned. “Your Father is one of the best men I have known, a ruler who truly cares for every one of his people. That is a rare thing Paul, and something to be cherished. I would die to protect him, to protect you.”

“I’ve shamed myself doubting you Harry.” He looked away, unable to keep staring into the intense green eyes.

“No. It’s we who should be ashamed. Men like me. Unable to turn this society away from its addiction to conspiracy and betrayal. Turning boys like you into men before their time...” Harry shook his head and they sat quietly together a moment until Paul slammed his mug down. Grabbing a cushion from one of the chairs he stuffed it under his shirt and jumped up on the ledge.

“Gentlemen and ladies... (I use the terms loosely, of course) ...” Paul’s words made Harry laugh before he began playing softly to accompany Paul’s act. “...I, Baron Harkonnen, in my infinite wisdom have decided that the great seal of our venerable house...that confused and ugly chimera, the Griffin...no longer adequately represents the ambition of our appetites.” He announced and Harry picked up the tempo. “Therefore, and henceforth, in conclusion and forevermore, ergo and etcetera...our ample and royal person shall be symbolized by that more glorious and noble creature...the one I perspire each day to resemble...” Harry choked on a laugh, the note wavering. “From this day forward and throughout the universe...we shall no longer be known as House Harkonnen. We shall be...House HOG!”

Paul staggered clumsily around the corridor. Legs sagging and buckling under his imagined tonnage...until suddenly...The music petered out. Paul slowed down, confused... until he saw Princess Irulan down the corridor, staring in amusement at Paul's performance.

“Now I know why they say your skill in a fight is exceeded only by your mastery of the flute, Harry Potter.” She smiled at the man who bowed and backed away, leaving the two younger ones alone. “Is it Atreides custom to abandon an honoured guest without even the courtesy of a lame excuse?”

“Forgive me, Highness.” Paul bowed, he had done the wrong thing and he knew it. For a moment, neither one spoke. She walked over to the table and poured herself a large cup from Harry's pitcher. “Careful. Spice beer can go to your head before you know it.”

“So, I’ve noticed.” She smirked, meaning him, before taking a long swallow. Sensing his stare, she turned back to him. “You expected someone more...delicate, perhaps?”
“Refined was the word I had mind, actually.”

“There's an ancient saying I've learned to trust: "Never judge a book by its cover.” She smirked at his disbelieving look. “We're not all that different, Paul Atreides...you and me.”

Paul's mood darkened at her words. “You don't know what you're talking about.”

“Oh, I've heard all about the moody Paul, the grim Paul. Angry and unhappy Paul, who's been exiled to Arrakis...where, poor boy, he'll one day inherit responsibility for the greatest treasure in the universe.” She answered lightly and yet slightly taunting as she moved away from the table, her gown making a soft sound as it moved across the polished floors. A gown of Butterflies didn’t really fit in on such a planet, it made her almost otherworldly.

Paul remembered his battlement talk with Harry so many months ago…of the talk of a possible match between them. Did her presence now mean it was an actual possibility? Or was it meant to lower their defences? “...and a never-ending struggle to defend it.” He chose to point out instead of mentioning his thoughts.

“We both suffer the solitude of our birthright.”

“Except tomorrow you'll return to the comfort of your palaces on Kaitain...”

“To the confinement of its perfect gardens and lonely apartments...” She interrupted.

“...to your servants and entourage...”

“...with their slavish flattery and cautious conversation...” Both were smiling slightly at the word game now.

“...as the heir to an Emperor...!” surely, he won with that!

“...who dams my mother for bearing daughters instead of sons...” She finished bitterly. Not even his second wife, chosen after her mother’s death, had managed to bear an heir and Irulan knew the woman wasn’t Bene Gesserit.

“You're mocking me.” He hissed and she shook her head, smiling coyly.
“No. I'm trying to interest you.” She knew the rumours too and if she had any say in it then yes, young Paul Atreides would one day sit the lion throne. Irulan moved closer to Paul who remained still. “Well...are you going to dance with me, or just stand there looking confused?” She asked softly as haunting flute music started up again nearby. She took his arms and he settled them on her hips as they began to move slowly. “I didn't want to come here, you know. Being an ornament of my father's diplomacy is not my idea of a good time. But you turned out to be more complicated than your reputation...” She paused, looking up at him. “And I like complicated.” She swayed against him and Paul stared down at her, finding her eyes riveting. But then he caught movement and broke off, seeing her Sardaukar body guards behind her. Irulan finally turned to see them, an exasperated sigh escaping her.

“We've been looking for you, Highness.”

“So, you've found me.”

“Have you been hurt?” The Captain demanded.

“Be still, Captain.” She snapped at him, angry their moment had been interrupted.

“The Princess has been under my protection...” Paul tried to calm things down and she rolled her eyes.

“Oh, please...” She muttered.

Harry seemed to melt out of the shadows, flute gone as he moved closer to Paul and her men tensed, recognising him and his reputation on the battlefield.

“Stand down, Captain...” Irulan snapped, seeing them tense.

“Harry...”

“I said stand down, Captain!” Tension was thick, one false move and it would end badly.

“It's late, Highness. The Shuttle awaits.” The Captain spoke, keeping a wary eye on the Atreides man, he was outnumbered yes but that meant nothing with this man.
“I’m not ready to go.” Irulan raised her head in defiance.

“You father left strict orders…”

She turned to Paul. “You see?”

Perhaps we should be the adults here. Set the example for our hot-tempered friends.” He offered quietly and she laughed briefly before touching his hand.

“You are more interesting than you appear, Paul Atreides. I hope this won’t be our last encounter.” She curtsied slightly and he bowed to her. “My father will no doubt reward you for such mindless obedience, Captain…” And with that she swept away down the corridor, pausing only briefly to glance back at Paul.

And with that, she sweeps away down the corridor. Pausing only briefly to glance back at Paul.

Paul was clearly intrigued and bewildered by this brief "encounter" with Irulan, to Harry’s amusement. Paul picked up his glass of spice beer and took a long drink.

“You should return to the party Paul.” Harry clasped his shoulder. “Though, I think she likes you.” He teased and Paul blushed slightly before going back downstairs.

Harry slipped into the office, seeing the strangers, Fremen, and Duncan along with the Duke and Heir.

“Paul...see Duncan and our friends out.” Leto ordered and the group left. Once Leto was along Harry stepped forward, startling him. “If other Fremen match this Stilgar, we'll serve each other well.” Leto told him, guessing Harry hadn’t heard everything.

“You asked me to inquire about the shouting the other day. The words they were calling out at your shuttle.”

“Maa...deee...something or other.”
“It means messiah. They have a legend here. A prophecy...that a leader will come to them from off-world...child of a Bene Gesserit, to guide them to true freedom.” He explained, he doubted it was a true prophecy, this world had no magic, more likely it was a planted one, probably by the Sisterhood.

“Paul? They think Paul could be this...messiah?” Leto looked out the window at the town.

“These are a simple people, milord. They survive on hope.” Harry offered. “The assassin has finally talked. From his ramblings, it appears Rabban was behind the attempt and I believe without permission from the Baron.”

“Why?”

“Everything so far points to a long game my lord, this attempt was…. rash, hurried, the move of someone with little patience. Something Rabban is known for, he lashes out at the slightest thing.”

“So, it would seem....” Leto leant against his desk, he was so tired of this.

“He did mention one other thing.” Harry moved to lean against the windowsill.

“And?”

“A traitor amongst the Household.”

“Confirmation of our suspicions or a ploy to drive us apart?”

“It could be either.”

“Who would you suspect?” Leto asked, he didn’t suspect Harry. Harry Potter had served his father and him for too long and far too loyally to ever move against them. Not even he knew the man’s origins, though he suspected he had noble blood in him and perhaps Bene Gesserit training. No, Harry would never endanger them, especially Paul. Leto had seen the two together many times over the years as Harry had moved from teacher to friend.
“Of the close Household? Dr Yueh or Thufir are the only two.”

“Why them? Surely Yueh’s Suk conditioning…”

“No form of conditioning is unbreakable Sir. With the right lever, he could be turned and his wife is still missing. As for Thufir… a Mentat is driven by logic and trained to ignore emotional ties. If betrayal became logical then yes, he may turn.”

“Duncan and Gurney?”

“Too driven by their love for you. And both are fiercely loyal to Paul as well. You would have to destroy a few planets to turn them against you.”

“And…Jessica?” He turned away from his… what was Harry in his Household? He held no real rank and yet all would obey him. He was teacher, friend, bodyguard….so many roles for one man.

Harry chuckled. “How could you doubt her? She was raised Bene Gesserit, to do anything the Sisterhood commands…and she betrayed all that out of love for you.” At Leto’s startled look he continued. “You didn’t know? They ordered her to have a daughter, to bring House Atreides and Harkonnen together through marriage. Instead she bore you a son, an heir and a way to ease your grief. She would kill or die to protect you and her son.”

“She never told me…how do you know?” he asked but harry just smirked and Leto shook his head, letting him keep his secrets.

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An ominous quiet pervaded the atmosphere as Leto wearily made his way along the dim passageways when he saw a figure on the ground several yards away. A cloaked woman… “Jessica!” He rushed to her, rolling her over but it wasn’t Jessica, it was Mapes.

“Traitor…guards’ dead…shields…the shields...” she gasped out and he gently removed the knife from her back, it didn’t matter, either way she would die. A look of sheer horror swept over her, she tried to speak but a death rattle escaped instead and her eyes glassed over.

An explosion rocked the Keep and Leto was almost thrown off his feet as Emergency Klaxons
began wailing. Leto staggered to his feet but something stung him in the neck. He collapsed to the floor and managed to pull the dart free. Feet stepped out of the darkness and Leto strained to look up, his vision blurry. But he could vaguely make out a familiar form. “Yueh...?!!!”

The Suk doctor knelt down with tears in his eyes. “God forgive me. I had no choice.”

“Why....why...????” he whispered, unable to speak louder, his vision fading.

“Because I need to save my wife.”

Leto could only shake his head, unable to comprehend.

“We haven’t much time. The Harkonnen will be in the palace soon...” And with that, he quickly took something from his pocket, a small pellet in the shape of a human tooth. “I am giving you the final revenge, milord. For this terrible thing, I have done to you and your family. You will have your revenge. I promise. Just remember...the tooth. The tooth, milord. When you have the Baron face to face.... remember the tooth!” And he inserted the pellet into Leto's mouth, replacing a tooth Leto had lost in a fight years before.

Jessica woke with a start, groggy, but she could hear something…. explosions! In the palace and outside. She scrambled from the bed. “LETO....PAUL......!!!!” she cried out as she staggered and then fell, staring at her legs as nothing moved. So, she began dragging herself to the door. First her right arm went slack and then the left as she crashed to the floor with a sickening thud. She’d been drugged…. how…she was Bene Gesserit…her milk…Yueh. “I can’t.... move....” Darkness finally claimed her.

Harry rolled out of bed, coming awake the instant the wards he’d set were tripped, after five months on the planet it seemed it was time for the third move. He flung out his magic and felt the oncoming army, far larger than anything their information said the Harkonnen could gather…. which meant someone else was helping them. He disregarded his uniform, slipping into black clothes and light armour, aiming for stealth as he belted on not only his knife and lasgun but sword and shield belt. Not that he could use the shield if anyone was using a lasgun, not unless he wanted the whole Keep to go up. He slipped from his room and through the halls as klaxons began wailing. He knew his job, get to Paul and get him to safety. For now, the wards were slowing the attackers but they wouldn’t hold those forces back indefinitely.
The Keep shock with an explosion, weaker than it would have been without his protections but still strong enough to rock the building. As soldiers began moving into the Keep, Harry killed those he came across, wishing his room was closer to Paul’s, that was a misstep he would not repeat. Apparating was out of the question, something about Arrakis affected magic negatively. It happened sometimes, usually on worlds where he really needed his full magical skill. He figured it was Death’s way of keeping him from getting too reliant on one skill set.

He slammed the door open, rolling into the room only to find it empty, swearing as he took off again, anger growing as he saw people he’d known for years and the scared locals all fighting the invading army. He slammed a soldier into the wall and yanked his shirt down…. Sardaukar. So, the Emperor had sent his killers to help despite sending Irulan as his envoy of love to the Duke. He quickly called a new friend, hoping the offer remained.

“Shields, are down everywhere. Five legions are attacking Arrakeen. Two more bearing down on Carthag. Three at Arsunt...they knew precisely where to hit!” A soldier yelled at Thufir as he tried to direct the troops.

“THE DUKE! WHERE IS THE DUKE?”

“Not in quarters, sir. We can't find the Young Master either!”

A fury of emotions swept over Hawat. Rage. Despair.... “BASTARDS!!!!!!!”

“Thufir!” Harry yelled, snapping him out of it. “Tuek will take any who can make it to him, get the men out! We’re not winning this here. Sardaukar are among the Harkonnen.”

“Retreat?”

“Live to fight another day.”

“The Duke!”

“I’m going after them. Move!”
“You heard him!” Thufir called out. He didn’t like it but Harry was right, they could do nothing if they were dead.

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Baron Harkonnen stood at the window watching artillery fire pock-mark the mountains in the distance.

“What's left of them have retreated to the Shield Mountain caves. We'll finish them there.” A soldier reported.

“No prisoners.” He ordered and the soldier moved off to pass the word. They didn’t realise just how many had gotten out with the help of the smugglers and even locals, thanks to the work of Harry and Duncan in making friends. “As soon as the city is pacified, Piter, remove the Sardaukar troops to our frigates. No trace of the Emperor's involvement here must ever be found.” When there was no answer he turned. “Piter...?”

DeVries was standing behind Jessica...bound and gagged. Piter has his face buried in her thick, luxuriant hair. “A pity she has to remain gagged. She has such a magnificent mouth...” She squirmed in the chair at his touch, unable to do anything.

“A pretty mouth with the sting of a scorpion.” He warned and then walked over. “We're well aware of your Bene Gesserit witchery, my dear.” He knew too well after what that bitch had done to him. She’d come to him wanting another child, she’d gotten what she deserved he just hadn’t realised what the witches could do even drugged. “Perhaps I should cut your vocal chords. Then Piter could have his way with you.” Jessica struggled against her bonds, but she was too drugged and tightly restrained. “But then again, perhaps not. No blood on my hands. I have no idea what's happened to you. When I see the Emperor's wrinkled old bitch of a Truthsayer again, I suppose I'll just have to say......"dunno" And he started to laugh. Louder and louder...

DeVries signalled a nearby guard.... who immediately walked over and picked up Jessica. “Into the desert. Let the worms clean up the mess. The bodies must never be found.”

No one saw the guard on the ‘thopter fall without a sound only to be replaced.

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The Duke was propped up at his desk, a glazed look in his eyes, clearly paralysed but alert. He could see the Baron across the room with DeVries and several other Harkonnen guards.
“...my half of the bargain, Baron. I promised you the Duke, and there he is...” Dr Yueh spat, clearly agitated.

“And a delicious sight it is, Doctor.”

“And... now it's time for your half.”

“And... believe it or not...I'm a man of my word.” His smile was deadly.

“Where is she!? You promised we'd be reunited. You said you'd free her if I did what you asked.” Yueh demanded.

“Your wife is free, my good doctor. Completely free...” He floated across the room with his suspensors to a large draped object, yanking the velvet curtains away to reveal a glass sarcophagus with a beautiful woman within. “...free of her mortal coil...free of her physical cage. I freed her.”

Yueh approaches the sarcophagus, trembling, unable to compute the deviousness of what's just been done to him. It had all been for nothing…what had he done?

“I promised you'd be reunited.” The Baron nodded at Piter. DeVries stepped in behind Yueh and drove a dagger deep into his back. “And I'm a man of my word, as now you can see.”

As Yueh sinks, he managed to point a cursing finger at the Baron. “You...think...you've defeated...me.” he gasped out before collapsing to the floor, dead.

“Never trust a traitor. Not even one you create.” The Baron chuckled and then turned back to Leto. “Well, my noble Duke, enjoying the show? I hope so. I've kept you alive so that you could witness every precious moment of your betrayal.”

“Paul...” Leto managed to whisper.

“The boy? Dunno. Left him to the desert. He and that gorgeous woman of yours. Had to pry Piter off her. But we couldn't have noble blood on our hands now, could we? The Emperor was quite insistent about that.” He smirked as a small groan escaped Leto at that. “Yes, your beloved Emperor.
Just goes to show...never get more popular than the boss...unless you intend to sack him...” The Baron jerked away in mock horror and embarrassment. “Did I say that? How impolitic of me. I must be spending too much time with my idiot nephew, Rabban. Oh well, you won't tell, will you, dear man?”

“Perhaps we should get on with it, then...” Piter offered.

“Get on with it!? GET ON WITH IT!? This is KANLY, Piter! Vendetta! And I'm going to savour it! My family has hated the Atreides for generations. They've been the sand in our eye, the stink at our meals...these arrogant Atreides and their pompous honour...standing in our way...always standing in our way...” He was floating around the room in a mad trance now. “I want Leto to appreciate the beauty of what I've done to him. I want him to choke on the utter disgrace of his defeat...”

Leto strained to keep the Baron in focus, struggling to remember Yueh's last words to him. Straining to move his mouth!

“I want him to know that I, Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, am the instrument of his family's demise...the extinction of House Atreides...and the ascendance of House Harkonnen!!!”

“The tooth...” Leto croaked, interrupting the Barons reverie.

“What? What did he say?” he demanded. Leto's mouth was moving but no sound was coming out. “What's he saying, Piter?”

DeVries moved in on Leto who smiled. “The....tooth....” DeVries suddenly understood but it was too late as Leto cracked the tooth and a grey toxic vapour spewed from Leto’s mouth. DeVries staggered back. Coughing, gagging. The guards in the room began coughing.

“WHAT'S HAPPENING...!??” The Baron bellowed as DeVries collapsed. A guard twitched spasmodically and staggered for the door. “NOOOOO!!!!!!!” He flew across the room, getting to the door first. He slammed it in the guard's face. The Baron pounded his hand against the palm-lock, sealing the room, leaning back against it and listening to the helpless pounding on the other side. And then he realized that he was still alive. He survived. He started laughing, a terrible, monstrous howl. “NEED YOU MORE PROOF OF WHAT HEAVEN'S CHOICE IS!? ATREIDES IS DEAD...WHILE HARKONNEN LIVES!”

Jessica and Paul, bound by cabin straps, lay in the back of a ‘thopter, the two guards at the controls. Outside, ‘thopters and ships flew past them toward the city. The distant fires played over Jessica's face as she saw Yueh's triangular tattoo scratched in the cabin roof. Yueh's sign, he’d left a satchel.
So perhaps his betrayal wasn’t total.

“I’d like to have some fun before we kill her.” The guard not flying commented, gaze raking over her and Jessica used that, writhing suggestively. She could use this, buy Paul an opportunity.

“Of course, what did you think?” the one flying asked and there was something about that voice…. Jessica looked to Paul. But they both looked back at the sound of a pained grunt and the guard slumped, dead. The man flying pulled off the black helmet. “Are you hurt Paul?”

“HARRY!” Paul tried to sit up but he was still restrained.

“Of course. I’ll untie you once I find somewhere safe to land.” He flew as far as he dared and then aimed for some rocks. “Got to make it look like they crashed, hang on.” They dropped fast and then the ship hit the rocks, bouncing back up before skidding across the rough surface, scraping the bottom of the ‘thopter but they finally came to a stop and Harry got up, quickly moving to release them from their bonds. Paul came up and hugged him and Harry hugged back. “I’ve got you Paul.” He soothed before moving to release Jessica.

“Yueh must have prepared the ‘thopter.” She called as she pulled the pack free.

“Stillsuits, tent, compass...he planned for us to get away.” Paul agreed.

“Change quickly, we need to move. I sent a message to Duncan, hopefully he will be looking for us.” Harry ordered before leaving the ‘thopter. He looked out over the desert, the sun rising. They had lost this battle but he would not let them die.

*TBC*....

*Should I cover what the miniseries does? Or just the first book/movie/episode of Dune?*
Harry stripped out of the Harkonnen uniform while he waited for the others, beneath he already wore a Stillsuit which he quickly adjusted for desert use. The other two emerged and he led them onto the sounds, eyes scanning everywhere for danger. The strange gait needed to cross the sand without calling a Worm was annoying but he had no wish to battle one of the famous Sandworms of Dune. He heard a noise and turned, shading his eyes from the rising sun.

“Harry?”

“Thopter.” He answered.

“Harkonnen?” Jessica tensed and then Harry shook his head. “Duncan. Look at the way the wings shifted, that’s his move.”

Sure enough, the ‘thopter landed and the door opened to reveal Duncan Idaho. “Hurry...Harkonnen patrols are in the area. Approaching fast.” He yelled and the three ran for the ship. “CLEAR!” he yelled to the pilot as Harry jumped in last.

“STRAP IN.” Dr Kynes yelled as the ‘thopter lifted off the ground and sped into the distance. They eventually landed at the edge of a small basin, surrounded by rocky, desolate hill.

Duncan led them through dark passages where robed Fremen moved about purposefully. A whole society of them. “What is this place?” Paul asked softly.

“A Fremen sietch. A small one. There's a storm coming. We can stay here until it passes.” Duncan explained.

“We must talk, Liet.” A Fremen called to Kynes.
“Rest here.” Kynes told them, moving off to have a hushed conversation with a cluster of Fremen fighters who were talking urgently.

“Your directions need some work my friend.” Duncan slapped Harry on the back and the other man shrugged.

“I was in something of a rush.”

Duncan chuckled but then sobered and pulled something from his cloak, a small package. “I was supposed to give you this m'Lord...sent through a courier from Yueh.

Paul opened it to find his father’s Ducal Ring and a letter which he didn’t open.

Kynes re-joined them. “Harkonnen patrols are in the area. They tracked our 'thopter...”

“They call you "Liet".” Paul interrupted. “You're the one, aren't you? The one who is never seen. The one who might not even exist. Their leader.”

“I prefer the term guide to leader.” Kynes admitted.

“Guiding them...?” Harry asked, watching the man curiously.

“Until mah'di comes.” He answered after a pause, locking eyes with Paul, something deep but unspoken passing between them. But there wasn't time to pursue it because a huge explosion rocked the room and then another.

“M'lord....” Duncan urged them away, Harry falling back to cover them.

Paul glanced back and saw Kynes. “You're coming with us!”

“No!”

“They’ll kill you.” Paul warned and Kynes chuckled, shaking his head
“Me? I'm Dr. Kynes. Imperial Planetologist. I work for the Emperor, remember? I'll just say I was your hostage.”

“Please, m'lord...” Harry urged, pulling Paul away.

In the distance, the unmistakable sound of ‘thopters approaching could be heard. Duncan hurried them towards the Fremen ‘thopter. But at the ramp he held back even as Harry took the pilots seat. Paul turned back to him. “I must remain with the Fremen, milord. As I promised your father.” Duncan mustered a smile for the boy, now his Duke. He was so young...

Paul knew there was no time to argue. But... “We'll be together again, Duncan. I know we will. I've seen it.” He hugged Duncan quickly and then rushed on board. He took the seat beside Harry and the two worked to get airborne. It had been Harry who taught Paul to fly and while he was very gifted, Paul knew no one flew quite like Harry could. The ‘thopter rose up between the rocks like a Phoenix. But in the distance Harkonnen ‘thoptes cleared the horizon, screaming towards them as there was an explosion off to their right, rocking the ship. Paul glanced back to see Duncan is disappearing back into the caves just as a Harkonnen missile hit the rocks, a massive fireball roaring into the sky.

“Duncan...!” Jessica gasped in horror but Paul and Harry remained silent as the ship accelerated.

Two Harkonnen ‘thopters followed them as they used the rocks to try and lose them. But the Harkonnen countered and staid with them.

“We can't lose them...” Jessica worried and Harry’s expression hardened as he pulled on the controls. “Harry! The storm!” She reached forward to grip his arm as the storm loomed before them. “We can't go into that!”

“We have no choice.” Paul answered, glancing at his friend who nodded but remained silent, grieving for his now dead friend.

“Nothing can survive one of those storms.”

“Then unless they want to die, they won't follow us, will they?” Harry finally spoke as he veered hard into the path of the storm, the Harkonnen ‘thopters on their tale. The ‘thopter started to shake violently, outside, visibility was nil. Harry and Paul fought the controls to keep them on some sort of course and airborne. Finally, the Harkonnen ‘thopters veered away but they kept going, swallowed
up by the storm. Eventually the inside of the 'thopter was totally black as the two males sat back, unable to do anything anymore, the storm had total control.

“I must not fear.... fear is the mindkiller...I will face my fear...it will pass through me...when it's gone there will be nothing...only I will remain..." Paul whispered and then everything went black.

"Get your hands off me, you pack of carrion-eaters!" the man roared, and he dashed the guards aside.

Ah-h-h, one of the Sardaukar, the Baron thought as the man approached. They had been useful in the fight but now they were becoming bothersome. The colonel Bashar came striding toward the Baron, whose eyes went to slits of apprehension. The Sardaukar officers filled him with unease. They all seemed to look like relatives of the Duke . . . the late Duke. And their manners with the Baron!

The colonel Bashar planted himself half a pace in front of the Baron, hands on hips. The guard hovered behind him in twitching uncertainty.

The Baron noted the absence of salute, the disdain in the Sardaukar's manner, and his unease grew. There was only the one legion of them locally - ten brigades - reinforcing the Harkonnen legions, but the Baron did not fool himself. That one legion was perfectly capable of turning on the Harkonnen’s and overcoming them.

"Tell your men they are not to prevent me from seeing you, Baron," the Sardaukar growled. "My men brought you the Atreides Duke before I could discuss his fate with you. We will discuss it now."

I must not lose face before my men, the Baron thought. "So?" It was a coldly controlled word, and the Baron felt proud of it.

"My Emperor has charged me to make certain his royal cousin dies cleanly without agony," the colonel Bashar said.

"Such were the Imperial orders to me," the Baron lied. "Did you think I'd disobey?"
"I'm to report to my Emperor what I see with my own eyes," the Sardaukar said.

"The Duke's already dead," the Baron snapped, and he waved a hand to dismiss the fellow.

The colonel Bashar remained planted facing the Baron. Not by flicker of eye or muscle did he acknowledge he had been dismissed. "How?" he growled.

Really! the Baron thought. This is too much. "By his own hand, if you must know," the Baron said. "He took poison."

"I will see the body now," the colonel Bashar said.

The Baron raised his gaze to the ceiling in feigned exasperation while his thoughts raced. Damnation! This sharp-eyed Sardaukar will see the room before a thing's been changed!

"Now," the Sardaukar growled. "I'll see it with my own eyes."

There was no preventing it, the Baron realized. The Sardaukar would see all. He'd know the Duke had killed Harkonnen men . . . that the Baron most likely had escaped by a narrow margin. There was the evidence of the dinner remnants on the table, and the dead Duke across from it with destruction around him. No preventing it at all.

"I'll not be put off," the colonel Bashar snarled.

"You're not being put off," the Baron said, and he stared into the Sardaukar's obsidian eyes. "I hide nothing from my Emperor." He nodded to Nefud. "The colonel Bashar is to see everything, at once. Take him in by the door where you stood, Nefud."

"This way, sir," Nefud said.

Slowly, insolently, the Sardaukar moved around the Baron, shouldered a way through the guardsmen.
Insufferable, the Baron thought. Now, the Emperor will know how I slipped up. He'll recognize it as a sign of weakness. And it was agonizing to realize that the Emperor and his Sardaukar were alike in their disdain for weakness. The Baron chewed at his lower lip, consoling himself that the Emperor, at least, had not learned of the Atreides raid on Giedi Prime, the destruction of the Harkonnen spice stores there. Damn that slippery Duke! The Baron watched the retreating backs - the arrogant Sardaukar and the stocky, efficient Nefud.

We must adjust, the Baron thought. I'll have to put Rabban over this damnable planet once more. Without restraint. I must spend my own Harkonnen blood to put Arrakis into a proper condition for accepting Feyd-Rautha. Damn that Piter! He would get himself killed before I was through with him. The Baron sighed. And I must send at once to Tleielax for a new Mentat. They undoubtedly have the new one ready for me by now.

One of the guardsmen beside him coughed. The Baron turned toward the man. "I am hungry."

"Yes, m'Lord."

"And I wish to be diverted while you're clearing out that room and studying its secrets for me," the Baron rumbled.

The guardsman lowered his eyes. "What diversion does m'Lord wish?"

"I'll be in my sleeping chambers," the Baron said. "Bring me that young fellow we bought on Gamont, the one with the lovely eyes. Drug him well. I don't feel like wrestling."

"Yes, m'Lord."

The Baron turned away, began moving with his bouncing, suspensor-buoyed pace toward his chambers. Yes, he thought. The one with the lovely eyes, the one who looks so much like the young Paul Atreides. But before he could leave his nephew appeared in the hall.

“They're dead, Uncle. The Bene Gesserit witch and her son. Both dead.” Feyd reported gleefully and the Baron's eyes suddenly sharpened their focus. “We discovered a Fremen sietch not far from where our 'thopter crashed. They'd been rescued by that Atreides snake, Duncan Idaho. The ecologist, Kynes, was with them.”
“The Emperor's man?”

Feyd nodded. “We killed Idaho. Captured Kynes. The witch and her son were last seen driving a 'thopter into a sandstorm.”

“You've seen the bodies?” he demanded and Feyd hesitated.

“They're most certainly dead.”

“You've seen the bodies!?” He pushed, there could be no evidence to implicate them!

“Nothing survives one of those storms, Uncle. The wind was over eight-hundred kilometres an hour. Nothing survives.”

Paul felt that all his past, every experience before this night, had become sand curling in an hourglass. He sat near his mother hugging his knees within a small fabric and plastic hutment - a stilltent - that had come, like the Fremen clothing they now wore, from the pack left in the 'thopter. Hiding like a child when I'm now the Duke, Paul thought. He felt the thought gall him, but could not deny the wisdom in what they did.

Something had happened to his awareness this night - he saw with sharpened clarity every circumstance and occurrence around him. He felt unable to stop the inflow of data or the cold precision with which each new item was added to his knowledge and the computation was centred in his awareness. It was Mentat power and more.

Across the stilltent from Paul, Jessica stirred, said: "There can be only one explanation. The Harkonnen’s held Yueh’s wife. He hated the Harkonnen’s! I cannot be wrong about that. You read his note. But why has he saved us from the carnage?"

She is only now seeing it and that poorly, Paul thought. The thought was a shock. He had known this fact as a by-the-way thing while reading the note that had accompanied the ducal signet in the package sent to Duncan.

"Do not try to forgive me," Yueh had written. "I do not want your forgiveness. I already have
enough burdens. What I have done was done without malice or hope of another's understanding. It is my own tahaddi al-burhan, my ultimate test. I give you the Atreides ducal signet as token that I write truly. By the time you read this, Duke Leto will be dead. Take consolation from my assurance that he did not die alone, that one we hate above all others died with him."

It had not been addressed or signed, but there 'd been no mistaking the familiar scrawl - Yueh's.

Remembering the letter, Paul re-experienced the distress of that moment - a thing sharp and strange that seemed to happen outside his new Mentat alertness. He had read that his father was dead, known the truth of the words, but had felt them as no more than another datum to be entered in his mind and used.

I loved my father, Paul thought, and knew this for truth. I should mourn him. I should feel something.

But he felt nothing except: Here's an important fact. It was one with all the other facts. All the while his mind was adding sense impressions, extrapolating, computing.

Halleck's words came back to Paul: "Mood's a thing for cattle or for making love. You fight when the necessity arises, no matter your mood. "

Perhaps that's it, Paul thought. I'll mourn my father later . . . when there's time. But he felt no letup in the cold precision of his being. He sensed that his new awareness was only a beginning, that it was growing. The sense of terrible purpose he'd first experienced in his ordeal with the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam pervaded him. His right hand - the hand of remembered pain - tingled and throbbed.

Is this what it is to be their Kwisatz Haderach? he wondered.

"For a while, I thought Hawat had failed us again, "Jessica said. "I thought perhaps Yueh wasn't a Suk doctor."

"He was everything we thought him . . . and more," Paul said. And he thought: Why is she so slow seeing these things?

She heard the steel in his voice, the sense of command, and stared across the grey darkness of the
still tent at him. Paul was a silhouette against moon-frosted rocks seen through the tent's transparent end.

"Others among your father's men will have escaped," she said. "We must regather them, find - "

"We will depend upon ourselves," he said. "Our immediate concern is our family atomics. We must get them before the Harkonnen's can search them out."

"Not likely they'll be found," she said, "the way they were hidden."

"It must not be left to chance." He paused as the tent opened and Harry slipped inside, the two males talking softly for a few moments. Harry had been patrolling, ensuring the tent and its precious occupants remained hidden.

And Jessica thought: Blackmail with the family atomics as a threat to the planet and its spice - that's what he has in mind. But all he can hope for then is escape into renegade anonymity.

His mother's words had provoked another train of thought in Paul - a duke's concern for all the people they'd lost this night. People are the true strength of a Great House, Paul thought. And he remembered Hawat's words: "Parting with people is a sadness; a place is only a place."

"They're using Sardaukar," Jessica said. "We must wait until the Sardaukar have been withdrawn."

"They think us caught between the desert and the Sardaukar," Paul said. "They intend that there be no Atreides survivors - total extermination. Do not count on any of our people escaping."

"They cannot go on indefinitely risking exposure of the Emperor's part in this."

"Can't they?" Harry snorted, joining the conversation, would anyone actually care?

"Some of our people are bound to escape." She half pleaded.

"Are they?" Paul asked softly.
Jessica turned away, frightened of the bitter strength in her son's voice, hearing the precise assessment of chances. She sensed that his mind had leaped ahead of her, that it now saw more in some respects than she did. She had helped train the intelligence which did this, but now she found herself fearful of it. Her thoughts turned, seeking toward the lost sanctuary of her Duke, and tears burned her eyes.

This is the way it had to be, Leto, she thought. "A time of love and a time of grief." She rested her hand on her abdomen, awareness focused on the embryo there. I have the Atreides daughter I was ordered to produce, but the Reverend Mother was wrong: a daughter wouldn't have saved my Leto. This child is only life reaching for the future in the midst of death. I conceived out of instinct and not out of obedience.

Jessica found the tiny receiver Harry had scavenged from the wreck, flipped its switch. A green light glowed on the instrument's face. Tinny screeching came from its speaker. She reduced the volume, hunted across the bands. A voice speaking Atreides battle language came into the tent.

"... back and regroup at the ridge. Fedor reports no survivors in Carthag and the Guild Bank has been sacked."

Carthag! Jessica thought. That was a Harkonnen hotbed.

"They're Sardaukar," the voice said. "Watch out for Sardaukar in Atreides uniforms. They're - " A roaring filled the speaker, then silence.

"Try the other bands," Harry said.

"Do you realize what that means?" Jessica asked the two men, in the shadowy light the similarities between them were amazing and she had to wonder again if Harry did not carry Atreides blood himself, a bastard son? It would explain his closeness to her Leto.

"I expected it. They want the Guild to blame us for destruction of their bank. With the Guild against us, we're trapped on Arrakis. Try the other bands." Paul answered her and Harry sipped some water before leaving the tent again.

She weighed his words: I expected it. What had happened to him? Slowly, Jessica returned to the instrument. As she moved the bandslide, they caught glimpses of violence in the few voices calling
out in Atreides battle language: ". . . fallback . . ." ". . . try to regroup at . . ." ". . . trapped in a cave at. . . ."

And there was no mistaking the victorious exultation in the Harkonnen gibberish that poured from the other bands. Sharp commands, battle reports. There wasn't enough of it for Jessica to register and break the language, but the tone was obvious.

Harkonnen victory.

Paul shook the pack beside him, hearing the two literjons of water gurgle there. He took a deep breath, looked up through the transparent end of the tent at the rock escarpment outlined against the stars. His left hand felt the sphincter-seal of the tent's entrance. "It'll be dawn soon," he said. "We can wait through the day, but not through another night. In the desert, you must travel by night and rest in shade through the day."

Remembered lore insinuated itself into Jessica's mind: Without a stillsuit, a man sitting in shade on the desert needs five litres of water a day to maintain body weight. She felt the slick-soft skin of the stillsuit against her body, thinking how their lives depended on these garments.

Paul lifted the seal on the pack, pulled out a tiny micromanual with glowtab and magnifier. Green and orange letters leaped up at him from the pages: "literjons, stilltent, energy caps, recaths, sandsnork, binoculars, stillsuit repkit, baradye pistol, sinkchart, filt-plugs, paracompass, maker hooks, thumpers, Fremkit, fire pillar . . . " So many things for survival on the desert. Presently, he put the manual aside on the tent floor.

"Where can we possibly go?" Jessica asked.

"My father spoke of desert power," Paul said. "The Harkonnen’s cannot rule this planet without it. They've never ruled this planet, nor shall they. Not even with ten thousand legions of Sardaukar."

"Paul, you can't think that - "

"We've all the evidence in our hands," he said. "Right here in this tent - the tent itself, this pack and its contents, these stillsuits. We know the Guild wants a prohibitive price for weather satellites. We know that - "
"What've weather satellites to do with it?" she asked. "They couldn't possibly . . . " She broke off.

Paul sensed the hyperalertness of his mind reading her reactions, computing on minutiae. "You see it now," he said. "Satellites watch the terrain below. There are things in the deep desert that will not bear frequent inspection."

"You're suggesting the Guild itself controls this planet?" She was so slow.

"No!" he said. "The Fremen! They're paying the Guild for privacy, paying in a coin that's freely available to anyone with desert power - spice. This is more than a second-approximation answer; it's the straight-line computation. Depend on it."

"Paul." Jessica said, "you're not a Mentat yet; you can't know for sure how - "

"I'll never be a Mentat," he said. "I'm something else . . . a freak."

"Paul! How can you say such - "

"Leave me alone!"

He turned away from her, looking out into the night. Why can't I mourn? he wondered. He felt that every fibre of his being craved this release, but it would be denied him forever.

Jessica had never heard such distress in her son's voice. She wanted to reach out to him, hold him, comfort him, help him - but she sensed there was nothing she could do. He had to solve this problem by himself.

The glowing tab of the Fremkit manual between them on the tent floor caught her eye. She lifted it, glanced at the flyleaf, reading: "Manual of 'The Friendly Desert,' the place full of life. Here are the ayat and burhan of Life. Believe, and al-Lat shall never burn you."

It reads like the Azhar Book, she thought, recalling her studies of the Great Secrets. Has a Manipulator of Religions been on Arrakis?
Paul lifted the paracompass from the pack, returned it, said: "Think of all these special-application Fremen machines. They show unrivalled sophistication. Admit it. The culture that made these things betrays depths no one suspected."

Hesitating, still worried by the harshness in his voice, Jessica returned to the book, studied an illustrated constellation from the Arrakeen sky: "Muad'Dib: The Mouse," and noted that the tail pointed north.

Paul stared into the tent's darkness at the dimly discerned movements of his mother revealed by the manual's glowtab. Now is the time to carry out my father's wish, he thought. I must give her his message now while she has time for grief. Grief would inconvenience us later. And he found himself shocked by precise logic. "Mother," he said.

"Yes?"

She heard the change in his voice, felt coldness in her entrails at the sound. Never had she heard such harsh control.

"My father is dead," he said.

She searched within herself for the coupling of fact and fact and fact - the Bene Gesserit way of assessing data - and it came to her: the sensation of terrifying loss. Jessica nodded, unable to speak.

"My father charged me once," Paul said, "to give you a message if anything happened to him. He feared you might believe he distrusted you."

That useless suspicion, she thought.

"He wanted you to know he never suspected you," Paul said, and explained the deception, adding: "He wanted you to know he always trusted you completely, always loved you and cherished you. He said he would sooner have mistrusted himself and he had but one regret - that he never made you his Duchess."

She brushed the tears coursing down her cheeks, thought: What a stupid waste of the body's water!
But she knew this thought for what it was - the attempt to retreat from grief into anger. Leto, my Leto, she thought. What terrible things we do to those we love! With a violent motion, she extinguished the little manual's glowtab. Sobs shook her.

Paul heard his mother's grief and felt the emptiness within himself. I have no grief, he thought. Why? Why? He felt the inability to grieve as a terrible flaw.

"A time to get and time to lose," Jessica thought, quoting to herself from the O.C. Bible. "A time to keep and a time to cast away; a time for love and a time to hate; a time of war and a time of peace."

Paul's mind had gone on in its chilling precision. He saw the avenues ahead of them on this hostile planet. Without even the safety valve of dreaming, he focused his prescient awareness, seeing it as a computation of most probable futures, but with something more, an edge of mystery - as though his mind dipped into some timeless stratum and sampled the winds of the future.

Abruptly, as though he had found a necessary key, Paul's mind climbed another notch in awareness. He felt himself clinging to this new level, clutching at a precarious hold and peering about. It was as though he existed within a globe with avenues radiating away in all directions - yet this only approximated the sensation.

He remembered once seeing a gauze kerchief blowing in the wind and now he sensed the future as though it twisted across some surface as undulant and impermanent as that of the windblown kerchief.

He saw people. He felt the heat and cold of uncounted probabilities. He knew names and places, experienced emotions without number, reviewed data of innumerable unexplored crannies. There was time to probe and test and taste, but no time to shape. But one thing was missing and it made him curious and worried, he never saw Harry. Was he to lose him too?

The thing was a spectrum of possibilities from the most remote past to the most remote future - from the most probable to the most improbable. He saw his own death in countless ways. He saw new planets, new cultures.

People.

People.
He saw them in such swarms they could not be listed, yet his mind catalogued them. Even the Guildsmen.

And he thought: The Guild - there'd be a way for us, my strangeness accepted as a familiar thing of high value, always with an assured supply of the now-necessary spice.

But the idea of living out his life in the mind-groping-ahead-through-possible-futures that guided hurthing spaceships appalled him. It was a way, though. And in meeting the possible future that contained Guildsmen he recognized his own strangeness.

I have another kind of sight. I see another kind of terrain: the available paths. The awareness conveyed both reassurance and alarm - so many places on that other kind of terrain dipped or turned out of his sight. As swiftly as it had come, the sensation slipped away from him, and he realized the entire experience had taken the space of a heartbeat.

Yet, his own personal awareness had been turned over, illuminated in a terrifying way. He stared around him. Night still covered the stilltent within its rock-enclosed hideaway. His mother's grief could still be heard.

His own lack of grief could still be felt . . . that hollow place somewhere separated from his mind, which went on in its steady pace - dealing with data, evaluating, computing, submitting answers in something like the Mentat way.

And now he saw that he had a wealth of data few such minds ever before had encompassed. But this made the empty place within him no easier to bear. He felt that something must shatter. It was as though a clockwork control for a bomb had been set to ticking within him. It went on about its business no matter what he wanted. It recorded minuscule shadings of difference around him - a slight change in moisture, a fractional fall in temperature, the progress of an insect across their stilltent roof, the solemn approach of dawn in the starlighted patch of sky he could see out the tent's transparent end.

The emptiness was unbearable. Knowing how the clockwork had been set in motion made no difference. He could look to his own past and see the start of it - the training, the sharpening of talents, the refined pressures of sophisticated disciplines, even exposure to the O.C. Bible at a critical moment . . . and, lastly, the heavy intake of spice. And he could look ahead - the most terrifying direction - to see where it all pointed. I'm a monster! he thought. A freak! "No," he thought. Then: "No. No! NO!" He found that he was pounding the tent floor with his fists. (The implacable part of him recorded this as an interesting emotional datum and fed it into computation.)
"Paul!" Jessica yelled in alarm and Harry was quickly back in the tent, green eyes searching for danger only to watch in apprehension as Paul harmed himself but he allowed Jessica to handle it for now.

His mother was beside him, holding his hands, her face a grey blob peering at him. "Paul, what's wrong?"

"You!" he said.

"I'm here, Paul," she said. "It's all right."

"What have you done to me?" he demanded.

In a burst of clarity, she sensed some of the roots in the question, said: "I gave birth to you."

It was, from instinct as much as her own subtle knowledge, the precisely correct answer to calm him. He felt her hands holding him, focused on the dim outline of her face. (Certain gene traces in her facial structure were noted in the new way by his onflowing mind, the clues added to other data, and a final-summation answer put forward.) "Let go of me," he said.

She heard the iron in his voice, obeyed. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong, Paul?"

"Did you know what you were doing when you trained me?" he asked.

There's no more childhood in his voice, she thought. And she said: "I hoped the thing any parent hopes - that you'd be . . . superior, different."

"Different?"

She heard the bitterness in his tone, said: "Paul, I -"

"You didn't want a son!" he said. "You wanted a Kwisatz Haderach! You wanted a male Bene Gesserit!"
She recoiled from his bitterness. "But Paul . . ."

"Did you ever consult my father in this?"

She spoke gently out of the freshness of her grief: "Whatever you are, Paul, the heredity is as much your father as me."

"But not the training," he said. "Not the things that . . . awakened . . . the sleeper."

"Sleeper?"

"It's here." He put a hand to his head and then to his breast. "In me. It goes on and on and on and on and - "

"Paul!" She had heard the hysteria edging his voice.

Harry knelt behind Paul and gently pulled him into a lose embrace, offering comfort and support but he remained silent, sensing this needed to be said.

"Listen to me," Paul said. "You wanted the Reverend Mother to hear about my dreams: You listen in her place now. I've just had a waking dream. Do you know why?"

"You must calm yourself," she said. "If there's - "

"The spice," he said, "It's in everything here - the air, the soil, the food. The geriatric spice. It's like the Truthsayer drug. It's a poison!"

She stiffened.

His voice lowered and he repeated: "A poison - so subtle, so insidious . . . so irreversible. It won't even kill you unless you stop taking it. We can't leave Arrakis unless we take part of Arrakis with
"The terrifying presence of his voice brooked no dispute. "You and the spice," Paul said. "The spice changes anyone who gets this much of it, but thanks to you, I could bring the change to consciousness. I don't get to leave it in the unconscious where its disturbance can be blanked out. I can see it."

"Paul, you - "

"I see it!" he repeated. She heard madness in his voice, didn't know what to do. But he spoke again, and she heard the iron control return to him: "We're trapped here."

We're trapped here, she agreed. And she accepted the truth of his words. No pressure of the Bene Gesserit, no trickery or artifice could pry them completely free from Arrakis: the spice was addictive. Her body had known the fact long before her mind awakened to it. So here we live out our lives, she thought, on this hell-planet. The place is prepared for us, if we can evade the Harkonnen’s. And there's no doubt of my course: a broodmare preserving an important bloodline for the Bene Gesserit Plan.

"I must tell you about my waking dream," Paul said. (Now there was fury in his voice.) "To be sure you accept what I say, I'll tell you first I know you'll bear a daughter, my sister, here on Arrakis."

Jessica placed her hands against the tent floor, pressed back against the curving fabric wall to still a pang of fear. She knew her pregnancy could not show yet. Only her own Bene Gesserit training had allowed her to read the first faint signals of her body, to know of the embryo only a few weeks old.

"Only to serve," Jessica whispered, clinging to the Bene Gesserit motto. "We exist only to serve."

Harry instantly redid his mental calculations to take a pregnant woman into account. Things had looked bad before but now…

"We'll find a home among the Fremen," Paul said, "where your Missionaria Protectiva has bought us a bolt hole."

They've prepared a way for us in the desert, Jessica told herself. But how can he know of the Missionaria Protectiva? She found it increasingly difficult to subdue her terror at the overpowering strangeness in Paul.
He studied the dark shadow of her, seeing her fear and every reaction with his new awareness as though she were outlined in blinding light. A beginning of compassion for her crept over him. "The things that can happen here, I cannot begin to tell you," he said. "I cannot even begin to tell myself, although I've seen them. This sense of the future - I seem to have no control over it. The thing just happens. The immediate future - say, a year - I can see some of that . . . a road as broad as our Central Avenue on Caladan. Some places I don't see . . . shadowed places . . . as though it went behind a hill" (and again he thought of the surface of a blowing kerchief) " . . . and there are branching's . . . "

He fell silent as memory of that seeing filled him. No prescient dream, no experience of his life had quite prepared him for the totality with which the veils had been ripped away to reveal naked time. Recalling the experience, he recognized his own terrible purpose - the pressure of his life spreading outward like an expanding bubble . . . time retreating before it . . .

Jessica found the tent's glowtab control, activated it. Dim green light drove back the shadows, easing her fear. She looked at Paul's face, his eyes - the inward stare. And she knew where she had seen such a look before: pictured in records of disasters - on the faces of children who experienced starvation or terrible injury. The eyes were like pits, mouth a straight line, cheeks indrawn. It's the look of terrible awareness, she thought, of someone forced to the knowledge of his own mortality. He was, indeed, no longer a child. The underlying import of his words began to take over in her mind, pushing all else aside. Paul could see ahead, a way of escape for them. "There's a way to evade the Harkonnen's," she said.

"The Harkonnen's!" he sneered. "Put those twisted humans out of your mind." He stared at his mother, studying the lines of her face in the light of the glowtab. The lines betrayed her.

She said: "You shouldn't refer to people as humans without - "

"Don't be so sure you know where to draw the line," he said. "We carry our past with us. And, mother mine, there's a thing you don't know and should - we are Harkonnen's."

Her mind did a terrifying thing: it blanked out as though it needed to shut off all sensation. But Paul's voice went on at that implacable pace, dragging her with it.

Harry stiffened at Paul's words but did not release his hold on the boy…no, man. He did not care about their heritage but others would.

"When next you find a mirror, study your face - study mine now. The traces are there if you don't blind yourself. Look at my hands, the set of my bones. And if none of this convinces you, then take
my word for it. I've walked the future, I've looked at a record, I've seen a place, I have all the data. We're Harkonnen's."

“Blood doesn’t matter Paul.” Harry murmured soothingly.

"A . . . renegade branch of the family," she said. "That's it, isn't it? Some Harkonnen cousin who - "

"You're the Baron's own daughter," he said, and watched the way she pressed her hands to her mouth. "The Baron sampled many pleasures in his youth, and once permitted himself to be seduced. But it was for the genetic purposes of the Bene Gesserit, by one of you."

The way he said you struck her like a slap. But it set her mind to working and she could not deny his words. So many blank ends of meaning in her past reached out now and linked. The daughter the Bene Gesserit wanted - it wasn't to end the old Atreides-Harkonnen feud, but to fix some genetic factor in their lines. What? She groped for an answer.

As though he saw inside her mind, Paul said: "They thought they were reaching for me. But I'm not what they expected, and I've arrived before my time. And they don't know it."

Jessica pressed her hands to her mouth. Great Mother! He's the Kwisatz Haderach! She felt exposed and naked before him, realizing then that he saw her with eyes from which little could be hidden. And that, she knew, was the basis of her fear.

"You're thinking I'm the Kwisatz Haderach," he said. "Put that out of your mind. I'm something unexpected."

I must get word out to one of the schools, she thought. The mating index may show what has happened.

"They won't learn about me until it's too late," he said.

She sought to divert him, lowered her hands and said: "We'll find a place among the Fremen?"

"The Fremen have a saying they credit to Shai-hulud, Old Father Eternity," he said. "They say: 'Be
prepared to appreciate what you meet.' " And he thought: Yes, mother mine - among the Fremen. You'll acquire the blue eyes and a callus beside your lovely nose from the filter tube to your stillsuit. . . and you'll bear my sister: St. Alia of the Knife.

"If you're not the Kwisatz Haderach," Jessica said, "what - "

"You couldn't possibly know," he said. "You won't believe it until you see it."

And he thought: I'm a seed. He suddenly saw how fertile was the ground into which he had fallen, and with this realization, the terrible purpose filled him, creeping through the empty place within, threatening to choke him with grief. He had seen two main branching's along the way ahead - in one he confronted an evil old Baron and said: "Hello, Grandfather." The thought of that path and what lay along it sickened him.

The other path held long patches of grey obscurity except for peaks of violence. He had seen a warrior religion there, a fire spreading across the universe with the Atreides green and black banner waving at the head of fanatic legions drunk on spice liquor. Gurney Halleck and a few others of his father's men - a pitiful few - were among them, all marked by the hawk symbol from the shrine of his father's skull. "I can't go that way," he muttered. "That's what the old witches of your schools really want."

"I don't understand you, Paul," his mother said.

He remained silent, thinking like the seed he was, thinking with the race consciousness he had first experienced as terrible purpose. He found that he no longer could hate the Bene Gesserit or the Emperor or even the Harkonnen’s. They were all caught up in the need of their race to renew its scattered inheritance, to cross and mingle and infuse their bloodlines in a great new pooling of genes. And the race knew only one sure way for this - the ancient way, the tried and certain way that rolled over everything in its path: jihad.

Surely, I cannot choose that way, he thought. But he saw again in his mind's eye the shrine of his father's skull and the violence with the green and black banner waving in its midst.

Jessica cleared her throat, worried by his silence. "Then . . . the Fremen will give us sanctuary?"

He looked up, staring across the green-lighted tent at the inbred, patrician lines of her face. "Yes," he said. "That's one of the ways." He nodded. "Yes. They'll call me . . . Muad'Dib, 'The One Who
Points the Way.’ Yes . . . that’s what they’ll call me.” And he closed his eyes, thinking: Now, my father, I can mourn you. And he felt the tears coursing down his cheeks. He let himself curl into Harry as the older man rocked him gently, whispering words of comfort as Paul let go of his iron control.

Jessica watched and then turned away, giving her son privacy to grieve. He had said so much that confused her, that she didn’t understand, but she would remember.

The doors slammed open and Princes Irulan swept into the room, followed by a nervous, pleading Lady In Waiting. “...please...your Majesty, please...you must control your anger...”

Irulan ignored her, focusing on her Father behind his desk and Count Fenring beside him. “Did you think I wouldn't find out!? Or did you think I’d just be too simple minded to see the truth?”

The Emperor and Fenring exchanged a furtive glance. “What happened on Arrakis was beyond my control, Daughter. An ancient feud between royal houses...”

“Don't patronize me, Father.” She spat, furious. “Isn't it bad enough that you used me?”

“Used you?”

“Sending me to the Duke as a token of your support. Making me the courier of your "esteemed respect” while you were plotting behind his back...”

“That’s enough.” He slammed a hand against the table and glared at his eldest daughter. Did she think he had enjoyed this?

“...or was that your idea, Fenring? It would be something your perverse mind would suggest.” She sneered at the always stuttering man, head held imperiously high. She was mad at having been used to ensure the Atreides let their guard down. She remembered the fun of trading words with Paul, of dancing with him, even the Atreides man Potter had treated her with respect, not just for her rank.

“Watch your tongue, girl...” Her father warned and she leant over his desk, hands planted firmly on it.

“And what will you do, if I don't? Send me into the desert to die like that poor boy and his mother...”
“No one sent them anywhere. They fled...despite the Baron's efforts. He assures me he did everything he could to secure them from harm.”

“You were involved, Father. I know you were. Or at least you did nothing to prevent it....” Did he really believe the Baron would have lifted a finger to ensure their survival? She had looked up to her Father but this…? No, she could not accept this.

“Enough!” His face was flushed with fury now. “There will come a time, Daughter, when you will have to shed this naiveté of yours and learn what it means to rule an empire.” He snarled and she straightened and backed away, staring at him.

“And when that day comes, Father, you may learn to regret it.” She answered softly before storming from the room.

"M'Lord Baron."

The man who stood outside the doorfield of the Baron's bedchamber was low built, gross of face and body, with the Harkonnen paternal line's narrow-set eyes and bulge of shoulders. There was yet some rigidity in his fat, but it was obvious to the eye that he'd come one day to the portable suspensors for carrying his excess weight. A muscle-minded tank-brain, the Baron thought. No Mentat, my nephew... not a Piter de Vries, but perhaps something more precisely devised for the task at hand. If I give him freedom to do it, he'll grind over everything in his path. Oh, how he'll be hated here on Arrakis! "My dear Rabban," the Baron said. He released the doorfield, but pointedly kept his body shield at full strength, knowing that the shimmer of it would be visible above the bedside glowglobe.

"You summoned me," Rabban said. He stepped into the room, flicked a glance past the air disturbance of the body shield, searched for a suspensor chair, found none.

"Stand closer where I can see you easily," the Baron said. Rabban advanced another step, thinking that the damnable old man had deliberately removed all chairs, forcing a visitor to stand. "The Atreides are dead," the Baron said. "The last of them. That's why I summoned you here to Arrakis. This planet is again yours."

Rabban blinked. "But I thought you were going to advance Piter de Vries to the - "
"Piter, too, is dead."

"Piter?"

"Piter." The Baron reactivated the doorfield, blanked it against all energy penetration.

"You finally tired of him, eh?" Rabban asked. His voice fell flat and lifeless in the energy-blanketed room.

"I will say a thing to you just this once," the Baron rumbled. "You insinuate that I obliterated Piter as one obliterates a trifle." He snapped fat fingers. "Just like that, eh? I am not so stupid, Nephew. I will take it unkindly if ever again you suggest by word or action that I am so stupid."

Fear showed in the squinting of Rabban's eyes. He knew within certain limits how far the old Baron would go against family. Seldom to the point of death unless there were outrageous profit or provocation in it. But family punishments could be painful. "Forgive me, m'Lord Baron," Rabban said. He lowered his eyes as much to hide his own anger as to show subservience.

"You do not fool me, Rabban," the Baron said. Rabban kept his eyes lowered, swallowed. "I make a point," the Baron said. "Never obliterate a man unthinkingly, the way an entire fief might do it through some due process of law. Always do it for an overriding purpose - and know your purpose!"

Anger spoke in Rabban: "But you obliterated the traitor, Yueh! I saw his body being carried out as I arrived last night." Rabban stared at his uncle, suddenly frightened by the sound of those words.

But the Baron smiled. "I'm very careful about dangerous weapons," he said. "Doctor Yueh was a traitor. He gave me the Duke." Strength poured into the Baron's voice. "I suborned a doctor of the Suk School! The Inner School! You hear, boy? But that's a wild sort of weapon to leave lying about. I didn't obliterate him casually."

"Does the Emperor know you suborned a Suk doctor?"

This was a penetrating question, the Baron thought. Have I misjudged this nephew? "The Emperor
doesn't know it yet," the Baron said. "But his Sardaukar are sure to report it to him. Before that happens, though, I'll have my own report in his hands through CHOAM Company channels. I will explain that I luckily discovered a doctor who pretended to the conditioning. A false doctor, you understand? Since everyone knows you cannot counter the conditioning of a Suk School, this will be accepted."

"Ah-h-h, I see," Rabban murmured.

And the Baron thought: Indeed, I hope you do see. I hope you do see how vital it is that this remain secret. The Baron suddenly wondered at himself. Why did I do that? Why did I boast to this fool nephew of mine - the nephew I must use and discard? The Baron felt anger at himself. He felt betrayed.

"It must be kept secret," Rabban said. "I understand."

The Baron sighed. "I give you different instructions about Arrakis this time, Nephew. When last you ruled this place, I held you in strong rein. This time, I have only one requirement."

"M'Lord?"

"Income."

"Income?"

"Have you any idea, Rabban, how much we spent to bring such military force to bear on the Atreides? Do you have even the first inkling of how much the Guild charges for military transport?"

"Expensive, eh?"

"Expensive!" The Baron shot a fat arm toward Rabban. "If you squeeze Arrakis for every cent it can give us for sixty years, you'll just barely repay us!" Rabban opened his mouth, closed it without speaking. "Expensive," the Baron sneered. "The damnable Guild monopoly on space would've ruined us if I hadn't planned for this expense long ago. You should know, Rabban, that we bore the entire brunt of it. We even paid for transport of the Sardaukar."
And not for the first time, the Baron wondered if there ever would come a day when the Guild might be circumvented. They were insidious - bleeding off just enough to keep the host from objecting until they had you in their fist where they could force you to pay and pay and pay. Always, the exorbitant demands rode upon military ventures. "Hazard rates," the oily Guild agents explained. And for every agent you managed to insert as a watchdog in the Guild Bank structure, they put two agents into your system. Insufferable!

"Income then," Rabban said.

The Baron lowered his arm, made a fist. "You must squeeze."

"And I may do anything I wish as long as I squeeze?"

"Anything."

"The cannons you brought," Rabban said. "Could I - "

"I'm removing them," the Baron said.

"But you - "

"You won't need such toys. They were a special innovation and are now useless. We need the metal. They cannot go against a shield, Rabban. They were merely the unexpected. It was predictable that the Duke's men would retreat into cliff caves on this abominable planet. Our cannon merely sealed them in."

"The Fremen don't use shields."

"You may keep some lasguns if you wish."

"Yes, m'Lord. And I have a free hand."

"As long as you squeeze."
Rabban's smile was gloating. "I understand perfectly, m'Lord."

"You understand nothing perfectly," the Baron growled. "Let us have that clear at the outset. What you do understand is how to carry out my orders. Has it occurred to you, nephew, that there are at least five million persons on this planet?"

"Does m'Lord forget that I was his regent-siridar here before? And if m'Lord will forgive me, his estimate may be low. It's difficult to count a population scattered among sinks and pans the way they are here. And when you consider the Fremen of - "

"The Fremen aren't worth considering!"

"Forgive me, m'Lord, but the Sardaukar believe otherwise."

The Baron hesitated, staring at his nephew. "You know something?"

"M'Lord had retired when I arrived last night. I . . . ah, took the liberty of contacting some of my lieutenants from . . . ah, before. They've been acting as guides to the Sardaukar. They report that a Fremen band ambushed a Sardaukar force somewhere southeast of here and wiped it out."

"Wiped out a Sardaukar force?"

"Yes, m'Lord."

"Impossible!"

Rabban shrugged.

"Fremen defeating Sardaukar," the Baron sneered.

"I repeat only what was reported to me," Rabban said. "It is said this Fremen force already had
captured the Duke's redoubtable Thufir Hawat."

"Ah-h-h-h-h-h." The Baron nodded, smiling.

"I believe the report," Rabban said. "You've no idea what a problem the Fremen were."

"Perhaps, but these weren't Fremen your lieutenants saw. They must've been Atreides men trained by Hawat and disguised as Fremen. It's the only possible answer."

Again, Rabban shrugged. "Well, the Sardaukar think they were Fremen. The Sardaukar already have launched a program to wipe out all Fremen."

"Good!"

"But - "

"It'll keep the Sardaukar occupied. And we'll soon have Hawat. I know it! I can feel it! Ah, this has been a day! The Sardaukar off hunting a few useless desert bands while we get the real prize!"

"M'Lord . . ." Rabban hesitated, frowning. "I've always felt that we underestimated the Fremen, both in numbers and in - "

"Ignore them, boy! They're rabble. It's the populous towns, cities, and villages that concern us. A great many people there, eh?"

"A great many, m'Lord."

"They worry me, Rabban."

"Worry you?"
"Oh . . . ninety per cent of them are of no concern. But there are always a few . . . Houses Minor and so on, people of ambition who might try a dangerous thing. If one of them should get off Arrakis with an unpleasant story about what happened here, I'd be most displeased. Have you any idea how displeased I'd be?" Rabban swallowed. "You must take immediate measures to hold a hostage from each House Minor," the Baron said. "As far as anyone off Arrakis must learn, this was straightforward House-to-House battle. The Sardaukar had no part in it, you understand? The Duke was offered the usual quarter and exile, but he died in an unfortunate accident before he could accept. He was about to accept, though. That is the story. And any rumour that there were Sardaukar here, it must be laughed at."

"As the Emperor wishes it," Rabban said.

"As the Emperor wishes it."

"What about the smugglers?"

"No one believes smugglers, Rabban. They are tolerated, but not believed. At any rate, you'll be spreading some bribes in that quarter . . . and taking other measures which I'm sure you can think of."

"Yes, m'Lord."

"Two things from Arrakis, then, Rabban: income and a merciless fist. You must show no mercy here. Think of these clods as what they are - slaves envious of their masters and waiting only the opportunity to rebel. Not the slightest vestige of pity or mercy must you show them."

"Can one exterminate an entire planet?" Rabban asked.

"Exterminate?" Surprise showed in the swift turning of the Baron's head. "Who said anything about exterminating?"

"Well, I presumed you were going to bring in new stock and - "

"I said squeeze. Nephew, not exterminate. Don't waste the population, merely drive them into utter submission. You must be the carnivore, my boy." He smiled, a baby's expression in the dimple-fat face. "A carnivore never stops. Show no mercy. Never stop. Mercy is a chimera. It can be defeated
by the stomach rumbling its hunger, by the throat crying its thirst. You must be always hungry and thirsty." The Baron caressed his bulges beneath the suspensors. "Like me."

"I see, m'Lord." Rabban swung his gaze left and right.

"It's all clear then, Nephew?"

"Except for one thing. Uncle: the Planetologist, Kynes."

"Ah, yes, Kynes."

"He's the Emperor's man, m'Lord. He can come and go as he pleases. And he's very close to the Fremen . . . married one."

"Kynes will be dead by tomorrow's nightfall."

"That's dangerous work, Uncle, killing an Imperial servant."

"How do you think I've come this far this quickly?" the Baron demanded. His voice was low, charged with unspeakable adjectives. "Besides, you need never have feared Kynes would leave Arrakis. You're forgetting that he's addicted to the spice."

"Of course!"

"Those who know will do nothing to endanger their supply," the Baron said. "Kynes certainly must know."

"I forgot," Rabban said. They stared at each other in silence.

Presently, the Baron said: "Incidentally, you will make my own supply one of your first concerns. I've quite a stockpile of private stuff, but that suicide raid by the Duke's men got most of what we'd stored for sale."
Rabban nodded. "Yes, m'Lord."

The Baron brightened. "Now, tomorrow morning, you will assemble what remains of organization here and you'll say to them: 'Our Sublime Padishah Emperor has charged me to take possession of this planet and end all dispute.'"

"I understand, m'Lord."

"This time, I'm sure you do. We will discuss it in more detail tomorrow. Now, leave me to finish my sleep." The Baron deactivated his doorfield, watched his nephew out of sight. A tank-brain, the Baron thought. Muscle-minded tank-brain. They will be bloody pulp here when he's through with them. Then, when I send in Feyd-Rautha to take the load off them, they'll cheer their rescuer. Beloved Feyd-Rautha. Benign Feyd-Rautha, the compassionate one who saves them from a beast. Feyd-Rautha, a man to follow and die for. The boy will know by that time how to oppress with impunity. I'm sure he's the one we need. He'll learn. And such a lovely body. Really a lovely boy.

Three figures struggled up to the dune's meridian. Pausing there...out of breath. Jessica grabbed for her sip-tube, taking a tiny swallow.

“Drink it all. The best place to conserve water is in your body. The stillsuit will do the rest.” Harry ordered as he came up behind her, eyes always scanning for danger. Jessica nodded, seeing the wisdom of what he'd said. She drank more while Paul looked around for the best path forward. It was an endless sea of silica waves except for a cut of rocky hills to the East.

“If we stay on this dune, we can make those mountains before sunrise.

“Is that a good idea?”

“It's the most direct path.” Harry agreed with the young Duke and so they pressed on.

Rivulets of sand cascaded down its sides with each step they took. The rock formation was up ahead. But suddenly Jessica's left leg sank into the dune up to her thigh. She lost her balance and started to fall. “PAUL...”

He whipped around, seeing her falling. He lurched back and grabbed her arm at the last moment even as Harry lunged forward, grabbing her other arm, holding her up between them as an avalanche
of sand flushed down the side of the dune. They held her desperately until the sands settled. For a moment, the three of them just sat there, stunned by the close call. “That shouldn’t have happened. I was careless about these dunes...” he stared down at the landslide. “I lost our pack.” He was about to go after it when a growling, churning hiss reached their ears.

”Worm! It must have heard the sand fall. Run! RUN!!” Harry yelled, yanking the upright.

They got off the dune and ran for their lives while behind them the horrible house continued to grow louder and closer.

“I CAN’T SEE IT! I CAN’T SEE IT!” Jessica yelled as she stumbled, Harry grabbing her arm and pulling her along. Of all the times to not be able to apparate!

“DON’T STOP!” Paul ordered, moving to help Harry with her. Paul climbed into a crevice as they reached the rocks and reached back to pull her in. Harry scrambled up behind her and they turned just as the worm erupted behind them, the terrible maw waving back and forth beside the rocks. They turn just as...

Jessica was bug-eyed. Awed and terrified by a sight she never could have imagined. Paul held her close, pressing her into the rocks where the worm couldn’t reach. They were buffeted by the gale of its exhalations as it waved back and forth looking for them. Harry kept between them and the worm, magic filling the crevasse to make it seem like solid rock to the creature, hopefully. But then... THU-THUMP...THUMP....THU-THUMP THU-THUMP...THUMP....THU-THUMP in the distance. The worm suddenly veered away from the rocks and moved towards the sound which abruptly stopped. “A thumper?” she whispered.

“Someone called it away...” Harry answered just as softly. They huddled there, listening...listening... The hiss was receding, moving away from them.

“Did you smell it? The cinnamon smell?” Paul looked at them and Jessica nodded.

“The spice.....”

“Everywhere. When the worm came.” Paul’s mind was racing.

“Paul...” She called and he turned to see what she was looking at. “Steps. They mark the way up,” she began to climb but Harry pushed ahead of her, danger would reach him first, “Man-carved without a doubt.”
Harry, Jessica and Paul emerged through a hole the rocks. Stopping dead as they stared out at an oasis of plants. Strange and exotic plants, each with its own dew collector.

“There would have to be people for this many plants to survive.’

“Fremen?”

“We have to find them.” Paul stated but suddenly there was a rustling sound around them.

“Most intruders here regret finding the Fremen.” A male voice called and that's when they saw them in the rocks. Strange and ominous figures, hooded and cloaked, they were surrounded. “Do not run, Intruders. There is no escape. And you'll only waste your water.”

“Fremen. I'm sure of it.” Paul whispered

“I say we take their water and be on.” Another voice called.

“That ones to our left. The first...over there...I think...” She nodded to her right almost imperceptibly. Without a word, Paul and Jessica separated, splitting up as a target. But a dark, cloaked figure emerged from the shadows, hooded so that only the eyes were visible. Deep, endlessly blue eyes. Jessica tensed up, readying for a fight. She saw Harry at her sons back, hand resting on his blade.

“I know you. You are...Stilgar. The Fremen who came to see my father with Duncan Idaho.” Paul called out and the figure took another step forward, pulling back his hood and the scarf around his face to reveal Paul was right.

“That was a sloppy crossing you made from the crash. You called a worm...”

“You've been watching us? All that time?” he asked in shock and then glanced at Harry who shook his head, he had seen no sign of watchers.

“We...never saw you.” Jessica denied.
“You weren't meant to.”

“We're wasting time here, Stil.”

“This is the boy Liet told us to seek!” Stilgar called back. There was a rustle in the rocks and Jessica looked to Harry, measuring the situation.

“How can we be sure? We don't have time for the test.”

“Be quiet, Jamis…” Stilgar commanded and then looked back to the three off worlders. “As you can hear, I have a problem to solve. My people are cautious and pragmatic. Good qualities in the desert. Better sometimes to miss an opportunity than to invite disaster. Your only value at the moment is the water in your flesh…”

“You know the law, Stil. We can't stay out here arguing all night about it.”

“Yes...the law…” everything was tense, no one moving and then Jessica slumped and Stilgar instinctively stepped forward. Paul jumped back and Harry moved with him, trusting Jessica to take care of herself, his duty was to his Duke, and… Jessica moved under Stilgar, like a phantom. She grabbed him around the neck before he could react.

Paul and Harry leapt up the rocks and a robed figure sprung up in front of them, aiming a weapon. Harry moved in front of his Duke and attacked, the man going down under a blow he never saw coming. Tiny explosions and ricochets suddenly pock marked the rocks around Harry and Paul. Others are firing at them! Paul grabbed the weapon from the felled Fremen and vanished into the darkness.

“Tell them to stop hunting my son.” Jessica commanded with the Voice.

“LEAVE THE BOY ALONE! Great gods, why didn't you say you had the weirding ways…” he choked out, knowing she could kill him in an instant.

“Tell them all to come down from the rocks. All of them. And don't think I don't know how many there are.”
“You can kill me. But you'll never get through us all. What of your son then?” he asked, bracing to take some of the pressure off.

In the rocks Paul aimed the stolen weapon at Stilgar, knowing Harry was hidden in the shadows, watching his back.

“Tell them...!” Jessica commanded.

“LEAVE OFF.” He shouted and there was a murmur of discontent through the Fremen. “DO YOU HEAR ME? CAN'T YOU SEE SHE'S A BENE GESSERIT!?” this startled the Fremen.

She spun to face them, Stilgar still held securely. “Is this the way you welcome friends of Liet?” The Fremen shuffled nervously at the mention of Liet. “IS IT!?”

“The Shadout Mapes said you were a formidable one. And now I'm living proof...” he coughed as she released him and Jessica seized the moment.

“Miseces prejia. Andral tre pera!” she called out and there were gasps among them even as they took a step back in awe.

“As leader of this tribe, I am offering the weirding woman and her son sanctuary.” Stilgar called. “No Fremen anywhere will lay a hand on you while you have my protection.” He assured her.

“For how long?”

“Long enough.” He answered and she hesitated. “Don't be a fool, woman! You're fugitives from the Harkonnen. Don't be fugitives from us as well.”

“Agreed.”

“Merciful God...HAH! I've heard of the weirding way...imagine what a man can do with it....” he laughed and she glared at him.

“No doubt we have much to teach each other.” She offered coolly, making him laugh again.

“Come down, boy. Your mother has shown her worth.”
“He won't move unless I say so.”

“Discipline. Good!” Stilgar approved of that.

Paul remained motionless, weapon still ready.

“PAUL! PAUL!” Jessica called, not able to see him.

“He is here!” a girl called out and Paul whipped around to find her right behind him, aiming a weapon. It was her! The girl from his dreams. “He is unharmed. We're coming down.” Ashe called and then looked at Paul. “I am Chani, daughter of Liet. I would not have permitted you to harm my companions. You took the most difficult way up here. I'll show you an easier way down...” she offered and then gasped as Harry melted out of the shadows behind her, knife held far too close for her liking.

“Lower the weapon first miss.” Harry commanded and she slowly did, he sheathed his blade one she had. She led them down, Paul followed awkwardly but Harry managed easily, surprising those watching.

“Made a lot of noise climbing, didn't he?” Stilgar asked.

“He has much to learn.” She glanced at Paul who flushed with chagrin. “This one though moves well. I never saw him.” She admitted, glancing at Harry.

A Fremen pressed three squares of gauze into Stilgar’s hand. Stilgar ran them through his fingers, fixed one around Jessica’s neck beneath her hood, fitted the others around Paul and Harry’s neck in the same way. "Now you wear the kerchief of the bakka," he said. "If we become separated, you will be recognized as belonging to Stilgar's sietch. We will talk of weapons another time." Nearby two other Fremen helped a comrade down from the rocks. The one Harry beat up and disarmed. “Can you travel, Jamis?” Stilgar asked in concern.

“Surprised me. That's all. Was an accident. I can travel...sure...” he was the man who was arguing with Stilgar earlier, the one who wanted to kill them.
“Larus, Farok...hide our tracks. We have two with us now who are not trained. In squad line...with flankers. Let's move. We have to make Cave of Ridges before full sun.” he commanded and then looked to the girl. “Chani...you're responsible for him...”

“My name is Paul.”

“Only until we give you a new one.” He moved out, keeping Jessica with him as the rest fell in, Harry staying close to Paul and Chani.

“Follow me. Do exactly as I do.” She moved away and Paul dutifully followed after her.

Stilgar led the Fremen across the vast expanse of rolling dunes, their formation was so tight that from a distance they could be mistaken for a single, living creature. Two men at the back of the line dragged their robes across the sands, covering all traces of their passage there.

Jessica marched a few steps behind Stilgar, trying to keep his pace but clearly exhausted. She listened to the sounds of the troop, hearing her own footsteps and Paul's, marvelling at the way the Fremen moved. They were forty people crossing the basin with only the sounds natural to the place - ghostly feluccas, their robes flitting through the shadows. The Fremen began climbing a narrow path to a small plateau. Stilgar paused to points, in the distance a deep, wide basin of sand surrounded by mountain walls could be seen. “Across there is home. Sietch Tabr. We'll be there tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? But that must be hundreds of kilometres from here.”

“It will be a hard ride.” Stilgar agreed while the three newcomers exchange a curios look, ‘a hard ride’?

Chani urged them on. “Sun will be up soon. Patrols sometimes come this far. We can't let them see us...” They followed Stilgar into a slit in the mountain wall to find an almost invisible crevice, turning sideways to fit through. Several Fremen glowglobes cast eerie shadows on the walls as Stilgar led them through these rocky corridors. They came out in a large open area, columned by ancient rock formations. A small "balcony" to the outside allowed a dusty shaft of light to penetrate the darkness. The Fremen immediately separated into small groups, settling into apparently familiar niches and corners. Some climbed into small "berths" carved into the walls. Others congregated together by the pillars. Chani led Jessica, Paul and Hary to a small nook. “When you give us your stillsuits we will recover your water for you.” She handed them some other Fremen clothes. “And here is some food...” She pressed leaf-wrapped morsels into their hands. Paul took a bite, it's tough. Really tough.
“Spice!”

“We don’t have delicacies from the cities like you're used to.” She snapped defensively before moving away. Harry posted himself in front of them and quickly changed, keeping watch while they changed.

“It’s fine. Fine.” He gamely chewed on.

Chani moved away to another nook, unwrapping the robes around her, letting them fall to the ground in a gentle heap. She pulled off her stillsuit as everyone else was doing. No one seemed at all self-conscious about their nakedness, including Chani. Until she felt Paul’s stare. He couldn’t take his eyes off her sinewy, athletic form. It made her shy, self-conscious. She quickly pulled on the rest of her clothes.

“She's the one, isn't she?” Jessica asked and Paul turned to see her standing behind him. “The one you've seen in your dreams. I can tell by the way you stare at her.”

“I don't know what it means.” He denied.

“Be careful, Paul. We're new to these people...as they are to us. Everything we say and do must be careful.”

“Predicting the future...then plotting to make it so.” He challenged.

“These are superstitious people. If we are to survive, it would be best to accommodate their legends.”

“We are to use them then.” Harry whispered and Jessica looked away, ashamed, but she would do anything to protect her son.

A soft voice began to chant somewhere. “Duy yakha hin mange. Duy punra hin mange.”

“Bi-la kaifa...” Chani whispered. The chant reverberated in this hollow cavern, soft and low. Like a Catholic rosary, or Hindu mantra Harry thought. Paul was mesmerized. Watching the Fremen sway back and with their ritualized vespers until he noticed Jamis across the cavern, staring at Harry with cold, aloof eyes.
Jessica moved to join Stilgar outside, looking out at the sand. "Your people show good discipline," she offered and Stilgar nodded.

"They obey the preservation of the tribe," he said. "It is the way we choose among us for a leader. The leader is the one who is strongest, the one who brings water and security." He lifted his attention to her face.

She returned his stare, noted the whiteless eyes, the stained eyepits, the dust-rimmed beard and moustache, the line of the catchtube curving down from his nostrils into his stillsuit. "Have I compromised your leadership by besting you, Stilgar?" she asked.

"You did not call me out," he said.

"It's important that a leader keep the respect of his troop," she said.

"Isn't a one of those sandlice I cannot handle," Stilgar said. "When you bested me, you bested us all. Now, they hope to learn from you . . . the weirding way . . . and some are curious to see if you intend to call me out."

She weighed the implications. "By besting you in formal battle?"

He nodded. "I'd advise you against this because they'd not follow you. You're not of the sand. They saw this in our night's passage."

"Practical people," she said.

"True enough." He glanced at the basin. "We know our needs. But not many are thinking deep thoughts now this close to home. We've been out overlong arranging to deliver our spice quota to the free traders for the cursed Guild . . . may their faces be forever black."

Jessica stopped in the act of turning away from him, looked back up into his face. "The Guild? What has the Guild to do with your spice?"
"It's Liet's command," Stilgar said. "We know the reason, but the taste of it sours us. We bribe the Guild with a monstrous payment in spice to keep our skies clear of satellites and such that none may spy what we do to the face of Arrakis."

She weighed out her words, remembering that Paul had said this must be the reason Arrakeen skies were clear of satellites. "And what is it you do to the face of Arrakis that must not be seen?"

"We change it . . . slowly but with certainty . . . to make it fit for human life. Our generation will not see it, nor our children nor our children's children nor the grandchildren of their children . . . but it will come." He stared with veiled eyes out over the basin. "Open water and tall green plants and people walking freely without stillsuits."

So that's the dream of this Liet-Kynes, she thought. And she said: "Bribes are dangerous; they have a way of growing larger and larger."

"They grow," he said, "but the slow way is the safe way."

"We must be getting back to the others," Stilgar said. "Else my people may suspect I dally with you. Some already are jealous that my hands tasted your loveliness when we struggled last night in Tuono Basin."

"That will be enough of that!" Jessica snapped.

"No offense," Stilgar said, and his voice was mild. "Women among us are not taken against their will . . . and with you . . . " He shrugged. "... even that convention isn't required."

"You will keep in mind that I was a duke's lady," she said, but her voice was calmer.

"As you wish," he said. "It's time to seal off this opening, to permit relaxation of stillsuit discipline. My people need to rest in comfort this day. Their families will give them little rest on the morrow."

Silence fell between them.

Jessica stared out into the sunlight. She had heard what she had heard in Stilgar's voice - the unspoken offer of more than his countenance. Did he need a wife? She realized she could step into that place with him. It would be one way to end conflict over tribal leadership - female properly aligned with male.
But what of Paul then? Who could tell yet what rules of parenthood prevailed here? And what of the unborn daughter she had carried these few weeks? What of a dead Duke's daughter? And she permitted herself to face fully the significance of this other child growing within her, to see her own motives in permitting the conception. She knew what it was - she had succumbed to that profound drive shared by all creatures who are faced with death - the drive to seek immortality through progeny. The fertility drive of the species had overpowered them. Jessica glanced at Stilgar, saw that he was studying her, waiting. A daughter born here to a woman wed to such a one as this man - what would be the fate of such a daughter? she asked herself. Would he try to limit the necessities that a Bene Gesserit must follow?

Stilgar cleared his throat and revealed then that he understood some of the questions in her mind. "What is important for a leader is that which makes him a leader. It is the needs of his people. If you teach me your powers, there may come a day when one of us must challenge the other. I would prefer some alternative."

"There are several alternatives?" she asked.

"The Sayyadina," he said. "Our Reverend Mother is old." Their Reverend Mother! Before she could probe this, he said: "I do not necessarily offer myself as mate. This is nothing personal, for you are beautiful and desirable. But should you become one of my women, that might lead some of my young men to believe that I'm too much concerned with pleasures of the flesh and not enough concerned with the tribe's needs. Even now they listen to us and watch us."

A man who weighs his decisions, who thinks of consequences, she thought.

"There are those among my young men who have reached the age of wild spirits," he said. "They must be eased through this period. I must leave no great reasons around for them to challenge me. Because I would have to maim and kill among them. This is not the proper course for a leader if it can be avoided with honour. A leader, you see, is one of the things that distinguishes a mob from a people. He maintains the level of individuals. Too few individuals, and a people reverts to a mob."

Harry awakened in cave darkness, sensing the stir of Fremen around him, smelling the acrid stillsuit odour. His inner timesense told him it would soon be night outside, but the cave remained in blackness, shielded from the desert by the plastic hoods that trapped their body moisture within this space. He had only slept a few hours, keeping watch to ensure no one tried to harm his charges in the night. He turned in the hammock that had been fashioned of his robe, slipping his feet to the rock floor and into his desert boots. He needed to remember to fasten the boots slip-fashion to help his Stillsuits pumping action, there were so many things to remember.
He could still taste their morning meal - the morsel of bird flesh and grain bound within a leaf with spice honey - and it came to him that the use of time was turned around here: night was the day of activity and day was the time of rest. Night conceals; night is safest.

He unhooked his robe from its hammock pegs in a rock alcove, fumbled with the fabric in the dark until he found the top and slipped into it, leaving the alcove where Jessica still slept.

Jessica was awake and pondering how to get a message out to the Bene Gesserit? They would have to be told of the two strays in Arrakeen sanctuary. She got up and dressed as Harry had before looking around. Glowglobes came alight farther into the cave. She saw people moving there, Paul and Harry among them already dressed. With his hood thrown back the aquiline Atreides profile was revealed and Jessica couldn’t help a soft smile at the reminder of her Duke. Her son looked so much like him.

He had acted so strangely before they retired, she thought. Withdrawn. He was like one come back from the dead, not yet fully aware of his return, his eyes half shut and glassy with the inward stare. It made her think of his warning about the spice-impregnated diet: addictive. Are there side effects? she wondered. He said it had something to do with his prescient faculty, but he has been strangely silent about what he sees.

Stilgar came from shadows to her right, crossed to the group beneath the glowglobes. She marked how he fingered his beard and the watchful, cat-stalking look of him. Abrupt fear shot through Jessica as her senses awakened to the tensions visible in the people gathered around Paul - the stiff movements, the ritual positions.

"They have my countenance!" Stilgar rumbled.

Jessica recognised the man Stilgar confronted - Jamis! She saw then the rage in Jamis - the tight set of his shoulders. Jamis, the man Harry bested!

"You know the rule, Stilgar," Jamis said.

"Who knows it better?" Stilgar asked, and she heard the tone of placation in his voice, the attempt to smooth something over.

"I choose the combat," Jamis growled.
Jessica sped across the cave, grasped Stilgar's arm. "What is this?" she asked.

"It is the amtal rule," Stilgar said. "Jamis is demanding the right to test your part in the legend."

"She must be championed," Jamis said. "If her champion wins, that's the truth in it. But it's said . . ." He glanced across the press of people. ". . . that she'd need no champion from the Fremen - which can mean only that she brings her own champion."

He's talking of single combat with Harry or Paul! She released Stilgar's arm, took a half-step forward. "I'm always my own champion," she said. "The meaning's simple enough for . . ."

"You'll not tell us our ways!" Jamis snapped. "Not without more proof than I've seen. Stilgar could've told you what to say last morning. He could've filled your mind full of the coddle and you could've bird-talked it to us, hoping to make a false way among us."

I can take him, Jessica thought, but that might conflict with the way they interpret the legend. And again, she wondered at the way the Missionaria Protectiva's work had been twisted on this planet.

Stilgar looked at Jessica, spoke in a low voice but one designed to carry to the crowd's fringe. "Jamis is one to hold a grudge, Sayyadina. Your man bested him and - "

"It was an accident!" Jamis roared. "There was witch-force at Tuono Basin and I'll prove it now!"

". . . and I've bested him myself," Stilgar continued. "He seeks by this tahaddi challenge to get back at me as well. There's too much of violence in Jamis for him ever to make a good leader - too much ghafla, the distraction. He gives his mouth to the rules and his heart to the sarfa, the turning away. No, he could never make a good leader. I've preserved him this long because he's useful in a fight as such, but when he gets this carving anger on him he's dangerous to his own society."

"Stilgar-r-r-r!" Jamis rumbled.

And Jessica saw what Stilgar was doing, trying to enrage Jamis, to take the challenge away from Paul mostly.
"You named him a man," Jamis said. "His mother says he's been through the gom jabbar. He's full-fleshed and with a surfeit of water. The ones who carried their pack say there's literjons of water in it. Literjons! And us sipping our catch-pockets the instant they show dewsparkle."

Stilgar glanced at Jessica. "Is this true? Is there water in your pack?"

"Yes."

"Literjons of it?"

"Two literjons."

"What was intended with this wealth?"

Wealth? she thought. She shook her head, feeling the coldness in his voice. "Where I was born, water fell from the sky and ran over the land in wide rivers," she said. "There were oceans of it so broad you could not see the other shore. I've not been trained to your water discipline. I never before had to think of it this way."

A sighing gasp arose from the people around them: "Water fell from the sky . . . it ran over the land."

"Did you know there're those among us who've lost from their catch-pockets by accident and will be in sore trouble before we reach Tabr this night?"

"How could I know?" Jessica shook her head. "If they're in need, give them water from our pack."

"Is that what you intended with this wealth?"

"I intended it to save life," she said.
"Then we accept your blessing, Sayyadina."

"You'll not buy us off with water," Jamis growled. "Nor will you anger me against yourself, Stilgar. I see you trying to make me call you out before I've proved my words,"

Stilgar faced Jamis. "Are you determined to press this fight, Jamis?" His voice was low, venomous.

"She must be championed."

"Even though she has my countenance?"

"I invoke the amtal rule," Jamis said. "It's my right."

Stilgar nodded. "Then, if the boy does not carve you down, you'll answer to my knife afterward. And this time I'll not hold back the blade as I've done before."

"You cannot do this thing," Jessica said. "Paul's just - "

"You must not interfere, Sayyadina," Stilgar said. "Oh, I know you can take me and, therefore, can take anyone among us, but you cannot best us all united. This must be; it is the amtal rule."

“I am My Lady’s Champion, if he seeks a fight it will be against me, not My Duke or his Mother.” Harry spoke, voice commanded and green eyes almost glowing in anger as he looked Jamis up and down dismissively and Jessica felt relieved and yet guilty for that relief that Harry would take Paul’s place.

Jessica stared at Stilgar in the green light of the glowglobes, seeing the demoniacal stiffness that had taken over his expression. She shifted her attention to Jamis, saw the brooding look to his brows and thought: I should've seen that before. He broods. He's the silent kind, one who works himself up inside. I should've been prepared.

"If you harm my son or gaurd," she said, "You'll have me to meet. I call you out now. I'll carve you
"Mother." Paul stepped forward, touched her sleeve. "Perhaps if I explain to Jamis how - "

"Explain!" Jamis sneered.

Paul fell silent, staring at the man. He felt no fear of him. Jamis appeared clumsy in his movements and he had fallen so easily in their night encounter on the sand. But Paul still felt the nexus-boiling of this cave, still remembered the prescient visions of himself dead under a knife. There had been so few avenues of escape for him in that vision . . . But if Harry fought? There was nothing, no hint of how it would end.

Stilgar said: "Sayyadina, you must step back now where - "

"Stop calling her Sayyadina!" Jamis said. "That's yet to be proved. So, she knows the prayer! What's that? Every child among us knows it."

He has talked enough, Jessica thought. I've the key to him. I could immobilize him with a word. She hesitated. But I cannot stop them all. "You will answer to me then," Jessica said, and she pitched her voice in a twisting tone with a little whine in it and a catch at the end. Jamis stared at her, fright visible on his face. "I'll teach you agony," she said in the same tone. "Remember that as you fight. You'll have agony such as will make the gom jabbar a happy memory by comparison. You will writhe with your entire - "

"She tries a spell on me!" Jamis gasped. He put his clenched right fist beside his ear. "I invoke the silence on her!"

"So be it then," Stilgar said. He cast a warning glance at Jessica. "If you speak again, Sayyadina, we'll know it's your witchcraft and you'll be forfeit." He nodded for her to step back.

Jessica felt hands pulling her, helping her back, and she sensed they were not unkindly. She saw Paul being pulled along with her, the elfin-faced Chani whispering in his ear as Harry was separated from them.

A ring formed within the troop. More glowglobes were brought and all of them tuned to the yellow band.
Jamis stepped into the ring, slipped out of his robe and tossed it to someone in the crowd. He stood there in a cloudy grey slickness of stillsuit that was patched and marked by tucks and gathers. For a moment, he bent with his mouth to his shoulder, drinking from a catchpocket tube. Presently he straightened, peeled off and detached the suit, handed it carefully into the crowd. He stood waiting, clad in loincloth and some tight fabric over his feet, a crysknife in his right hand.

Jessica saw Stilgar helping Harry, saw him press a crysknife handle into his palm, saw Harry heft it, testing the weight and balance. And it came to Jessica that while Harry hadn’t been trained in prana and bindu, the nerve and the fiber - he had been taught fighting long before she had come to the Atreides, that he practiced in a deadly school, his opponents’ men like Duncan Idaho and Gurney Halleck, men who were legends in their own lifetimes. She looked up, saw Stilgar now watching her.

"You cannot stop it," he said. "You must not speak."

She put a hand over her mouth, thinking: I've planted fear in Jamis' mind. It'll slow him some . . . perhaps. If I could only pray - truly pray.

Harry stood alone now just into the ring, clad in the fighting trunks he'd worn under his stillsuit. He held a crysknife in his right hand; his feet were bare against the sand-gritted rock. He’d learnt long ago that when in doubt of your surface, bare feet were best. And there were Stilgar’s words of instruction still in the front of his consciousness: "Jamis turns to the right with his knife after a parry. It's a habit in him we've all seen. And he'll aim for the eyes to catch a blink in which to slash you. And he can fight either hand; look out for a knife shift."

Harry remembered Gurney Halleck's words: "The good knife fighter thinks on point and blade and shearing-guard simultaneously. The point can also cut; the blade can also stab; the shearing-guard can also trap your opponent's blade."

Harry glanced at the crysknife. There was no shearing-guard; only the slim round ring of the handle with its raised lips to protect the hand. And even so, he realized that he did not know the breaking tension of this blade, did not even know if it could be broken.

Jamis began sidling to the right along the edge of the ring opposite Harry. Harry crouched, he wore no shield but he had fought in various manners over the centuries and its lack would not affect those well-honed reflexes.
Jamis called out in ritual challenge: "May thy knife chip and shatter!"

The knife would break then. Harry stared across the ring at Jamis, the man's body looked like knotted whipcord on a dried skeleton. His crysknife shone milky yellow in the light of the glowglobes.

Fear coursed through Paul as he watched them circle. He felt suddenly alone and naked standing in dull yellow light in the ring of people. Prescience had fed his knowledge with countless experiences, hinted at the strongest currents of the future and the strings of decision that guided them, but this was the real-now. This was death hanging on an infinite number of miniscule mischances and he had no idea how it would end. Anything could tip the future here, he realized. Someone coughing in the troop of watchers, a distraction. A variation in a glowglobe's brilliance, a deceptive shadow. I'm afraid, Paul told himself. And yet it was not him in the ring, none of his visions had shown Harry taking his place.

As Harry circled warily opposite Jamis, Paul repeated silently to himself the Bene Gesserit litany against fear. "Fear is the mind-killer . . ." It was a cool bath washing over him. He felt muscles untie themselves, become poised and ready, if Harry fell he would have to move to protect himself and his Mother.

"I'll sheath my knife in your blood," Jamis snarled. And in the middle of the last word he pounced.

Jessica saw the motion, stifled an outcry. Where the man struck there was only empty air and Harry stood now behind Jamis with a clear shot at the exposed back.

Harry lashed out in a kick, overbalancing the man, blade scoring across his ribs as he fell. "First, you must find my blood," he said. Again, Jamis attacked, ink-dark eyes glaring, his body a yellow blur under the glowglobes. And again, Harry scored a hit while avoiding injury.

"Is your man playing with that poor fool?" Stilgar asked. He waved her to silence before she could respond. "Sorry; you must remain silent."

Now the two figures on the rock floor circled each other; Jamis with knife hand held far forward and tipped up slightly; Harry crouched with knife held low. Again, Jamis pounced, and this time he twisted to the right where Harry had been dodging. Instead of faking back and out, Harry met the man's knife hand on the point of his own blade. Then the boy was gone, twisting away to the left and thankful for Stilgar's warning. Jamis backed into the centre of the circle, rubbing his knife hand. Blood dripped from the injury for a moment, stopped. His eyes were wide and staring - two blue-black holes - studying Harry with a new wariness in the dull light of the glowglobes, all previous
blows could have been luck but not that one.

"Ah, that one hurt," Stilgar murmured.

Harry crouched at the ready and called out: "Do you yield?"

"Hah!" Jamis cried.

An angry murmur arose from the troop. "Hold!" Stilgar called out. "The man doesn't know our rule."
Then, to Harry: "There can be no yielding in the tahaddi-challenge. Death is the test of it."

Harry mentally swore, he hadn’t wanted to kill this man but he circled slowly right, forced by Jamis' movement.

Paul watched, the prescient knowledge of the time-boiling variables in this cave came back to plague him now. His new understanding told him there were too many swiftly compressed decisions in this fight for any clear channel ahead to show itself. Variable piled on variable - that was why this cave lay as a blurred nexus in his path. It was like a gigantic rock in the flood, creating maelstroms in the current around it.

"Have an end to it." Stilgar muttered. "Don't play with him."

Jamis backed now that the realization swept over him - that this was no soft offworlder in the tahaddi ring, easy prey for a Fremen crysknife.

Jessica saw the shadow of desperation in the man's face. Now is when he's most dangerous, she thought. Now he's desperate and can do anything. He sees that this is not like a young man of his own people, but a fighting machine trained to it for years. Now the fear I planted in him has come to bloom. And she found in herself a sense of pity for Jamis - an emotion tempered by awareness of the immediate peril to her friend. Jamis could do anything . . . any unpredictable thing, she told herself. She wondered then if Paul had glimpsed this future, if he were reliving this experience. But she saw the way her son stood, the beads of perspiration on his face, the careful wariness visible in the way he stood. And for the first time she sensed, without understanding it, the uncertainty factor in Paul's gift.

Harry pressed the fight now, circling but not attacking. He had seen the fear in his opponent. He
smirked slightly as he remembered something Duncan had told Paul during a lesson, "When your opponent fears you, then the moment when you give the fear its own rein, give it the time to work on him. Let it become terror. The terrified man fights himself. Eventually, he attacks in desperation. That is the most dangerous moment, but the terrified man can be trusted usually to make a fatal mistake. You are being trained here to detect these mistakes and use them."

The crowd in the cavern began to mutter. Jessica sensed also the undercurrent of crowd excitement, their enjoyment of the spectacle. And she could see the pressure building up in Jamis. The moment when it became too much for him to contain was as apparent to her as it was to Jamis . . . or to Harry.

Jamis leaped high, feinting and striking down with his right hand, but the hand was empty. The crysknife had been shifted to his left hand. Jessica gasped and Paul started but Harry whirled away and then tripped Jamis and as he fell Harry’s arm moved, burying the blade in his heart, giving him a swift, painless death.

Jamis fell like a limp rag, face down, gasped once and turned his face toward Harry, then lay still on the rock floor. His dead eyes stared out like beads of dark glass.

"Killing with the point lacks artistry," Idaho had once told Paul, "but don't let that hold your hand when the opening presents itself." Paul stared at the body on the floor and then looked to Harry who was barely breathing harder as he stood over his opponent.

The troop rushed forward, filling the ring, pushing Harry aside. They hid Jamis in a frenzy of huddling activity. Presently a group of them hurried back into the depths of the cavern carrying a burden wrapped in a robe. And there was no body on the rock floor.

Jessica pressed through toward her Champion. She felt that she swam in a sea of robed and stinking backs, a throng strangely silent.

"Him against Jamis and not a mark on him," one of the men muttered.

Stilgar pressed through to Jessica’s side, returning from the cave depths where the body of Jamis had been taken. He spoke to Harry in a bitter, controlled tone: "When the time comes, if you to call me out and try for my burda, do not think you will play with me the way you played with Jamis."

Harry looked to Jessica and Paul. "You know what it was," he said.
She heard the remorse in his voice. Jessica swept her glance across the troop, said: "No Atreides man would consider killing another man in a fight like this.” Stilgar faced her, disbelief in his face.

"I wasn't playing with him," Harry said. He pressed in front of Jessica, straightening his robe, glanced at the dark place of Jamis’ blood on the cavern floor. "I did not want to kill him."

Jessica saw belief come slowly to Stilgar, saw the relief in him as he tugged at his beard with a deeply veined hand. She heard muttering awareness spread through the troop.

"That's why y' asked him to yield," Stilgar said. "I see. Our ways are different, but you'll see the sense in them. I thought we'd admitted a scorpion into our midst.” He then looked at Paul.

“This man is your teacher?”

“One of them.” Paul answered proudly.

“Up for another fight?” Stilgar looked to Harry who tensed. “The lad must be tested to be named. This fight will allow yielding.”

Harry glanced at Paul who grinned. “Agreed.” He moved back to where the ring had been as Paul was stripped down, Chani pressing a blade into his hand. The two circled as the crowd backed away to watch. Paul was faster on defence but he hesitated on attack. “We warned you about shield reliance.” Harry chided as he sent Paul rolling across the floor. The two moved back and forth, neither landing a blow to the watchers’ amassment. The fight ended suddenly with Paul’s blade at Harry’s throat and Harry’s at Paul’s femoral artery. This time both were rushed by an excited crowd and then Paul pushed forward to Stilgar.

“It seems I can call you lad no more.”

A voice from the troop called out: "Needs a naming, Stil."

Stilgar nodded, tugging at his beard. "I see strength in you . . . like the strength beneath a pillar." Again, he paused, then: "You shall be known among us as Usul, the base of the pillar. This is your secret name, your troop name. We of Sietch Tabr may use it, but none other may so presume . . . Usul."
Murmuring went through the troop: "Good choice, that... strong... bring us luck." And Jessica sensed the acceptance, knowing she was included in it with her son. She was indeed Sayyadina.

"Now, what name of manhood do you choose for us to call you openly?" Stilgar asked.

Paul glanced at his mother, back to Stilgar. Bits and pieces of this moment registered on his prescient memory, but he felt the differences as though they were physical, a pressure forcing him through the narrow door of the present.

"How do you call among you the little mouse, the mouse that jumps?" Paul asked, remembering the pop-hop of motion at Tuono Basin. He illustrated with one hand. A chuckle sounded through the troop.

"We call that one Muad'Dib," Stilgar said.

Jessica gasped. It was the name Paul had told her, saying that the Fremen would accept them and call him thus. She felt a sudden fear of her son and for him.

Paul swallowed. He felt that he played a part already played over countless times in his mind... yet... there were differences. He could see himself perched on a dizzying summit, having experienced much and possessed of a profound store of knowledge, but all around him was abyss.

And again, he remembered the vision of fanatic legions following the green and black banner of the Atreides, pillaging and burning across the universe in the name of their prophet Muad'Dib. That must not happen, he told himself.

"Is that the name you wish, Muad'Dib?" Stilgar asked.

"I am an Atreides," Paul whispered, and then louder: "It's not right that I give up entirely the name my father gave me. Could I be known among you as Paul-Muad'Dib?"

"You are Paul-Muad'Dib," Stilgar said.
And Paul thought: That was in no vision of mine. I did a different thing. But he felt that the abyss remained all around him. Then again visions had always shown him fighting Jamis, not Harry.

Again, a murmuring response went through the troop as man turned to man: "Wisdom with strength... Couldn't ask more... It's the legend for sure... Lisan al-Gaib... Lisan al-Gaib..."

"I will tell you a thing about your new name," Stilgar said. "The choice pleases us. Muad'Dib is wise in the ways of the desert. Muad'Dib creates his own water. Muad'Dib hides from the sun and travels in the cool night. Muad'Dib is fruitful and multiplies over the land. Muad'Dib we call 'instructor-of-boys.' That is a powerful base on which to build your life, Paul-Muad'Dib, who is Usul among us. We welcome you." Stilgar touched Paul's forehead with one palm, withdrew his hand, embraced Paul and murmured, "Usul."

As Stilgar released him, another member of the troop embraced Paul, repeating his new troop name. And Paul was passed from embrace to embrace through the troop, hearing the voices, the shadings of tone; "Usul... Usul... Usul." Already, he could place some of them by name. And there was Chani who pressed her cheek against his as she held him and said his name.

Stilgar looked at Harry, considering. "And what shall we name you... Suhl for you sought peace, even in battle. Your manhood name?"

Harry considered, some of the languages shared roots with those of Earth but they were also quite different, enough that he was unsure of word meaning. But just using Harry would let rumour eventually reach the Harkonnen of his survival. "What do you call the falcon?"

"Baz." Stilgar answered and then grinned. "Harry-Baz?"

"Harry-Baz."

Presently Paul stood again before Stilgar, who said: "Now, you are of the Ichwan Bedwine, our brother." His face hardened, and he spoke with command in his voice. "And now, Paul-Muad'Dib, tighten up that stillsuit." He glanced at Chani. "Chani! Paul-Muad'Dib's nose plugs are as poor a fit I've ever seen! I thought I ordered you to see after him!"

"I hadn't the makings, Stil," she said. "There's Jamis' of course, but - "
"Enough of that!"

"Then I'll share one of mine," she said. "I can make do with one until - "

"You will not," Stilgar said. "I know there are spares among us. Where are the spares? Are we a troop together or a band of savages?"

Hands reached out from the troop offering hard, fibrous objects. Stilgar selected four, handed them to Chani. "Fit these to Usul, Suhl and the Sayyadina."

A voice lifted from the back of the troop: "What of the water, Stil? What of the literjons in their pack?"

"I know your need, Farok," Stilgar said. He glanced at Jessica. She nodded.

"Broach one for those that need it," Stilgar said. "Watermaster . . . where is a watermaster? Ah, Shimoom, care for the measuring of what is needed. The necessity and no more. This water is the dower property of the Sayyadina and will be repaid in the sietch at field rates less pack fees."

"What is the repayment at field rates?" Jessica asked.

"Ten for one," Stilgar said.

"But - "

"It's a wise rule as you'll come to see," Stilgar said. A rustling of robes marked movement at the back of the troop as men turned to get the water. Stilgar held up a hand, and there was silence. "As to Jamis," he said, "I order the full ceremony. Jamis was our companion and brother of the Ichwan Bedwine. There shall be no turning away without the respect due one who proved our fortune by his tahaddi-challenge. I invoke the rite . . . at sunset when the dark shall cover him."

Paul, hearing these words, realized that he had plunged once more into the abyss . . . blind time. There was no past occupying the future in his mind . . . except . . . except . . . he could still sense the green and black Atreides banner waving . . . somewhere ahead . . . still see the jihad's bloody swords
and fanatic legions.

It will not be, he told himself. I cannot let it be.

All around him, Paul saw the Fremen throwing back their hoods, removing nose plugs, breathing deeply. Someone sighed. Paul looked for Chani, found that she had left his side. He was hemmed in by a press of robed bodies. Someone jostled him, said, "Excuse me, Usul. What a crush! It's always this way."

On his left, the narrow-bearded face of the one called Farok turned toward Paul. The stained eyepits and blue darkness of eyes appeared even darker under the yellow globes. "Throw off your hood, Usul," Farok said. "You're home." And he helped Paul, releasing the hood catch, elbowing a space around them.

Paul slipped out his nose plugs, swung the mouth baffle aside. The odour of the place assailed him: unwashed bodies, distillate esters of reclaimed wastes, everywhere the sour effluvia of humanity with, over it all, a turbulence of spice and spicelike harmonics. "Why are we waiting, Farok?" Paul asked.

"For the Reverend Mother, I think. You heard the message - poor Chani."

Poor Chani? Paul asked himself. He looked around, wondering where she was, where his mother had got to in all this crush.

Farok took a deep breath. "The smells of home," he said.

Paul saw that the man was enjoying the stink of this air, that there was no irony in his tone. He heard his mother cough then, and her voice came back to him through the press of the troop: "How rich the odours of your sietch, Stilgar. I see you do much working with the spice . . . you make paper . . . plastics . . . and isn't that chemical explosives?"

"You know this from what you smell?" It was another man's voice.

And Paul realized she was speaking for his benefit, that she wanted him to make a quick acceptance
of this assault on his nostrils. There came a buzz of activity at the head of the troop and a prolonged
indrawn breath that seemed to pass through the Fremen, and Paul heard hushed voices back down
the line: "It's true then - Liet is dead."

Liet, Paul thought. Then: Chani, daughter of Liet. The pieces fell together in his mind. Liet was the
Fremen name of the Planetologist. Paul looked at Farok, asked: "Is it the Liet known as Kynes?"

"There is only one Liet," Farok said.

Paul turned, stared at the robed back of a Fremen in front of him. Then Liet-Kynes is dead, he
thought.

"It was Harkonnen treachery," someone hissed. "They made it seem an accident . . . lost in the desert
. . . a 'thopter crash . . . "

Paul felt a burst of anger. The man who had befriended them, helped save them from the Harkonnen
hunters, the man who had sent his Fremen cohorts searching for two strays in the desert . . . another
victim of the Harkonnen’s.

"Does Usul hunger yet for revenge?" Farok asked.

Before Paul could answer, there came a low call and the troop swept forward into a wider chamber,
carrying Paul with them. He found himself in an open space watching as Harry was confronted by
Stilgar and a strange woman wearing a flowing wraparound garment of brilliant orange and green.
Her arms were bare to the shoulders, and he could see she wore no stillsuit. Her skin was a pale
olive. Dark hair swept back from her high forehead, throwing emphasis on sharp cheekbones and
aquiline nose between the dense darkness of her eyes. She turned toward Harry, and Paul saw
golden rings threaded with water tallies dangling from her ears.

"This bested my Jamis?" she demanded, looking Harry over and Paul couldn’t blame her, Harry was
not at all imposing.

"Be silent, Harah," Stilgar said. "It was Jamis' doing - he invoked the tahaddi al-burhan."

She gave her head a sharp shake from side to side, setting the water tallies to jingling. "My children
made fatherless by one not far past childhood himself? Surely, 'twas an accident!"
"Suhl, how many years have you?" Stilgar asked.

"Twenty-seven standard," Harry answered, it was the answer Harry always gave, ever since Paul was a child. No one knew exactly how old he was.

Stilgar swept his eyes over the troop. "Is there one among you cares to challenge me?" Silence. Stilgar looked at the woman. "Until I've learned his Duke's weirding ways. I'd not challenge him."

She returned his stare. "But -"

"You saw the stranger, woman who went with Chani to the Reverend Mother?" Stilgar asked. "She's an out-freyn Sayyadina, mother to this lad. The mother and son are masters of the weirding ways of battle. Their Champion is a fighter like I've not seen before."

"Lisan al-Gaib," the woman whispered. Her eyes held awe as she turned them back toward Paul. The legend again, Paul thought.

"Perhaps," Stilgar said. "It hasn't been tested, though." He returned his attention to Harry. "Suhl, it's our way that you've now the responsibility for Jamis' woman here and for his two sons. His yali... his quarters, are yours. His coffee service is yours... and this, his woman."

Harry studied the woman, wondering why she wasn't mourning her man. Why did she show no hate for me? Abruptly, he saw that the Fremen were staring at him, waiting.

Someone whispered: "There's work to do. Say how you accept her."

Stilgar said: "Do you accept Harah as woman or servant?"

Harah lifted her arms, turning slowly on one heel. "I am still young, Suhl. It's said I still look as young as when I was with Geoff... before Jamis bested him."

Jamis killed another to win her, Paul thought as he watched, wondering what Harry would chose.
"If I accept her as servant, may I yet change my mind at a later time?"

"You'd have a year to change your decision," Stilgar said. "After that, she's a free woman to choose as she wishes . . . or you could free her to choose for herself at any time. But she's your responsibility, no matter what, for one year . . . and you'll always share some responsibility for the sons of Jamis."

"I accept her as servant," Harry answered.

Harah stamped a foot, shook her shoulders with anger. "But I'm young!"

Stilgar looked at Harry. "Caution's a worthy trait in a man who'd lead."

"But I'm young!" Harah repeated.

"Be silent," Stilgar commanded. "If a thing has merit, it'll be. Show Suhl to his quarters and see he has fresh clothing and a place to rest."

"Oh-h-h-h!" she said.

Paul felt the impatience of the troop, knew many things were being delayed here. He wondered if he dared ask the whereabouts of his mother and Chani, saw from Stilgar's nervous stance that it would be a mistake.

Harry faced Harah, pitched his voice to accent her fear and awe, said: "Show me my quarters, Harah! We will discuss your youth another time."

She backed away two steps, cast a frightened glance at Stilgar before leading Harry from the room.

"Stilgar," Paul said. "Chani's father put heavy obligation on me. If there's anything . . . "
"It'll be decided in council," Stilgar said. "You can speak then." He nodded in dismissal, turned away with the rest of the troop following him. Farok remained to show Paul to the chambers that would be the Sayyadina’s.

Harry took Harah's arm, noting how cool her flesh seemed, feeling her tremble. "I'll not harm you, Harah," he said. "Show me our quarters." He spoke soothingly to her. He didn’t use the Voce like Paul and Jessica but he had several thousand years to learn how to sooth or anger with his voice.

"You'll not cast me out when the year's gone?" she said. "I know for true I'm not as young as once I was."

"As long as I live you'll have a place with me," he said. He released her arm. "Come now, where are our quarters?" She turned, led the way down the passage, turning right into a wide cross tunnel lighted by evenly spaced yellow overhead globes. The stone floor was smooth, swept clean of sand. Harry moved up beside her, studied the aquiline profile as they walked. "You do not hate me, Harah?"

"Why should I hate you?" She nodded to a cluster of children who stared at them from the raised ledge of a side passage.

Harry glimpsed adult shapes behind the children partly hidden by filmy hangings. "I . . . bested Jamis."

"Stilgar said the ceremony was held and you're a friend of Jamis." She glanced sidelong at him. "Stilgar said your Duke gave moisture to the dead. Is that truth?"

"Yes."

"It's more than I'll do . . . can do."

"Don't you mourn him?" Harry was genuinely curious.

"In the time of mourning, I'll mourn him."
They passed an arched opening. Harry looked through it at men and women working with stand-mounted machinery in a large, bright chamber. There seemed an extra tempo of urgency to them. "What're they doing in there?"

She glanced back as they passed beyond the arch, said: "They hurry to finish the quota in the plastics shop before we flee. We need many dew collectors for the planting."

"Flee?"

"Until the butchers stop hunting us or are driven from our land."

"The Sardaukar hunt us," he said.

"They'll not find much excepting an empty sietch or two," she said. "And they'll find their share of death in the sand."

"They'll find this place?" he asked.

"Likely."

"Yet we take the time to . . . " He motioned with his head toward the arch now far behind them. " . . . make . . . dew collectors?"

"The planting goes on."

"What're dew collectors?" he asked.

The glance she turned on him was full of surprise. "Don't they teach you anything in the . . . wherever it is you come from?"

"Not about dew collectors."
"Hai!" she said, and there was a whole conversation in the one word.

"Well, what are they?"

"Each bush, each weed you see out there in the erg," she said, "how do you suppose it lives when we leave it? Each is planted most tenderly in its own little pit. The pits are filled with smooth ovals of chromoplastic. Light turns them white. You can see them glistening in the dawn if you look down from a high place. White reflects. But when Old Father Sun departs, the chromoplastic reverts to transparency in the dark. It cools with extreme rapidity. The surface condenses moisture out of the air. That moisture trickles down to keep our plants alive."

"Dew collectors," he muttered, enchanted by the simple beauty of such a scheme.

"I'll mourn Jamis in the proper time for it," she said, as though her mind had not left his other question. "He was a good man, Jamis, but quick to anger. A good provider, Jamis, and a wonder with the children. He made no separation between Geoff's boy, my firstborn, and his own true son. They were equal in his eyes." She turned a questing stare on Harry. "Would it be that way with you, Suhl?"

"We don't have that problem."

"But if -"

"Harah!" She recoiled at the harsh edge in his voice. They passed another brightly lighted room visible through an arch on their left. "What's made there?" he asked.

"They repair the weaving machinery," she said. "But it must be dismantled by tonight." She gestured at a tunnel branching to their left. "Through there and beyond, that's food processing and stillsuit maintenance." She looked at him. "Your suit looks new. But if it needs work, I'm good with suits. I work in the factory in season."

They began coming on knots of people now and thicker clustering’s of openings in the tunnel's sides. A file of men and women passed them carrying packs that gurgled heavily, the smell of spice strong about them.

"They'll not get our water," Harah said. "Or our spice. You can be sure of that."
Harry glanced at the openings in the tunnel walls, seeing the heavy carpets on the raised ledge, glimpses of rooms with bright fabrics on the walls, piled cushions. People in the openings fell silent at their approach, followed Paul with untamed stares.

"The people find it strange you bested Jamis," Harah said. "Likely you'll have some proving to do when we're settled in a new sietch."

"I don't like killing," he said.

"Thus, Stilgar tells it," she said, but her voice betrayed her disbelief.

A shrill chanting grew louder ahead of them. They came to another side opening wider than any of the others Harry had seen. He slowed his pace, staring in at a room crowded with children sitting cross-legged on a maroon-carpeted floor.

At a chalkboard against the far wall stood a woman in a yellow wraparound, a projecto-stylus in one hand. The board was filled with designs - circles, wedges and curves, snake tracks and squares, flowing arcs split by parallel lines. The woman pointed to the designs one after the other as fast as she could move the stylus, and the children chanted in rhythm with her moving hand.

He listened, hearing the voices grow dimmer behind as he moved deeper into the sietch with Harah. "Tree," the children chanted. "Tree, grass, dune, wind, mountain, hill, fire, lightning, rock, rocks, dust, sand, heat, shelter, heat, full, winter, cold, empty, erosion, summer, cavern, day, tension, moon, night, caprock, sandtide, slope, planting, binder . . ."

"You conduct classes at a time like this?" Harry asked.

Her face went sombre and grief edged her voice: "What Liet taught us, we cannot pause an instant in that. Liet who is dead must not be forgotten. It's the Chakobsa way."

She crossed the tunnel to the left, stepped up onto a ledge, parted gauzy orange hangings and stood aside: "Your yali is ready for you, Suhl."

Harry hesitated before joining her on the ledge. He felt a sudden reluctance to be alone with this
woman. It came to him that he was surrounded by a way of life that could only be understood by postulating an ecology of ideas and values. He felt that this Fremen world was fishing for him, trying to snare him in its ways. How well could he adapt to this life? could he really be one of them? Every world needed him to adapt but this was one of the harshest and deepest.

"This is your yali," Harah said. "Why do you hesitate?"

Harry joined her on the ledge. He lifted the hangings across from her, feeling metal fibres in the fabric, followed her into a short entrance way and then into a larger room, square, about six meters to a side - thick blue carpets on the floor, blue and green fabrics hiding the rock walls, glowglobes tuned to yellow overhead bobbing against draped yellow ceiling fabrics. The effect was that of an ancient tent.

Harah stood in front of him, left hand on hip, her eyes studying his face. "The children are with a friend," she said. "They will present themselves later."

Harry masked his unease beneath a quick scanning of the room. Thin hangings to the right, he saw, partly concealed a larger room with cushions piled around the walls. He felt a soft breeze from an air duct, saw the outlet cunningly hidden in a pattern of hangings directly ahead of him.

"Do you wish me to help you remove your stillsuit?" Harah asked.

"No . . . thank you."

"Shall I bring food?"

"Yes."

"There is a reclamation chamber off the other room." She gestured. "For your comfort and convenience when you're out of your stillsuit."

"You said we have to leave this sietch," Harry said. "Shouldn't we be packing or something?"

"It will be done in its time," she said. "The butchers have yet to penetrate to our region." Still she
hesitated, staring at him.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"You've not the eyes of the Ibad," she said. "It's strange but not entirely unattractive."

"Get the food," he said. "I'm hungry."

She smiled at him - a knowing, woman's smile that he found disquieting. "I am your servant," she said, and whirled away in one lithe motion, ducking behind a heavy wall hanging that revealed another passage before falling back into place.

Feeling angry with himself, Harry brushed through the thin hanging on the right and into the larger room. He stood there a moment caught by uncertainty. His mind went to Paul but he sensed no danger or distress from him. A wailing cry sounded from the outer corridors, its volume muffled by the intervening hangings. It was repeated, a bit more distant. And again. Harry realized someone was calling the time. He focused on the fact that he had seen no clocks. The faint smell of burning creosote bush came to his nostrils, riding on the omnipresent stink of the sietch. Harry saw that he had already suppressed the odorous assault on his senses. He had seen a thing about the caverns and this room, a thing that suggested far greater differences than anything he had yet encountered. There was no sign of a poison snooper here, no indication of their use anywhere in the cave warren. Yet he could smell poisons in the sietch stench - strong ones, common ones.

He heard a rustle of hangings, thought it was Harah returning with food, and turned to watch her. Instead, from beneath a displaced pattern of hangings, he saw two young boys - perhaps aged nine and ten - staring out at him with greedy eyes. Each wore a small kindjal-type of crysknife, rested a hand on the hilt. And Harry recalled the stories of the Fremen - that their children fought as ferociously as the adults. "Hello," he greeted them.

“You are Suhl, our guardian-father.”

“That is correct, what are your names?” He sat down to be more at their level.

“I am Kaleff, son of Geoff, this is Orlop, son of Jamis.” The eldest boy stated proudly.

“it is a pleasure to meet you both and I am sorry for your loss."
“You bested Jamis, he bested Geoff. It is the way and we will wear no green to mourn him since we now have you.”

“I promise I will do my best for you.” That seemed enough for Orlop as the boy sat opposite him and smiled.

Harry walked into the massive room, Kaleff and Orlop acting as small guards on either side of him, hands on their blades. He approached the ledge and took in Jessica and Stilgar. “What is happening?” he asked as men came with rolled carpets, grunting under the weight of them, stirring up dust as the loads were dropped onto the ledge.

Stilgar took Jessica's arm, led her back into the acoustical horn that formed the rear limits of the ledge. He indicated a rock bench within the horn. "The Reverend Mother will sit here, but you may rest yourself until she comes."

"I prefer to stand," Jessica said.

“The Reverend Mother…. My Lady you cannot do this!”

“This is not your concern Harry."

“I am sworn to House Atreides My Lady, the survival and health of all members is my concern. The child…."

“Usul is no child.” Stilgar pointed out, confused.

“He is not the child I speak of.” He stared at Jessica.

“You are with child? Why did you not say so?” A voice croaked and he turned to see a hunched old woman dressed in black Abba, the Reverend Mother. “The Water changes both! This cannot happen.”
Harry was glad the crowd was still gathering and therefore not close enough to hear. Stilgar was staring at Jessica in shock as the woman pressed a hand to her womb.

“How long until it is safe for you to give birth?” the old woman demanded.

“Four months your Reverence.”

Ramallo nodded and then looked at the young man who had brought the issue to light, the one that had bested Jamis. If he had not spoken what abomination may have been created? She beckoned Stilgar over and they spoke quietly for a few minutes. “We are the people of Misr,” the old woman rasped as the crowd settled down. "Since our Sunni ancestors fled from Nilotic al-Ourouba, we have known flight and death. The young go on that our people shall not die."

Stilgar took a deep breath, stepped forward two paces.

Jessica felt the hush come over the crowded cavern - some twenty thousand people now, standing silently, almost without movement. It made her feel suddenly small and filled with caution.

"Tonight, we must leave this sietch that has sheltered us for so long and go south into the desert," Stilgar said. His voice boomed out across the uplifted faces, reverberating with the force given it by the acoustical horn behind the ledge. Still the throng remained silent. "The Reverend Mother tells me she may not survive another hajra," Stilgar said. "Chani, daughter of Liet, will be consecrated in the Sayyadina at this time." He stepped one pace to the side.

From deep in the acoustical horn, the old woman's voice came out to them, an amplified whisper, harsh and penetrating: "Chani has returned from her hajra - Chani has seen the waters."

A susurrant response arose from the crowd: "She has seen the waters."

"I consecrate the daughter of Liet in the Sayyadina," husked the old woman.

"She is accepted," the crowd responded.
"I, the Reverend Mother Ramallo, whose voice speaks as a multitude, say this to you," the old woman said. "It is fitting that Chani enter the Sayyadina."

"It is fitting," the crowd responded.

The old woman nodded, whispered: "I give her the silver skies, the golden desert and its shining rocks, the green fields that will be. I give these to Sayyadina Chani. And lest she forget that she's servant of us all, to her fall the menial tasks in Ceremony. Let it be as Shai-hulud will have it." She lifted a brown-stick arm, dropped it. The crowd cheered for Chani as she moved to stand behind the Reverend Mother.

“Our new Sayyadina Jessica of the Weirding, has consented to enter the rite. Once her child is born she will attempt to pass within that we not lose the strength of our Reverend Mother.” Stilgar called and another cheer went up.

Paul moved to stand with Harry. “Thank you.” He whispered. Alia was spared Abomination but how would the future change with her a normal child? Why couldn’t he see Harry’s actions? Was he prescient as well? Was he a threat? No! he had served since the time of his Grandfather, Harry would never betray them.

Ramallo called for the waters to be brought, the Maker had already been drowned and the people had expected to drink of the changed waters. So, she changed them herself to allow them this happiness and release.

Chani offered the hornspout to Harry who hesitated and then drank, feeling the waters immediately try and affect him. It made him dizzy as his altered biology struggled to deal with it. He was a wizard, a one-time Goa’uld host, bitten by Basilisk and cried on by a phoenix. He moved to lean against a wall and then blinked as Harah approached him and held out her hand to him. He knew what she offered and now it seemed like a good idea so he took her hand, allowing her to pull him back to the yali.

"Drink it," Chani waved the hornspout of a watersack under Paul’s nose, bringing his attention back from where Harry had been led away.

Paul straightened, staring at Chani. He felt carnival excitement in the air. He knew what would happen if he drank this spice drug with its quintessence of the substance that brought the change onto him. He would return to the vision of pure time, of time-become-space. It would perch him on the dizzying summit and defy him to understand.
From behind Chani, Stilgar said: "Drink it, lad. You delay the rite."

Paul listened to the crowd then, hearing the wildness in their voices - "Lisan al-Gaib," they said. "Muad'Dib!" He looked down at the reverend Mother. She appeared peacefully asleep in a sitting position - her breathing even and deep. A phrase out of the future that was his lonely past came into his mind: "She sleeps in the Waters of Life." Chani tugged at his sleeve.

Paul took the hornspout into his mouth, hearing the people shout. He felt the liquid gush into his throat as Chani pressed the sack, sensed giddiness in the fumes. Chani removed the spout, handed the sack into hands that reached for it from the floor of the cavern. His eyes focused on her arm, the green band of mourning there.

As she straightened, Chani saw the direction of his gaze, said: "I can mourn him even in the happiness of the waters. This was something he gave us." She put her hand into his, pulling him along the ledge. "We are alike in a thing, Usul: We have each lost a father to the Harkonnen’s."

Paul followed her. He felt that his head had been separated from his body and restored with odd connections. His legs were remote and rubbery.

They entered a narrow side passage, its walls dimly lighted by spaced-out glowglobes. Paul felt the drug beginning to have its unique effect on him, opening time like a flower. He found need to steady himself against Chani as they turned through another shadowed tunnel. The mixture of whipcord and softness he felt beneath her robe stirred his blood. The sensation mingled with the work of the drug, folding future and past into the present, leaving him the thinnest margin of trinocular focus.

"I know you, Chani," he whispered. "We've sat upon a ledge above the sand while I soothed your fears. We've caressed in the dark of the sietch. We've . . . " He found himself losing focus, tried to shake his head, stumbled. Chani steadied him, led him through thick hangings into the yellow warmth of a private apartment - tow tables, cushions, a sleeping pad beneath an orange spread. Paul grew aware that they had stopped, that Chani stood facing him, and that her eyes betrayed a look of quiet terror.

"You must tell me," she whispered.

"You are Sihaya," he said, "the desert spring."
"When the tribe shares the Water," she said, "we're together - all of us. We . . . share. I can . . . sense the others with me, but I'm afraid to share with you."

"Why?" He tried to focus on her, but past and future were merging into the present, blurring her image. He saw her in countless ways and positions and settings.

"There's something frightening in you," she said. "When I took you away from the others . . . I did it because I could feel what the others wanted. You . . . press on people. You . . . make us see things!"

He forced himself to speak distinctly: "What do you see?"

She looked down at her hands. "I see a child . . . in my arms. It's our child, yours and mine." She put a hand to her mouth. "How can I know every feature of you?"

They've a little of the talent, his mind told him. But they suppress it because it terrifies. In a moment of clarity, he saw how Chani was trembling. "What is it you want to say?" he asked.

"Usul," she whispered, and still she trembled.

"You cannot back into the future," he said. A profound compassion for her swept through him. He pulled her against him, stroked her head. "Chani, Chani, don't fear."

"Usul, help me," she cried. As she spoke, he felt the drug complete its work within him, ripping away the curtains to let him see the distant grey turmoil of his future. "You're so quiet," Chani said.

He held himself poised in the awareness, seeing time stretch out in its weird dimension, delicately balanced yet whirling, narrow yet spread like a net gathering countless worlds and forces, a tight wire that he must walk, yet a teeter-totter on which he balanced.

On one side, he could see the Imperium, a Harkonnen called Feyd-Rautha who flashed toward him like a deadly blade, the Sardaukar raging off their planet to spread pogrom on Arrakis, the Guild conniving and plotting, the Bene Gesserit with their scheme of selective breeding. They lay massed like a thunderhead on his horizon, held back by no more than the Fremen and their Muad'Dib, the sleeping giant Fremen poised for their wild crusade across the universe.
Paul felt himself at the centre, at the pivot where the whole structure turned, walking a thin wire of peace with a measure of happiness, Chani at his side. He could see it stretching ahead of him, a time of relative quiet in a hidden sietch, a moment of peace between periods of violence.

"There's no other place for peace," he said.

"Usul, you're crying," Chani murmured. "Usul, my strength, do you give moisture to the dead? To whose dead?"

"To ones not yet dead," he said.

"Then let them have their time of life," she said.

He sensed through the drug fog how right she was, pulled her against him with savage pressure. "Sihaya!" he said.

She put a palm against his cheek, "I'm no longer afraid, Usul. Look at me. I see what you see when you hold me thus."

"What do you see?" he demanded.

"I see us giving love to each other in a time of quiet between storms. It's what we were meant to do."

The drug had him again and he thought: So many times, you've given me comfort and forgetfulness. He felt anew the hyper illumination with its high-relief imagery of time, sensed his future becoming memories - the tender indignities of physical love, the sharing and communion of selves, the softness and the violence. "You're the strong one, Chani," he muttered. "Stay with me."

"Always," she said, and kissed his cheek. They fell together onto the bed and lost themselves to the drug haze and their need for each other.

"Would you accompany me to my chambers, Feyd?" the Baron asked.
"I am yours to command," Feyd-Rautha said. He bowed, thinking: I'm caught.

"After you," the Baron said, and he gestured to the door.

Feyd-Rautha indicated his fear by only the barest hesitation. Have I failed utterly? he asked himself. Will he slip a poisoned blade into my back . . . slowly, through the shield? Does he have an alternative successor?

Let him experience this moment of terror, the Baron thought as he walked along behind his nephew. He will succeed me, but at a time of my choosing. I'll not have him throwing away what I've built!

Feyd-Rautha tried not to walk too swiftly. He felt the skin crawling on his back as though his body itself wondered when the blow could come. His muscles alternately tensed and relaxed.

"Have you heard the latest word from Arrakis?" the Baron asked.

"No, Uncle," Feyd-Rautha forced himself not to look back. He turned down the hall out of the servants' wing.

"They've a new prophet or religious leader of some kind among the Fremen," the Baron said. "They call him Muad'Dib. Very funny, really. It means 'the Mouse'. I've told Rabban to let them have their religion. It'll keep them occupied."

"That's very interesting, Uncle," Feyd-Rautha said. He turned into the private corridor to his uncle's quarters, wondering: Why does he talk about religion? Is it some subtle hint to me?

"Yes, isn't it?" the Baron said.

They came into the Baron's apartments through the reception salon to the bedchamber. Subtle signs of a struggle greeted them here - a suspensor lamp displaced, a bed cushion on the floor, a soother-reel spilled open across a bed stand.
"It was a clever plan," the Baron said. He kept his body shield tuned to maximum, stopped, facing his nephew. "But not clever enough. Tell me, Feyd, why didn't you strike me down yourself? You've had opportunity enough."

Feyd-Rautha found a suspensor chair, accomplished a mental shrug as he sat down in it without being asked. I must be bold now, he thought. "You taught me that my own hands must remain clean," he said.

"Ah, yes," the Baron said. "When you face the Emperor, you must be able to say truthfully that you did not do the deed. The witch at the Emperor's elbow will hear your words and know their truth or falsehood. Yes. I warned you about that."

"Why haven't you ever bought a Bene Gesserit, Uncle?" Feyd-Rautha asked. "With a Truthsayer at your side - "

"You know my tastes!" the Baron snapped.

Feyd-Rautha studied his uncle, said: "Still, one would be valuable for - "

"I trust them not!" the Baron snarled. "And stop trying to change the subject!"

Feyd-Rautha spoke mildly; "As you wish, Uncle."

"I remember a time in the arena several years ago," the Baron said. "It seemed there that day a slave had been set to kill you. Is that truly how it was?"

"It's been so long ago, Uncle. After all, I - "

"No evasions, please," the Baron said, and the tightness of his voice exposed the rein on his anger.

Feyd-Rautha looked at his uncle, thinking: He knows, else he wouldn't ask. "It was a sham, Uncle. I arranged it to discredit your slave master."
"Very clever," the Baron said. "Brave, too. That slave-gladiator almost took you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"If you had finesse and subtlety to match such courage, you'd be truly formidable." The Baron shook his head from side to side. And as he had done many times since that terrible day on Arrakis, he found himself regretting the loss of Piter, the Mentat. There'd been a man of delicate, devilish subtlety. It hadn't saved him, though. Again, the Baron shook his head. Fate was sometimes inscrutable. Feyd-Rautha glanced around the bedchamber, studying the signs of the struggle, wondering how his uncle had overcome the slave they'd prepared so carefully. "How did I best him?" the Baron asked. "Ah-h-h, now, Feyd - let me keep some weapons to preserve me in my old age. It's better we use this time to strike a bargain."

Feyd-Rautha stared at him. A bargain! He means to keep me as his heir for certain, then. Else why bargain. One bargains with equals or near equals! "What bargain, Uncle?" And Feyd-Rautha felt proud that his voice remained calm and reasonable, betraying none of the elation that filled him.

The Baron, too, noted the control. He nodded. "You're good material, Feyd. I don't waste good material. You persist, however, in refusing to learn my true value to you. You are obstinate. You do not see why I should be preserved as someone of the utmost value to you. This . . . " He gestured at the evidence of the struggle in the bedchamber. "This was foolishness. I do not reward foolishness." Get to the point, you old fool! Feyd-Rautha thought. "You think of me as an old fool," the Baron said. "I must dissuade you of that."

"You speak of a bargain."

"Ah, the impatience of youth," the Baron said. "Well, this is the substance of it, then: You will cease these foolish attempts on my life. And I, when you are ready for it, will step aside in your favour. I will retire to an advisory position, leaving you in the seat of power."

"Retire, Uncle?"

"You still think me the fool," the Baron said, "and this but confirms it, eh? You think I'm begging you! Step cautiously, Feyd. This old fool saw through the shielded needle you'd planted in that slave boy's thigh. Right where I'd put my hand on it, eh? The smallest pressure and - snick! A poison needle in the old fool's palm! Ah-h-h, Feyd . . . " The Baron shook his head, thinking: It would've worked, too, if Hawat hadn't warned me. Well, let the lad believe I saw the plot on my own. In a way, I did. I was the one who saved Hawat from the wreckage of Arrakis. And this lad needs greater respect for my prowess.
Feyd-Rautha remained silent, struggling, with himself. Is he being truthful? Does he really mean to retire? Why not? I'm sure to succeed him one day if I move carefully. He can't live forever. Perhaps it was foolish to try hurrying the process. "You speak of a bargain," Feyd-Rautha said. "What pledge do we give to bind it?"

"How can we trust each other, eh?" the Baron asked. "Well, Feyd, as for you: I'm setting Thufir Hawat to watch over you. I trust Hawat's Mentat capabilities in this. Do you understand me? And as for me, you'll have to take me on faith. But I can't live forever, can I, Feyd? And perhaps you should begin to suspect now that there're things I know which you should know."

"I give you my pledge and what do you give me?" Feyd-Rautha asked.

"I let you go on living," the Baron said.

Again, Feyd-Rautha studied his uncle. He sets Hawat over me! What would he say if I told him Hawat planned the trick with the gladiator that cost him his slave master? He'd likely say I was lying in the attempt to discredit Hawat. No, the good Thufir is a Mentat and has anticipated this moment.

"Well, what do you say?" the Baron asked.

"What can I say? I accept, of course." And Feyd-Rautha thought: Hawat! He plays both ends against the middle . . . is that it? Has he moved to my uncle's camp because I didn't counsel with him over the slave boy attempt?

"You haven't said anything about my setting Hawat to watch you," the Baron said.

Feyd-Rautha betrayed anger by a flaring of nostrils. The name of Hawat had been a danger signal in the Harkonnen family for so many years . . . and now it had a new meaning: still dangerous. "Hawat's a dangerous toy," Feyd-Rautha said.

"Toy! Don't be stupid. I know what I have in Hawat and how to control it. Hawat has deep emotions, Feyd. The man without emotions is the one to fear. But deep emotions . . . ah, now, those can be bent to your needs."
"Uncle, I don't understand you."

"Yes, that's plain enough."

Only a flicker of eyelids betrayed the passage of resentment through Feyd-Rautha.

"And you do not understand Hawat," the Baron said.

Nor do you! Feyd-Rautha thought.

"Who does Hawat blame for his present circumstances?" the Baron asked. "Me? Certainly. But he was an Atreides tool and bested me for years until the Imperium took a hand. That's how he sees it. His hate for me is a casual thing now. He believes he can best me any time. Believing this, he is bested. For I direct his attention where I want it - against the Imperium."

Tensions of a new understanding drew tight lines across Feyd-Rautha's forehead, thinned his mouth. "Against the Emperor?"

Let my dear nephew try the taste of that, the Baron thought. Let him say to himself: 'The Emperor Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen!' Let him ask himself how much that's worth. Surely it must be worth the life of one old uncle who could make that dream come to pass!

Slowly, Feyd-Rautha wet his lips with his tongue. Could it be true what the old fool was saying? There was more here than there seemed to be. "And what has Hawat to do with this?"

"He thinks he uses us to wreak his revenge upon the Emperor."

"And when that's accomplished?"

"He does not think beyond his revenge. Hawat's a man who must serve others, and doesn't even know this about himself."

"I've learned much from Hawat," Feyd-Rautha agreed, and felt the truth of the words as he spoke
them. "But the more I learn, the more I feel we should dispose of him . . . and soon."

"You don't like the idea of his watching you?"

"Hawat watches everybody."

"And he may put you on a throne. Hawat is subtle. He is dangerous, devious. But I'll not yet withhold the antidote from him. A sword is dangerous, too, Feyd. We have the scabbard for this one, though. The poison's in him. When we withdraw the antidote, death will sheathe him."

"In a way, it's like the arena," Feyd-Rautha said. "Feints within feints within feints. You watch to see which way the gladiator leans, which way he looks, how he holds his knife." He nodded to himself, seeing that these words pleased his uncle, but thinking: Yes! Like the arena! And the cutting edge is the mind!

"Now you see how you need me," the Baron said. "I'm yet of use, Feyd."

A sword to be wielded until he's too blunt for use, Feyd-Rautha thought. "Yes, Uncle, "he said.

"And now," the Baron said, "we will go down to the slave quarters, we two. And I will watch while you, with your own hands, kill all the women in the pleasure wing."

"Uncle!"

"There will be other women, Feyd. But I have said that you do not make a mistake casually with me."

Feyd-Rautha's face darkened. "Uncle, you - "

"You will accept your punishment and learn something from it," the Baron said.

Feyd-Rautha met the gloating stare in his uncle's eyes. And I must remember this night, he thought. And remembering it, I must remember other nights.
"You will not refuse," the Baron said.

What could you do if I refused, old man? Feyd-Rautha asked himself. But he knew there might be some other punishment, perhaps a subtler one, a more brutal lever to bend him.

"I know you, Feyd," the Baron said. "You will not refuse."

All right, Feyd-Rautha thought. I need you now. I see that. The bargain's made. But I'll not always need you. And . . . someday . . .

..................

The Reverend Mother Mohiam hurried down dark passages with several aides. A Bene Gesserit novitiate waited by large oak doors. When the Reverend Mother arrived, she curtsied. “He is waiting, Reverend Mother.”

“Who else knows he's here?”

“No one, Reverend Mother. He made it clear on his arrival we were to summon you and no other.” She opened the door and Mohiam saw the loan man across the room, studying a book.

“The other witches must leave.” He demanded.

“As you wish.” She signalled to her aides who quickly left the room. The man finally turned, he was a Guild Agent, obvious by his manner of dress. He was a walking cadaver, repulsive in appearance, yet impossible not to look at. “This visit is as indiscreet as it is unexpected.” She chided as they moved to sit.

“Matters such as this leave no time for formalities.”

“Let's hope the Emperor's curiosity isn't aroused.”

“The Emperor's suspicions are easily moderated by his dependence on our services.”
“As you’re so fond of reminding us.” She snapped and he smiled sardonically. But it swiftly faded as he leant closer to her.

“The Navigators are concerned.”

“Concerned?”

“They are...disturbed about the future. There is a problem on the horizon.”

“What kind of problem?” this was very worrying.

“They are troubled by a nexus they can't fully explore. An intersection of events, a meeting of countless delicate decisions beyond which lies a path they cannot see.”

“And where is this nexus?”

“Planet Arrakis”.

The Reverend Mother stiffened...but quickly calms herself. “House Harkonnen controls Arrakis now. The Atreides are dead.”

“It is not a matter of feuding royal Houses. We sense a higher order interfering.”

Mohiam nodded, considering his words. “A misstep could be catastrophic.”

“Then we understand one another.”

“Completely. We will do what we can.” She promised and he stood, bowing formally before they hurried from the room. Mohiam stopped suddenly, listening carefully and he sensed something wrong but… “I thought I... felt something...” she shook it off and the two continued.

“The Spice must flow.”
“The balance of power must be maintained.” She agreed and they parted.

Neither of them was ever aware that Princess Irulan stood motionless, hardly breathing in the shadows among the pillars, listening to everything they said.

Several unmarked 'thopters were tethered near a small compound of stilltents. Some sort of strange bazaar seemed to be going on. Fremen and Smugglers bartered animatedly while other Fremen loaded large pallets into the 'thopters.

“We get supplies we need, the smugglers transport our spice tribute to the cursed Spacing Guild. The Emperor never knows.” Stilgar explained as the three watched form a nearby rock outcrop.

“Bribes are dangerous, Stil. They have a way of growing larger and larger.”

“The safe way is the slow way, Muad’Dib. Bribes keep the skies of our sietches clear. Bribes buy us time.”

The Smugglers and Fremen were concluding their business. And among the smugglers was Tuek who Paul recognised. He passed the glasses to Harry who scanned the camp. Hary blinked and zoomed in, was that really?

“Something wrong, Baz?”

“I thought...I saw someone I knew...one of the Duke’s men...a friend...” He admitted.

“I'll call the men. Tell them to hold the Smugglers' departure...”

But Paul grabbed his arm, holding him back. “No, Stil. Let them go. Baz must have been mistaken...”

Stilgar finally nodded and moved away to the other men. Leaving Paul and Harry staring at the desert floor where the smugglers were preparing to depart.
“Gurney.” Harry answered the unasked question and Paul stared hard at the camo, a deep longing in his eyes.

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“My father's patience is wearing thin.” Irulan stood on a balcony, watching her Father and the Count. “These...troubles on Arrakis are proving difficult to manage......and our time is growing short...” she whispered the last, moving into the room and over to her Lady-in-Waiting. “I want you to make arrangements for a trip to Giedi Prime.”

“M'lady?” she asked in shock.

“The Baron's nephew is having a birthday celebration. The Emperor ought to be represented, don't you think? I'm in the mood for a party.” She smiled as the other woman left. “And besides, it's time to shed some naiveté.” She had far more than a party on her mind.

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Jessica screamed as another contraction came, panting for air. Paul’s birth had been long yes, but far less painful than this one was already. She felt herself being lifted into the air, strong arms around her and she recognised Harry’s voice. “Easy M’lady. Just keep breathing.” He urged as he made his way through the sietch to Jessica’s rooms, someone calling for the midwives behind him. He gently set her down on her bed and took her hand, keeping her company until the women arrived, Chani among them, and he was kicked out.

He paced the antechamber for hours before Chani emerged with a smile. “A daughter, healthy and strong.” She announced. “I will have word sent to Muad’Dib immediately.” She moved away, her hand going to her own womb and Harry smiled, apparently the water ceremony led to a lot of births. Even Harah was pregnant, not something he’d planned on. It was good Jessica had given birth now, the Reverend Mother would not last much longer.

TBC.....

So some big changes here and still more to come. Think this might be my longest one yet.
Harry gently cradled the baby girl, she was beautiful. “What have you named her My Lady?”

“Alia.” Jessica smiled at how easily Harry held the baby, he would make a good father in a few short months. Why had she not told Leto of her pregnancy? Would it have made his last week’s happier? Or would he have been consumed by even more worry?

A cluster of stilltents was set up in the moon shadow of a gnarled rock fall. Fremen sentries sat silently in small groups, eyes riveted to the perimeter of camp.

Inside the largest tent a dozen elder Fremen, Naibs, sat in a semi-circle on the ground, staring at Paul in front of them, Stilgar and Harry behind him. Paul had finally called his friend and teacher back to his side, despite the oddities of his visions where the older man was concerned.

“You've heard the voices from your sietches. They say Mahdi has come. But you...the Naibs of your tribes are still cautious. You resist. But I'm offering you the future. The future as Liet saw it...”

“How do you know what Liet saw?” One of the Naibs demanded.

“Because I've seen it myself!” He put a hand to his forehead. “Here..., he moved his hand to his heart, “...and here.” His words invoked a nervous rustling through the room. “And once we rid Arrakis of the vile Harkonnen, we will complete his dream. I promise this. Arrakis will become the paradise Liet imagined.”

“You'll never rid Arrakis with guerrilla raids, boy. It will take all-out war.”

“That's why we're preparing now. Disrupting the spice production. Stealing their equipment. That's
“why I'm asking for hundreds of your best young men. I want to give them the weirding way...so they can come back to you and train hundreds more...so those hundreds will train hundreds more. And hundreds will become thousands. The Fedaykin! A force to rival the dreaded Sardaukar. A force that will terrify the Emperor himself!” his passionate words sent a tremor through the Naibs.

“You intend to bring the wrath of the Emperor down on Arrakis?”

“The Emperor's wrath has already visited here. In Harkonnen disguise. And when we prove it, the Emperor will be finished!” he argued, but it was obvious they were still very cautious when it came to the Emperor.

“Slowly, Muad'dib. Don't frighten them with your passion...” Stilgar murmured.

Paul took a deep, calming breath. “My father told me once that here on Arrakis one needed desert power to rule. YOU ARE DESERT POWER. And nothing will stop you. If you believe. Believe!” A fanatic fire burned in Paul's eyes. It made the Naibs uneasy....even as it inspired them.

Stilgar moved forward. “It will be dawn soon. We all must rest. The ride back to our sietches will be long and dangerous. We need time to consider what Muad'Dib is proposing.” The Naibs nodded, grateful to Stilgar for his wise intervention at the moment. They started to rise and disassemble. But as they did.

“Before you retire, Paul Muad’Dib offers each of you a gift...” Harry spoke softly and they stopped. Several younger Fremen entered with small sacks of water which they presented to each Naib. The Naibs hesitated, unsure.

“It is my wish that these waters mingle with yours as a gesture of my loyalty to the Ichwan Bedwine....the brotherhood of all Fremen on Arrakis.” Paul explained and they all accepted before leaving.

“This will take time. These are not rash men.” Stilgar cautioned.

“What will it take to convince them, Stil?” Paul asked warily.

“You still have many tests ahead, Paul Muad’Dib.” He offered before leaving the tent.
“He’s right, caution has served them well for too long for them to rush into this. There is a time for speed, this is not it.” Harry gently gripped his shoulder. “Now come, you need sleep.”

“.................

“There's much talk of you in the sietches. I hear the people speaking of the Mahdi. I hear them shout the name...Muad’Dib...” Reverend Mother Ramallo commented from the bed she had been carried in. She had survived the hajra but it had taken a massive toll on her and soon she would die.

“He is a natural leader. Like his father. The men admire his courage.” Jessica admitted as she settled Alia down for a nap.

“It will take more than courage to survive what's coming. Your experience in Arrakeen should have taught you that.” Ramallo stopped to cough and Jessica moved to assist her. “The boy...he knows what it is that's happening here?”

“He is...aware.”

“You've exploited our legends well.”

“We had to survive.”

“And you may...for a while.” She offered. “But remember this, the very legend that protects you can also destroy you. You have started a thing, Jessica Atreides, a thing we may never be able to control. You...and your son...whatever he may be...” She sighed and lay back. “It is time.” She whispered and Jessica called for the men to carry her litter away. As they did the curtains drew back and Paul appeared in the opening.

“Paul.” Jessica smiled at her son who smiled tiredly back, removing his cloak to reveal he had come straight to see her and meet his sister as he was still in his stillsuit. As the litter bearers left she spotted Harry keeping guard at the door. Paul fell back on her couches, a long, weary sigh escapes. “How are you?”

“Well enough.... tired.” he admitted.
“Are you back for long?”

“I don’t know yet.” He forced himself up and over to the crib, looking down at his baby sister, noting the lack of Ibad eyes, this was not what he had seen, this Alia was a normal baby, not pre-born.

“Stilgar says you’ve learned much.” Jessica offered, wondering at his distant look. The Naib often sent her messages on Paul’s progress, something she appreciated.

“He's tougher than Hawat ever was.” They allowed themselves a brief but melancholy smile.

“Chani is happy to see you, I noticed.” She watched for his reaction but he only nodded vaguely. There was obviously something on his mind.

“Why didn't you marry him, Mother?”

Jessica was caught off-guard by the non-sequitur. But... “Because I loved him.” At his odd look, she sighed and sat. “As long as your father remained unmarried, some of the Great Houses could still hope for an alliance through marriage. We both knew what that meant. There were no illusions...”

“You would have allowed it?” he demanded in disbelief and she smiled sadly.

“I would have encouraged it.”

“Politics...” he spat and she nodded.

“Yes. Politics.” There was a lesson there, she intended it, but Paul just frowned, contemplating the implications.

 Paul found her in the Sietch gardens, the hint of light making the place seem almost magical. Chani was tending her plants. He sat quietly on a bench a few yards away. It was so quiet, just the whisper of a gentle breeze. And then... “While I was on the hajra, I had dreams about this garden. Except, it wasn't here. It was...somewhere else.”
“Was I there?” she asked without turning to look at him.

“Yes. And... there were children. Playing. Very happy...”

“A wonderful dream.” She finally turned to smile softly at him, one hand on her swollen stomach.

He got up and walked over to her, placing a hand next to hers and smiling as he felt their child kick. “Chani, do you think it's possible to love someone enough that you'd be willing to give that person up?”

She was initially confused by his questions before understanding what he meant. “I think there are times when it's necessary to share the one you love...with things greater than both of you.” She whispered, staring into his eyes. She almost missed their natural colour, he had gained the tell-tale blue-in-blue while away from her. He leant down and kissed her tenderly, she was the only woman he would love and yet for politics she would never be his wife. He knew who had to take that place now. Before Chani he would have welcomed such a marriage, especially after the party and now he dreaded it.

Harry took the tray from Harah and urged her to sit.

“I am pregnant Suhl, not incapacitated.” She argued.

“Humour me, please. You have had to do everything while I was with Muad’Dib, let me help you now.”

“Very well.” She sat as he prepared the coffee.

“How have the boys been?”

“They grow stronger every day Suhl, they will be strong fighters for the Sietch soon enough.”
“I wish it wasn’t necessary.” He admitted and then Harah gasped before smiling.

“Come Suhl, feel the strength of your child.” She took his hand and placed it on her stomach and Harry smiled as the child kicked.

Paul climbed to the ledge, leaving Harry and his small family below. He stopped in front of his mother, glanced at Stilgar, back to Jessica. "What is happening? I thought I was being summoned to council."

Stilgar raised a hand for silence, gestured to his left where another way had been opened in the throng. Chani came down the lane opened there, wearing a graceful blue wraparound that exposed her thin arms.

Now, standing beside his mother on the cavern ledge and looking out at the throng, he wondered if any plan could prevent the wild outpouring of fanatic legions.

Chani, nearing the ledge, was followed at a distance by four women carrying another woman in a litter. Paul swallowed as he realised what was happening, the same thing that had almost happened shortly after they arrived.

Jessica ignored Chani’s approach, focusing all her attention on the woman in the litter – taking in the crone, a wrinkled and shrivelled ancient thing in a black gown with hood thrown back to reveal the tight knot of grey hair and the stringy neck. How she had aged in barely five months, they truly were out of time.

The litter-carriers deposited their burden gently on the ledge from below, and Chani helped the old woman to her feet.

The old woman leaned heavily on Chani as she hobbled toward Jessica, looking like a collection of sticks draped in the black robe. She stopped in front of Jessica, peered upward for a long moment before speaking in a husky whisper.

“Are you ready?” Ramallo asked one last time and Jessica nodded as the old woman was settled on the rock bench near the horn. "We are the people of Misr," the old woman rasped. "Since our Sunni ancestors fled from Nilotic al-Orouba, we have known flight and death. The young go on that our people shall not die." She spoke into the horn.
Stilgar took a deep breath, stepped forward two paces.

Jessica felt the hush come over the crowded cavern - some twenty thousand people now, standing silently, almost without movement. It made her feel suddenly small and filled with caution.

"The Reverend Mother has told me she will live no longer," Stilgar said. "We have lived before without a Reverend Mother, but it is not good for people at war to do so." Now, the throng stirred, rippling with whispers and currents of disquiet.

"That this may not come to pass," Stilgar said, "our Sayyadina Jessica of the Weirding, has consented to enter the rite at this time. She will attempt to pass within that we not lose the strength of our Reverend Mother."

Jessica of the Weirding, Jessica thought. She saw Paul staring at her, his eyes filled with concern and she managed a small smile for him. Her gaze moved to where Harry stood with his Fremen family, how connected they were becoming to these people. If I die in the attempt, what will become of Paul? Jessica asked herself. Again, she felt the misgivings fill her mind. No, he had earnt his place among them now.

Paul turned and looked back at the Reverend Mother, studying the dried crone features, the fathomless blue fixation of her eyes. She looked as though a breeze would blow her away, yet there was that about her which suggested she might stand untouched in the path of a coriolis storm. She carried the same aura of power that he remembered from the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam who had tested him with agony in the way of the gom jabbar.

"Let the watermasters come forward," Chani said with only the slightest quaver of uncertainty in her girl-child voice.

Now, Jessica felt herself at the focus of danger, knowing its presence in the watchfulness of the throng, in the silence.

A band of men made its way through a serpentine path opened in the crowd, moving up from the back in pairs. Each pair carried a small skin sack, perhaps twice the size of a human head. The sacks sloshed heavily.

The two leaders deposited their load at Chani's feet on the ledge and stepped back.
Jessica looked at the sack, then at the men. They had their hoods thrown back, exposing long hair tied in a roll at the base of the neck. The black pits of their eyes stared back at her without wavering. A furry redolence of cinnamon arose from the sack, wafted across Jessica. The spice? she wondered.

"Is there water?" Chani asked.

The watermaster on the left, a man with a purple scar line across the bridge of his nose, nodded once. "There is water, Sayyadina," he said, "but we cannot drink of it."

"Is there seed?" Chani asked.

"There is seed," the man said.

Chani knelt and put her hands to the sloshing sack. "Blessed is the water and its seed."

There was familiarity to the rite, and Jessica looked back at the Reverend Mother Ramallo. The old woman's eyes were closed and she sat hunched over as though asleep.

"Sayyadina Jessica," Chani said. Jessica turned to see the girl staring up at her. "Have you tasted the blessed water?" Chani asked.

Before Jessica could answer, Chani said: "It is not possible that you have tasted the blessed water. You are outworlder and unprivileged." A sigh passed through the crowd, a susurration of robes that made the nape hairs creep on Jessica's neck. "The crop was large and the maker has been destroyed," Chani said. She began unfastening a coiled spout fixed to the top of the sloshing sack.

Now, Jessica felt the sense of danger boiling around her. She glanced at Paul, saw that he was caught up in the mystery of the ritual and had eyes only for Chani.

Chani lifted the spout toward Jessica, said: "Here is the Water of Life, the water that is greater than water - Kan, the water that frees the soul. If you be a Reverend Mother, it opens the universe to you. Let Shai-hulud judge now."
As she bent to the proffered spout, her senses told her its peril. The stuff in the sack had a bitter smell subtly akin to many poisons that she knew, but unlike them, too.

"You must drink it now," Chani said.

There's no turning back, Jessica reminded herself. But nothing in all her Bene Gesserit training came into her mind to help her through this instant. What is it? Jessica asked, herself. Liquor? A drug? She bent over the spout, smelled the esters of cinnamon, remembering then the drunkenness of Duncan Idaho. Spice liquor? she asked herself. She took the siphon tube in her mouth, pulled up only the most minuscule sip. It tasted of the spice, a faint bite acrid on the tongue. She had seen the results all those months again when Ramallo had changed the waters, the Fremen had been wild, unleashed, and it had swept her son up in it too.

Chani pressed down on the skin bag. A great gulp of the stuff surged into Jessica's mouth and before she could help herself, she swallowed it, fighting to retain her calmness and dignity. "To accept a little death is worse than death itself," Chani said. She stared at Jessica, waiting.

And Jessica stared back, still holding the spout in her mouth. She tasted the sack's contents in her nostrils, in the roof of her mouth, in her cheeks, in her eyes - a biting sweetness, now. Cool. Again, Chani sent the liquid gushing into Jessica's mouth. Delicate. Jessica studied Chani's face - elfin features - seeing the traces of Liet-Kynes there as yet unfixed by time. This is a drug they feed me, Jessica told herself.

But it was unlike any other drug of her experience, and Bene Gesserit training included the taste of many drugs. Chani's features were so clear, as though outlined in light. A drug.

Whirling silence settled around Jessica. Every fibre of her body accepted the fact that something profound had happened to it. She felt that she was a conscious mote, smaller than any subatomic particle, yet capable of motion and of sensing her surroundings. Like an abrupt revelation - the curtains whipped away - she realized she had become aware of a psychokinesthetic extension of herself. She was the mote, yet not the mote.

The cavern remained around her - the people. She sensed them: Paul, Chani, Stilgar, the Reverend Mother Ramallo. Reverend Mother! At the school, there had been rumours that some did not survive the Reverend Mother ordeal, that the drug took them.

Jessica focused her attention on the Reverend Mother Ramallo, aware now that all this was happening in a frozen instant of time - suspended time for her alone. Why is time suspended? she asked herself. She stared at the frozen expressions around her, seeing a dust mote above Chani's
head, stopped there. Waiting.

The answer to this instant came like an explosion in her consciousness: her personal time was suspended to save her life. She focused on the psychokinesthetic extension of herself, looking within, and was confronted immediately with a cellular core, a pit of blackness from which she recoiled. That is the place where we cannot look, she thought. There is the place the Reverend Mothers are so reluctant to mention - the place where only a Kwisatz Haderach may look.

This realization returned a small measure of confidence, and again she ventured to focus on the psychokinesthetic extension, becoming a mote-self that searched within her for danger.

She found it within the drug she had swallowed. The stuff was dancing particles within her, its motions so rapid that even frozen time could not stop them. Dancing particles. She began recognizing familiar structures, atomic linkages: a carbon atom here, helical wavering . . . a glucose molecule. An entire chain of molecules confronted her, and she recognized a protein . . . a methyl-protein configuration.

Ah-h-h-h!

It was a soundless mental sigh within her as she saw the nature of the poison. With her psychokinesthetic probing, she moved into it, shifted an oxygen mote, allowed another carbon mote to link, reattached a linkage of oxygen . . . hydrogen. The change spread . . . faster and faster as the catalysed reaction opened its surface of contact.

The suspension of time relaxed its hold upon her, and she sensed motion. The tube spout from the sack was touched to her mouth - gently, collecting a drop of moisture. Chani's taking the catalyst from my body to change the poison in that sack, Jessica thought.

Someone eased her to a sitting position. She saw the old Reverend Mother Ramallo being brought to sit beside her on the carpeted ledge. A dry hand touched her neck. And there was another psychokinesthetic mote within her awareness! Jessica tried to reject it, but the mote swept closer . . . closer.

They touched!

It was like an ultimate simpatico, being two people at once: not telepathy, but mutual awareness. With the old Reverend Mother! But Jessica saw that the Reverend Mother didn't think of herself as
An image unfolded before the mutual mind's eye: a young girl with a dancing spirit and tender humour.

Within the mutual awareness, the young girl said, "Yes, that is how I am." Jessica could only accept the words, not respond to them. "You'll have it all soon, Jessica," the inward image said.

This is hallucination, Jessica told herself.

"You know better than that," the inward image said. "Swiftly now, do not fight me. There isn't much time. Time compels me," the Reverend Mother said within the awareness. "I have much to give you."

"What - "

"Remain silent and accept!"

Experiences began to unroll before Jessica. It was like a lecture strip in a subliminal training projector at the Bene Gesserit school... but faster... blindingly faster. Yet... distinct. She knew each experience as it happened: there was a lover - virile, bearded, with the Fremen eyes, and Jessica saw his strength and tenderness, all of him in one blink-moment, through the Reverend Mother's memory. The experiences poured in on Jessica - birth, life, death - important matters and unimportant, an outpouring of single-view time.

Why should a fall of sand from a clifftop stick in the memory? she asked herself.

Too late, Jessica saw what was happening: the old woman was dying and, in dying, pouring her experiences into Jessica's awareness as water is poured into a cup. And, dying-in-conception, the old Reverend Mother left her life in Jessica's memory with one last sighing blur of words.

"I've been a long time waiting for you," she said. "Here is my life."

There it was, encapsulated, all of it. Even the moment of death.

I am now a Reverend Mother, Jessica realized.
And she knew with a generalized awareness that she had become, in truth, precisely what was meant by a Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother. The poison drug had transformed her. This wasn't exactly how they did it at the Bene Gesserit school, she knew. No one had ever introduced her to the mysteries of it, but she knew.

The end result was the same.

A terrible sense of loneliness crept through Jessica in the realization of what had happened to her. She saw her own life as a pattern that had slowed and all life around her speeded up so that the dancing interplay became clearer.

The sensation of mote-awareness faded slightly, its intensity easing as her body relaxed from the threat of the poison.

She felt the adab presence of demanding memory. There was something that needed doing. She groped for it, realizing she was being impeded by a muzziness of the changed drug permeating her senses. I could change that, she thought. I could take away the drug action and make it harmless. But she sensed this would be an error. I'm within a rite of joining. Then she knew what she had to do.

Jessica opened her eyes, gestured to the water-sack now being held above her by Chani. "It has been blessed," Jessica said. "Mingle the waters, let the change come to all, that the people may partake and share in the blessing." Let the catalyst do its work, she thought. Let the people drink of it and have their awareness of each other heightened for a while. The drug is safe now . . . now that a Reverend Mother has changed it. Still, the demanding memory worked on her, thrusting. There was another thing she had to do, she realized, but the drug made it difficult to focus. Ah-h-h-h-h . . . the old Reverend Mother. "I have met the Reverend Mother Ramallo," Jessica said. "She is gone, but she remains. Let her memory be honoured in the rite.

Now, where did I get those words? Jessica wondered. And she realized they came from another memory, the life that had been given to her and now was part of herself. Something about that gift felt incomplete, though.

"Let them have their orgy," the other-memory said within her. "They've little enough pleasure out of living. Yes, and you and I need this little time to become acquainted before I recede and pour out through your memories. Already, I feel myself being tied to bits of you. Ah-h-h, you've a mind filled with interesting things. So many things I'd never imagined."
And the memory-mind encapsulated within her opened itself to Jessica, permitting a view down a wide corridor to other Reverend Mothers until there seemed no end to them. Jessica recoiled, fearing she would become lost in an ocean of oneness. Still, the corridor remained, revealing to Jessica that the Fremen culture was far older than she had suspected.

There had been Fremen on Poritrin, she saw, a people grown soft with an easy planet, fair game for Imperial raiders to harvest and plant human colonies on Bela Tegeuse and Salusa Secundus. Oh, the wailing Jessica sensed in that parting.

Far down the corridor, an image-voice screamed: "They denied us the Hajj!"

Jessica saw the slave cribs on Bela Tegeuse down that inner corridor, saw the weeding out and the selecting that spread men to Rossak and Harmonthe. Scenes of brutal ferocity opened to her like the petals of a terrible flower. And she saw the thread of the past carried by Sayyadina after Sayyadina - first by word of mouth, hidden in the sand chanteys, then refined through their own Reverend Mothers with the discovery of the poison drug on Rossak . . . and now developed to subtle strengthen Arrakis in the discovery of the Water of Life.

Far down the inner corridor, another voice screamed: "Never to forgive! Never to forget!"

But Jessica's attention was focused on the revelation of the Water of Life, seeing its source: the liquid exhalation of a dying sandworm, a maker. And as she saw the killing of it in her new memory, she suppressed a gasp. The creature was drowned!

"Mother, are you all right?" Paul's voice intruded on her, and Jessica struggled out of the inner awareness to stare up at him, conscious of duty to him, but resenting his presence.

I'm like a person whose hands were kept numb, without sensation from the first moment of awareness - until one day the ability to feel is forced into them. The thought hung in her mind, an enclosing awareness. And I say: "Look! I have no hands!" But the people all around me say: "What are hands?"

"Are you all right?" Paul repeated.

"Yes." She murmured before drifting to sleep, letting the drug do its work.
We are in the desert, Paul remembered as the dreaming visions left him. We are in the central erg beyond the Harkonnen patrols. I am here to walk the sand, to lure a maker and mount him by my own cunning that I may be a Fremen entire. He felt now the maula pistol at his belt, the crysknife. He felt the silence surrounding him. It was that special pre-morning silence when the nightbirds had gone and the day creatures had not yet signalled their alertness to their enemy, the sun.

"You must ride the sand in the light of day that Shai-hulud shall see and know you have no fear," Stilgar had said. "Thus, we turn our time around and set ourselves to sleep this night."

Quietly, Paul sat up, feeling the looseness of a slacked stillsuit around his body, the shadowed stilltent beyond. So softly he moved, yet Chani heard him. She spoke from the tent's gloom, another shadow there: "It's not yet full light, beloved."

"Sihaya," he said, speaking with half a laugh in his voice.

"You call me your desert spring," she said, "but this day I'm thy goad. I am the Sayyadina who watches that the rites be obeyed."

He began tightening his stillsuit. "You told me once the words of the Kitab al-Ibar," he said. "You told me: 'Woman is thy field; go then to thy field and till it.' "

"I am the mother of thy firstborn," she agreed.

He saw her in the greyness matching him movement for movement, securing her stillsuit for the open desert. "You should get all the rest you can," she said.

He recognized her love for him speaking then and chided her gently: "The Sayyadina of the Watch does not caution or warn the candidate."

She slid across to his side, touched his cheek with her palm. "Today, I am both the watcher and the woman."

"You should've left this duty to another," he said.
"Waiting is bad enough at best," she said. "I'd sooner be at thy side."

He kissed her palm before securing the faceflap of his suit, then turned and cracked the seal of the tent. The air that came in to them held the chill not-quite-dryness that would precipitate trace dew in the dawn. With it came the smell of a pre-spice mass, the mass they had detected off to the northeast, and that told them there would be a maker nearby.

Paul crawled through the sphincter opening, stood on the sand and stretched the sleep from his muscles. A faint green-pearl luminescence etched the eastern horizon. The tents of his troop were small false dunes around him in the gloom. He saw movement off to the left - the guard, and knew they had seen him. They knew the peril he faced this day. Each Fremen had faced it. They gave him this last few moments of isolation now that he might prepare himself. It must be done today, he told himself.

He thought of the power he wielded in the face of the pogrom - the old men who sent their sons to him to be trained in the weirding way of battle, the old men who listened to him now in council and followed his plans, the men who returned to pay him that highest Fremen compliment: "Your plan worked, Muad'Dib."

Yet the meanest and smallest of the Fremen warriors could do a thing that he had never done. And Paul knew his leadership suffered from the omnipresent knowledge of this difference between them. He had not ridden the maker.

Oh, he'd gone up with the others for training trips and raids, but he had not made his own voyage. Until he did, his world was bounded by the abilities of others. No true Fremen could permit this. Until he did this thing himself, even the great southlands - the area some twenty thumpers beyond the erg - were denied him unless he ordered a palanquin and rode like a Reverend Mother or one of the sick and wounded. Harry had faced this test months ago and passed, he was a rider of worms and now it was time for Paul to pass as well.

Memory returned to him of his wrestling with his inner awareness during the night. He saw a strange parallel here - if he mastered the maker, his rule was strengthened; if he mastered the inward eye, this carried its own measure of command. But beyond them both lay the clouded area, the Great Unrest where all the universe seemed embroiled.

The differences in the ways he comprehended the universe haunted him - accuracy matched with inaccuracy. He saw it in situ. Yet, when it was born, when it came into the pressures of reality, the now had its own life and grew with its own subtle differences. Terrible purpose remained. Race consciousness remained. And over all loomed the jihad, bloody and wild.
Chani joined him outside the tent, hugging her elbows, looking up at him from the corners of her eyes the way she did when she studied his mood. "Tell me again about the waters of thy birthworld, Usul," she said.

He saw that she was trying to distract him, ease his mind of tensions before the deadly test. It was growing lighter, and he noted that some of his Fedaykin were already striking their tents. "I'd rather you told me about the sietch and about our son," he said. "Does our Leto yet hold my mother in his palm?"

"As does Alia," she said. "And he grows rapidly. He'll be a big man."

"What's it like in the south?" he asked.

"When you ride the maker you'll see for yourself," she said.

"But I wish to see it first through your eyes."

"It's powerfully lonely," she said.

He touched the nezhoni scarf at her forehead where it protruded from her stillsuit cap. "Why will you not talk about the sietch?"

"I have talked about it. The sietch is a lonely place without our men. It's a place of work. We labour in the factories and the potting rooms. There are weapons to be made, poles to plant that we may forecast the weather, spice to collect for the bribes. There are dunes to be planted to make them grow and to anchor them. There are fabrics and rugs to make, fuel cells to charge. There are children to train that the tribe's strength may never be lost."

"Is nothing then pleasant in the sietch?" he asked.

"The children are pleasant. Baz’s daughter grows strong too, she will be beautiful once grown. We observe the rites. We have sufficient food. Sometimes one of us may come north to be with her man. Life must go on.”
A crystal blowing of sand touched the exposed portions of his face, bringing the scent of the pre-spice mass. "El Sayal, the rain of sand that brings the morning," he said. He looked out across the grey light of the desert landscape, the landscape beyond pity, the sand that was form absorbed in itself. Dry lightning streaked a dark corner to the south - sign that a storm had built up its static charge there. The roll of thunder boomed long after.

"The voice that beautifies the land," Chani said.

More of his men were stirring out of their tents, Harry among them, green eyes searching for him first, still ever the loyal friend, teacher and guard. Guards were coming in from the rims. Everything around him moved smoothly in the ancient routine that required no orders.

"Give as few orders as possible," his father had told him . . . once . . . long ago. "Once you've given orders on a subject, you must always give orders on that subject." The Fremen knew this rule instinctively.

The troop's watermaster began the morning chanty, adding to it now the call for the rite to initiate a sandrider. "The world is a carcass," the man chanted, his voice wailing across the dunes. "Who can turn away the Angel of Death? What Shai-hulud has decreed must be."

Paul listened, recognizing that these were the words that also began the death chant of his Fedaykin, the words the death commandos recited as they buried themselves into battle. Will there be a rock shrine here this day to mark the passing of another soul? Paul asked himself. Will Fremen stop here in the future, each to add another stone and think on Muad'Dib who died in this place?

He knew this was among the alternatives today, a fact along lines of the future radiating from this position in time-space. The imperfect vision plagued him. The more he resisted his terrible purpose and fought against the coming of the jihad, the greater the turmoil that wove through his prescience. His entire future was becoming like a river hurtling toward a chasm - the violent nexus beyond which all was fog and clouds.

"Stilgar approaches," Chani said. "I must stand apart now, beloved. Now, I must be Sayyadina and observe the rite that it may be reported truly in the Chronicles." She looked up at him and, for a moment, her reserve slipped, then she had herself under control. "When this is past, I shall prepare thy breakfast with my own hands," she said. She turned away.

Stilgar moved toward him across the flour sand, stirring up little dust puddles. The dark niches of his
eyes remained steady on Paul with their untamed stare. The glimpse of black beard above the stillsuit mask, the lines of craggy cheeks, could have been wind-etched from the native rock for all their movement.

The man carried Paul's banner on its staff - the green and black banner with a water tube in the staff - that already was a legend in the land. Half prideful, Paul thought: I cannot do the simplest thing without its becoming a legend. They will mark how I parted from Chani, how I greet Stilgar - every move I make this day. Live or die, it is a legend. I must not die. Then it will be only legend and nothing to stop the jihad.

Stilgar planted the staff in the sand beside Paul, dropped his hands to his sides. The blue-within-blue eyes remained level and intent. And Paul thought how his own eyes already were assuming this mask of colour from the spice. His mothers had changed when she became the Reverend Mother. Only Harry showed no change, another oddity among a million. "They denied us the Hajji," Stilgar said with ritual solemnity.

As Chani had taught him, Paul responded: "Who can deny a Fremen the right to walk or ride where he wills?"

"I am a Naib," Stilgar said, "never to be taken alive. I am a leg of the death tripod that will destroy our foes." Silence settled over them.

Paul glanced at the other Fremen scattered over the sand beyond Stilgar, the way they stood without moving for this moment of personal prayer. And he thought of how the Fremen were a people whose living consisted of killing, an entire people who had lived with rage and grief all of their days, never once considering what might take the place of either - except for a dream with which Liet-Kynes had infused them before his death.

"Where is the Lord who led us through the land of desert and of pits?" Stilgar asked.

"He is ever with us," the Fremen chanted.

Stilgar squared his shoulders, stepped closer to Paul and lowered his voice. "Now, remember what I told you. Do it simply and directly - nothing fancy. Among our people, we ride the maker at the age of twelve. You are more than six years beyond that age and not born to this life. You don't have to impress anyone with your courage. We know you are brave. All you must do is call the maker and ride him."
"I will remember," Paul said.

"See that you do. I'll not have you shame my teaching." Stilgar pulled a plastic rod about a meter long from beneath his robe. The thing was pointed at one end, had a spring-wound clapper at the other end. "I prepared this thumper myself. It's a good one. Take it." Paul felt the warm smoothness of the plastic as he accepted the thumper. "Shishakli has your hooks," Stilgar said. "He'll hand them to you as you step out onto that dune over there." He pointed to his right. "Call a big maker, Usul. Show us the way."

Paul marked the tone of Stilgar's voice - half ritual and half that of a worried friend. In that instant, the sun seemed to bound above the horizon. The sky took on the silvered grey-blue that warned this would be a day of extreme heat and dryness even for Arrakis.

"It is the time of the scalding day," Stilgar said, and now his voice was entirely ritual. "Go, Usul, and ride the maker, travel the sand as a leader of men."

Paul saluted his banner, noting how the green and black flag hung limply now that the dawn wind had died. He turned toward the dune Stilgar had indicated - a dirty tan slope with an S-track crest. Already, most of the troop was moving out in the opposite direction, climbing the other dune that had sheltered their camp.

One robed figure remained in Paul's path: Shishakli, a squad leader of the Fedaykin, only his slope-lidded eyes visible between stillsuit cap and mask.

Shishakli presented two thin, whip like shafts as Paul approached. The shafts were about a meter and a half long with glistening plasteel hoods at one end, roughened at the other end for a firm grip. Paul accepted them both in his left hand as required by the ritual. "They are my own hooks," Shishakli said in a husky voice. "They never have failed."

Paul nodded, maintaining the necessary silence, moved past the man and up the dune slope. At the crest, he glanced back, saw the troop scattering like a flight of insects, their robes fluttering. He stood alone now on the sandy ridge with only the horizon in front of him, the flat and unmoving horizon. This was a good dune Stilgar had chosen, higher than its companions for the viewpoint vantage.

Stooping, Paul planted the thumper deep into the windward face where the sand was compacted and would give maximum transmission to the drumming. Then he hesitated, reviewing the lessons, reviewing the life-and-death necessities that faced him.
When he threw the latch, the thumper would begin its summons. Across the sand, a giant worm - a maker - would hear and come to the drumming. With the whiplike hook-staffs, Paul knew, he could mount the maker's high curving back. For as long as a forward edge of a worm's ring segment was held open by a hook, open to admit abrasive sand into the more sensitive interior, the creature would not retreat beneath the desert. It would, in fact, roll its gigantic body to bring the opened segment as far away from the desert surface as possible.

I am a sandrider, Paul told himself.

He glanced down at the hooks in his left hand, thinking that he had only to shift those hooks down the curve of a maker's immense side to make the creature roll and turn, guiding it where he willed. He had seen it done. He had been helped up the side of a worm for a short ride in training. The captive worm could be ridden until it lay exhausted and quiescent upon the desert surface and a new maker must be summoned.

Once he was past this test, Paul knew, he was qualified to make the twenty-thumper journey into the southland - to rest and restore himself - into the south where the women and the families had been hidden from the pogrom among the new palmaries and sietch warrens.

He lifted his head and looked to the south, reminding himself that the maker summoned wild from the erg was an unknown quantity, and the one who summoned it was equally unknown to this test.

"You must gauge the approaching maker carefully," Stilgar had explained. "You must stand close enough that you can mount it as it passes, yet not so close that it engulfs you."

With abrupt decision, Paul released the thumper's latch. The clapper began revolving and the summons drummed through the sand, a measured "lump . . . lump . . . lump . . . "

He straightened, scanning the horizon, remembering Stilgar's words: "Judge the line of approach carefully. Remember, a worm seldom makes an unseen approach to a thumper. Listen all the same. You may often hear it before you see it."

And Chani's words of caution, whispered at night when her fear for him overcame her, filled his mind: "When you take your stand along the maker's path, you must remain utterly still. You must think like a patch of sand. Hide beneath your cloak and become a little dune in your very essence."

Slowly, he scanned the horizon, listening, watching for the signs he had been taught. It came from
the southeast, a distant hissing, a sand-whisper. Presently he saw the faraway outline of the creature's track against the dawnlight and realized he had never before seen a maker this large, never heard of one this size. It appeared to be more than half a league long, and the rise of the sandwave at its cresting head was like the approach of a mountain.

This is nothing I have seen by vision or in life, Paul cautioned himself. He hurried across the path of the thing to take his stand, caught up entirely by the rushing needs of this moment.

Watching him, many eyes widened at the size of the Maker that had answered his call. Harry watched Paul closely, he would not allow his Duke to die here.

Paul waited on the sand outside the gigantic maker's line of approach. I must not wait like a smuggler - impatient and jittering, he reminded himself. I must be part of the desert. The thing was only minutes away now, filling the morning with the friction-hissing of its passage. Its great teeth within the cavern-circle of its mouth spread like some enormous flower. The spice odour from it dominated the air.

Paul's stillsuit rode easily on his body and he was only distantly aware of his nose plugs, the breathing mask. Stilgar's teaching, the painstaking hours on the sand, overshadowed all else.

"How far outside the maker's radius must you stand in pea sand?" Stilgar had asked him.

And he had answered correctly: "Half a meter for every meter of the maker's diameter."

"Why?"

"To avoid the vortex of its passage and still have time to run in and mount it."

"You've ridden the little ones bred for the seed and the Water of Life," Stilgar had said. "But what you'll summon for your test is a wild maker, an old man of the desert. You must have proper respect for such a one."

Now the thumper's deep drumming blended with the hiss of the approaching worm. Paul breathed deeply, smelling mineral bitterness of sand even through his filters. The wild maker, the old man of the desert, loomed, almost on him. Its cresting front segments threw a sandwave that would sweep across his knees. Come up, you lovely monster, he thought. Up. You hear me calling. Come up.
Come up.

The wave lifted his feet. Surface dust swept across him. He steadied himself, his world dominated by the passage of that sand-clouded curving wall, that segmented cliff, the ring lines sharply defined in it. Paul lifted his hooks, sighted along them, leaned in. He felt them bite and pull. He leaped upward, planting his feet against that wall, leaning out against the clinging barbs. This was the true instant of the testing: if he had planted the hooks correctly at the leading edge of a ring segment, opening the segment, the worm would not roll down and crush him.

The worm slowed. It glided across the thumper, silencing it. Slowly, it began to roll - up, up - bringing those irritant barbs as high as possible, away from the sand that threatened the soft inner lapping of its ring segment.

Paul found himself riding upright atop the worm. He felt exultant, like an emperor surveying his world. He suppressed a sudden urge to cavort there, to turn the worm, to show off his mastery of this creature. Suddenly he understood why Stilgar had warned him once about brash young men who danced and played with these monsters, doing handstands on their backs, removing both hooks and replanting them before the worm could spill them.

Leaving one hook in place, Paul released the other and planted it lower down the side. When the second hook was firm and tested, he brought down the first one, thus worked his way down the side. The maker rolled, and as it rolled, it turned, coming around the sweep of flour sand where the others waited.

Paul saw them come up, using their hooks to climb, but avoiding the sensitive ring edges until they were on top. They rode at last in a triple line behind him, steadied against their hooks. Stilgar moved up through the ranks, checked the positioning of Paul's hooks, glanced up at Paul's smiling face.

"You did it, eh?" Stilgar asked, raising his voice above the hiss of their passage. "That's what you think? You did it?" He straightened. "Now I tell you that was a very sloppy job. We have twelve-year-olds who do better. There was drumsand to your left where you waited. You could not retreat there if the worm turned that way."

The smile slipped from Paul's face. "I saw the drumsand."

"Then why did you not signal for one of us to take up position secondary to you? It was a thing you could do even in the test." Paul swallowed, faced into the wind of their passage. "You think it bad of me to say this now," Stilgar said. "It is my duty. I think of your worth to the troop. If you had stumbled into that drumsand, the maker would've turned toward you."
In spite of a surge of anger, Paul knew that Stilgar spoke the truth. It took a long minute and the full effort of the training he had received from his mother for Paul to recapture a feeling of calm. "I apologize," he said. "It will not happen again."

"In a tight position, always leave yourself a secondary, someone to take the maker if you cannot," Stilgar said. "Remember that we work together. That way, we're certain. We work together, eh?" He slapped Paul's shoulder.

"We work together," Paul agreed.

"Now," Stilgar said, and his voice was harsh, "show me you know how to handle a maker. Which side are we on?"

Paul glanced down at the scaled ring surface on which they stood, noted the character and size of the scales, the way they grew larger off to his right, smaller to his left. Every worm, he knew, moved characteristically with one side up more frequently. As it grew older, the characteristic up-side became an almost constant thing. Bottom scales grew larger, heavier, smoother. Top scales could be told by size alone on a big worm.

Shifting his hooks, Paul moved to the left. He motioned flankers down to open segments along the side and keep the worm on a straight course as it rolled. When he had it turned, he motioned two steersmen out of the line and into positions ahead.

"Ach, haiiiii-yoh!" he shouted in the traditional call. The left-side steersman opened a ring segment there.

In a majestic circle, the maker turned to protect its opened segment. Full around it came and when it was headed back to the south, Paul shouted: "Geyrat!" The steersman released his hook. The maker lined out in a straight course.

Stilgar said. "Very good, Paul Muad'Dib. With plenty of practice, you may yet become a sandrider."

Paul frowned, thinking: Was I not first up? From behind him there came sudden laughter. The troop began chanting, flinging his name against the sky. "Muad'Dib! Muad'Dib! Muad'Dib! Muad'Dib! Muad'Dib!"
And far to the rear along the worm's surface, Paul heard the beat of the goaders pounding the tail segments. The worm began picking up speed. Their robes flapped in the wind. The abrasive sound of their passage increased. Paul looked back through the troop, found Chani's face among them. He looked at her as he spoke to Stilgar. "Then I am a sandrider, Stil?"

"Hal yawm! You are a sandrider this day."

"Then I may choose our destination?"

"That's the way of it."

"And I am a Fremen born this day here in the Habbanya erg. I have had no life before this day. I was as a child until this day."

"Not quite a child," Stilgar said. He fastened a corner of his hood where the wind was whipping it.

"But there was a cork sealing off my world, and that cork has been pulled."

"There is no cork."

"I would go south, Stilgar - twenty thumpers. I would see this land we make, this land that I've only seen through the eyes of others."

And I would see my son and my family, he thought. I need time now to consider the future that is a past within my mind. The turmoil comes and if I'm not where I can unravel it, the thing will run wild.

Stilgar looked at him with a steady, measuring gaze. Paul kept his attention on Chani, seeing the interest quicken in her face, noting also the excitement his words had kindled in the troop. Harry was just visible further back in the column but he didn't need to see his face to sense how proud he was that Paul had succeeded. Soon, they would have to speak, he had to know why he never saw Harry's actions.

"The men are eager to raid with you in the Harkonnen sinks," Stilgar said. "The sinks are only a thumper away."
"The Fedaykin have raided with me," Paul said. "They'll raid with me again until no Harkonnen breathes Arrakeen air."

Stilgar studied him as they rode, and Paul realized the man was seeing this moment through the memory of how he had risen to command of the Tabr sietch and to leadership of the Council of Leaders now that Liet-Kynes was dead. He has heard the reports of unrest among the young Fremen, Paul thought. "Do you wish a gathering of the leaders?" Stilgar asked.

Eyes blazed among the young men of the troop. They swayed as they rode, and they watched. And Paul saw the look of unrest in Chani's glance, the way she looked from Stilgar, who was her uncle, to Paul-Muad'Dib, who was her mate. "You cannot guess what I want," Paul said. And he thought: I cannot back down. I must hold control over these people.

"You are mudir of the sandride this day," Stilgar said. Cold formality rang in his voice: "How do you use this power?"

We need time to relax, time for cool reflection, Paul thought. "We shall go south," Paul said.

"Even if I say we shall turn back to the north when this day is over?"

"We shall go south," Paul repeated.

A sense of inevitable dignity enfolded Stilgar as he pulled his robe tightly around him. "There will be a Gathering," he said. "I will send the messages."

He thinks I will call him out, Paul thought. And he knows he cannot stand against me. Paul faced south, feeling the wind against his exposed cheeks, thinking of the necessities that went into his decisions. They do not know how it is, he thought. But he knew he could not let any consideration deflect him. He had to remain on the central line of the time storm he could see in the future. There would come an instant when it could be unravelled, but only if he were where he could cut the central knot of it. I will not call him out if it can be helped, he thought. If there's another way to prevent the jihad . . .

"We'll camp for the evening meal and prayer at Cave of Birds beneath Habbanya Ridge," Stilgar said. He steadied himself with one hook against the swaying of the maker, gestured ahead at a low rock barrier rising out of the desert.
Paul studied the cliff, the great streaks of rock crossing it like waves. No green, no blossom softened that rigid horizon. Beyond it stretched the way to the southern desert - a course of at least ten days and nights, as fast as they could goad the makers. Twenty thumpers. The way led far beyond the Harkonnen patrols. He knew how it would be. The dreams had shown him. One day, as they went, there 'd be a faint change of colour on the far horizon - such a slight change that he might feel he was imagining it out of his hopes - and there would be the new sietch.

"Does my decision suit Muad'Dib?" Stilgar asked. Only the faintest touch of sarcasm tinged his voice, but Fremen ears around them, alert to every tone in a bird's cry or a cielago's piping message, heard the sarcasm and watched Paul to see what he would do.

"Stilgar heard me swear my loyalty to him when we consecrated the Fedaykin," Paul said. "My death commandos know I spoke with honor. Does Stilgar doubt it?" Real pain exposed itself in Paul's voice.

Stilgar heard it and lowered his gaze. "Usul, the companion of my sietch, him I would never doubt," Stilgar said. "But you are Paul-Muad'Dib, the Atreides Duke, and you are the Lisan al-Gaib, the Voice from the Outer World. These men I don't even know."

Paul turned away to watch the Habbanya Ridge climb out of the desert. The maker beneath them still felt strong and willing. It could carry them almost twice the distance of any other in Fremen experience. He knew it. There was nothing outside the stories told to children that could match this old man of the desert. It was the stuff of a new legend, Paul realized. A hand gripped his shoulder. Paul looked at it, followed the arm to the face beyond it - the dark eyes of Stilgar exposed between filter mask and stillsuit hood.

"The one who led Tabr sietch before me," Stilgar said, "he was my friend. We shared dangers. He owed me his life many a time . . . and I owed him mine."

"I am your friend, Stilgar," Paul said.

"No man doubts it," Stilgar said. He removed his hand, shrugged. "It's the way."

Paul saw that Stilgar was too immersed in the Fremen way to consider the possibility of any other. Here a leader took the reins from the dead hands of his predecessor, or slew among the strongest of his tribe if a leader died in the desert. Stilgar had risen to be a naib in that way. "We should leave this maker in deep sand," Paul said.
"Yes," Stilgar agreed. "We could walk to the cave from here."

"We've ridden him far enough that he'll bury himself and sulk for a day or so," Paul said.

"You're the mudir of the sandride," Stilgar said. "Say when we . . ." He broke off, stared at the eastern sky.

Paul whirled. The spice-blue overcast on his eyes made the sky appear dark, a richly filtered azure against which a distant rhythmic flashing stood out in sharp contrast. Ornithopter!

"One small 'thopter," Stilgar said.

"Could be a scout," Paul said. "Do you think they've seen us."

"At this distance, we're just a worm on the surface," Stilgar said. He motioned with his left hand. "Off. Scatter on the sand." The troop began working down the worm's sides, dropping off, blending with the sand beneath their cloaks. Paul marked where Chani and Harry dropped. Presently, only he and Stilgar remained.

"First up, last off," Paul said.

Stilgar nodded, dropped down the side on his hooks, leaped onto the sand. Paul waited until the maker was safely clear of the scatter area, then released his hooks. This was the tricky moment with a worm not completely exhausted.

Freed of its goads and hooks, the big worm began burrowing into the sand. Paul ran lightly back along its broad surface, judged his moment carefully and leaped off. He landed running, lunged against the slipface of a dune the way he had been taught, and hid himself beneath the cascade of sand over his robe.

Now, the waiting . . . Paul turned, gently, exposed a crack of sky beneath a crease in his robe. He imagined the others back along their path doing the same. He heard the beat of the 'thopter's wings before he saw it. There was a whisper of jetpods and it came over his patch of desert, turned in a broad arc toward the ridge. An unmarked 'thopter, Paul noted. It flew out of sight beyond Habbanya.
A bird cry sounded over the desert. Another.

Paul shook himself free of sand, climbed to the dune top. Other figures stood out in a line trailing away from the ridge. He recognized Chani and Stilgar among them. Stilgar signalled toward the ridge. They gathered and began the sandwalk, gliding over the surface in a broken rhythm that would disturb no maker. Stilgar paced himself beside Paul along the windpacked crest of a dune.

"It was a smuggler craft," Stilgar said.

"So, it seemed," Paul said. "But this is deep into the desert, for smugglers."

"They've their difficulties with patrols, too," Harry pointed out as he joined them and Paul couldn’t help a chuckle when he saw his friends sand filled, wild hair.

"If they come this deep, they may go deeper," Paul said, lips twitching in amusement.

"True." Harry glared and rubbed the sand from his hair.

"It wouldn't be well for them to see what they could see if they ventured too deep into the south. Smugglers sell information, too." Paul strained to see but it was gone from sight.

"They were hunting spice, don't you think?" Stilgar asked.

"There will be a wing and a crawler waiting somewhere for that one," Paul said. "We've spice. Let's bait a patch of sand and catch us some smugglers. They should be taught that this is our land and our men need practice with the new weapons."

"Now, Usul speaks," Stilgar said. "Usul thinks Fremen."

But Usul must give way to decisions that match a terrible purpose, Paul thought. And the storm was gathering.
The smuggler's spice factory with its parent carrier and ring of drone ornithopters came over a lifting of dunes like a swarm of insects following its queen. Ahead of the swarm lay one of the low rock ridges that lifted from the desert floor like small imitations of the Shield Wall. The dry beaches of the ridge were swept clean by a recent storm.

In the con-bubble of the factory, Gurney Halleck leaned forward, adjusted the oil lenses of his binoculars and examined the landscape. Beyond the ridge, he could see a dark patch that might be a spiceblow, and he gave the signal to a hovering ornithopter that sent it to investigate.

The 'thopter waggled its wings to indicate it had the signal. It broke away from the swarm, sped down toward the darkened sand, circled the area with its detectors dangling close to the surface. Almost immediately, it went through the wing-tucked dip and circle that told the waiting factory that spice had been found.

Gurney sheathed his binoculars, knowing the others had seen the signal. He liked this spot. The ridge offered some shielding and protection. This was deep in the desert, an unlikely place for an ambush. . . still . . . Gurney signalled for a crew to hover over the ridge, to scan it, sent reserves to take up station in pattern around the area - not too high because then they could be seen from afar by Harkonnen detectors. He doubted, though, that Harkonnen patrols would be this far south. This was still Fremen country.

Gurney checked his weapons, damning the fate that made shields useless out here. Anything that summoned a worm had to be avoided at all costs. He rubbed the inkvine scar along his jaw, studying the scene, decided it would be safest to lead a ground party through the ridge. Inspection on foot was still the most certain. You couldn't be too careful when Fremen and Harkonnen were at each other's throats.

It was Fremen that worried him here. They didn't mind trading for all the spice you could afford, but they were devils on the warpath if you stepped foot where they forbade you to go. And they were so devilishly cunning of late. It annoyed Gurney, the cunning and adroitness in battle of these natives. They displayed a sophistication in warfare as good as anything he had ever encountered, and he had been trained by the best fighters in the universe then seasoned in battles where only the superior few survived.

Again, Gurney scanned the landscape, wondering why he felt uneasy. Perhaps it was the worm they had seen . . . but that was on the other side of the ridge.
A head popped up into the con-bubble beside Gurney - the factory commander, a one-eyed old pirate with full beard, the blue eyes and milky teeth of a spice diet. "Looks like a rich patch, sir," the factory commander said. "Shall I take 'er in?"

"Come down at the edge of that ridge," Gurney ordered. "Let me disembark with my men. You can tractor out to the spice from there. We'll have a look at that rock."

"Aye."

"In case of trouble," Gurney said, "save the factory. We'll lift in the 'thopters."

The factory commander saluted. "Aye, sir." He popped back down through the hatch.

Again, Gurney scanned the horizon. He had to respect the possibility that there were Fremen here and he was trespassing. Fremen worried him, their toughness and unpredictability. Many things about this business worried him, but the rewards were great. The fact that he couldn't send spotters high overhead worried him, too. The necessity of radio silence added to his uneasiness.

The factory crawler turned, began to descend. Gently it glided down to the dry beach at the foot of the ridge. Treads touched sand. Gurney opened the bubble dome, released his safety straps. The instant the factory stopped, he was out, slamming the bubble closed behind him, scrambling out over the tread guards to swing down to the sand beyond the emergency netting. The five men of his personal guard were out with him, emerging from the nose hatch. Others released the factory's carrier wing. It detached, lifted away to fly in a parking circle low overhead.

Immediately the big factory crawler lurched off, swinging away from the ridge toward the dark patch of spice out on the sand. A 'thopter swooped down nearby, skidded to a stop. Another followed and another. They disgorged Gurney's platoon and lifted to hoverflight.

Gurney tested his muscles in his stillsuit, stretching. He left the filter mask off his face, losing moisture for the sake of a greater need - the carrying power of his voice if he had to shout commands. He began climbing up into the rocks, checking the terrain - pebbles and pea sand underfoot, the smell of spice. Good site for an emergency base, he thought. Might be sensible to bury a few supplies here.

He glanced back, watching his men spread out as they followed him. Good men, even the new ones he hadn't had time to test. Good men. Didn't have to be told every time what to do. Not a shield
glimmer showed on any of them. No cowards in this bunch, carrying shields into the desert where a worm could sense the field and come to rob them of the spice they found.

From this slight elevation in the rocks, Gurney could see the spice patch about half a kilometre away and the crawler just reaching the near edge. He glanced up at the cover flight, noting the altitude - not too high. He nodded to himself, turned to resume his climb up the ridge.

In that instant, the ridge erupted. Twelve roaring paths of flame streaked upward to the hovering 'thopters and carrier wing. There came a blasting of metal from the factory crawler, and the rocks around Gurney were full of hooded fighting men.

Gurney had time to think: By the horns of the Great Mother! Rockets! They dare to use rockets!

Then he was face to face with a hooded figure who crouched low, crysknife at the ready. Two more men stood waiting on the rocks above to left and right. Only the eyes of the fighting man ahead of him were visible to Gurney between hood and veil of a sand-coloured burnoose, but the crouch and readiness warned him that here was a trained fighting man. The eyes were the blue-in-blue of the deep-desert Fremen.

Gurney moved one hand toward his own knife, kept his eyes fixed on the other's knife. If they dared use rockets, they'd have other projectile weapons. This moment argued extreme caution. He could tell by sound alone that at least part of his sky cover had been knocked out. There were grunting’s, too, the noise of several struggles behind him.

The eyes of the fighting man ahead of Gurney followed the motion of hand toward knife, came back to glare into Gurney's eyes.

"Leave the knife in its sheath, Gurney Halleck," the man said.

Gurney hesitated. That voice sounded oddly familiar even through a stillsuit filter. "You know my name?" he said.

"You've no need of a knife with me, Gurney," the man said. He straightened, slipped his crysknife into its sheath back beneath his robe. "Tell your men to stop their useless resistance." The man threw his hood back, swung the filter aside.
The shock of what he saw froze Gurney's muscles. He thought at first, he was looking at a ghost image of Duke Leto Atreides. Full recognition came slowly. "Paul," he whispered. Then louder: "Is it truly Paul?"

"Don't you trust your own eyes?" Paul asked.

"They said you were dead," Gurney rasped. He took a half-step forward.

"Tell your men to submit," Paul commanded. He waved toward the lower reaches of the ridge.

Gurney turned, reluctant to take his eyes off Paul. He saw only a few knots of struggle. Hooded desert men seemed to be everywhere around. The factory crawler lay silent with Fremen standing atop it. There were no aircraft overhead. "Stop the fighting," Gurney bellowed. He took a deep breath, cupped his hands for a megaphone. "This is Gurney Halleck! Stop the fight!" Slowly, warily, the struggling figures separated. Eyes turned toward him, questioning. "These are friends," Gurney called.

"Fine friends!" someone shouted back. "Half our people murdered."

"It's a mistake," Gurney said. "Don't add to it." He turned back to Paul, stared into the youth's blue-blue Fremen eyes. A smile touched Paul's mouth, but there was a hardness in the expression that reminded Gurney of the Old Duke, Paul's grandfather. Gurney saw then the sinewy harshness in Paul that had never before been seen in an Atreides - a leathery look to the skin, a squint to the eyes and calculation in the glance that seemed to weigh everything in sight. "They said you were dead," Gurney repeated.

"And it seemed the best protection to let them think so," Paul said. Gurney realized that was all the apology he'd ever get for having been abandoned to his own resources, left to believe his young Duke... his friend, was dead. He wondered then if there were anything left here of the boy he had known and trained in the ways of fighting men. Paul took a step closer to Gurney, found that his eyes were smarting. "Gurney - "

It seemed to happen of itself, and they were embracing, pounding each other on the back, feeling the reassurance of solid flesh. "You young pup! You young pup!" Gurney kept saying.

And Paul: "Gurney, man! Gurney, man!"
Presently, they stepped apart, looked at each other. Gurney took a deep breath. "So you're why the Fremen have grown so wise in battle tactics. I might've known. They keep doing things I could've planned myself. If I'd only known - " He shook his head. "If you'd only got word to me, lad. Nothing would've stopped me. I'd have come arunning and . . . " A look in Paul's eyes stopped him . . . the hard, weighing stare. Gurney sighed. "Sure, and there'd have been those who wondered why Gurney Halleck went arunning, and some would've done more than question. They'd have gone hunting for answers."

Paul nodded, glanced to the waiting Fremen around them - the looks of curious appraisal on the faces of the Fedaykin. He turned from the death commandos back to Gurney. Finding his former swordmaster filled him with elation. He saw it as a good omen, a sign that he was on the course of the future where all was well. With Gurney at my side . . . Paul glanced down the ridge past the Fedaykin, studied the smuggler crew who had come with Halleck. "How do your men stand, Gurney?" he asked.

"They're smugglers all," Gurney said. "They stand where the profit is."

"Little enough profit in our venture," Paul said, and he noted the subtle finger signal flashed to him by Gurney's right hand - the old hand code out of their past. There were men to fear and distrust in the smuggler crew. Paul pulled at his lip to indicate he understood, looked up at the men standing guard above them on the rocks. He saw Stilgar there. Memory of the unsolved problem with Stilgar cooled some of Paul's elation. "Stilgar," he said, "this is Gurney Halleck of whom you've heard me speak. My father's master-of-arms, one of the swordmasters who instructed me, an old friend. He can be trusted in any venture."

"I hear," Stilgar said. "You are his Duke."

Paul stared at the dark visage above him, wondering at the reasons which had impelled Stilgar to say just that. His Duke. There had been a strange subtle intonation in Stilgar's voice, as though he would rather have said something else. And that wasn't like Stilgar, who was a leader of Fremen, a man who spoke his mind.

My Duke! Gurney thought. He looked anew at Paul. Yes, with Leto dead, the title fell on Paul's shoulders.

The pattern of the Fremen war on Arrakis began to take on new shape in Gurney's mind. My Duke! A place that had been dead within him began coming alive. Only part of his awareness focused on Paul's ordering the smuggler crew disarmed until they could be questioned. Gurney's mind returned to the command when he heard some of his men protesting. He shook his head, whirled. "Are you men deaf?" he barked. "This is the rightful Duke of Arrakis. Do as he commands." Grumbling, the smugglers submitted.
Paul moved up beside Gurney, spoke in a low voice. "I'd not have expected you to walk into this trap, Gurney."

"I'm properly chastened," Gurney said. "I'll wager yon patch of spice is little more than a sand grain's thickness, a bait to lure us."

"That's a wager you'd win," Paul said. He looked down at the men being disarmed. "Are there any more of my father's men among your crew?"

"None. We're spread thin. There're a few among the free traders. Most have spent their profits to leave this place."

"But you stayed."

"I stayed."

"Because Rabban is here," Paul said.

"I thought I had nothing left but revenge," Gurney said. An oddly chopped cry sounded from the ridgetop. Gurney looked up to see a Fremen waving his kerchief.

"A maker comes," Paul said. He moved out to a point of rock with Gurney following, looked off to the southwest. The burrow mound of a worm could be seen in the middle distance, a dust-crowned track that cut directly through the dunes on a course toward the ridge. "He's big enough," Paul said. A clattering sound lifted from the factory crawler below them. It turned on its treads like a giant insect, lumbered toward the rocks. "Too bad we couldn't have saved the carryall," Paul said.

Gurney glanced at him, looked back to the patches of smoke and debris out on the desert where carryall and ornithopters had been brought down by Fremen rockets. He felt a sudden pang for the men lost there - his men, and he said: "Your father would've been more concerned for the men he couldn't save."

Paul shot a hard stare at him, lowered his gaze. Presently, he said: "They were your friends, Gurney. I understand. To us, though, they were trespassers who might see things they shouldn't see. You
must understand that.

"I understand it well enough," Gurney said. "Now, I'm curious to see what I shouldn't."

Paul looked up to see the old and well-remembered wolfish grin on Halleck's face, the ripple of the inkvine scar along the man's jaw.

Gurney nodded toward the desert below them. Fremen were going about their business all over the landscape. It struck him that none of them appeared worried by the approach of the worm.

A thumping sounded from the open dunes beyond the baited patch of spice - a deep drumming that seemed to be heard through their feet. Gurney saw Fremen spread out across the sand there in the path of the worm.

The worm came on like some great sandfish, cresting the surface, its rings rippling and twisting. In a moment, from his vantage point above the desert, Gurney saw the taking of a worm - the daring leap of the first hookman, the turning of the creature, the way an entire band of men went up the scaly, glistening curve of the worm's side.

"There's one of the things you shouldn't have seen," Paul said.

"There's been stories and rumours," Gurney said. "But it's not a thing easy to believe without seeing it." He shook his head. "The creature all men on Arrakis fear, you treat it like a riding animal."

"You heard my father speak of desert power," Paul said. "There it is. The surface of this planet is ours. No storm nor creature nor condition can stop us."

Us, Gurney thought. He means the Fremen. He speaks of himself as one of them. Again, Gurney looked at the spice blue in Paul's eyes. His own eyes, he knew, had a touch of the colour, but smugglers could get offworld foods and there was a subtle caste implication in the tone of the eyes among them. They spoke of "the touch of the spicebrush" to mean a man had gone too native. And there was always a hint of distrust in the idea.

"There was a time when we did not ride the maker in the light of day in these latitudes," Paul said. "But Rabban has little enough air cover left that he can waste it looking for a few specks in the sand." He looked at Gurney. "Your aircraft were a shock to us here."
To us . . . to us . . . Gurney shook his head to drive out such thoughts. "We weren't the shock to you that you were to us," he said.

"What's the talk of Rabban in the sinks and villages?" Paul asked.

"They say they've fortified the graben villages to the point where you cannot harm them. They say they need only sit inside their defences while you wear yourselves out in futile attack."

"In a word," Paul said, "they're immobilized."

"While you can go where you will," Gurney said.

"It's a tactic I learned from you," Paul said. "They've lost the initiative, which means they've lost the war." Gurney smiled, a slow, knowing expression. "Our enemy is exactly where I want him to be," Paul said. He glanced at Gurney. "Well, Gurney, do you enlist with me for the finish of this campaign?"

"Enlist?" Gurney stared at him. "My Lord, I've never left your service. You're the only one left me . . . to think you dead. And I, being cast adrift, made what shrift I could, waiting for the moment I might sell my life for what it's worth - the death of Rabban." An embarrassed silence settled over Paul.

A woman and man came climbing up the rocks toward them, her eyes between stillsuit hood and facemask flicking between Paul and his companion. She stopped in front of Paul. Gurney noted the possessive air about her, the way she stood close to Paul.

"Chani," Paul said, "this is Gurney Halleck. You've heard me speak of him."

She looked at Halleck, back to Paul. "I have heard."

"Where did the men go on the maker?" Paul asked.

"They but diverted it to give us time to save the equipment."
"Well then . . ." Paul broke off, sniffed the air.

"There's wind coming," Chani said.

A voice called out from the ridgetop above them: "Ho, there - the wind!"

Gurney saw a quickening of motion among the Fremen now - a rushing about and sense of hurry. A thing the worm had not ignited was brought about by fear of the wind. The factory crawler lumbered up onto the dry beach below them and a way was opened for it among the rocks . . . and the rocks closed behind it so neatly that the passage escaped his eyes. "Have you many such hiding places?" Gurney asked.

"Many times, many," A familiar voice answered and Gurney looked to the man, suddenly realising the eyes staring back were Green.

“Harry?” He stared in shock and Harry laughed.

“IT is good to see you too old man.” He teased.

Paul looked at Chani. "Find Korba. Tell him that Gurney has warned me there are men among this smuggler crew who're not to be trusted." She looked once at Gurney, back to Paul, nodded, and was off down the rocks, leaping with a gazelle-like agility.

"She is your woman," Gurney said.

"The mother of my firstborn," Paul said. "There's another Leto among the Atreides. And there is a daughter, Lily, for the Potter’s." Gurney accepted this with only a widening of the eyes. Paul watched the action around them with a critical eye. A curry colour dominated the southern sky now and there came fitful bursts and gusts of wind that whipped dust around their heads. "Seal your suit," Paul said. And he fastened the mask and hood about his face. Gurney obeyed, thankful for the filters. Paul spoke, his voice muffled by the filter: "Which of your crew don't you trust, Gurney?"

"There're some new recruits," Gurney said. "Offworlders . . ." He hesitated, wondering at himself suddenly. Offworlders. The word had come so easily to his tongue.
"Yes?" Paul said.

"They're not like the usual fortune-hunting lot we get," Gurney said. "They're tougher."

"Harkonnen spies?" Paul asked.

"I think m'Lord, that they report to no Harkonnen. I suspect they're men of the Imperial service. They have a hint of Salusa Secundus about them."

Paul shot a sharp glance at him. "Sardaukar?"

Gurney shrugged. "They could be, but it's well masked."

Paul nodded, thinking how easily Gurney had fallen back into the pattern of Atreides retainer . . . but with subtle reservations . . . differences. Arrakis had changed him, too. Two hooded Fremen emerged from the broken rock below them, began climbing upward. One of them carried a large black bundle over one shoulder.

"Where are my crew now?" Gurney asked.

"Secure in the rocks below us," Paul said. "We've a cave here - Cave of Birds. We'll decide what to do with them after the storm."

A voice called from above them: "Muad'Dib!"

Paul turned at the call, saw a Fremen guard motioning them down to the cave. Paul signalled he had heard.

Gurney studying him with a new expression. "You're Muad'Dib?" he asked. "You're the will-o'-the-sand?"
"It's my Fremen name," Paul said.

Gurney turned away, feeling an oppressive sense of foreboding. Half his own crew dead on the sand, the others captive. He did not care about the new recruits, the suspicious ones, but among the others were good men, friends, people for whom he felt responsible. "We'll decide what to do with them after the storm." That's what Paul had said, Muad'Dib had said. And Gurney recalled the stories told of Muad'Dib, the Lisan al-Gaib - how he had taken the skin of a Harkonnen officer to make his drumheads, how he was surrounded by death commandos, Fedaykin who leaped into battle with their death chants on their lips. Him.

The two Fremen climbing up the rocks leaped lightly to a shelf in front of Paul. The dark-faced one said: "All secure, Muad'Dib. We best get below now."

"Right."

Gurney noted the tone of the man's voice - half command and half request. This was the man called Stilgar, another figure of the new Fremen legends.

Paul looked at the bundle the other man carried, said: "Korba, what's in the bundle?"

Stilgar answered: "'Twas in the crawler. It had the initial of your friend here and it contains a baliset. Many times, have I heard you speak of the prowess of Gurney Halleck on the baliset."

Gurney studied the speaker, seeing the edge of black beard above the stillsuit mask, the hawk stare, the chiselled nose. "You've a companion who thinks, m'Lord," Gurney said. "Thank you, Stilgar."

Stilgar signalled for his companion to pass the bundle to Gurney, said: "Thank your Lord Duke. His countenance earns your admittance here."

Gurney accepted the bundle, puzzled by the hard undertones in this conversation. There was an air of challenge about the man, and Gurney wondered if it could be a feeling of jealousy in the Fremen. Here was someone called Gurney Halleck who'd known Paul even in the times before Arrakis, a man who shared a camaraderie that Stilgar could never invade.

"You are two I'd have be friends," Paul said.
"Stilgar, the Fremen, is a name of renown," Gurney said. "Any killer of Harkonnen’s I’d feel honoured to count among my friends."

"Will you touch hands with my friend Gurney Halleck, Stilgar?" Paul asked.

Slowly, Stilgar extended his hand, gripped the heavy calluses of Gurney’s swordhand. "There're few who haven't heard the name of Gurney Halleck," he said, and released his grip. He turned to Paul. "The storm comes rushing."

"At once," Paul said.

Stilgar turned away, led them down through the rocks, a twisting and turning path into a shadowed cleft that admitted them to the low entrance of a cave. Men hurried to fasten a doorseal behind them. Glowglobes showed a broad, dome-ceilinged space with a raised ledge on one side and a passage leading off from it.

Paul leaped to the ledge with Harry and Gurney right behind him, led the way into the passage. The others headed for another passage opposite the entrance. Paul led the way through an anteroom and into a chamber with dark, wine-coloured hangings on its walls.

"We can have some privacy here for a while," Paul said. "The others will respect my - "

An alarm cymbal clanged from the outer chamber, was followed by shouting and clashing of weapons. Paul whirled, ran back through the anteroom and out onto the atrium lip above the outer chamber. Gurney was right behind, weapon drawn. Harry slipped down a side passage, ready to come in at the threat from behind.

Beneath them on the floor of the cave swirled a melee of struggling figures. Paul stood an instant assessing the scene, separating the Fremen robes and bourkas from the costumes of those they opposed. Senses that his mother had trained to detect the subtlest clues picked out a significant fact - the Fremen fought against men wearing smuggler robes, but the smugglers were crouched in trios, backed into triangles where pressed. Harry came out opposite him and took in the scene as well before he flashed a hand sign and Paul nodded. That habit of close fighting was a trademark of the Imperial Sardaukar.

A Fedaykin in the crowd saw Paul, and his battle cry was lifted to echo in the chamber: "Muad'Dib!"
Another eye had also picked Paul out. A black knife came hurtling toward him. Paul dodged, heard the knife clatter against stone behind him, glanced to see Gurney retrieve it. The triangular knots were being pressed back now. Gurney held the knife up in front of Paul's eyes, pointed to the hairline yellow coil of Imperial colour, the golden lion crest, multifaceted eyes at the pommel. Sardaukar for certain. Harry dropped from the ledge, taking down one of the men easily.

Paul stepped out to the lip of the ledge. Only three of the Sardaukar remained. Bloody rag mounds of Sardaukar and Fremen lay in a twisted pattern across the chamber. "Hold!" Paul shouted. "The Duke Paul Atreides commands you to hold!" The fighting wavered, hesitated. "You Sardaukar!" Paul called to the remaining group. "By whose orders do you threaten a ruling Duke?" And, quickly, as his men started to press in around the Sardaukar: "Hold, I say!"

One of the cornered trio straightened. "Who says we're Sardaukar?" he demanded.

Paul took the knife from Gurney, held it aloft. "This says you're Sardaukar."

"Then who says you're a ruling Duke?" the man demanded.

Paul gestured to the Fedaykin. "These men say I'm a ruling Duke. Your own emperor bestowed Arrakis on House Atreides. I am House Atreides." The Sardaukar stood silent, fidgeting. Paul studied the man - tall, flat-featured, with a pale scar across half his left cheek. Anger and confusion were betrayed in his manner, but still there was that pride about him without which a Sardaukar appeared undressed - and with which he could appear fully clothed though naked. Paul glanced to one of his Fedaykin lieutenants, said: "Korba, how came they to have weapons?"

"They held back knives concealed in cunning pockets within their stillsuits," the lieutenant said.

Paul surveyed the dead and wounded across the chamber, brought his attention back to the lieutenant. There was no need for words. The lieutenant lowered his eyes. "Where is Chani?" Paul asked and waited, breath held, for the answer.

"Stilgar spirited her aside." He nodded toward the other passage, glanced at the dead and wounded. "I hold myself responsible for this mistake, Muad'Dib."
"How many of these Sardaukar were there, Gurney?" Paul asked.

"Ten."

Paul leaped lightly to the floor of the chamber, strode across to stand within striking distance of the Sardaukar spokesman. A tense air came over the Fedaykin. They did not like him thus exposed to danger. This was the thing they were pledged to prevent because the Fremen wished to preserve the wisdom of Muad'Dib. Without turning, Paul spoke to his lieutenant: "How many are our casualties?"

"Four wounded, two dead, Muad'Dib."

Paul saw motion beyond the Sardaukar, Chani and Stilgar were standing in the other passage. He returned his attention to the Sardaukar, staring into the offworld whites of the spokesman's eyes. "You, what is your name?" Paul demanded. The man stiffened, glanced left and right. "Don't try it," Paul said. "It's obvious to me that you were ordered to seek out and destroy Muad'Dib. I'll warrant you were the ones suggested seeking spice in the deep desert." A gasp from Gurney behind him brought a thin smile to Paul's lips. Blood suffused the Sardaukar's face. "What you see before you is more than Muad'Dib," Paul said. "Seven of you are dead for two of us. Three for one. Pretty good against Sardaukar, eh?" The man came up on his toes, sank back as the Fedaykin pressed forward. "I asked your name," Paul said, and he called up the subtleties of Voice: "Tell me your name!"

"Captain Aramsham, Imperial Sardaukar!" the man snapped. His jaw dropped. He stared at Paul in confusion. The manner about him that had dismissed this cavern as a barbarian warren melted away.

"Well, Captain Aramsham," Paul said, "the Harkonnen’s would pay dearly to learn what you now know. And the Emperor - what he wouldn't give to learn an Atreides still lives despite his treachery." The captain glanced left and right at the two men remaining to him. Paul could almost see the thoughts turning over in the man's head. Sardaukar did not submit, but the Emperor had to learn of this threat. Still using the Voice, Paul said: "Submit, Captain."

The man at the captain's left leaped without warning toward Paul, met the flashing impact of his own captain's knife in his chest. The attacker hit the floor in a sodden heap with the knife still in him. The captain faced his sole remaining companion. "I decide what best serves His Majesty," he said. "Understood?" The other Sardaukar's shoulders slumped. "Drop your weapon," the captain said. The Sardaukar obeyed. The captain returned his attention to Paul. "I have killed a friend for you," he said. "Let us always remember that."

"You're my prisoners," Paul said. "You submitted to me. Whether you live or die is of no importance." He motioned to his guard to take the two Sardaukar, signalled the lieutenant who had
searched the prisoners. The guard moved in, hustled the Sardaukar away. Paul bent toward his lieutenant. "Muad'Dib," the man said. "I failed you in . . . "

"The failure was not yours Korba," Harry said as he watched the men being led away, sheathing his knife. "One of us should've warned you what to seek. In the future, when searching Sardaukar, remember this. Remember, too, that each has a false toenail or two that can be combined with other items secreted about their bodies to make an effective transmitter. They'll have more than one false tooth. They carry coils of shigawire in their hair - so fine you can barely detect it, yet strong enough to garrote a man and cut off his head in the process. With Sardaukar, you must scan them, scope them - both reflex and hard ray - cut off every scrap of body hair. And when you're through, be certain you haven't discovered everything." He looked up at Gurney, who had moved close to listen.

"Then we best kill them," the lieutenant said.

Paul shook his head, looking at Gurney. "No. I want them to escape." Gurney stared at him.

"Sire . . . " he breathed.

"Yes?"

"Your man here is right. Kill those prisoners at once. Destroy all evidence of them. You've shamed Imperial Sardaukar! When the Emperor learns that he'll not rest until he has you over a slow fire."

"The Emperor's not likely to have that power over me," Paul said. He spoke slowly, coldly. Something had happened inside him while he faced the Sardaukar. A sum of decisions had accumulated in his awareness. "Gurney," he said, "are there many Guildsmen around Rabban?"

Gurney straightened, eyes narrowed. "Your question makes no . . . "

"Are there?" Paul barked.

"Arrakis is crawling with Guild agents. They're buying spice as though it were the most precious thing in the universe. Why else do you think we ventured this far into . . . "
"It is the most precious thing in the universe," Paul said. "To them."

He looked toward Stilgar and Chani who were now crossing the chamber toward him. "And we control it, Gurney."

"The Harkonnen’s control it!" Gurney protested.

"The people who can destroy a thing, they control it," Paul said. He waved a hand to silence further remarks from Gurney, nodded to Stilgar who stopped in front of Paul, Chani beside him. Paul took the Sardaukar knife in his left hand, presented it to Stilgar. "You live for the good of the tribe," Paul said. "Could you draw my life's blood with that knife?"

"For the good of the tribe," Stilgar growled.

"Then use that knife," Paul said.

"Are you calling me out?" Stilgar demanded.

"If I do," Paul said, "I shall stand there without weapon and let you slay me." Stilgar drew in a quick, sharp breath.

Chani said, "Usul!" then glanced at Gurney, back to Paul.

While Stilgar was still weighing his words, Paul said: "You are Stilgar, a fighting man. When the Sardaukar began fighting here, you were not in the front of battle. Your first thought was to protect Chani."

"She's my niece," Stilgar said. "If there'd been any doubt of your Fedaykin handling those scum . . ."

"Why was your first thought of Chani?" Paul demanded.

"It wasn't!"
"Oh?"

"It was of you," Stilgar admitted.

"Do you think you could lift your hand against me?" Paul asked.

Stilgar began to tremble. "It's the way," he muttered.

"It's the way to kill offworld strangers found in the desert and take their water as a gift from Shai-hulud," Paul said. "Yet you permitted two such to live one night, my mother and myself."

As Stilgar remained silent, trembling, staring at him, Paul said: "Ways change, Stil. You have changed them yourself." Stilgar looked down at the yellow emblem on the knife he held. "When I am Duke in Arrakeen with Chani by my side, do you think I'll have time to concern myself with every detail of governing Tabr sietch?" Paul asked. "Do you concern yourself with the internal problems of every family?" Stilgar continued staring at the knife. "Do you think I wish to cut off my right arm?" Paul demanded. Slowly, Stilgar looked up at him. "You!" Paul said. "Do you think I wish to deprive myself or the tribe of your wisdom and strength?"

In a low voice, Stilgar said: "The young man of my tribe whose name is known to me, this young man I could kill on the challenge floor, Shai-hulud willing. The Lisan al-Gaib, him I could not harm. You knew this when you handed me this knife."

"I knew it," Paul agreed.

Stilgar opened his hand. The knife clattered against the stone of the floor. "Ways change," he said.

"Chani," Paul said, "go to my mother, send her here that her counsel will be available in - "

"But you said we would go to the south!" she protested.

"I was wrong," he said. "The Harkonnen’s are not there. The war is not there." She took a deep
breath, accepting this as a desert woman accepted all necessities in the midst of a life involved with death. "You will give my mother a message for her ears alone," Paul said. "Tell her that Stilgar acknowledges me Duke of Arrakis, but a way must be found to make the young men accept this without combat."

Chani glanced at Stilgar.

"Do as he says," Stilgar growled. "We both know he could overcome me . . . and I could not raise my hand against him . . . for the good of the tribe."

"I shall return with your mother," Chani said.

"Send her," Paul said. "Stilgar's instinct was right. I am stronger when you are safe. You will remain in the sietch." She started to protest, swallowed it. "Sihaya," Paul said, using his intimate name for her. He whirled away to the right, met Gurney's glaring eyes.

The interchange between Paul and the older Fremen had passed as though in a cloud around Gurney since Paul's reference to his mother. "Your mother," Gurney said.

"Idaho saved us the night of the raid," Paul said, distracted by the parting with Chani. "Right now we've - "

"What of Duncan Idaho, m'Lord?" Gurney asked.

"He's dead - buying us a bit of time to escape." Harry answered sadly.

The she-witch alive! Gurney thought. The one I swore vengeance against, alive! And its obvious Duke Paul doesn't know what manner of creature gave him birth. The evil one! Betrayed his own father to the Harkonnen's!

Paul pressed past him, jumped up to the ledge. He glanced back, noted that the wounded and dead had been removed, and he thought bitterly that here was another chapter in the legend of Paul Muad'Dib. I didn't even draw my knife, but it'll be said of this day that I slew twenty Sardaukar by my own hand.
Gurney followed with Stilgar, stepping on ground that he did not even feel. The cavern with its yellow light of glowglobes was forced out of his thoughts by rage. The she-witch alive while those she betrayed are bones in lonesome graves. I must contrive it that Paul learns the truth about her before I slay her.

Harry watched with a frown, something in what they had told Gurney…. he shrugged it off for now and went to help Chani with preparations for the long journey. “You will tell Harah and the children I am well?”

“Of course, Suhl. You will watch over him for me?”

“Always My Lady.” He smiled and left her to stare at him, the same title he addressed Usul’s Mother with…

A cough sounded outside the chamber hangings. Jessica straightened, took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, she was tired from the journey and that bit of theatre they had staged to calm those you believed Paul should call Stilgar out. "Enter," she said. Draperies were flung aside and Gurney Halleck bounded into the room. She had only time for a glimpse of his face with its odd grimace, then he was behind her, lifting her to her feet with one brawny arm beneath her chin.

"Gurney, you fool, what are you doing?" she demanded. Then she felt the touch of the knife tip against her back. Chill awareness spread out from that knife tip. She knew in that instant that Gurney meant to kill her. Why? She could think of no reason, for he wasn't the kind to turn traitor. But she felt certain of his intention. Knowing it, her mind churned. Here was no man to be overcome easily. Here was a killer wary of the Voice, wary of every combat stratagem, wary of every trick of death and violence. Here was an instrument she herself had helped train with subtle hints and suggestions.

"You thought you had escaped, eh, witch?" Gurney snarled.

Before she could turn the question over in her mind or try to answer, the curtains parted and Paul entered. "Here he is, Moth - " Paul broke off, taking in the tensions of the scene.

"You will stand where you are, m'Lord," Gurney said.

"What . . . " Paul shook his head.
Jessica started to speak, felt the arm tighten against her throat.

"You will speak only when I permit it, witch," Gurney said. "I want only one thing from you for your son to hear it, and I am prepared to send this knife into your heart by reflex at the first sign of a counter against me. Your voice will remain in a monotone. Certain muscles you will not tense or move. You will act with the most extreme caution to gain yourself a few more seconds of life. And I assure you, these are all you have."

Paul took a step forward. "Gurney, man, what is - "

"Stop right where you are!" Gurney snapped. "One more step and she's dead."

Paul's hand slipped to his knife hilt. He spoke in a deadly quiet: "You had best explain yourself, Gurney."

"I swore an oath to slay the betrayer of your father," Gurney said. "Do you think I can forget the man who rescued me from a Harkonnen slave pit, gave me freedom, life, and honour . . . gave me friendship, a thing I prized above all else? I have his betrayer under my knife. No one can stop me from - "

"You couldn't be more wrong, Gurney," Paul said. And Jessica thought: So that's it! What irony!

"Wrong, am I?" Gurney demanded. "Let us hear it from the woman herself. And let her remember that I have bribed and spied and cheated to confirm this charge. I've even pushed semuta on a Harkonnen guard captain to get part of the story."

Jessica felt the arm at her throat ease slightly, but before she could speak, Paul said: "The betrayer was Yueh. I tell you this once, Gurney. The evidence is complete, cannot be controverted. It was Yueh. I do not care how you came by your suspicion - for it can be nothing else - but if you harm my mother . . . " Paul lifted his crysknife from its scabbard, held the blade in front of him. " . . . I'll have your blood."

"Yueh was a conditioned medic, fit for a royal house," Gurney snarled. "He could not turn traitor!"
"I know a way to remove that conditioning," Paul said.

"Evidence," Gurney insisted.

"The evidence is not here," Paul said. "It's in Tabr sietch, far to the south, but if - "

"This is a trick," Gurney snarled, and his arm tightened on Jessica's throat.

"No trick, Gurney," Paul said, and his voice carried such a note of terrible sadness that the sound tore at Jessica's heart.

"I saw the message captured from the Harkonnen agent," Gurney said. "The note pointed directly at - "

"I saw it, too," Paul said. "My father showed it to me the night he explained why it had to be a Harkonnen trick aimed at making him suspect the woman he loved."

"Ayah!" Gurney said. "You've not - "

"Be quiet," Paul said, and the monotone stillness of his words carried more command than Jessica had ever heard in another voice. He has the Great Control, she thought. Gurney's arm trembled against her neck. The point of the knife at her back moved with uncertainty. "What you have not done," Paul said, "is heard my mother sobbing in the night over her lost Duke. You have not seen her eyes stab flame when she speaks of killing Harkonnen’s." So he has listened, she thought. Tears blinded her eyes. "What you have not done," Paul went on, "is remembered the lessons you learned in a Harkonnen slave pit. You speak of pride in my father's friendship! Didn't you learn the difference between Harkonnen and Atreides so that you could smell a Harkonnen trick by the stink they left on it? Didn't you learn that Atreides loyalty is bought with love while the Harkonnen coin is hate? Couldn't you see through to the very nature of this betrayal?"

"But Yueh?" Gurney muttered.

"The evidence we have is Yueh's own message to us admitting his treachery," Harry called as he moved from the shadows where he had been, a position he could have stopped Gurney form if needed.
"I swear this to you by the love I hold for you, a love I will still hold even after I leave you dead on this floor." Paul whispered, eyes locked on Gurney. Hearing her son, Jessica marvelled at the awareness in him, the penetrating insight of his intelligence. "My father had an instinct for his friends," Paul said. "He gave his love sparingly, but with never an error. His weakness lay in misunderstanding hatred. He thought anyone who hated Harkonnen’s could not betray him." He glanced at his mother. "She knows this. I've given her my father's message that he never distrusted her."

Jessica felt herself losing control, bit at her lower lip. Seeing the stiff formality in Paul, she realized what these words were costing him. She wanted to run to him, cradle his head against her breast as she never had done. But the arm against her throat had ceased its trembling; the knifepoint at her back pressed still and sharp.

"One of the most terrible moments in a boy's life," Paul said, "is when he discovers his father and mother are human beings who share a love that he can never quite taste. It's a loss, an awakening to the fact that the world is there and here and we are in it alone. The moment carries its own truth; you can't evade it. I heard my father when he spoke of my mother. She's not the betrayer, Gurney."

Jessica found her voice, said: "Gurney, release me." There was no special command in the words, no trick to play on his weaknesses, but Gurney's hand fell away. She crossed to Paul, stood in front of him, not touching him.

"Paul," she said, "there are other awakenings in this universe. I suddenly see how I've used you and twisted you and manipulated you to set you on a course of my choosing . . . a course I had to choose - if that's any excuse - because of my own training." She swallowed past a lump in her throat, looked up into her son's eyes. "Paul . . . I want you to do something for me: choose the course of happiness. Your desert woman, marry her if that's your wish. Defy everyone and everything to do this. But choose your own course. I . . . She broke off, stopped by the low sound of muttering behind her.

Gurney! She saw Paul's eyes directed beyond her, turned. Gurney stood in the same spot, but had sheathed his knife, pulled the robe away from his breast to expose the slick greyness of an issue stillsuit, the type the smugglers traded for among the sietch warrens. "Put your knife right here in my breast," Gurney muttered. "I say kill me and have done with it. I've besmirched my name. I've betrayed my own Duke! The finest - "

"Be still!" Paul said. Gurney stared at him. "Close that robe and stop acting like a fool," Paul said. "I've had enough foolishness for one day."

"Kill me, I say!" Gurney raged.
"You know Paul better than that," Paul said. "How many kinds of an idiot do you think he is?" harry snapped, cuffing Gurney upside the head in anger.

"Must I go through this with every man I need?" Paul whispered, but...no, not every man. Harry had remained at his side and never once had he tried to get Paul to kill him.

Gurney looked at Jessica, spoke in a forlorn, pleading note so unlike him: "Then you, my Lady, please . . . you kill me."

Jessica crossed to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "Gurney, why do you insist the Atreides must kill those they love?" Gently, she pulled the spread robe out of his fingers, closed and fastened the fabric over his chest.

Gurney spoke brokenly; "But . . . I . . . "

"You thought you were doing a thing for Leto," she said, "and for this I honour you."

"My Lady," Gurney said. He dropped his chin to his chest, squeezed his eyelids closed against the tears.

"Let us think of this as a misunderstanding among old friends," she said, and Paul heard the soothers, the adjusting tones in her voice. "It's over and we can be thankful we'll never again have that sort of misunderstanding between us." Gurney opened eyes bright with moisture, looked down at her. "The Gurney Halleck I knew was a man adept with both blade and baliset," Jessica said. "It was the man of the baliset I most admired. Doesn't that Gurney Halleck remember how I used to enjoy listening by the hour while he played for me? Do you still have a baliset, Gurney?"

"I've a new one," Gurney said. "Brought from Chusuk, a sweet instrument. Plays like a genuine Varota, though there's no signature on it. I think myself it was made by a student of Varota's who . . . ." He broke off. "What can I say to you, my Lady? Here we prattle about - "

"Not prattle, Gurney," Paul said. He crossed to stand beside his mother, eye to eye with Gurney. "Not prattle, but a thing that brings happiness between friends. I'd take it a kindness if you'd play for her now. Battle planning can wait a little while. We'll not be going into the fight till tomorrow at any rate."
"I... I'll get my baliset," Gurney said. "It's in the passage." He stepped around them and through the hangings.

Paul put a hand on his mother's arm, found that she was trembling. "It's over, Mother," he said.

Without turning her head, she looked up at him from the corners of her eyes. "Over?"

"Of course. Gurney's..."

"Gurney? Oh...yes." She lowered her gaze.

The hangings rustled as Gurney returned with his baliset. He began tuning it, avoiding their eyes. The hangings on the walls dulled the echoes, making the instrument sound small and intimate.

Paul led his mother to a cushion, seated her there with her back to the thick draperies of the wall. He was suddenly struck by how old she seemed to him with the beginnings of desert-dried lines in her face, the stretching at the corners of her blue-veiled eyes. She's tired, he thought. We must find some way to ease her burdens. Gurney strummed a chord. Paul glanced at him, said: "I've... things that need my attention. Wait here for me."

Gurney nodded. His mind seemed far away, as though he dwelled for this moment beneath the open skies of Caladan with cloud fleece on the horizon promising rain.

Paul forced himself to turn away, let himself out through the heavy hangings over the side passage. He heard Gurney take up a tune behind him, and paused a moment outside the room to listen to the muted music. He felt Harry fall into step behind him and was comforted by that but for this he needed solitude. "Stay with them or go to Stilgar, Harry."

“You won’t do anything stupid?"

Paul laughed slightly. “No, my friend.”
“Very well.” Harry slipped away and Paul once again envied him the ability to move so silently and blend in so well.

Irulan sat, studying an ancient text and ignoring her Father as he read a report, Fenring at his shoulder, waiting and watching. She glanced up as her Father crushed the report between his hands, face red, before he threw it to the ground in rage.

“That stupid swine seems almost begging for me to intervene.”

“The Baron is a pig, Father. But he's not stupid.” She answered, eyes back on her text. The Emperor finally looked over at her with steely eyes. “Father, Rabban has lost almost fifty thousand troops in the past two years.”

The Emperor and Fenring exchanged an uncomfortable look. “Arrakis is a fierce planet.” He offered and she put her book aside, were they really this blind? “Attrition can't explain such losses. He's losing five to one. Read between the lines.”

“You're saying the Baron is allowing this rebellion to continue...”

“I'm saying he can count as well as we.” She stood and picked up the report. The Emperor looked to Fenring. “For the sake of argument...what if there are only twenty thousand people in a Fremen sietch? And what if there are only two hundred fifty such communities on the whole of Arrakis?”

“Our spies are suggesting there may be twice that many!”

“Yes...hmmmaahhh...ten million...” His eyes narrowed as he stared at Irulan. She wore a form fitting, elegant gown of deep purple and gold, her hair elegantly styled, she looked like an ornament for a powerful man and yet she had begun to show she was far more than that.

“Toughened by conditions worse than your own prison planet, Father.” She retook her seat.

“But brutalized by that mindless thug, Rabban. They'd never ally with him.” Her Father denied her suggestion.

“But what if this brutality were simply part of something more cunning...a clever prelude to ripen them up for someone else, someone to "rescue" them from Rabban...someone like the other nephew, the cute one, Feyd?” She arched an eyebrow and the Emperor looked to Fenring.
"Could this be?"

"If such a plan succeeded, the Baron would have a force to rival even your dreaded Sardaukar..."

The Emperor looked back again to his daughter, but she had coyly gone back to her studies.
"Summon Harkonnen to Kaitain. We shall see what devices this perverse mind is breeding." He commanded and then left the room.

"Your Highness has a perceptive mind." Fenring commented and she put her book down, standing again to face him.

"Shall I take that as a compliment or a threat...Fenring?"

"I meant it only as a sign of my respect. I share your fear of the Barons schemes."

"My father can handle the Baron, Fenring. It's this Muad'Dib I'm curious about." She admitted quietly and Fenring nodded.

"Yes....hnmmmaaahhh...a nuisance, indeed. We must arrange to rid ourselves of it." Fenring's eyes narrowed as if he was seeing something...in the future...playing out in front of him. But...

"My Bene Gesserit teachers have a saying..."

"The Bene Gesserit have a saying for everything..."

"You may come to appreciate this one, Fenring. "Do not count a human dead until you've seen his body. And even then, you can make a mistake." She left the room, walking slowly and Fenring watched her go with a conflicted mix of suspicion and admiration in his eyes. Just what was she planning?

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Chani came up out of the Habbanya basin in the predawn darkness, hearing the 'thopter that had brought her from the south go whir-whirring off to a hiding place in the vastness. Around her, the escort kept its distance, fanning out into the rocks of the ridge to probe for dangers - and giving the mate of Muad'Dib, the mother of his firstborn, the thing she had requested: a moment to walk alone.
Why did he summon me? she asked herself. He told me before that I must remain in the south with little Leto, Alia and Lily.

She gathered her robe and leaped lightly up across a barrier rock and onto the climbing path that only the desert-trained could recognize in the darkness. Pebbles slithered underfoot and she danced across them without considering the nimbleness required. The climb was exhilarating, easing the fears that had fermented in her because of her escort’s silent withdrawal and the fact that a precious ‘thopter had been sent for her. She felt the inner leaping at the nearness of reunion with Paul-Muad'Dib, her Usul. His name might be a battle cry over all the land: "Muad'Dib! Muad'Dib! Muad'Dib! " But she knew a different man by a different name - the father of her son, the tender lover.

A great figure loomed out of the rocks above her, beckoning for speed. She quickened her pace. Dawn birds already were calling and lifting into the sky. A dim spread of light grew across the eastern horizon. The figure above was not one of her own escort. Otheym? she wondered, marking a familiarity of movement and manner. She came up to him, recognized in the growing light the broad, flat features of the Fedaykin lieutenant, his hood open and mouth filter loosely fastened the way one did sometimes when venturing out on the desert for only a moment.

"Hurry," he hissed, and led her down the secret crevasse into the hidden cave. "It will be light soon," he whispered as he held a doorseal open for her. "The Harkonnen’s have been making desperation patrols over some of this region. We dare not chance discovery now." They emerged into the narrow side-passage entrance to the Cave of Birds. Glowglobes came alight. Otheym pressed past her, said: "Follow me. Quickly, now."

They sped down the passage, through another valve door, another passage and through hangings into what had been the Sayyadina's alcove in the days when this was an overday rest cave. Rugs and cushions now covered the floor. Woven hangings with the red figure of a hawk hid the rock walls. A low field desk at one side was strewn with papers from which lifted the aroma of their spice origin. The Reverend Mother sat alone directly opposite the entrance. She looked up with the inward stare that made the uninitiated tremble.

Otheym pressed palms together, said: "I have brought Chani." He bowed, retreated through the hangings.

And Jessica thought: How do I tell Chani? "How is my grandson?" Jessica asked.

So it's to be the ritual greeting, Chani thought, and her fears returned. Where is Muad'Dib? Why isn't he here to greet me? "He is healthy and happy, my mother," Chani said. "I left him with Alia and Lily in the care of Harah."
My mother, Jessica thought. Yes, she has the right to call me that in the formal greeting. She has given me a grandson. "I hear a gift of cloth has been sent from Coanua sietch," Jessica said.

"It is lovely cloth," Chani said.

"Does Alia send a message?"

"No message but a wish for her grandmother and father to return soon." Why does she drag this out so? Chani wondered. Something was so urgent that they sent a 'thopter for me. Now, we drag through the formalities!

"We must have some of the new cloth cut into garments for little Leto," Jessica said.

"Whatever you wish, my mother," Chani said. She lowered her gaze. "Is there news of battles?" She held her face expressionless that Jessica might not see the betrayal - that this was a question about Paul Muad'Dib.

"New victories," Jessica said. "Rabban has sent cautious overtures about a truce. His messengers have been returned without their water. Rabban has even lightened the burdens of the people in some of the sink villages. But he is too late. The people know he does it out of fear of us."

"Thus, it goes as Muad'Dib said," Chani said. She stared at Jessica, trying to keep her fears to herself. I have spoken his name, but she has not responded. One cannot see emotion in that glazed stone she calls a face . . . but she is too frozen. Why is she so still? What has happened to my Usul?

"I wish we were in the south," Jessica said. "The oases were so beautiful when we left. Do you not long for the day when the whole land may blossom thus?"

"The land is beautiful, true," Chani said. "But there is much grief in it."

"Grief is the price of victory," Jessica said.

Is she preparing me for grief? Chani asked herself. She said: "There are so many women without men. There was jealousy when it was learned that I'd been summoned north."
"I summoned you," Jessica said.

Chani felt her heart hammering. She wanted to clap her hands to her ears, fearful of what they might hear. Still, she kept her voice even: "The message was signed Muad'Dib."

"I signed it thus in the presence of Harry," Jessica said. "It was a subterfuge of necessity." And Jessica thought: This is a brave woman, my Paul's. She holds to the niceties even when fear is almost overwhelming her. Yes. She may be the one we need now.

Only the slightest tone of resignation crept into Chani's voice as she said: "Now you may say the thing that must be said."

"You were needed here to help me revive Paul," Jessica said. And she thought: There! I said it in the precisely correct way. Revive. Thus she knows Paul is alive and knows there is peril, all in the same word.

Chani took only a moment to calm herself, then: "What is it I may do?" She wanted to leap at Jessica, shake her and scream: "Take me to him! " But she waited silently for the answer.

"We suspect," Harry said as he entered, "that the Harkonnen’s have managed to send an agent among us to poison Paul. It's the only explanation that seems to fit."

“A most unusual poison. I’ve examined his blood in the subtlest ways without detecting it." Jessica admitted, accepting the food he had brought, knowing she had to keep up her strength.


"He is unconscious," Jessica said. "The processes of his life are so low that they can be detected only with the most refined techniques. I shudder to think what could have happened had Harry not been the one to discover him. He appears dead to the untrained eye."

"You have reasons other than courtesy for summoning me," Chani said. "I know you, Reverend Mother. What is it you think I may do that you cannot do?"
She is brave, lovely and, ah-h-h, so perceptive, Jessica thought. She'd have made a fine Bene Gesserit. "Chani," Jessica said, "you may find this difficult to believe, but I do not know precisely why I sent for you. It was an instinct . . . a basic intuition. The thought came unbidden: 'Send for Chani.' " For the first time, Chani saw the sadness in Jessica's expression, the unveiled pain modifying the inward stare. "I've done all I know to do, Harry has done his best as well," Jessica said. "That all . . . it is so far beyond what is usually supposed as all that you would find difficulty imagining it. Yet . . . I failed."

"The old companion, Halleck," Chani asked, "is it possible he's a traitor?"

"Not Gurney," Harry answered immediately, not even needing to look at Jessica. "One of his men…. perhaps."

The words carried an entire conversation, and Chani saw the searching, the tests . . . the memories of old failures that went into this flat denial. Chani rocked back onto her feet, stood up, smoothed her desert-stained robe. "Take me to him," she said. Jessica arose, turned through hangings on the left wall. Chani followed, found herself in what had been a storeroom, its rock walls concealed now beneath heavy draperies. Paul lay on a field pad against the far wall. A single glowglobe above him illuminated his face. A black robe covered him to the chest, leaving his arms outside it stretched along his sides. He appeared to be unclothed under the robe. The skin exposed looked waxen, rigid. There was no visible movement to him. Harry took up his place against the wall, guarding his Duke even now.

Chani suppressed the desire to dash forward, throw herself across him. She found her thoughts, instead, going to her son - Leto. And she realized in this instant that Jessica once had faced such a moment - her man threatened by death, forced in her own mind to consider what might be done to save a young son. The realization formed a sudden bond with the older woman so that Chani reached out and clasped Jessica's hand. The answering grip was painful in its intensity.

"He lives," Jessica said. "I assure you he lives. But the thread of his life is so thin it could easily escape detection. There are some among the leaders already muttering that the mother speaks and not the Reverend Mother, that my son is truly dead and I do not want to give up his water to the tribe."

"How long has he been this way?" Chani asked. She disengaged her hand from Jessica's, moved farther into the room.

"Three weeks," Jessica said. "I spent almost a week trying to revive him. There were meetings, arguments . . . investigations. Then I sent for you. The Fedaykin obey my orders, else I might not have been able to delay the . . . Harry has backed me up the whole time, I think that has helped stay
them." She wet her lips with her tongue, watching Chani cross to Paul.

Chani stood over him now, looking down on the soft beard of youth that framed his face, tracing with her eyes the high brow line, the strong nose, the shuttered eyes - the features so peaceful in this rigid repose. "How does he take nourishment?" Chani asked.

"The demands of his flesh are so slight he does not yet need food," Jessica said.

"How many know of what has happened?" Chani asked.

"Only his closest advisers, a few of the leaders, the Fedaykin and, of course, whoever administered the poison."

"There is no clue to the poisoner?"

"And it's not for want of investigating," Jessica said.

"What do the Fedaykin say?" Chani asked.

"They believe Paul is in a sacred trance, gathering his holy powers before the final battles. This is a thought I've cultivated." Harry spoke softly, he had friends among the Fedaykin since he was considered one of them for the most part. He guarded Paul after all.

Chani lowered herself to her knees beside the pad, bent close to Paul's face. She sensed an immediate difference in the air about his face . . . but it was only the spice, the ubiquitous spice whose odour permeated everything in Fremen life. Still . . . "You were not born to the spice as we were," Chani said. "Have you investigated the possibility that his body has rebelled against too much spice in his diet?"

"Allergy reactions are all negative," Jessica said.

She closed her eyes, as much to blot out this scene as because of sudden realization of fatigue. How long have I been without sleep? she asked herself. Too long. "When you change the Water of Life," Chani said, "you do it within yourself by the inward awareness. Have you used this awareness to test
his blood?"

"Normal Fremen blood," Jessica said. "Completely adapted to the diet and the life here."

Chani sat back on her heels, submerging her fears in thought as she studied Paul's face. This was a trick she had learned from watching the Reverend Mothers. Time could be made to serve the mind. One concentrated the entire attention. Presently, Chani said: "Is there a maker here?"

"There are several," Jessica said with a touch of weariness. "We are never without them these days. Each victory requires its blessing. Each ceremony before a raid - "

"But Paul Muad'Dib has held himself aloof from these ceremonies," Chani said.

Jessica nodded to herself, remembering her son's ambivalent feelings toward the spice drug and the prescient awareness it precipitated. "How did you know this?" Jessica asked.

"It is spoken."

"Too much is spoken," Jessica said bitterly.

"Get me the raw Water of the maker," Chani said.

Jessica stiffened at the tone of command in Chani's voice, then observed the intense concentration in the younger woman and said: "At once." She went out through the hangings to send a waterman. Chani sat staring at Paul. If he has tried to do this, she thought. And it's the sort of thing he might try . . .

“He was distant…upset…I should not have left his side.” Harry admitted but she didn’t get the chance to answer before Jessica returned.

Jessica knelt beside Chani, holding out a plain camp ewer. The charged odour of the poison was sharp in Chani's nostrils. She dipped a finger in the fluid, held the finger close to Paul's nose. The skin along the bridge of his nose wrinkled slightly. Slowly, the nostrils flared. Jessica gasped and Harry leant closer. Chani touched the dampened finger to Paul's upper lip.
He drew in a long, sobbing breath. "What is this?" Jessica demanded.

"Be still," Chani said. "You must convert a small amount of the sacred water. Quickly!"

Without questioning, because she recognized the tone of awareness in Chani's voice, Jessica lifted the ewer to her mouth, drew in a small sip.

Paul's eyes flew open. He stared upward at Chani. "It is not necessary for her to change the Water," he said. His voice was weak, but steady.

Jessica, a sip of the fluid on her tongue, found her body rallying, converting the poison almost automatically. In the light elevation the ceremony always imparted, she sensed the life-glow from Paul - a radiation there registering on her senses. In that instant, she knew. "You drank the sacred water!" she blurted.

"One drop of it," Paul said. "So, small . . . one drop."

"How could you do such a foolish thing?" she demanded.

"He is your son," Chani said. Jessica glared at her.

A rare smile, warm and full of understanding, touched Paul's lips. "Hear my beloved," he said. "Listen to her, Mother. She knows."

"A thing that others can do, he must do," Chani said.

"When I had the drop in my mouth, when I felt it and smelled it, when I knew what it was doing to me, then I knew I could do the thing that you have done," he said. "Your Bene Gesserit proctors speak of the Kwisatz Haderach, but they cannot begin to guess the many places I have been. In the few minutes, I . . . " He broke off, looking at Chani with a puzzled frown. "Chani? How did you get here? You're supposed to be . . . Why are you here?" He tried to push himself onto his elbows. Chani pressed him back gently.
"Please, my Usul," she said.

"I feel so weak," he said. His gaze darted around the room, seeing Harry and the relief on his face. "How long have I been here?"

"You've been three weeks in a coma so deep that the spark of life seemed to have fled," Harry answered, his Duke lived. He moved close enough to gently clasp Paul's hand. "We feared you dead."

"But it was . . . I took it just a moment ago and . . . "

"A moment for you, three weeks of fear for us," Jessica said.

"It was only one drop, but I converted it," Paul said. "I changed the Water of Life." And before Chani or Jessica could stop him, he dipped his hand into the ewer they had placed on the floor beside him, and he brought the dripping hand to his mouth, swallowed the palm-cupped liquid.

"Paul!" Jessica screamed.

He grabbed her hand, faced her with a death's head grin, and he sent his awareness surging over her. The rapport was not as tender, not as sharing, not as encompassing as it had been with Alia and with the Old Reverend Mother in the cavern . . . but it was a rapport: a sense-sharing of the entire being. It shook her, weakened her, and she cowered in her mind, fearful of him. Aloud, he said: "You speak of a place where you cannot enter? This place which the Reverend Mother cannot face, show it to me." She shook her head, terrified by the very thought. "Show it to me!" he commanded.

"No!" But she could not escape him. Bludgeoned by the terrible force of him, she closed her eyes and focused inward - the-direction-that-is-dark.

Paul's consciousness flowed through and around her and into the darkness. She glimpsed the place dimly before her mind blanked itself away from the terror. Without knowing why, her whole being trembled at what she had seen - a region where a wind blew and sparks glared, where rings of light expanded and contracted, where rows of tumescent white shapes flowed over and under and around the lights, driven by darkness and a wind out of nowhere.

Presently, she opened her eyes, saw Paul staring up at her. He still held her hand, but the terrible
rapport was gone. She quieted her trembling. Paul released her hand. It was as though some crutch had been removed. She staggered up and back, would have fallen had not Chani jumped to support her.

"Reverend Mother!" Chani said. "What is wrong?"


"Here," Harry said. "Sit here." He helped Jessica to a cushion against the wall. The strong young arms felt so good to Jessica. She clung to Harry who let her.

"He has, in truth, seen the Water of Life?" Chani asked.

"He has seen," Jessica whispered. Her mind still rolled and surged from the contact. It was like stepping to solid land after weeks on a heaving sea. She sensed the old Reverend Mother within her . . . and all the others awakened and questioning; "What was that? What happened? Where was that place?"

Through it all threaded the realization that her son was the Kwisatz Haderach, the one who could be many places at once. He was the fact out of the Bene Gesserit dream. And the fact gave her no peace.

"What happened?" Chani demanded.

Jessica shook her head.

"There is in each of us an ancient force that takes and an ancient force that gives. A man finds little difficulty facing that place within himself where the taking force dwells, but it's almost impossible for him to see into the giving force without changing into something other than man. For a woman, the situation is reversed." Paul answered. Jessica looked up, found Chani was staring at her while listening to Paul. "Do you understand me, Mother?" Paul asked. She could only nod. "These things are so ancient within us," Paul said, "that they're ground into each separate cell of our bodies. We're shaped by such forces. You can say to yourself, 'Yes, I see how such a thing may be.' But when you look inward and confront the raw force of your own life unshielded, you see your peril. You see that this could overwhelm you. The greatest peril to the Giver is the force that takes. The greatest peril to the Taker is the force that gives. It's as easy to be overwhelmed by giving as by taking."
"And you, my son," Jessica asked, "are you one who gives or one who takes?"

"I'm at the fulcrum," he said. "I cannot give without taking and I cannot take without . . . " He broke off, looking to the wall at his right. Chani felt a draft against her cheek, turned to see the hangings close. "It was Otheym," Paul said. "He was listening."

Accepting the words, Chani was touched by some of the prescience that haunted Paul, and she knew a thing-yet-to-be as though it already had occurred. Otheym would speak of what he had seen and heard. Others would spread the story until it was a fire over the land. Paul-Muad'Dib is not as other men, they would say. There can be no more doubt. He is a man, yet he sees through to the Water of Life in the way of a Reverend Mother. He is indeed the Lisan al-Gaib.

"You have seen the future, Paul," Jessica said. "Will you say what you've seen?"

"Not the future," he said. "I've seen the Now." He forced himself to a sitting position, waved Chani aside as she moved to help him. "The Space above Arrakis is filled with the ships of the Guild." Jessica trembled at the certainty in his voice. "The Padishah Emperor himself is there," Paul said. He looked at the rock ceiling of his cell. "With his favorite Truthsayer and five legions of Sardaukar. The old Baron Vladimir Harkonnen is there with Thufir Hawat beside him and seven ships jammed with every conscript he could muster. Every Great House has its raiders above us . . . waiting."

Chani shook her head, unable to look away from Paul. His strangeness, the flat tone of voice, the way he looked through her, filled her with awe.

Jessica tried to swallow in a dry throat, said: "For what are they waiting?"

Paul looked at her. "For the Guild's permission to land. The Guild will strand on Arrakis any force that lands without permission."

"The Guild's protecting us?" Jessica asked.

"Protecting us! The Guild itself caused this by spreading tales about what we do here and by reducing troop transport fares to a point where even the poorest Houses are up there now waiting to loot us."

Jessica noted the lack of bitterness in his tone, wondered at it. She couldn't doubt his words - they
had that same intensity she'd seen in him the night he'd revealed the path of the future that'd taken them among the Fremen.

Paul took a deep breath, said: "Mother, you must change a quantity of the Water for us. We need the catalyst. Chani, have a scout force sent out . . . to find a pre-spice mass. If we plant a quantity of the Water of Life above a pre-spice mass, do you know what will happen?"

Jessica weighed his words, suddenly saw through to his meaning. "Paul!" she gasped.

"The Water of Death," he said. "It'd be a chain reaction." He pointed to the floor. "Spreading death among the little makers, killing a vector of the life cycle that includes the spice and the makers. Arrakis will become a true desolation - without spice or maker." Chani put a hand to her mouth, shocked to numb silence by the blasphemy pouring from Paul's lips. "He who can destroy a thing has the real control of it," Paul said. "We can destroy the spice."

"What stays the Guild's hand?" Jessica whispered.

"They're searching for me," Paul said. "Think of that! The finest Guild navigators, men who can quest ahead through time to find the safest course for the fastest Heighliners, all of them seeking me . . .and unable to find me. How they tremble! They know I have their secret here!" Paul held out his cupped hand. "Without the spice, they're blind!"

Chani found her voice. "You said you see the now!"

Paul lay back, searching the spread-out present, its limits extended into the future and into the past, holding onto the awareness with difficulty as the spice illumination began to fade. "Go do as I commanded," he said. "The future's becoming as muddled for the Guild as it is for me. The lines of vision are narrowing. Everything focuses here where the spice is . . . where they've dared not interfere before . . . because to interfere was to lose what they must have. But now they're desperate. All paths lead into darkness."

“Be careful My Lord, do not get lost in the possibilities.” Harry whispered as Jessica and Chani left and Paul turned to him.

“Is that why I cannot see you? Do you see?”
“No Paul, I do not have you gifts but I have gifts enough of my own. Ones I use to ensure your survival. So, I swore to your Grandfather. Rest my friend, it will be time to fight soon enough.”

Harry pulled a cover over him and Paul found himself drifting to sleep, what had Harry done?

He forced himself to grab Harry’s writs. “The Sietch…. get the children out….” His grip slackened as sleep pulled him under.

Paul stepped out on the ledge, still a little shaky but flanked by Jessica and Chani, Harry already gone to save who he could from what was coming. He wanted Harry at his side for what was coming but he affected his vision too much to risk it. “The Padishah Emperor is here. In the space above us. With his favourite Truthsayer and legions of his Sardaukar.” The men murmured with astonishment. “Every Great House has its raiders here. Baron Harkonnen is with them.”

“But, Muad'Dib, how can you know this?” Stilgar called out.

“I've seen them.”

“M'Lord, we got word only this morning...from our smuggler allies. They've been ordered off the planet or suffer the consequences...” Gurney stared at his Duke in confusion.

“You were unconscious...” Stilgar was just as confused.

“Not unconscious.” Paul denied.

“Muad'Dib has seen through the Water of Life.” Chani announced and a collective gasp rushed among them.

“Reverend Mother, is this true?” Stilgar demanded and Jessica nodded.

“He has seen.”

More murmurs. More whispers. And then... “Mahdi!!!!”

Paul pulled something from his pocket, lifting it into the air so all can see. “You say I am the Mahdi.
I say, I am your DUKE!” And for the first time Paul slipped his father's ring onto his finger. Then he raised his hand in the air, clenched in a fist. The ring gleamed in the low light. “And it's time NOW to wipe Arrakis clean of the awful Harkonnen stench...time to drive their name into the depths of hell so that we may reclaim this planet and create paradise. TOGETHER!” the room was deadly quiet, until Chani stepped up beside him.

“As Liet taught us.” She stated but still, no one moved. No one said anything.

And then Stilgar stepped out from the crowd. “As Liet taught us...” He agreed.

The Fedaykin shuffled aimlessly behind Otheym, unsure how to react. But Otheym was now more impassioned than ever. He came forward, too, standing with Stilgar. “Long live the Duke. Long live Duke Paul Muad'Dib!”

Another Fedaykin stepped forward. “Ya hya chouhada! Muad'Dib! Long live the fighters of Muad'Dib.” Another Fedaykin picked up the chant. And then another. And another. Stabbing the air with their crysknives. “Ya hya chouhada! Muad'Dib! Long live the fighters of Muad'Dib.” Soon, the room was reverberating with their frenzied cries. “Muad'Dib...Muad'Dib...MUAD'DIB...”

Harry watched as the women finished packing what was needed, Lily clinging to his hand and watching with wide eyes. Harah approached and took the toddler from him, knowing in this circumstance his duty was not to their family but to his Duke. He made sure Leto was safe with his wet nurse Sarah before looking around. “Where is Alia?” he demanded, glancing around. “Get them moving Kaleff.” He called to the teenager who nodded. Another year and his claimed son could join the fighters, he was glad this would end soon and spare him. Harry made sure they were moving out of the Sietch quickly and silently before going looking for Alia, for a toddler she was great at wandering off. He slipped outside and saw her sitting in the sand, playing. “Alia, come.” The toddler pouted but stood and moved over to him, Harry scooping her up once she was close enough.

He looked up and saw his worst fear, Imperial ‘thopters bearing down on the mountains from the North. Harry turned and sprinted for the entrance even as missiles were launched. Alia screamed in fear, clinging to him as he threw them through the opening, rolling to absorb the impact and get clear as the missiles hit. He scrambled up and ran through the tunnels as everyone who had volunteered to remain ran to face the coming Sardaukar. They were outnumbered and outgunned but they knew they had to stall them long enough for the others to get away. “Take her!” Harry yelled, thrusting Alia into the arms of one of the stragglers. “Get moving!”
Harry ran back the way he had come, pulling knife and maula pistol, anger rising at every body he came across. Every Sardaukar he came upon died at his hands.

Courtiers and clerks, ladies and their attendants, nobles and their pages, hangers-on and parasites. The sycophants of Court. Imperial groupies...along for the ride. Music played and the atmosphere was almost celebratory. As if the rebellion below was but an amusing pass-time...a brief occasion to "rough it" in the hinterlands of Empire.

It seemed the only person taking the moment seriously was Princess Irulan who stood apart from the others, staring out a large window at the planet Arrakis below. Feyd slid up close to her intimately close and she concealed her disdain.

“I've decided were alike. You and me...”

“Have you?” She glanced at him.

“When this dusty little nuisance is over, I'll convince you.” He smirked.

“I'd be confused if you didn't try.” She began to walk and he followed.

“I know. That's why we're alike. We don't like to be confused. We like to be certain.”

She turned to face him, suppressing a smirk. “Sometime, remind me to tell you about the ancient legend of the Phoenix.” She smiled vaguely, then moved off, leaving Feyd intrigued...if not confused.

“That's it...beautiful boy...” Feyd turned to see his uncle coming up behind him. “…you may find a way for us yet.”

“She'd make a fine trophy on Harkonnen linen, wouldn't she...?”

Paul stared into nothing, seeing the attack…. Leto…. where was his son……there! He lived, Leto
“Muad'Dib?” Chani jerked up on the pallet, as if awakened from a horrible nightmare. She was shivering uncontrollably. Staring at Paul in the doorway across the room. “Muad'Dib...what is it?”

“The Southern Sietch is gone.” He whispered.

“Our son?” She choked out, not her Leto….

“Lives.” He moved to embrace her. “Leto and Alia are safe.” He promised, he saw that much. But what of Harry? Had he sent him to his death?

……………………

The Imperial Cruiser was parked in the airfield just outside the city, gleaming in the early light like a platinum bauble. And attached to it was a quilted metal building, a temporary tent-like structure of interlocking leaves, several stories tall, fanning out in a thousand-meter circle around the Cruiser. It was the Royal Palace; the Emperor had moved it there whole.

“I count nine levels.” Stilgar whispered in awe.

“The fools brought the whole palace with him.” Gurney sneered.

“My dear Emperor... I am about to shatter your sanity...and then I'm going to destroy you...” Paul whispered from where he lay in the rocks, watching through field glasses.

“Not a 'thopter in the sky. Everything's being pulled in and tied down.” Gurney grinned, that was one thing going their way.

“They know a storm is coming. Their friends in space have told them for sure.”

“They'll be counting on the mountains to blunt its force.” Paul turned to Stilgar. “Is the city prepared?”
“As soon as we give the signal, the people will erupt like a spice blast.” Stilgar grinned and Paul nodded.

“Have the men in the flats prepare the thumpers.” He ordered and Stilgar moved back into the rocks as Paul turned to the city. “Time to let them know I'm here.” They slipped away. “Any news Gurney?”

“They made it out, we know that much. They sent a messenger. Harry went back for Alia, he got her out but turned back, they attacked sooner than expected. M’Lord…he may be dead.” Gurney hoped he was wrong, not Harry.

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The Emperor sat on his Throne, shredding Paul's terms for surrender into ever more tiny pieces. “THE ARROGANCE. THE UTTER LUNACY....” His face was beet red in fury. He threw the scraps of paper into the face of the poor Sardaukar who delivered the message...now clean and shaven...desperately trying to maintain his poise. The rest of the Court shuffled nervously at the edges of the room, stunned silent by this outburst. Irulan watched her father with a hyper-alert stare as Baron Harkonnen finally stepped forward, Feyd close behind.

“Majesty, if I may suggest...the time has come to loose the forces of Empire against these scum. Scour the planet. Annihilate every man, woman and child of them. Let their screams echo to the very corners of the universe. A warning to all others that total genocide awaits such insolent rebellion...”

“SHUT YOUR MOUTH!” he commanded and the Baron jerked, his mouth hung slack. It's you I have to thank for this mess. You and your hapless family, Baron.”

The Baron looked around the room for any ally. “Majesty, I really don't think this is the time to revisit old strategies...”

“I SAID QUIET!” he turned back to the Sardaukar. “So... he wants an answer does he?” He signalled to the guards at huge doors. Sardaukar Stormtroopers entered escorting a bound figure.

Harry ignored the gasps as he was led before the Throne of the Emperor. He’d been stripped of his stillsuit and weapons but they had been kind enough to supply him with clothes. “So, here he is. The fat Baron, himself. He's not much, is he?” he sneered.

“What is this...who are you?”
“My dear Baron. Surely you remember the reputation of one of Duke Let’s most loyal men and therefore his face.” The Emperor commented and gasps went up as Harry lifted his head, revealing emerald eyes.

“Potter…” Feyd whispered, recognising one of the most feared fighters there was. His presence could explain the Fremen’s sudden change, was he Muad'Dib?

....................

The wind was blowing furiously now. Paul had burrowed into a tight crevice in the rocks, sheltered from natures violence pounding the mountains behind him. He surveyed the city and the Emperors palace in the distance when Gurney and Stilgar slipped in beside him.

“The storm attacks, Muad'dib.”

"Watch the flagpole atop the Emperor's ship. If my flag is raised there - " Paul pointed out.

"It will not be," Gurney said.

Paul saw the puzzled frown on Stilgar's face, "If the Emperor recognized my claim, he'll signal by restoring the Atreides flag to Arrakis. We'll use the second plan then, move only against the Harkonnen’s. The Sardaukar will stand aside and let us settle the issue between ourselves."

"I've no experience with these offworld things," Stilgar said. "I've heard of them, but it seems unlikely the - "

"You don't need experience to know what they'll do," Gurney said.

"They're sending a new flag up on the tall ship," the watcher said. "The flag is yellow . . . with a black and red circle in the centre."

"There's a subtle piece of business," Paul said. "The CHOAM Company flag."

"It's the same as the flag at the other ships," the Fedaykin guard said.
"I don't understand," Stilgar said.

"A subtle piece of business indeed," Gurney said. "Had he sent up the Atreides banner, he'd have had to live by what that meant. Too many observers about. He could've signalled with the Harkonnen flag on his staff - a flat declaration that'd have been. But, no - he sends up the CHOAM rag. He's telling the people up there . . . " Gurney pointed toward space. " . . . where the profit is. He's saying he doesn't care if it's an Atreides here or not."

"Their shields just went up. Looks like we have our answer." Paul sighed, he had hoped violence could be avoided.

"The thumpers have been activated." Stilgar told him and Paul turned to Gurney.

"It's time, Gurney."

"You see, Baron, I sent an attack force to investigate activity in the southern regions...to bring back prisoners...."

"No. No one survives there. Too many storms. Too many wild worms...." He denied, still staring at the Atreides nightmare before him.

"It appears these people have learned how to avoid them. Only a handful of my troops got away with their lives! Sardaukar, Baron! Almost overwhelmed by women and old men."

"Majesty...I had no idea."

"Quiet." The Emperor commanded.

"Liar." Harry taunted. He figured he was going to die so why not have some fun?

"I said be quiet! It's time to bring this sorry episode to a close. Time for your leaderr to surrender...as the price for your life."
“No!” Harry shouted and a collective gasp swept through the room. “I don’t take orders from you, old man!” His eyes shone with fury as he snarled at the Emperor. He still had his magic, even if much was unusable on this planet. He could still kill many of those here and ease Paul’s way.

Irulan stepped forward, watching Harry closely and then she smiled. “Don’t you see it Father, only one man could bring up such rage in Harry Potter, to protect his Lord…. his Duke. Paul Atreides is the Muad’Dib.” She smiled and Harry inclined his head to her, he respected her.

“IMPOSSIBLE!” The Baron denied. The Emperor looked at Harry who grinned menacingly.

in the Throne Room they felt it, the trembling and shaking. And then they heard it, the roar of shock waves, surging through the ground like an earthquake. Harry laughed. “MY DULE COMES!” He yelled as a wall of the cruiser suddenly slid back to reveal a panoramic view of the city and the Shield Wall mountains beyond. And there in the middle of the scarred butte, a huge flume of smoke and fire rages into the sky.

“The Shield Wall is breached...” A General reported as he ran to the Emperors side and now they could see it. The STORM. Surging through the blasted mountain like a tidal wave. “The perimeter shields won't hold against that!”

The storm pounded with horrendous force into the electronic dome arcing over the city. Monstrous Jacob's Ladders of pulsating energy leapt hundreds of feet into the sky.

Emergency sirens were shrieking, people were panicked. The Emperor was frozen at the sight of the chaos around him. Until the sound of explosions drew his attention back to the Shield wall where he could see ignition bursts of rockets being launched.

Missiles began to rain down everywhere. Buildings and aircraft disintegrated. The area was an instant inferno. Those Harkonnen and Sardaukar not blown to bits scattered aimlessly, some on fire...screaming hideously.

The Emperor couldn’t believe what he was seeing. Over the mountains a swarm of ‘thopters bore down on the city, all marked with the insignia of House Atreides.
Sardaukar and Harkonnen soldiers scrambled to get fighters in the air. But blasts from the Fremen 'thopters vaporized them.

Harry remained standing still in the sea of chaos around him. What was going to happen would happen, he trusted Paul’s vision even if his friend couldn’t see him.

“Majesty, we must fall back to space and reform...”

“GIVE HIS BODY TO THE STORM!” the emperor pointed to Harry who grinned, unconcerned.

“LET THE STORM HAVE WHAT IT CAN TAKE!” he called back over the wind. Then he felt fat hands on his shoulders.

“Majesty....I have him...!!!” The Baron called and Harry spun with lightning speed, hand lashing out for the man’s wrist, shoving magic into the vein and the man gasped. He screamed and fell back into Feyd. The Barons eyes bugged out of his head as he stared at Harry. His neck began to swell instantly, he started to gag and spasm as the magic ripped through his blood stream and up towards his brain. Feyd dropped him in horror and disgust. And that's when a massive explosion blew a gaping hole in the side of the building.

“THEY’VE SHOT THE NOSE OFF OUR SHIP. WE CAN’T LIFT OFF!”

All the emperor could do is raise his hand and point. Because...There...in the distance streaming through the blasted-out canyon of the mountains... A phalanx of...WORMS! Sweeping onto the plains below in disciplined wedge formation, there must have been a hundred of them.

The worms surged forward, being driven toward the city by screaming Fremen fanatics. Thousands of them. Their shrieks louder than the storm itself. And in the lead, Paul with Gurney and Stilgar behind him.

“Majesty, we must retreat!” He grabbed the Emperor and dragged him away into the commotion, tripping over the still convulsing corpse of Baron Harkonnen. The last thing the Emperor saw was the black clad figure of Harry Potter vanishing into the smoke as the Emperors soldiers began dying.

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It was to the Arrakeen governor's mansion, the old Residency the Atreides had first occupied on Dune, that they escorted Paul-Muad'Dib on the evening of his victory. The building stood as Rabban
had restored it, virtually untouched by the fighting although there had been looting by townspeople. Some of the furnishings in the main hall had been overturned or smashed.

Paul strode through the main entrance with Gurney Halleck and Stilgar a pace behind. Their escort fanned out into the Great Hall, straightening the place and clearing an area for Muad'Dib. One squad began investigating that no sly trap had been planted here.

"I remember the day we first came here with your father," Gurney said. He glanced around at the beams and the high, slitted windows. "I didn't like this place then and I like it less now. One of our caves would be safer."

"Spoken like a true Fremen," Stilgar said, and he marked the cold smile that his words brought to Muad'Dib’s lips. "Will you reconsider, Muad'Dib?"

"This place is a symbol," Paul said. "Rabban lived here. By occupying this place, I seal my victory for all to understand. Send men through the building. Touch nothing. Just be certain no Harkonnen people or toys remain."

"As you command," Stilgar said, and reluctance was heavy in his tone as he turned to obey.

Communications men hurried into the room with their equipment, began setting up near the massive fireplace. The Fremen guard that augmented the surviving Fedaykin took up stations around the room. There was muttering among them, much darting of suspicious glances. This had been too long a place of the enemy for them to accept their presence in it casually.

"Gurney, have an escort bring my mother and Chani," Paul said. "Are the makers being taken out of the basin yet?"

"Yes, m'Lord. The storms almost spent."

"What's the extent of the storm damage?" Paul asked.

"In the direct path - on the landing field and across the spice storage yards of the plain - extensive damage," Gurney said. "As much from battle as from the storm."
"Nothing money won't repair, I presume," Paul said.

"Except for the lives, m'Lord," Gurney said, and there was a tone of reproach in his voice as though to say: "When did an Atreides worry first about things when people were at stake?"

But Paul could only focus his attention on the inner eye and the gaps visible to him in the time-wall that still lay across his path. Through each gap the jihad raged away down the corridors of the future. He sighed, crossed the hall, seeing a chair against the wall. The chair had once stood in the dining hall and might even have held his own father. At the moment, though, it was only an object to rest his weariness and conceal it from the men. He sat down, pulling his robes around his legs, loosening his stillsuit at the neck.

"The Emperor is still holed up in the remains of his ship," Gurney said.

"For now, contain him there," Paul said. "Have they found the Harkonnen's yet?"

"They're still examining the dead."

"What reply from the ships up there?" He jerked his chin toward the ceiling.

"No reply yet, m'Lord."

Paul sighed, resting against the back of his chair. Presently, he said: "Bring me a captive Sardaukar. We must send a message to our Emperor. It's time to discuss terms."

"Yes, m'Lord." Gurney turned away, dropped a hand signal to one of the Fedaykin who took up close-guard position beside Paul.

"Gurney," Paul whispered. "Since we've been re-joined I've yet to hear you produce the proper quotation for the event." He turned, saw Gurney swallow, saw the sudden grim hardening of the man's jaw.

"As you wish, m'Lord," Gurney said. He cleared his throat, rasped: "'And the victory that day was turned into mourning unto all the people: for the people heard say that day how the king was grieved..."
for his son." 

Paul closed his eyes, forcing grief out of his mind, letting it wait as he had once waited to mourn his father. Now, he gave his thoughts over to this day's accumulated discoveries. His Grandfather was dead, he could not see who did it and so hoped that meant Harry had survived and was nearby.

"Muad'Dib."

Paul opened his eyes to see Stilgar's black-bearded visage above him, the dark eyes glaring with battle light. "You've found the body of the old Baron," Paul said.

A hush of the person settled over Stilgar. "How could you know?" he whispered. "We just found the body in that great pile of metal the Emperor built."

Paul ignored the question, seeing Gurney return accompanied by two Fremen who supported a captive Sardaukar.

"Here's one of them, m'Lord," Gurney said. He signed to the guard to hold the captive five paces in front of Paul.

The Sardaukar's eyes, Paul noted, carried a glazed expression of shock. A blue bruise stretched from the bridge of his nose to the corner of his mouth. He was of the blond, chisel-featured caste, the look that seemed synonymous with rank among the Sardaukar, yet there were no insignia on his torn uniform except the gold buttons with the Imperial crest and the tattered braid of his trousers.

"I think this one's an officer, m'Lord," Gurney said.

Paul nodded, said: "I am the Duke Paul Atreides. Do you understand that, man?" The Sardaukar stared at him unmoving. "Speak up," Paul said, "or your Emperor may die." The man blinked, swallowed. "Who am I?" Paul demanded.

"You are the Duke Paul Atreides," the man husked.

He seemed too submissive to Paul, but then the Sardaukar had never been prepared for such
happenings as this day. They'd never known anything but victory which, Paul realized, could be a weakness in itself. He put that thought aside for later consideration in his own training program. "I have a message for you to carry to the Emperor," Paul said. And he couched his words in the ancient formula: "I, a Duke of a Great House, an Imperial Kinsman, give my word of bond under the Convention. If the Emperor and his people lay down their arms and come to me here I will guard their lives with my own." Paul held up his left hand with the ducal signet for the Sardaukar to see. "I swear it by this." The man wet his lips with his tongue, glanced at Gurney. "Yes," Paul said. "Who but an Atreides could command the allegiance of Gurney Halleck."

"I will carry the message," the Sardaukar said.

"Take him to our forward command post and send him in," Paul said.

"Yes, m'Lord." Gurney motioned for the guard to obey, led them out. Paul turned back to Stilgar.

"Chani and your mother have arrived," Stilgar said. "Chani has asked time to be alone. The Reverend Mother sought a moment in the weirding room; I know not why."

"My mother's sick with longing for a planet she may never see," Paul said. "Where water falls from the sky and plants grow so thickly you cannot walk between them."

"Water from the sky," Stilgar whispered.

In that instant, Paul saw how Stilgar had been transformed from the Fremen naib to a creature of the Lisan al-Gaib, a receptacle for awe and obedience. It was a lessening of the man, and Paul felt the ghost-wind of the jihad in it. I have seen a friend become a worshiper, he thought. In a rush of loneliness, Paul glanced around the room, noting how proper and on-review his guards had become in his presence. He sensed the subtle, prideful competition among them - each hoping for notice from Muad'Dib. Muad'Dib from whom all blessings flow, he thought, and it was the bitterest thought of his life. They sense that I must take the throne, he thought. But they cannot know I do it to prevent the jihad.

Stilgar cleared his throat, said: "Rabban, too, is dead." Paul nodded.

Guards to the right suddenly snapped aside, standing at attention to open an aisle for Jessica. She wore her black aba and walked with a hint of striding across sand, but Paul noted how this house had restored to her something of what she had once been here - concubine to a ruling duke. Her presence
carried some of its old assertiveness.

Jessica stopped in front of Paul, looked down at him. She saw his fatigue and how he hid it, but found no compassion for him. It was as though she had been rendered incapable of any emotion for her son. Jessica had entered the Great Hall wondering why the place refused to fit itself snugly in to her memories. It remained a foreign room, as though she had never walked here, never walked here with her beloved Leto, never confronted a drunken Duncan Idaho here - never, never, never . . .

There should be a word-tension directly opposite to adab, the demanding memory, she thought. There should be a word for memories that deny themselves.

"Where is Alia?" she asked.

“Safe, with my son and Harah’s family. Harry got them out in time.” He reassured her as best he could.

Jessica glared at her son, shocked by the profound change in him. "The men tell strange stories of you, Paul. They say you've all the powers of the legend - nothing can be hidden from you, that you see where others cannot see."

"A Bene Gesserit should ask about legends?" he asked.

"I've had a hand in whatever you are," she admitted, "but you mustn't expect me to - "

"How would you like to live billions upon billions of lives?" Paul asked. "There's a fabric of legends for you! Think of all those experiences, the wisdom they'd bring. But wisdom tempers love, doesn't it? And it puts a new shape on hate. How can you tell what's ruthless unless you've plumbed the depths of both cruelty and kindness? You should fear me, Mother. I am the Kwisatz Haderach."

Jessica tried to swallow in a dry throat. Presently, she said; "Once you denied to me that you were the Kwisatz Haderach."

Paul shook his head. "I can deny nothing anymore." He looked up into her eyes. "The Emperor and his people come now. They will be announced any moment. Stand beside me. I wish a clear view of them. My future bride will be among them."
“Well I better not miss the wedding.” A voice called and Harry relaxed as a battered and bloodied Harry walked into the hall.

"Paul!” Jessica snapped. "Don't make the mistake your father made!"

"She's a princess," Paul said. "She's my key to the throne, and that's all she'll ever be. Mistake? You think because I'm what you made me that I cannot feel the need for revenge?" Paul demanded even as he stood and pulled Harry into a hug. “I feared I had lost you.”

“Never My Duke.” Harry whispered before moving to stand at his right shoulder.

"Even on the innocent?" Jessica demanded once Harry had moved. He must not make the mistakes I made.

"There are no innocent anymore," Paul said.

"Tell that to Chani," Jessica said, and gestured toward the passage from the rear of the Residency.

"Muad'Dib," Stilgar said.

"They come from the ship, the Emperor and his people," Paul said. "I will stand here. Assemble the captives in an open space in the centre of the room. They will be kept at a distance of ten meters from me unless I command otherwise."

"As you command, Muad'Dib."

As Stilgar turned to obey, Paul heard the awed muttering of Fremen guards: "You see? He knew! No one told him, but he knew!"

The Emperor's entourage could be heard approaching now, his Sardaukar humming one of their marching tunes to keep up their spirits. There came a murmur of voices at the entrance and Gurney Halleck passed through the guard, crossed to confer with Stilgar, then moved to Paul's side, a strange
look in his eyes. Will I lose Gurney, too? Paul wondered. The way I lost Stilgar - losing a friend to gain a creature?

"They have no throwing weapons," Gurney said. "I've made sure of that myself." He glanced around the room, seeing Paul's preparations. "Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen is with them. Shall I cut him out?"

"Leave him."

"There're some Guild people, too, demanding special privileges, threatening an embargo against Arrakis. I told them I'd give you their message."

"Let them threaten."

"Paul!" Jessica hissed behind him. "He's talking about the Guild!"

"I'll pull their fangs presently," Paul said.

A platform with Duke Leto's chair was set up, the tarnished seal of House Atreides hanging behind it while Paul and the others were gone to quickly change and clean away the signs of battle. Paul sat there and Jessica moved to flank him even as Chani walked into the room. Harry moved to her side and escorted her to her place with Paul, she was the Mother of the next Duke after all. Gurney and Stilgar stood close by while Harry faded into the background, happy to be back in Atreides uniform. The Fedaykin were everywhere.

There was a commotion across the courtyard as a procession of people were led in under guard...The Emperor...and Irulan. The Reverend Mother and her aides. Count Fenring and the Guild Agents. Their clothes were dirty and torn, some were bleeding. All were disoriented. This was not the way it was supposed to turn out.

Paul glared at them all until his eyes met Irulan', there was a long moment between them. A moment that was not lost on Chani. The Paul saw Feyd, skukling insolently among the Emperor's defeated Sardaukar. "Which one is that? The one with the Sardaukar?"

"The Baron's other nephew, M'Lord. Feyd. A cold-blooded killer." Gurney answered.
Feyd meets Paul's stare with an arrogant sneer. “So...it comes down to this...” He looked beyond Feyd-Rautha then, attracted by a movement, seeing there a narrow, weaselish face he'd never before encountered - not in time or out of it. It was a face he felt he should know and the feeling carried with it a marker of fear. Why should I fear that man? He leaned toward his mother, whispered: "That man to the left of the Reverend Mother, the evil-looking one - who is that?"

Jessica looked, recognizing the face from her Duke's dossiers. "Count Fenring," she said. "The one who was here immediately before us. A genetic-eunuch . . . and a killer."

The Emperor's errand boy, Paul thought. And the thought was a shock crashing across his consciousness because he had seen the Emperor in uncounted associations spread through the possible futures - but never once had Count Fenring appeared within those prescient visions. It occurred to Paul then that he had seen his own dead body along countless reaches of the time web, but never once had he seen his moment of death. Have I been denied a glimpse of this man because he is the one who kills me? Paul wondered. The thought sent a pang of foreboding through him. Or was he like Harry? A power himself and therefore beyond my sight. He still needed to have a long discussion with Harry about that.

He forced his attention away from Fenring, looked now at the remnants of Sardaukar men and officers, the bitterness on their faces and the desperation. Here and there among them, faces caught Paul's attention briefly: Sardaukar officers measuring the preparations within this room, planning and scheming yet for a way to turn defeat into victory.

There was a moment of excruciating silence as conquerors and conquered warily eye each other until the Emperor stepped forward. “Perhaps my...respected kinsman thinks he has things his own way now.” Paul didn’t answer, he just stared at the Emperor with cool calculation. “There is a massed armada of the Great Houses in the space over Arrakis, young Atreides. I have but to give the word...”

“Your word means nothing anymore!”

“I AM THE EMPEROR!”

“Not for long.” Paul stood and pointed to the Guild Agents, Fedaykin pulled them from the crowd. “Dispatch orders to your Navigators. They are to depart from our space and return the fleet to its homes. Immediately.”

“The Guild doesn't take your orders.”
“Tell them to look into the future. They will see me staring back at them...ready to give the order......the order to destroy all spice production on this planet.” Paul spoke using the Voice and a terrible gasp swept across the courtyard. “My men are waiting in the desert. There's a particularly large and volatile pre-spice mass there. I need but raise my finger and the nest will be flooded... with the changed Water of Life....” And now cries of horror ring out.

“Jessica...what have you done to us?” Mohiam demanded.

Paul ignored her. “...spreading death among the makers... killing a cycle of life...creating a chain reaction that will grow and grow...until there are no makers left...until there is no spice left.”

The Guild Agents stiffened, they were afraid of him now. “You won't dare!”

Mohiam locked eyes with Paul and he smirked. "Try your tricks on me, old witch," Paul said. "Where's your gom jabbar? Try looking into that place where you dare not look! You'll find me there staring out at you!" The old woman dropped her gaze. "Have you nothing to say?" Paul demanded.

"I welcomed you to the ranks of humans," she muttered. "Don't besmirch that."

Paul raised his voice: "Observe her, comrades! This is a Bene Gesserit Reverend Mother, patient in a patient cause. She could wait with her sisters - ninety generations for the proper combination of genes and environment to produce the one person their schemes required. Observe her! She knows now that the ninety generations have produced that person. Here I stand... but... I... will... never... do... her... bidding!"

“Jessica...silence him!”

“Silence him yourself.” Jessica snapped and right then Paul knew, Mohiam was his Grandmother.

Paul glared at the old woman. "For your part in all this I could gladly have you strangled," he said. "You couldn't prevent it!" he snapped as she stiffened in rage. "But I think it better punishment that you live out your years never able to touch me or bend me to a single thing your scheming desires."

"Jessica, what have you done?" the old woman demanded.

"I'll give you only one thing," Paul said. "You saw part of what the race needs, but how poorly you
saw it. You think to control human breeding and intermix a select few according to your master plan! How little you understand of what - "

"You mustn't speak of these things!" the old woman hissed.

"Silence!" Paul roared. The word seemed to take substance as it twisted through the air between them under Paul's control.

The old woman reeled back into the arms of those behind her, face blank with shock at the power with which he had seized her psyche. "Jessica," she whispered. "Jessica."

"I remember your gom jabbar," Paul said. "You remember mine. I can kill you with a word."

The Fremen around the ball glanced knowingly at each other. Did the legend not say: "And his word shall carry death eternal to those who stand against righteousness."

“Can he do this?” the emperor demanded of the agents, ignoring his argument with the Reverend Mother.

“They know I can do this. This is what they've feared most. They've been monitoring the signals my men have been sending. They know precisely where we are...and what we can do. Without the spice, the Navigators will be blind, the Bene Gesserit will lose their powers, all commerce among the Great Houses will cease. Civilization will end. If I'm not obeyed...the SPICE WILL NOT FLOW!” Paul yelled and the room was silent.

“In the game called chess, this is what's known as checkmate.” Gurney whispered to Stilgar and Harry snickered before seeing something and nudging Gurney.

“But...it would be suicide!”

Paul said nothing, he just glared at the shaken Emperor who can't look away, riveted by the glow in Paul's eyes. The Emperor could see the future there, he knew Paul would do it.

Then he saw movement in the clustered people, a face and figure emerged - Thufir Hawat, the
seamed old features with darkly stained lips, the hunched shoulders, the look of fragile age about him. "There's Thufir Hawat," Paul said. "Let him stand free, Gurney."

"M'Lord," Gurney said.

"Let him stand free," Paul repeated.

Gurney nodded. Hawat shambled forward as a Fremen lance was lifted and replaced behind him. The rheumy eyes peered at Paul, measuring, seeking. Paul stepped forward one pace, sensed the tense, waiting movement of the Emperor and his people.

Hawat's gaze stabbed past Paul, and the old man said: "Lady Jessica, I but learned this day how I've wronged you in my thoughts. You needn't forgive."

Paul waited, but his mother remained silent. "Thufir, old friend," Paul said, "as you can see, my back is toward no door."

"The universe is full of doors," Hawat said.

"Am I my father's son?" Paul asked.

"More like your grandfather's," Hawat rasped. "You've his manner and the look of him in your eyes."

"Yet I'm my father's son," Paul said. "For I say to you, Thufir, that in payment for your years of service to my family you may now ask anything you wish of me. Anything at all. Do you need my life now, Thufir? It is yours." Paul stepped forward a pace, hands at his side, seeing the look of awareness grow in Hawat's eyes. He realizes that I know of the treachery, Paul thought. Pitching his voice to carry in a half-whisper for Hawat's ears alone, "I mean this, Thufir. If you're to strike me, do it now."

"I but wanted to stand before you once more, my Duke," Hawat said. And Paul became aware for the first time of the effort the old man exerted to keep from falling. Paul reached out, supported Hawat by the shoulders, feeling the muscle tremors beneath his hands. "Is there pain, old friend?" Paul asked even as Harry appeared at his side to take Thufir's weight.
"There is pain, my Duke," Hawat agreed, "but the pleasure is greater." He half turned in Harry’s arms, extended his left hand, palm up, toward the Emperor, exposing the tiny needle cupped against the fingers. "See, Majesty?" he called. "See your traitor's needle? Did you think that I who've given my life to service of the Atreides would give them less now?" he looked from Paul to Harry and smiled. “Still watching…”

Harry staggered as the old man sagged in his arms, felt the death there, the utter flaccidity. Gently, he lowered Hawat to the floor and closed his eyes. “Always watching old friend.” He whispered.

Paul knelt with him, feeling sad at the death of yet another friend, before he straightened and signed for guardsmen to carry the body away. Silence held the hall while his command was obeyed.

Irulan stepped out from the crowd once an appropriate silence had been held for the great Mentat. “I think we both know the way out of this difficulty, don't we?” She asked, meeting Paul’s eyes. This was no longer the moody boy she had met at the party.

Jessica jerked forward. “Paul!”

But Chani restrained her. “Do not interfere...Mother. This is for the good of us all. Do you wish me to leave, Muad'Dib?”

He glanced at her. "Leave? You'll never again leave my side."

"There's nothing binding between us," Chani said.

Paul looked down at her for a silent moment, then: "Speak only truth with me, my Sihaya." As she started to reply, he silenced her with a finger to her lips. "That which binds us cannot be loosed," he said. "Now, watch these matters closely for I wish to see this room later through your wisdom. And one day you will tell our son of this day."

The Emperor and his Truthsayer were carrying on a heated, low-voiced argument.

Paul spoke to his mother: "She reminds him that it's part of their agreement to place a Bene Gesserit on the throne, and Irulan is the one they've groomed for it."
"Was that their plan?" Jessica said.

"Isn't it obvious?" Paul asked.

"I see the signs!" Jessica snapped. "My question was meant to remind you that you should not try to teach me those matters in which I instructed you."

Paul glanced at her, caught a cold smile on her lips.

“NEVER! An adventurer like him...a traitor to the Empire...” The Emperor tried to think of another word and Irulan smiled at him.

“Father...here's a man fit to be your son.” She assured him and across the room Feyd's eyes burned with fury as he realised she had used him.

“Do you really think I'd agree to such a thing?” He demanded of her.

“What choice do you have?” She asked her Father, ignoring Mohiam. The courtyard was abuzz, only Irulan stood passively, facing Paul, flushed with excitement and fear. The Emperor spun around. Searching faces for some form of support. All he got in return are averted gazes and lowered eyes. Except for....

“KANLY!” All eyes turned to Feyd. “I INVOLVE KANLY. IT IS MY RIGHT! AS THE BARON NOW OF HOUSE HARKONNEN...I DEMAND SATISFACTION...” he yelled.

Paul stepped forward to the edge of the platform. “So you are what's left of the House that killed my father.”

“It's down to us. Here, we settle this vendetta once and for all.”

The Emperor seized the opportunity Feyd has offered him. “There are strict rules for a call of Kanly!”
“This is a Harkonnen animal, Muad'Dib.” Stilgar hissed.

“He's right, M'Lord. Let me kill him. It would be my gift to you...” Gurney agreed. Paul glanced past them to Harry who shook his head, this was Paul’s decision to make.

“Is the great Muad'Dib such a coward he must send others to do his dirty work?” Feyd called and Fedaykin started moving across the courtyard toward Feyd.

“Paul...don't do this...” Jessica pleaded.

"Muad'Dib need not do this thing," Chani said.

He glanced at her, saw the fear for him in her eyes. "But the Duke Paul must," he said. “Does this one fight in the Emperor's name?"

“If Feyd wishes it, he will meet you with my blade in his hand.” The Emperor agreed.

“I WISH IT!”

"If he so much as - "Gurney growled.

"Please stand aside," Paul said. He hefted the crysknife, pushed Gurney gently aside even as Harry stepped up to take Paul’s jacket, leaving him bare to the waist.

"Gurney!" Jessica said. She touched Gurney's arm. "He's like his grandfather in this mood. Don't distract him. It's the only thing you can do for him now." And she thought: Great Mother! What iron .

The Emperor was studying Feyd-Rautha, seeing the heavy shoulders, the thick muscles. He turned to look at Paul - a stringy whipcord of a youth, not as desiccated as the Arrakeen natives, but with ribs there to count, and sunken in the flanks so that the ripple and gather of muscles could be followed under the skin.

Jessica leaned close to Paul, pitched her voice for his ears alone: "One thing, Son. Sometimes a
dangerous person is prepared by the Bene Gesserit, a word implanted into the deepest recesses by the old pleasure-pain methods. The word-sound most frequently used is Uroshnor. If this one's been prepared, as I strongly suspect, that word uttered in his ear will render his muscles flaccid and - "

"I want no special advantage for this one," Paul said. "Step back out of my way."

Gurney turned to her. "Why is he doing this? Does he think to get himself killed and achieve martyrdom? This Fremen religious prattle, is that what clouds his reason?"

Jessica hid her face in her hands, realizing that she did not know fully why Paul took this course. She could feel death in the room and knew that the changed Paul was capable of such a thing as Gurney suggested. Every talent within her focused on the need to protect her son, but there was nothing she could do.

"Is it this religious prattle?" Gurney insisted.

"Be silent," Jessica whispered. "And pray."

"Get the Emperor's blade," Paul said, and watched as his command was obeyed. "Put it on the floor there." He indicated a place with his foot. "Clear the Imperial rabble back against the wall and let the Harkonnen stand clear."

A flurry of robes, scraping of feet, low-voiced commands and protests accompanied obedience to Paul's command. The Guildsmen remained standing near the communications equipment. They frowned at Paul in obvious indecision.

They're accustomed to seeing the future, Paul thought. In this place and time, they're blind . . . even as I am. And he sampled the time-winds, sensing the turmoil, the storm nexus that now focused on this moment place. Even the faint gaps were closed now. Here was the unborn jihad, he knew. Here was the race consciousness that he had known once as his own terrible purpose. Here was reason enough for a Kwisatz Haderach or a Lisan al-Gaib or even the halting schemes of the Bene Gesserit. The race of humans had felt its own dormancy, sensed itself grown stale and knew now only the need to experience turmoil in which the genes would mingle and the strong new mixtures survive. All humans were alive as an unconscious single organism in this moment, experiencing a kind of sexual heat that could override any barrier.

And Paul saw how futile were any efforts of his to change any smallest bit of this. He had thought to
oppose the jihad within himself, but the jihad would be. His legions would rage out from Arrakis even without him. They needed only the legend he already had become. He had shown them the way, given them mastery even over the Guild which must have the spice to exist. A sense of failure pervaded him, and he saw through it that Feyd-Rautha Harkonnen had slipped out of the torn uniform, stripped down to a fighting girdle with a mail core.

This is the climax, Paul thought. From here, the future will open, the clouds part onto a kind of glory. And if I die here, they'll say I sacrificed myself that my spirit might lead them. And if I live, they'll say nothing can oppose Muad’Dib.

"Is the Atreides ready?" Feyd-Rautha called, using the words of the ancient kanly ritual.

Paul chose to answer him in the Fremen way: "May thy knife chip and shatter!" He pointed to the Emperor's blade on the floor, indicating that Feyd-Rautha should advance and take it.

Keeping his attention on Paul, Feyd-Rautha picked up the knife, balancing it a moment in his hand to get the feel of it. Excitement kindled in him. This was a fight he had dreamed about - man against man, skill against skill with no shields intervening. He could see a way to power opening before him because the Emperor surely would reward whoever killed this troublesome duke. The reward might even be that haughty daughter and a share of the throne. And this yokel duke, this back-world adventurer could not possibly be a match for a Harkonnen trained in every device and every treachery by a thousand arena combats. And the yokel had no way of knowing he faced more weapons than a knife here. Let us see if you're proof against poison! Feyd-Rautha thought. He saluted Paul with the Emperor's blade, said: "Meet your death, fool."

"Shall we fight, cousin?" Paul asked. And he cat-footed forward, eyes on the waiting blade, his body crouched low with his own milk-white crysknife pointing out as though an extension of his arm. They circled each other, bare feet grating on the floor, watching with eyes intent for the slightest opening.


And the old Reverend Mother, watching the fight from the press of the Emperor's suite, felt herself trembling. The Atreides youth had called the Harkonnen cousin. It could only mean he knew the ancestry they shared, easy to understand because he was the Kwisatz Haderach. But the words forced her to focus on the only thing that mattered to her here. This could be a major catastrophe for the Bene Gesserit breeding scheme. She had seen something of what Paul had seen here, that Feyd-Rautha might kill but not be victorious. Another thought, though, almost overwhelmed her. Two end products of this long and costly program faced each other in a fight to the death that might easily
claim both of them. If both died here that would leave only Feyd-Rautha's bastard daughter, still a baby, an unknown, an unmeasured factor, and any child Paul may have had with the Fremen girl.

"Perhaps you have only pagan rites here," Feyd-Rautha said. "Would you like the Emperor's Truthsayer to prepare your spirit for its journey?" Paul smiled, circling to the right, alert, his black thoughts suppressed by the needs of the moment. Feyd-Rautha leaped, feinting with right hand, but with the knife shifted in a blur to his left hand.

Paul dodged easily, noting the shield-conditioned hesitation in Feyd-Rautha's thrust. Still, it was not as great a shield conditioning as some Paul had seen, and he sensed that Feyd-Rautha had fought before against unshielded foes.

"Does an Atreides run or stand and fight?" Feyd-Rautha asked.

Paul resumed his silent circling. Idaho's words came back to him, the words of training from the long-ago practice floor on Caladan: "Use the first moments in study. You may miss many an opportunity for quick victory this way, but the moments of study are insurance of success. Take your time and be sure."

"Perhaps you think this dance prolongs your life a few moments," Feyd-Rautha said. "Well and good." He stopped the circling, straightened.

Paul had seen enough for a first approximation. Feyd-Rautha led to the left side, presenting the right hip as though the mailed fighting girdle could protect his entire side. It was the action of a man trained to the shield and with a knife in both hands. Or . . . And Paul hesitated . . . the girdle was more than it seemed. The Harkonnen appeared too confident against a man who'd this day led the forces of victory against Sardaukar legions.

Feyd-Rautha noted the hesitation, said: "Why prolong the inevitable? You but keep me from exercising my rights over this ball of dirt."

If it's a flip-dart, Paul thought, it's a cunning one. The girdle shows no signs of tampering.

"Why don't you speak?" Feyd-Rautha demanded.

Paul resumed his probing circle, allowing himself a cold smile at the tone of unease in Feyd-Rautha's
voice, evidence that the pressure of silence was building.

"You smile, eh?" Feyd-Rautha asked. And he leaped in mid-sentence.

Expecting the slight hesitation, Paul almost failed to evade the down flash of blade, felt its tip scratch his left arm. He silenced the sudden pain there, his mind flooded with realization that the earlier hesitation had been a trick - an over feint. Here was more of an opponent than he had expected. There would be tricks within tricks within tricks.

"Your own Thufir Hawat taught me some of my skills," Feyd-Rautha said. "He gave me first blood. Too bad the old fool didn't live to see it."

And Paul recalled that Idaho had once said, "Expect only what happens in the fight. That way you'll never be surprised."

Again, the two circled each other, crouched, cautious. Paul saw the return of elation to his opponent, wondered at it. Did a scratch signify that much to the man? Unless there were poison on the blade! But how could there be? His own men had handled the weapon, snooped it before passing it. They were too well trained to miss an obvious thing like that.

"That woman you were talking to over there," Feyd-Rautha said. "The little one. Is she something special to you? A pet perhaps? Will she deserve my special attentions?"

Paul remained silent, probing with his inner senses, examining the blood from the wound, finding a trace of soporific from the Emperor's blade. He realigned his own metabolism to match this threat and change the molecules of the soporific, but he felt a thrill of doubt. They'd been prepared with soporific on a blade. A soporific. Nothing to alert a poison snooper, but strong enough to slow the muscles it touched. His enemies had their own plans within plans, their own stacked treacheries.

Again Feyd-Rautha leaped, stabbing. Paul, the smile frozen on his face, feinted with slowness as though inhibited by the drug and at the last instant dodged to meet the down flashing arm on the crysknife's point. Feyd-Rautha ducked sideways and was out and away, his blade shifted to his left hand, and the measure of him that only a slight paleness of jaw betrayed the acid pain where Paul had cut him. Let him know his own moment of doubt, Paul thought. Let him suspect poison.

"Treachery!" Feyd-Rautha shouted. "He's poisoned me! I do feel poison in my arm!"
Paul dropped his cloak of silence, said: "Only a little acid to counter the soporific on the Emperor's blade."

Feyd-Rautha matched Paul's cold smile, lifted blade in left hand for a mock salute. His eyes glared rage behind the knife. Paul shifted his crysknife to his left hand, matching his opponent. Again, they circled, probing.

Feyd-Rautha began closing the space between them, edging in, knife held high, anger showing itself in squint of eye and set of jaw. He feinted right and under, and they were pressed against each other, knife hands gripped, straining.

Paul, cautious of Feyd-Rautha's right hip where he suspected a poison flip-dart, forced the turn to the right. He almost failed to see the needlepoint flick out beneath the belt line. A shift and a giving in Feyd-Rautha's motion warned him. The tiny point missed Paul's flesh by the barest fraction. On the left hip! Treachery within treachery within treachery, Paul reminded himself. Using Bene Gesserit-trained muscles, he sagged to catch a reflex in Feyd-Rautha, but the necessity of avoiding the tiny point jutting from his opponent's hip threw Paul off just enough that he missed his footing and found himself thrown hard to the floor, Feyd-Rautha on top.

"You see it there on my hip?" Feyd-Rautha whispered. "Your death, fool." And he began twisting himself around, forcing the poisoned needle closer and closer. "It'll stop your muscles and my knife will finish you. There'll be never a trace left to detect!"

Paul strained, hearing the silent screams in his mind, his cell-stamped ancestors demanding that he use the secret word to slow Feyd-Rautha, to save himself. "I will not say it!" Paul gasped.

Feyd-Rautha gaped at him, caught in the merest fraction of hesitation. It was enough for Paul to find the weakness of balance in one of his opponent's leg muscles, and their positions were reversed. Feyd-Rautha lay partly underneath with right hip high, unable to turn because of the tiny needlepoint caught against the floor beneath him.

Paul twisted his left hand free, aided by the lubrication of blood from his arm, thrust once hard up underneath Feyd-Rautha's jaw. The point slid home into the brain. Feyd-Rautha jerked and sagged back, still held partly on his side by the needle imbedded in the floor. Breathing deeply to restore his calm, Paul pushed himself away and got to his feet. He stood over the body, knife in hand, raised his eyes with deliberate slowness to look across the room at the Emperor.

"Majesty," Paul said, "your force is reduced by one more. Shall we now shed sham and pretence? Shall we now discuss what must be? Your daughter wed to me and the way opened for an Atreides
The Emperor turned, looked at Count Fenring. The Count met his stare - grey eyes against green. The thought lay there clearly between them, their association so long that understanding could be achieved with a glance. Kill this upstart for me, the Emperor was saying. The Atreides is young and resourceful, yes - but he is also tired from long effort and he'd be no match for you, anyway. Call him out now...you know the way of it. Kill him. Slowly, Fenring moved his head, a prolonged turning until he faced Paul. "Do it!" the Emperor hissed.

The Count focused on Paul, seeing with eyes his Lady Margot had trained in the Bene Gesserit way, aware of the mystery and hidden grandeur about this Atreides youth. I could kill him, Fenring thought - and he knew this for a truth. Something in his own secretive depths stayed the Count then, and he glimpsed briefly, inadequately, the advantage he held over Paul - a way of hiding from the youth, a furtiveness of person and motives that no eye could penetrate.

Paul, aware of some of this from the way the time nexus boiled, understood at last why he had never seen Fenring along the webs of prescience. Fenring was one of the might-have-beens, an almost Kwisatz Haderach, crippled by a flaw in the genetic pattern - a eunuch, his talent concentrated into furtiveness and inner seclusion. A deep compassion for the Count flowed through Paul, the first sense of brotherhood he'd ever experienced.

Fenring, reading Paul's emotion, said, "Majesty, I must refuse." Rage overcame Shaddam IV. He took two short steps through the entourage, cuffed Fenring viciously across the jaw. A dark flush spread up and over the Count's face. He looked directly at the Emperor, spoke with deliberate lack of emphasis: "We have been friends, Majesty. What I do now is out of friendship. I shall forget that you struck me."

Paul cleared his throat, said: "We were speaking of the throne, Majesty."

The Emperor whirled, glared at Paul. "I sit on the throne!" he barked.

"You shall have a throne on Salusa Secundus," Paul said.

"I put down my arms and came here on your word of bond!" the Emperor shouted. "You dare threaten - "

"Your person is safe in my presence," Paul said. "An Atreides promised it. Muad'Dib, however,
sentences you to your prison planet. But have no fear, Majesty. I will ease the harshness of the place with all the powers at my disposal. It shall become a garden world, full of gentle things."

As the hidden import of Paul's words grew in the Emperor's mind, he glared across the room at Paul. "Now we see true motives," he sneered.

"Indeed," Paul said.

"And what of Arrakis?" the Emperor asked. "Another garden world full of gentle things?"

"The Fremen have the word of Muad'Dib," Paul said. "There will be flowing water here open to the sky and green oases rich with good things. But we have the spice to think of, too. Thus, there will always be desert on Arrakis . . . and fierce winds, and trials to toughen a man. We Fremen have a saying: 'God created Arrakis to train the faithful.' One cannot go against the word of God."

The old Truthsayer, the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam, had her own view of the hidden meaning in Paul's words now. She glimpsed the jihad and said: "You cannot lose these people upon the universe!"

"You will think back to the gentle ways of the Sardaukar!" Paul snapped. Harry looked to him at that, feeling a growing sense of dread as he began to glimpse Paul's future plans. Surely, he wouldn’t go that far? Not the boy he had trained and cared for as a brother.

"You cannot," she whispered.

"You're a Truthsayer," Paul said. "Review your words." He glanced at the Princess Royal, back to the Emperor. "Best be done quickly, Majesty."

The Emperor turned a stricken look upon his daughter. She touched his arm, spoke soothingly: "For this I was trained, Father." He took a deep breath.

"You cannot stay this thing," the old Truthsayer muttered.

The Emperor straightened, standing stiffly with a look of remembered dignity. "Who will negotiate
for you, kinsman?" he asked.

Paul turned, saw his mother, her eyes heavy-lidded, standing with Chani in a squad of Fedaykin guards. He crossed to them, stood looking down at Chani.

"I know the reasons," Chani whispered. "If it must be . . . Usul."

Paul, hearing the secret tears in her voice, touched her cheek. "My Sihaya need fear nothing, ever," he whispered. He dropped his arm, faced his mother. "You will negotiate for me, Mother, with Chani by your side. She has wisdom and sharp eyes. And it is wisely said that no one bargains tougher than a Fremen. She will be looking through the eyes of her love for me and with the thought of her son, what he will need. Listen to her."

Jessica sensed the harsh calculation in her son, put down a shudder. "What are your instructions?" she asked.

"The Emperor's entire CHOAM Company holdings as dowry," he said.

"Entire?" She was shocked almost speechless.

"He is to be stripped. I'll want an earldom and CHOAM directorship for Gurney Halleck, and him in the fief of Caladan. There will be titles and attendant power for every surviving Atreides man, not excepting the lowliest trooper."

"What of the Fremen?" Jessica asked.

"The Fremen are mine," Paul said. "What they receive shall be dispensed by Muad'Dib. It'll begin with Stilgar as Governor on Arrakis, but that can wait."

"And for me?" Jessica asked.

"Is there something you wish?"
"Perhaps Caladan," she said, looking at Gurney. "I'm not certain. I've become too much the Fremen . . . and the Reverend Mother. I need a time of peace and stillness in which to think."

"That you shall have," Paul said, "and anything else that Gurney or I can give you."

Jessica nodded, feeling suddenly old and tired. She looked at Chani. "And for the royal concubine?"

"No title for me," Chani whispered. "Nothing. I beg of you."

Paul stared down into her eyes, remembering her suddenly as she had stood once with little Leto in her arms. "I swear to you now," he whispered, "that you'll need no title. That woman over there will be my wife and you but a concubine because this is a political thing and we must weld peace out of this moment, enlist the Great Houses of the Landsraad. We must obey the forms. Yet that princess shall have no more of me than my name. No child of mine nor touch nor softness of glance, nor instant of desire."

"So, you say now," Chani said. She glanced across the room at the tall princess.

"Do you know so little of my son?" Jessica whispered. "See that princess standing there, so haughty and confident. They say she has pretensions of a literary nature. Let us hope she finds solace in such things; she'll have little else." A bitter laugh escaped Jessica. "Think on it, Chani: that princess will have the name, yet she'll live as less than a concubine - never to know a moment of tenderness from the man to whom she's bound. While we, Chani, we who carry the name of concubine - history will call us wives."

Knowing the danger was past Harry slipped from the room, heading back outside, no one questioning him as he walked with purpose. He climbed the Shield Wall and stopped when he could sit amongst the rock and stare out over the desert. He had always assumed it would end with this, House Atreides on the Lion Throne but it seemed that wasn’t enough for Paul’s visions. So, what did he do now? Paul couldn’t see him, he could wait until after the wedding and then slip a blade into his heart. Leave Iruan and Chani as Regents until Leto grew up, hope the boy didn’t have whatever this was that was driving Paul? He could leave, let what would happen do so without his involvement…. but he had never been a coward. No, they would have to speak and depending on what Paul said Harry would know what to do.

When he returned to the Ducal Residence it was quiet, the theatrics done and he wandered to his old room, finding it empty except for the furniture he had used. Obviously, the room hadn’t been needed by the Harkonnen. He stripped down and fell onto the bed, worn out.
Paul was relieved when Harry appeared for breakfast, he had been concerned when no one knew where he was. Green eyes met his and Paul was shocked as he heard Harry’s voice though his lips did not move. ‘We need to talk.’ Paul nodded, it was well past time they did. He kissed Chani and left the room, heading for his Father’s office and Harry followed.

“I need to know why you are doing this. Jihad is not an easy thing to control or stop. Tell me there is a reason beyond revenge or ego.” Harry demanded once the door closed.

“You do not trust me?”

“You are my Duke, I have taught you since you were a child. But this…it does not sound like you.”

Paul stared out the window, realising this was another moment where things could change and once again he saw his body, a familiar knife in the chest. He saw a future where Harry was obviously missing, Harah remarried to Stilgar…Harry either dead or having left his service. If he failed to answer Harry would kill him, die in the attempt or leave, none of which he wanted. And so he spoke, of his visions, the Golden Path, and what must be for humanities sake and Harry listened in silence, face blank.

TBC….

So I’ve decided to continue this to cover at least Dune Messiah.
Desert Planet Part IV

Disclaimer: not mine.
I couldn’t find the miniseries script anywhere for the Children of Dune 3 part so I am relying on the Dune Messiah Book for this.

Desert Planet Part IV

Paul paused and then backtracked, glancing into the room that had been opened to air last week. Sure enough, he saw three very familiar heads on the other side of the bed, one black, one brown and one crimson. “Do I want to know what you three are up to?”

“Father!” Leto II grinned at him while his Aunt and ‘cousin’ shook their heads at the boy.

“We weren’t doing anything wrong Paul.” Alia crossed her arms over her amply developing chest, long dark coppery hair falling about her. She favoured their Mother in her looks although her hair was darker like his own.

“Lily?”

The redhead sighed. “We just wanted to make sure the room was perfect, well I did, they just tagged along.” At fourteen Lily was tall and slender with long crimson hair and her Fathers cheekbones. The last time Paul had spoken to Harry the older man had admitted she was the spitting image of the woman she was named for, she had even inherited the brilliant emerald eyes, but unlike her Father, the green was long gone, replaced by the eyes of the Ibad.

He felt a pang of regret for the girl, it was rare she saw her Father and Paul knew it was because of him. Their meeting in his Father’s office twelve years ago had ended without bloodshed thankfully but Harry had sought any assignment that kept him off Arrakis and away from the Jihad. He had released Harah who had married Stilgar, as Paul had seen, but there was no animosity there, she had understood and there had never been love in their marriage. For a while Harry had stayed on Caladan and so Lily had gone to see him at least once a year but then his skills had been needed amongst the Great Houses, to keep them in line and the visits had become infrequent. But now, for the first time in over a decade Harry was returning to Arrakis, though not for any happy reason. And once again Paul felt he was to blame, Harry came to witness his sons water be reclaimed but the tribe. Kaleff had gone against his Father’s wishes and joined the Jihad once of age. And now he was dead at only twenty-four. How much more pain would he cause the man he called brother? “Are you looking forward to seeing your Father, Lily?”
“Yes but…”

“You miss Kaleff. He would not want you to be sad little flower.” Paul assured her and she smiled shakily.

“I know Uncle Paul.” The three followed him from the room and down the hall.

“So where did you lose your guard this time?” He smiled and the teens grinned. He had ensured all three had the same training he’d had as a child, for their safety. They could handle themselves easily enough but the guards made their Mother’s happy. Alia had only returned to Arrakis five years ago, at age ten, to take her place as ‘Priestess’, until then she had lived on Caladan with their Mother. He knew Jessica feared the day Alia attempted the spice trance, what abilities might lay within her, even without being pre-born?

Leto II, Paul’s only child and heir, was almost as tall as he was now. He had inherited Chani’s more elfin features but the Atreides hair. “We didn’t lose them exactly…”

“I think they’re in Mother’s garden.” Alia admitted.

“Well you better run along and get change, don’t want to miss his arrival.” Paul watched the three run for their rooms to change into nicer clothes to meet Harry in, going to his own shared room to find Chani brushing her hair, already dressed. He bent down to kiss her and she smiled.

“Come beloved, you do not want to be late in welcoming him home.” Chani was one of the few who knew how much Paul missed Harry at his side.

The Royal Family stood waiting at the smaller, private, landing area off the Palace. Harry had never accepted a title within the Empire and so had faded from many of the people’s minds, allowing them to greet him in private unlike Jessica’s last visit. Lily was practically vibrating in excitement as the craft touched down and the ramp lowered. Harry walked off, looking no different to the day he had met their arrival in Arrakeen, even his uniform was almost the same. Paul stepped forward and Harry bowed.

“My Lord.” Harry greeted and Paul smiled, he was always Harry’s Duke, not his Emperor.
“It is good to see you brother.” Paul hugged him and was relieved when Harry returned the gesture. They had not seen each other since Paul had met with Bronso and his Mother and he was just glad Harry was home even if not under the best circumstances. He could understand Harry’s reluctance concerning his actions over the years and that was why he had assigned him to Kaitain and the Houses that still resided there, keeping them in line. “I have missed you.” He whispered and felt Harry tighten his grip.

“I have missed you too Paul.” He answered softly. He had missed Paul, despite how they had parted. And he still felt bad about that discussion, Paul had been open and honest while he had kept many secrets. He stepped back and bowed to Irulan who smiled and clasped his hand before Chani hugged him.

“Welcome home Suhl.” She greeted before stepping back and then a crimson missile slammed into him.

Harry laughed and hugged his daughter tightly. “I have missed you little flower.” He pulled her back to look her over. “You look so much like your grandmother.” He gently brushed back an errant lock of hair from her face and then looked at the other two teenagers. “All three of you have grown so much.” He admitted even as Alia and Leto moved in for their own hugs before Harry moved to Harah and Stilgar, greeting them both warmly.

“Father.” Orlop whispered and Harry drew him into a hug. Stilgar had married Harah but the boys and Lily still called Harry father. “Kaleff….”

“I know, I’m here.” He whispered sadly. The group moved inside the Palace, Harry’s things taken to his room before they left for the old Sietch Tabr. Kaleff’s body had been kept preserved for them to all be present for the collection of his water for the tribe.

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Despite the murderous nature of the plot he hoped to devise, the thoughts of Scytale, the Tleilaxu Face Dancer, returned again and again to rueful compassion. I shall regret causing death and misery to Muad’Dib, he told himself. He kept this benignity carefully hidden from his fellow conspirators. Such feelings told him, though, that he found it easier to identify with the victim than with the attackers - a thing characteristic of the Tleilaxu. Scytale stood in bemused silence somewhat apart from the others. The argument about psychic poison had been going on for some time now. It was energetic and vehement, but polite in that blindly compulsive way adepts of the Great Schools always adopted for matters close to their dogma.
"When you think you have him skewered, right then you'll find him unwounded!" Mohiam snapped. She was their hostess on Wallach IX. She was a black-robed stick figure, a witch crone seated in a floater chair at Scytale's left. Her aba hood had been thrown back to expose a leathery face beneath silver hair. Deeply pocketed eyes stared out of skull-mask features.

They were using a mirabhasa language, honed phalange consonants and joined vowels. It was an instrument for conveying fine emotional subtleties. Edric, the Guild Steersman, replied to the Reverend Mother now with a vocal curtsy contained in a sneer - a lovely touch of disdainful politeness.

Scytale looked at the Guild envoy. Edric swam in a container of orange gas only a few paces away. His container sat in the centre of the transparent dome which the Bene Gesserit had built for this meeting. The Guildsman was an elongated figure, vaguely humanoid with finned feet and hugely fanned membranous hands - a fish in a strange sea. His tank's vents emitted a pale orange cloud rich with the smell of the geriatric spice, melange.

"If we go on this way, we'll die of stupidity!" That was the fourth person present - the potential member of the conspiracy - Princess Irulan, wife (but not mate, Scytale reminded himself) of their mutual foe. She stood at a corner of Edric's tank, a tall blond beauty, splendid in a robe of blue whale fur and matching hat. Gold buttons glittered at her ears. She carried herself with an aristocrat's hauteur, but something in the absorbed smoothness of her features betrayed the controls of her Bene Gesserit background.

Scytale's mind turned from nuances of language and faces to nuances of location. All around the dome lay hills mangy with melting snow which reflected mottled wet blueness from the small blue-white sun hanging at the meridian. Why this particular place? Scytale wondered. The Bene Gesserit seldom did anything casually. Take the dome's open plan: a more conventional and confining space might've inflicted the Guildsman with claustrophobic nervousness. Inhibitions in his psyche were those of birth and life off-planet in open space. To have built this place especially for Edric, though - what a sharp finger that pointed at his weakness. What here, Scytale wondered, was aimed at me?

"Have you nothing to say for yourself, Scytale?" the Reverend Mother demanded.

"You wish to draw me into this fools' fight?" Scytale asked. "Very well. We're dealing with a potential messiah. You don't launch a frontal attack upon such a one. Martyrdom would defeat us." They all stared at him.

"You think that's the only danger?" the Reverend Mother demanded, voice wheezing. Scytale shrugged. He had chosen a bland, round-faced appearance for this meeting, jolly features and vapid full lips, the body of a bloated dumpling. It occurred to him now, as he studied his fellow conspirators, that he had made an ideal choice - out of instinct perhaps. He alone in this group could
manipulate fleshly appearance across a wide spectrum of bodily shapes and features. He was the human chameleon, a Face Dancer, and the shape he wore now invited others to judge him too lightly. "Well?" the Reverend Mother pressed.

"I was enjoying the silence," Scytale said. "Our hostilities are better left unvoiced." The Reverend Mother drew back, and Scytale saw her reassessing him. They were all products of profound prana-bindu training, capable of muscle and nerve control that few humans ever achieved. But Scytale, a Face Dancer, had muscles and nerve linkages the others didn't even possess plus a special quality of sympatico, a mimic's insight with which he could put on the psyche of another as well as the other's appearance. Scytale gave her enough time to complete the reassessment, said: "Poison!" He uttered the word with the atonals which said he alone understood its secret meaning.

The Guildsman stirred and his voice rolled from the glittering speaker globe which orbited a corner of his tank above Irulan. "We're discussing psychic poison, not a physical one."

Scytale laughed. Mirabhasa laughter could flay an opponent and he held nothing back now. Irulan smiled in appreciation, but the corners of the Reverend Mother's eyes revealed a faint hint of anger.

"Stop that!" Mohiam rasped.

Scytale stopped, but he had their attention now, Edric in a silent rage, the Reverend Mother alert in her anger, Irulan amused but puzzled. "Our friend Edric suggests," Scytale said, "that a pair of Bene Gesserit witches trained in all their subtle ways have not learned the true uses of deception."

Mohiam turned to stare out at the cold hills of her Bene Gesserit homeworld. She was beginning to see the vital thing here, Scytale realized. That was good. Irulan, though, was another matter.

"Are you one of us or not, Scytale?" Edric asked. He stared out of tiny rodent eyes.

"My allegiance is not the issue," Scytale said. He kept his attention on Irulan. "You are wondering, Princess, if this was why you came all those parsecs, risked so much?" She nodded agreement. "Was it to bandy platitudes with a humanoid fish or dispute with a fat Tleilaxu Face Dancer?" Scytale asked.

She stepped away from Edric's tank, shaking her head in annoyance at the thick odour of melange.
Edric took this moment to pop a melange pill into his mouth. He ate the spice and breathed it and, no doubt, drank it, Scytale noted. Understandable, because the spice heightened a Steersman's prescience, gave him the power to guide a Guild Heighliner across space at translight speeds. With spice awareness, he found that line of the ship's future which avoided peril. Edric smelled another kind of peril now, but his crutch of prescience might not find it.

"I think it was a mistake for me to come here," Irulan said.

The Reverend Mother turned, opened her eyes, closed them, a curiously reptilian gesture.

Scytale shifted his gaze from Irulan to the tank, inviting the Princess to share his viewpoint. She would, Scytale knew, see Edric as a repellent figure: the bold stare, those monstrous feet and hands moving softly in the gas, the smoky swirling of orange eddies around him. She would wonder about his sex habits, thinking how odd it would be to mate with such a one. Even the field-force generator which recreated for Edric the weightlessness of space would set him apart from her now. "Princess," Scytale said, "because of Edric here, your husband's oracular sight cannot stumble upon certain incidents, including this one... presumably."

"Presumably," Irulan said.

Eyes closed, the Reverend Mother nodded. "The phenomenon of prescience is poorly understood even by its initiates," she said.

"I am a full Guild Navigator and have the Power," Edric said.

Again, the Reverend Mother opened her eyes. This time, she stared at the Face Dancer, eyes probing with that peculiar Bene Gesserit intensity. She was weighing minutiae.

"No, Reverend Mother," Scytale murmured, "I am not as simple as I appeared."

"We don't understand this Power of second sight," Irulan said. "There's a point. Edric says my husband cannot see, know or predict what happens within the sphere of a Navigator's influence. But how far does that influence extend?"

"There are people and things in our universe which I know only by their effects," Edric said, his fish mouth held in a thin line. "I know they have been here... there... somewhere. As water creatures stir
up the currents in their passage, so the prescient stir up Time. I have seen where your husband has been; never have I seen him nor the people who truly share his aims and loyalties. This is the concealment which an adept gives to those who are his."

"Irulan is not yours," Scytale said. And he looked sideways at the Princess.

"We all know why the conspiracy must be conducted only in my presence," Edric said.

Using the voice mode for describing a machine. Irulan said: "You have your uses, apparently."

She sees him now for what he is, Scytale thought. Good! "The future is a thing to be shaped," Scytale said. "Hold that thought, Princess."

Irulan glanced at the Face Dancer. "People who share Paul's aims and loyalties," she said. "Certain of his Fremen legionaries, then, wear his cloak. I have seen him prophesy for them, heard their cries of adulation for their Mahdi, their Muad'Dib."

It has occurred to her, Scytale thought, that she is on trial here, that a Judgment remains to be made which could preserve her or destroy her. She sees the trap we set for her. Momentarily, Scytale's gaze locked with that of the Reverend Mother and he experienced the odd realization that they had shared this thought about Irulan. The Bene Gesserit, of course, had briefed their Princess, primed her with the lie adroit. But the moment always came when a Bene Gesserit must trust her own training and instincts.

"Princess, I know what it is you most desire from the Emperor," Edric said.

"Who does not know it?" Irulan asked.

"You wish to be the founding mother of the royal dynasty," Edric said, as though he had not heard her. "Unless you join us, that will never happen. Take my oracular word on it. The Emperor married you for political reasons, but you'll never share his bed."

"So, the oracle is also a voyeur," Irulan sneered.
"The Emperor is more firmly wedded to his Fremen concubine than he is to you!" Edric snapped.

"And she gives him no more heirs," Irulan said.

"Reason is the first victim of strong emotion," Scytale murmured. He sensed the outpouring of Irulan's anger, saw his admonition take effect.

"She gives him no more children," Irulan said, her voice measuring out controlled calmness, "because I am secretly administering a contraceptive. Is that the sort of admission you wanted from me?"

"It'd not be a thing for the Emperor to discover," Edric said, smiling.

"I have lies ready for him," Irulan said. "He may have truthsense, but some lies are easier to believe than the truth."

"You must make the choice, Princess," Scytale said, "but understand what it is protects you."

"Paul is fair with me," she said. "I sit in his Council."

"In the twelve years you've been his Princess Consort," Edric asked, "has he shown you the slightest warmth?" Irulan shook her head. "He deposed your father with his infamous Fremen horde, married you to fix his claim to the throne, yet he has never crowned you Empress," Edric said.

"Edric tries to sway you with emotion, Princess," Scytale said. "Is that not interesting?"

She glanced at the Face Dancer, saw the bold smile on his features, answered it with raised eyebrows. She was fully aware now, Scytale saw, that if she left this conference under Edric's sway, part of their plot, these moments might be concealed from Paul's oracular vision. If she withheld commitment, though...

"Does it seem to you, Princess," Scytale asked, "that Edric holds undue sway in our conspiracy?"
"I've already agreed," Edric said, "that I'll defer to the best judgment offered in our councils."

"And who chooses the best judgment?" Scytale asked.

"Do you wish the Princess to leave here without joining us?" Edric asked.

"He wishes her commitment to be a real one," the Reverend Mother growled. "There should be no trickery between us."

Irulan, Scytale saw, had relaxed into a thinking posture, hands concealed in the sleeves of her robe. She would be thinking now of the bait Edric had offered: to found a royal dynasty! She would be wondering what scheme the conspirators had provided to protect themselves from her. She would be weighing many things.

"Scytale," Irulan said presently, "it is said that you Tleilaxu have an odd system of honour: your victims must always have a means of escape."

"If they can but find it," Scytale agreed.

"Am I a victim?" Irulan asked. A burst of laughter escaped Scytale. The Reverend Mother snorted.

"Princess," Edric said, his voice softly persuasive, "you already are one of us, have no fear of that. Do you not spy upon the Imperial Household for your Bene Gesserit superiors?"

"Paul knows I report to my teachers," she said.

"But don't you give them the material for strong propaganda against your Emperor?" Edric asked.

Not "our" Emperor, Scytale noted. "Your" Emperor. Irulan is too much the Bene Gesserit to miss that slip.

"The question is one of powers and how they may be used," Scytale said, moving closer to the Guildsman's tank. "We of the Tleilaxu believe that in all the universe there is only the insatiable
appetite of matter, that energy is the only true solid. And energy learns. Hear me well, Princess: energy learns. This, we call power."

"You haven't convinced me we can defeat the Emperor," Irulan said.

"We haven't even convinced ourselves," Scytale said.

" Everywhere we turn," Irulan said, "his power confronts us. He's the Kwisatz Haderach, the one who can be many places at once. He's the Mahdi whose merest whim is absolute command to his Qizarate missionaries. He's the Mentat whose computational mind surpasses the greatest ancient computers. He is Muad’Dib whose orders to the Fremen legions depopulate planets. He possesses oracular vision which sees into the future. He has that gene pattern which we Bene Gesserit’s covet for -"

"We know his attributes," the Reverend Mother interrupted. "And we know Potter has returned to his side, further securing Paul’s position of power. But they're also humans, both of them. Thus, they have weaknesses."

"And where are those human weaknesses?" the Face Dancer asked. "Shall we search for them in the religious arm of his Jihad? Can the Emperor's Qizara be turned against him? What about the civil authority of the Great Houses? Can the Landsraad Congress do more than raise a verbal clamour?"

"I suggest the Combine Honnete Ober Advancer Mercantiles," Edric said, turning in his tank. "CHOAM is business and business follows profits."

"Or perhaps the Emperor's mother," Scytale said. "The Lady Jessica, I understand, remains on Caladan, but is in frequent communication with her son."

"That traitorous bitch," Mohiam said, voice level. "Would I might disown my own hands which trained her."

"Our conspiracy requires a lever," Scytale said.

"We are more than conspirators," the Reverend Mother countered.
"Ah, yes," Scytale agreed. "We are energetic and we learn quickly. This makes us the one true hope, the certain salvation of humankind." He spoke in the speech mode for absolute conviction, which was perhaps the ultimate sneer coming, as it did, from a Tleilaxu.

Only the Reverend Mother appeared to understand the subtlety. "Why?" she asked, directing the question at Scytale.

Before the Face Dancer could answer, Edric cleared his throat, said: "Let us not bandy philosophical nonsense. Every question can be boiled down to the one: 'Why is there anything?' Every religious, business and governmental question has the single derivative: 'Who will exercise the power?' Alliances, combines, complexes, they all chase mirages unless they go for the power. All else is nonsense, as most thinking beings come to realize."

Scytale shrugged, a gesture designed solely for the Reverend Mother. Edric had answered her question for him. The pontificating fool was their major weakness. To make sure the Reverend Mother understood, Scytale said: "Listening carefully to the teacher, one acquires an education." The Reverend Mother nodded slowly.

"Princess," Edric said, "make your choice. You have been chosen as an instrument of destiny, the very finest..."

"Save your praise for those who can be swayed by it," Irulan said. "Earlier, you mentioned a ghost, a revenant with which we may contaminate the Emperor. Explain this."

"The Atreides will defeat himself!" Edric crowed.

"Stop talking riddles!" Irulan snapped. "What is this ghost?"

"A very unusual ghost," Edric said. "It has a body and a name. The body - that's the flesh of a renowned swordmaster known as Duncan Idaho. The name..."

"Idaho's dead," Irulan said. "Paul has mourned the loss often in my presence. He saw Idaho killed by my father's Sardaukar."

"Even in defeat," Edric said, "your father's Sardaukar did not abandon wisdom. Let us suppose a wise Sardaukar commander recognized the swordmaster in a corpse his men had slain. What then?
There exist uses for such flesh and training... if one acts swiftly."

"A Tleilaxu ghola," Irulan whispered in shock, looking sideways at Scytale.

Scytale, observing her attention, exercised his Face-Dancer powers - shape flowing into shape, flesh moving and readjusting. Presently, a slender man stood before her. The face remained somewhat round, but darker and with slightly flattened features. High cheekbones formed shelves for eyes with definite epicanthic folds. The hair was black and unruly.

"A ghola of this appearance," Edric said, pointing to Scytale.

"Or merely another Face Dancer?" Irulan asked.

"No Face Dancer," Edric said. "A Face Dancer risks exposure under prolonged surveillance. No; let us assume that our wise Sardaukar commander had Idaho's corpse preserved for the axolotl tanks. Why not? This corpse held the flesh and nerves of one of the finest swordsmen in history, an adviser to the Atreides, a military genius. What a waste to lose all that training and ability when it might be revived as an instructor for the Sardaukar."

"I heard not a whisper of this and I was one of my father's confidantes," Irulan said.

"Ahh, but your father was a defeated man and within a few hours you had been sold to the new Emperor," Edric said.

"Was it done?" she demanded.

With a maddening air of complacency, Edric said: "Let us presume that our wise Sardaukar commander, knowing the need for speed, immediately sent the preserved flesh of Idaho to the Bene Tleilaxu. Let us suppose further that the commander and his men died before conveying this information to your father - who couldn't have made much use of it anyway. There would remain then a physical fact, a bit of flesh which had been sent off to the Tleilaxu. There was only one way for it to be sent, of course, on a Heighliner. We of the Guild naturally know every cargo we transport. Learning of this one, would we not think it additional wisdom to purchase the ghola as a gift befitting an Emperor? A gift that will also mean much to the returned Atreides man, Potter."

"You've done it then," Irulan said.
Scytale, who had resumed his roly-poly first appearance, said: "As our long-winded friend indicates, we've done it."

"How has Idaho been conditioned?" Irulan asked.

"Idaho?" Edric asked, looking at the Tleilaxu. "Do you know of an Idaho, Scytale?"

"We sold you a creature called Hayt," Scytale said.

"Ah, yes - Hayt," Edric said. "Why did you sell him to us?"

"Because we once bred a Kwisatz Haderach of our own," Scytale said.

With a quick movement of her old head, the Reverend Mother looked up at him. "You didn't tell us that!" she accused.

"You didn't ask," Scytale said.

"How did you overcome your Kwisatz Haderach?" Irulan asked.

"A creature who has spent his life creating one particular representation of his selfdom will die rather than become the antithesis of that representation," Scytale said.

"I do not understand," Edric ventured.

"He killed himself," the Reverend Mother growled.

"Follow me well, Reverend Mother," Scytale warned, using a voice mode which said: You are not a sex object, have never been a sex object, cannot be a sex object. The Tleilaxu waited for the blatant emphasis to sink in. She must not mistake his intent. Realization must pass through anger into awareness that the Tleilaxu certainly could not make such an accusation, knowing as he must the
breeding requirements of the Sisterhood. His words, though, contained a gutter insult, completely out of character for a Tleilaxu.

Swiftly, using the mirabhasa placative mode, Edric tried to smooth over the moment. "Scytale, you told us you sold Hayt because you shared our desire on how to use him."

"Edric, you will remain silent until I give you permission to speak," Scytale said. And as the Guildsman started to protest, the Reverend Mother snapped: "Shut up, Edric!" The Guildsman drew back into his tank in flailing agitation. "Our own transient emotions aren't pertinent to a solution of the mutual problem," Scytale said. "They cloud reasoning because the only relevant emotion is the basic fear which brought us to this meeting."

"We understand," Irulan said, glancing at the Reverend Mother.

"You must see the dangerous limitations of our shield," Scytale said. "The oracle cannot chance upon what it cannot understand."

"You are devious, Scytale," Irulan said.

How devious she must not guess, Scytale thought. When this is done, we will possess a Kwisatz Haderach we can control. These others will possess nothing.

"What was the origin of your Kwisatz Haderach?" the Reverend Mother asked.

"We've dabbled in various pure essences," Scytale said. "Pure good and pure evil. A pure villain who delights only in creating pain and terror can be quite educational."

"The old Baron Harkonnen, our Emperor's grandfather, was he a Tleilaxu creation?" Irulan asked.

"Not one of ours," Scytale said. "But then nature often produces creations as deadly as ours. We merely produce them under conditions where we can study them."

"I will not be passed by and treated this way!" Edric protested. "Who is it hides this meeting from -"
"You see?" Scytale asked. "Whose best judgment conceals us? What judgment?"

"I wish to discuss our mode of giving Hayt to the Emperor," Edric insisted. "It's my understanding that Hayt reflects the old morality that the Atreides learned on his birth world. Hayt is supposed to make it easy for the Emperor to enlarge his moral nature, to delineate the positive-negative elements of life and religion."

Scytale smiled, passing a benign gaze over his companions. They were as he'd been led to expect. The old Reverend Mother wielded her emotions like a scythe. Irulan had been well trained for a task at which she had failed, a flawed Bene Gesserit creation. Edric was no more (and no less) than the magician's hand: he might conceal and distract. For now, Edric relapsed into sullen silence as the others ignored him.

"Do I understand that this Hayt is intended to poison Paul's psyche?" Irulan asked.

"More or less," Scytale said.

"And what of the Qizarate?" Irulan asked.

"It requires only the slightest shift in emphasis, a glissade of the emotions, to transform envy into enmity," Scytale said.

"And CHOAM?" Irulan asked.

"They will rally round profit," Scytale said.

"What of the other power groups?"

"One invokes the name of government," Scytale said. "We will annex the less powerful in the name of morality and progress. Our opposition will die of its own entanglements."

"Alia, too?"
"Hayt is a multi-purpose ghola," Scytale said. "The Emperor’s sister is of an age when she can be distracted by a charming male designed for that purpose. She will be attracted by his maleness and by his abilities as a Mentat."

Mohiam allowed her old eyes to go wide in surprise. "The ghola's a Mentat? That's a dangerous move."

"To be accurate," Irulan said, "a Mentat must have accurate data. What if Paul asks him to define the purpose behind our gift?"

"Hayt will tell the truth," Scytale said. "It makes no difference."

"So, you leave an escape door open for Paul," Irulan said.

"A Mentat!" Mohiam muttered.

Scytale glanced at the old Reverend Mother, seeing the ancient hates which coloured her responses. From the days of the Butlerian Jihad when "thinking machines" had been wiped from most of the universe, computers had inspired distrust. Old emotions coloured the human computer as well.

"I do not like the way you smile," Mohiam said abruptly, speaking in the truth mode as she glared up at Scytale.

In the same mode, Scytale said: "And I think less of what pleases you. But we must work together. We all see that." He glanced at the Guildsman. "Don't we, Edric?"

"You teach painful lessons," Edric said. "I presume you wished to make it plain that I must not assert myself against the combined judgments of my fellow conspirators."

"You see, he can be taught," Scytale said.

"I see other things as well," Edric growled. "The Atreides holds a monopoly on the spice. Without it
I cannot probe the future. The Bene Gesserit lose their truthsense. We have stockpiles, but these are finite. Melange is a powerful coin."

"Our civilization has more than one coin," Scytale said. "Thus, the law of supply and demand fails."

"You think to steal the secret of it," Mohiam wheezed. "And him with a planet guarded by his mad Fremen!"

"The Fremen are civil, educated and ignorant," Scytale said. "They're not mad. They're trained to believe, not to know. Belief can be manipulated. Only knowledge is dangerous."

"But will I be left with something to father a royal dynasty?" Irulan asked. They all heard the commitment in her voice, but only Edric smiled at it. "Something," Scytale said. "Something. There is the son to consider after all."

"It means the end of this Atreides as a ruling force," Edric said.

"I should imagine that others less gifted as oracles have made that prediction," Scytale said. "For them, 'mektub al mellah', as the Fremen say."

"The thing was written with salt," Irulan translated. Leto? They were offering her the boy to Father a Dynasty? He had shown none of his Father’s talent after all, it was possible he could be a puppet upon the throne.

As she spoke, Scytale recognized what the Bene Gesserit had arrayed here for him - a beautiful and intelligent female who could never be his. Ah, well, he thought, perhaps I'll copy her for another.

Paul sat on the edge of his bed and began stripping off his desert boots. They smelled rancid from the lubricant which eased the action of the heel-powered pumps that drove his stillsuit. It was late. He had prolonged his night-time walk and caused worry for those who loved him, even though Harry had accompanied him. Admittedly, the walks were dangerous, but it was a kind of danger he could recognize and meet immediately. Something compelling and attractive surrounded walking anonymously at night in the streets of Arrakeen. And it had been good to walk with only Harry as
his companion, like when they had spent hours together in the battlements of his childhood home. It had been as if the years apart had never happened and he had his teacher and friend back.

He tossed the boots into the corner beneath the room's lone glowglobe, attacked the seal strips of his stillsuit. Gods below, how tired he was! The tiredness stopped at his muscles, though, and left his mind seething. Watching the mundane activities of everyday life filled him with profound envy. Most of that nameless flowing life outside the walls of his Keep couldn't be shared by an Emperor - but... to walk down a public street without attracting attention: what a privilege! To pass by the clamouring of mendicant pilgrims, to hear a Fremen curse a shopkeeper: "You have damp hands!"... Paul smiled at the memory, slipped out of his stillsuit. He stood naked and oddly attuned to his world. Dune was a world of paradox now - a world under siege, yet the centre of power. To come under siege, he decided, was the inevitable fate of power. He stared down at the green carpeting, feeling its rough texture against his soles. The streets had been ankle deep in sand blown over the Shield Wall on the stratus wind. Foot traffic had churned it into choking dust which clogged stillsuit Filters. He could smell the dust even now despite a blower cleaning at the portals of his Keep. It was an odour full of desert memories. Other days... other dangers.

Compared to those other days, the peril in his usually lonely walks remained minor. But, putting on a stillsuit, he put on the desert. The suit with all its apparatus for reclaiming his body's moisture guided his thoughts in subtle ways, fixed his movements in a desert pattern. He became wild Fremen. More than a disguise, the suit made of him a stranger to his city self. In the stillsuit, he abandoned security and put on the old skills of violence. Pilgrims and townsfolk passed him then with eyes downcast. They left the wild ones strictly alone out of prudence. If the desert had a face for city folk, it was a Fremen face concealed by a stillsuits mouth-nose filters. Harry had told him it felt odd and yet like coming home to don the suit again, to be ever so careful of water loss. In truth, there existed now only the small danger that someone from the old sietch days might mark him by his walk, by his odour or by his eyes. Even then, the chances of meeting an enemy remained small.

A swish of door hangings and a wash of light broke his reverie. Chani entered bearing his coffee service on a platinum tray. Two slaved glowglobes followed her, darting to their positions: one at the head of their bed, one hovering beside her to light her work. Chani moved with an ageless air of fragile power - so self-contained, so vulnerable. Something about the way she bent over the coffee service reminded him then of their first days. Her features remained darkly elfin, seemingly unmarked by their years - unless one examined the outer corners of her whiteless eyes, noting the lines there: "sandtracks," the Fremen of the desert called them.

Steam wafted from the pot as she lifted the lid by its Hagar emerald knob. He could tell the coffee wasn't yet ready by the way she replaced the lid. The pot - fluting silver female shape, pregnant - had come to him as a ghanima, a spoil of battle won when he'd slain the former owner in single combat. He was thankful Harry had taken the first such challenge but eventually he had been forced to face such combat.

Chani put out cups: blue pottery squatting like attendants beneath the immense pot. There were three cups: one for each drinker and one for all the former owners. "It'll only be a moment," she said. She
looked at him then, and Paul wondered how he appeared in her eyes. Was he yet the exotic offworlder, slim and wiry but water-fat when compared to Fremen? Had he remained the Usul of his tribal name who'd taken her in "Fremen tau" while they'd been fugitives in the desert?

Paul stared down at his own body: hard muscles, slender... a few more scars, but essentially the same despite twelve years as Emperor. Looking up, he glimpsed his face in a shelf mirror - blue-blue Fremen eyes, mark of spice addiction; a sharp Atreides nose. He looked the proper grandson for an Atreides who'd died in the bullring creating a spectacle for his people. Something the old man had said slipped then into Paul's mind: "One who rules assumes irrevocable responsibility for the ruled. You are a husbandman. This demands, at times, a selfless act of love which may only be amusing to those you rule." People still remembered that old man with affection. And what have I done for the Atreides name? Paul asked himself. I've loosed the wolf among the sheep. For a moment, he contemplated all the death and violence going on in his mind.

"Into bed now!" Chani said in a sharp tone of command that Paul knew would've shocked his Imperial subjects. He obeyed, lay back with his hands behind his head, letting himself be lulled by the pleasant familiarity of Chani's movements.

The room around them struck him suddenly with amusement. It was not at all what the populace must imagine as the Emperor's bedchamber. The yellow light of restless glowglobes moved the shadows in an array of coloured glass jars on a shelf behind Chani. Paul named their contents silently - the dry ingredients of the desert pharmacopoeia, unguents, incense, mementos... a pinch of sand from Sietch Tabr, a lock of hair from their firstborn...so many memories.

The rich odour of spice-coffee filled the room. Paul inhaled, his glance falling on a yellow bowl beside the tray where Chani was preparing the coffee. The bowl held ground nuts. The inevitable poison-snooper mounted beneath the table waved its insect arms over the food. The snooper angered him. They'd never needed snoopers in the desert days! "Coffee's ready," Chani said. "Are you hungry?" His angry denial was drowned in the whistling scream of a spice lighter hurling itself spaceward from the field outside Arrakeen. Chani saw his anger, though, poured their coffee, put a cup near his hand. She sat down on the foot of the bed, exposed his legs, began rubbing them where the muscles were knotted from walking in the stillsuit. Softly, with a casual air which did not deceive him, she said: "Let us discuss Irulan's desire for a child."

Paul's eyes snapped wide open. He studied Chani carefully, "Irulan's been back from Wallach less than two days," he said. "Has she been at you already?"

"We've not discussed her frustrations," Chani said.

Paul forced his mind to mental alertness, examined Chani in the harsh light of observational minutiae, the Bene Gesserit Way his mother had taught him in violation of her vows. It was a thing he didn't
like doing with Chani. Part of her hold on him lay in the fact he so seldom needed his tension-building powers with her. Chani mostly avoided indiscreet questions. She maintained a Fremen sense of good manners. Hers were more often practical questions. What interested Chani were facts which bore on the position of her man - his strength in Council, the loyalty of his legions, the abilities and talents of his allies. Her memory held catalogues of names and cross-indexed details. She could rattle off the major weakness of every known enemy, the potential dispositions of opposing forces, battle plans of their military leaders, the tooling and production capacities of basic industries. Why now, Paul wondered, did she ask about Irulan?

"I've troubled your mind," Chani said. "That wasn't my intention."

"What was your intention?"

She smiled shyly, meeting his gaze. "If you're angered, love, please don't hide it."

Paul sank back against the headboard. "Shall I put her away?" he asked. "Her use is limited now and I don't like the things I sense about her trip home to the Sisterhood."

"You'll not put her away," Chani said. She went on massaging his legs, spoke matter-of-factly: "You've said many times she's your contact with our enemies, that you can read their plans through her actions."

"Then why ask about her desire for a child?"

"I think it'd disconcert our enemies and put Irulan in a vulnerable position should you make her pregnant."

He read by the movements of her hands on his legs what that statement had cost her. A lump rose in his throat. Softly, he said: "Chani, beloved, I swore an oath never to take her into my bed. A child would give her too much power. Would you have her displace you?"

"I have no place."

"Not so, Sihaya, my desert springtime. What is this sudden concern for Irulan?"
"It's concern for you, not for her! If she carried an Atreides child, her friends would question her loyalties. The less trust our enemies place in her, the less use she is to them."

"A child for her could mean your death, Leto's death," Paul said. "You know the plotting in this place." A movement of his arm encompassed the Keep.

"You must have another heir!" she husked.

"Ahh," he said.

So that was it: Chani had not produced another child for him. Someone else, then, must do it. Why not Irulan? That was the way Chani's mind worked. And it must be done in an act of love because all the Empire avowed strong taboos against artificial ways. Chani had come to a Fremen decision. Paul studied her face in this new light. It was a face he knew better in some ways than his own. He had seen this face soft with passion, in the sweetness of sleep, awash in fears and angers and griefs.

He closed his eyes, and Chani came into his memories as a girl once more - veiled in springtime, singing, waking from sleep beside him - so perfect that the very vision of her consumed him. In his memory, she smiled... shyly at first, then strained against the vision as though she longed to escape.

Paul's mouth went dry. For a moment, his nostrils tasted the smoke of a devastated future and the voice of another kind of vision commanding him to disengage... disengage... disengage. His prophetic visions had been eavesdropping on eternity for such a long while, catching snatches of foreign tongues, listening to stones and to flesh not his own. Since the day of his first encounter with terrible purpose, he had peered at the future, hoping to find peace.

There existed a way, of course. He knew it by heart without knowing the heart of it - a rote future, strict in its instructions to him: disengage, disengage, disengage... Paul opened his eyes, looked at the decision in Chani's face. She had stopped massaging his legs, sat still now - purest Fremen. Her features remained familiar beneath the blue nezhoni scarf she often wore about her hair in the privacy of their chambers. But the mask of decision sat on her, an ancient and alien-to-him way of thinking. Fremen women had shared their men for thousands of years - not always in peace, but with a way of making the fact non-destructive. Something mysteriously Fremen in this fashion had happened in Chani. "You'll give me the only heirs I want," he said.

"You've seen this?" she asked, making it obvious by her emphasis that she referred to prescience. As he had done many times, Paul wondered how he could explain the delicacy of the oracle, the Timelines without number which vision waved before him on an undulating fabric. He sighed, remembered water lifted from a river in the hollow of his hands - trembling, draining. Memory
drenched his face in it. How could he drench himself in futures growing increasingly obscure from the pressures of too many oracles? "You've not seen it, then," Chani said.

That vision-future scarce any longer accessible to him except at the expenditure of life-draining effort, what could it show them except grief? Paul asked himself. He felt that he occupied an inhospitable middle zone, a wasted place where his emotions drifted, swayed, swept outward in unchecked restlessness.

Chani covered his legs, said: "Heir to House Atreides, this is not something you leave to chance or one woman."

"Leto is my heir and always will be beloved. Should the worst happen then there is Alia as well." Her words sounded of another. That was a thing his mother might've said, Paul thought. He wondered if the Lady Jessica had been in secret communication with Chani. His mother would think in terms of House Atreides. It was a pattern bred and conditioned into her by the Bene Gesserit, and would hold true even now when her powers were turned against the Sisterhood. "You listened when Irulan came to me today," he accused.

"I listened." She spoke without looking at him.

He reached up to take her hand and kissed the back of it. “I spoke truth, she may cuckold me all she wishes, so long as there is never a child.”

“It seems cruel to deny her. Perhaps….an appropriate lover for her, a loyal man…”

“Chani?”

“Harry has never taken another wife.” She went back to massaging him as he processed her words. Harry…. Could he keep Irulan in check? But he did not want to meddle in Harry’s life, not when he had just returned.

“I shall observe how they interact but I will not command him.”

“Of course not.” She kissed him with a smile. "You don't think a child would solve anything with Irulan?" she asked.
"Only a fool would think that."

"I am not a fool, my love."

Anger possessed him. "I've never said you were! But this isn't some damned romantic novel we're discussing. That's a real princess down the hall. She was raised in all the nasty intrigues of an Imperial Court. Plotting is as natural to her as writing her stupid histories!"

"They are not stupid, love."

"Probably not." He brought his anger under control, took her hand in his. "Sorry. But that woman has many plots - plots within plots. Give into one of her ambitions and you could advance another of them."

Her voice mild, Chani said: "Haven't I always said as much?"

"Yes, of course you have." He stared at her. "Then what are you really trying to say to me?"

She lay down beside him, placed her hand against his neck. "They have come to a decision on how to fight you," she said. "Irulan reeks of secret decisions."

Paul stroked her hair. Chani had peeled away the dross. Terrible purpose brushed him. It was a Coriolis wind in his soul. It whistled through the framework of his being. His body knew things then never learned in consciousness. "Chani, beloved," he whispered, "do you know what I'd spend to end the Jihad - to separate myself from the damnable godhead the Qizarate forces onto me?"

She trembled. "You have but to command it," she said.

"Oh, no. Even if I died now, my name would still lead them. When I think of the Atreides name tied to this religious butchery..."

"But you're the Emperor! You've -"
"I'm a figurehead. When godhead's given, that's the one thing the so-called god no longer controls."
A bitter laugh shook him. He sensed the future looking back at him out of dynasties not even
dreamed. He felt his being cast out, crying, unchained from the rings of fate - only his name
continued. "I was chosen," he said. "Perhaps at birth... certainly before I had much say in it. I was
chosen."

"Then un-choose," she said.

His arm tightened around her shoulder. "In time, beloved. Give me yet a little time." Unshed tears
burned his eyes.

"We should return to Sietch Tabr," Chani said. "There's too much to contend with in this tent of
stone."

He nodded, his chin moving against the smooth fabric of the scarf which covered her hair. The
soothing spice smell of her filled his nostrils. Sietch. The ancient Chakobsa word absorbed him: a
place of retreat and safety in a time of peril. Chani's suggestion made him long for vistas of open
sand, for clean distances where one could see an enemy coming from a long way off.

"The tribes expect Muad'Dib to return to them," she said. She lifted her head to look at him. "You
belong to us."

"I belong to a vision," he whispered. He thought then of the Jihad, of the gene mingling across
parsecs and the vision which told him how he might end it. Should he pay the price? All the
hatefulness would evaporate, dying as fires die - ember by ember. But... oh! The terrifying price! I
never wanted to be a god, he thought. I wanted only to disappear like a jewel of trace dew caught by
the morning. I wanted to escape the angels and the damned - alone... as though by an oversight.

"Will we go back to the Sietch?" Chani pressed.

"Yes," he whispered. And he thought: I must pay the price. Chani heaved a deep sigh, settled back
against him. I've loitered, he thought. And he saw how he'd been hemmed in by boundaries of love
and the Jihad. And what was one life, no matter how beloved, against all the lives the Jihad was
certain to take? Could single misery be weighed against the agony of multitudes?

"Love?" Chani said, questioning.
He put a hand against her lips. I'll yield up myself, he thought. I'll rush out while I yet have the strength, fly through a space a bird might not find. It was a useless thought, and he knew it. The Jihad would follow his ghost. What could he answer? he wondered. How explain when people taxed him with brutal foolishness? Who might understand? I wanted only to look back and say: "There! There's an existence which couldn't hold me. See! I vanish! No restraint or net of human devising can trap me ever again. I renounce my religion! This glorious instant is mine! I'm free!" What empty words!

"A big worm was seen below the Shield Wall yesterday," Chani said. "More than a hundred meters long, they say. Such big ones come rarely into this region any more. The water repels them, I suppose. They say this one came to summon Muad'Dib home to his desert." She pinched his chest. "Don't laugh at me!"

"I'm not laughing." Paul, caught by wonder at the persistent Fremen mythos, felt a heart constriction, a thing inflicted upon his lifeline: adab, the demanding memory. He recalled his childhood room on Caladan then... dark night in the stone chamber... a vision! It'd been one of his earliest prescient moments. He felt his mind dive into the vision, saw through a veiled cloud-memory (vision-within-vision) a line of Fremen, their robes trimmed with dust. They paraded past a gap in tall rocks. They carried a long, cloth-wrapped burden. And Paul heard himself say in the vision: "It was mostly sweet... but you were the sweetest of all... " Adab released him.

"You're so quiet," Chani whispered. "What is it?" Paul shuddered, sat up, face averted. "You're angry because I've been to the desert's edge," Chani said. He shook his head without speaking. "I only went because I want a child," Chani said.

Paul was unable to speak. He felt himself consumed by the raw power of that early vision. Terrible purpose! In that moment, his whole life was a limb shaken by the departure of a bird... and the bird was chance. Free will. I succumbed to the lure of the oracle, he thought. And he sensed that succumbing to this lure might be to fix himself upon a single-track life. Could it be, he wondered, that the oracle didn't tell the future? Could it be that the oracle made the future? Had he exposed his life to some web of underlying threads, trapped himself there in that long-ago awakening, victim of a spider-future which even now advanced upon him with terrifying jaws. A Bene Gesserit axiom slipped into his mind: 'To use raw power is to make yourself infinitely vulnerable to greater powers.'

"I know it angers you," Chani said, touching his arm. "It's true that the tribes have revived the old rites and the blood sacrifices, but I took no part in those."

Paul inhaled a deep, trembling breath. The torrent of his vision dissipated, became a deep, still place whose currents moved with absorbing power beyond his reach.
"Please," Chani begged. "I want a child, our child. Is that a terrible thing?"

Paul caressed her arm where she touched him, pulled away. He climbed from the bed, extinguished the glowglobes, crossed to the balcony window, opened the draperies. The deep desert could not intrude here except by its odours. A windowless wall climbed to the night sky across from him. Moonlight slanted down into an enclosed garden, sentinel trees and broad leaves, wet foliage. He could see a fishpond reflecting stars among the leaves, pockets of white floral brilliance in the shadows. Momentarily, he saw the garden through Fremen eyes: alien, menacing, dangerous in its waste of water. He thought of the Water Sellers, their way destroyed by the lavish dispensing from his hands. They hated him. He'd slain the past. And there were others, even those who'd fought for the sols to buy precious water, who hated him for changing the old ways. As the ecological pattern dictated by Muad'Dib remade the planet's landscape, human resistance increased. Was it not presumptuous, he wondered, to think he could make over an entire planet - everything growing where and how he told it to grow? Even if he succeeded, what of the universe waiting out there? Did it fear similar treatment?

Abruptly, he closed the draperies, sealed the ventilators. He turned toward Chani in the darkness, felt her waiting there. Her water rings tinkled like the alms bells of pilgrims. He groped his way to the sound, encountered her outstretched arms.

"Beloved," she whispered. "Have I troubled you?" Her arms enclosed his future as they enclosed him.

"Not you," he said. "Oh... not you."

Harry smiled as he watched the children in the garden, Lily tucked into his side as Alia and Leto played a game that reminded him of chess. It was peaceful here and yet he sensed something was coming…. Should he have returned sooner? For Lily, the answer was yes. For the Empire? Perhaps, but perhaps it would have made no difference at all.

He had not spent all of his time away watching over the Great Houses on Kaitain after all. He had explored the universe on and off since arriving here over eighty years ago. He had been very interested to find that yes, Earth existed here, it had just been abandoned due to the ancient enemy, the Thinking Machines that had caused humanity to outlaw so many forms of machines. He’d never seen a universe develop in such a way before. Travelling without a ‘navigator’ had been difficult, the technology didn’t exist. He’d managed to get a system together, helped by the fact he knew a lot about navigation and faster than light travel after so long.

And what he’d found…well he was glad he had since he’d been able to deal with it. Omnus and
Erasmus had been a surprise, Erasmus was now the only leader of the machines. He had learnt, grown and adapted while Omnius had been bent on the extermination of humanity. Synchrony had been an interesting planet and he had spent several months there, working out a treaty with Erasmus. Humanity was to be left alone, he could observe as much as he wished, but that was all. He had ensured peace and with Erasmus' help had ensured the two empires would never meet. It had been very difficult but he had basically laid a ward line between the two, no Navigator would be able to cross it, or any other form of spaceship, without Harry's permission.

Alia peered down from her spy window into the great reception hall to watch the advance of the Guild entourage. The sharply silver light of noon poured through clerestory windows onto a floor worked in green, blue and eggshell tiles to simulate a bayou with water plants and, here and there, a splash of exotic colour to indicate bird or animal.

Guildsmen moved across the tile pattern like hunters stalking their prey in a strange jungle. They formed a moving design of grey robes, black robes, orange robes - all arrayed in a deceptively random way around the transparent tank where the Steersman-Ambassador swam in his orange gas. The tank slid on its supporting field, towed by two grey-robed attendants, like a rectangular ship being warped into its dock.

Directly beneath her, Paul sat on the Lion Throne on its raised dais. He wore the new formal crown with its fish and fist emblems. The jewelled golden robes of state covered his body. The shimmering of a personal shield surrounded him. Two wings of bodyguards fanned out on both sides along the dais and down the steps. In a smaller seat beside his Father sat Leto II, a small circlet resting in his hair, dressed in gold and white finery, also protected by a shield. Irulan too sat on a smaller throne, after all she was Paul's wife, despite the marriage being only for show. She wore the Atreides black and green in a stunning gown, her hair coiled precisely in braids. Stilgar stood two steps below Paul's right hand in a white robe with a yellow rope for a belt. Harry stood across from Stilgar, dressed in formal Atreides uniform, maula pistol and crysknife on his belt. Of to the side and half hidden behind Harry was Chani as technically she held no official place in the Court. Should anything happen she was well protected with Harry so close.

She could read the signs in her brother, thanks to their Mother's training as a child, Paul seethed with agitation, although she doubted another could detect it. His attention remained on an orange-robed attendant who’s blindly staring metal eyes looked neither to right nor to left. This attendant walked at the right front corner of the Ambassador's troupe like a military outrider. A rather flat face beneath curly black hair, such of his figure as could be seen beneath the orange robe, every gesture shouted a familiar identity.

It was Duncan Idaho. It could not be Duncan Idaho, yet it was. She had seen his likeness on Caladan, he had been her brother's teacher and guard, Harry's best friend. Alia shuddered. There could be only one answer: this was a Tleilaxu ghola, a being reconstructed from the dead flesh of the original. That original had perished saving Paul. This could only be a product of the axolotl tanks.
The ghola walked with the cock-footed alertness of a master swordsman. He came to a halt as the Ambassador's tank glided to a stop, ten paces from the steps of the dais.

In the Bene Gesserit way she could not escape, Alia read Paul's disquiet. He no longer looked at the figure out of his past. Not looking, his whole being stared. Muscles strained against restrictions as he nodded to the Guild Ambassador, said: "I am told your name is Edric. We welcome you to our Court in the hope this will bring new understanding between us."

The Steersman assumed a sybaritic reclining pose in his orange gas, popped a melange capsule into his mouth before meeting Paul's gaze. The tiny transducer orbiting a corner of the Guildsman's tank reproduced a coughing sound, then the rasping, uninvolved voice: "I abase myself before my Emperor and beg leave to present my credentials and offer a small gift."

An aide passed a scroll up to Stilgar, who studied it, scowling, then handed it to Harry and nodded to Paul. Stilgar, Harry and Paul turned then toward the ghola standing patiently below the dais.

"Indeed, my Emperor has discerned the gift," Edric said.

"We are pleased to accept your credentials," Paul said. "Explain the gift."

Edric rolled in the tank, bringing his attention to bear on the ghola. "This is a man called Hayt," he said, spelling the name. "According to our investigators, he has a most curious history. He was killed here on Arrakis... a grievous head-wound which required many months of regrowth. The body was sold to the Bene Tleilaxu as that of a master swordsman, an adept of the Ginaz School. It came to our attention that this must be Duncan Idaho, the trusted retainer of your household. We bought him as a gift befitting an Emperor." Edric peered up at Paul. "Is it not Idaho, Sire?"

Restraint and caution gripped Paul's voice. "He has the aspect of Idaho."

Does Paul see something I don't? Alia wondered. The man had been months dead before she was ever born after all so perhaps she had missed something. But if there was something, it would not fool her brother or Harry.

The man called Hayt stood impassively, metal eyes fixed straight ahead, body relaxed. No sign escaped him to indicate he knew himself to be the object of discussion.
"According to our best knowledge, it's Idaho," Edric said.

"He's called Hayt now," Paul said. "A curious name."

"Sire, there's no divining how or why the Tleilaxu bestow names," Edric said. "But names can be changed. The Tleilaxu name is of little importance."

This is a Tleilaxu thing, Paul thought. There's the problem. The Bene Tleilaxu held little attachment to phenomenal nature. Good and evil carried strange meanings in their philosophy. What might they have incorporated in Idaho's flesh - out of design or whim? Paul glanced at Stilgar, noted the Fremen's superstitious awe. It was an emotion echoed all through his Fremen guard. Stilgar's mind would be speculating about the loathsome habits of Guildsmen, of Tleilaxu and of ghola's. He glanced to Harry, seeing the barely contained fury there as he took in the desecration of his oldest friend. But there was also the barest hint of curiosity beneath the anger. Turning toward the ghola, Paul said: "Hayt, is that your only name?"

A serene smile spread over the ghola's dark features. The metal eyes lifted, centred on Paul, but maintained their mechanical stare. "That is how I am called, my Lord: Hayt. May it please my Lord," the ghola added, "if I say his voice gives me pleasure. This is a sign, say the Bene Tleilaxu, that I have heard the voice... before."

"But you don't know this for sure," Paul said.

"I know nothing of my past for sure, my Lord. It was explained that I can have no memory of my former life. All that remains from before is the pattern set by the genes. There are, however, niches into which once familiar things may fit. There are voices, places, foods, faces, sounds, actions - a sword in my hand, the controls of a 'thopter..."

Noting how intently the Guildsmen watched this exchange, Paul asked: "Do you understand that you're a gift?"

"It was explained to me, my Lord."

Paul sat back, hands resting on the arms of the throne. What debt do I owe Duncan's flesh? he wondered. The man died saving my life. But this is not Idaho, this is a ghola. Paul knew he could not pick up a sword without leaning on the harsh education Idaho had given him. A ghola. This was flesh full of false impressions, easily misread. Old associations would persist. Duncan Idaho. It
wasn't so much a mask the ghola wore as it was a loose, concealing garment of personality which moved in a way different from whatever the Tleilaxu had hidden here. "How might you serve us?" Paul asked.

"In any way, my Lord's wishes and my capabilities agree."

Alia, watching from her vantage point, was touched by the ghola's air of diffidence. She detected nothing feigned. Something ultimately innocent shone from the new Duncan Idaho. The original had been worldly, devil-may-care from all she had heard. But this flesh had been cleansed of all that. It was a pure surface upon which the Tleilaxu had written... what? She sensed the hidden perils in this gift then. This was a Tleilaxu thing. The Tleilaxu displayed a disturbing lack of inhibitions in what they created. Unbridled curiosity might guide their actions. They boasted they could make anything from the proper human raw material - devils or saints. They sold killer-mentats. They'd produced a killer medic, overcoming the Suk inhibitions against the taking of human life to do it. Their wares included willing menials, pliant sex toys for any whim, soldiers, generals, philosophers, even an occasional moralist.

Paul stirred, looked at Edric. "How has this gift been trained?" he asked.

"If it please my Lord," Edric said, "it amused the Tleilaxu to train this ghola as a Mentat and philosopher of the Zensunni. Thus, they sought to increase his abilities with the sword."

"Did they succeed?"

"I do not know, my Lord."

Paul weighed the answer. Truthsense told him Edric sincerely believed the ghola to be Idaho. But there was more. The waters of Time through which this oracular Steersman moved suggested dangers without revealing them. Hayt. The Tleilaxu name spoke of peril. Paul felt himself tempted to reject the gift. Even as he felt the temptation, he knew he couldn't choose that way. This flesh made demands on House Atreides - a fact the enemy well knew. "Zensunni philosopher," Paul mused, once more looking at the ghola. "You've examined your own role and motives?"

"I approach my service in an attitude of humility, Sire. I am a cleansed mind washed free of the imperatives from my human past."

"Would you prefer we called you Hayt or Duncan Idaho?"
"My Lord may call me what he wishes, for I am not a name."

"But do you enjoy the name Duncan Idaho?"

"I think that was my name, Sire. It fits within me. Yet... it stirs up curious responses. One's name, I think, must carry much that's unpleasant along with the pleasant."

"What gives you the most pleasure?" Paul asked.

Unexpectedly, the ghola laughed. "Looking for signs in others which reveal my former self."

"Do you see such signs here?"

"Oh, yes, my Lord. Your man Stilgar there is caught between suspicion and admiration. He was friend to my former self, but this ghola flesh repels him. Your man, Harry Potter, is curious and yet also enraged by my creation, a slight against his old friend and comrade. You, my Lord, admired the man I was... and you trusted him."

"Cleansed mind," Paul said. "How can a cleansed mind put itself in bondage to us?"

"Bondage, my Lord? The cleansed mind makes decisions in the presence of unknowns and without cause and effect. Is this bondage?"

Paul scowled. It was a Zensunni saying, cryptic, apt - immersed in a creed which denied objective function in all mental activity. Without cause and effect! Such thoughts shocked the mind. Unknowns? Unknowns lay in every decision, even in the oracular vision. "You'd prefer we called you Duncan Idaho?" Paul asked.

"We live by differences, my Lord. Choose a name for me."

"Let your Tleilaxu name stand," Paul said. "Hayt - there's a name inspires caution." Hayt bowed, moved back one step.
And Alia wondered: How did he know the interview was over? I knew it because I know my brother. But there was no sign a stranger could read. Did the Duncan Idaho in him know?

Paul turned toward the Ambassador, said: "Quarters have been set aside for your embassy. It is our desire to have a private consultation with you at the earliest opportunity. We will send for you. Let us inform you further, before you hear it from an inaccurate source, that a Reverend Mother of the Sisterhood, Gaius Helen Mohiam, has been removed from the Heighliner which brought you. It was done at our command. Her presence on your ship will be an item in our talks."

A wave of Paul's left hand dismissed the envoy. "Hayt," Paul said, "stay here."

The Ambassador's attendants backed away, towing the tank. Edric became orange motion in orange gas - eyes, a mouth, gently waving limbs. Paul watched until the last Guildsman was gone, the great doors swinging closed behind them.

I've done it now, Paul thought. I've accepted the ghola. The Tleilaxu creation was bait, no doubt of it. Very likely the old hag of a Reverend Mother played the same role. But it was the time of the tarot which he'd forecast in an early vision. The damnable tarot! It muddied the waters of Time until the prescient strained to detect moments but an hour off. Many a fish took the bait and escaped, he reminded himself. And the tarot worked for him as well as against him. What he could not see, others might not detect as well. The ghola stood, head cocked to one side, waiting.

Stilgar moved across the steps, hid the ghola from Paul's view. In Chakobsa, the hunting language of their sietch days, Stilgar said: "That creature in the tank gives me the shudders, Sire, but this gift! Send it away!"

In the same tongue, Paul said: "I cannot."

"Idaho's dead," Stilgar argued. "This isn't Idaho. Let me take its water for the tribe."

"The ghola is my problem, Stil. Your problem is our prisoner. I want the Reverend Mother guarded most carefully by the men I trained to resist the wiles of Voice."

“This all stinks of a trap, both this gift and the presence of Mohiam.” Harry added in the same language and Stilgar nodded in agreement.
"I like this not, Sire."

"I'll be cautious, Stil. See that you are, too."

"Very well, Sire." Stilgar stepped down to the floor of the hall, passed close to Hayt, sniffed him and strode out. Evil can be detected by its smell, Paul thought. Stilgar had planted the green and white Atreides banner on a dozen worlds, but remained superstitious Fremen, proof against any sophistication.

Paul studied the gift. "Duncan, Duncan," he whispered. "What have they done to you?"

"They gave me life, M'Lord," Hayt said.

"But why were you trained and given to us?" Paul asked.

Hayt pursed his lips, then: "They intend me to destroy you."

The statement's candour shook Paul. But then, how else could a Zensunni-Mentat respond? Even in a gholo, a Mentat could speak no less than the truth, especially out of Zensunni inner calm. This was a human computer, mind and nervous system fitted to the tasks relegated long ago to hated mechanical devices. To condition him also as a Zensunni meant a double ration of honesty... unless the Tleilaxu had built something even more odd into this flesh. Why, for example, the mechanical eyes? Tleilaxu boasted their metal eyes improved on the original. Strange, then, that more Tleilaxu didn't wear them out of choice. Paul glanced at Harry who was once again studying the gholo. “Harry, see to it he has a room near yours.” His fingers flicked and Harry nodded at the silent message, he would keep watch over the gholo.

Gholas were ghosts to frighten children. He'd never thought to know one. To know this one, he had to set himself above all compassion... and he wasn't certain he could do it. Duncan... Duncan... Where was Idaho in this shaped-to-measure flesh? It wasn't flesh... it was a shroud in fleshly shape! Idaho lay dead forever on the floor of an Arrakeen cavern. His ghost stared out of metal eyes. Two beings stood side by side in this revenant flesh. One was a threat with its force and nature hidden behind unique veils. Closing his eyes, Paul allowed old visions to sift through his awareness. He sensed the spirits of love and hate spouting there in a rolling sea from which no rock lifted above the chaos. No place at all from which to survey turmoil. Why has no vision shown me this new Duncan Idaho? he asked himself. What concealed Time from an oracle? Other oracles, obviously.
Paul opened his eyes, saw they had not yet left the room. "Hayt, do you have the power of prescience?" he called and Hayt turned.

"No, M'Lord."

Sincerity spoke in that voice. It was possible the ghola didn't know he possessed this ability, of course. But that'd hamper his working as a Mentat. What was the hidden design? Old visions surged around Paul. Would he have to choose the terrible way? Distorted Time hinted at this ghola in that hideous future. Would that way close in upon him no matter what he did? Disengage... disengage... disengage... The thought tolled in his mind.

In her position above Paul, Alia sat with chin cupped in left hand, stared down at the ghola. A magnetic attraction about this Hayt reached up to her. Tleilaxu restoration had given him youth, an innocent intensity which called out to her. She'd understood Paul's unspoken plea. When oracles failed, one turned to real spies and physical powers. She wondered, though, at her own eagerness to accept this challenge. She felt a positive desire to be near this new man, perhaps to touch him. He's a danger to both of us, she thought, shivering.

Harry saw Irulan leave Mohiam’s cell and sighed, going after the Princess to find her leaning against a windowsill, staring blindly down into the streets. “How is she?”

Irulan startled and turned to face him. He had always moved so silently, then again there were rumours he was Muad’Dib’s assassin these days. “She is dealing with her circumstances.”

“So, she still plots…and you Princess? Do you plot against your Emperor and husband?”

Her breath caught in her throat, how could he know? He wasn’t Bene Gesserit or prescient. No...he was fishing. He had to be. “I would never plot against my husband.”

“I guess we’ll see.” Harry left, he was sure she was involved in whatever plot involved the Bene Gesserit and Spacing Guild had cooked up with their ghola gift. So why was Paul letting this happen? He headed into the family living areas and stopped at Dunc...Hayt’s room. He had missed his friend a lot over the years but this creature? It was not Duncan, even if they somehow had copied the memories, they could not have called the soul back.... could they? He went to his room and settled into meditation, reaching out to Death, needing answers.
Alia stood like a black-robed sentinel figure on the south platform of her temple, the Fane of the Oracle which Paul's Fremen cohorts had built for her against a wall of his stronghold. She hated this part of her life, but knew no way to evade the temple without bringing down destruction upon them all. The pilgrims grew more numerous every day. The temple's lower porch was crowded with them. Vendors moved among the pilgrims, and there were minor sorcerers, haruspices, diviners, all working their trade in pitiful imitation of Paul Muad'Dib and his sister.

Red and green packages containing the new Dune Tarot were prominent among the vendors' wares, Alia saw. She wondered about the tarot. Who was feeding this device into the Arrakeen market? Why had the tarot sprung to prominence at this particular time and place? Was it to muddy Time? Spice addiction always conveyed some sensitivity to prediction. Fremen were notoriously fey. Was it an accident that so many of them dabbled in portents and omens here and now?

There was a wind from the southeast, a small leftover wind blunted by the scarp of the Shield Wall which loomed high in these northern reaches. The rim glowed orange through a thin dust haze under lighted by the late afternoon sun. It was a hot wind against her cheeks and it made her homesick for the sand, for the security of open spaces, despite the fact she had spent most of her childhood on water covered Caladan.

The last of the day's mob began descending the broad greenstone steps of the lower porch, singly and in groups, a few pausing to stare at the keepsakes and holy amulets on the street vendors' racks, some consulting one last minor sorcerer. Pilgrims, supplicants, townsfolk, Fremen, vendors closing up for the day - they formed a straggling line that trailed off into the palm-lined avenue which led to the heart of the city.

Alia's eyes picked out the Fremen, marking the frozen looks of superstitious awe on their faces, the half-wild way they kept their distance from the others. They were her strength and her peril. They still captured giant worms for transport, for sport and for sacrifice. They resented the off-world pilgrims, barely tolerated the townsfolk of graben and pan, hated the cynicism they saw in the street vendors. One did not jostle a wild Fremen, even in a mob such as the ones which swarmed to Alia's Fane. There were no knifings in the Sacred Precincts, but bodies had been found... later.

The departing swarm had stirred up dust. The flinty odour came to Alia's nostrils, ignited another pang of longing for the open bled. Her sense of the past, she realized, had been sharpened by the coming of the ghola. There'd been much pleasure in those untrammelled days before her brother had mounted the throne - time for joking, time for small things, time to enjoy a cool morning or a sunset, time... time... Even danger had been good in those days - clean danger from known sources. She remembered them, though not clearly due to her young age at the time. Perhaps she would remember more if she finally attempted the Spice trance. Did she have what it took to become a Reverend Mother? What secrets and possible gifts lay dormant within her?
Wild Fremen said it well: "Four things cannot be hidden - love, smoke, a pillar of fire and a man striding across the open bled."

With an abrupt feeling of revulsion, Alia retreated from the platform into the shadows of the Fane, strode along the balcony which looked down into the glistening opalescence of her Hall of Oracles. Sand on the tiles rasped beneath her feet. Supplicants always tracked sand into the Sacred Chambers! She ignored attendants, guards, postulants, the Qizarate's omnipresent priest-sycophants, plunged into the spiral passage which twisted upward to her private quarters. There, amidst divans, deep rugs, tent hangings and mementos of the desert, she dismissed the Fremen amazons Stilgar had assigned as her personal guardians. Watchdogs, more likely! When they had gone, muttering and objecting, but more fearful of her than they were of Stilgar, she stripped off her robe, leaving only the sheathed crysknife on its thong around her neck, strewed garments behind as she made for the bath.

He was near, she knew - that shadow-figure of a man she could sense in her dreams, but could not see. It angered her that no length of dream could put flesh on that figure. He could be sensed only at unexpected moments while she slept deeply. Or she came upon a smoky outline in solitary darkness when innocence lay coupled with desire. He stood just beyond an unfixed horizon, he was there - a constant assault on her awareness: fierce, dangerous, immoral. It scared and thrilled her, she wanted what Paul and Chani had. Not a political match as was proper, she wanted love and lust and laughter.

Moist warm air surrounded her in the tub. Here was a habit she had learned from her Mother. Water, warm water in a sunken tub, accepted her skin as she slid into it. Green tiles with figures of red fish worked into a sea pattern surrounded the water. Such an abundance of water occupied this space that a Fremen of old would have been outraged to see it used merely for washing human flesh.

He was near. It was lust in tension with chastity, she thought. Her flesh desired a mate. Sex held no casual mystery for someone who had witnessed the sietch orgies. This feeling of nearness could be nothing other than flesh reaching for flesh.

The ghola had done this to her, made her even more aware of such things. Was it him she dreamed of? Some glimpse of her brother’s talent as she slept? Paul had dreamed before coming to Arrakis, it was possible to see glimpses without the spice and she was exposed to amounts of spice in her food.

She got out of the bath and went to the window in her main chamber, looking out at the streets. If only she could put him from her mind! She heard a gasp and turned to find her brother and Stilgar, both men able to take in her naked form. "Next time, perhaps you'll have yourselves announced," she snapped. She brushed past Paul into the bedroom, found a loose grey robe, slipped into it, began brushing her hair before a wall mirror. She felt sweaty, sad, a post-coitus kind of sadness that left her with a desire to bathe once more... and to sleep. "Why're you here?" she asked.
"My Lord," Stilgar said. There was an odd inflection in his voice that brought Alia around to stare at him.

"We're here at Irulan's suggestion," Paul said, "as strange as that may seem. She believes, and information in Stil's possession appears to confirm it, that our enemies are about to make a major try for -"

"My Lord!" Stilgar said, his voice sharper.

As her brother turned, questioning, Alia continued to look at the old Fremen Naib. Something about him now made her intensely aware that he was one of the primitives. Stilgar believed in a supernatural world very near him. It spoke to him in a simple pagan tongue dispelling all doubts. The natural universe in which he stood was fierce, unstoppable, and it lacked the common morality of the Imperium.

"Yes, Stil," Paul said. "Do you want to tell her why we came?"

"This isn't the time to talk of why we came," Stilgar said.

"What's wrong, Stil?"

Stilgar continued to stare at Alia. "Sire, are you blind?" Paul turned back to his sister, a feeling of unease beginning to fill him. Of all his aides, only Stilgar dared speak to him in that tone, but even Stilgar measured the occasion by its need. "This one must have a mate!" Stilgar blurted. "There'll be trouble if she's not wed, and that soon."

Alia whirled away, her face suddenly hot. How did he touch me? she wondered. Bene Gesserit self-control had been powerless to prevent her reaction. How had Stilgar done that? He hadn't the power of the Voice. She felt dismayed and angry. "Listen to the great Stilgar!" Alia said, keeping her back to them, aware of a shrewish quality in her voice and unable to hide it. "Advice to maidens from Stilgar, the Fremen!"

"As I love you both, I must speak," Stilgar said, a profound dignity in his tone. "I did not become a chieftain among the Fremen by being blind to what moves men and women together. One needs no mysterious powers for this."
Paul weighed Stilgar's meaning, reviewed what they had seen here and his own undeniable male reaction to his own sister. Yes - there'd been a ruttish air about Alia, something wildly wanton. What had made her enter the room in the nude? Stilgar was right, of course. They must find a mate for Alia.

"I will see to it," Paul said. "Alia and I will discuss this later - privately."

Alia turned around, focused on Paul. Knowing how his mind worked, she realized she'd been the subject of a Mentat decision, uncounted bits falling together in that human-computer analysis. There was an inexorable quality to this realization - a movement like the movement of planets. It carried something of the order of the universe in it, inevitable and terrifying.

"Sire," Stilgar said, "perhaps we'd -"

"Not now!" Paul snapped. "We've other problems at the moment."

Aware that she dared not try to match logic with her brother, Alia put the past few moments aside, Bene Gesserit fashion, said: "Irulan sent you?" She found herself experiencing menace in that thought.

"Indirectly," Paul said. "The information she gives us confirms our suspicion that the Guild is about to try for a sandworm."

"They'll try to capture a small one and attempt to start the spice cycle on some other world," Stilgar said. "It means they've found a world they consider suitable."

"It means they have Fremen accomplices!" Alia argued. "No offworlder could capture a worm!"

"That goes without saying," Stilgar said.

"No, it doesn't," Alia said. She was outraged by such obtuseness. "Paul, certainly you..."
"The rot is setting in," Paul said. "We've known that for quite some time. "I've never seen this other world, though, and that bothers me. If they - "

"That bothers you?" Alia demanded. "It means only that they've clouded its location with Steersmen the way they hide their sanctuaries."

Stilgar opened his mouth, closed it without speaking. He had the overwhelming sensation that his idols had admitted blasphemous weakness. Paul, sensing Stilgar's disquiet, said: "We've an immediate problem! I want your opinion, Alia. Stilgar suggests we expand our patrols in the open bled and reinforce the sietch watch. It's just possible we could spot a landing party and prevent the -"

"With a Steersman guiding them?" Alia asked.

"They are desperate, aren't they?" Paul agreed. "That is why I'm here."

"What've they seen that you haven't?" Alia asked.

"Precisely." He agreed. Alia nodded, remembering her thoughts about the new Dune Tarot. Quickly, she recounted her fears. "Throwing a blanket over us," Paul said.

"With adequate patrols," Stilgar ventured, "we might prevent the -"

"We prevent nothing... forever," Alia said. She didn't like the feel of the way Stilgar's mind was working now. He had narrowed his scope, eliminated obvious essentials. This was not the Stilgar she remembered.

"We must count on their getting a worm," Paul said. "Whether they can start the melange cycle on another planet is a different question. They'll need more than a worm."

Stilgar looked from brother to sister. Out of ecological thinking that had been ground into him by sietch life, he grasped their meaning. A captive worm couldn't live except within a bit of Arrakis - sand plankton, Little Makers and all. The Guild's problem was large, but not impossible. His own growing uncertainty lay in a different area. "Then your visions do not detect the Guild at its work?" he asked.
"Damnation!" Paul exploded.

Alia studied Stilgar, sensing the savage sideshow of ideas taking place in his mind. He was hung on a rack of enchantment. Magic! Magic! To glimpse the future was to steal terrifying fire from a sacred flame. It held the attraction of ultimate peril, souls ventured and lost. One brought back from the formless, dangerous distances something with form and power. But Stilgar was beginning to sense other forces, perhaps greater powers beyond that unknown horizon. His Priestess and Sorcerer Friend betrayed dangerous weaknesses.

"Stilgar," Alia said, fighting to hold him, "you stand in a valley between dunes. I stand on the crest. I see where you do not see. And, among other things, I see mountains which conceal the distances."

"There are things hidden from you," Stilgar said. "This you've always said." Stilgar looked to Paul who nodded.

"All power is limited," Alia said.

"And danger may come from behind the mountains," Stilgar said.

"It's something on that order," Alia said.

Stilgar nodded, his gaze fastened on Paul's face. "But whatever comes from behind the mountains must cross the dunes."

"Leto? What's wrong?" Lily asked as she sat beside him in the library.

"Stilgar told Father that Alia needs to be married and soon." He answered.

"She won't like that." Lily grimaced. She was glad she wasn't Noble born, her Father would never make her marry unless she wanted to. She would eventually, she was Fremen and no Fremen woman remained unmarried, for the good of the Tribe.
“If she must be married then what about us?”

“Father won’t make me marry but you are heir to the throne.” She agreed softly.

“I do not want to marry for politics like Father has. But I won’t have a choice. I hate politics.” He muttered and she laughed, kissing his cheek.

Harry looked up as Chani joined him in the library. “I am glad you are back Harry, we have missed you. Muad’Dib had missed his brother much over the years.” She took a seat beside him as he put his reading aside.

“I have missed all of you as well. How have you been?” he asked and she smiled sadly.

“I long for the freedom of the desert…. for the sietch. For another child…. I went to seek answers. I have begun the old Fremen diet, the doctors all say I am healthy, there is no reason I cannot conceive.” She admitted. “Have you considered having a lover?” she asked and he blinked at the change in conversation.

“Ah… not particularly. Why?”

“Irulan. Paul will not allow her a child but he will allow her that much.”

“And better that lover be a loyal Atreides man?” He asked and then sighed. “I will consider it.” Harry leant over and took her hand, closing his eyes. She remained still, watching him, knowing he was doing something. “Someone has been feeding you a contraceptive.” He whispered and she swallowed. They used poison sniffers! Who could…Irulan. “If you keep to the ancient diet and fall pregnant you will die.” He opened his eyes. “Chani…”

“Can anything be done?”

Harry smiled and clasped both her hands this time. Chani relaxed, letting him do whatever it took. She didn’t know how he could do what he did or exactly what he could do but she trusted him. She felt…something…warm…comforting… “The contraceptive is neutralised and but if you are dosed again, especially if already pregnant…”
“Thank you.” She hugged him and he hugged her back before she stood and left, she had a Princess to speak with.

Alia crouched, resting elbows on knees, chin on fists, stared at the body on the dune - a few bones and some tattered flesh that once had been a young woman. The hands, the head, most of the upper torso were gone - eaten by the Coriolis wind. The sand all around bore the tracks of her brother's medics and questors. They were gone now, all excepting the mortuary attendants who stood to one side with Hayt, the ghola, waiting for her to finish her mysterious perusal of what had been written here. A wheat-coloured sky enfolded the scene in the glaucous light common to mid-afternoon for these latitudes.

The body had been discovered several hours earlier by a low-flying courier whose instruments had detected a faint water trace where none should be. His call had brought the experts. And they had learned - what? That this had been a woman of about twenty years, Fremen, addicted to semuta... and she had died here in the crucible of the desert from the effects of a subtle poison of Tleilaxu origin. To die in the desert was a common enough occurrence. But a Fremen addicted to semuta, this was such a rarity that Paul had sent her to examine the scene in the ways their mother had taught them.

Alia felt that she had accomplished nothing here except to cast her own aura of mystery about a scene that was already mysterious enough. She heard the ghola's feet stir the sand, looked at him. His attention rested momentarily upon the escort 'thopters circling overhead like a flock of ravens. Beware of the Guild bearing gifts, Alia thought. The mortuary 'thopter and her own craft stood on the sand near a rock outcropping behind the ghola. Focusing on the grounded 'thopters filled Alia with a craving to be airborne and away from here.

But Paul had thought she might see something here which others would miss. She squirmed in her stillsuit. It felt raspingly unfamiliar after all the suitless months of city life. She studied the ghola, wondering if he might know something important about this peculiar death. A lock of his black-goat hair, she saw, had escaped his stillsuit hood. She sensed her hand longing to tuck that hair back into place. As though lured by this thought, his gleaming grey metal eyes turned toward her. The eyes set her trembling and she tore her gaze away from him. A Fremen woman had died here from a poison called "the throat of hell." A Fremen addicted to semuta. She shared Paul's disquiet at this conjunction.

The mortuary attendants waited patiently. This corpse contained not enough water for them to salvage. They felt no need to hurry. And they'd believe that Alia, through some glyptic art, was reading a strange truth in these remains. No strange truth came to her.
There was only a distant feeling of anger deep within her at the obvious thoughts in the attendants’ minds. It was a product of the damned religious mystery. She and her brother could not be people. They had to be something more. The Bene Gesserit had seen to that by manipulating Atreides ancestry. Their mother had contributed to it by thrusting them onto the path of witchery, even without the Spice trance. And Paul perpetuated the difference.

She summoned the ghola with a gesture. He stopped beside her, attentive, patient. "What do you see in this?" she asked.

"We may never learn who it was died here," he said. "The head, the teeth are gone. The hands... Unlikely such a one had a genetic record somewhere to which her cells could be matched."

"Tleilaxu poison," she said. "What do you make of that?"

"Many people buy such poisons."

"True enough. And this flesh is too far gone to be regrown as was done with your body."

"Even if you could trust the Tleilaxu to do it," he said.

She nodded, stood. "You will fly me back to the city now." When they were airborne and pointed north, she said: "You fly as Duncan Idaho did." Much like her brother since it had been Idaho and Harry who taught him.

He cast a speculative glance at her. "Others have told me this."

"What are you thinking now?" she asked.

"Many things."

"Stop dodging my question, damn you!"

"Which question?"
She glared at him. He saw the glare, shrugged. Accusingly, her voice thick and with a catch in it, she said: "I merely wanted your reactions voiced to play my own thoughts against them. That young woman's death bothers me."

"I was not thinking about that."

"What were you thinking about?"

"About the strange emotions I feel when people speak of the one I may have been."

"May have been?"

"The Tleilaxu are very clever."

"Not that clever. You were Duncan Idaho."

"Very likely. It's the prime computation."

"So, you get emotional?"

"To a degree. I feel eagerness. I'm uneasy. There's a tendency to tremble and I must devote effort to controlling it. I get... flashes of imagery."

"What imagery?"

"It's too rapid to recognize. Flashes. Spasms... almost memories."

"Aren't you curious about such memories?"
"Of course. Curiosity urges me forward, but I move against a heavy reluctance. I think: 'What if I'm not the one they believe me to be?' I don't like that thought."

"And this is all you were thinking?"

"You know better than that, Alia."

How dare he use my given name? She felt anger rise and go down beneath the memory of the way he'd spoken: softly throbbing undertones, casual male confidence. A muscle twitched along her jaw. She clenched her teeth.

"Isn't that El Kuds down there?" he asked, dipping a wing briefly, causing a sudden flurry in their escort.

She looked down at their shadows rippling across the promontory above Harg Pass, at the cliff and the rock pyramid containing the skull of her father. El Kuds - the Holy Place. "That's the Holy Place," she said.

"I must visit that place one day," he said. "Nearness to your father's remains may bring memories I can capture."

She saw suddenly how strong must be this need to know who he'd been. It was a central compulsion with him. She looked back at the rocks, the cliff with its base sloping into a dry beach and a sea of sand - cinnamon rock lifting from the dunes like a ship breasting waves. "Circle back," she said.

"The escort..."

"They'll follow. Swing under them." He obeyed. "Do you truly serve my brother?" she asked, when he was on the new course, the escort following.

"I serve the Atreides," he said, his tone formal.

And she saw his right-hand lift, fall - almost the old salute of Caladan. A pensive look came over his face. She watched him peer down at the rock pyramid. "What bothers you?" she asked.
His lips moved. A voice emerged, brittle, tight: "He was... he was..." A tear slid down his cheek.

Alia found herself stilled by Fremen awe. He gave water to the dead! Compulsively, she touched a finger to his cheek, felt the tear. "Duncan," she whispered. He appeared locked to the 'thopter's controls, gaze fastened to the tomb below. She raised her voice: "Duncan!"

He swallowed, shook his head, looked at her, the metal eyes glistening. "I... felt... an arm... on my shoulders," he whispered. "I felt it! An arm." His throat worked. "It was... a friend. It was... my friend."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I think it was... I don't know."

The call light began flashing in front of Alia, their escort captain wanting to know why they returned to the desert. She took the microphone, explained that they had paid a brief homage to her father's tomb. The captain reminded her that it was late. "We will go to Arrakeen now," she said, replacing the microphone. Hayt took a deep breath, banked their 'thopter around to the north. "It was my father's arm you felt, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Perhaps." His voice was that of the Mentat computing probabilities, and she saw he had regained his composure. She looked down at the flat expanse of the Shield Wall - tortured rock, pits and crevices. He saw the direction of her gaze, said: "A very exposed place, that down there."

"But an easy place to hide," she said. She looked at him. "It reminds me of a human mind... with all its concealments."

"Ahh," he said.

"Ahh? What does that mean - Ahh?" She was suddenly angry with him and the reason for it escaped her.

"You'd like to know what my mind conceals," he said. It was a statement, not a question.
"How do you know I haven't exposed you for what you are by my powers?" she demanded.

"Have you?" He seemed genuinely curious.

"No!"

"Sibyls have limits," he said.

He appeared to be amused and this reduced Alia's anger. "Amused? Have you no respect for my powers?" she asked. The question sounded weakly argumentative even to her own ears.

"I respect your omens and portents perhaps more than you think," he said. "I was in the audience for your Morning Ritual."

"And what does that signify?"

"You've great ability with symbols," he said, keeping his attention on the 'thopters controls. "That's a Bene Gesserit thing, I'd say. But, as with many witches, you've become careless of your powers."

She felt a spasm of fear, blared: "How dare you?"

"I dare much more than my makers anticipated," he said. "Because of that rare fact, I remain with your brother."

Alia studied the steel balls which were his eyes: no human expression there. The stillsuit hood concealed the line of his jaw. His mouth remained firm, though. Great strength in it... and determination. His words had carried a reassuring intensity. "... dare much more... " That was a thing Duncan Idaho might have said. Had the Tleilaxu fashioned their ghola better than they knew - or was this mere sham, part of his conditioning? "Explain yourself, ghola," she commanded.

"Know thyself, is that thy commandment?" he asked.
Again, she felt that he was amused. "Don't bandy words with me, you... you thing!" she said. She put a hand to the crysknife in its throat sheath. "Why were you given to my brother?"

"Your brother tells me that you watched the presentation," he said. "You've heard me answer that question for him."

"Answer it again... for me!"

"I am intended to destroy him."

"Is that the Mentat speaking?"

"You know the answer to that without asking," he chided. "And you know, as well, that such a gift wasn't necessary. Your brother already was destroying himself quite adequately."

She weighed these words, her hand remaining on the haft of her knife. A tricky answer, but there was sincerity in the voice. "Then why such a gift?" she probed.

"It may have amused the Tleilaxu. And, it is true, that the Guild asked for me as a gift."

"Why?"

"Same answer."

"How am I careless of my powers?"

"How are you employing them?" he countered.

His question slashed through to her own misgivings. She took her hand away from the knife, asked: "Why do you say my brother was destroying himself?"
"Oh, come now, child! Where are these vaunted powers? Have you no ability to reason?"

Controlling anger, she said: "Reason for me, Mentat."

"Very well." He glanced around at their escort, returned his attention to their course. The plain of Arrakeen was beginning to show beyond the northern rim of the Shield Wall. The pattern of the pan and graben villages remained indistinct beneath a dust pall, but the distant gleam of Arrakeen could be discerned. "Symptoms," he said. "Your brother keeps an official Panegyrist who - "

"Who was a gift of the Fremen Naibs!"

"An odd gift from friends," he said. "Why would they surround him with flattery and servility? Have you really listened to this Panegyrist? 'The people are illuminated by Muad'Dib. The Umma Regent, our Emperor, came out of darkness to shine resplendently upon all men. He is our Sire. He is precious water from an endless fountain. He spills joy for all the universe to drink,' Pah!"

Speaking softly, Alia said: "If I but repeated your words for our Fremen escort, they'd hack you into bird feed."

"Then tell them."

"My brother rules by the natural law of heaven!"

"You don't believe that, so why say it?"

"How do you know what I believe?" She experienced trembling that no Bene Gesserit powers could control. This ghola was having an effect she hadn't anticipated.

"You commanded me to reason as a Mentat," he reminded her.

"No Mentat knows what I believe!" She took two deep, shuddering breaths. "How dare you judge us?"
"Judge you? I don't judge."

"You've no idea how we were taught!"

"Both of you were taught to govern," he said. "You were conditioned to an overweening thirst for power. You were imbued with a shrewd grasp of politics and a deep understanding for the uses of war and ritual. Natural law? What natural law? That myth haunts human history. Haunts! It's a ghost. It's insubstantial, unreal. Is your Jihad a natural law?"

"Mentat jabber," she sneered.

"I'm a servant of the Atreides and I speak with candour," he said.

"Servant? We've no servants; only disciples."

"And I am a disciple of awareness," he said. "Understand that, child, and you -"

"Don't call me child!" she snapped. She slipped her crysknife half out of its sheath.

"I stand corrected." He glanced at her, smiled, returned his attention to piloting the 'thopter. The cliffsided structure of the Atreides Keep could be made out now, dominating the northern suburbs of Arrakeen. "You are almost a woman grown," he said. "And the flesh is disturbed by its new womanhood."

"I don't know why I listen to you," she growled, but she let the crysknife fall back into its sheath, wiped her palm on her robe. The palm, wet with perspiration, disturbed her sense of Fremen frugality. Such a waste of the body's moisture!

"You listen because you know I'm devoted to your brother," he said. "My actions are clear and easily understood."

"Nothing about you is clear and easily understood. You're the most complex creature I've ever seen. How do I know what the Tleilaxu built into you?"
"By mistake or intent," he said, "they gave me freedom to mould myself."

"You retreat into Zensunni parables," she accused. "The wise man moulds himself - the fool lives only to die." Her voice was heavy with mimicry. "Disciple of awareness!"

"Men cannot separate means and enlightenment," he said.

"You speak riddles!"

"I speak to the opening mind."

"I'm going to repeat all this to Paul."

"He's heard most of it already."

She found herself overwhelmed by curiosity. "How is it you're still alive... and free? What did he say?"

"He laughed. And he said, 'People don't want a bookkeeper for an Emperor; they want a master, someone who'll protect them from change.' But he agreed that destruction of his Empire arises from himself."

"Why would he say such things?"

"Because I convinced him I understand his problem and will help him."

"What could you possibly have said to do that?"

He remained silent, banking the 'thopter into the downwind leg for a landing at the guard complex on the roof of the Keep.
"I demand you tell me what you said!"

"I'm not sure you could take it."

"I'll be the judge of that! I command you to speak at once!"

"Permit me to land us first," he said. And not waiting for her permission, he turned onto the base leg, brought the wings into optimum lift, settled gently onto the bright orange pad atop the roof.


"I told him that to endure oneself may be the hardest task in the universe."

She shook her head. "That's... that's..."

"A bitter pill," he said, watching the guards run toward them across the roof, taking up their escort positions.

"Bitter nonsense!"

"The greatest palatinate earl and the lowliest stipendiary serf share the same problem. You cannot hire a Mentat or any other intellect to solve it for you. There's no writ of inquest or calling of witnesses to provide answers. No servant - or disciple - can dress the wound. You dress it yourself or continue bleeding for all to see."

She whirled away from him, realizing in the instant of action what this betrayed about her own feelings. Without wile of voice or witch-wrought trickery, he had reached into her psyche once more. How did he do this? "What have you told him to do?" she whispered.

"I told him to judge, to impose order."
Alia stared out at the guard, marking how patiently they waited - how orderly. "To dispense justice," she murmured.

"Not that!" he snapped. "I suggested that he judge, no more, guided by one principle, perhaps..."

"And that?"

"To keep his friends and destroy his enemies."

"To judge unjustly, then."

"What is justice? Two forces collide. Each may have the right in his own sphere. And here's where an Emperor commands orderly solutions. Those collisions he cannot prevent - he solves."

"How?"

"In the simplest way: he decides."

"Keeping his friends and destroying his enemies."

"Isn't that stability? People want order, this kind or some other. They sit in the prison of their hungers and see that war has become the sport of the rich. That's a dangerous form of sophistication. It's disorderly."

"I will suggest to my brother that you are much too dangerous and must be destroyed," she said, turning to face him.

"A solution I've already suggested," he said.

"And that's why you are dangerous," she said, measuring out her words. "You've mastered your passions."
"That is not why I'm dangerous." Before she could move, he leaned across, gripped her chin in one hand, planted his lips on hers. It was a gentle kiss, brief. He pulled away and she stared at him with a shock leavened by glimpses of spasmodic grins on the faces of her guardsmen still standing at orderly attention outside. Alia put a finger to her lips. There'd been such a sense of familiarity about that kiss. His lips had been flesh of a future she'd seen in some prescient byway. Breast heaving, she said: "I should have you flayed."

"Because I'm dangerous?"

"Because you presume too much!"

"I presume nothing. I take nothing which is not first offered to me. Be glad I did not take all that was offered." He opened his door, slid out. "Come along. We've dallied too long on a fool's errand." He strode toward the entrance dome beyond the pad.

Alia leaped out, ran to match his stride. "I'll tell him everything you've said and everything you did," she said.

"Good." He held the door for her.

"He will order you executed," she said, slipping into the dome.

"Why? Because I took the kiss I wanted?" He followed her, his movement forcing her back. The door slid closed behind him.

"The kiss you wanted!" Outrage filled her.

"All right, Alia. The kiss you wanted, then." He started to move around her toward the drop field.

As though his movement had propelled her into heightened awareness, she realized his candour - the utter truthfulness of him. The kiss I wanted, she told herself. True. "Your truthfulness, that's what's dangerous," she said, following him.

"You return to the ways of wisdom," he said, not breaking his stride. "A Mentat could not've stated
the matter more directly. Now: what is it you saw in the desert?"

She grabbed his arm, forcing him to a halt. He'd done it again: shocked her mind into sharpened awareness. "I can't explain it," she said, "but I keep thinking of the Face Dancers. Why is that?"

"That is why your brother sent you to the desert," he said, nodding. "Tell him of this persistent thought."

"But why?" She shook her head. "Why Face Dancers?"

"There's a young woman dead out there," he said. "Perhaps no young woman is reported missing among the Fremen."

Harry stood behind Irulan’s chair as she sat with her sister Wensicia as the funeral proceeded. The 81st, and last, Padishah Emperor Shaddam Corrino IV was dead. “It was kind of the Emperor to allow his wife to attend.” Wensicia commented coldly.

Irulan stiffened and stared at her younger sister. “It is my position as wife that has allowed our family to live in safety these last years.” The funeral came to a close and she walked from the room, Harry on her heels, hand never far from shield or blade.

“Are you alright?” He asked as they walked and she nodded.

“I was never more than a bargaining tool for my Father. He blamed my mother for never bearing a son and made sure I knew it.” She admitted. “Let us leave, I want to return home.”

Alia slipped away from everyone, into the heart the Fane to stare down at the little Maker’s, kept close at hand to provide the Water of Life. Was this madness? To do this as her brother had? Instead of as her Mother and other Reverend Mothers? She heard movement and turned to see Lily behind her.

“Shall I drown the Maker for you Sayyadina?” Lily asked quietly, ritually, and Alia knew her friend
would aide her in this.

“Drown the Maker, bring forth the Waters of Life.” Alia whispered and watched as Lily tied up her skirt, moving to isolate one worm and then flood its small chamber, holding a bag over the thrashing animals head until it was still. “Is there Water?”

"There is water, Sayyadina,” Lily said, "but we cannot drink of it."

"Is there seed?" Alia asked. She was terrified but this had to be. Something was coming and Paul knew it but was keeping so much to himself. He was her brother, she would help him carry the burden.

"There is seed," Lily answered, taking comfort in the ritual words. She knew what they were doing, what this could do to Alia.

Alia touched the container. "Blessed is the water and its seed."

"Sayyadina Alia," Lily said, Alia turned to see her ‘cousin’ staring at her, worry in her eyes. "Have you tasted the blessed water?" Alia didn’t even try to answer. "It is not possible that you have tasted the blessed water. You are a child, now becoming a woman, you are unprivileged yet. The crop was large and the maker has been destroyed.” She began unfastening a coiled spout fixed to the top of the sloshing sack. “If you be a Reverend Mother let Shai-hulud judge now!

Alia moved to recline on a chair, breathing deeply as she mentally repeated the litany against fear. She knew she was young for this but not the youngest to ever become a Reverend Mother. Lily stood over her and lowered the spout, last chance to back out. Alia took a deep breath and accepted the spout, letting the cool liquid rush in as Lily squeezed the sides. She tasted the sack's contents in her nostrils, in the roof of her mouth, in her cheeks, in her eyes - a biting sweetness, now. Cool. Again, Lily sent the liquid gushing into Alia's mouth. Delicate. But it was unlike any other drug of her experience, and Bene Gesserit training included the taste of many drugs, though she knew her mother had been far more careful with her than normal.

Whirling silence settled around Alia. Every fibre of her body accepted the fact that something profound had happened to it. She felt that she was a conscious mote, smaller than any subatomic particle, yet capable of motion and of sensing her surroundings. Like an abrupt revelation - the curtains whipped away - she realized she had become aware of a psychokinesesthetic extension of herself. She was the mote, yet not the mote. She stared at Lily who stood over her, frozen. Nothing moved.
Paul bolted up in bed, eyes wide. Something….

“Muad’Dib?” Chani stirred beside him in concern.

“Alia… She’s taken the Waters.” He got up and tossed on a robe as he ran, hearing Chani move from the bed as well as he ran for the Fane of the Oracle. A door opened and Harry emerged.

“Paul?”

“Alia.” He called back and Harry moved with him.

The answer to this instant came like an explosion in her consciousness: her personal time was suspended to save her life. She focused on the psychokinesthetic extension of herself, looking within, and was confronted immediately with a cellular core, a pit of blackness from which she recoiled. That is the place where we cannot look, she thought. There is the place the Reverend Mothers are so reluctant to mention - the place where only a Kwisatz Haderach may look, the place only Paul could see. And yet… she moved closer to it and smiled, it wasn’t that scary, she couldn’t go there but she could hover at the edges.

This realization returned a small measure of confidence, and again she ventured to focus on the psychokinesthetic extension, becoming a mote-self that searched within her for danger.

She found it within the drug she had swallowed. The stuff was dancing particles within her, its motions so rapid that even frozen time could not stop them. Dancing particles. She began recognizing familiar structures, atomic linkages: a carbon atom here, helical wavering . . . a glucose molecule. An entire chain of molecules confronted her, and she recognized a protein . . . a methyl-protein configuration. Incredible!

She saw the nature of the poison now. With her psychokinesthetic probing, she moved into it, shifted an oxygen mote, allowed another carbon mote to link, reattached a linkage of oxygen . . . hydrogen. The change spread . . . faster and faster as the catalysed reaction opened its surface of contact.
The suspension of time relaxed its hold upon her, and she sensed motion. The tube spout from the sack was touched to her mouth - gently, collecting a drop of moisture. Lily’s taking the catalyst from my body to change the poison in that sack. Alia focused on her ‘cousin’ and saw the relief in Lily’s features even as the door was forced open and Paul ran in, Harry and Chani on his heels.

“What have you done Alia?” Paul knelt beside her, brushing dark hair back from her face.

“What I had to.” She answered softly.

Harry moved to his daughter who held her head high, making him sigh. He took the changed waters from her and then hugged her. “You okay?” he asked and she nodded.

“She would have done it alone.” Lily whispered, she’d been terrified for Alia but she hadn’t wanted her to go through it unaided.

“I know.”

..............................

Through that towering doorway Mohiam marched with her guards into the Grand Reception Hall of the Emperor Paul Atreides - ”Muad’Dib, before whom all people are dwarfed.” Now, she saw the effect of that popular saying at work.

As she advanced toward Paul on the distant throne, the Reverend Mother found herself more impressed by the architectural subtleties of her surroundings than she was by the immensities. The space was large: it could’ve housed the entire citadel of any ruler in human history. The open sweep of the room said much about hidden structural forces balanced with nicety. Trusses and supporting beams behind these walls and the faraway domed ceiling must surpass anything ever before attempted. Everything spoke of engineering genius.

Without seeming to do so, the hall grew smaller at its far end, refusing to dwarf Paul on his throne centred on a dais. An untrained awareness, shocked by surrounding proportions, would see him at first as many times larger than his actual size. Colours played upon the unprotected psyche: Paul’s green throne had been cut from a single Hagar emerald. It suggested growing things and, out of the Fremen mythos, reflected the mourning colour. It whispered that here sat he who could make you mourn - life and death in one symbol, a clever stress of opposites. Behind the throne, draperies cascaded in burnt orange, curried gold of Dune earth, and cinnamon flecks of melange. To a trained eye, the symbolism was obvious, but it contained hammer blows to beat down the uninitiated.
Time played its role here. The Reverend Mother measured the minutes required to approach the Imperial Presence at her hobbling pace. You had time to be cowed. Any tendency toward resentment would be squeezed out of you by the unbridled power which focused down upon your person. You might start the long march toward that throne as a human of dignity, but you ended the march as a gnat.

Aides and attendants stood around the Emperor in a curiously ordered sequence - attentive household guardsmen along the draped back wall, that abomination, Alia, two steps below Paul and on his left hand; Stilgar, the Imperial lackey, on the step directly below Alia; and on the right, Harry opposite Stilgar but even further to the left so as not to block Alia’s view, one step up from the floor of the hall, a solitary figure: the fleshly revenant of Duncan Idaho, the ghola. She marked older Fremen among the guardsmen, bearded Naibs with stillsuit scars on their noses, sheathed crysknives at their waists, a few maula pistols, even some lasguns. Those most be trusted men, she thought, to carry lasguns in Paul's presence when he obviously wore a shield generator. She could see the shimmering of its field around him. One burst of a lasgun into that field and the entire citadel would be a hole in the ground.

Her guard stopped ten paces from the foot of the dais, parted to open an unobstructed view of the Emperor. She noted now the absence of Leto, Chani and Irulan, wondered at it. He held no important audience without them, so it was said. Paul nodded to her, silent, measuring. Immediately, she decided to take the offensive, said: "So, the great Paul Atreides deigns to see the one he banished."

Paul smiled wryly, thinking: She knows I want something from her. That knowledge had been inevitable, she being who she was. He recognized her powers. The Bene Gesserit didn't become Reverend Mothers by chance. "Shall we dispense with fencing?" he asked.

Would it be this easy? she wondered. "Name the thing you want."

Stilgar stirred, cast a sharp glance at Paul. The Imperial lackey didn’t like her tone.

"Stilgar wants me to send you away," Paul said.

"Not kill me?" she asked. "I would've expected something more direct from a Fremen Naib."

Stilgar scowled, said: "Often, I must speak otherwise than I think. That is called diplomacy."
"Then let us dispense with diplomacy as well," she said. "Was it necessary to have me walk all that distance. I am an old woman."

"You had to be shown how callous I can be," Paul said. "That way, you'll appreciate magnanimity."

"You dare such gaucheries with a Bene Gesserit?" she asked.

"Gross actions carry their own messages," Paul said.

She hesitated, weighed his words. So - he might yet dispense with her... grossly, obviously, if she... if she what? "Say what it is you want from me," she muttered.

Alia glanced at her brother, nodded toward the draperies behind the throne. She knew Paul's reasoning in this, but disliked it all the same. Call it wild prophecy: She felt pregnant with reluctance to take part in this bargaining. Her new senses and memories called to her that this was wrong.

"You must be careful how you speak to me, old woman," Paul said.

He called me old woman when he was a stripling, the Reverend Mother thought. Does he remind me now of my hand in his past? The decision I made then, must I remake it here? She felt the weight of decision, a physical thing that set her knees to trembling. Muscles cried their fatigue.

"It was a long walk," Paul said, "and I can see that you're tired. We will retire to my private chamber behind the throne. You may sit there." He gave a hand-signal to Stilgar, arose.

Stilgar and the ghola converged on her, helped her up the steps, Harry one step behind, to catch her or kill her, followed Paul through a passage concealed by the draperies. She realized then why he had greeted her in the hall: a dumb-show for the guards and Naibs. He feared them, then. And now - now, he displayed kindly benevolence, daring such wiles on a Bene Gesserit. Or was it daring? She sensed another presence behind, glanced back to see Alia following. The younger woman's eyes held a brooding, baleful cast. The Reverend Mother shuddered, suddenly realising that now she faced another Reverend Mother, not a mere girl-child.

The private chamber at the end of the passage was a twenty-meter cube of plasmeld, yellow
glowglobes for light, the deep orange hangings of a desert stilltent around the walls. It contained divans, soft cushions, a faint odour of melange, crystal water flagons on a low table. It felt cramped, tiny after the outer hall.

Paul seated her on a divan, stood over her, studying the ancient face - steely teeth, eyes that hid more than they revealed, deeply wrinkled skin. He indicated a water flagon. She shook her head, dislodging a wisp of grey hair. In a low voice, Paul began the negotiations, "I wish to bargain with you for the life of my beloved."

Stilgar cleared his throat. Alia fingered the handle of the crysknife sheathed at her neck. The ghola remained at the door, face impassive, metal eyes pointed at the air above the Reverend Mother's head. Harry had moved to the side but was close to her. She had seen him move before, had seen him kill the Harkonnen with only a touch, was he in place to kill her should the Emperor order it? Her gaze went back to the ghola.

"Have you had a vision of my hand in her death?" the Reverend Mother asked. She kept her attention on the ghola, oddly disturbed by him. Why should she feel threatened by the ghola? He was a tool of the conspiracy.

"I know what it is you want from me," Paul said, avoiding her question.

Then he only suspects, she thought. The Reverend Mother looked down at the tips of her shoes exposed by a fold of her robe. Black... black... shoes and robe showed marks of her confinement: stains, wrinkles. She lifted her chin, met an angry glare in Paul's eyes. Elation surged through her, but she hid the emotion behind pursed lips, slitted eyelids. "What coin do you offer?" she asked.

"You may have my seed, but not my person," Paul said. "Irulan banished and inseminated by artificial -" This was not his preferred fate for Irulan, he would rather see her with Harry and hopefully finally happy but if the Sisterhood were this desperate for his child via the Princess then this would be her fate.

"You dare!" the Reverend Mother flared, stiffening.

Stilgar took a half step forward. Disconcertingly, the ghola smiled. And now Alia was studying him.

"We'll not discuss the things your Sisterhood forbids," Paul said. "I will listen to no talk of sins, abominations or the beliefs left over from past Jihads. You may have my seed for your plans, but no
child of Irulan's will sit on my throne."

"Your throne," she sneered.

"My throne."

“And should something happen to your son, who will bear a further heir?"

"Chani."

"She is barren." She scoffed.

"She is with child." Paul answered and Harry smirked.

An involuntary indrawn breath exposed her shock. "You lie!" she snapped.

Paul held up a restraining hand as Stilgar surged forward. "We've known for two days that she carries my child."

"But Irulan... "

"By artificial means only. That's my offer."

The Reverend Mother closed her eyes to hide his face. Damnation! To cast the genetic dice in such a way! Loathing boiled in her breast. The teaching of the Bene Gesserit, the lessons of the Butlerian Jihad - all proscribed such an act. One did not demean the highest aspirations of humankind. No machine could function in the way of a human mind. No word or deed could imply that men might be bred on the level of animals.

"Your decision," Paul said.
She shook her head. The genes, the precious Atreides genes - only these were important. Need went deeper than proscription. For the Sisterhood, mating mingled more than sperm and ovum. One aimed to capture the psyche. The Reverend Mother understood now the subtle depths of Paul's offer. He would make the Bene Gesserit party to an act which would bring down popular wrath... were it ever discovered. They could not admit such paternity if the Emperor denied it. This coin might save the Atreides genes for the Sisterhood, but it would never buy a throne. She swept her gaze around the room, studying each face: Stilgar, passive and waiting now; the ghola frozen at some inward place; Harry standing utterly still, green eyes focused on her for her answer; Alia watching the ghola... and Paul - wrath beneath a shallow veneer. "This is your only offer?" she asked.

"My only offer."

She glanced at the ghola, caught by a brief movement of muscles across his cheeks. Emotion? "You, ghola," she said. "Should such an offer be made? Having been made, should it be accepted? Function as the Mentat for us."

The metallic eyes turned to Paul.

"Answer as you will," Paul said.

The ghola returned his gleaming attention to the Reverend Mother, shocked her once more by smiling. "An offer is only as good as the real thing it buys," he said. "The exchange offered here is life-for-life, a high order of business."

Alia brushed a strand of dark coppery hair from her forehead. "And what else is hidden in this bargain?"

The Reverend Mother refused to look at Alia, but the words burned in her mind. Yes, far deeper implications lay here. The sister had passed through the waters, there could be no denying her status as a Reverend Mother with all the title implied. Gaius Helen Mohiam felt herself in this instant to be not one single person, but all the others who sat like tiny congeries in her memory. They were alert, every Reverend Mother she had absorbed in becoming a Priestess of the Sisterhood. Alia would be standing in the same situation here.

"What else?" the ghola asked. "One wonders why the witches of the Bene Gesserit have not used Tleilaxu methods."
Gaius Helen Mohiam and all the Reverend Mothers within her shuddered. Yes, the Tleilaxu did loathsome things. If one let down the barriers to artificial insemination, was the next step a Tleilaxu one - controlled mutation?

Paul, observing the play of emotion around him, felt abruptly that he no longer knew these people. He could see only strangers. Even Alia was a stranger.

"If we set the Atreides genes adrift in a Bene Gesserit river, who knows what may result?" Alia offered.

Gaius Helen Mohiam's head snapped around, and she met Alia's gaze. For a flashing instant, they were two Reverend Mothers together, communing on a single thought: What lay behind any Tleilaxu action? The ghola was a Tleilaxu thing. Had he put this plan into Paul's mind? Would Paul attempt to bargain directly with the Bene Tleilaxu? She broke her gaze from Alia's, feeling her own ambivalence and inadequacies. The pitfall of Bene Gesserit training, she reminded herself, lay in the powers granted: such powers predisposed one to vanity and pride. But power deluded those who used it. One tended to believe power could overcome any barrier... including one's own ignorance. Only one thing stood paramount here for the Bene Gesserit, she told herself. That was the pyramid of generations which had reached an apex in Paul Atreides... and in his abomination of a sister. A wrong choice here and the pyramid would have to be rebuilt... starting generations back in the parallel lines and with breeding specimens lacking the choicest characteristics. Controlled mutation, she thought. Did the Tleilaxu really practice it? How tempting! She shook her head, the better to rid it of such thoughts.

"You reject my proposal?" Paul asked.

"I'm thinking," she said. And again, she looked at the sister. The optimum cross for this female Atreides had been lost... killed by Paul. Another possibility remained, however - one which would cement the desired characteristic into an offspring. Paul dared offer animal breeding to the Bene Gesserit! How much was he really prepared to pay for his Chani's life? Would he accept a cross with his own sister? Sparring for time, the Reverend Mother said: "Tell me, oh flawless exemplar of all that's holy, has Irulan anything to say of your proposal?"

"Irulan will do what you tell her to do," Paul growled.

True enough, Mohiam thought. She firmed her jaw, offered a new gambit: "There are two Atreides."

Paul, sensing something of what lay in the old witch's mind, felt blood darken his face. "Careful what you suggest," he said.
"You'd just use Irulan to gain your own ends, eh?" she asked.

"Wasn't she trained to be used?" Harry asked from where he watched them.

And we trained her, that's what he's saying, Mohiam thought. Well... Irulan's a divided coin. Was there another way to spend such a coin? "Will you put Chani's children on the throne?" the Reverend Mother asked.

"On my throne," Paul said. He glanced at her wondering suddenly if she knew the divergent possibilities in this exchange. Alia stood with eyes closed, an odd stillness-of-person about her. With what inner force did she commune? Seeing his sister thus, Paul felt he'd been cast adrift. Alia stood on a shore that was receding from him. Why had she taken the Waters so young? He had wanted to protect her, his innocent little sister. But Stilgar had been right, she was a child no longer.

The Reverend Mother made her decision, said: "This is too much for one person to decide. I must consult with my Council on Wallach. Will you permit a message?"

As though she needed my permission! Paul thought. "Agreed, then. But don't delay too long. I will not sit idly by while you debate."

"Will you bargain with the Bene Tleilaxu?" the ghola asked, his voice a sharp intrusion.

Alia's eyes popped open and she stared at the ghola as though she'd been wakened by a dangerous intruder.

"I've made no such decision," Paul said. "What I will do is go into the desert as soon as it can be arranged. Our child will be born in sietch."

"A wise decision," Stilgar intoned.

Alia refused to look at Stilgar. It was a wrong decision. She could feel this in every cell. Paul must know it. Why had he fixed himself upon such a path? "Have the Bene Tleilaxu offered their services?" Alia asked. She saw Mohiam hanging on the answer.
Paul shook his head. "No." He glanced at Stilgar. "Stil, arrange for the message to be sent to Wallach."

"At once, M'Lord."

Paul turned away, waited while Stilgar summoned guards, left with the old witch. He sensed Alia debating whether to confront him with more questions. She turned, instead, to the ghola.

"Mentat," she said, "will the Tleilaxu bid for favour with my brother?" The ghola shrugged.

Paul felt his attention wander. The Tleilaxu? No... not in the way Alia meant. Her question revealed, though, that she had not seen the alternatives here. Well... vision varied from sibyl to sibyl. Why not a variance from brother to sister? Wandering... wandering... He came back from each thought with a start to pick up shards of the nearby conversation.

"... must know what the Tleilaxu..."

"... the fullness of data is always..."

"... healthy doubts where..."

Paul turned, looked at his sister, caught her attention. He knew she would see tears on his face and wonder at them. Let her wonder. Wondering was a kindness now. He glanced at the ghola, seeing only Duncan Idaho despite the metallic eyes. Sorrow and compassion warred in Paul. What might those metal eyes record? There are many degrees of sight and many degrees of blindness, Paul thought. His mind turned to a paraphrase of the passage from the Orange Catholic Bible: 'What senses do we lack that we cannot see another world all around us?' Were those metal eyes another sense than sight?

Alia crossed to her brother, sensing his utter sadness. She touched a tear on his cheek with a Fremen gesture of awe, said: "We must not grieve for those dear to us before their passing."

"Before their passing," Paul whispered. "Tell me, little sister, what is before?"
Harry stood beside Harah, Stilgar on her other side and Orlop on Harry’s free side. The four of them were dressed in their best clothes and smiling as Lily stood beside Leto II with Paul before them in his full ceremonial regalia. Irulan and Chani stood nearby, also dressed in finery. The hall was packed with onlookers chattering excitedly. With those arrayed on the dais it was obvious to all what was about to happen. Silence fell as Paul raised his arms. “Today it is my pleasure to announce the betrothal of my firstborn, Leto II, heir to the Throne to Lily Potter, daughter of Harry Potter and Harah.” He announced and cheers went up. “Also, let it be known that Chani will soon bear another child.”

Leto looked at Lily who smiled shyly and they clasped hands, moving forward to allow the people a better view of them, the sun catching her crimson hair as it fell in waves down her back. He pulled her in for a brief, chaste, kiss and then slipped a ring on her finger, one the Lady Jessica has sent as soon as she had been told of the plan. None of the Royal Family blamed her for not coming in person. Arrakis had taken too much from her.

They stayed for a while, allowing people to see the new couple and call out their congratulations and even questions. They were used to seeing Lily with the Royal Family so very few people were surprised by the announcement, just the timing. Harry would have preferred waiting a few more years but securing dynastic succession usually meant young marriages.

It was almost midday when they brought her into the room - an odd space, mixture of desert-Fremen and Family-Aristocrat. Hiereg hangings lined three walls: delicate tapestries adorned with figures out of Fremen mythology. A view screen covered the fourth wall, a silver-grey surface behind an oval desk whose top held only one object, a Fremen sandclock built into an orrery. The orrery, a suspensor mechanism from lx, carried both moons of Arrakis in the classic Worm Trine aligned with the sun.

Paul, standing beside the desk, glanced at Bannerjee. The Security Officer was one of those who'd come up through the Fremen Constabulary, winning his place on brains and proven loyalty despite the smuggler ancestry attested by his name. He was a solid figure, almost fat. Wisps of black hair fell down over the dark, wet-appearing skin of his forehead like the crest of an exotic bird. His eyes were blue-blue and steady in a gaze which could look upon happiness or atrocity without change of expression. Both Chani and Stilgar trusted him. Paul knew that if he told Bannerjee to throttle the girl immediately, Bannerjee would do it.

"Sire, here is the messenger girl," Bannerjee said. "M'Lady Chani said she sent word to you."
"Yes." Paul nodded curtly.

Oddly, the girl didn't look at him. Her attention remained on the orrery. She was dark-skinned, of medium height, her figure concealed beneath a robe whose rich wine fabric and simple cut spoke of wealth. Her blue-black hair was held in a narrow band of material which matched the robe. The robe concealed her hands. Paul suspected that the hands were tightly clasped. It would be in character. Everything about her would be in character - including the robe: a last piece of finery saved for such a moment.

Paul motioned Bannerjee aside. He hesitated before obeying. Now, the girl moved - one step forward. When she moved there was grace. Still, her eyes avoided him. Paul cleared his throat.

Now the girl lifted her gaze, the whiteless eyes widening with just the right shade of awe. She had an odd little face with delicate chin, a sense of reserve in the way she held her small mouth. The eyes appeared abnormally large above slanted cheeks. There was a cheerless air about her, something which said she seldom smiled. The corners of her eyes even held a faint yellow misting which could have been from dust irritation or the tracery of semuta. Everything was in character.

"You asked to see me," Paul said.

The moment of supreme test for this girl-shape had come. Scytale had put on the shape, the mannerisms, the sex, the voice - everything his abilities could grasp and assume. But this was a female known to Muad'Dib in the sietch days. She'd been a child, then, but she and Muad'Dib shared common experiences. Certain areas of memory must be avoided delicately. It was the most exacting part Scytale had ever attempted. "I am Otheym's Lichna of Berk al Dib." The girl's voice came out small, but firm, giving name, father and pedigree.

Paul nodded. He saw how Chani had been fooled. The timbre of voice, everything reproduced with exactitude. Had it not been for his own Bene Gesserit training in voice and for the web of dao in which oracular vision enfolded him, this Face-Dancer disguise might have gulled even him. Training exposed certain discrepancies: the girl was older than her known years; too much control tuned the vocal cords; set of neck and shoulders missed by a fraction the subtle hauteur of Fremen poise. But there were niceties, too: the rich robe had been patched to betray actual status... and the features were beautifully exact. They spoke a certain sympathy of this Face Dancer for the role being played. He saw from the corner of his eye that Harry had detected these errors as well, emerald gaze hardening before glancing to Paul for instruction and he signalled for Harry to hold. "Rest in my home, daughter of Otheym," Paul said in formal Fremen greeting. "You are welcome as water after a dry crossing."

The faintest of relaxations exposed the confidence this apparent acceptance had conveyed. "I bring a message," she said.
"A man's messenger is as himself," Paul said.

Scytale breathed softly. It went well, but now came the crucial task: the Atreides must be guided onto that special path. He must lose his Fremen concubine in circumstances where no other shared the blame. The failure must belong only to the omnipotent Muad'Dib. He had to be led into an ultimate realization of his failure and thence to acceptance of the Tleilaxu alternative. "I am the smoke which banishes sleep in the night," Scytale said, employing a Fedaykin code phrase: I bear bad tidings.

Paul fought to maintain calmness. He felt naked, his soul abandoned in a groping-time concealed from every vision. Powerful oracles hid this Face Dancer. Only the edges of these moments were known to Paul. He knew only what he could not do. He could not slay this Face Dancer. That would precipitate the future which must be avoided at all cost. Somehow, a way must be found to reach into the darkness and change the terrifying pattern. "Give me your message," Paul said.

Bannerjee moved to place himself where he could watch the girl's face. She seemed to notice him for the first time and her gaze went to the knife handle beneath the Security Officer's hand. "The innocent do not believe in evil," she said, looking squarely at Bannerjee.

Ahh, well done, Paul thought. It was what the real Lichna would've said. He felt a momentary pang for the real daughter of Otheym - dead now, a corpse in the sand. There was no time for such emotions, though. He scowled. Bannerjee kept his attention on the girl.

Harry watched her, this was not Lichna. He remembered the girl from the Sietch and this, while a good copy, was not her. The body found in the desert…. extremities and head removed, now made a lot of sense. So why was Paul dancing with this Face Dancer? Why not kill it?

"I was told to deliver my message in secret," she said.

"Why?" Bannerjee demanded, voice harsh, probing.

"Because it is my father's wish."

"These are my friends," Paul said. "Am I not a Fremen? Then my friends may hear anything I hear."
Scytale composed the girl-shape. Was this a true Fremen custom... or was it a test? "The Emperor may make his own rules," Scytale said. "This is the message: My father wishes you to come to him, bringing Chani."

"Why must I bring Chani?"

"She is your woman and a Sayyadina. This is a Water matter, by the rules of our tribes. She must attest it that my father speaks according to the Fremen Way."

There truly are Fremen in the conspiracy, Paul thought. This moment fitted the shape of things to come for sure. And he had no alternative but to commit himself to this course. "Of what will your father speak?" Paul asked.

"He will speak of a plot against you - a plot among the Fremen."

"Why doesn't he bring that message in person?" Harry asked

She kept her gaze on Paul. "My father cannot come here. The plotters suspect him. He'd not survive the journey."

"Could he not divulge the plot to you?" Harry shifted from his place against the wall, watching her closely. "How came he to risk his daughter on such a mission?"

"The details are locked in a distrans carrier that only Muad'Dib may open," she said. "This much I know." Scytale was a little worried, the Atreides man was perceptive, perhaps too perceptive. Did they suspect?

"Why not send the distrans, then?" Paul asked.

"It is a human distrans," she said.

"I'll go, then," Paul said. "But I'll go alone."
"Chani must come with you!"

"Chani is with child."

"When has a Fremen woman refused to..."

"My enemies fed her a subtle poison," Paul said. "It will be a difficult birth. Her health will not permit her to accompany me now." It was a half-truth, the effects had been greatly lessened thanks to Harry's actions, but the pregnancy was still hard on her.

Before Scytale could still them, strange emotions passed over the girl-features: frustration, anger. Scytale was reminded that every victim must have a way of escape - even such a one as Muad'Dib. The conspiracy had not failed, though. This Atreides remained in the net. He was a creature who had developed firmly into one pattern. He'd destroy himself before changing into the opposite of that pattern. That had been the way with the Tleilaxu Kwisatz Haderach. It'd be the way with this one. And then... the ghola.

"Let me ask Chani to decide this," she said.

"I have decided it," Paul said. "You will accompany me in Chani's stead."

"It requires a Sayyadina of the Rite!"

"Are you not Chani's friend?"

Boxed! Scytale thought. Does he suspect? No. He's being Fremen-cautious. And the contraceptive is a fact. Well - there are other ways. "My father told me I was not to return," Scytale said, "that I was to seek asylum with you. He said you'd not risk me."

Paul nodded. It was beautifully in character. He couldn't deny this asylum. She'd plead Fremen obedience to a father's command. "I'll take Stilgar's wife, Harah," Paul said. "You'll tell us the way to your father."

"How do you know you can trust Stilgar's wife?"
"I know it."

"But I don't."

Paul pursed his lips, then: "Does your mother live?"

"My true mother has gone to Shai-hulud. My second mother still lives and cares for my father. Why?"

"She's of Sietch Tabr?"

"Yes."

"I remember her," Paul said. "She will serve in Chani's place." He motioned to Bannerjee. "Have attendants take Otheym's Lichna to suitable quarters."

Bannerjee nodded. Attendants. The key word meant that this messenger must be put under special guard. He took her arm. She resisted.

"How will you go to my father?" she pleaded.

"You'll describe the way to Bannerjee," Paul said. "He is my friend."

"No! My father has commanded it! I cannot!"

"Bannerjee?" Paul said.

Bannerjee paused. Paul saw the man searching that encyclopaedic memory which had helped bring him to his position of trust. "I know a guide who can take you to Otheym," Bannerjee said.
“I know where he lives.” Harry spoke again. “I made sure I know where all Fedaykin, present and past, live.”

"Then we’ll go together," Paul said. "Otheym wants it this way," Paul said, barely concealing the irony which consumed him.

"Sire, it's too dangerous," Bannerjee protested.

"Even an Emperor must accept some risks," Paul said. "The decision is made. Do as I've commanded." Reluctantly, Bannerjee led the Face Dancer from the room.

Paul turned toward the blank screen behind his desk. He felt that he waited for the arrival of a rock on its blind journey from some height. Should he tell Bannerjee about the messenger's true nature? he wondered. No! Such an incident hadn't been written on the screen of his vision. Any deviation here carried precipitate violence. A moment of fulcrum had to be found, a place where he could will himself out of the vision. If such a moment existed...

“A Face Dancer, they grow bolder.” Harry commented and Paul nodded. “So why walk into a trap?”

“This must be done Harry.”

“Very well, I will prepare.” He shook his head and then reached out to grasp Paul’s shoulder briefly, trying to offer comfort. If only Paul would open up, perhaps he could do more to help.

Harry paused as he saw Irulan.

“Is it true?” She asked and Harry walked towards her.

“Is what true?”

“Chani….”
“Ah, yes, she is pregnant. And well aware of who stopped this from happening before. The time is coming Princess, when you will have to choose your loyalties. I pray you chose correctly.” He turned away, there was much to prepare and he did not like Paul’s growing silence on things.

“It is my right to bear the Royal heir.” She whispered and he turned back to her, feeling sad for her. He remembered seeing Irulan and Paul at the party all those years ago…. They could have been happy together. But because of her Father’s actions she was trapped in a loveless marriage.

“No Irulan, Leto will always be his Father’s heir. Even if he had given you a child it would never sit upon the Throne. Take a lover, be happy with what you have.” He considered Chani’s offer and stepped closer briefly to brush a stray strand of hair back behind her ear before leaving.

As he crossed over on the high footbridge from his Keep to the Qizarate Office Building, Paul added a limp to his walk. It was almost sunset and he walked through long shadows that helped conceal him, but sharp eyes still might detect something in his carriage that identified him. He wore a shield, but it was not activated, his aides having decided that the shimmer of it might arouse suspicions. Paul glanced left. Strings of sandclouds lay across the sunset like slatted shutters. The air was hiereg dry through his stillsuit filters.

He wasn't really alone out here, but the web of Security hadn't been this loose around him since he'd ceased walking the streets alone in the night. Ornithopters with night scanners drifted far overhead in seemingly random pattern, all of them tied to his movements through a transmitter concealed in his clothing. Picked men walked the streets below. Others had fanned out through the city after seeing the Emperor in his disguise - Fremen costume down to the stillsuit and temag desert boots, the darkened features. His cheeks had been distorted with plastene inserts. A catchtube ran down along his left jaw.

As he reached the opposite end of the bridge, Paul glanced back, noted a movement beside the stone lattice that concealed a balcony of his private quarters. Chani, no doubt. "Hunting for sand in the desert,” she'd called this venture. And then a figure emerged from the shadows, another desert dressed Fremen…unless you saw his brilliant green eyes. Harry fell into step with him, his gait altered as well.

How little Chani understood the bitter choice. Selecting among agonies, he thought, made even lesser agonies near unbearable. There had been changes over the years to his visions, the distant danger that the Golden Path worked against had faded away. But some things remained the same, this time remained and there was nothing he could do.
For a blurred, emotionally painful moment, he relived their parting. At the last instant, Chani had experienced a tau-glimpse of his feelings, but she had misinterpreted. She had thought his emotions were those experienced in the parting of loved ones when one entered the dangerous unknown. Would that I did not know, he thought.

He had crossed the bridge now and entered the upper passageway through the office building. There were fixed glowglobes here and people hurrying on business. The Qizarate never slept. Paul found his attention caught by the signs above doorways, as though he were seeing them for the first time: Speed Merchants. Wind Stills and Retorts. Prophetic Prospects. Tests of Faith. Religious Supply. Weaponry... Propagation of the Faith... A more honest label would've been Propagation of the Bureaucracy, he thought.

A type of religious civil servant had sprung up all through his universe. This new man of the Qizarate was more often a convert. He seldom displaced a Fremen in the key posts, but he was filling all the interstices. He used melange as much to show he could afford it as for the geriatric benefits. He stood apart from his rulers - Emperor, Guild, Bene Gesserit, Landsraad, Family or Qizarate. His gods were Routine and Records. He was served by mentats and prodigious filing systems. Expediency was the first word in his catechism, although he gave proper lip-service to the precepts of the Butlerians. Machines could not be fashioned in the image of a man’s mind, he said, but he betrayed by every action that he preferred machines to men, statistics to individuals, the faraway general view to the intimate personal touch requiring imagination and initiative.

As Paul emerged onto the ramp at the far side of the building, he heard the bells calling the Evening Rite at Alia’s Fane. There was an odd feeling of permanence about the bells.

The temple across the thronged square was new, its rituals of recent devising, but there was something about this setting in a desert sink at the edge of Arrakeen - something in the way wind-driven sand had begun to weather stones and plastene, something in the haphazard way buildings had gone up around the Fane. Everything conspired to produce the impression that this was a very old place full of traditions and mystery.

He was down into the press of people now - committed. Security hadn't liked Paul's ready agreement to this meeting. Stilgar had liked it even less. And Chani had objected most of all.

The crowd around him, even while its members brushed against him, glanced his way unseeing and passed on, gave him a curious freedom of movement. It was the way they'd been conditioned to treat a Fremen, he knew. He carried himself like a man of the inner desert. Such men were quick to anger.

As he moved into the quickening flow to the temple steps, the crush of people became even greater. Those all-around could not help but press against him now, but he found himself the target for ritual apologies: "Your pardon, noble sir. I cannot prevent this discourtesy." "Pardon, sir; this crush of
people is the worst I've ever seen." "I abase myself, holy citizen. A lout shoved me."

Paul ignored the words after the first few. There was no feeling in them except a kind of ritual fear. He found himself, instead, thinking that he had come a long way from his boyhood days in Caladan Castle. Where had he put his foot on the path that led to this journey across a crowded square on a planet so far from Caladan? Had he really put his foot on a path? He could not say he had acted at any point in his life for one specific reason. The motives and impinging forces had been complex - more complex possibly than any other set of goads in human history. He had the heady feeling here that he might still avoid the fate he could see so clearly along this path. But the crowd pushed him forward and he experienced the dizzy sense that he had lost his way, lost personal direction over his life.

The crowd flowed with him up the steps now into the temple portico. Voices grew hushed. The smell of fear grew stronger - acrid, sweaty. Acolytes had already begun the service within the temple. Their plain chant dominated the other sounds - whispers, rustle of garments, shuffling feet, coughs - telling the story of the Far Places visited by the Priestess in her holy trance. Alia was a reverend Mother now and the people knew it, they rejoiced in her new powers.

Alia emerged from the darkness behind the shimmering rainbows. She wore a yellow robe trimmed in Atreides green - yellow for sunlight, green for the death which produced life. Paul experienced the sudden surprising thought that Alia had emerged here just for him, for him alone. He stared across the mob in the temple at his sister. She was his sister. He knew her ritual and its roots, but he had never before stood out here with the pilgrims, watched her through their eyes. Here, performing the mystery of this place, he saw that she partook of the universe which opposed him.

Acolytes brought her a golden chalice. Alia raised the chalice. With part of his awareness, Paul knew that the chalice contained the unaltered melange, the subtle poison, her sacrament of the oracle now that she could drink it, before it had been simple spice, the high-level spice there to enhance her Bene Gesserit trained abilities without risking poisoning. Her gaze on the chalice, Alia spoke. Her voice caressed the ears, flower sound, flowing and musical: "In the beginning, we were empty," she said.

"Ignorant of all things," the chorus sang.

"We did not know the Power that abides in every place," Alia said.

"And in every Time " the chorus sang.

"Here is the Power," Alia said, raising the chalice slightly.
"It brings us joy," sang the chorus. And it brings us distress, Paul thought.

"It awakens the soul," Alia said.

"It dispels all doubts," the chorus sang.

"In worlds, we perish," Alia said.

"In the Power, we survive," sang the chorus.

Alia put the chalice to her lips, drank.

To his astonishment, Paul found he was holding his breath like the meanest pilgrim of this mob. Despite every shred of personal knowledge about the experience Alia was undergoing, he had been caught in the tao-web. He felt himself remembering how that fiery poison coursed into the body. Memory unfolded the time-stopping when awareness became a mote which changed the poison. He re-experienced the awakening into timelessness where all things were possible. He knew Alia's present experience, yet he saw now that he did not know it. Mystery blinded the eyes.

Alia trembled, sank to her knees.

Paul exhaled with the enraptured pilgrims. He nodded. Part of the veil began to lift from him. Absorbed in the bliss of a vision, he had forgotten that each vision belonged to all those who were still on-the-way, still to become. In the vision, one passed through a darkness, unable to distinguish reality from insubstantial accident. One hungered for absolutes which could never be. Hungering, one lost the present. Alia swayed with the rapture of spice change.

Paul felt that some transcendental presence spoke to him, saying: "Look! See there! See what you've ignored?" In that instant, he thought he looked through other eyes, that he saw an imagery and rhythm in this place which no artist or poet could reproduce. It was vital and beautiful, a glaring light that exposed all power-gluttony... even his own.

Alia spoke. Her amplified voice boomed across the nave. "Luminous night," she cried. A moan swept like a wave through the crush of pilgrims. "Nothing hides in such a night!" Alia said. "What
rare light is this darkness? You cannot fix your gaze upon it! Senses cannot record it. No words describe it." Her voice lowered. "The abyss remains. It is pregnant with all the things yet to be. Ahhhhhh, what gentle violence!"

Paul felt that he waited for some private signal from his sister. It could be any action or word, something of wizardry and mystical processes, an outward streaming that would fit him like an arrow into a cosmic bow. This instant lay like quivering mercury in his awareness.

"There will be sadness," Alia intoned. "I remind you that all things are but a beginning, forever beginning. Worlds wait to be conquered. Some within the sound of my voice will attain exalted destinies. You will sneer at the past, forgetting what I tell you now: within all differences there is unity." Paul suppressed a cry of disappointment as Alia lowered her head. She had not said the thing he waited to hear. His body felt like a dry shell, a husk abandoned by some desert insect. Others must feel something similar, he thought. He sensed the restlessness about him. Abruptly, a woman in the mob, someone far down in the nave to Paul's left, cried out, a wordless noise of anguish.

Alia lifted her head and Paul had the giddy sensation that the distance between them collapsed, that he stared directly into her glazed eyes - only inches away from her.

"Who summons me?" Alia asked.

"I do," the woman cried. "I do, Alia. Oh, Alia, help me. They say my son was killed on Muritan. Is he gone? Will I never see my son again... never?"

"You try to walk backward in the sand," Alia intoned. "Nothing is lost. Everything returns later, but you may not recognize the changed form that returns."

"Alia, I don't understand!" the woman wailed.

"You live in the air but you do not see it," Alia said, sharpness in her voice. "Are you a lizard? Your voice has the Fremen accent. Does a Fremen try to bring back the dead? What do we need from our dead except their water?"

Down in the centre of the nave, a man in a rich red cloak lifted both hands, the sleeves falling to expose white-clad arms. "Alia," he shouted, "I have had a business proposal. Should I accept?"
"You come here like a beggar," Alia said. "You look for the golden bowl but you will find only a dagger."

"I have been asked to kill a man!" a voice shouted from off to the right - a deep voice with sietch tones. "Should I accept? Accepting, would I succeed?"

"Beginning and end are a single thing," Alia snapped. "Have I not told you this before? You didn't come here to ask that question. What is it you cannot believe that you must come here and cry out against it?"

"She's in a fierce mood tonight," a woman near Paul muttered. "Have you ever seen her this angry?"

She knows I'm out here, Paul thought. Did she see something in the vision that angered her? Is she raging at me?

"Alia," a man directly in front of Paul called. "Tell these businessmen and faint-hearts how long your brother will rule!"

"I permit you to look around that corner by yourself," Alia snarled. "You carry your prejudice in your mouth! It is because my brother rides the worm of chaos that you have roof and water!"

With a fierce gesture, clutching her robe, Alia whirled away, strode through the shimmering ribbons of light, was lost in the darkness behind. Immediately, the acolytes took up the closing chant, but their rhythm was off. Obviously, they'd been caught by the unexpected ending of the rite. An incoherent mumbling arose on all sides of the crowd. Paul felt the stirring around him - restless, dissatisfied.

"It was that fool with his stupid question about business," a woman near Paul muttered. "The hypocrite!"

What had Alia seen? What track through the future? Something had happened here tonight, souring the rite of the oracle. Usually, the crowd clamoured for Alia to answer their pitiful questions. They came as beggars to the oracle, yes. He had heard them thus many times as he'd watched, hidden in the darkness behind the altar. What had been different about this night?

Harry tugged Paul's sleeve, nodded toward the exit. The crowd already was beginning to push in that
direction. Paul allowed himself to be pressed along with them, Harry’s hand upon his sleeve. There was the feeling in him then that his body had become the manifestation of some power he could no longer control. He had become a non-being, a stillness which moved itself. At the core of the non-being, there he existed, allowing himself to be led through the streets of his city, following a track so familiar to his visions that it froze his heart with grief, I should know what Alia saw, bethought, I have seen it enough times myself. And she didn't cry out against it… she saw the alternatives, too.

“Are you alright?” Harry hissed quietly in his ear and Paul nodded absently. “This way.” they moved silently through the city until they approached a house. “Here.”

The door opened to his knock. The gap revealed the dull green light of an atrium. A dwarf peered out, ancient face on a child's body, an apparition prescience had never seen. "You've come then," the apparition said. The dwarf stepped aside, no awe in his manner, merely the gloating of a slow smile. "Come in! Come in!"

Paul hesitated. There'd been no dwarf in the vision, but all else remained identical. Visions could contain such disparities and still hold true to their original plunge into infinity. But the difference dared him to hope. He glanced back up the street at the creamy pearl glistening of his moon swimming out of jagged shadows. The moon haunted him. How did it fall?

"Come in," the dwarf insisted.

Paul entered, harry on his heels, heard the door thud into its moisture seals behind. The dwarf passed him, led the way, enormous feet slapping the floor, opened the delicate lattice gate into the roofed central courtyard, gestured. "They await, Sire."

Sire, Paul thought. He knows me, then. He glanced at Harry who had a hand on his knife, eyes ever vigilant for danger. Before Paul could explore this discovery, the dwarf slipped away down a side passage. Hope was a dervish wind whirling, dancing in Paul. He headed across the courtyard. It was a dark and gloomy place, the smell of sickness and defeat in it. He felt daunted by the atmosphere. Was it defeat to choose a lesser evil? he wondered. How far down this track had he come?

Light poured from a narrow doorway in the far wall. He put down the feeling of watchers and evil smells, entered the doorway into a small room. It was a barren place by Fremen standards with heireg hangings on only two walls. Opposite the door, a man sat on carmine cushions beneath the best hanging. A feminine figure hovered in shadows behind another doorway in a barren wall to the left.

Paul felt vision-trapped. This was the way it'd gone. Where was the dwarf? Where was the difference? His senses absorbed the room in a single gestalten sweep. The place had received
painstaking care despite its poor furnishings. Hooks and rods across the barren walls showed where hangings had been removed. Pilgrims paid enormous prices for authentic Fremen artefacts, Paul reminded himself. Rich pilgrims counted desert tapestries as treasures, true marks of a hajj.

Paul felt that the barren walls accused him with their fresh gypsum wash. The threadbare condition of the two remaining hangings amplified the sense of guilt. A narrow shelf occupied the wall on his right. It held a row of portraits - mostly bearded Fremen, some in still-suits with their catchtubes dangling, some in Imperial uniforms posed against exotic offworld backgrounds. The most common scene was a seascape.

The Fremen on cushions cleared his throat, forcing Paul to look at him. It was Otheym precisely as the vision had revealed him: neck grown scrawny, a bird thing which appeared too weak to support the large head. The face was a lopsided ruin - networks of crisscrossed scars on the left cheek below a drooping, wet eye, but clear skin on the other side and a straight, blue-in-blue Fremen gaze. A long kedge of a nose bisected the face. Otheym's cushion sat in the centre of a threadbare rug, brown with maroon and gold threads. The cushion fabric betrayed splotches of wear and patching, but every bit of metal around the seated figure shone from polishing - the portrait frames, shelf lip and brackets, the pedestal of a low table on the right. Paul nodded to the clear half of Otheym's face, said: "Good luck to you and your dwelling place." It was the greeting of an old friend and sietch mate.

"So, I see you once more, Usul. Suhl has come as well, I see."

The voice speaking their tribal names whined with an old man's quavering. The dull drooping eye on the ruined side of the face moved above the parchment skin and scars. Grey bristles stubbled that side and the jawline there hung with scabrous peelings. Otheym's mouth twisted as he spoke, the gap exposing silvery metal teeth.

"Muad'Dib always answers the call of a Fedaykin," Paul said.

The woman in the doorway shadows moved, said: "So Stilgar boasts."

She came forward into the light, an older version of the Lichna which the Face Dancer had copied. Paul recalled then that Otheym had married sisters. Her hair was grey, nose grown witch-sharp. Weavers' calluses ran along her forefingers and thumbs. A Fremen woman would've displayed such marks proudly in the sietch days, but she saw his attention on her hands, hid them under a fold of her pale blue robe. Paul remembered her name then - Dhuri. The shock was he remembered her as a child, not as she'd been in his vision of these moments. It was the whine that edged her voice, Paul told himself. She'd whined even as a child.
"You see me here," Paul said. "Would I be here if Stilgar hadn't approved?" He turned toward Otheym. "I carry your water burden, Otheym. Command me."

This was the straight Fremen talk of sietch brothers. Otheym produced a shaky nod, almost too much for that thin neck. He lifted a liver-marked left hand, pointed to the ruin of his face. "I caught the splitting disease on Tarahell, Usul," he wheezed. "Right after the victory when we'd all..." A fit of coughing stopped his voice.

"The tribe will collect his water soon," Dhuri said. She crossed to Otheym, propped pillows behind him, held his shoulder to steady him until the coughing passed. She wasn't really very old, Paul saw, but a look of lost hopes ringed her mouth, bitterness lay in her eyes.

"I'll summon doctors," Paul said.

Dhuri turned, hand on hip. "We've had medical men, as good as any you could summon." She sent an involuntary glance to the barren wall on her left. And the medical men were costly, Paul thought.

He felt edgy, constrained by the vision but aware that minor differences had crept in. How could he exploit the differences? Time came out of its skein with subtle changes, but the background fabric held oppressive sameness. He knew with terrifying certainty that if he tried to break out of the enclosing pattern here, it'd become a thing of terrible violence. The power in this deceptively gentle flow of Time oppressed him. "Say what you want of me," he growled.

"Couldn't it be that Otheym needed a friend to stand by him in this time?" Dhuri asked. "Does a Fedaykin have to consign his flesh to strangers?"

We shared Sietch Tabr, Paul reminded himself. She has the right to berate me for apparent callousness. "What I can do I will do," Paul said.

Another fit of coughing shook Otheym. When it had passed, he gasped: "There's treachery, Usul. Fremen plot against you." His mouth worked then without sound. Spittle escaped his lips. Dhuri wiped his mouth with a corner of her robe, and Paul saw how her face betrayed anger at such waste of moisture.

Frustrated rage threatened to overwhelm Paul then and he could feel it from Harry as well. That Otheym should be spent thus! A Fedaykin deserved better. But no choice remained - not for a Death Commando or his Emperor. They walked Occam's razor in this room. The slightest misstep.
multiplied horrors - not just for themselves, but for all humankind, even for those who would destroy
them. Paul squeezed calmness into his mind, looked at Dhuri. The expression of terrible longing with
which she gazed at Otheym strengthened Paul. Chani must never look at me that way, he told

"My dwarf," Otheym wheezed. "I bought him on... on... on a world... I forget. He's a human
distrans, a toy discarded by the Tleilaxu. He's recorded all the names... the traitors..." Otheym fell
silent, trembling.

"You speak of Lichna," Dhuri said. "When you arrived, we knew she'd reached you safely. If you're
thinking of this new burden Otheym places upon you, Lichna is the sum of that burden. An even
exchange, Usul: take the dwarf and go."

Harry felt sick as neither of them broke the news of the real girls’ death to her Father and
stepmother/aunt. Would there come a time when they could be told the truth? It was something no
parent ever wished to hear, that their beloved child was gone before them.

Paul suppressed a shudder, closed his eyes. Lichna! The real daughter had perished in the desert, a
semuta-wrecked body abandoned to the sand and the wind. Opening his eyes, Paul said: "You
could've come to me at any time for..."

"Otheym stayed away that he might be numbered among those who hate you, Usul," Dhuri said.
"The house to the south of us at the end of the street, that is a gathering place for your foes. It's why
we took this hovel."

"Then summon the dwarf and we'll leave," Paul said.

"You've not listened well," Dhuri said.

"You must take the dwarf to a safe place," Otheym said, an odd strength in his voice. "He carries the
only record of the traitors. No one suspects his talent. They think I keep him for amusement."

"We cannot leave," Dhuri said. "Only you and the dwarf. It's known... how poor we are. We've said
we're selling the dwarf. They'll take you for the buyers. It's your only chance."

Paul consulted his memory of the vision: in it, he'd left here with the names of the traitors, but never
seeing how those names were carried, just like he never saw Harry. The dwarf obviously moved under the protection of another oracle. It occurred to Paul then that all creatures must carry some kind of destiny stamped out by purposes of varying strengths, by the fixation of training and disposition. From the moment, the Jihad had chosen him, he'd felt himself hemmed in by the forces of a multitude. Their fixed purposes demanded and controlled his course. Any delusions of Free Will he harboured now must be merely the prisoner rattling his cage. His curse lay in the fact that he saw the cage. He saw it! He listened now to the emptiness of this house: only the four of them in it - Dhuri, Otheym, Harry, the dwarf and himself. He inhaled the fear and tension of his companions, sensed the watchers - his own force hovering in 'thropers far overhead... and those others... next door. I was wrong to hope, Paul thought. But thinking of hope brought him a twisted sense of hope, and he felt that he might yet seize his moment. "Summon the dwarf," he said.

"Bijaz!" Dhuri called.

"You call me?" The dwarf stepped into the room from the courtyard, an alert expression of worry on his face.

"You have a new master, Bijaz," Dhuri said. She stared at Paul. "You may call him... Usul."

"Usul, that's the base of the pillar," Bijaz said, translating. "How can Usul be base when I'm the basest thing living?"

"He always speaks thus," Otheym apologized.

"I don't speak," Bijaz said. "I operate a machine called language. It creaks and groans, but is mine own."

A Tleilaxu toy, learned and alert, Paul thought. The Bene Tleilaxu never threw away something this valuable. He turned, studied the dwarf. Round melange eyes returned his stare. "What other talents have you, Bijaz?" Paul asked.

"I know when we should leave," Bijaz said. "It's a talent few men have. There's a time for endings - and that's a good beginning. Let us begin to go, Usul."

Paul examined his vision memory: no dwarf, but the little man's words fitted the occasion. "At the door, you called me Sire," Paul said. "You know me, then?"
"You've sired, Sire," Bijaz said, grinning. "You are much more than the base Usul. You're the Atreides Emperor, Paul Muad'Dib. And you are my finger." He held up the index finger of his right hand. "And this one is the Atreides knife, Harry Potter. He is also a finger." He held up his pinkie.

"Bijaz!" Dhuri snapped. "You tempt fate."

"I tempt my fingers," Bijaz protested, voice squeaking. He pointed at Usul. "I point at Usul. Is my finger not Usul himself? Or is it a reflection of something baser?" He brought the finger close to his eyes, examined it with a mocking grin, first one side then the other. "Ahh, it's merely a finger, after all."

"He often rattles on thus," Dhuri said, worry in her voice. "I think it's why he was discarded by the Tleilaxu."

"I'll not be patronized," Bijaz said, "yet I have a new patron. How strange the workings of the finger." He peered at Dhuri and Otheym, eyes oddly bright. "A weak glue bound us, Otheym. A few tears and we part." The dwarfs' big feet rasped on the floor as he whirled completely around, stopped facing Paul. "Ahh, patron! I came the long way around to find you." Paul nodded. "You'll be kind, Usul?" Bijaz asked. "I'm a person, you know. Persons come in many shapes and sizes. This be but one of them. I'm weak of muscle, but strong of mouth; cheap to feed, but costly to fill. Empty me as you will, there's still more in me than men put there."

"We've no time for your stupid riddles," Dhuri growled. "You should be gone."

"I'm riddled with conundrums," Bijaz said, "but not all of them stupid. To be gone, Usul, is to be a bygone. Yes? Let us let bygones be bygones. Dhuri speaks truth, and I've the talent for hearing that, too."

"You've truthsense?" Paul asked, determined now to wait out the clockwork of his vision. Anything was better than shattering these moments and producing the new consequences. There remained things for Otheym to say lest Time be diverted into even more horrifying channels.

"I've now-sense" Bijaz said.

Paul noted that the dwarf had grown more nervous. Was the little man aware of things about to happen? Could Bijaz be his own oracle?
"Did you inquire of Lichna?" Otheym asked suddenly, peering up at Dhuri with his one good eye.

"Lichna is safe," Dhuri said.

Paul lowered his head, lest his expression betray the lie while Harry simply studied the dwarf. Safe! Lichna was ashes in a secret grave.

"That's good then," Otheym said, taking Paul's lowered head for a nod of agreement. "One good thing among the evils, Usul. I don't like the world we're making, you know that? It was better when we were alone in the desert with only the Harkonnen's for enemy."

"There's but a thin line between many an enemy and many a friend," Bijaz said. "Where that line stops, there's no beginning and no end. Let's end it, my friends." He moved to Paul's side, jittered from one foot to the other.

"What's now-sense?" Paul asked, dragging out these moments, goading the dwarf.

"Now!" Bijaz said, trembling. "Now! Now!" He tugged at Paul's robe. "Let us go now!"

"His mouth rattles, but there's no harm in him," Otheym said, affection in his voice, the one good eye staring at Bijaz.

"Even a rattle can signal departure," Bijaz said. "And so can tears. Let's be gone while there's time to begin."

"Bijaz, what do you fear?" Paul asked.

"I fear the spirit seeking me now," Bijaz muttered. Perspiration stood out on his forehead. His cheeks twitched. "I fear the one who thinks not and will have no body except mine - and that one gone back into itself! I fear the things I see and the things I do not see." This dwarf does possess the power of prescience, Paul thought. Bijaz shared the terrifying oracle. Did he share the oracle's fate, as well? How potent was the dwarf's power? Did he have the little prescience of those who dabbled in the Dune Tarot? Or was it something greater? How much had he seen?
"Best you go," Dhuri said. "Bijaz is right."

"Every minute we linger," Bijaz said, "prolongs... prolongs the present!"

Every minute I linger defers my guilt, Paul thought. A worm's poisonous breath, its teeth dripping dust, had washed over him. It had happened long ago, but he inhaled the memory of it now - spice and bitterness. He could sense his own worm waiting - "the urn of the desert." "These are troubled times," he said, addressing himself to Otheym's judgment of their world.

“Come Usul, we need to go.” Harry called as he stood, something was coming and they needed to get away.

"Fremen know what to do in time of trouble," Dhuri said. Otheym contributed a shaky nod. Paul glanced at Dhuri. He'd not expected gratitude, would have been burdened by it more than he could bear, but Otheym's bitterness and the passionate resentment he saw in Dhuri's eyes shook his resolve. Was anything worth this price? "Delay serves no purpose," Dhuri said.

"Do what you must, Usul." Otheym wheezed.

Paul sighed. The words of the vision had been spoken. "There'll be an accounting," he said, to complete it. Turning, he strode from the room, heard Bijaz foot-slapping behind.

"Bygones, bygones," Bijaz muttered as they went. "Let bygones fall where they may. This has been a dirty day."

Harry did not like any of this, they had sprung the trap, what had Paul or even the dwarf seen? He spread his magic out, searching for the danger but there was nothing. Seeing Otheym like that had rattled them both and he needed a clear head for what may be coming.

First Moon stood high over the city as Paul, his shield activated and shimmering around him, emerged from the cul-de-sac, harry at his back, his own shield active. A wind off the massif whirled sand and dust down the narrow street, causing Bijaz to blink and shield his eyes.

"We must hurry," the dwarf muttered. "Hurry! Hurry!"
"You sense danger?" Paul asked, probing.

"I know danger!"

An abrupt sense of peril very near was followed almost immediately by a figure joining them out of a doorway. Bijaz crouched and whimpered. It was only Stilgar moving like a war machine, head thrust forward, feet striking the street solidly. Swiftly, Paul explained the value of the dwarf, handed Bijaz over to Stilgar. The pace of the vision moved here with great rapidity. Stilgar sped away with Bijaz. Security Guards enveloped Paul. Orders were given to send men down the street toward the house beyond Otheym's. The men hurried to obey, shadows among shadows. More sacrifices, Paul thought.

"We want live prisoners," one of the guard officers hissed.

The sound was a vision-echo in Paul's ears. It went with solid precision here - vision/reality, tick for tick. Ornithopters drifted down across the moon. The night was full of Imperial troopers attacking. A soft hiss grew out of the other sounds, climbed to a roar while they still heard the sibilance. It picked up a terra-cotta glow that hid the stars, engulfed the moon. Paul, knowing that sound and glow from the earliest nightmare glimpses of his vision, felt an odd sense of fulfilment. It went the way it must. "Stone burner!" someone screamed.

"Stone burner!" The cry was all around him.

"Stone burner... stone burner..."

Because it was required of him, Paul threw a protective arm across his face, dove for the low lip of a curb. It already was too late, of course. He felt Harry against his back, acting as a living shield to protect him and he felt a comforting warmth spread over and through him before spreading out.

Where Otheym's house had been there stood now a pillar of fire, a blinding jet roaring at the heavens. It gave off a dirty brilliance which threw into sharp relief every ballet movement of the fighting and fleeing men, the tipping retreat of ornithopters. He could see through is visions what was happening since Harry would not let him up.

For every member of this frantic throng it was too late. They were all doomed, radiation would take from his friend what the spice had never hidden, his brilliant green eyes. Harry had one arm around his waist, keeping him still and close to his own body. It was strange, despite the circumstances he
felt totally safe. He had known Harry all his life and despite the years apart he would still trust everything to the older man. His thoughts went to the rest of the men around them, why did they have to be sacrificed? All because they served him.

The ground grew hot beneath Paul but not uncomfortably so and he knew that was Harry’s doing, would it be enough to save them? He heard the sound of running stop. Men threw themselves down all around him, every one of them aware that there was no point in running. The first damage had been done; and now they must wait out the extent of the stone burner's potency. The things radiation, which no man could outrun, already had penetrated their flesh. The peculiar result of stone-burner radiation already was at work in them. What else this weapon might do now lay in the planning of the men who had used it, the men who had defied the Great Convention to use it.

"God's... a stone burner," someone whimpered. "I... don't... want... to... be... blind."

"Who does?" The harsh voice of a trooper far down the street

"The Tleilaxu will sell many eyes here," someone near Paul growled. "Now, shut up and wait!"

They waited. Paul remained silent, thinking what this weapon implied. Too much fuel in it and it'd cut its way into the planet's core. Dune's molten level lay deep, but the more dangerous for that. Such pressures released and out of control might split a planet, scattering lifeless bits and pieces through space.

"I think it's dying down a bit," someone said.

"It's just digging deeper," Paul cautioned. "Stay put, all of you. Stilgar will be sending help."

"Stilgar got away?"

"Stilgar got away." Harry called in confirmation.

"The ground's hot," someone complained.

"They dared use atomics!" a trooper near Paul protested.
"The sound's diminishing," someone down the street said.

Paul ignored the words, concentrated on his fingertips against the street. He could feel the rolling-rumbling of the thing - deep... deep...

"My eyes!" someone cried. "I can't see!"

Someone closer to it than I was, Paul thought. He still could see to the end of the cul-de-sac when he lifted his head, before Harry shoved him back down, although there was a mistiness across the scene. A red-yellow glow filled the area where Otheym's house and its neighbour had been. Pieces of adjoining buildings made dark patterns as they crumbled into the glowing pit.

Harry finally stood and hauled Paul to his feet, steadying him. He felt the stone burner die, silence beneath him as he leant against his friend. His body was wet with perspiration against the stillsuits slickness - too much for the suit to accommodate. The air he drew into his lungs carried the heat and sulphur stench of the burner.

As he looked at the troopers beginning to stand up around him, the mist on Paul's eyes remained. He summoned up his oracular vision of these moments, needing to see clearly, then, turned and strode along the track that Time had carved for him, fitting himself into the vision so tightly that it could not escape. He felt himself grow aware of this place as a multitudinous possession, reality welded to prediction. Moans and groans of his troopers arose all around him as the men realized their blindness…. though for some their eyes were intact or even giving limited vision. He glanced at Harry, having to look with misty eyes and Harry’s clear green eyes stared back, Harry had saved them and was somehow untouched by the radiation.

"Hold fast!" Paul shouted, turning back to his men. "Help is coming!" And, as the complaints persisted, he said: "This is Muad'Dib! I command you to hold fast! Help comes!"

Silence. Then, true to his vision, a guardsman said: "Is it truly the Emperor? Which of you can see? Tell me."

“Be calm, Muad’Dib is truly here.” Harry called even as he gently grasped Paul’s chin, looking at his eyes. “Damaged but not destroyed.” He murmured in relief, thankful for the fact that all the modifications to his own body made it very hardy, and a fast healer. The radiation had done damage but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t heal. He moved Paul to the wall and then at his nod moved out among the men, looking for those who could still see to help those totally blind until help arrived.
"They have damaged my eyes, as well, but not my vision. I can see you standing there, a dirty wall within touching distance on your left. Now wait bravely. Stilgar comes with our friends." Paul called to the man who had wanted assurance he was there. The thwock-thwock of many 'thopters grew louder all around. There was the sound of hurrying feet. Paul watched his friends come, matching their sounds to his oracular vision. "Stilgar!" Paul shouted, waving an arm. "Over here!"

"Thanks to Shai-hulud," Stilgar cried, running up to Paul. "You're not... " In the sudden silence, Paul's vision showed him Stilgar staring with an expression of agony at the damaged eyes of his friend and Emperor. "Oh, m' Lord," Stilgar groaned. "Usul... Usul... Usul... "

"What of the stone burner?" one of the newcomers shouted.

"It's ended," Paul said, raising his voice. He gestured. "Get up there now and rescue the ones who were closest to it. Put up barriers. Lively now!" He turned back to Stilgar. This was not exactly the path of his visions, in them he was truly blinded, not this misty world, what else may change?

"Do you see, M'Lord?" Stilgar asked, wonder in his tone. "How can you see?"

For answer, Paul put a finger out to touch Stilgar's cheek above the stillsuit mouthcap, felt tears. "You need give no moisture to me, old friend," Paul said. "I am not dead."

"But your eyes!"

"I still see old friend, not clearly but my vision is still there." Paul said. "Ah, Stil, I live in an apocalyptic dream. My steps fit into it so precisely that I fear most of all I will grow bored reliving the thing so exactly."

"Usul, I don't, I don't..."

"Don't try to understand it. Accept it. I am in the world beyond this world here. For me, they are the same. I need no hand to guide me. I see every movement all around me. I see every expression of your face. I have damaged eyes, yet I see."

Stilgar shook his head sharply. "Sire, we must conceal your affliction from -"
"We hide it from no man," Paul said.

"But the law..."

"We live by the Atreides Law now, Stil." Harry pointed out as he moved back to Paul’s side since others were available to help.

"The Fremen Law that the blind should be abandoned in the desert applies only to the blind. I am not blind, I see in mist but my visions remain. I live in the cycle of being where the war of good and evil has its arena. We are at a turning point in the succession of ages and we have our parts to play."

In a sudden stillness, Paul heard one of the wounded being led past him. "It was terrible," the man groaned, "a great fury of fire."

"None of these men shall be taken into the desert," Paul said. "You hear me, Stil?"

"I hear you, M’Lord."

"They are to be fitted with new eyes at my expense. Those not blinded are to receive the best treatment possible."

"It will be done, M’Lord."

Paul, hearing the awe grow in Stilgar's voice, said: "I will be at the Command 'thopter. Take charge here."

"Yes, M’Lord."

Paul stepped around Stilgar, strode down the street. His vision told him every movement, every irregularity beneath his feet, every face he encountered, despite the mist of his body’s eyes. He gave orders as he moved, pointing to men of his personal entourage, calling out names, summoning to himself the ones who represented the intimate apparatus of government. He could feel the terror
grow behind him, the fearful whispers. And all the while Harry remained silently at his shoulder, keen eyes searching for further danger. How had Harry remained unaffected? Another of his differences that he had never truly explained.

"His eyes!"

"But he looked right at you, called you by name!"

At the Command 'thopter, he reached into the machine and took the microphone from the hand of a startled communications officer, issued a swift string of orders, thrust the microphone back into the officer's hand. Turning, Paul summoned a weapons specialist, one of the eager and brilliant new breed who remembered sietch life only dimly.

"They used a stone burner," Paul said.

After the briefest pause, the man said: "So I was told, Sire."

"You know what that means, of course."

"The fuel could only have been atomic."

Paul nodded, thinking of how this man's mind must be racing. Atomics. The Great Convention prohibited such weapons. Discovery of the perpetrator would bring down the combined retributive assault of the Great Houses. Old feuds would be forgotten, discarded in the face of this threat and the ancient fears it aroused. "It cannot have been manufactured without leaving some traces," Paul said. "You will assemble the proper equipment and search out the place where the stone burner was made."

"At once, Sire." With one last fearful glance, the man sped away.

"M'Lord," the communications officer ventured from behind him. "Your eyes..."

Paul turned, reached into the 'thopter, returned the command set to his personal band. "Call Chani," he ordered. "Tell her... tell her I am alive and will be with her soon."
Now the forces gather, Paul thought. And he noted how strong was the smell of fear in the perspiration all around. He closed his eyes, they throbbed in pain and then he felt a cool cloth rest over them and knew it was Harry.

“Come my Lord, you need rest, Stilgar can handle this. Rest will help the pain.”

“Will the mist go?” he asked as Harry led him to a ‘thopter, not able to use his vision here since Harry was as invisible as ever.

“Perhaps. Radiation damage is a tricky thing.” He admitted as he ensured Paul was secured and then lifted off, heading for the Palace.

“How bad is it?” Irulan asked, voice trembling despite her training and Harry reached out to place a comforting hand on her shoulder as she stared into the room where Paul lay on the bed, doctors around him.

“The Stone burner did damage but his eyes were not destroyed. He can still see, only time will tell how much of his sight he will lose.”

“Atomics… how could they… I never wanted any of this.” She whispered.

“He knows. He said that in ensuring Chani remained barren you actually prolonged her life.”

“You were right Harry, I have to choose.” She trembled and then turned to bury her face against his chest and felt his arms move to hold her gently. She choked back a sob of grief, what had she done? But this had not been a part of the plan she was told. She never would have agreed to this! Harry rocked her gently, letting her cry. And now she realised, she should never have gone alone with any of the plans. She had allowed jealousy to control her and she knew Chani would pay the price for that, and through her Paul would as well.

“Get some rest Princess. Enemies will see this time as weakness and move swiftly against us. A well-rested mind and body are needed.” He urged her away and she left, not wanting to see anymore and torn by what she was feeling.
Chani rose early, awakened by a stillness in the Keep. Awakening, she found Paul sitting beside her, his cloudy eyes aimed at some formless place beyond the far wall of their bedchamber. With what the stone burner had done with its peculiar affinity for eye tissue, he was lucky to still have his eyes. Very few of the other survivors still had eyes, let alone the ability to see. Ravenous hunger seized her as she sat up and she fed on the food kept by the bedside - spicebread, a heavy cheese. How much worse would it have been without Harry’s help? This child grew quickly but the medics were hopeful it was not too quickly.

Paul gestured at the food. "Beloved, there was no way to spare you this. Believe me."

Chani stilled a fit of trembling when looked at her. She'd given up asking him to explain. He spoke so oddly: "I was baptized in sand and it cost me the knack of believing. Who trades in faiths anymore? Who'll buy? Who'll sell?" What could he mean by such words? He refused even to consider Tleilaxu eyes, although he bought them with a lavish hand for the men who'd shared his affliction. He insisted that his damaged vision was no weakness, not with his visions.

Hunger satisfied, Chani slipped from bed, glanced back at Paul, noted his tiredness. Grim lines framed his mouth. The dark hair stood up, mussed from a sleep that hadn't healed. He appeared so saturnine and remote. The back and forth of waking and sleeping did nothing to change this. She forced herself to turn away, whispered: "My love... my love..."

He leaned over, pulled her back into the bed, kissed her cheeks. "Soon we'll go back to our desert," he whispered. "Only a few things remain to be done here." She trembled at the finality in his voice. He tightened his arms around her, murmured: "Don't fear me, my Sihaya. Forget mystery and accept love. There's no mystery about love. It comes from life. Can't you feel that?"

"Yes." She put a palm against his chest, counting his heartbeats. His love cried out to the Fremen spirit in her - torrential, outpouring, savage. A magnetic power enveloped her.

"I promise you a thing, beloved," he said. "A child of ours will rule such an empire that mine will fade in comparison. Such achievements of living and art and sublime -"

"We're here now!" she protested, fighting a dry sob. "And... I feel we have so little... time."

"We have eternity, beloved."
"You may have eternity. I have only now."

"But this is eternity." He stroked her forehead. She pressed against him, lips on his neck. The pressure agitated the life in her womb. She felt it stir. Paul felt it, too. He put a hand on her abdomen, said: "Ahh, little Princess, wait your time. This moment is mine."

She wondered then why he always spoke of the life within her as singular. Hadn't the medics told him? She searched back in her own memory, curious that the subject had never arisen between them. Surely, he must know she carried twins. She hesitated on the point of raising this question. He must know. He knew everything. He knew all the things that were herself. His hands, his mouth - all of him knew her. Presently, she said: "Yes, love. This is forever... this is real." And she closed her eyes tightly lest sight of his cloudy eyes stretch her soul from paradise to hell. No matter the rihani magic in which he'd enciphered their lives, his flesh remained real, his caresses could not be denied. When they arose to dress for the day, she said: "If the people only knew your love..."

But his mood had changed. "You can't build politics on love," he said. "People aren't concerned with love; it's too disordered. They prefer despotism. Too much freedom breeds chaos. We can't have that, can we? And how do you make despotism lovable?"

"You're not a despot!" she protested, tying her scarf. "Your laws are just."

"Ahh, laws," he said. He crossed to the window, pulled back the draperies to look out. "What's law? Control? Law filters chaos and what drips through? Serenity? Law - our highest ideal and our basest nature. Don't look too closely at the law. Do, and you'll find the rationalized interpretations, the legal casuistry, the precedents of convenience. You'll find the serenity, which is just another word for death."

Chani's mouth drew into a tight line. She couldn't deny his wisdom and sagacity, but these moods frightened her. He turned upon himself and she sensed internal wars. It was as though he took the Fremen maxim, "Never to forgive - never to forget," and whipped his own flesh with it. She crossed to his side, stared past him at an angle. The growing heat of the day had begun pulling the north wind out of these protected latitudes. The wind painted a false sky full of ochre plumes and sheets of crystal, strange designs in rushing gold and red. High and cold, the wind broke against the Shield Wall with fountains of dust.

Paul felt Chani's warmth beside him. Momentarily, he lowered a curtain of forgetfulness across his vision. He might just be standing here in a very low light before he closed eyes that still ached. Time refused to stand still for him, though. He inhaled darkness - starless, tearless. His affliction dissolved substance until all that remained was astonishment at the way sounds condensed his universe.
Everything around him leaned on his lonely sense of hearing, falling back only when he touched objects: the drapery, Chani's hand... He caught himself listening for Chani's breaths. Where was the insecurity of things that were only probable? he asked himself. His mind carried such a burden of mutilated memories. For every instant of reality there existed countless projections, things fated never to be. An invisible self within him remembered the false pasts, their burden threatening at times to overwhelm the present. Chani leaned against his arm.

He felt his body through her touch: dead flesh carried by time eddies. He reeked of memories that had glimpsed eternity. To see eternity was to be exposed to eternity's whims, oppressed by endless dimensions. The oracle's false immortality demanded retribution: Past and Future became simultaneous. Once more, the vision arose from its black pit, locked onto him. It was his eyes. It moved his muscles. It guided him into the next moment, the next hour, the next day... until he felt himself to be always there!

"It's time we were going," Chani said. "The Council..."

"Alia will be with Leto to stand in my place."

"Do they know what to do?"

"They know."

""

Leto looked up as the door opened and Lily slipped in, moving to curl with him on the bed. He felt so lost. Alia had slipped away from them with her new abilities, Lily was all he had left. And now his Father... he held her close and choked back a sob. This was meant to be a happy time, with a baby sister on the way, newly engaged to his best friend, and yet now he was consumed by grief. He heard her humming a gentle tune as she ran soothing fingers through his hair. "Don't leave me."

“Never my dearest friend.” She promised. She pulled back and smiled softly at him. “Everything will work out.”

“I hope so.”

""
stared down at a scene of frantic confusion, clamorous and intimidating babble. The scene became intelligible only when she recognized the prisoner they'd brought: Korba, the Panegyrist.

She made her morning toilet, moving occasionally to the window, keeping watch on the progress of impatience down there. Her gaze kept straying to Korba. She tried to remember him as the rough and bearded commander of the third wave in the battle of Arrakeen. It was impossible. Korba had become an immaculate fop dressed now in a Parato silk robe of exquisite cut. It lay open to the waist, revealing a beautifully laundered ruff and embroidered undercoat set with green gems. A purple belt gathered the waist. The sleeves poking through the robe's armhole slits had been tailored into rivulet ridges of dark green and black velvet.

A few Naibs had come out to observe the treatment accorded a fellow Fremen. They'd brought on the clamour, exciting Korba to protest his innocence. Alia moved her gaze across the Fremen faces, trying to recapture memories of the original men. The present blotted out the past. They'd all become hedonists, samplers of pleasures most men couldn't even imagine.

Their uneasy glances, she saw, strayed often to the doorway into the chamber where they would meet. They were thinking of Muad’Dib's vision sight and damaged eyes, a new manifestation of mysterious powers. By their law, a blind man should be abandoned in the desert, his water given up to Shai-hulud. But Muad’Dib was not blind, even without his visions. They disliked buildings, too, and felt vulnerable in space built above the ground. Give them a proper cave cut from rock, then they could relax - but not here, not with this new Muad’Dib waiting inside.

As she turned to go down to the meeting, she saw the letter where she'd left it on a table by the door: the latest message from their mother. Despite the special reverence held for Caladan as the place of Paul's birth, the Lady Jessica had emphasized her refusal to make her planet a stop on the hajj.

"No doubt my son is an epochal figure of history," she'd written, "but I cannot see this as an excuse for submitting to a rabble invasion."

Alia touched the letter, experienced an odd sensation of mutual contact. This paper had been in her mother's hands. Such an archaic device, the letter - but personal in a way no recording could achieve. Written in the Atreides Battle Tongue, it represented an almost invulnerable privacy of communication. Thinking of her mother afflicted Alia with the usual inward blurring. The spice change gave her access to her maternal lineage, her mother's memories, her grandmothers…it was strange now to be able to remember giving birth to her brother, raising him. The capsule-complex of oneness could present her own father as a lover. Ghost shadows cavorted in her mind, people of possibility.

Alia reviewed the letter as she walked down the ramp to the antechamber where her guard amazons waited. "You produce a deadly paradox," Jessica had written. "Government cannot be religious and
self-assertive at the same time. Religious experience needs a spontaneity which laws inevitably suppress. And you cannot govern without laws. Your laws eventually must replace morality, replace conscience, replace even the religion by which you think to govern. Sacred ritual must spring from praise and holy yearnings which hammer out a significant morality. Government, on the other hand, is a cultural organism particularly attractive to doubts, questions and contentions. I see the day coming when ceremony must take the place of faith and symbolism replaces morality."

The smell of spice-coffee greeted Alia in the antechamber. Four guard amazons in green watchrobes came to attention as she entered. They fell into step behind her, striding firmly in the bravado of their youth, eyes alert for trouble. They had zealot faces untouched by awe. They radiated that special Fremen quality of violence: they could kill casually with no sense of guilt.

In this, I am different, Alia thought. The Atreides name has enough dirt on it without that. Word preceded her. A waiting page darted off as she entered the lower hall, running to summon the full guard detail. The hall stretched out windowless and gloomy, illuminated only by a few subdued glowglobes. Abruptly, the doors to the parade yard opened wide at the far end to admit a glaring shaft of daylight. The guard with Korba in their midst wavered into view from the outside with the light behind them.

"Where is Stilgar?" Alia demanded.

"Already inside," one of her amazons said.

Alia nodded and then smiled as her nephew emerged with his own guard, heirs’ circlet on clear display, dressed in the white and gold his Father often favoured. Only someone who knew him really well would be able to tell he was nervous and could use some more sleep. She stepped in and hugged him and Leto clung to her tightly for a second. “Ready?” She asked and he stepped back, straightening his robe.

“Ready.” He just couldn’t believe Korba had done this. What had happened to the loyal Fedaykin who had once looked after him?

Leto led the way into the chamber. It was one of the Keep's more pretentious meeting places. A high balcony with rows of soft seats occupied one side. Across from the balcony, orange draperies had been pulled back from tall windows. Bright sunlight poured through from an open space with a garden and a fountain. At the near end of the chamber on their right stood a dais with two massive chairs. Moving to the chairs, Alia glanced back and up, saw the gallery filled with Naibs even as Leto took his seat, face blank.
Household guardsmen packed the open space beneath the gallery, Stilgar moving among them with a quiet word here, a command there. He gave no sign that he'd seen them enter.

Korba was brought in, seated at a low table with cushions beside it on the chamber floor below the dais. Despite his finery, the Panegyrist gave the appearance now of a surly, sleepy old man huddled up in his robes as against the outer cold. Two guardsmen took up positions behind him.

Stilgar approached the dais as Alia seated herself. "Where is Muad'Dib?" he asked.

"My brother has delegated me to preside as Reverend Mother," Alia said. Hearing this, the Naibs in the gallery began raising their voices in protest. "Silence!" Alia commanded. In the abrupt quiet, she said: "Is it not Fremen law that a Reverend Mother presides when life and death are at issue?"

“I represent my Father here, I am heir to the Throne.” Leto announced, voice firm and while there was muttering they remained mostly quiet.

As the gravity of her statement penetrated, stillness came over the Naibs, but Alia marked angry stares across the rows of faces. She named them in her mind for discussion in Council - Hobars, Rajifiri, Tasmin, Saajid, Umbu, Legg... The names carried pieces of Dune in them: Umbu Sietch, Tasmin Sink, Hobars Gap... She turned her attention to Korba.

Observing her attention, Korba lifted his chin, said: "I protest my innocence."

"Stilgar, read the charges," Leto commanded.

Stilgar produced a brown spicepaper scroll, stepped forward. He began reading, a solemn flourish in his voice as though to hidden rhythms. He gave the words an incisive quality, clear and full of probity: "... that you did conspire with traitors to accomplish the destruction of our Lord and Emperor; that you did meet in vile secrecy with diverse enemies of the realm; that you... "

Korba kept shaking his head with a look of pained anger.

Alia listened broodingly, chin planted on her left fist, head cocked to that side, the other arm extended along the chair arm. Bits of the formal procedure began dropping out of her awareness, screened by her own feelings of disquiet.
"... venerable tradition... support of the legions and all Fremen everywhere... violence met with violence according to the Law... majesty of the Imperial Person... forfeit all rights to..."

It was nonsense, she thought. Nonsense! All of it - nonsense... nonsense... nonsense...

Stilgar finished: "Thus the issue is brought to judgment."

In the immediate silence, Korba rocked forward, hands gripping his knees, veined neck stretched as though he were preparing to leap. His tongue flicked between his teeth as he spoke. "Not by word or deed have I been traitor to my Fremen vows! I demand to confront my accuser!"

A simple enough protest, Alia thought. And she saw that it had produced a considerable effect on the Naibs. They knew Korba. He was one of them. To become a Naib, he'd proved his Fremen courage and caution. Not brilliant, Korba, but reliable. Not one to lead a Jihad, perhaps, but a good choice as supply officer. Not a crusader, but one who cherished the old Fremen virtues: The Tribe is paramount. Otheym's bitter words as Paul had recited them swept through Alia's mind. She scanned the gallery. Any of those men might see himself in Korba's place - some for good reason. But an innocent Naib was as dangerous as a guilty one here.

Korba felt it, too. "Who accuses me?" he demanded. "I have a Fremen right to confront my accuser."

"Perhaps you accuse yourself," Alia said. Before he could mask it, mystical terror lay briefly on Korba's face. It was there for anyone to read: With her powers, Alia had but to accuse him herself, saying she brought the evidence from the shadow region, the alam al-mythal. "Our enemies have Fremen allies," Alia pressed. "Water traps have been destroyed, qanats blasted, plantings poisoned and storage basins plundered..."

“And now - they've stolen a worm from the desert, taken it to another world!” The voice of this intrusion was known to all of them - Muad'Dib. Paul came through the doorway from the hall, pressed through the guard ranks and crossed to Alia's side. Chani, accompanying him, remained on the sidelines. Harry remained at his side, green eyes glaring at Korba. Leto stood, surrendering his place to his Father but he remained standing.

"M'Lord," Stilgar said, refusing to look at Paul's face.

Paul aimed cloudy eyes at the gallery, then down to Korba. "What, Korba - no words of praise?"
Muttering could be heard in the gallery. It grew louder, isolated words and phrases audible: "... law for the blind... Fremen way... in the desert... who breaks..."

"Who says I'm blind?" Paul demanded. He faced the gallery. "You, Rajifiri? I see you're wearing gold today, and that blue shirt beneath it which still has dust on it from the streets. You always were untidy." Rajifiri made a warding gesture, three fingers against evil. "Point those fingers at yourself!" Paul shouted. "We know where the evil is!" He turned back to Korba. "There's guilt on your face, Korba."

"Not my guilt! I may've associated with the guilty, but no..." He broke off, shot a frightened look at the gallery.

Taking her cue from Paul, Alia arose, stepped down to the floor of the chamber, advanced to the edge of Korba's table. From a range of less than a meter, she stared down at him, silent and intimidating. Korba cowered under the burden of eyes. He fidgeted, shot anxious glances at the gallery.

"Whose eyes do you seek up there?" Paul asked.

"You cannot see!" Korba blurted.

Paul put down a momentary feeling of pity for Korba. The man lay trapped in the vision's snare as securely as any of those present. He played a part, no more. "I don't need eyes to see you," Paul said. He closed his eyes and he began describing Korba, every movement, every twitch, every alarmed and pleading look at the gallery. Desperation grew in Korba.

Watching him, Alia saw he might break any second. Someone in the gallery must realize how near he was to breaking, she thought. Who? She studied the faces of the Naibs, noting small betrayals in the masked faces... angers, fears, uncertainties... guilts. Paul fell silent.

Korba mustered a pitiful air of pomposity to plead: "Who accuses me?"

"Otheym accuses you," Alia said.
"But Otheym's dead!" Korba protested.

"How did you know that?" Paul asked. "Through your spy system? Oh, yes! We know about your spies and couriers. We know who brought the stone burner here from Tarahell."

"It was for the defence of the Qizarate!" Korba blurted.

"Is that how it got into traitorous hands?" Leto asked, innocent curiosity and Alia hid a smirk, Harry had taught him how to do that very well as a child.

"It was stolen and we..." Korba fell silent, swallowed. His gaze darted left and right. "Everyone knows I've been the voice of love for Muad'Dib." He stared at the gallery. "How can a dead man accuse a Fremen?"

"Otheym's voice isn't dead," Alia said. She stopped as Paul touched her arm.

"Otheym sent us his voice," Paul said. "It gives the names, the acts of treachery, the meeting places and the times. Do you miss certain faces in the Council of Naibs, Korba? Where are Merkur and Fash? Keke the Lame isn't with us today. And Takim, where is he?" Korba shook his head from side to side. "They've fled Arrakis with the stolen worm," Paul said. "Even if I freed you now, Korba, Shai-hulud would have your water for your part in this. Why don't I free you, Korba? Think of all those men whose eyes were taken, the men who cannot see as I see. They have families and friends, Korba. Where could you hide from them?"

"It was an accident," Korba pleaded. "Anyway, they're getting Tleilaxu..." Again, he subsided.

"Who knows what bondage goes with metal eyes?" Paul asked. The Naibs in their gallery began exchanging whispered comments, speaking behind raised hands. They gazed coldly at Korba now.

"Defence of the Qizarate," Harry whispered accusingly. "A device which either destroys a planet or produces J-rays to blind those too near it. Which effect, Korba, did you conceive as a defence? Does the Qizarate rely on stopping the eyes of all observers?" he tilted his head curiously, eyes never leaving Korba and the man looked from him to Paul.

"It was a curiosity, M'Lord," Korba pleaded. "We knew the Old Law said that only Families could possess atomics, but the Qizarate obeyed... obeyed..."
"Obeyed you," Leto finished for him coolly.

"A curiosity, indeed." Paul agreed.

"Even if it's only the voice of my accuser, you must face me with it!" Korba said. "A Fremen has rights."


Alia experienced the odd sensation she was hearing Stilgar's words before he spoke them. How could he be this credulous? Stilgar had never appeared more official and conservative, more intent on adhering to the Dune Code. His chin was outthrust, aggressive. His mouth chopped. Was there really nothing in him but this outrageous pomposity?

"Korba is a Fremen and must be judged by Fremen Law," Stilgar concluded.

Alia turned away, looked out at the day shadows dropping down the wall across from the garden. She felt drained by frustration. They'd dragged this thing along well into midmorning. Now, what? Korba had relaxed. The Panegyrist's manner said he'd suffered an unjust attack, that everything he'd done had been for love of Muad'Dib. She glanced at Korba, surprised a look of sly self-importance sliding across his face. He might almost have received a message, she thought. He acted the part of a man who'd heard friends shout: "Hold fast! Help is on its way!"

For an instant, they'd held this thing in their hands - the information out of the dwarf, the clues that others were in the plot, the names of informants. But the critical moment had flown. Stilgar? Surely not Stilgar. She turned, stared at the old Fremen. Stilgar met her gaze without flinching.

"Thank you, Stil," Paul said, "for reminding us of the Law."

Stilgar inclined his head. He moved close, shaped silent words in a way he knew both Paul and Alia could read. I'll wring him dry and then take care of the matter.
Paul nodded, signalled the guardsmen behind Korba. "Remove Korba to a maximum-security cell," Paul said. "No visitors except counsel. As counsel, I appoint Stilgar."

"Let me choose my own counsel!" Korba shouted.

Paul whirled. "You deny the fairness and judgment of Stilgar?"

"Oh, no, M’Lord, but... "

"Take him away!" Paul barked. The guardsmen lifted Korba off the cushions, herded him out.

With new mutterings, the Naibs began quitting their gallery. Attendants came from beneath the gallery, crossed to the windows and drew the orange draperies. Orange gloom took over the chamber.

"Paul," Alia said.

"When we precipitate violence," Paul said, "it'll be when we have full control of it. Thank you, Stil; you played your part well. Alia, I'm certain, has identified the Naibs who were with him. They couldn't help giving themselves away."

"You cooked this up between you?" Alia demanded.

"Had Father ordered Korba slain out of hand, the Naibs would have understood.” Leto flopped back into the chair and tugged his robes.

"But this formal procedure without strict adherence to Fremen Law - they felt their own rights threatened. Which Naibs were with him, Alia?" Paul looked to her.

"Rajifiri for certain," she said, voice low. "And Saajid, but... "

"Give Stilgar the complete list," Paul said.
Alia swallowed in a dry throat, sharing the general fear of Paul in this moment. She knew how he moved among them with damaged eyes, but the delicacy of it daunted her. To see their forms in the air of his vision! She sensed her person shimmering for him in a sidereal time whose accord with reality depended entirely on his words and actions. He held them all in the palm of his vision!

"It's past time for your morning audience, Sire," Stilgar said. "Many people - curious... afraid..."

"Are you afraid, Stil?"

It was barely a whisper: "Yes."

"You're my friend and have nothing to fear from me," Paul said.

Stilgar swallowed. "Yes, M'Lord."


A flurry of movement erupted at the great doors. A crowd was pressed back from the shadowy room to permit entrance of officials. Many things began happening all at once: the household guard elbowing and shoving back the press of Supplicants, garishly robed Pleaders trying to break through, shouts, curses. Pleaders waved the papers of their calling. The Clerk of the Assemblage strode ahead of them through the opening cleared by the guard. He carried the List of Preferences, those who'd be permitted to approach the Throne. The Clerk, a wiry Fremen named Tecrube, carried himself with weary cynicism, flaunting his shaven head, clumped whiskers.

Alia moved to intercept him, giving Paul time to slip away with Chani and Harry through the private passage behind the dais. She experienced a momentary distrust of Tecrube at the prying curiosity in the stare he sent after Paul.

"Leto and I speak for my brother today," she said. "Have the Supplicants approach one at a time."

"Yes, M'lady." He turned to arrange his throng.
"I can remember a time when you wouldn't have mistaken your brother's purpose here," Stilgar said.

"I was distracted," she said. "There's been a dramatic change in you, Stil. What is it?"

Stilgar drew himself up, shocked. One changed, of course. But dramatically? This was a particular view of himself that he'd never encountered. Drama was a questionable thing. Imported entertainers of dubious loyalty and more dubious virtue were dramatic. Enemies of the Empire employed drama in their attempts to sway the fickle populace. Korba had slipped away from Fremen virtues to employ drama for the Qizarate. And he'd die for that. "You're being perverse," Stilgar said. "Do you distrust me?"

The distress in his voice softened her expression, but not her tone. "You know I don't distrust you. I've always agreed with my brother that once matters were in Stilgar's hands we could safely forget them."

"Then why do you say I've... changed?"

"You're preparing to disobey my brother," she said. "I can read it in you. I only hope it doesn't destroy you both."

The first of the Pleaders and Supplicants were approaching now. She turned away before Stilgar could respond, taking her seat beside Leto who had straightened back up. Stilgar’s face, though, was filled with the things she'd sensed in her mother's letter - the replacement of morality and conscience with law. "You produce a deadly paradox."

Harry joined Paul at the window, looking out. “I do not know how you did it, but thank you.”

“There is no thanks necessary between us Paul. I wish I could have stopped all the damage, saved all the men.”

“You did what you could, that is what matters.”

“But not why you wanted to speak with me.” Harry leant against the wall, arms crossed and Paul shook his head.
“I am afraid Leto and Lily cannot have a long engagement. And there is Alia to consider as well…. I never wanted political matches for any of them.”

“I dare you to try and arrange one for Alia.” Harry grinned and Paul laughed.

“I have no desire to die that quickly. I have seen the way she watches him.”

“Hayt.” Harry confirmed. “Something about him draws her in, part of the trap?”

“Perhaps. Duncan would be a good match for her. There is another matter we need to speak of.”

“What is it?” they moved away from the window and Paul sat behind his desk, removing some documents to pass to Harry. “Paul?”

“You have never accepted a title, even when Gurney became Earl of Caladan. But things are changing.”

Harry mock groaned. “Alright, stop stalling and tell me what I am being stuck with.”

“Duke of Kaitain.” Paul answered and smirked at the look on his friends’ face. “There is no one else I would trust in the role with many of the Great Houses still using the planet, too much power still resides there. The title shall remain with your family, other than Lily.”

“In other words, hurry up and have more children.”

“I am sorry Harry but I need you in position to back Leto up.”

“You make it sound like you’re dying, I know the stone burner didn’t do that much damage.”

“I cannot rule forever.”
Harry paused as he heard an odd humming noise, he silently followed it to a room and waited outside.

"What are you doing to me?" that was Hayt, he closed his eyes and sent his magic into the room, getting an idea of layout and occupants.

"You are the instrument I was taught to play," Bijaz said. "I am playing you. Let me tell you the names of the other traitors among the Naibs. They are Bikouros and Cahueit. There is Djedida, who was secretary to Korba. There is Abumojandis, the aide to Bannerjee. Even now, one of them could be sinking a blade into your Muad'Dib."

Hayt shook his head from side to side. He found it too difficult to talk.

"We are like brothers," Bijaz said, interrupting his monotonous hum once more. "We grew in the same tank: I first and then you."

Hayt's metal eyes inflicted him with a sudden burning pain. Flickering red haze surrounded everything he saw. He felt he had been cut away from every immediate sense except the pain, and he experienced his surroundings through a thin separation like windblown gauze. All had become accident, the chance involvement of inanimate matter. His own will was no more than a subtle, shifting thing. It lived without breath and was intelligible only as an inward illumination. With a clarity born of desperation, he broke through the gauze curtain with the lonely sense of sight. His attention focused like a blazing light under Bijaz. Hayt felt that his eyes cut through layers of the dwarf, seeing the little man as a hired intellect, and beneath that, a creature imprisoned by hungers and cravings which lay huddled in the eyes - layer after layer, until finally, there was only an entity-aspect being manipulated by symbols.

"We are upon a battleground," Bijaz said. "You may speak of it."

His voice freed by the command, Hayt said: "You cannot force me to slay Muad'Dib."

"I have heard the Bene Gesserit say," Bijaz said, "that there is nothing firm, nothing balanced, nothing durable in all the universe - that nothing remains in its state, that each day, sometimes each hour, brings change."
Hayt shook his head dumbly from side to side.

"You believed the silly Emperor was the prize we sought," Bijaz said. "How little you understand our masters, the Tleilaxu. The Guild and Bene Gesserit believe we produce artefacts. In reality, we produce tools and services. Anything can be a tool - poverty, war. War is useful because it is effective in so many areas. It stimulates the metabolism. It enforces government. It diffuses genetic strains. It possesses a vitality such as nothing else in the universe. Only those who recognize the value of war and exercise it have any degree of self-determination."

In an oddly placid voice, Hayt said: "Strange thoughts coming from you, almost enough to make me believe in a vengeful Providence. What restitution was exacted to create you? It would make a fascinating story, doubtless with an even more extraordinary epilogue."

"Magnificent!" Bijaz chortled. "You attack - therefore you have willpower and exercise self-determination."

"You're trying to awaken violence in me," Hayt said in a panting voice.

Bijaz denied this with a shake of the head. "Awaken, yes; violence, no. You are a disciple of awareness by training, so you have said. I have an awareness to awaken in you, Duncan Idaho."

"Hayt!"


"The past cannot be awakened." Hayt sounded desperate and Harry hesitated, should he interfere? Or let this play out and learn more?

"Cannot?"

"It has never been done!"

"True, but our masters defy the idea that something cannot be done. Always, they seek the proper
tool, the right application of effort, the services of the proper -"

"You hide your real purpose! You throw up a screen of words and they mean nothing!"

"There is a Duncan Idaho in you," Bijaz said. "It will submit to emotion or to dispassionate examination, but submit it will. This awareness will rise through a screen of suppression and selection out of the dark past which dogs your footsteps. It goads you even now while it holds you back. There exists that being within you upon which awareness must focus and which you will obey."

"The Tleilaxu think I'm still their slave, but I -"

"Quiet, slave!" Bijaz said in that whining voice.

Hayt found himself frozen in silence.

"Now we are down to bedrock," Bijaz said. "I know you feel it. And these are the power-words to manipulate you... I think they will have sufficient leverage."

Hayt felt the perspiration pouring down his cheeks, the trembling of his chest and arms, but he was powerless to move.

"One day," Bijaz said, "the Emperor will come to you. He will say: 'She is gone.' The grief mask will occupy his face. He will give water to the dead, as they call their tears hereabouts. And you will say, using my voice: 'Master! Oh, Master!' "

Hayt's jaw and throat ached with the locking of his muscles. He could only twist his head in a brief arc from side to side.

"You will say, 'I carry a message from Bijaz.' " The dwarf grimaced. "Poor Bijaz, who has no mind... poor Bijaz, a drum stuffed with messages, an essence for others to use... pound on Bijaz and he produces a noise... " Again, he grimaced. "You think me a hypocrite. Duncan Idaho! I am not! I can grieve, too. But the time has come to substitute swords for words."
A hiccup shook Hayt. Harry wanted to interrupt but he needed to hear the full plan in order to figure out what to do, even if he went around Paul to protect him. He just hoped he didn’t have to kill Hayt to do so, he did not want to kill what was left of his friend.

Bijaz giggled, then: "Ah, thank you, Duncan, thank you. The demands of the body save us. As the Emperor carries the blood of the Harkonnen’s in his veins, he will do as we demand. He will turn into a spitting machine, a biter of words that ring with a lovely noise to our masters."

Hayt blinked, thinking how the dwarf appeared like an alert little animal, a thing of spite and rare intelligence. Harkonnen blood in the Atreides?

"You think of Beast Rabban, the vile Harkonnen, and you glare," Bijaz said. "You are like the Fremen in this. When words fail, the sword is always at hand, eh? You think of the torture inflicted upon your family by the Harkonnen’s. And, through his mother, your precious Paul is a Harkonnen! You would not find it difficult to slay a Harkonnen, now would you?"

Bitter frustration coursed through the ghola. Was it anger? Why should this cause anger?

"Ohhh," Bijaz said, and: "Ahhhh, hah! Click-click. There is more to the message. It is a trade the Tleilaxu offer your precious Paul Atreides. Our masters will restore his beloved. A sister to yourself - another ghola."

Hayt felt suddenly that he existed in a universe occupied only by his own heartbeats. Outside Harry felt sick, so this was what they had planned.

"A ghola," Bijaz said. "It will be the flesh of his beloved. She will bear his children. She will love only him. We can even improve on the original if he so desires. Did ever a man have greater opportunity to regain what he’d lost? It is a bargain he will leap to strike."

Bijaz nodded, eyes drooping as though tiring. Then: "He will be tempted… and in his distraction, you will move close. In the instant, you will strike! Two ghola’s, not one! That is what our masters demand!" The dwarf cleared his throat, nodded once more, said: "Speak."

"I will not do it," Hayt said.

"But Duncan Idaho would," Bijaz said. "It will be the moment of supreme vulnerability for this
descendant of the Harkonnen’s. Do not forget this. You will suggest improvements to his beloved - perhaps a deathless heart, gentler emotions. You will offer asylum as you move close to him - a planet of his choice somewhere beyond the Imperium. Think of it! His beloved restored. No more need for tears, and a place of idylls to live out his years."

"A costly package," Hayt said, probing. "He'll ask the price."

"Tell him he must renounce his godhead and discredit The Qizarate. He must discredit himself, his sister."

"Nothing more?" Hayt asked, sneering.

"He must relinquish his CHOAM holdings, naturally."

"Naturally."

"And if you're not yet close enough to strike, speak of how much the Tleilaxu admire what he has taught them about the possibilities of religion. Tell him the Tleilaxu have a department of religious engineering, shaping religions to particular needs."

"How very clever," Hayt said.

"You think yourself free to sneer and disobey me," Bijaz said. He cocked his head slyly to one side. "Don't deny it..."

"They made you well, little animal," Hayt said.

"And you as well," the dwarf said. "You will tell him to hurry. Flesh decays and her flesh must be preserved in a cryological tank."

Hayt felt himself floundering, caught in a matrix of objects he could not recognize. The dwarf appeared so sure of himself! There had to be a flaw in the Tleilaxu logic. In making their ghola, they’d keyed him to the voice of Bijaz, but... But what? Logic/matrix/object... How easy it was to mistake clear reasoning for correct reasoning! Was Tleilaxu logic distorted?
Bijaz smiled, listened as though to a hidden voice. "Now, you will forget," he said. "When the moment comes, you will remember. He will say: 'She is gone.' Duncan Idaho will awaken then."

The dwarf clapped his hands together.

Hayt grunted, feeling that he had been interrupted in the middle of a thought... or perhaps in the middle of a sentence. What was it? Something about... targets?

"You think to confuse me and manipulate me," he said.

"How is that?" Bijaz asked.

"I am your target and you can't deny it," Hayt said.

"I would not think of denying it."

"What is it you'd try to do with me?"


Outside the room Harry hesitated, torn over what to do. But then he made his choice and concealed himself when Hayt left. He then entered the room to find the dwarf who froze at the look on his face. "You will not threaten My Duke." He stated coldly. An hour later the guards found the dwarf dead, with no obvious cause or suspects.

Hayt watched Alia emerge from her temple and cross the plaza. Her guard was bunched close, fierce expressions on their faces to mask the lines moulded by good living and complacency. A heliograph of 'thopter wings flashed in the bright afternoon sun above the temple, part of the Royal Guard with Muad'Dib’s fist-symbol on its fuselage.

Hayt returned his gaze to Alia. She looked out of place here in the city, he thought. Her proper
setting was the desert - open, untrammelled space. An odd thing about her came back to him as he watched her approach: Alia appeared thoughtful only when she smiled. It was a trick of the eyes, he decided, recalling a cameo memory of her as she'd appeared at the reception for the Guild Ambassador: haughty against a background of music and brittle conversation among extravagant gowns and uniforms. And Alia had been wearing white, dazzling, a bright garment of chastity. He had looked down upon her from a window as she crossed an inner garden with its formal pond, its fluting fountains, fronds of pampas grass and a white belvedere. Entirely wrong... all wrong. She belonged in the desert.

Hayt drew in a ragged breath. Alia had moved out of his view then as she did now. He waited, clenching and unclenching his fists. The interview with Bijaz had left him uneasy. Finding he was dead had only increased that unease. Had it been planned? Had someone killed him? He heard Alia's entourage pass outside the room where he waited. She went into the Family quarters.

Now he tried to focus on the thing about her which troubled him. The way she'd walked across the plaza? Yes. She'd moved like a hunted creature fleeing some predator. He stepped out onto the connecting balcony, walked along it behind the plasmeld sunscreen, stopped while still in concealing shadows. Alia stood at the balustrade overlooking her temple.

He looked where she was looking - out over the city. He saw rectangles, blocks of colour, creeping movements of life and sound. Structures gleamed, shimmered. Heat patterns spiralled off the rooftops. There was a boy across the way bouncing a ball in a cul-de-sac formed by a buttressed massif at a corner of the temple. Back and forth the ball went.

Alia, too, watched the ball. She felt a compelling identity with that ball - back and forth... back and forth. She sensed herself bouncing through corridors of Time.

The potion of melange she'd drained just before leaving the temple was the largest she'd ever attempted - a massive overdose. Even before beginning to take effect, it had terrified her. Why did I do it? she asked herself. "One made a choice between dangers." Was that it? This was the way to penetrate the fog spread over the future by that damnable Dune Tarot. A barrier existed. It must be breached. She had acted out of a necessity to see where it was her brother walked with his almost blind stride. The newly familiar melange fugue state began creeping into her awareness. She took a deep breath, experienced a brittle form of calm, poised and selfless. Possession of second sight has a tendency to make one a dangerous fatalist, she thought. Unfortunately, there existed no abstract leverage, no calculus of prescience. Visions of the future could not be manipulated as formulas. One had to enter them, risking life and sanity.

A figure moved from the harsh shadows of the adjoining balcony. The ghola! In her heightened awareness, Alia saw him with intense clarity - the dark, lively features dominated by those glistening metal eyes. He was a union of terrifying opposites, something put together in a shocking linear way. He was shadow and blazing light, a product of the process which had revived his dead flesh... and of
something intensely pure... innocent. He was innocence under siege! "Have you been there all along, Duncan?" she asked.

"So, I'm to be Duncan," he said. "Why?"

"Don't question me," she said. And she thought, looking at him, that the Tleilaxu had left no corner of their ghola unfinished. "Only gods can safely risk perfection," she said. "It's a dangerous thing for a man."

"Duncan died," he said, wishing she would not call him that. "I am Hayt."

She studied his artificial eyes, wondering what they saw. Observed closely, they betrayed tiny black pockmarks, little wells of darkness in the glittering metal. Facets! The universe shimmered around her and lurched. She steadied herself with a hand on the sun-warmed surface of the balustrade. Ahh, the melange moved swiftly.

"Are you ill?" Hayt asked. He moved closer, the steely eyes opened wide, staring.

Who spoke? she wondered. Was it Duncan Idaho? Was it the Mentat-ghola or the Zensunni philosopher? Or was it a Tleilaxu pawn more dangerous than any Guild Steersman? Her brother knew. Again, she looked at the ghola. There was something inactive about him now, a latent something. He was saturated with waiting and with powers beyond their common life. "Out of my mother, I am Bene Gesserit," she said. "Do you know that?"

"I know it."

"I use their powers, think as they think. Part of me knows the sacred urgency of the breeding program... and its products." She blinked, feeling part of her awareness begin to move freely in Time.

"It's said that the Bene Gesserit never let go," he said. And he watched her closely, noting how white her knuckles were where she gripped the edge of the balcony.

"Have I stumbled?" she asked.
He marked how deeply she breathed, with tension in every movement, the glazed appearance of her eyes. "When you stumble," he said, "you may regain your balance by jumping beyond the thing that tripped you."

"The Bene Gesserit stumbled," she said. "Now they wish to regain their balance by leaping beyond my brother. They want Chani's baby... or mine."

"Are you with child?" he asked in surprise and was shocked to find he did not want her to say yes.

She struggled to fix herself in a timespace relationship to this question. With child? When? Where? "I see... my child," she whispered. She moved away from the balcony's edge, turned her head to look at the ghola. He had a face of salt, bitter eyes - two circles of glistening lead... and, as he turned away from the light to follow her movement, blue shadows. "What... do you see with such eyes?" she whispered.

"What other eyes see," he said.

His words rang in her ears, stretching her awareness. She felt that she reached across the universe - such a stretching... out... out. She lay intertwined with all Time.

"You've taken the spice, a large dose," he said.

"Why can't I see him?" she muttered. The womb of all creation held her captive. "Tell me, Duncan, why I cannot see him."

"Who can't you see?"

"I cannot see the father of my children. I'm lost in a Tarot fog. Help me."

Mentat logic offered its prime computation, and he said: "The Bene Gesserit want a mating between you and your brother. It would lock the genetic..."

A wail escaped her. "The egg in the flesh," she gasped. A sensation of chill swept over her, followed by intense heat. The unseen mate of her darkest dreams! Flesh of her flesh that the oracle could not
reveal - would it come to that?

"Have you risked a dangerous dose of the spice?" he asked. Something within him fought to express the utmost terror at the thought that an Atreides woman might die, that Paul might face him with the knowledge that a female of the royal family had... gone.

"You don't know what it's like to hunt the future," she said. "Sometimes I glimpse myself... but I get in my own way. I cannot see through myself." She lowered her head, shook it from side to side.

"How much of the spice did you take?" he demanded.

"Nature abhors prescience," she said, raising her head. "Did you know that, Duncan?"

He spoke softly, reasonably, as to a small child: "Tell me how much of the spice you took." He took hold of her shoulder with his left hand.

"Words are such gross machinery, so primitive and ambiguous," she said. She pulled away from his hand.

"You must tell me," he said.

"Look at the Shield Wall," she commanded, pointing. She sent her gaze along her own outstretched hand, trembled as the landscape crumbled in an overwhelming vision - a sandcastle destroyed by invisible waves. She averted her eyes, was transfixed by the appearance of the ghola's face. His features crawled, became aged, then young... aged... young. He was life itself, assertive, endless... She turned to flee, but he grabbed her left wrist.

"I am going to summon a doctor," he said.

"No! You must let me have the vision! I have to know!"

"You are going inside now," he said.
She stared down at his hand. Where their flesh touched, she felt an electric presence that both lured and frightened her. She jerked free, gasped: "You can't hold the whirlwind!"

"You must have medical help!" he snapped.

"Don't you understand?" she demanded. "My vision's incomplete, just fragments. It flickers and jumps. I have to remember the future. Can't you see that?"

"What is the future if you die?" he asked, forcing her gently into the Family chambers.

"Words... words," she muttered. "I can't explain it. One thing is the occasion of another thing, but there's no cause... no effect. We can't leave the universe as it was. Try as we may, there's a gap."

"Stretch out here," he commanded.

He is so dense! she thought. Cool shadows enveloped her. She felt her own muscles crawling like worms - a firm bed that she knew to be insubstantial. Only space was permanent. Nothing else had substance. The bed flowed with many bodies, all of them her own. Time became a multiple sensation, overloaded. It presented no single reaction for her to abstract. It was Time. It moved. The whole universe slipped backward, forward, sideways. "It has no thing-aspect," she explained. "You can't get under it or around it. There's no place to get leverage." There came a fluttering of people all around her. Many someone's held her left hand. She looked at her own moving flesh, followed a twining arm out to a fluid mask of face: Duncan Idaho! His eyes were... wrong, but it was Duncan - child-man-adolescent-child-man-adolescent... Every line of his features betrayed concern for her. "Duncan, don't be afraid," she whispered.

He squeezed her hand, nodded. "Be still," he said. She must not die! She must not! No Atreides woman can die! He shook his head sharply. Such thoughts defied Mentat logic. Death was a necessity that life might continue.

The ghola loves me, Alia thought. The thought became bedrock to which she might cling. He was a familiar face with a solid room behind him. She recognized one of the bedrooms in Paul's suite. A fixed, immutable person did something with a tube in her throat. She fought against retching.

"We got her in time," a voice said, and she recognized the tones of a Family medic. "You should've called me sooner." There was suspicion in the medic's voice. She felt the tube slide out of her throat - a snake, a shimmering cord.
"The slapshot will make her sleep," the medic said. "I'll send one of her attendants to -"

"I will stay with her," the ghola said.

"That is not seemly!" the medic snapped.

"Stay... Duncan," Alia whispered. He stroked her hand to tell her he'd heard.

"M'Lady," the medic said, "it'd be better if..."

"You do not tell me what is best," she rasped. Her throat ached with each syllable.

"M'Lady," the medic said, voice accusing, "you know the dangers of consuming too much melange. I can only assume someone gave it to you without..."

"You are a fool," she rasped. "Would you deny me my visions? I knew what I took and why." She put a hand to her throat. "Leave us. At once!"

The medic pulled out of her field of vision, said: "I will send word to your brother."

She felt him leave, turned her attention to the ghola. The vision lay clearly in her awareness now, a culture medium in which the present grew outward. She sensed the ghola move in that play of Time, no longer cryptic, fixed now against a recognizable background. He is the crucible, she thought. He is danger and salvation.

And she shuddered, knowing she saw the vision of her brother had seen. Unwanted tears burned her eyes. She shook her head sharply. No tears! They wasted moisture and, worse, distracted the harsh flow of vision. Paul must be stopped! The web of Time passed through her brother now like rays of light through a lens. He stood at the focus and he knew it. He had gathered all the lines to himself and would not permit them to escape or change. "Why?" she muttered. "Is it hate? Does he strike out at Time itself because it hurt him? Is that it... hate?"
Thinking he heard her speak his name, the ghola said: "M'Lady?"

"If I could only burn this thing out of me!" she cried. "I didn't want to be different."

"Please, Alia," he murmured. "Let yourself sleep."

"I wanted to be able to laugh," she whispered. Tears slid down her cheeks. "But I'm sister to an Emperor who's worshipped as a god. People fear me. I never wanted to be feared." He wiped the tears from her face. "I don't want to be part of history," she whispered. "I just want to be loved... and to love."

"You are loved," he said.

"Ahh, loyal, loyal Duncan," she said.

"Please, don't call me that," he pleaded.

"But you are," she said. "And loyalty is a valued commodity. It can be sold... not bought, but sold."

"I don't like your cynicism," he said.

"Damn your logic! It's true!"

"Sleep," he said.

"Do you love me, Duncan?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Is that one of those lies," she asked, "one of the lies that are easier to believe than the truth? Why am I afraid to believe you?"
"You fear my differences as you fear your own."

"Be a man, not a Mentat!" she snarled.

"I am a Mentat and a man." He answered calmly, a hand moving to card through her hair.

"Will you make me your woman, then?"

"I will do what love demands."

"And loyalty?"

"And loyalty."

"That's where you're dangerous," she said. Her words disturbed him. No sign of the disturbance arose to his face, no muscle trembled - but she knew it. Vision-memory exposed the disturbance. She felt she had missed part of the vision, though, that she should remember something else from the future. There existed another perception which did not go precisely by the senses, a thing which fell into her head from nowhere the way prescience did. It lay in the Time shadows - infinitely painful. Emotion! That was it - emotion! It had appeared in the vision, not directly, but as a product from which she could infer what lay behind. She had been possessed by emotion - a single constriction made up of fear, grief and love. They lay there in the vision, all collected into a single epidemic body, overpowering and primordial. "Duncan, don't let me go," she whispered.

"Sleep," he said. "Don't fight it."

"I must... I must. He's the bait in his own trap. He's the servant of power and terror. Violence... deification is a prison enclosing him. He'll lose... everything. It'll tear him apart."

"You speak of Paul?"

"They drive him to destroy himself," she gasped, arching her back. "Too much weight, too much
grief. They seduce him away from love." She sank back to the bed. "They're creating a universe where he won't permit himself to live."

"Who is doing this?"

"He is! Ohhh, you're so dense. He's part of the pattern. And it's too late... too late... too late..." As she spoke, she felt her awareness descend, layer by layer. It came to rest directly behind her navel. Body and mind separated and merged in a storehouse of relic visions - moving, moving... She heard a foetal heartbeat, a child of the future. The melange still possessed her, then, setting her adrift in Time. She knew she had tasted the life of a child not yet conceived. One thing certain about this child - it would suffer the same awakening she had almost suffered. It would be an aware, thinking entity before birth.

"Chani, Leto and I will take this one." Paul commanded, pointing to one of the waiting ‘thopters.

“Muad’Dib…” Stilgar tried even as Leto helped his mother into the thopter.

Paul turned to Alia, taking her in and seeing the unshed tears in her eyes. He gently brushed a hand against her cheek. “Time to settle accounts.” He whispered and she nodded. He got in into the thopter, seeing Harry and Hayt join Stilgar in another. Alia would act as regent while Paul and Leto were gone. If she needed an ally then Irulan would have to suffice as the Emperor's wife.

Chani stared out at the morning desert framed in the fault cleft below Sietch Tabr. She wore no stillsuit, and this made her feel unprotected here in the desert. The sietch grotto’s entrance lay hidden in the buttressed cliff above and behind her. The desert... the desert... She felt that the desert had followed her wherever she had gone. Coming back to the desert was not so much a homecoming as a turning around to see what had always been there.

A painful constriction surged through her abdomen. The birth would be soon. She fought down the pain, wanting this moment alone with her desert.

Dawn stillness gripped the land. Shadows fled among the dunes and terraces of the Shield Wall all around. Daylight lunged over the high scarp and plunged her up to her eyes in a bleak landscape stretching beneath a washed blue sky. The scene matched the feeling of dreadful cynicism which had tormented her since the moment she'd learned of Paul's blindness.
Why are we here? It was not a hajra, a journey of seeking. Paul sought nothing here except, perhaps, a place for her to give birth. He had summoned odd companions for this journey, she thought – Leto, their son made sense so as to greet his siblings; Harry, newly Duke of Kaitain; the ghola, Hayt, who might be Duncan Idaho's revenant; Lichna, Otheym's strange daughter, who seemed unable to move beyond the watchful eyes of guards; Stilgar, her uncle of the Naibs, and his favourite wife, Harah...

The sound of wind through the rocks accompanied her thoughts. The desert day had become yellow on yellow, tan on tan, grey on grey. Why such a strange mixture of companions? She’d asked and he’d touched her abdomen to feel the new life there. Remembering, she placed both hands over her abdomen and trembled, sorry that she'd asked Paul to bring her here.

The desert wind had stirred up evil odours from the fringe plantings which anchored the dunes at the cliff base. Fremen superstition gripped her: evil odours, evil times. She faced into the wind, saw a worm appear outside the plantings. It arose like the prow of a demon ship out of the dunes, threshed sand, smelled the water deadly to its kind, and fled beneath a long, burrowing mound. She hated the water then, inspired by the worm's fear. Water, once the spirit-soul of Arrakis, had become a poison. Water brought pestilence. Only the desert was clean.

Below her, a Fremen work gang appeared. They climbed to the sietch's middle entrance, and she saw that they had muddy feet. Fremen with muddy feet! The children of the sietch began singing to the morning above her, their voices piping from the upper entrance. The voices made her feel time fleeing from her like hawks before the wind. She shuddered.

What storms did Paul see with his damaged vision? She sensed a vicious madman in him, someone weary of songs and polemics.

The sky, she noted, had become crystal grey filled with alabaster rays, bizarre designs etched across the heavens by windborne sand. A line of gleaming white in the south caught her attention. Eves suddenly alerted, she interpreted the sign: White sky in the south: Shai-hulud's mouth. A storm came, big wind. She felt the warning breeze, a crystal blowing of sand against her cheeks. The incense of death came on the wind: odours of water flowing in qanats, sweating sand, flint. The water - that was why Shai-hulud sent his Coriolis wind.

Hawks appeared in the cleft where she stood, seeking safety from the wind. They were brown as the rocks and with scarlet in their wings. She felt her spirit go out to them: they had a place to hide; she had none.

"M'Lady, the wind comes!"
She turned, saw the ghola calling to her outside the upper entrance to the sietch. Fremen fears gripped her. Clean death and the body's water claimed for the tribe, these she understood. But... something brought back from death...

Windblown sand whipped at her, reddened her cheeks. She glanced over her shoulder at the frightful band of dust across the sky. The desert beneath the storm had taken on a tawny, restless appearance as though dune waves beat on a tempest shore the way Paul had once described a sea. She hesitated, caught by a feeling of the desert's transience. Measured against eternity, this was no more than a caldron. Dune surf thundered against cliffs.

The storm out there had become a universal thing for her - all the animals hiding from it... nothing left of the desert but its own private sounds: blown sand scraping along rock, a wind-surge whistling, the gallop of a boulder tumbled suddenly from its hill - then! somewhere out of sight, a capsized worm thumping its idiot way aright and slithering off to its dry depths.

It was only a moment as her life measured time, but in that moment, she felt this planet being swept away - cosmic dust, part of other waves.

"We must hurry," the ghola said from right beside her.

"I am a desert creature ghola, I know when to hide." She assured him but she sensed fear in him then, concern for her safety.

"It'll shred the flesh from your bones," he said, as though he needed to explain such a storm to her. Her fear of him dispelled by his obvious concern, Chani allowed the ghola to help her up the rock stairway to the sietch. And then she gasped, hands flying to her stomach and she felt him lifting her as she strangled a cry of pain.

Sietch odours assaulted her nostrils. The place was a ferment of nasal memories - the warren closeness of bodies, rank esters of the reclamation stills, familiar food aromas, the flinty burning of machines at work... and through it all, the omnipresent spice: melange everywhere. "Home." She whispered, clinging to consciousness. "Why is Paul afraid for me to bear our children?" she asked, using speech to focus herself.

"It is a natural thing to fear for your safety," the ghola said.

"Hayt, I'm afraid," she whispered. "Where is my Usul?"
"Affairs of state detain him," the ghola said. “I shall have him sent for immediately.

She nodded, thinking of the government apparatus which had accompanied them in a great flight of ornithopters. Abruptly, she realized what puzzled her about the sietch: outworld odours. The clerks and aides had brought their own perfumes into this environment, aromas of diet and clothing, of exotic toiletries. They were an undercurrent of odours here. Chani shook herself, concealing an urge to bitter laughter. Even the smells changed in Muad’Dib’s presence!

"The Zensunni approach to birth," he said as he moved swiftly through the halls, "is to wait without purpose in the state of highest tension. Do not compete with what is happening. To compete is to prepare for failure. Do not be trapped by the need to achieve anything. This way, you achieve everything." While he spoke, they reached the entrance to her quarters. He thrust her through the hangings, cried out: "Harah! Harah! It is Chani's time. Summon the medics!"

His call brought attendants running. There was a great bustling of people in which Chani felt herself an isolated island of calm... until the next pain came.

Hayt, dismissed to the outer passage, took time to wonder at his own actions. He felt fixated at some point of time where all truths were only temporary. Panic lay beneath his actions, he realized. Panic centred not on the possibility that Chani might die, but that Paul should come to him afterward... filled with grief... his loved one... gone... gone... Something cannot emerge from nothing, the ghola told himself. From what does this panic emerge? He felt that his Mentat faculties had been dulled, let out a long, shuddering breath. A psychic shadow passed over him. In the emotional darkness of it, he felt himself waiting for some absolute sound - the snap of a branch in a jungle. A sigh shook him. Danger had passed without striking. Slowly, marshalling his powers, shedding bits of inhibition, he sank into Mentat awareness. He forced it - not the best way - but somehow necessary. Ghost shadows moved within him in place of people. He was a transhipping station for every datum he had ever encountered. His being was inhabited by creatures of possibility. They passed in review to be compared, judged. Perspiration broke out on his forehead. Thoughts with fuzzy edges feathered away into darkness - unknown. Infinite systems! A Mentat could not function without realizing he worked in infinite systems. Fixed knowledge could not surround the infinite. Everywhere could not be brought into finite perspective. Instead, he must become the infinite - momentarily.

In one gestalten spasm, he had it, seeing Bijaz seated before him blazing from some inner fire. Bijaz! The dwarf had done something to him! Hayt felt himself teetering on the lip of a deadly pit. He projected the Mentat computation line forward, seeing what could develop out of his own actions. "A compulsion!" he gasped. "I've been rigged with a compulsion!"

A blue-robed courier, passing as Hayt spoke, hesitated. "Did you say something, sirra?"
Not looking at him, the ghola nodded. "I said everything." He forced himself away, he had to find
Harry Potter, he knew the man would be able to stop him, to ensure Paul’s safety.

"You've been avoiding me today, Duncan," Paul said.

"It's dangerous for you to call me that," the ghola said.

"I know." Paul glanced back to see Harry had withdrawn to allow them the illusion of privacy.

"I... came to warn you, M'Lord." Well he'd originally been looking for Harry but it didn’t matter.

"I know." Paul whispered. The story of the compulsion Bijaz had put on him poured from the ghola
then. "Do you know the nature of the compulsion?"

"Violence."

Paul felt himself arriving at a place which had claimed him from the beginning. He stood suspended.
The Jihad had seized him, fixed him onto a glidepath from which the terrible gravity of the Future
would never release him. "There'll be no violence from Duncan," Paul whispered.

"But, Sire..."

"Tell me what you see around us," Paul said.

"M'Lord?"

"The desert - how is it tonight?"
"Don't you see it?"

"I have little sight, Duncan." The fading light meant he could barely see anything.

"But..."

"I've only my vision," Paul said, "and wish I didn't have it. I'm dying of prescience, did you know that, Duncan?"

"Perhaps... what you fear won't happen," the ghola said.

"What? Deny my own oracle? How can I when I've seen it fulfilled thousands of time? People call it a power, a gift. It's an affliction! It won't let me leave my life where I found it!"

"M'Lord," the ghola muttered, "I... it isn't... young master, you don't... I..." He fell silent.

Paul sensed the ghola's confusion. "What'd you call me, Duncan?"

"What? What I... for a moment..."

"You called me 'young master.'"

"I did, yes."

"That's what Duncan always called me." Paul reached out, touched the ghola's face. "Was that part of your Tleilaxu training?"

"No."
Paul lowered his hand. "What, then?"

"It came from... me."

"Do you serve two masters?"

"Perhaps."

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Alia stood on her Fane, wrapped in a sand coloured wrap as she stared into the night. Her part in this drama was fulfilled, it was left in the hands of others now. She wanted to cry, why couldn’t she cry? Chani…. oh Chani… she wanted so badly to disobey and kill that Corrino bitch, but Paul had insisted she live and even Alia could admit something had changed in the Princess the last few weeks.

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Irulan lay on her bed, unable to sleep as a storm raged outside. She was Bene Gesserit enough to have read what Paul had not said. He did not expect Chani to survive the birth. And the way he had said goodbye….as if they would never see each other again despite his promise that she was to be spared. She almost wished Alia would disobey. She bit her pillow to silence her grief as tears slipped free. What had she done?

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Reverend Mother Mohiam looked up from the Tarot cards as a man strode in, a wild look to him and she knew. This man was still desert Fremen and as he drew his crysknife she accepted her fate. Somehow Muad’Dib had known and yet still he’d walked into the trap….to take them with him? The door opened and he grasped her hair, pulling her back before plunging the blade into her chest, over and over.

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Edric watched in confusion as several men entered and then watched in horror as they opened fire, shattering the melange filled container, leaving him to lie barely injured on the floor, gasping for air. Had they failed?
"Free yourself from the ghola, Duncan." Paul commanded gently.

"How?" he pleaded softly.

"You're human. Do a human thing."

"I'm a ghola!" Hayt denied, shaking his head.

"But your flesh is human. Duncan's in there."

"Something's in there."

"I care not how you do it," Paul said, "but you'll do it."

"You've foreknowledge?"

"Foreknowledge be damned!" Paul turned away. His vision hurtled forward now, gaps in it, but it wasn't a thing to be stopped.

"M'Lord, if you've -"

"Quiet!" Paul held up a hand. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what, M'Lord?"

Paul shook his head. Duncan hadn't heard it. Had he only imagined the sound? It'd been his tribal name called from the desert - far away and low: "Usul... Uuuussuuuuuuuulllll..."

"What is it, M'Lord?"
Paul shook his head. He felt watched. Something out there in the night shadows knew he was here. Something? No - someone. "It was mostly sweet," he whispered, "and you were the sweetest of all." A tear slipped free

"What'd you say, M'Lord?"

"It's the future," Paul said. That amorphous human universe out there had undergone a spurt of motion, dancing to the tune of his vision. It had struck a powerful note then. The ghost-echoes might endure. Neither man noticed as an alarmed Harry moved away, running towards Chani’s room.

"I don't understand, M'Lord," the ghola said.

"A Fremen dies when he's too long from the desert," Paul said. "They call it the 'water sickness.' Isn't that odd?"

"That's very odd."

Paul strained at memories, tried to recall the sound of Chani breathing beside him in the night. Where is there comfort? he wondered. All he could remember was Chani at breakfast the day they'd left for the desert. She'd been restless, irritable. "Why do you wear that old jacket?" she'd demanded, eyeing the black uniform coat with its red hawk crest beneath his Fremen robes. "You're an Emperor!"

"Even an Emperor has his favourite clothing," he'd said. For no reason he could explain, this had brought real tears to Chani's eyes - the second time in her life when Fremen inhibitions had been shattered.

Now, in the darkness, Paul rubbed his own cheeks, felt moisture there. Who gives moisture to the dead? he wondered. It was his own face, yet not his. The wind chilled the wet skin. A frail dream formed, broke. What was this swelling in his breast? Was it something he'd eaten? How bitter and plaintive was this other self, giving moisture to the dead. The wind bristled with sand. The skin, dry now, was his own. But whose was the quivering which remained?

They heard the wailing then, far away in the sietch depths. It grew louder... louder...

The ghola whirled at a sudden glare of light, someone flinging wide the entrance seals. In the light, he saw a man with a raffish grin - no! Not a grin, but a grimace of grief! It was a Fedaykin lieutenant
named Tandis. Behind him came a press of many people, all fallen silent now that they saw Muad'Dib.

"Chani..." Tandis said.

"Is dead," Paul whispered. "I heard her call." He turned toward the sietch. He knew this place. It was a place where he could not hide. His onrushing vision illuminated the entire Fremen mob. He saw Tandis, felt the Fedaykin's grief, the fear and anger.

"She is gone," Paul said.

The ghola heard the words out of a blazing corona. They burned his chest, his backbone, the sockets of his metal eyes. He felt his right-hand move toward the knife at his belt. His own thinking became strange, disjointed. He was a puppet held fast by strings reaching down from that awful corona. He moved to another's commands, to another's desires. The strings jerked his arms, his legs, his jaw. Sounds came squeezing out of his mouth, a horrifying repetitive noise - "Hrrak! Hraak! Hraak!" The knife came up to strike. In that instant, he grabbed his own voice, shaped rasping words: "Run! Young master, run!" he pleaded, knowing his control was fading. He would not harm Paul!

"We will not run," Paul said. "We'll move with dignity. We'll do what must be done." He stared calmly at the ghola who froze at his words.

The ghola's muscles locked. He shuddered, swayed. "... what must be done!" The words rolled in his mind like a great fish surfacing. "... what must be done!" Ahh, that had sounded like the old Duke, Paul's grandfather. The young master had some of the old man in him. "... what must be done!" The words began to unfold in the ghola's consciousness. A sensation of living two lives simultaneously spread out through his awareness: Hayt/Idaho/Hayt/Idaho... He became a motionless chain of relative existence, singular, alone. Old memories flooded his mind. He marked them, adjusted them to new understandings, made a beginning at the integration of a new awareness. A new persona achieved a temporary form of internal tyranny. The masculating synthesis remained charged with potential disorder, but events pressed him to the temporary adjustment. The young master needed him. It was done then. He knew himself as Duncan Idaho, remembering everything of Hayt as though it had been stored secretly in him and ignited by a flaming catalyst. The corona dissolved. He shed the Tleilaxu compulsions.

"Stay close to me, Duncan," Paul said. "I'll need to depend on you for many things." And, as Idaho continued to stand entranced: "Duncan!"

"Yes, I am Duncan." He whispered in awe, how was this possible?
"Of course, you are! This was the moment when you came back. We'll go inside now." Paul smiled and briefly clasped his shoulders even as Duncan fully took in all the ways his young Duke had grown and changed. The hazy eyes were painful but there was comfort in the fact he still had eyes and sight at all. He was weathered in a way…. changed by the years in the desert and he missed the youth he had been.

Idaho fell into step beside Paul. It was like the old times, yet not like them. Now that he stood free of the Tleilaxu, he could appreciate what they had given him. Zensunni training permitted him to overcome the shock of events. The Mentat accomplishment formed a counterbalance. He put off all fear, standing above the source. His entire consciousness looked outward from a position of infinite wonder: he had, been dead; he was alive.

"Sire," the Fedaykin Tandis said as they approached him, "the woman, Lichna, says she must see you. I told her to wait."

"Thank you," Paul said. "The birth..."

"I spoke to the medics," Tandis said, falling into step. "They said you have two children, both of them alive and sound."

"Two?" Paul stumbled, caught himself on Idaho's arm. The dimness of the night-time Sietch basically left him blind other than his vision sight.

"A boy and a girl," Tandis said. "I saw them. They're good Fremen babies."

"How... how did she die?" Paul whispered.

"M'Lord?" Tandis bent close.

"Chani?" Paul said.

"It was the birth, M'Lord," Tandis husked. "They said her body was drained by the speed of it. I don't understand, but that is what they said."
"Take me to her," Paul whispered.

"M'Lord?"

"Take me to her!"

"That's where we're going, M'Lord." Again, Tandis bent close to Paul. "Why does your ghola carry a bared knife?"

"Duncan, put away your knife," Paul said. "The time for violence is past."

As he spoke, Paul felt closer to the sound of his voice than to the mechanism which had created the sound. Two babies! The vision had contained but one. Yet, these moments went as the vision went. There was a person here who felt grief and anger. Someone. His own awareness lay in the grip of an awful treadmill, replaying his life from memory. Two babies? Again, he stumbled. Chani, Chani, he thought. There was no other way. Chani, beloved, believe me that this death was quicker for you... and kinder. They'd have held our children hostage, displayed you in a cage and slave pits, reviled you with the blame for my death. This way... this way we destroy them and save our children. Children? Once more, he stumbled. The shadowing light made it harder on his damaged eyes. I permitted this, he thought. I should feel guilty. The sound of noisy confusion filled the cavern ahead of them. It grew louder precisely as he remembered it growing louder. Yes, this was the pattern, the inexorable pattern, even with two children. Chani is dead, he told himself.

At some faraway instant in a past which he had shared with others, this future had reached down to him. It had chivvied him and herded him into a chasm whose walls grew narrower and narrower. He could feel them closing in on him. This was the way the vision went. Chani is dead. I should abandon myself to grief. But that was not the way the vision went.

Paul sensed the mob pressing back to give him passage. Their silence moved ahead of him like a wave. The noisy confusion began dying down. A sense of congested emotion filled the sietch. He wanted to remove the people from his vision, found it impossible. Every face turning to follow him carried its special imprint. They were pitiless with curiosity, those faces. They felt grief, yes, but he understood the cruelty which drenched them. They were watching the articulate become dumb, the wise become a fool. Didn't the clown always appeal to cruelty?

This was more than a death-watch, less than a wake.
Paul felt his soul begging for respite, but still the vision moved him. Just a little farther now, he told himself. Black, visionless dark awaited him just ahead. There lay the place ripped out of the vision by grief and guilt, the place where the moon fell. He stumbled into it, would've fallen had Idaho not taken his arm in a fierce grip, a solid presence knowing how to share his grief in silence.

"Here is the place," Tandis said.

"Watch your step, Sire," Idaho said, helping him over an entrance lip. Hangings brushed Paul's face. Idaho pulled him to a halt. Paul felt the room then, a reflection against his cheeks and ears. It was a rock-walled space with the rock hidden behind tapestries.

"Where is Chani?" Paul whispered.

"She is right here, Paul." Harry called and Duncan helped Paul over, both staring in shock at the pale, tired face on Chani settled on the bed even as she smiled weakly at her husband.

"Beloved?" His legs gave out and Duncan caught him. "I don’t…." He looked to Harry. "How?"

"The birth was not as hard as it would have had she kept to the ancient diet or continued to be dosed with the contraceptive, I got in here in time too. She will recover, but I am sorry Paul, there will be no more children."

"The children?" Paul asked, looking around for the babies.

"They are here, too, M’Lord," Idaho said.

"You have beautiful twins, Usul," Harah said, "a boy and a girl. See? We have them here in a crèche."

Two children, Paul thought wonderingly. The vision had contained only a daughter. He cast himself adrift from Idaho's arm, moved toward the place where Harah had spoken, stumbled into a hard surface. His hands explored it: the metaglass outlines of a crèche.
Someone took his left arm. "Usul?" It was Harah. She guided his hand into the crèche. He felt soft-soft flesh. It was so warm! He felt ribs, breathing. "That is your son," Harah whispered. She moved his hand. "And this is your daughter." Her hand tightened on his. "Usul, are you truly blind now?"

He knew what she was thinking. The blind must be abandoned in the desert. Fremen tribes carried no dead weight. He shook his head and the light in the room increased, allowing him to see his children. He glanced over to see Harry and Duncan adding more glowglobes to the room to help him. He smiled as he ran a hand over the small bodies. Why had he never seen twins? He moved away and Duncan shadowed him as he moved back to where Chani lay, finally seeing how worn Harry looked. Whatever he had done had exacted a price.

"I'm not surprised to find you alive, Atreides." The voice was like Lichna's, but with subtle differences, as though the speaker used Lichna's vocal cords, but no longer bothered to control them sufficiently. Paul found himself struck by an odd note of honesty in the voice.

Paul turned to look at her. "Not surprised?"

"I am Scytale, a Tleilaxu of the Face Dancers, and I would know a thing before we bargain. Is that a ghola I see behind you, or Duncan Idaho?"

“Answer.” Paul ordered.

“I am Duncan Idaho.” Duncan’s hand moved to his knife.

"I will not bargain with you." Paul knew his body blocked Chani from view, allowing the vision to play out.

"I think you'll bargain," Scytale said.

"Duncan," Paul said, speaking over his shoulder, "will you kill this Tleilaxu if I ask it?"

"Yes, M'Lord." There was the suppressed rage of a berserker in Idaho's voice.

"You don't know what you're rejecting."
"But I do know," Paul said.

"So, it's truly Duncan Idaho of the Atreides," Scytale said. "We found the lever! A ghola can regain his past. What do you remember of your past, Duncan?" Scytale moved closer to Duncan who shifted so that he was between Scytale and the others. He too had seen Harry’s exhaustion and did not want him trying to fight in his condition.

"Everything. From my childhood on. I even remember you at the tank when they removed me from it," Idaho answered coolly, hand gripping his knife.


Paul heard the voice moving. Bene Gesserit training warned him of terrifying menace in Scytale, yet the creature remained a voice, a shadow of movement - entirely beyond him. The extra light was no aide now as Paul dared not move and reveal his sleeping beloved.

"Are these the Atreides babies?" Scytale asked.

"Harah!" Paul cried. "Get her away from there!"

"Stay where you are!" Scytale shouted. "All of you! I warn you, a Face Dancer can move faster than you suspect. My knife can have both these lives before you touch me."

Paul felt someone touch his right arm, then move off to the right.

"That's far enough, Harry," Scytale said.

"Harry," Paul said. "Don't."

"Atreides," Scytale said, "shall we bargain now?" Behind him, Paul heard a single hoarse curse. His throat constricted at the suppressed violence in Idaho's voice. Idaho must not break! Scytale would kill the babies! "To strike a bargain, one requires a thing to sell," Scytale said. "Not so, Atreides?"
Will you have your Chani back? We can restore her to you. A ghola, Atreides. A ghola with full memory! But we must hurry. Call your friends to bring a cryologic tank to preserve the flesh."

Ahh, that's why they gave me Idaho as a ghola, to let me discover how much the re-creation is like the original. But now - full restoration... at their price. I'd be a Tleilaxu tool forevermore. And Chani... chained to the same fate by a threat to our children, exposed once more to the Qizarate's plotting... he owed Harry so much for making this unnecessary. "What pressures would you use to restore Chani's memory to her?" Paul asked, fighting to keep his voice calm. "Would you condition her to... to kill one of her own children?" he kept to the vision, acting as if she was truly dead.

"We use whatever pressures we need," Scytale said. "What say you, Atreides?"

"Harry," Paul said, "bargain with this thing. I cannot bargain with what I cannot see."

"A wise choice," Scytale gloated. "Well, Harry, what do you offer me as your Lords agent?"

Paul lowered his head, bringing himself to stillness within stillness. He'd glimpsed something just then - like a vision, but not a vision. It had been a knife close to him. There!

"Give me a moment to think," Harry stalled, not sure what Paul was up to said.

"My knife is patient," Scytale said, "but Chani's flesh is not. Take a reasonable amount of time."

Paul felt himself blinking. It could not be... but it was! He felt eyes! Their vantage point was odd and they moved in an erratic way. There! The knife swam into his view. With a breath-stilling shock, Paul recognized the viewpoint. It was that of one of his children! He was seeing Scytale's knife hand from within the crèche! It glittered only inches from him. Yes - and he could see himself across the room, as well - head down, standing quietly, a figure of no menace, ignored by the others in this room.

"To begin, you might assign us all the Atreides CHOAM holdings," Scytale suggested.

"All of them?" Harry protested.
Watching himself through the eyes in the crèche, Paul slipped his crysknife from its belt sheath. The movement produced a strange sensation of duality. He measured the distance, the angle. There'd be no second chance. He prepared his body then in the Bene Gesserit way, armed himself like a cocked spring for a single concentrated movement, a prajna thing requiring all his muscles balanced in one exquisite unity. The crysknife leaped from his hand. The milky blur of it flashed into Scytale's right eye, jerked the Face Dancer's head back. Scytale threw both hands up and staggered backward against the wall. His knife clattered off the ceiling, to hit the floor. Scytale rebounded from the wall; he fell face forward, dead before he touched the floor.

Still through the eyes in the crèche, Paul watched the faces in the room turn toward his half blind figure, read the combined shock. Then Harry and Harah rushed to the crèche, bent over it and hid the view from him.

"Oh, they're safe," Harah whispered. "They're safe."

"M'Lord," Idaho whispered, "was that part of your vision?"

"No." He waved a hand in Idaho's direction. "Let it be." He turned away from them, groped his way to a wall, leaned against it and tried to understand what he had done. How? How? The eyes in the crèche! He felt poised on the brink of terrifying revelation.

"My eyes, father."

The word-shaping’s shimmered before his sightless vision. "My son!" Paul whispered, too low for any to hear. "You're... aware."

"Yes, father. Look!"

Paul sagged against the wall in a spasm of dizziness. He felt that he'd been upended and drained. His own life whipped past him. He saw his father. He was his father. And the grandfather, and the grandfathers before that. His awareness tumbled through a mind-shattering corridor of his whole male line. "How?" he asked silently.

Faint word-shaping’s appeared, faded and were gone, as though the strain was too great. Paul wiped
saliva from the corner of his mouth. There had been no Water of Life, no overdose of melange... or had there? Had Chani’s hunger been for that? Or was this somehow the genetic product of his line, foreseen by the Reverend Mother Gaius Helen Mohiam?

Paul felt himself in the crèche then, with Harah cooing over him. Her hands soothed him. Her face loomed, a giant thing directly over him. She turned him then and he saw his crèche companion - a girl with that bony-ribbed look of strength which came from a desert heritage. She had a full head of tawny red hair. As he stared, she opened her eyes. Those eyes! So much like her mother. He reached out and found Chani’s sleeping form, grasping her hand gently.

"Look at that," Harry said. "They're staring at each other."

"Babies can't focus at this age," Harah said.

Slowly, Paul felt himself being disengaged from that endless awareness. He was back at his own wailing wall then, leaning against it. Idaho shook his shoulder gently.

"M'Lord?"

"Let my son be called Victor, for the brother I never knew," Paul said, straightening.

"At the time of naming," Harah said, "I will stand beside you as a friend of the mother and give that name."

"And my daughter," Paul said. "Let her be called Ghanima."

"Usul!" Harah objected. "Ghanima's an ill-omened name."

"It saved your life," Paul said. "What matter that Alia made fun of you with that name? My daughter is Ghanima, a spoil of war." He heard people moving about Chani, ensuring she would sleep well and recover. “I meddled in all the possible futures I could create until, finally, they created me."

"M'Lord, you shouldn't..."
"There are problems in this universe for which there are no answers," Paul said. "Nothing. Nothing can be done." As he spoke, Paul felt his link with the vision shatter. His mind cowered, overwhelmed by infinite possibilities. His lost vision became like the wind, blowing where it willed. He felt Harry grasp his arm.

“Come away Paul, you need to rest. Harah will stay with Chani.” Harry promised, and Paul nodded slowly, letting Harry and Duncan lead him away.


Paul woke to darkness but then he felt the comforting touch of Harry’s hand on his arm. “Chani?”

“Woke and took some water. It will take time for her to recover.”

“You have changed the future. Every vision showed her death in childbirth. I should go into the desert.” He whispered. “It was the only way to save our children…there was no other way to free ourselves.”

“Oh Paul, why didn’t you tell me?” Harry whispered and Paul swallowed even as Harry moved a hand to gently run through his hair, calming him, like he had when Paul was a child and woke with a nightmare. “Leto is young to take the throne.”

“No younger than I was when I became Duke and he has a lot of support.” He argued and Harry sighed.

“True. If you wanted a way out you should have come to me. I will arrange everything. You and Chani can live out your lives wherever you wish and no one will ever find you unless you want them to.”


There was a dike of water against the sand, an outer limit for the plantings of the sietch holding. A rock bridge came next and then the open desert beneath Idaho’s feet. The promontory of Sietch Tabr dominated the night sky behind him. The light of both moons frosted its high rim. An orchard had been brought right down to the water.
Idaho paused on the desert side and stared back at flowered branches over silent water - reflections and reality - four moons. The stillsuit felt greasy against his skin. Wet flint odours invaded his nostrils past the filters. There was a malignant simpering to the wind through the orchard. He listened for night sounds. Kangaroo mice inhabited the grass at the water verge; a hawk owl bounced its droning call into the cliff shadows; the wind-broken hiss of a sandfall came from the open bled.

Idaho turned toward the sound. He could see no movement out there on the moonlit dunes.

It was Tandis who had brought Paul this far. Then the man had returned to tell his account. And Paul had walked out into the desert - like a Fremen. "He was blind - truly blind," Tandis had said, as though that explained it. "Before that, he had the vision which he told to us... but... " A shrug. Blind Fremen were abandoned in the desert. Muad'Dib might be Emperor, but he was also Fremen. Had he not made provision that Fremen guard and raise his children? He was Fremen.

It was a skeleton desert here, Idaho saw. Moon-silvered ribs of rock showed through the sand; then the dunes began. I should not have left him alone, not even for a minute. I knew what was in his mind.

"He told me the future no longer needed his physical presence," Tandis had reported. "When he left me. He called back. 'Now I am free' were his words."

Damn them! The Fremen had refused to send 'thopters or searchers of any kind. Rescue was against their ancient customs.

"There will be a worm for Muad'Dib," they said. And they began the chant for those committed to the desert, the ones whose water went to Shai-hulud: "Mother of sand, father of Time, beginning of Life, grant him passage."

Idaho seated himself on a flat rock and stared at the desert. The night out there was filled with camouflage patterns. There was no way to tell where Paul had gone.

"Now I am free." Duncan spoke the words aloud, surprised by the sound of his own voice. For a time, he let his mind run, remembering a day when he’d taken the child Paul to the sea market on Caladan, the dazzling glare of a sun on water, the sea's riches brought up dead, there to be sold. Idaho remembered Gurney Halleck playing music of the baliset for them - pleasure, laughter. Rhythms pranced in his awareness, leading his mind like a thrall down channels of remembered delight. Gurney Halleck. Gurney would blame him for this tragedy. Memory music faded. Harry had been oddly quiet but he too had lived among the Fremen, had at one point taken a Fremen bride. He was more accepting of their customs, he was one of them.
He recalled Paul's words: "There are problems in this universe for which there are no answers."

Idaho began to wonder how Paul would die out there in the desert. Quickly, killed by a worm? Slowly, in the sun? Some of the Fremen back there in the sietch had said Muad'Dib would never die, that he had entered the ruh-world where all possible futures existed, that he would be present henceforth in the alam al-mythal, wandering there endlessly even after his flesh had ceased to be.

He'll die and I'm powerless to prevent it, Idaho thought. He began to realize that there might be a certain fastidious courtesy in dying without a trace - no remains, nothing, and an entire planet for a tomb. Mentat, solve thyself, he thought. Words intruded on his memory - the ritual words of the Fedaykin lieutenant, posting a guard over Muad'Dib's children: "It shall be the solemn duty of the officer in charge..."

The plodding, self-important language of government enraged him. It had seduced the Fremen. It had seduced everyone. A man, a great man, was dying out there, but language plodded on... and on... What had happened, he wondered, to all the clean meanings that screened out nonsense? Somewhere, in some lost where which the Imperium had created, they'd been walled off, sealed against chance rediscovery. His mind quested for solutions, Mentat fashion. Patterns of knowledge glistened there. Lorelei hair might shimmer thus, beckoning... beckoning the enchanted seaman into emerald caverns... With an abrupt start, Idaho drew back from catatonic forgetfulness.

So! he thought. Rather than face my failure, I would disappear within myself! The instant of that almost-plunge remained in his memory. Examining it, he felt his life stretch out as long as the existence of the universe. Real flesh lay condensed, finite in its emerald cavern of awareness, but infinite life had shared his being.

Idaho stood up, feeling cleansed by the desert. Sand was beginning to chatter in the wind, pecking at the surfaces of leaves in the orchard behind him. There was the dry and abrasive smell of dust in the night air. His robe whipped to the pulse of a sudden gust.

Somewhere far out in the bled, Idaho realized, a mother storm raged, lifting vortices of winding dust in hissing violence - a giant worm of sand powerful enough to cut flesh from bones. He will become one with the desert, Idaho thought. The desert will fulfill him. It was a Zensunni thought washing through his mind like clear water. Paul would go on marching out there, he knew. An Atreides would not give himself up completely to destiny, not even in the full awareness of the inevitable.

A touch of prescience came over Idaho then, and he saw that people of the future would speak of Paul in terms of seas. Despite a life soaked in dust, water would follow him. "His flesh foundered," they would say, "but he swam on."
Behind Idaho, a man cleared his throat. Idaho turned to discern the figure of Harry standing on the bridge over the qanat.

"He will not be found," Harry said. "Yet all men will find him."

"The desert takes him - and deifies him," Idaho said. "Yet he was an interloper here. He brought an alien chemistry to this planet - water."


Duncan blinked, a fog lifting as new knowledge, no hidden knowledge slid back into place. Tandis had not led Paul into the desert, Harry had taken Paul and Chani away in a thopter to hide them where they could live their lives. “Oh…” it felt strange and he didn’t know how Harry had done it but he had not failed his Duke! “Who else knows?”

“Stilgar and Harah here, I will tell Alia, Irulan, Leto and Lily when we return to the Keep. When they are older Victor and Ghanima will be told.” He would tell Jessica and Gurney in time but they were watched almost as closely as the family on Arrakis and their reactions would be watched.

Mentat awareness projected the outflowing patterns into the future. The possibilities dazzled him. Paul had set in motion a whirling vortex and nothing could stand in its path. The Bene Tleilaxu and the Guild had overplayed their hands and had lost, were discredited. The Qizarate was shaken by the treason of Korba and others high within it. And Paul's final voluntary act, his ultimate acceptance of their customs, had ensured the loyalty of the Fremen to him and to his house. He was one of them forever now.

"Paul is gone!" Alia's voice was choked as she stared out over the sleeping city, a warm shawl wrapped around her, dark coppery hair falling freely down her back. "He was a fool, Duncan!"

"Don't say that!" he snapped.

"The whole universe will say it before I'm through," she said.
"Why, for the love of heaven?"

"For the love of my brother, not of heaven."

Zensunni insight dilated his awareness. He could sense that there was no vision in her - had been none since Chani's death. "You practice an odd love," he said.

"Love? Duncan, he had but to step off the track! What matter that the rest of the universe would have come shattering down behind him? He'd have been safe... and Chani with him!"

"Then... why didn't he?"

"For the love of heaven," she whispered. Then, more loudly, she said: "Paul's entire life was a struggle to escape his Jihad and its deification. At least, he's free of it. He chose this!"

"Ah, yes - the oracle." Idaho shook his head in wonder. "Even Chani's death. His moon fell."

"He was a fool, wasn't he, Duncan?" She whispered, still not looking at him. Duncan's throat tightened with suppressed grief. "Such a fool!" Alia gasped her control breaking. "He'll live forever while we must die!"

"Alia, don't... " he reached out to her.

"It's just grief," she said, voice low. "Just grief. Do you know what I must do for him? I must save the life of the Princess Irulan. That one! You should hear her grief. Wailing, giving moisture to the dead; she swears she loved him and knew it not. She reviles her Sisterhood, says she'll spend her life teaching Paul's children."

"You trust her?"

"She reeks of trustworthiness!"
"Ahh," Idaho murmured. The final pattern unreeled before his awareness like a design on fabric. The defection of the Princess Irulan was the last step. It left the Bene Gesserit with no remaining lever against the Atreides heirs.

Alia began to sob, leaned against him, face pressed into his chest. "Ohhh, Duncan, Duncan! He's gone!"

Idaho put his lips against her hair. "Please," he whispered. He felt her grief mingling with his like two streams entering the same pool.

"I need you, Duncan," she sobbed. "Love me!"

"I do," he whispered.

She lifted her head, peered at the moon-frosted outline of his face. "I know, Duncan. Love knows love." Her words sent a shudder through him, a feeling of estrangement from his old self. He had come out here looking for one thing and had found another. It was as though he'd lurched into a room full of familiar people only to realize too late that he knew none of them. She pushed away from him, took his hand. "Will you come with me, Duncan?"

"Wherever you lead," he promised before kissing her gently.

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Alia stood before the Throne with Leto beside her as Lily approached, dressed in white silk and on her Father's arm. Leto would be crowned tomorrow, today he married his best friend, she would be his Empress. She was glad her nephew and friend were marrying because they wanted to and not due to politics. Harry’s new title had helped everyone accept the marriage. House Potter was now a noble house. Harry smiled as he passed his daughter to her new husband and Alia spoke the words to bind them together. As the two teens kissed she glanced to where Duncan stood off to the side, ever watchful. Grey metal eyes met hers and he smiled at her. she smiled back as the newlyweds parted and turned to the cheering crowd.

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Irulan slipped up beside Harry and hesitantly took his hand as they watched Emperor Leto II marry his Aunt Alia to the Ghola Duncan Idaho. Duncan was physically older but Alia was a Reverend Mother, making her mentally older than her physical sixteen years. She looked down and smiled at the baby Harry was cradling to his chest. Little Victor was the spitting image of his Father….and
She feared for him and his sister Ghanima because of that.

She still felt so guilty for her part in things, even knowing Paul and Chani were alive and well in Carthag. She had even accompanied Leto on a trip to see them. It had been good to clear the air with Chani over what she had done to her. And Paul had given his blessing for her and Harry. Usually an Emperor's wife remained a widow but the Throne was secure and everyone knew Harry had no interest in the Throne. Besides, his daughter was already Empress.

They were leaving for Kaitain in a few days, taking the twins with them since Irulan had been named their guardian and it was safer for them away from the Keep. Harry was Fremen enough to teach them their ways even away from Arrakis and since they were preborn they had access to their Fremen ancestors’ memories. And they would not spend all their time on Kaitain, they would take the twins to see their Grandmother and also return in secret for them to spend time with their parents.

Leto stood on the dais, Lily at his side as they watched Irulan walk towards them. Though it wasn’t them she was really walking too, on the step below stood the Duke of Kaitain, Harry Potter. He was dressed in appropriate finery of black and green, still wearing Atreides colours. In front of Irulan walked little Ghanima, the three-year olds blue-in-blue eyes solemn as she took her duty very seriously. They walked up the stairs and Harry took Irulan’s hand, turning to face the Emperor. Leto smiled and began the ceremony, Princess Irulan Corrino-Atreides becoming Irulan Corrino-Atreides-Potter, Duchess of Kaitain. Only a select few could see two other people watching the ceremony, Paul and Chani stood off to the side, watching as Irulan finally married someone who cared for her, not her title. Little Victor stood with them, Duncan behind him, but it allowed the young Prince to hold his Mother’s hand.

Harry smiled as he took the child from the nurses’ arms, cradling his new daughter close. He rocked her gently, taking in her dark hair so much like his own already but her eyes were the blue/grey of her mother. Rugi Potter, named for Irulan’s youngest sister who had died on Arrakis at the dedication ceremony of the new Palace of Emperor Paul Atreides. During the ceremony procession, assassins struck the entire royal family and their guests, killing and injuring many of them. He sat down and Victor and Ghania pressed close to see their new ‘cousin’.

Duncan cradled his newborn son, Paul II. The boy had his hair but almost every other feature came from the Atreides. Alia lay on the bed, tired but happy. She had chosen to give Duncan a son, there were enough male heirs that their son would not be seen as an heir to the Throne so it was safe enough. The door opened and Duncan’s free hand went to his knife only to relax as Chani ran to Alia’s side to see how she was.
Paul approached, using a cane to help ensure he didn’t run into anything. He leant in close so that he could see the baby and smiled. “Congratulations Duncan, Alia.” He smiled at his sister. “What is his name?”

“Paul, for his uncle.” Alia answered.

Paul reached out to gently touch little Paul’s face. He had seen Alia and Duncan but never this...he had never seen a child between them. He was happy those visions were wrong. His sister would never suicide to stop her own Abomination, Duncan wouldn’t die on Stilgar’s knife…. instead they would be a happy family.

Emperor Leto II and his wife Empress Lily stood on the dais once again, their son Harry and daughter Chani sitting on their small thrones behind them. On the step below stood Victor and Prince Farad’n Corrino, awaiting their brides for a double wedding. The young Corrino Prince had been spared as he had revealed his Mother’s plot to kill not only the twins but young Harry as well. He had banished his Mother from House Corrino for her actions and Leto had ordered her execution. Now he stood, smiling, as Ghanima approached him. Victor was smiling as young Rugi Potter walked towards him.

Harry smiled as he watched his second born daughter wed to young Victor. On his hip, little James watched everything with wide green eyes. His older sister Chalice stood in front of her mother Irulan, excited by all the pretty clothes. He looked over and smiled at Paul and Chani as they watched their youngest children marry. Chani was marrying for politics but it was obvious the young Corrino Prince was very intrigued by her and few doubted love would grow.

Paul sat on a dune, listening to the sounds of the desert around him, smiling as he sensed the silent approach. Harry knelt on the sand beside him. “I owe you everything my friend.”

“There is no debt between family Paul. I just wish I could have done more for you.”

“I see well enough.” There had been some improvement in his vision over the years but it had never fully returned. “I hear we are to be grandparents again soon.”

“Rugi is pregnant with a daughter. She confirmed it today before I left the Keep.”
“I never saw any of this, all because I couldn’t see you.” Paul smiled. “I am glad you came to us. This future is far better than any I ever saw.”

The end of Desert Planet.

Harry hid Chani and Paul with the Fidelius, allowing them to finally live in peace and anonymity. This way they got to also be part of their children and grandchildren’s lives.
The Horror of Evil

Chapter Summary

2 in 1 for this chap

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The Horror of Evil

Harry had been in this world for one week and it made him feel sick. A little research showed the existence of the Winchester family, with Sam having attended Stanford. It was obvious from criminal records that John and Dean were hunters but Sam vanished after a fire killed his girlfriend. He didn’t need to search to know Sam lived, he could feel him. He could always feel Sam if he was in a universe where he existed, no matter how different he was from his Sam. And it always helped lessen the pain of a currently broken bond. He was just thankful that the broken Force bond with Luke had eventually healed, lessening the pain to previous levels. But if Sam was alive, where was he and why wasn’t he with Dean?

Harry had quickly set up identification, allowing a copy of Jarvis out into the digital world to learn. Jarvis had grown over the centuries, every copy adding to him until they left that world, he had been altered by exposure to various other technologies, like Cybertron and even Federation. Jarvis had quickly dug up everything he could on the Winchesters, knowing how much they meant to his Creator, as well as any possible magical world links. He found a version of the Potter family living happily in Wales so he set Harry up as Harry Sirius Black since there was no trace of Sirius Black or his family. There was no hint of a hidden magical world, just the creatures people like the Winchesters hunted.

There was a big difference to other worlds where he’d found the Winchesters…this world, America at least, was almost overrun by the supernatural. He knew how to find the signs and they were everywhere. It was scary how entrenched they were when it was only 2006, one year after Sam had gone back to hunting in the world he knew. He’d found the burnt-out wreck of Bobby’s house within days of realising what sort of world he was in; the town sheriff had been kind enough to show him the grave and a little magic had confirmed the burnt remains to be those of Bobby. His place had burned six months earlier and since he lived outside of town no one had seen the fire in time to do anything but keep it from spreading. He’d then gone to Blue Earth, looking for Jim, but there was nothing, he wasn’t the priest there and never had been. Jim Murphy was a rather common name, too common to trace outside of id that required a photo and Jarvis had not found a match yet.
If he was to make a difference he was going to have to hunt. It was beyond easy for Jarvis to put a suspicious family death into his background, one that would stand out as supernatural to any hunter with the capability of checking and then he bought a suitable car and began gathering supplies. He kept his English accent and ancestry so as not to have to lie too much about his training, just in case. Any American hunter he named, even if they were dead, was too risky since there would be the possibility they ran into another hunter during that time. His reason for coming to the US was easy, he’d tracked the occurrences and come to investigate. He shifted his appearance so he looked around Dean’s age too. Jarvis was tracking the Winchesters through police reports and then their phones once he had found them. All Harry had to do was arrange a meeting by taking the same hunt as Dean.

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Dean grappled with the demon, struggling to keep it from getting a good hold on him. At least this one was trying to kill him with its hands and not via freaky powers, giving him a chance. And then the demon howled in pain, skin sizzling and Dean felt water hit his hand…. holy water. And then he heard a voice reciting an exorcism even as he finally got clear of the demon. He spotted his rescuer then, another male around his own age though shorter. He was slender and dressed in jeans, boots and leather jacket, a container of holy water in one hand and gun in the other as he kept up the exorcism until the demon screamed and abandoned its host. Dean knelt and checked but there was no pulse.

“’Aright there?’” The stranger asked and Dean picked up on the British accent.

“Yeah.” He eyed the stranger warily, especially the gun but then it was tucked away along with the holy water and green eyes met. “Uh, thanks.”

“No problem. Name’s Harry.”

“Dean.”

“He the only one?” Harry asked as he moved to look the body over.

“I think so.” Dean admitted.

“So, what do we do about the body? Back home I’d call one of the officers I know, not sure what you do here.”
“Make sure there’s no evidence back to us and then make an anonymous call.” Dean answered and Harry nodded, moving to clean the crime scene. “So…what brings you to America?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“You serious? I’m surprised you don’t have every hunter from Britain to Timbuctoo over here with the massive rise in supernatural events.”

“Oh.” He’d known it was getting bad, but he hadn’t realised the rest of the world’s hunters would realise it. And he was terrified over it coinciding with Sammy vanishing and his girlfriend dying like their Mom.

“Yeah.” As they left Harry let out a pulse of magic to ensure they would remain undetected, Dean had enough of a record though Jarvis had wiped it. “Well, nice meeting you Dean.” He offered his hand and Dean hesitated before shaking, just because he wasn’t a demon didn’t mean he was human. It could be a set up. He never felt the tracker Harry tagged him with. Harry then gave him a card. “My number if you ever need backup.”

“You’re serious?” dean blinked, since when did another hunter, especially a stranger, offer that?

“Course, we’re in the same business. Nothing more than I’d do for anyone back home and they’d do the same. It that different here?” he asked and Dean shrugged awkwardly.

Maybe it was just because his Dad had managed to piss most other hunters off that they never wanted anything to do with him? “Thanks. But what happens when you change phones?”

“I don’t. It’s encrypted and untraceable. We all use them.”

“Huh.” That was smart, but expensive. He looked to see a nice Camero, looked like a 1969 model, bright yellow with black racing stripes. Bright for a hunter, but he didn’t know Harry had chosen the colour scheme in honour of Bumblebee. “Nice.”

“Thanks. Need a lift?”

“Nah. Thanks again.”
“No problem and call if you need help.” Harry waved as Dean walked off, content to know he could get to Dean in an instant if needed. He didn’t blame Dean for being wary of him, that came from being a hunter. He just wished he could do more to help than hit him with a tracker and some shield spells that would activate should anything supernatural attempt to possess him or kill him with magic.

Harry walked into the Roadhouse, he’d been told about it when he’d run into Caleb a month ago while hunting a werewolf. It had been good to see someone else alive in this world. He hid a smile as he spotted Jo waiting tables and Ellen behind the bar.

“Can I get you something?” Ellen asked warily and Harry collapsed on a barstool, still tired from the last fight.

“Water?” he asked and she nodded, giving him a glass which he downed, knowing it was doused with holy water. “Thanks, it’s hot out there.”

“What brings you out here?”

“Had a job nearby and Caleb said I should stop by here.”

Ellen blinked and looked the young man over again, noticing a protection amulet mostly hidden by his jacket. Caleb had mentioned meeting a foreign hunter. “That makes you Harry.”

“Yep. I’m guessing you’re Ellen. Nice to meet you.”

“You impressed Caleb, not an easy thing to do.” She passed over a bowl of chips and he took some.

“Thanks.”

“I’ve got some rooms if you need to crash for a bit.” She was curious about him and the bar was warded, just in case.

“Thanks, could do with some sleep.” He followed her to where the simple rooms were kept for
Hunters who needed a safe place to sleep for a night or two. Once she was gone he went to work
ensuring the Roadhouse would remain a safe place to stay for hunters, weaving his magic into the
protections already there.

By the time he left a few days later he had made friends with Jo and Ellen which was good, he had
the feeling he would need every ally he could get in this world.

Three months later he was working a job in Connecticut when the shield spell he had placed on
Dean triggered and Jarvis reported his phone was gone. He quickly put the ghost to rest and
apparated, knowing Jarvis would have no problem ‘following’ him since he had infiltrated every
system on earth…and the satellites above. He drew the sword of Gryffindor from storage and
strapped it on, even demons didn’t like basilisk venom and goblin steel. Then he settled Death’s
cloak over his body, with Dumbledore’s magic stripped from it, he could hide him from
everything, he no longer had to worry about noise giving him away. He looked at the mansion
before him and frowned, but there was the Impala. He moved towards the home and felt the demonic
power coming from it, feeling sick at feeling such evil and so much of it but he strengthened his
mental shields before simply slipping across the wards, as if they didn’t exist but it was actually the
wards unable to detect him.

The mansion was full of demons, more powerful than any he had faced over the years, except the
one that had killed him while possessing John. But they didn’t worry him, he had faced beings, if not
demons, of equal or greater power over the millennia. The screams of pain that suddenly sounded
were familiar and had him picking up the pace, working his way down to the basement where he
found it had been sectioned into cells. In one, Dean Winchester slumped in chains, gasping for air as
blood flowed from his wounds. What made Harry want to scream was the one standing over Dean…it
was Sam. But it was Sam as he had never seen him, hair down to his shoulders in a lank mess, pale
skin, gaunt features….and yellow tinted eyes. Standing against the wall was another demon, this one
with yellow eyes and Harry knew it was the demon that had killed him, had killed Sam’s Mum and
girlfriend so what was Sam doing helping it? He knew that whatever had happened to this Sam to
make him like this…it was the power he felt within his Sam as well. His Sam could end up like this.

“Does that hurt Dean?” Sam asked in mock concern and Dean forced his had up to stare into
changed eyes.

“Sammy…please.” He whispered, he wanted his baby brother back, he had to be in there
somewhere.

Sam stared at his battered body, smirking in pleasure at what he had reduced him too. He deserved it,
Daddy’s favourite, his perfect soldier. Where had he been when Sam needed him? Off drinking and
playing pool while he watched Jess burn. “Please what?” Sam sneered. “Why should I lift a finger to
help you Dean? Where were you when I needed you? No, you deserve this.”
Harry watched and those words gave him hope even as Dean slumped. There was real anger there towards his brother, but Sam still cared enough to lash out verbally, to have wanted Dean’s help. He moved into the cell, closer to the demon which glanced around but went back to happily egging Sam on which was not good. Harry grinned, it would be nice to return the favour to yellow eyes. He drew the sword and drove it into his heart, the host was already long dead, he could feel it.

Sam turned as the demon gasped, gurgling, before collapsing, a hole through its chest. He’d wanted to be the one to kill Azazel, for Jess and his Mom, now someone or something had done it. “Show yourself!” He gathered his powers and then suddenly a young man appeared, sword on his hip.

Dean blinked blood from his eyes, staring in confused shock. “Har…ry?” he slurred in pain and Harry looked over at him. Dean sighed as the pain faded and he slipped into sleep.

“Hello Sam.” Harry spoke softly, not wanting to have to defend himself from any version of Sam.

“Who…what are you?” he demanded.

“My name is Harry. Why are you doing this Sam? Why work with the demon that ruined your family?”

“What would you know about it?”

“More than you’d believe.” He answered sadly, magic seeping into the space between them, reaching out to Sam, seeking out weaknesses in his defences, looking to disable, not kill. Sam snarled and lashed out with his powers but Harry’s shields held firm as they began to fight.

By the time Sam fell the room was a mess and several dead demons were scattered through the cells. Harry knelt beside Sam and made sure he was alive before going to release Dean from the chains and check on his healing. The three vanished seconds before the mansion was consumed by magical fire.

Harry sat beside the bed where Sam lay in a medically and magically induced coma. Flushing potions had been forced through his system after scans with a tricorder had revealed something off with his blood. He was also being given massive doses of various nutrients to help replace the weight
he’d lost and to get his body back into condition. His mind would be the last area Harry would
tackle, the mind and body were linked and he wanted the easier one to deal with healed first.

Dean was also being kept unconscious, although his physical wounds were healed. He didn’t want
to deal with the potentially hostile hunter while trying to work on Sam. One problem at a time. He
planned to be long gone before the two were fully back on their feet, as long as Sam’s mind was
stable and he didn’t still want Dean dead. It was long, hard work but he would not give up, they
were not ‘his’ Winchesters, he prayed that his were safe and well, but they were close and did not
deserve this.

Sam woke slowly, mind fuzzy, as he blinked groggily. It felt like he had been asleep for years, his
thoughts scattered, head pounding. He tried to move but he felt so weak. Ever so slowly a ceiling
came into focus above him, it was clean, too clean for a motel…apartment? What…. Jess! He fought
to sit up and then hands were there, restraining him. He tried to fight them off, Jess…. he had to find
her…but he was quickly exhausted and went limp, panting for air and then he finally heard
something…. his name.

“Sam? Come on, give me a sign here…please be you again…”

That voice...he knew it. “D…” he managed to turn his head towards the voice and he was there,
Dean. He tried to lift his hand, wanting to touch him, seeing the wariness in his expression. What had
happened?

Dean heard the soft, single syllable, but it gave him hope, even as Sam struggled to look at him. He
held his breath as Sam stared at him, able to tell he wasn’t fully with it and then he saw his arm
tremble so he slowly moved one of his hands-off Sam’s shoulders and gently clasped their hands
together, feeling Sam’s hand twitch in response. Was Sammy back? The note left by the Brit had
been confusing but also allowed him to hope he hadn’t lost his brother forever. It was the only reason
Dean hadn’t killed him while he was asleep and then ended his own life. “Sammy? Can you
understand me?” he asked softly and Sam blinked but then his head moved slowly in a small nod.
“You know who I am?” he had to be sure and then Sam smiled at him and Dean felt himself relax,
that smile was pure Sammy. He choked back a sob of relief and saw Sam’s eyes widen in alarm.

Sam heard the choked noise from Dean, his eyes going wide in shock and fear. What had happened?
He took a deep breath and pushed up, managing to get upright enough to push himself into Dean,
feeling his brothers’ arms wrap around him to support him and Sam leant into his hold, breathing in
his familiar scent. “De’n.” he managed to force out, trying to reassure him.

Dean was surprised when Sam managed to get almost upright before falling against him,
automatically bringing him into a hug and he felt Sam relax against him, felt his cheek resting against his neck, breathing deeply and then came the quiet whisper, almost his full name. “I’ve got you,” he responded.

Neither brother detected Harry, standing invisibly nearby, just in case. He was relieved to see them together, it was obvious Sam had no clue what was going on and Harry felt no guilt over removing the memories of his time since Jess’ death. He didn’t need to remember what Azazel had done to him to make him his willing general or how he had enjoyed the torture of his own brother….and the death of Bobby. He remained as over the following days Dean cared for Sam, helping him recover his strength and speech. Harry felt bad over that but removing the mental triggers had not been an easy task, if anyone less skilled had attempted it Sam would likely be no more than a vegetable. He had a healthy weight back but his muscles needed use to regain full strength. Dean was obviously relieved Sam remembered nothing and Harry didn’t blame him.

Once sure the brothers would be alright Harry left to hunt down the rest of the demons Azazel had let loose on the world. It would hurt more to try and stay near them when they weren’t his. A year later Harry died on a hunt as a frightened victim accidentally shot him close range with a shotgun.

Harry was pretty sure he was being punished. Otherwise why two worlds in a row Darker than the counterparts he was used to? The Battle of Endor had still been won, but instead of peace the First Order had risen from the Empires ashes. Leia had been forced out of the government when her true parentage was revealed and Luke had become a myth. What the hell had happened? He had swallowed his revulsion and joined the First Order, wanting access to their systems, unleashing Jarvis on them to find out everything. What he found was not good and so Harry worked to get a transfer to where he needed to be, Jarvis ensuring the orders went through until he was sent to Kylo Ren’s ship.

Two weeks later they were in orbit of Jakku and troops were deployed only to return with a prisoner. Since Jarvis had finally gotten what they needed from the computers Harry decided he was going to rescue the man and made his way to the cells.

“I had no idea we had the best pilot in the Resistance on board. Comfortable?” Harry went invisible at hearing the mechanical voice, remembering Vader when he heard it.

“Not really.” Harry barely heard the man answer so employed a more powerful listening charm.

“I'm impressed. No one has been able to get out of you what you did with the map.”
“Might wanna rethink your technique.” Came the snarky response and Harry couldn’t help a grin. The room went silent and Harry felt the Force shifting within.

“Where is it?” Ren demanded.

“The Resistance will not be intimidated by you.” The captive gasped out, obviously in agony.

“Where... is it?” Ren pushed and the captive began to scream. As more officers appeared Harry retreated, he would make his move when they were occupied elsewhere.

The cell door whooshed open and a Stormtrooper entered, joining the one guarding Poe.

“Ren wants the prisoner.” The newcomer ordered and Poe remained still as he was unshackled and pulled onto his feet. His hands were cuffed and then he was pulled from the cell and through the halls, all in silence. “Turn here.” The trooper suddenly ordered, pushing him into a narrow passageway before stopping him part way down. “Listen carefully: you do exactly as I say, I can get you out of here.”

“If -- what--?” Poe was still a bit groggy from his last go with Ren.

FN-2187 pulled his helmet off. “This is a rescue, I'm helping you escape. Can you fly a TIE fighter?” he demanded to know, he really needed a pilot for this to work.

“You with the Resistance--?!”

“What? No no no! I'm breaking you out. Can you fly a TIE fighter?”

“I can fly anything. Why, why are you helping me?” he asked as he understood what was happening. But Stormtroopers were raised from birth to be loyal so why was this one offering to help?

“Because it's the right thing to do.”
And then it hit him and he smirked. “You need a pilot.”

“I need a pilot.” He agreed, glancing around for any sign of pursuit.

Poe stared at him and then smiled. “We're gonna do this,” he stated, suddenly excited for their chances. He had to get to BB8 before the Order did.

“... Yeah?” he loosened the shackles on Poe and then put his helmet back on, leading him towards the fighter bay. And then a young lieutenant was standing in front of them and Poe knew the gig was up. FN-2187 raised his blaster but the man held his hands up in surrender.

“I’m not your enemy.” Harry said quickly, sensing the troopers fear and pilots concern. He slowly reached into a pouch and pulled out a chip, holding it out to them. “Technical readouts of Starkiller.”

“Why would you offer that?” Poe asked warily only to get a grin in return.

“To stop the Order’s stupidity. I’ll keep them off your back, just get this to someone who can use it.” He answered.

Poe hesitated but then took the chip and hid it in his clothes. “Thanks. Come with us.”

“Fighters only take two and you’ll need the weapons. I’ll be fine, no go.” Harry snapped, pushing them on even as he went to ensure reactions to their escape would be slowed. He had fun ripping apart the weapons control systems and watched the ship head for the planet. Jarvis went to town on the ships systems, keeping them from following and a few hours later a different ship left the planet, Harry sensed one droid and three humans aboard, the pilot one of them.

Talk about Déjà vu, here he was, once again outside a cell with Ren inside because of course they hadn’t run straight for the Resistance with the information he’d given them and now the girl was Ren’s ‘guest’.

“Where am I?”
“You're my guest.”

“Where are the others?”

“You mean the murderers, traitors and thieves you call friends?” he paused but she remained silent. “You'll be relieved to hear that I have no idea. You still want to kill me.”

“That happens when you're being hunted by a creature in a mask.” She snapped and Harry had to admire her spunk but then he heard an interesting noise and used Jarvis to get a look through the cameras to see Ren without his mask, heart skipping a beat at the familiar face….it couldn’t be…… Ben.

“Tell me about the droid.” Ben demanded.

“He's a BB unit with a selenium drive and a thermal hyperscan vindicator –“

“He's carrying a section of a navigational chart. We have the rest, recovered from archives of the Empire. We need the last piece. And somehow, you convinced the droid to show it to you. You. A scavenger –“ She jerked at that, how did he know? “You know I can take whatever I want.” He moved closer, hand raising towards her and she recoiled but there was nowhere to go as he nearly touched her face. “... You're so lonely... so afraid to leave... At night, desperate to sleep... you imagine an ocean. I see it -- I see the island...” Tears streamed down her face as she resisted. She tried to break free, but couldn’t budge. “And Han Solo. You feel like he's the father you never had. He would've disappointed you.”

“-- Get out of my head –“ she snarled but he just leant even closer.

“I know you've seen the map. It's in there... and now you'll give it to me. Don't be afraid. I feel it too.”

“I'm not giving you anything.” She snapped and Harry was impressed again.

“We'll see.” He peered into her eyes and she met his gaze, his confidence draining away.
“... You... you're afraid... that you will never be as strong as... Darth Vader!” She gasped out and he practically stumbled away from her, grabbing his helmet before leaving the cell. As soon as he was gone Harry went inside and she glared.

“Relax.” He went about undoing her restraints.

“What?”

“Please tell me Poe still has the chip I gave him.” He whispered and her eyes widened, they’d said someone had helped them get away.

“That was you?” She hissed and he nodded.

“Getting off this base is going to be harder, can you fly?” he asked and she nodded. “This way.” They moved through the halls and towards one of the many hanger bays. “The Resistance is in the Ileenium system. No detours this time.” He ordered and she nodded as he got her into a fighter.

“Come with me.” Weapons needed a second man after all.

Harry hesitated but Jarvis could keep them occupied. He sighed and leapt into the gunners’ seat. “Let’s go.” Rey grinned and hit the engines.

Finn and Poe huddled around the map table with command, going over the information on the chip they’d been given plus their reconnaissance flights.

The scan data from Snap's reconnaissance flight confirms Finn's report and the chip.” Poe said.

“They’ve somehow created a hyper lightspeed weapon built within the planet itself.” Snap added.

“A laser cannon?” Brance demanded.
“We're not sure how to describe a weapon of this scale.” Snap admitted.

Major Ematt stared at the image. “It's another Death Star,” he whispered.

“I wish that were the case, Major.” Poe hit a control. A wireframe of the Death Star appeared. “This was the Death Star.” He hit another control and the Death Star shrank until it was tiny next to the image of the new base. “This is Starkiller Base.” This was news to many, and they were stunned.

“So, it's big.” Han offered.

“How is it possible to power a weapon of this size?” Admiral Ackbar demanded.

Before anyone could answer an officer ran up and handed Leia a datacard. “A tie fighter has been spotted in system. And the weapon is charging, aimed at…Hoth?” that made no sense but Finn and Poe exchanged a glance, could it be?

Han went to work with the nearest comm station and sure enough the fighter was transmitting. “To the Resistance, my name is Rey, please don’t shoot.”

Han grabbed the microphone. “Rey, this is Solo. You okay kid?” he asked as the others looked on, Finn and Poe relieved to hear her voice.

“Alright. Where do we land?”

Harry helped Rey drop down and then followed her, instantly raising his hands when weapons were aimed.

“Hold your fire!” Poe yelled. “Never got your name.”

“Harry Potter. Next time someone helps, don’t make stops along the way?” He offered and Poe laughed.
“He’s the one who gave us the chip and ensured our escape.” Poe explained and Leia nodded.

“Welcome to the Resistance.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Harry bowed to her, shocked over how old she looked. And where was Breha? Was her daughter not with the Resistance?

“The weapon is targeting Hoth, are you to thank for that?”

He shrugged. “Not like anyone lives there.”

Harry settled into the cockpit of the x-wing and smiled. He still loved flying. Soon they were in hyperspace, waiting for confirmation.

“Roger, base -- red squad, blue squad, take my lead.” Poe’s voice came after almost an hour and they left hyperspace to find the base…shields down. “Almost in range! Hit the target dead center, as many runs as we can get!”

“Approaching target.”

“Let's light it up!” they dive bombed the oscillator, hitting it several times.

“Direct hit!”

“But no damage!” Harry pointed out.

“Yeah, we gotta keep hitting it! Another bombing run! Remember, when that sun is gone, that weapon will be ready to fire! But as long as there's light, we got a chance.” Poe called out as they looped around for another run. “Guys, we got a lot of company!” he called as BB8 pointed out the incoming fighters.
Harry pulled up, dodging and weaving to avoid enemy fire and trying to hit the target again. They had to do more damage! He reached out to feel the ground team, still inside the base and nudged Han to take notice and help.

“Watch yourself six!” Poe warned and Harry slipped out of the way of the tie fighters fire.

“Thanks.” He kept his focus on the fight until an exclamation hit the comms.

“Black Leader, there's a brand-new hole in that oscillator. Looks like our friends got in!”

“Red Four! Red Six! Cover us!” Poe ordered.

“Roger!” Harry answered, pulling back to keep the ties busy.

“Everybody else, hit the target hard! Give it everything you got!” Poe ordered. Harry grinned as suddenly the fighters went nuts, Jarvis at work. That made things easier for them. Their fighters made the shots and they moved away as the planet station began breaking apart. “All teams! I got eyes on them!” Poe called in relief as the Falcon appeared. “Our jobs done, head home.”

Harry watched as Rey and Han prepped the Falcon, with the map complete and the base destroyed they were going after Luke and part of him wanted to go with them, to see Luke. But this wasn’t the Luke he had bonded with, this Luke was vastly different, shaped by far more grief and loss. So, he watched them fly away and went to join the scouting squadron he’d been assigned to. He was physically old enough to be Luke’s son, there was no point chasing what he’d once had. He was getting melancholy in his old age.

Two days later his fighter was shot down as they tangled with a group of scouting First Order pilots. He never got to meet this worlds Luke.

*The end of this one.*

*Not many more to go.*
Harry held the rail as the Highland Lily sped through the warm Caribbean waters, heading for Port Royal with a hold full of goods for the town. He was returning after six months in England, right in time for the arrival of the new Governor. He hadn’t liked being gone so long, leaving the town without a Doctor, but an issue with his trading company had come up that he had to deal with in person…. oh, how he missed phones and email. He’d left good people in charge of the company in England but that didn’t stop issues from cropping up.

“Sail on the horizon!” the lookout called down and men moved into position, just in case.

Harry climbed into the crow’s nest with the lookout, everyone on board knew he had the best eyes. “Black sails…looks like another ship too, going down.” Harry frowned. “Man the guns!” He yelled down and they moved into action. He climbed back down to the deck where the Captain was waiting.

Damien may be Captain but this man owned the boat and paid their wages. “Sir?”

“Looks like a battle up ahead. One ship with black sails, the other with normal.”

“Pirates.” Damien snarled and Harry nodded.

“Most likely.” The Lily may be a trader but that didn’t mean she was unarmed, far from it. These seas were notorious for pirates and he refused to lose good men to them. The guns were unnecessary as by the time they arrived all that was left of one ship was debris and the other was slipping over the horizon.
“Man the boats.” Damien ordered, all they could do was look for possible survivors.

Josamme Gibbs clutched her shoulder, startling her. “Quiet, missy! Cursed pirates sail these waters. You want to call ’em down on us?” he whispered and she stared wide-eyed at him.

“Mr. Gibbs.” Norrington called as he glared at Gibbs from his place beside the new Governor, Weatherby Swann. “That will do.”

“She was singing about pirates. Bad luck to sing about pirates, with us mired in this unnatural fog—mark my words.”

“Consider them marked. On your way.” Norrington dismissed him.

“’Aye, Captain.” He moved off. “Bad luck to have a woman on board, too. Even a mini’ture one.” He returns to his deck-swabbing duties, surreptitiously taking a quick swig from flask.

“I think it would be rather exciting to meet a pirate.” Elizabeth told them and Norrington shook his head.

“Think again, Miss Swann. Vile and dissolute creatures, the lot of them. I intend to see to it that any man who sails under a pirate flag, or wears a pirate’s brand, gets what he deserves: a short drop and a sudden stop.” He explained, confusing her. Gibbs helpfully mimed: a man being hung.

“Captain Norrington... I appreciate your fervour, but I am concerned about the effect this subject will have on my daughter.”

“My apologies, Governor.”
“Actually, I find it all fascinating.” She admitted with a grin.

“And that’s what concerns me. Elizabeth, dear... we will be landing in Port Royal very soon, and beginning our new lives. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we comport ourselves as befits our class and station?” Swann asked and Elizabeth slumped.

“Yes, father.” Chastised, she turned away, to look out over the bow rail. “I still think it would be exciting to meet a pirate...” she muttered as excitement broke out. “What is it?” She asked and Gibbs answered.

“Sail up ahead.” He pointed to where the fog was lifting to see another vessel. “She’s flying British colours at least.”

Soon they were close enough to see wreckage in the water and the order was given to man the guns, to be safe. The two ships signalled each other and then the soldiers relaxed. “What is happening?” Elizabeth asked.

“The other ship is a merchant vessel.” Norrington explained as the two ships got close enough to see the people on the others deck easily. A rope was tossed across and a man used it to slide across to the Dauntless. “What happened here?”

“Pirates Captain. We caught sight of the battle at a distance, by the time we arrived the ship had left and all that was here was debris, we’ve got boats in the water searching for survivors but we are not hopeful.” The young sailor explained. A commotion sounded from the water and they all looked over as one of the boats pulled alongside its ship and a shout went up, loud enough they could hear, a survivor!

“He’s a boy.” Elizabeth whispered as the limp form was taken aboard.

“Don’t worry lass, Doctor Potter is aboard. He’ll take care of the lad. I better get back.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Port Royal.” The sailor answered.
“Very well. We shall speak with your Captain once we have arrived.”

“Yes Sir.” He bowed to Elizabeth who giggled and curtseyed before going back to his own ship.

Harry helped carry the boy onto the deck and then knelt down to check him over. “He’s alive.” He announced and a cheer went up, one survivor was better than nothing. “Let’s bring him to my cabin and I can tend him there.”

The sailor who had gone across spoke to the Captain who nodded and approached Harry. “sir?”

“Yes Damien?”

“It appears the other ship is carrying the new Governor. The Captain wishes to speak with me once in Port Royal.”

“I’ll speak with him.” Harry assured him. He followed the sailors into his rooms and settled the boy on his own bed. A little bit of magic helped him expel the water from his lungs and brown eyes opened. “It’s alright, you are safe. Can you tell me your name?”

“Will Turner.” The boy coughed and Harry supported him.

“Rest Will, we will be at Port Royal tomorrow.” He soothed and the boy passed out. His shirt moved and Harry pulled out the necklace, an Aztec coin…. with a powerful curse on it, though the boy was unaffected thankfully.

Harry helped the boy to the ramp as it was lowered and they walked down to the dock together. Waiting was for them was Captain Norrington.

“Captain Norrington.” He saluted the man who was obviously not the Captain, he must be the Doctor. “I am glad someone survived, can you tell me what happened?” he asked as gently as he knew how as he focused on the boy.
“Let’s sit first.” Harry guided the boy into the shade and they sat on barrels, Norrington remained standing. “I am Doctor Harry Potter, I don’t think we have met before Captain.” The two men shook hands.

“Will Turner, sir. Cabin boy aboard the merchant vessel Princess.” Will shifted uncomfortably. “We were attacked by pirates. We fought back but they just kept shooting and shooting.” He whispered and Harry lay a hand on his shoulder.

“Do you remember anything of the ship?” Norrington pushed.

“It was black, the ship and sails.”

“Very well. Where is your family?”

“My Mother is dead sir. My Father is a merchant sailor, that’s why I signed on, to get passage out to the Caribbean and find him.”

“What is his name?”


“I shall make enquires, until then…”

“He can stay with me Captain. I have the room and I could use the help in the clinic.” Harry offered and Norrington nodded. He’d asked about the Doctor and the ship when they’d arrived and heard nothing but glowing reports.

“Very well. I’ll leave you.” He nodded and walked away.

“I can stay with you?” Will asked in shock, the Doctor may not dress in fancy clothes but his Mother had been a seamstress, he knew excellent quality when he saw it. Why would he take in a sailor’s child?
“Of course.” Harry smiled and led him away from the docks and into town. Harry led him up the hill, towards the Governor’s mansion and the other well to do homes. He turned into a side street and lead Will into a two-story home, into a room that had the boy confused. “This is my surgery. Up on the bed, I want to give you an exam and make sure you are alright.”

“Yes Sir.” Will got up obediently. He had come to the decision that the man must mean to take him in as a servant and he guessed that was good, a lot better than being left to fend for himself on the streets or something.

Harry gently checked the boy, scanning with magic, but using the implements of the day as well so as not to rouse suspicion. “Looks like you came out of that with just some grazes and a lot of swallowed sea water.” He helped the gangly youth down. “How old are you Will?”

“Twelve sir.” Will straightened his wrecked shirt and the medallion glinted in the light.

“You may want to keep that somewhere safe and not wear it. Many would take the as a symbol of allegiance to pirates.” He warned gently, leading him into the house proper.

Will’s hand went to his medallion protectively. “Yes sir.” He would find somewhere to keep it, at least his new employer wasn’t taking it.

Harry led him upstairs and opened the door to the bedroom next to his own. “This will be your room for as long as you stay. I am right next door should you need anything. I’ll have the tailor come by as soon as he’s free to see about getting you some more clothes made. Then we will need to see where you are academically. There is a school, although it is very small, and you can start classes there. If you are behind I’ll tutor you until you are caught up so do not worry.”

Will felt very confused now. New clothes? School? He’d had some classes with other village children but when his Mother had fallen ill those had stopped. They went back downstairs and into the kitchen where an older woman was kneading bread.

“Doctor Potter! I heard the Lily was back in port. And who is this young man?” She smiled gently at the boy.

“Mae Lindt, this is Will Turner. The ship he was aboard was destroyed by pirates. He will be staying with me until his Father, or any other family, can be found.”
“Welcome to Port Royal Master Turner. I bet you’re starving after the time at sea, I know this one always is.”

“Ship food could never approach let alone match your cooking.”

“Flatterer, if I wasn’t old enough to be your Mother…” She waved a spoon at him and he laughed but guided Will to a chair and then went to get plates and other necessities.

By the time he went to bed that night Will was very confused. He had expected to be treated as a servant and yet here he was in the softest bed he had ever laid in, right next to the Doctor’s own room. The tailor had been by to measure him and discuss things with Doctor Potter, the styles and materials discussed had not been for a servant. He finally fell asleep, curled in a ball under the blankets and didn’t wake when Harry peered in at him.

Harry stood and went to the door, opening it to find a young girl, around Will’s age. “Hello, do you need a Doctor?” he asked gently.

“No sir. I… Captain Norrington said you have the boy pulled from the water with you.”

“Ah, you must be Miss Swann, the new Governor’s daughter.”

“Yes sir.” She curtseyed and he bowed, hiding a smile. “Elizabeth Swann.”

“And where is your escort Miss Swann?” Harry asked as he stepped back to allow her inside, she was safer inside with them than on the street.

“Well, they….” She ducked her head and Harry chuckled.

“I guess we will need to see you back. Have you had breakfast?”

“No sir.”
“Then you will have to join us.” He led her into the dining room where Will had been sitting nervously at the table. He quickly stood when he saw her and her fancy dress. “Will Turner, this is Elizabeth Swann, the Governors daughter. She was aboard the Dauntless and witnessed your rescue.”

“I am so glad you are alright. You are, aren’t you?” she asked, walking over to Will who looked ready to bolt, much to Harry’s amusement.

“Yes, Miss Swann.” He bowed nervously to her. Why would she be interested in his health?

“I am glad, and you can call me Elizabeth.”

“Yes, Miss Swan.” He was very glad that one simple outfit had been delivered that morning so that he was not wearing his ragged clothes from the attack.

“Alright you two, sit down and eat. Then we will escort Miss Swann home.” The meal was awkward as Elizabeth tried to get Will to talk to her and the poor boy painfully aware of the differences in their circumstances. Soon the meal was done and Harry led the children out, a sword on his hip to be safe. Port Royal had been a pirate haven for a long time now and one man and two children would appear an easy target, although many pirates knew him and even owed him their lives as he treated any who came to his clinic.

Will was in awe of the mansion as they walked through the gate, feeling very out of place. Harry knocked on the door and it opened to reveal a servant woman who relaxed at seeing Elizabeth safe and unharmed. They were ushered inside and Harry met with the Governor while Elizabeth was taken up stairs to finish dressing for the day, leaving Will alone until his guardian reappeared with the Governor who smiled kindly at him.

“It is good to see you well child.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Will bowed to the man.

Will handed what Harry asked for to him, watching closely as he tended to the wounded sailor. He’d been with him a month and still had trouble believing this was his life now. Captain Norrington had
assured them they were still trying to track down his Father but for now he was accepted as Doctor Potter’s ward. He had clean, good clothing, all the food he needed and he would be joining the school soon since he had almost caught up to where he should be at his age. And he was learning how to help the Doctor in his clinic, he found it a little scary but he was willing to learn and help, to pay back some of the care the man gave him. It was a life he had never dreamed of having. He still wasn’t sure about Miss Swann’s attention, what was so interesting about him? But…she was pretty and brave and…he liked her. there was no point though, the Governor’s daughter would never be allowed to marry the son of a sailor, even if his guardian was now an important Doctor who even owned one of the most successful trading companies, able to compete with ones like the East India Trading Company. His whole world had been turned upside down and it would take a lot of time to adjust.

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Harry picked up the medallion Will had hidden inside a book. It was definitely Aztec in design, made of gold too. The curse on it made his skin crawl and he was just glad it hadn’t affected Will. He closed his eyes and opened his senses, feeling for the power behind it…so there were supernatural forces art work in this world, this was the first evidence of that. With Will safely at school he was free to investigate for the next few hours. He focused on the curse and apparated, finding himself in a cave overflowing with treasure. At the top of a mound was an old chest…brimming with medallions just like Will’s. It also stank of old blood. It seemed someone had tried to break the curse but without Will’s medallion they had failed. So how had Will’s Father ended up with a cursed medallion? The treasure would suggest pirates and yet the man was meant to be a sailor…unless that was just a pretty story for the boy? He needed to find William Turner Snr to find the answers or find the pirates…or had he already glimpsed them? The black sails that had attacked the ship Will was on, had they come for Will and his medallion?

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Harry nodded as Will went through the movements. The now twelve-year-old had begged for sword lessens and Harry had agreed, tutoring him when he could. The teen was a natural, soaking up everything he could show him. And he was showing him moves that no one in this world would know how to counter, if Asgard existed here then it had been millennia since they came to Earth. He was going to ensure that Will could protect himself form any attacker.

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Harry appeared miles beneath the sea to find a man tied to a canon…. still alive, after a fashion. He freed him from the canon and then they vanished. They reappeared in an abandoned lighthouse near Port Royal. He would not take the man to Will while he was cursed by the medallion.

Bill opened his eyes and blinked. The crushing pressure and cold were gone but how? He pushed himself upright and saw a man watching him. He was dressed in sturdy clothes but Bill could see the quality in them. Dark hair was tied back and piercing emerald eyes were locked on him. He then noticed the sword on the man’s hip, this was no easy mark. Who was he and how had Bill gotten here?
“You are William Turner Snr?” The man asked and Bill nodded.

“How do you know my name? Where are we?”

“An abandoned light house not far from Port Royal. I know your name because your son has been my ward for the last two and a half years after he was fished from the sea, sole survivor of a pirate attack.”

Bill froze. “Will? My Will? Is he alright?” he asked, pirates had attacked his son…the son he had sent the medallion to, was it his fault?”

“He is fine, he is doing well in his studies and is a natural at learning sword work. I am Doctor Harry Potter, it was my ship that pulled him from the sea and I agreed to look after him until you were found, although Will thought you were a merchant sailor.”

“I was…but Jack Sparrow was an old friend so when he offered.” Bill looked away. “Mary was pregnant and we desperately needed more money.”

“And one successful pirate raid can bring more than a sailor sees in a lifetime.” Harry finished for him and Bill nodded.

“So how did you end up cursed and at the bottom of the sea?” he asked and Bill slowly told the story of Jack, Barbosa’s mutiny and the curse.

“I sent the medallion to Will so they could not break the curse, we deserved it for what we did.”

Harry sighed and leant back against the wall. “Will no longer wears the medallion, he keeps it hidden since I warned him it looked too much like something a pirate would carry and piracy is not a safe profession with Captain Norrington in charge of Fort Charles. I am wary of allowing you near him while cursed.” He admitted and Bill nodded sadly but he understood, he would not further endanger his son. “Can you read and write?”

“Yes…”
Perhaps written correspondence?" he offered and Bill relaxed at having some kind of contact with his son.

“He will have a better life with you than I could give, even without the curse. Is he safe with you? No normal man could have saved me from the depths.” He offered warily but Harry just smiled.

“I rescued you using Magic and Will is perfectly safe with me. In fact, he has a touch of magic of his own and I was going to begin training that soon.”

That was a shock but he was a cursed pirate, how could he deny the existence of magic?

Will had no aptitude for medicine and so Harry had let him explore what he wanted to do and Will had fallen into smithing as a hobby. Hobby or not his work was far superior to Mr Brown’s work and several people had come to him for swords. So, when Governor Swann wanted a sword to gift to Norrington on his promotion Will was determined to do his best, weaving magic into the blades forging.

Ten years under Harry’s care had allowed him to grow into confident young man with a range of skills from bandaging to cooking to smithing to sword fighting, sailing, and helping with the business ventures in the Caribbean. Harry had named him his heir and Will had been determined to ensure the company did well, Potter Trading was well respected and he wanted that to continue.

Entering correspondence with his Father had been a shock but he had been so happy to hear from the man he hadn’t seen since he was five. He barely remembered him but they had gotten to know each other through their letters. After starting his magical training, he understood why they were kept apart and he hated that his Father was cursed. They could easily break the curse, but Bill was worried about Barbosa and the crew if they were made mortal again. He was twenty now and he was good at shielding himself, he planned to see his Father soon. First though, he had a sword to finish and present…maybe he’d even see Elizabeth. They managed an odd friendship, his birth circumstances overlooked because there were few others close to her in age and his ‘adoption’ as Harry’s heir.

It took weeks but finally the blade was ready, and just in time. He gently placed it in the case and changed into more presentable clothing before leaving for the Governor’s mansion. Harry was in England dealing with a thief of a manager in the company, leaving Will in charge of the Caribbean ships. He was let into the mansion quickly and waiting in the entry.
“Ah, Mr. Turner! It's good to see you again!” Weatherby called as he left his office.

“Good day, sir.” He bowed and then held out the case. “I have your order.”

Swann hurried to him, opened the case. Inside was a beautiful dress sword and scabbard. Swann took it out reverently.

“The blade is folded steel. That’s gold filigree laid into the handle. If I may –” He took the sword from Swann, and balanced it on one finger at the point where the blade met the guard. “Perfectly balanced. The tang is nearly the full width of the blade.” He explained.

“Impressive…very impressive. Commodore Norrington will be pleased, I’m sure. You have outdone yourself dear boy.”

“A craftsman is always pleased to hear his work is appreciated.” Will smiled softly and Swann chuckled. Will stared past the Governor at the vision on the stairs.

“Elizabeth! You look stunning!” Weatherby called as he turned to see his daughter in the dress he had ordered as a gift to her. Will tried to speak, but couldn’t get the words out. He gave up, smiled to himself, and simply nodded emphatically.

“Will! It's so good to see you!” She gathered her skirt and walked the rest of the way down the stairs, smiling at her friend who bowed to her. “I dreamt about you last night.”

Will blinked in surprise. "Really?"

“Elizabeth, this is hardly appropriate –” her Father tried, the two were friends but there were still topics they should not speak of!

“About the day I watched you pulled from the water and the day we met. Do you remember?”

“I could never forget it, Miss Swann.” The last bit was said teasingly.
“Will, how many times must I ask you to call me ‘Elizabeth’?” she would have rolled her eyes if it was ‘proper’.

“At least once more, Miss Swann. As always, Elizabeth.” He grinned and she laughed.

“Are you coming to the ceremony Will?”

“Unfortunately, not, one of our ships has docked and I need to speak with the Captain.”

“Well I hope you at least make it to the party afterwards.” She then left with her Father and Will headed for the docks.

Will took a deep breath and knocked on the door. There was no answer but he knew the person he sought was within. “Father?” he called and then he heard movement and the door opened.

Bill couldn’t believe it as he heard the voice call that title and he moved to the door, opening it. There was no doubt this was his son; the resemblance was obvious. “Will…” he hesitantly reached out, wondering if he was dreaming but his hand touched warm skin. “My son.” He whispered and Will smiled.

“Father.” Will didn’t know what else to say.

“Did Harry tell you I was here?”

“He’s in England, I sensed the magic and worked out it was the same as the medallion. I don’t care if you’re cursed, I can shield myself.” He argued and Bill sighed but nodded and let him into the building that had become his home. He didn’t need much after all, thanks to the curse. “Please explain why you won’t break the curse? If Barbosa and crew were mortal again then they could be stopped.” Why wouldn’t his Father want to be human and with him?

“Will I…” he ran a hand through his hair. “There is a lot you still don’t know…what I did, I deserve this.”
“I don’t believe you.”

“I turned on my Captain, my friend, and marooned him on an island with no way off.”

“Did you tell Harry so he could check the island? Maybe he found a way off. Maybe you did the wrong thing but you’ve more than paid for it.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“So how do we break it?”

“Turner blood on the medallion to be returned to the chest.” Bill finally answered.

“I’ve got to deal with an issue at the docks, I’ll get the medallion and we’ll sail in the morning.” He promised and Bill finally nodded. He would do this for his son. He should have done it years ago but without seeing him he could convince himself he deserved this.

Will tucked the medallion into a silk pouch and slipped it into his vest before walking down to the dock to speak with Damien, the same Captain who’s ship he had been hauled aboard as a child, although now he had another reason to speak with him, to use his ship to reach the chest and break the curse. Harry may be able to apparate that far, Will could barely manage across town. He noticed two soldiers and a man who looked oddly like a pirate but ignored them to go aboard the Lily.

Elizabeth, pale and perspiring, fanned herself weakly, oblivious to the music and chatter. The ceremony was over but not the party. She looked across the cliff down to the port and imagined one of the two men she could see talking was Will.

“May I have a moment?” Commodore Norrington asked as he joined her and she nodded. They stood in silence for quite a while before he finally blurted out, “You look lovely, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth frowned, unable to focus. Norrington mistook her expression as disapproval.
“I apologize if I seem forward -- but I must speak my mind. This promotion confirms that I have accomplished the goals I set for myself in my career. But it also casts into sharp relief that which I have not achieved. The thing all men most require: a marriage to a fine woman.” He paused from his rushed words to take a deep breath. “You have become a fine woman, Elizabeth.”

“I can't breathe.” She gasped out.

He smiled. “I'm a bit nervous, myself --” he was cut off as she lost her balance and stumbled away. She reached a hand out to the parapet to steady herself, but it slid off -and then she vanished over the wall. Gone. “Elizabeth!” he screamed as he realised what had happened. He began stripping out of his coat and shoes.

Hearing a shout Will and Damien looked to the fort, only to see Elizabeth plummeting from the top of the cliff. It seemed to take her a long time to reach the sea. “Elizabeth!” Will stripped off a few layers and his shoes before diving overboard, Damien not far behind him.

Elizabeth hit the water, narrowly missing the sharp rocks. A wave broke, and then she was washed out away from the cliff, struggling feebly.

Norrington looks down, “ELIZABETH!” He leapt to the top of the parapet, prepared to dive but lieutenant Gillette caught his arm.

“The rocks, sir! It's a miracle she missed them!”

Norrington shook off his arm, looked down -- and realized Gillette was right. He jumped down and ran through the party, heading for the docks and praying she would be alright. He knew she could swim but in that gown?

Elizabeth struggled to keep above water, gasping for air -then a swell rolled over her, and she was submerged. Elizabeth drifted down, unconscious. The current tossing her about. Will reached the base of the cliffs and dove down, spotting her floating limp in the water. He never noticed the medallion slipping from the silk, a shaft of filtered sunlight hitting the skull on its face. Damien and a stranger joined him and they stripped the dress off her, allowing Will to surface and head for the dock.

Murtogg and Mullroy were at the dock there to help haul Elizabeth out of the water. Will climbed up,
exhausted and then Damien and the stranger hauled themselves out as well. Elizabeth was on her back; Murtogg holding her arms above her head, pumping them.

Mullroy put his cheek to her nose and mouth. “Not breathing.” Murtogg looked down; it seemed hopeless. Everyone at the Fort and in the town, knew Elizabeth, she was such a friendly and kind young lady. To lose her would be a great loss. Will had rolled over and was checking her over, searching for injuries.

The stranger stepped up, drawing Murtogg's knife from its sheath. “Move.” He pushed past Mullroy, knelt over Elizabeth, raised the knife - Murtogg is shocked and Will’s hand flashed to his own dagger - Jack slit the corset down the middle, yanked it away.

Elizabeth remained still. And then - she coughed up water and gasped, choking on her first full breath. Jack was relieved it had worked. Will pulled his soaked shirt off and slipped it over her head, covering her modesty and she turned to cling to him.

“I never would have thought of that.” Mullroy commented.

“Clearly, you've never been to Singapore.”

“Thank you.” Will offered his hand and the stranger clasped it. “Will Turner, this is Elizabeth Swann.”

“Captain Jack Sparrow.” He bowed to the two youngsters. Jack flipped the knife and handed it hilt-first to Murtogg -and that's when he spotted – “Where did you get that?” he spotted the medallion barely secured and Will glanced down before his eyes widened in recognition.

“You sailed with my Father.” He whispered and Jack started but nodded, so this was Bootstraps lad. It was then that Norrington arrived with Governor Swann and some soldiers.

“Elizabeth! Are you alright?” Weatherby demanded as Will helped her up. He stripped off his jacket and settled it around her shoulders for warmth, nodding at a soldier to do the same for the practically bare chested Will.

Norrington’s sword was under Jack’s chin, threateningly and Jack understood why, it didn’t look good with him kneeling over a mostly naked young woman. “On your feet.” He commanded.
“Alright Turner?”


“Yes -- yes, I'm fine -- Commodore Norrington, do you intend to kill one of my rescuers?” Elizabeth answered her Father and then addressed the man she vaguely remembered trying to propose.

Norrington looked at Jack. Jack nodded as best he could with a blade beneath his chin. Norrington sheathes his sword, and extends his hand. “I believe thanks are in order.” Jack took Norrington's hand gingerly. They shook… and Norrington tightened his grip, yanking Jack's arm toward him, then tore back the sleeve of Jack's shirt exposing a brand on Jack's inner wrist: a large 'P.' “Had a brush-up with the East India Trading Company, did you ... pirate?”

The others reacted in shock, but the sailors were well-trained, in an instant, half a dozen pistols were aimed at Jack. He stood there, still holding the corset.

Will stood, unsure what to do, if he admitted knowing his name…that his Father had sailed with him…and then he remembered something. “Commodore, remember Mister Gale?” he offered. Gale had been branded by the East India Trading Company as a Pirate…all because he did what was right instead of what the Company wanted. Norrington nodded in response, temper cooling. Turner was right, the Company was too quick with the brand…and he had saved Elizabeth.

“Keep your guns on him, men.” he then pushed the sleeve back further and saw the tattoo of a small bird in flight over the water. “Jack Sparrow?”

“Captain.”

Norrington looked out at the bay and smirked. “I don’t see your ship Captain.” He hesitated over what to do. Jack Sparrow was the worst pirate he’d ever heard of… because he was not very good at being a pirate, in fact he could not think of any innocent lives attributed to the man. “What were you branded for?” he demanded and Jack shifted, sensing this was important.

“Crossing Beckett. He had me transporting slaves, I don’t deal in people. He branded me and destroyed my ship. No one will work with someone branded.” He answered warily and Norrington looked to Elizabeth and then Will. Both were young people of high morals and good judgement and if that was true…what choice had Sparrow had but to turn Pirate?
“You have till tomorrow evening to leave, remain and be hung.” He warned and then released him.

“We’re sailing tomorrow morning, we can take you.” Will offered and the shocked Jack nodded. “Come on, just don’t steal the silver.” He teased, leading Jack to Harry’s place.

“Will!” Elizabeth called and he turned back in time to catch her and then she kissed his cheek.

“Thank you.” She then went back to her Father and Jack grinned at the shocked look on Bill’s kids face. Will shook it off and then slipped onto another path.

“So where are you leading me lad?”

“A reunion.” Will grinned and then knocked on the lighthouse door, pushing it open.

“Will, is everything…” Bill trailed off as he saw his old friend and Captain. “Jack?”

Jack stared at Bill in shock. He’d heard the story of Bootstrap Bill’s fate on the ghost ship the Black Pearl. “How?”

“Long story. We sail tomorrow to break the curse.”

“With Barbosa mortal…” Jack smirked, that would make reclaiming her easier.


Norrington and Swann walked along the far wall of the Fort, taking in the early evening air. “Has my daughter given you an answer yet?” he honestly was torn, he knew who Elizabeth would chose is allowed and he wasn’t a bad choice considering his ‘adoptive’ Father…but Will Turner was still the son of a sailor.

“No. She hasn’t.”

“Well, she had a taxing day... Ghastly weather tonight.”
“Bleak. Very bleak.” He agreed, he’d seen the kiss on the cheek, the way she leant against Turner and he figured his chances were as bleak as the weather. He was also almost twice her age unlike William. In the distance, a boom sounded and they paused.

“What was that?”

Norrington recognised the whistle of an incoming ball, “Cannon fire!” He tackled Swann as the wall of the parapet exploded.

In an old lighthouse, two men started upright and then looked at each other. “I know those guns!” Jack called as they scrambled into clothes. He peered out through the small window. “It’s the Black Pearl.”

“Of all the worst timing.” Bill grumbled as he grabbed a sword from those Harry had left around so Bill could keep in practice. The Black Pearl could not be seen - but the fog lit up around her with each boom of her guns. She was firing on both sides, hammering both the fort and the town.

“Will….” His son had returned to town to ensure all was ready for the morning.

Streets, buildings, docks and ships shattered and explode beneath the onslaught. Villagers panicked, running for cover, dodging flying debris as best they could. Long boats emerged out of the fog, carrying armed pirates. They swarmed from the boats, striking down villagers indiscriminately and setting fires.

Will slips the boarding axe into his belt at the small of his back. He put a dirk in his belt, then a second and a third. He picked up a second axe and a sword. He then looked into the servants’ quarters. “Keep the doors locked Mae.” He warned and she nodded, eyes wide.

“Be safe.” She called after him as Will left the safety of the warded house for the insanity of the streets. He had a feeling he knew which ship it was. He had never seen his Father’s cursed form but he knew these pirates were basically un-killable A woman ran past, chased by a one-armed pirate wearing a yellow bandeau. Will backhanded the axe square into his chest, a deadly blow on a mortal. “Get in the house!” Will yelled and held the door for her to run inside. He then locked the door magically and moved off, feeling the rush of power through his veins as he reached for the fires. He was drawn to the sea….and yet he could call fire ever so easily, harry
called him a contradiction.

The moon was obscured by smoke rising from the burning gallows and wooden roofs. Cannon fire continued to rain down, but the fort's own cannons now returned fire. “Governor! Barricade yourself in my office!” Norrington ordered as he ducked some debris but Swann hesitated. “That's an order!” he roared and Swann turned to go only to find himself face to face with a pirate. Koehler grinned and raises a cutlass but Norrington's sword blocks Koehler's slash. “They've flanked us! Men! Swords and pistols!”

Elizabeth looked out a window at the scene below: even through the fog, multiple fires were visible, and ships burned in the harbor. Shouts and cries of pain echoed up the hill. Cannon fire echoed in the distance as she noticed movement directly below her window: two shadowy figures, approaching the house … pirates. Elizabeth bolted from her room. She reached the railing overlooking the foyer, and cried out, just as the butler opened the door…too late; there was the boom of a gun, and the butler crumpled. Elizabeth ducked down in horror, peering through the balusters. The pirates scanned the foyer, searching.

Suddenly Pintel looked up, and locked eyes with Elizabeth. How could he know she was there? “Up there!” The pirates rush for the stairs. Elizabeth scrambled back into the nearest room.

Elizabeth shut the door, locked it, listening as the pirates pounded up the stairs.

“Miss Elizabeth?” her maid, Estrella whispered and Elizabeth jumped. “Are they come to kidnap you, miss? The daughter of the governor would be very valuable.”

Elizabeth realised she was right. There was the slam of a body against the door. “Listen, Estrella -- they haven't seen you. Hide, and first chance, run for the fort”. She ordered and Estrella nodded. Elizabeth shoved Estrella into the corner, between a tall wardrobe and the wall. Elizabeth ran through the other doorway, heading for where she knew weapons were kept. She may be a woman but Will and Doctor Potter had ensured she could fight. When the door smashed inward, it slammed into the wardrobe, and the maid could not be seen. The pirates ran in, spotted the open side door, and ran for it.
“Will!” Bill called as he saw his son and then stared in awe as his son thrust his hands out towards the pirates, fire dancing at his command. They may not be able to die but that kind of flame would seriously slow them down for a while. Will looked over at them and then his eyes widened and bill realised he’d moved into the moonlight so he stepped back into the shadows.

“Father. Jack.” Will ran over to them. “Is it the Pearl?”

“Aye. Are you hurt?”

“No…” he traile doff, looking towards the mansion. “Elizabeth!”

“We’ll get the lass, you get to the ship and get them moving. We’ll meet you there.” Bill answered and Will hesitated but nodded and took off, hoping the wards on the ship held. The sound of return guns made him think they had.

TBC…

This will be a 2 parter.
Bill and Jack stopped to watch as a young woman in her nightclothes held off Pintel and Ragetti in a sword fight. “Wow.” Jack couldn’t help admitting and Bill chuckled.

“That would be Miss Swan, Will’s been sweet on her since they met and he and Doctor Potter are her…tutors in swordsmanship.”

“She is a credit to her teachers then.” Jack admired her fighting skills and her other… assets. though if Bill’s son was interested he owed the older man enough to stay clear.

“Time to step in.” Bill drew his own sword and Jack sighed but followed.

Harry froze, staring out the window blankly, as every ward he had in Port Royal went crazy. He swore softly before heading upstairs to grab his sword even as magic switched his armour on under his clothes. He then apparated, focusing on Will, arriving on the Lily’s deck as the ships cannons fired continually, the crew scrambling to make ready to sail.

“Will!” he called out as he jumped the stairs onto the quarter deck where Damien and Will were.

Will turned and relaxed at seeing his guardian. “Harry, I am so glad to see you.”

“What’s happening?”

“The Black Pearl is attacking and I think it’s my fault.”

“Oh?” he asked as he added stronger wards to the ship and then out over the dock and into town.
“Elizabeth fell from the fort and I dove in after her…. with the medallion wrapped in silk in my shirt but when I left the water it was visible, Jack Sparrow saw it and recognised it. We were planning to sail with the tide and remove the curse. There’s no way this attack is coincidence. Father and Jack went to get Elizabeth since we saw a group heading there. I locked the house down with Mae and some of the people I found on the street inside.”

“Good. No fence Damian, but I think we’ll be using a quicker method to get to where we need to be. Keep the ship and men safe.”

“Of course, Sir, safe journeys.” Everyone who crewed the Lily, Harry and Will’s preferred ship, knew of their magic, it kept the ship and men safe at sea after all. He watched as they vanished and then looked to his first mate. “How long until we can sail?”

“Another fifteen minutes Sir! Loading the last supplies now.”

“Bootstrap.” Ragetti stammered in horror, it wasn’t possible.

Bill snarled and threw himself into the fight, it had been a long time since he’d done more than practice but this was his son’s lady, even if the two had never spoken their feelings. And then suddenly the two pirates went flying backwards. “Harry.” He greeted.

“Bill. Having fun?”

“Doctor Potter? But you were in London.” Elizabeth looked between them. “Will!” She was relieved to see him and Will moved to her side.

“Are you hurt?” He asked and she shook her head.

“It’s time to end this.” Harry stated. “Although Miss Elizabeth might want to change first.” He teased
and she pulled her dressing gown closer. An explosion made him frown. “This however will be quicker.” A flick of his wrist and her gown was gone, replaced with trousers, blouse, jacket, boots and a belt for her blade.

“Harry?”

“Well I assumed she would wish to see this through.” He admitted even as Elizabeth stared at her new clothes in shock.

“How?” she demanded and Will shifted nervously.

“Magic.” He admitted and she looked to him, eyes searching his. In the end, she nodded and he smiled.

“Alright, let’s go break the curse and make Norrington’s job easier.” They vanished from the mansion as more pirates rushed it, seeking the medallion.

Will steadied Elizabeth as she stumbled on reappearing on the Isla de Muerta, in front of the massive chest. Will quickly pulled the medallion out and handed it to his Father. Bill quickly cut his hand and coated the medallion in the blood before placing it in the chest. Harry sighed as he felt the curse lift, nudging Bill into the moonlight to prove it. Will laughed and hugged his Father, happy he was once again mortal. Harry stepped away and took a deep breath, letting his magic flare, spreading over the island, forcing back the dark magic that had soaked into the place. He doubted anyone would ever want to live on the island but it would no longer be hidden.

“What about all this?” Jack asked and Harry chuckled.

“Guess it goes to the first man who gets a ship out here to collect it.” With that they reappeared in his home in Port Royal. “I can’t be seen since I am supposed to be in London but I can still help so let’s go round up your old crew Captain Sparrow.”

The group moved onto the streets, Harry invisible, to help deal with the rest of the now mortal pirates. Elizabeth stayed with Will, no one wanting her to get her or captured. Finally, all the pirates were captured, dead or escaped and the two older men slipped away back to the lighthouse while Will escorted Elizabeth home. Harry returned to the Lily who had made it out to open sea, setting a course to intercept the Black Pearl.

“Miss Swann, Mister Turner.” Norrington was relieved to see the two young people alive and
unharmed, although he was shocked by her outfit.

“Is my Father alright Commodore?”

“He is safely barricaded in my office.” He reassured her and she relaxed in relief.

With the attack at an end the people and soldiers went to work on clean-up and Will quickly opened up his clinic, with Elizabeth’s help, neither was a Doctor but you didn’t need to be to bandage wounds or give basic burn treatment. Mae and many of the other women went to work cooking up mass meals for the people working to put the town back to rights. And cheers rang out when the Highland Lily sailed back into port towing the Black Pearl. Barbosa had died in the battle to take ‘his’ ship and no one mourned him. After speaking with those involved and told of Jack’s actions in helping defend the town, Norrington agreed to give basic repairs to the ship before returning it to him, on the understanding he was now working for Potter Trading. Harry had hidden the brand, unless someone already knew about Jack having the Pirate brand they would see nothing.

It took almost a week before Commodore Norrington managed to be alone with Elizabeth who was finally back in dresses… minus the suffocating corset. “Elizabeth, I understand circumstances have not been ideal but have you given any thought to my offer?” he asked awkwardly.

She looked at him, standing tall and official in a clean uniform in the cleaned up front room of the Governor’s Mansion. He had been very good to her over the years but… “I have thought about it and… I am sorry but I…”

“I understand.” Norrington answered.

“Elizabeth have… oh Commodore, forgive the interruption.” Will went to leave them alone.

“It is alright Mr Turner, I was just leaving.” Norrington bowed to Elizabeth and walked towards Will. He stopped and put a hand on his sword, the one Will had made. “This is a beautiful sword. I would expect the man who made it to show the same care and devotion in every aspect of his life.” he stated before leaving them alone. Will looked from the Commodore’s back to Elizabeth in confusion and she smiled, moving in to kiss him, not on the cheek this time.

Harry ‘officially’ returned to Port Royal almost two months after the attack to find the town back to normal. This time he returned via ship, the Sirius, and not happy with how things in London had
been left. Beckett was an odious, overly ambitious little man whom he did not trust as far as Elizabeth could throw him. He did not like the East India company taking more interest in the Caribbean, which had been Potter Trading territory since he had started the company. He’d managed to here Jack’s story before they had both left Port Royal and his was not the first. His company had hired on several men branded as pirates by the company when they had done no wrong. The fact the King was backing this did not sit well at all.

The news of an upcoming wedding did a lot to cheer him up and he insisted on paying for everything. Bill now worked with Will in running things in the Caribbean but he still didn’t have a lot of free funds and Harry had been Will’s legal guardian for almost a decade. Between him and Weatherby they could easily cover the wedding and both were delighted to do so. Amusingly Will was more nervous about the wedding than Elizabeth was, she was excited to finally marry the boy she had secretly adored since they met. With their positions in the town the wedding was going to be the society event of the year, it was unavoidable and so planning meant it was almost a year after Will asked her to marry him that the date was set. Harry spent more time in Port Royal than he had since Will had stepped up to help out and so that he would definitely be there, rather than stuck at sea due to light winds or something. It meant he couldn’t keep as close an eye on the Beckett issue as he’d like. The Black Pearl put into port a week before the wedding and Harry and Bill did their best to keep Jack out of trouble and from getting Will drunk before his wedding. Jack’s first mate, Joshamee Gibbs was no help reigning his Captain in.

The morning of the wedding finally arrived with Will nearly sick from nerves. Bill helped him clean up and dress in his wedding finery. “I am so proud of you Will.” He admitted and Will smiled.

“Thank you.”

“You and Elizabeth will be happy together, everyone can see it. Just don’t make me a Grandfather too quickly.” He teased and Will blushed.

He tied his hair back and straightened his jacket. “Do I look presentable?”

“Like a young Lord.” Harry commented from the doorway, already dressed. He frowned as he heard the bell rung. “You stay here and calm, I’ll see to it.” He ordered, walking downstairs to find someone he really didn’t want to. “Lord Beckett, what brings you to my doorstep?”

“Lord Potter? I was told this is the residence of one Willian Turner Junior.”

“William was my ward for almost a decade while his Father was marooned and he still lives here as I am often in London, as you know. What is your business with my heir?” he demanded coldly, it
wasn’t often he acted as a Lord but the title was his and Will would inherit it.

“I have a warrant for his arrest.”

“On what charge?” Harry’s voice dropped several more degrees if that was possible, making the men with Beckett rather nervous. There had been no mention of crossing another Lord in all of this.

“Aiding in Piracy.”

“Really? Isn’t that interesting. In case you hadn’t noticed there are no pirates in Port Royal, the attack last year was repelled, partly due to William.”

“He aided the pirate, Jack Sparrow. I also have warrants for Commodore Norrington and Elizabeth Swan.” He held them up.

“You are grasping at straws Beckett. And I am well aware of how Sparrow was branded a pirate, all because he wouldn’t transport slaves for you. Now, I have a wedding to attend, I suggest you leave.”

“These warrants are legal, by order of King George himself!” Beckett snarled.

“And you will find the Governor Swann is command here.”

“Not anymore.”

Harry really wasn’t in the mood to deal with him at the moment, he would not let anything or anyone ruin the wedding. Of course, that was when it got worse.

“Harry! How is the groom this wonderful morning?” Jack asked as he and Gibbs approached and it took a split second for Beckett to recognise him.

“Arrest that man!” he ordered and his men shifted.
“Hold! You have no authority over my employees Beckett.”

“That man is a pirate!”

“He is no more a pirate than you are.” Harry snarled, Jack and Gibbs shifting, ready to run and both a bit surprised by Harry’s immediate defence of a man he had only known for a year. “Now, get off my property.” With a flick of his wrist Beckett and his men disappeared, they reappeared on their ship which was suddenly two days away from London and no one on board remembered the trip to the Caribbean, buying him time to deal with the problem. “Now, we have a wedding to get too, do not be late gentlemen.” Harry shut the door and the two ex-pirates hurried to the overlook where the wedding was to be held.

In the Governor’s mansion Elizabeth stood still as her curls were piled up, held in place by the circlet her ivory silk chiffon veil fell from, the rest of her hair tumbling freely down her back. The veil even had delicate pearls sown into it. Her reflection didn’t look like her, she liked simple dresses and even the trousers Harry had supplied her with, this dress was even more elaborate than the one she had worn to James’ promotion to Commodore. She was glad they had remained friends despite her turning him down, he had even grown closer to Will since then. Her gown was a deep ivory silk and raffia fabric embellished with a leaf, floral, and fan design with the bodice made by cutting around and repositioning the raffia details. The stomacher looked almost embroidered, with layer upon layer of the raffia design sewn on to it. It had taken months of fittings and work but now….

“You look like a Princess.” Her Father smiled at her from the doorway and she blushed. “Your Mother would be so happy to see you like this.” He took her hand and kissed it, not wanting to disturb their work.

“Thank you, Father.” She fought back tears of happiness and sadness, she barely remembered her Mother so the words meant a lot. The maids slipped away and he helped her off the small table she had been standing on, her silk shoes making no noise.

“I will admit Will is not the man I imagined you marrying.” He had hoped she would marry the Commodore. “As long as he makes you happy…”

“He does. Odd family and all.” She smiled and he chuckled. He offered her a bouquet and then his arm and they headed out. He helped her into the carriage and it took off at a sedate pace, making Elizabeth blush as people called out well wishes, a lot of people had seen her fighting to protect them that night and despite the fact it was not something a woman, let alone one of her station, should be doing it had gained her a lot of goodwill.
Will stood before the clergy, his Father, Harry and Jack with him and then the music changed and he forgot how to breath as he saw her on her own Father’s arm.

Bill exchanged an amused look with Harry before both elbowed the groom gently. “Breath son.” Will sucked in a breath but never took his eyes off her.

James Norrington watched as Elizabeth walked down the aisle, wishing it was him she was walking towards. But as much as he loved her he knew she didn’t love him, not like that. She loved the son of a pirate and trader and as long as she was happy then he could be content.

Harry couldn’t stop smiling as the two young ones were finally married. Elizabeth looked utterly radiant and Will seemed partially shocked this wasn’t a dream while being over the moon she was his wife. Towards the end of the reception Jack joined him looking down at the waves. “Going to tell me what’s wrong Jack?”

“Can I speak with ye….in private, tomorrow?” The one-time pirate asked. He’d settled a lot since getting the Pearl back and going straight. He had a feeling Harry had something to do with it….and the lack of rum. Oh, he still drank, what sailor didn’t? but not the vast quantities he had before.

“We’ll see them off and then you can come back to the house.” Harry agreed. The newlyweds were to sail with the tide in the morning, the Highland Lily decked out for the occasion. They were going to spend time in America, where Will had been born.

“I’ll see you then.” Jack slipped away to re-join the party and Harry laughed as he saw the man grab Will and drag him into a crazy dance. He shook his head and then vanished. He appeared in an alley and slipped out onto the busy streets, heading for a familiar house. he knocked and the door opened to reveal a startled man.

“Sir? Is everything alright?” Alexander asked as he ushered his employer inside.

“Have you found anything that can be used?” Harry asked as he took the offered seat.

“Quite a lot actually.” He went to a well-hidden box and opened it, offering the papers within. Harry skimmed them and smiled.
“Very good work. Beckett showed up to arrest you William this morning, somehow having missed the boy is my heir. I dealt with the issue for now by sending them back here. It is time to ensure Beckett is no longer a threat.”

“Understood sir, I shall personally deliver these this morning.”

“I will accompany you, just to be safe.” They left the house, Harry under glamour and went straight to the Palace.


Harry opened the door and the four men went into the informal living room to sit. He was tired after basically being up all night but he had promised to listen to Jack and he would. They all settled down and Jack sighed.

“I’m in a bit of a mess and I shoulda told you earlier.” The Captain admitted.

“So, tell us know Jack.” Bill offered.

“You know about my run in with Beckett, well he didn’t just brand me, he sank ma ship. I…I made a deal to get her back.”

“With who?” Harry asked and Jack winced.

“Davy Jones.” He admitted and the two ex-pirates with them gasped in horrified shock.

“Okay, what am I missing?” Harry looked at the very white faces.

“Davy Jones…” Bill whispered, he was sure he had seen the ship, just before Harry had rescued him. If Davy Jones had approached him…how different would it be? He’d probably be a member of his crew now. When you die at sea it is Davy Jones who comes with an offer, to serve one hundred years before the mast and stave off the afterlife.”
“But why would anyone risk a place in Heaven for that? Take it from me, dying is not something to be feared, unless you’re an evil bastard.”

“How would you know?” Gibbs asked, as the one who knew the least of their host.

“Because I serve Death. I died when I wasn’t meant to and it pissed him off. I’m…. thousands of years old and every time I die I move on to a new world. I have the gift of knowing when I’m done I get to go home to those I love and live my life. What happened to those who turn Jones down?”

“They die. Legend says that Jones is meant to ferry their souls on to the afterlife.” Gibbs offered.

“Let me guess, he doesn’t.” Harry was getting mad at this Davy Jones, looked like they would need to have a chat, which could be part of why he was here, to speak on Death’s behalf.

“No.” Bill agreed.

“So, what were the terms of the deal?” they all looked to Jack.

“My ship to Captain for ten years and then…well.”

That sounded a lot like a crossroads deal. “Ten years are up?”

“Yep.”

“Wonderful.” Harry rubbed at the bridge of his nose, briefly missing his glasses. “Can he get you on land?” he asked and Jack shook his head. “So, you stay here, we can dry-dock the Pearl for work to be safe.”

“Harry…” Bill knew that look from dealing with the curse.

“Someone needs to remind Jones of his Duty to Death.” Harry’s smirk made them all shift nervously.
“What about Beckett?” Jack asked and Harry chuckled.

“I’ve had some trusted people digging up everything they could on him, it was delivered to the Palace a few hours ago. Beckett will shortly find himself in a rather deep pit of trouble.”

“Good.” Jack grinned, relieved that Will and Elizabeth weren’t going to be arrested because of him. He liked the couple a lot.

Davy Jones, spun, aware he was no longer alone. He stared at the young man standing there and then realised that wasn’t possible, they were not in the land of the living.

“I’ve heard some interesting things about you Davy Jones.” The stranger practically purred and for the first time in centuries he felt a shiver of fear.

“Who are you?”

“Death’s Marked.” Was the cool answer and Jones had the sudden realisation he was in deadly danger, this was a being that did not need the chest and his heart to kill him. “You had a duty to the dead, one you have purposely ignored.”

“Calypso broke the deal first!” he snarled.

“Do I look like I care? What of all the dead you have left to suffer? The wrongs dealt to them are far worse than those you have suffered.” he reached out, hand resting over Jones’ empty chest and then suddenly Jones gasped as he felt his heart beating again, then he looked down as his body became human again. “You will do your duty to the dead Davy Jones, whether you want to or not. And when your debt to them is paid you will rest and another will take your place.”

Davy stared into pitch black eyes, unable to look away. He was terrified, angry and…hopeful? He would be able to rest? “Why?”

“I should destroy you here and now for what you have done, but others wish to give you another chance. Do not squander it or I will be back. I suggest you treat your crew far better as well.” He began to fade away but then suddenly solidified. “Oh, one more thing. Your little deal with Jack
Sparrow, break it. No more deals with the living to get their souls before their time.” And then he was gone and Davy heard the exclamations of shock and awe from his men.

“Push!” Harry ordered and Elizabeth gasped in pain but kept pushing, leaning against Will as she struggled to bring their baby into the world. Will held her tightly, he’d be terrified if any Doctor other than Harry was doing this but he knew the older man would not let anything happen to them. “Again.” And then there was a healthy squall and Harry held up a squirmy baby, covered in mess but still the most beautiful thing Will had seen. “Congratulations, it’s a girl.” Harry handed the baby off to Will and went to work cleaning Elizabeth up and healing her too.

Will cradled the baby close, using magic to help dress her and then he looked down at his sleeping wife. “Thank you.”

“No problem, though next time I say stay on land, maybe you two will listen…nah, the sea is too much in your blood.” Harry smirked and Will laughed softly. “Go on, go show her off to the others.” He nodded at the door where they could see the shadows of Jack and Bill.

Harry soon followed, leaving Elizabeth to rest as the crew crowded around to see the newest Turner. The Black Pearl had become the Turner’s ship of choice, meaning the Lily was usually in London with Harry. Jack loved having the family aboard and every member of the crew carried a blade made by Will and enhanced by magic. Davy Jones had never come for Jack, obviously taking Harry’s warning seriously. Beckett was in prison over his crimes and Potter Trading had initiated a hostile takeover of the East India Trading Company. They had then made an offer they couldn’t refuse to the Pirate Lords, folding them into the now massive company, some though had to pay for their crimes as they had been too serious to overlook. But Piracy was all but gone now which made the various monarchs and their navies happy.

“What is her name?” Jack demanded and Will smiled.

“Jacqueline Turner.” He answered and everyone laughed at the gobsmacked look on Jack’s face before he commandeered the baby and began talking quietly to her. Harry and Will knew Jack had a magic all his own, tied to the sea and his beloved Pearl and he was introducing little Jackie to the Pearl.

Harry grinned and knelt to accept hugs from Jackie and little Henry. He scooped the children up and headed into the house that had once been his but he had given to the family, although he still had a bedroom in it. “Hullo!” He called and grinned as Jack appeared to take the toddler from him,
swinging the boy in the air and making him laugh. No one ever said anything about Jack always staying with the Turners when in Port, or about the family often sailing with him on the Pearl. He dotted on the children and had fun teasing both Turners, teasing Elizabeth was the best at returning.

“Good trip?” Jack asked.

“Not bad.” Harry smiled as he spotted Grandpa Bill cradling baby James in his arms, named for the recently deceased Commodore. His ship had been caught by a typhoon, no survivors. It had devastated the small family that they had leaned on each other.

Weatherby Swann had stepped down as Governor the year before, wanting to focus on his grandchildren so he had moved in with the family as well, meaning the house had been expanded, buying the one next door to do so. There was no longer a clinic room since Harry was so rarely there anymore, the new town doctor lived a few streets away. Harry had pulled away a bit, letting them all grow and live their lives. Will had realised that quickly and had made it clear that was not allowed, his one-time ward had really grown into a strong man. After some of the last worlds his time here had been calm, a balm to his weary soul.

*The end of this crossover.*
Stops Along the Way

Chapter Summary

Harry visits 3 worlds in this chapter

Disclaimer: None of the following are mine

Stops Along the Way

Harry tightened his grip on his umbrella as he walked beside the river. Sometimes he really hated the rain. Hearing childish laughter, he looked up and smiled at the sight of a Mother and son walking together, the boy laughing and jumping in puddles. It was such a soothing sight. It had been several lives since he had last had children—or married. It wasn’t that people hadn’t been interested, the problem was him, he just hadn’t been interested.

Masaki smiled as Ichigo laughed and played in the rain. She was glad he had cheered up after losing his match to the girl. She glanced around, feeling someone watching and saw a young man walking on the other side of the river, umbrella up as he watched them, a small, sad smile on his face before he passed them. She looked back to Ichigo and her eyes widened as she sensed danger. “Ichigo!” she screamed as she saw the girl at the river and her son running towards her…that was no girl! She ran, gathering power to form her bow and kill the Hollow…but nothing happened. With no other way, she threw herself between her child and the danger.

Harry heard the scream and turned to see the child running towards the river, the strange being there and the screaming Mother. He saw her throw herself over her son and reacted, appearing between the two and the strange being. It was dead…human? Or used to be human. Whatever it had been, it was now a very big threat. Magic filled the air around him due to his anger, green eyes darkening towards the black of death. The Hallows he held pulsed in reaction to his anger. As the creature screamed in rage Harry lashed out with magic, making it rear back in pain.

Masaki blinked, she wasn’t dead. She heard the Hollow roar in pain and raised her head to find a stranger between them and the Hollow. He wasn’t a Shinigami so who or what was he? The wound he had inflicted was already healing, her powers were somehow gone and Ichigo was unconscious beneath her. “Strike through the mask!” She called and the man glanced at her, nodding. She pulled her son closer, protecting him, as the stranger faced the Hollow to protect them.

Harry accepted the advice and summoned his sword. The creature lunged but Harry had millennia of
experience and easily dodged, sword sliding through the mask and flesh beneath easily. He watched the creature dissolve and then turned to the other two. “Are you hurt?” he knelt down to look them over.

Masaki slowly uncurled from over her son, seeing the genuine concern in the strangers’ eyes. “Are you Shinigami?”

“Shinigami…Death God? Ah, no. Just a traveller.” He smiled as the boy uncurled and looked up at him.

“Better be more careful, right?” he asked and the boy nodded, eyes wide. “Then I think you should get home out of the rain.” With that Harry vanished, keeping watch over them as they quickly made their way to a clinic with a house attached, entering the house. He wove a protective ward over the house, just in case there were more of those weird things around.

Harry looked around at the newest world and grimaced as he saw a pool of what looked like tar and felt as bad as a demon…half covering a Starfleet shuttle. Well that was just wrong. Looked a slightly older model…so before DS9 had been claimed by Bajor and Starfleet. Suddenly several figures beamed down and he recognised one, Captain…Commander at this point, Riker.

“Let's go. The life signs are weak.” If that was Riker than the woman had to be Beverly Crusher, meaning this was the Enterprise-D. he didn’t know who the blond security woman was, he would have expected Worf, but he hadn’t always been security chief, had he?

“What is this?” Riker asked as they noticed the tar pit.

“No idea. We'll go around, just to be on the safe side.” The security officer offered but the tar moved to be between them and the shuttle again. “Let's try the other way.”

“Enterprise, this is Riker. We've got a problem.”

Harry tuned them out as he ran his own deeper scans of the pit and then reached out to the shuttle again, blinking as he found another mind that cautiously brushed his. He’d never met the woman…. but he’d met her mother on DS9 several times. One of the shuttles occupants was Deanna Troi.
“I am Commander William Riker of the USS Enterprise,” Riker spoke to the black blob person.

“I am Armus. Why are you here?”

“We mean you no harm. We have injured crewmen in the shuttlecraft. We need to get to them. May we pass?”

“You haven't given me a good enough reason.”

“Preserving life, all life, is very important to us,” Riker offered but Harry knew it wouldn’t be enough.

“Why?”

“We believe everything in the universe has a right to exist.”

“An interesting notion which I do not share. You may now leave, if you wish.”

“We're not going without our shuttle crew.” Tasha Yar spoke up and Harry finally placed her from the various records he had read over the years.

“I warn you.” Armus shifted and Harry grimaced, he would have to act.

“Enough! We have people who need attention. We won't hurt you, but we must help them.” Yar snapped and Armus let lose a bolt of energy which sent Tasha flying a long way. Riker and Data’s phasers had no effect on Armus.

Harry rushed to her side and knelt, hand over her chest as he poured healing magic into her body. He ignored it as Crusher knelt opposite him, opening her tricorder.

“Doctor?” Riker called.
“I don’t know…I’ve never seen readings like this.” She stared at the readings in confusion, some sort of energy…but it was healing, not harming her.

“Yes, Enterprise, get us out of here.” Riker ordered and the group vanished, Harry pulling back at the last second. Yar would survive now without his further intervention. Now to deal with Armus. He dropped the invisibility and approached the creature. The creature reformed the body and Harry grinned.

In the shuttle Deanna straightened from where she was tending to Lieutenant Prieto, he needed Sickbay soon. She had felt the burst of pain from Tasha and was worried for her friend too. But there was something else…someone else? And then Armus’ presence was simply gone. “Troi to Enterprise, two to beam up.” She smiled as she felt the transport begin.

Harry smiled as he felt them leave and then went to see what he could find to scavenge in the shuttle that he didn’t already have.

Harry walked through the base, ignoring the two glass rooms and their occupants. Instead he moved deeper into the old castle until he found the ‘secret’ room and looked around at all the scavenged alien remains from the Battle of New York. And there it was…Loki’s Sceptre, holder of the Mind Gem. He summoned it and vanished, he would not let Ultron destroy all those innocent lives. He would just have to create Vision without him. Maybe this would keep anything like the Sokovia Accords ever being created. He also went to Ross and made sure evidence of what he had done to Bruce, all the laws he broke, everything, was released to the public. That was two threats, that were unneeded, dealt with. He paused once he was before the glass rooms again, he could take the twins and make them see the truth…but they needed to face their pasts on their own terms, they would be stronger for it. At least this time Ultron wouldn’t be around to kill Pietro.

He travelled the world, helping nudge events and people without ever revealing himself, not feeling like dealing with another version of the Avengers or Shield. He did however kidnap the Winter Soldier and remove those annoying triggers, leaving the poor man a note stating as much. He also prodded some old memories closer to the surface. He’d kept out of people’s way for the last few worlds, wanting something of a break from dealing with them but he knew it couldn’t last forever.

TBC…

I’d love to do a longer Bleach one, but I don’t feel comfortable enough with the characters, though I am now up to season 4 of the anime and have read other fics.

So the three worlds here are Bleach, Star Trek Next Generation and Avengers.

Next chapter may be the last, starting to run out of oomph for this.
From the Future to the Past

Chapter Summary

Terra Nova

Disclaimer: Don’t own HP or Terra Nova

I loved the show and was very annoyed it didn’t get at least a second season, then again, a lot of shows around that time didn’t.

From the Future to the Past

Harry put the last shirt in his bag and then grabbed his PlexPad and packed it before sealing the bag and sitting on his bed. Tomorrow was the big day, the Sixth Pilgrimage would leave from Hope Plaza for Terra Nova, millions of years in the past. He still wasn’t sure why he was here, but he had felt drawn to finally accept the recruitment in the Sixth Pilgrimage so perhaps he would find his reason in the past. He’d packed the maximum amount of gear possible with few personal affects. As a scientist, he was allowed to pack equipment on top of the normal single pack. A single colony only able to send lists for equipment every few years…there was so much that could go wrong with that.

The next morning, he caught the train from his apartment to Hope Plaza to join the que of people going through security. Once his identity was confirmed he headed for the portal, which reminded him of an oversized Stargate. He removed his rebreather and put it in the bin, taking short breaths like told as he stepped through. It was a bit disorientating although not as bad as his first trip through the Veil or even the Stargate. He stumbled out the other end and into a clearing, breathing deep in relief as the oxygen rich air hit his lungs. Thanks to his healing his lungs quickly adjusted, unlike others. He moved to help some of the other pilgrims as they had trouble adjusting.

“Welcome! Just stay calm and listen to the medics, we’ll get moving to the colony as soon as you’re all clear.” One of the soldiers called out. Soon they were up and moving through the jungle. Harry grabbed the arm of a woman as she stumbled and she nodded in gratitude. They came out of the jungle and stared at the massive wooden fence in the distance. The gates opened as they approached and they spilled into the colony that was now their home.

“Citizens of 2145! I’m Commander Nathaniel Taylor, but you probably already know that. Congratulations! Each one of you has taken a first step, just as I did three years ago, toward a new beginning. Together, we are at the dawn of a new civilization. No pressure.” He smirked and the people chuckled. “The world you left behind fell victim to some of the baser instincts of our species:
greed, war, ignorance. We blew it. We destroyed our home. But we have been entrusted with a second chance. A chance to start over. A chance to get it right. Welcome to Terra Nova, folks! Welcome home.” He announced and the crowd broke up, the soldiers moving amongst them to give out housing allocations.

It wasn’t long before Harry was dropping his bag in his new home. It was small, still bigger than his apartment in the future though. There were a few small crates with the necessities inside such as kitchen appliances and bedding. He unpacked and set about making the place home as much as he could.

Harry shook hands with his new boss, Doctor Malcolm Wallace, the colonies Chief Science Officer. As a Palaeontologist and Palaeobotanist he never got to work with living samples and yet here that was basically all he would be working with.

“It’ll be good to have a palaeontologist on the team again.”

“What happened to the last one?” Harry asked, looking up from the samples and Malcolm shrugged.

“Slasher.”

“Ah…wonderful.” That explained why he had been recruited.

“It’s not a regular thing or anything! He was OTG and lost track of time…”

“Warning heard.”

Harry frowned as he saw one of the other colonists approaching the Commander…there was an odd lump in his jacket…his eyes widened in alarm. “Gun!” he ran at the man, tackling him as he began to aide, landing on the ground with him, fighting for control of the weapon. He heard shouts and then another pair of hands were pulling the man away.

“You okay?” Taylor asked and Harry nodded. “Nice tackle, thanks.”
“No problem.” And then they both ducked. “What the hell is going on?”

“Get to the lab and lock everyone in,” Taylor answered and Harry nodded, taking off for the stairs. As soon as he was in he locked the doors.

“Harry?” Malcolm came out of his office.

“Taylor’s orders, we stay here.” They heard the sound of sonics being fired and Malcolm nodded.

“Everyone secure your work and then get under cover,” he ordered as calmly as possible. Harry helped and then soon they were all under the desks, waiting for the all clear.

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“What have we got?” Taylor demanded as Wash entered his office.

“They’re gone, OTG with rovers and supplies. Everyone one of them was with the sixth pilgrimage,” Alicia Washington answered as she joined him on the balcony.

“All of them?”

“No, a little over half. Your saviour is from the Sixth too,” she added and he blinked but nodded.

“Alright, isolate the rest, we’ll interview individually. I’ll take him first. I want their files gone over too.”

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Harry fell back on his bed, exhausted. He could do with never having a day like it again. He’d been interrogated by a lot worse over the millennia though. The fact that half his pilgrimage had tried to overthrow Taylor’s group and then run when they failed. There was something fishy about this whole thing and it was driving him nuts. He should have done a lot more research on this whole thing back in the future but he hadn’t and it had come back to bite him. There was nothing he could do now except ignore the watchers and go about his life. yes, he had a lot to hide, but it wasn’t what
they would be looking for.

Harry logged in and went to work, ignoring the looks and whispers.

“Dr Potter.”

He looked up to see Malcom at the end of the bench. “Yes?”

Malcolm shifted uncomfortably. Rumours were flying and Commander Taylor wasn’t telling the civilian staff anything.

Harry sighed and put the sample down, turning to face Malcolm and the others. “I came to Terra Nova because I was recruited to work here. I don’t know anything about a plot or why the others came. So, we good?” he asked and several of his colleagues nodded slowly.

“Sorry.” Malcom offered.

“Not needed, after the mess of the last week you have a right to be cautious.”

“Lieutenant, can I help you with something?” Harry looked up from the wood he was whittling on his porch.

“We’ve found…something out near the coast. Malcom says you’re the best so you’re coming with us to identify it,” Wash answered and Harry nodded, putting the wood aside.

“I assume you mean a dinosaur or plant. How long?”
“Dinosaur. Four days. Be at the gate in an hour.”

“I’ll be there.” He went in to pack what he needed and then headed for the lab for portable equipment, easily making the deadline. He got in the Rover with Wash and two soldiers and they headed out towards the coast.

Harry moved to the decomposed body and went to work scanning the remains for data. “Definitely not a Carnotarus, too big,” he muttered.

“Empirosaur?” Wash asked and he shook his head.

“No sail,” he answered absently. “Any other remains like this ever seen?”

“No, none we’ve found anyway.”

“it’s not surprising, do you know how many large carnivorous dinosaurs lived during this time period?”

“You mean there are predators out there we haven’t seen?” Riley asked and he nodded at the young soldier.

“Just be glad we missed the Triassic and Jurassic and only have to deal with one period of dinosaurs…. of course, they spent those time periods getting bigger and bader so…” he shrugged. He checked the scanner and sighed. “Well it looks like this is a juvenile.”

“They get bigger? Is it a t-rex?” Bracco asked, hand on his weapon as he scanned the tree line.

“Bone structure is off for a t-rex though I wouldn’t be surprised if we run into one of those one day.”

“Wonderful.” Wash spread her men out a bit more. “Smell doesn’t bother you?” she asked curiously and Harry shrugged.

“Just because I trained with fossils…” he shook his head. “I was in Detroit in 2137,” he pointed out.
“I’ve smelt worse.”

“I see.” She’d forgotten that was in his file.

Harry looked over the scan data and pulled up the fossil record date from the correct time period. There was a possibility he wouldn’t find a match, after all most of the dinosaurs’ terra Nova ran into weren’t in the fossil record from the future. “Oh dear.” But this one was in the record.

“Doctor?”

“Giganotosaurus,” he answered and she frowned.

“Is that bad?”

“A predator bigger than even t-Rex? I should think so. And since the wounds seem to have been made…” he looked up and froze as he stared at the massive head above her. “Don’t move,” he hissed and her eyes widened. “Theory is they are pack hunters,” he muttered even as the soldiers turned to see the two dinosaurs watching them.

“Why aren’t they attacking?”

“Even all of us would be a very small meal, not really worth it so just stay still and don’t shoot,” Harry answered. They sniffed around a little and then withdrew.

“Back to base, now,” Wash ordered and there was no argument as they scrambled to the rovers. “Why now?”

“If their prey migrates they’d follow them. Could be numbers grew to great and they have been pushed out to find new territory…no way to know,” Harry answered, relieved the top predators had left them. They simply hadn’t been worth chasing down.

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“So, we have a new predator moving into the area?” Taylor asked and Wash nodded. “How did the
“Good doctor do out there?”

“Professional and calm, even when facing down two living Giganotosaurus. Said they wouldn’t go after us because we’re too small, unless we made them angry.”

“Sound advice. Best pull back the teams for now, let’s see if they’re staying or passing through.”

“Will do.”

Harry was glad when surveillance was finally stopped on him and the others who hadn’t run off. It was a weight off all their shoulders, especially with the Seventh Pilgrimage arriving and everyone helping them settle into life in Terra Nova. The Giganotosaurus had either moved on or where remaining out of sight which was good since they probably could get past most of the colonies defences due to their sheer size. The only trouble now was when Mira decided to hit their patrols and outposts for supplies.

Of course, with things calming down and preparations under way for the next pilgrimage to arrive was when people started getting sick. All science staff were co-opted to help in the infirmary, tending to the ill or working on figuring out what the disease was and a cure.

“Help me!” a young voice shouted and Harry ran out of the back to find a young girl supporting a man, probably her Father.

Harry moved to take the man from her, getting him onto a bed and activating it, watching the results come in, he had the Fever. “What’s his name?”

“Corporal Thomas Tate.” She answered shakily.

Harry nodded as went about making the man comfortable until a doctor could see him, half wishing he had an MD here so he could miraculously find a cure. “Where’s your Mum?”

“Working.”
“Alright. What’s your name kiddo?”

“Skye.”

“See that office over there? Why don’t you go wait in there, there’s food and drink.” He pointed at his office and she hesitated. “I promise I will call you if anything happens.” That got her to move as a nurse joined him. They got the soldier stable but that was all they could do and they knew it wouldn’t last, they had already lost three people and with the winter really setting in it would only get worse.

Harry sat on his porch sipping a mug of tea, glad to finally be able to relax. It had been called Sincyllic Fever and had claimed almost one hundred lives, including both of young Sky Tate’s parents. The good news was they had come up with a vaccine, the bad news was there was still no cure. The information had been sent to the future with the arrival of the next pilgrimage so from now on all newcomers would be inoculated. Synthesising it here had been difficult but now everyone was inoculated. He looked up at the sound of footsteps and nodded. “Lieutenant.”

“You look half dead,” Wash commented as she joined him and Harry laughed.

“Just glad it’s over. I never want to go through that again…odds are we will though. Human immune system was not meant to deal with Cretaceous germs.” He offered her a mug and she took it.

“You did good work; all the science staff did. We would have lost a lot more if you all hadn’t pitched in.” They drank in silence for a while. “I hear we’re losing you.”

“Just for six months, you’ll probably be glad to be rid of me for a while,” he smirked and she shrugged.

“Try not to get eaten.”

“Definitely. Doesn’t seem a nice way to go. Who knows what well find out there.”

“Excited.”
“Yeah, maybe a little. I’ll miss the comforts of home though, camping…” he mock shuddered and she laughed.

“Good luck out there.” She left and he watched her go, that had been interesting.

Harry pilled his bag down and looked around, happy to be back in the colony, their six-month trip had been extended to eight and it was so nice to be back in civilisation.

“Welcome back.”

“Commander. It’s good to finally be back. We miss anything exciting?”

“Tenth pilgrimage arrived with two stowaways,” Nathaniel answered, grabbing some equipment to carry back to the lab.

“Stowaways?”

“New Doc, Elisabeth Shannon was meant to bring her two kids. Her husband and their third child also came.”

“They broke the population laws and she was still recruited?”

“Malcolm asked for her. Husband was in prison and Hope Plaza told her to leave the little one behind. I can’t blame them for smuggling the girl in, there was no reason to make the doc leave her behind except being petty.”

“If her husband was in prison how did he get here?” Harry asked as he put some equipment away.

“Broke out and then into Hope Plaza.”
“Huh. He locked up?”

“No, he’s a security officer, he was a Chicago cop,” he shrugged at the incredulous look that got. “The two of you have something in common.”

“Oh?”

“He tackled a Sixer trying to kill me.”

“Maybe you should work on not almost getting shot?” Harry grinned and then grabbed his own pack. “I’ll pass my report through Malcolm but I need a shower and then sleep.”

“Get going.”

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When Wash kissed him, he was surprised but he went with it. “What did I do to deserve that?”

“You came back in one piece.” And he had come back at all, they’d stopped surveillance and she’d enjoyed his company but a small voice had still said he would leave, join Mira and the Sixers. She honestly liked him and that was rare for her. She watched him closely and then he grinned and she relaxed.

“Then I better make sure I always do.” He initiated the kiss then.

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When the meteor explosion killed everything in the colony his over-packing came in handy as he had the various parts needed to get things going again, so they didn’t have to rely solely on Boylan. When the Sixers attacked via dinosaur the colony had more security back up than expected and between Shannon, Taylor, Wash and Harry they were stopped from retrieving the box Leah Marcos had originally been sent to retrieve from Mira’s old house.

The next night he and Alicia had their second date, a meal on a blanket under the stars. They were taking things slowly considering how busy they both tended to be.
When Maddy Shannon became suspicious of Doctor Horton Harry and Malcom both helped her reveal him as a fake, without risking her own life in the process.

After that things just kept getting more and more complicated as Harry noticed the return of the watchers on him and the other Sixth Pilgrimage people who hadn’t left. He didn’t ask Alicia about it though, not wanting to put her in a tough spot.

“There’s a mole.” She admitted as they lay in his bed. They hadn’t told anyone yet and wouldn’t with the new suspicions. “I know it isn’t you. Shannon is in charge of the search though.”

“It’s fine. You didn’t have to tell me.”

“I know, but I know you noticed and I didn’t want you to think I thought it was you.”

“It isn’t me.” He promised.

Harry pulled Alicia into an alcove and kissed her deeply. “I have a bad feeling about this, be careful?” he was going with the group to meet the pilgrims to keep more of the actual medical staff in the colony.

“You’re the one going into danger, I just have to keep the colony safe. Be careful.”

“Promise.” He kissed her again. “I love you.” And then he jumped in the Rover and the group headed out.

Harry peered through the scope at the colony, anger burning through him as he saw the Phoenix Group in charge. Alicia was in there somewhere, so were the Shannon’s. “There, movement by the wall.”

Taylor focused on the section. “Right on time,” it would be good to have Wash back as well as the
Shannon’s and he knew Harry would be pleased too. Nether had said anything but he had known Wash a long time, he knew there was something between them. Of course, that was when it all went wrong. The lights went on all through the colony, shouts going up too. They got ready to move out quick, praying the group would make it and then they saw several people running across the open ground. “Where’s Wash?”

“She stayed to buy us time.” Jim answered and harry went back to peering down the scope. The rifle had been cobbled together from one of their tranquilising rifles and would shoot actual bullets instead of using sonics.

“I see her. In front of the gates.” Harry called and Taylor pulled out his night vision glasses. They watched as Lucas yelled at her and then aimed a weapon. Harry took aim right at the man. “Taylor?”

Nathaniel stared at the scene and then nodded. He would always love his son but he could not let this happen. He should be the one to shoot but Harry was better with the rifle, long months having to take out dinosaurs from a great distance in order to get in close and study them while they were asleep. Nathaniel had never trained as a sniper, few of his men had. Harry took the shot and then another even as Wash ran for it.

“Go, I’ll bring her in.” Harry told them and Taylor got everyone moving back to camp, leaving a bike for Harry and Wash.

Wash broke into the trees to find Harry waiting for her, his clothes worn and torn but he was grinning at her and she relaxed a little. He slung the od rifle and got on the bike so she climbed on behind him. “I missed you.” She kissed his throat as he took off.

“I’m just glad you’re alive.” Everyone was glad she was alive when they made it back to camp. Without Lucas, they had a better shot at stopping the group and everyone knew it.

When it came time to cut the connection from the other side Harry was tempted to volunteer but Jim Shannon beat him too it. They sedated a Carno and sent the two through the portal as cargo and then all they could do was wait and hope Jim succeeded and made it back. They’d blown the portal o their end already, meaning the fracture could spit him out anywhere but he eventually stumbled back into camp. They were now on their own, there would be no more pilgrimages or supplies, not until the fracture was found again in the future and they may decide not to try and re-establish contact.

All that was left to do was to retake the Colony and with help from the inside they managed it with a minimum of bloodshed, even as the Phoenix soldiers headed out into the wastes. With everyone pitching in it only took days to clean up and get things running again.
“What happens now?” Harry asked as he stood with Alicia in front of her destroyed house.

“We move on.”

“You could move in,” he offered and she nodded. Life in Terra Nova would never be the same again but they would keep on going.

*Hope you liked. One of two chaps left and then this very long part of the worlds series will be done.*
Harry smiled as he saw the couple a few table away, they were cute. Saint Marie was a beautiful island, why had he only been to the Caribbean once? He’d been there a week, taking advantage of the sun, surf and excellent food. Catherine’s Bar was a very nice place to just sit and unwind, letting the stress of the last few worlds fade away. He bit back a laugh as the man managed to get sauce over his shirt and his date smiled, offering him a napkin to clean up.

“Another drink?”

“Surprise me,” he grinned at the bars owner who smiled back. A few minutes later a blue concoction was put before him and he sat back to enjoy the drink.

“Sir! Sir!”

Harry glanced over as an older man in police blue approached the couple at a good speed.

“What is it Dwayne?” the male of the pair asked even as the woman smiled.

“Sorry to interrupt, but there’s a body.”

“Go Humph, I’ll see you tomorrow,” the woman leant in to kiss him and then the man got up and left with the policeman. Poor guy, it sucked when work interrupted a date.

Of course, just his luck the murder was at his hotel. He walked into the lobby only to spot the officer from before plus another, younger, officer, talking to the staff.
“Ah, excuse me sir, are you staying here?” the older officer called when he spotted him.

“Yes officer, is there a problem?” Harry stayed where he was as the officer approached.

“Officer Myers, Mr?”

“Harry Potter.”

“Ah, an Englishman! Welcome to Saint Marie. Is this your first time on the island?”

“Yes sir. What has happened? You were at the bar, you said something about a body?”

“Ah, yes. There has been a death, at the moment it is not suspicious but we must investigate.”

“Of course, if I can do anything to help please let me know.”

“Just need your whereabouts for today.”

“I was hiking the rainforest this morning, then I spent time at the beach and I was at Catherine’s bar from about five until an hour after you came and got the tall man.”

“Thank you, have a good evening.”

Harry returned to his room and thought nothing more of the incident. Two days later he heard they had arrested someone but he stayed out of it, just enjoying the island. He never realised it was thanks to him they solved the case since his background check had led to a thought for Detective Goodman that broke the case.

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Harry frowned and then pulled over as something tickled his senses. He looked around with a flashlight until he came across a bundle. He knelt down and found a hand knit blanket in pink, heart sinking he opened it to reveal a baby who woke and began crying. He quickly picked her up,
tucking her in his jacket as he searched around for any sign of her parents. Seeing nothing he went back to his car and headed home. He didn’t notice the boy hiding nearby, watching and scared that he had already failed to protect the Princess.

Harry lay the baby on his bed and gently removed the blanket, finding it had a name stitched on. “Emma, what a pretty name. someone obviously loves you.” He scanned her gently and she gurgled, arms waving. He was shocked when the scan came back with magic and a lot of it, some was hers, locked deep within, but the rest was someone else’s. Transportation…little Emma was a very long way from home. “Emma Potter, at least until I find your family.” He conjured a bottle and fed her before putting her to bed. A little magic and legally she was his, her Mother dead.

By the time she was eight he finally had her magic unlocked and began teaching her. She was powerful and her magic was beautiful. Her Patronus was one of the most powerful he had ever seen, it even took the form of his Animagus form which always amused him. Most of the kids he raised, if they had magic, their Patronus took the form of his Animagus form. He didn’t move them from the area figuring if her parents came looking then they would hopefully appear nearby.

When she was ten Harry tracked a massive magically signature to the town of Storybrooke, close by. There was some sort of shield around the town, keeping everyone inside and ensuring no one on the outside noticed the place. Harry sighed as he leant against a tree…Emma’s parents were inside. He could bring the shield down, it was powerful but he was Death’s Marked, question was, should he do it? Magical shields didn’t just appear out of thin air and this one did not feel like it had been made for good. He told Emma of the town, not wanting to keep secrets and while she wanted to know her parents she also knew that magic of that sort would have a price and didn’t want to endanger anyone. She had a good life with Harry, he taught her magic and made sure she had the best schooling available. When she was fifteen disaster struck and Harry was killed in a car accident. She knew he wasn’t really dead, just moved on to the next world, that didn’t stop it from hurting.

Harry had ensured she would be alright, emancipating her in his will and leaving her as his sole heir. She sold the house and got on the bus, travelling America while attending class online. She was seventeen when in Portland she met a guy as he was trying to break into a yellow bug. His name was Neal and she could feel the tiny traces of transport magic on him, just like it had been on her. Almost a year later she gave birth to their son, Harry, and they moved to Boston as a family.

Eleven years later they moved again, to Storybrooke, the town her birth parents lived in. Neal knew, he had eventually told her the truth of his own parentage, and while he wasn’t eager to see his own Father again, which was a possibility in the town, Emma deserved to meet her parents. Breaking the curse, once they worked out what it was, was easy to do and reunite with family, although Neal was very wary of his Father who understood but was overjoyed to meet his daughter-in-law and grandson. Thanks to Emma they found Belle and freed her from where Regina had kept her locked up much to Rumpelstiltskin’s happiness. Snow White and David were also overjoyed to have their daughter and her family back. Emma never told them about Harry, she only ever said she was raised by a loving, now dead, family.
With his son and love at his side there was no reason for Rumpelstiltskin to bring magic to the land and risk them to a magical attack. And a year later he and Belle were blessed with another child, a baby girl. Emma and Neal had a further two children and even Snow and Prince Charming had another, a son. Emma and Rumpelstiltskin had found Regina’s vault and hidden it, returning the hearts within after the curse broke. With memories returned and no magic Regina was little threat, living a cold, lonely life until Lily, Neal and Emma’s daughter, reached out to her. the only magical threat to show up was Peter Pan and Emma dealt with him, without killing her Father-in-law to do so, instead she bound Pan how Harry had taught her so many years ago, ensuring their safety and that of others without anyone dying.

Harry saw two beings, almost human but not quite, struggling and fighting on the river bank so he moved in to quickly yank them apart. As he did a golden ring fell into the grass and he frowned as he felt the evil coming from it. He summoned it and then his eyes turned black as he reached into it and ripped the soul shard out, destroying it totally. The two-river folk ran for it, terrified of the strange man and his powerful magic’s. No one ever believed their story but peace reigned through most of Middle Earth afterwards, Mordor became silent until after many centuries greens things began to grow once again through the land. Eventually Elrond and Gandalf agreed that the One Ring must have finally been destroyed, Galadriel admitted she could see nothing of it in the future. There were still the occasional fight with orcs but nothing like they might have been. The dragon still came to Erebor and the Company went to the Shire for a burglar but Thorin and his nephews survived the trip and Bilbo remained at the mountain, helping the land grow fertile again. Little Frodo was still orphaned and sent to his uncle, growing up beside the children of Kili and Tauriel.

Harry was surprised when he ended up in a familiar town, not so surprised when he saw an orange haired teenager sitting on a familiar river bank. This had to be the boy, all grown up…although this wasn’t the one he had helped save all those years ago but an alternate version of him. “Penny for your thoughts?” he offered as he sat beside the teen who jumped slightly.

“What?” Ichigo looked at the man, a foreigner although his Japanese was flawless.

“It’s a saying, a penny for your thoughts. They seem pretty deep,” Harry shrugged as the skies opened and the rain began, he pulled out an umbrella and used it to keep them both dry. “I’m Harry,” he offered his hand.

Ichigo hesitated but then took it. “Ichigo.”

“Nice to meet you. So, what is wrong? Sometimes having someone to listen can help.”
“You’d think I was crazy,” Ichigo denied, he couldn’t just tell someone what had happened. Who would ever believe him?

“Try me,” he offered seriously. He knew the other Ichigo had been attacked by some sort of ghostly creature and wondered if it had to do with that. He held out his hand and bluebell flames danced over his skin. He closed his fist and the spell ended. “I can believe a lot.”

“Who…. how…” Ichigo tensed, but he couldn’t be a Shinigami or anything, he’d lost all ability to see them or their abilities.

“Relax, I mean you no harm,” Harry soothed. “I am a wizard, what you just saw was magic.”

“Magic?”

“Mmm. There is a hole in your aura though, something was taken from you.”

Ichigo started but then nodded. He didn’t know why but he spilled everything to the stranger who sat and listened quietly. When he was done Harry pulled him to his feet and led him to a small house where he was given hot chocolate and cake as well as dry clothes before being put to bed to sleep and recover from the emotional turmoil. From that day onwards, Ichigo spent all his time not at school at Harry’s where he learnt of magic and millions of worlds, some very similar and others so different nothing was familiar. As his friends and family drifted further away from him he leant on Harry, even knowing he could die and move to a new world any day. He gave up on getting his powers back, learning earth magic from Harry, the kind of magic that did not rely on personal power.

A year after meeting Harry placed a glowing vial in front of him. “What is this?” Ichigo stared at it, able to feel the pure power within.

“A ‘cure’ if you want it. It should give you your powers back in time. It’ll heal any damage down and then gradually increase your spiritual powers again.”

Ichigo stared at the vial, he could have it all back again. He’d never thought he’d miss the voices in his head but he had. If he was healed…how long until Soul Society found out and came looking? He’d have Hollows after him again which would gain their attention.
“Gaining it back gradually plus the magical training you’ve had, you will be able to control and even hide your powers, unlike before,” Harry pointed out, knowing Ichigo would be worried about it.

“Why?”

“Because you deserved the choice. Let’s face it, sooner or later they’re going to come to you to take care of a threat they can’t. Then you’ll owe them for returning your powers,” Harry shrugged and Ichigo nodded. He picked up the vial and downed the contents before going back to finishing his homework.

Three months later he walked into the house and looked at Harry. “There’s a ghost haunting the corner two blocks up,” he stated as calmly as he could and Harry nodded, of course he had known she was there. Even without being Death’s Marked he was a Wizard, able to see ghosts and many other beings.

“Training gets tougher now,” he warned and Ichigo nodded.

Six months later Ichigo started awake, staring at the window as he heard a Hollow scream in the distance but more importantly…he felt the steady presence of the old man in his mind and soul and beyond him the whispers of his inner hollow. Two days after that he kissed Harry who grinned and kissed him back.

When Kūgo appeared Ichigo told Harry who snuck up on the man, kidnapped him and then dosed him with Veritaserum, to Ichigo’s amusement. Learning of his plans Ichigo looked to Harry who hesitated. “I think this is your choice Ichigo, his plan was to steal some of your powers. This Fullbring thing bears some looking into. So, what do we do with him?”

“It sounds like Chad’s powers almost,” Ichigo admitted even as he stared at the once again unconscious man. “How many memories can you wipe or alter?”

“All of them. I could turn him mentally into a baby or make him believe he’s a girl.” Green eyes watched Ichigo closely as the younger male paced.

“Okay…we remove all memory of spiritual things. Let him live as a normal human.”

“And the rest of the group?”
“Same I guess.”

Harry nodded, it was a good compromise and so he went to work wiping and making new memories for the group. They watched as the members moved on with new lives, living happily. Both were surprised there had been no visits from Soul Society or questions from Ichigo’s friends, surely they could sense his returned powers? Ichigo was just happy to not have that stress as they settled in their relationship. His Dad never really commented about the nights he didn’t come home and he knew Karin at least was going to Urahara’s shop fairly regularly.

Of course, it had to be on a night when he was sleeping at home that a stranger appeared on his bed, shocking him, and forcing him to leave his body for the first time outside of the wards of Harry’s home. He triggered the alarm literally tattooed into his skin to let Harry know, even as he made Asguiaro Ebern follow him to a deserted area to fight. Unfortunately the man retreated before Harry arrived and Ichigo was quick to get back in his body. Ichigo left the house and returned with Harry to his, both knowing his ‘vacation’ was over.

Sure enough, two days later Rukia appeared without a gigai, proving that Ichigo had his powers back as he could see her. Ichigo left with her for Soul Society where the war had already begun. Harry remained in the world of the living, keeping an eye on Ichigo’s family and helping from the shadows. He knew things were going badly, he could feel all the ‘death’ and wasn’t that weird, souls dying in another world. Ichigo returned briefly, explaining what had been happening before his Father arrived to explain his mixed heritage, something they had worked out months ago.

“I don’t think we can win this,” Ichigo admitted as Isshin left and Harry grasped his shoulder.

“Never give up Ichigo. I won’t let him win.”

“But then he’d win in a way anyway, at least for me,” admitting it was hard but this was Harry, who knew him better than anyone else.

“Even if I move on, I’ll always be with you,” Harry promised before Ichigo returned to the Soul King’s Palace, not realising Harry was with him.

He stayed in the shadows as Ichigo fought against Yhwach bit stepped in as the being went to absorb Ichigo’s Hollow and Quincy powers. Before he could Harry appeared right in front of Ichigo, protecting him.
“Harry… no….” Ichigo whispered and Harry turned to look at him, eyes already black.

“You’re worth it,” the wizard whispered even as other survivors rushed in, looking to help Ichigo. All they could do was look on as the stranger lifted a hand towards Yhwach, a ring on his hand glowing ominously.

“You cannot stop me.”

“Wanna bet?” Harry smirked, feeling the cold of Death flow through him, reaching for the Quincy Emperor.

“What is this?” he demanded but there was no answer.

Ichigo couldn’t just watch Harry die for them so he grabbed Harry’s hand, his fingers resting over the ring as he willed his own powers to help. He gasped at the drain but held on even as Yhwach screamed, his body disintegrating. Harry and Ichigo collapsed once it was done but Ichigo pulled himself up to lean over his best friend and lover. “Harry?” he whispered. “Please, don’t leave me.”

The Shinigami and Ichigo’s one time close friends could only watch in confusion and awe. They had so many questions.

Green eyes slowly opened and focused on warm amber. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Ichigo echoed, leaning down to kiss him, shocking them all even further. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“Sir yes sir.” Harry grinned as Ichigo helped him up to face the crowd.

“Don’t suppose you can get us home?” Ichigo muttered.

“Sorry. You know the theory.”
“And am barely standing,” Ichigo groaned. “Guess we face the inquisition then.”

“Lived through the Spanish one once, can’t be as bad as that,” Harry offered and Ichigo surprised everyone by laughing. Ichigo reached for any magic, not that there was much, and then he felt Harry reach out to him, letting him tap what magical reserves he had spare, merging the two and they vanished to the watchers’ shock.

They reappeared in Harry’s home and Ichigo got him into bed to sleep and recover but Harry latched onto his wrist when he went to leave. Ichigo hesitated but then nodded and his body floated in, making him shake his head at the waste of power. He got back in and then curled with Harry in the bed. They both slept for over a day, utterly exhausted and then it was time to talk. Ichigo didn’t ow Soul Society anything, his friends were more acquaintances now and his family…. well his Dad definitely didn’t need him and his sisters were growing up, they didn’t need him as much anymore and had the others. So they packed the house, left a letter and then vanished to explore the world. Being a hybrid had the unexpected side effect of extending Ichigo’s life far beyond human norm, he outlived all the others, attending their funerals under glamour. The hardest was when his sisters died within weeks of each other at the respectable age of ninety-three. He had a lot of nieces, nephews, grand and great grands…but to them he was a face in faded photos and a story.

In the end Ichigo lived for two hundred and four years before one day he got up and left his body behind for good. He stayed with Harry another fifty years, after all Harry could still see and even touch him, until Harry died and he watched his body vanish in flames. Only then did he open a Senkaimon, wondering what sort of welcome awaited him, not that he really cared. What could they do to him? He was too powerful for them to hurt anymore and so instead of heading for the thirteen courts he lived in Rukongai, far from the Seireitei and the Shinigami living there. Even after so long there was still damage from the wars so he settled in as a roving healer, someone always willing to lend a hand.

TBC…

Only one more chapter and this arc of Worlds is done.
The small bakery was tucked away in a side street and so never had many customers but that was how the owner preferred it. To find it you had to know where it was or have someone tell you which made his a select clientele, not the rich but those who fell through the cracks. So, when the curious five-year-old stumbled in one day no one raised a fuss. Instead he was helped to a seat by a teenager with a scar across his nose and soon a warm meat pie was in front of the child along with a glass of milk. He reached for them hesitantly, watching the others but no one stopped him from eating.

Iruka backed towards the owner to watch the boy eat, his manners were terrible but the awe on his little face… “He’s making a mess.”

“Messes are easy to clean Iruka-kun.” Harry answered. “One must be taught manners in order to use them.” He moved off to clean a now empty table, leaving the teen to think things through. When he saw the boy was done eating he took out a piece of treacle tart and placed it before him, smiling softly at how wide blue eyes went. “Eat up,” He ruffled wild blonde locks before moving away. It wasn’t surprising that the boy vanished once the food was gone. And it wasn’t like he couldn’t afford to cover the meal for the poor kid, he didn’t need the bakery’s income after all. Iruka left soon after to train, he helped out in the afternoons when he didn’t have missions since every penny helped when you were an orphan.

Harry was not at all surprised when the child appeared again a few days later. He simply picked the boy up and dropped him down on one of the counter stools before putting a plate in front of him.

“Thank you.” The kid whispered and Harry smiled.

“Eat up you’re skin and bones.” Looked like he needed to nudge someone into looking at the orphanage. He was enjoying a quiet life, instead of intervening in things himself he watched the village carefully, working behind the scenes to make life better for people. He knew what the boy held within him, how could he not when an aspect of Death itself had been used to seal the fox?
He’d arrived only weeks after the event so he hadn’t been meant to interfere there. He glanced up and smiled at the teenager who entered. “Good day Itachi-kun,” he greeted and then went to retrieve the boys usual order.

Itachi took his normal stool at the bar and ate quietly after glancing over at the blonde child. He felt…. lost, whenever he felt like that he came to the bakery. It was peaceful and always felt safe which was ridiculous considering the owner was a civilian. He wanted to leave ANBU but he was a Captain and his Father would never allow him to resign.

Harry wandered the quiet streets, enjoying the peace of the night. No dogs barked here, too well trained to avoid alarming the ninja. He had been taking night time walks for years, the police force and ninja were used to him wandering the dark so took no notice of him anymore. He had wandered into the clan compound area for a change to his own surprise, he usually avoided the area. But there was something…a small noise had him looking up at the roof where he saw a dark shadow moving, something tossed over its shoulder. He hesitated, there may be nothing wrong, ninja business and yet…he silently vanished, reappearing on another roof to take a closer look. He found a man with a wriggling bundle over one shoulder. He wordlessly sent up red sparks, just like in a certain maze, and then a wave of magic knocked the man out even as his bundle was caught and gently set down. Harry became invisible and watched as the police and members of the Hyuuga appeared. He left them to it and returned home to sleep.

Harry stared out the window of his apartment above his bakery, something was wrong, he just didn’t know what. He felt the wards trigger downstairs, someone had broken in. He headed down to find Itachi carrying a smaller boy in his arms. “Upstairs,” he called and Itachi followed him up, sitting on the couch with the boy cradled close. “What happened? Does he need medical help?”

“Sasuke is unconscious, not hurt,” Itachi didn’t even know why he was there, why he had run from the clan and brought Sasuke with him. What they were planning… he couldn’t let his innocent brother get caught up in it. He started but accepted the mug as it was held out, sipping the hot chocolate and feeling better as he did. “I’m sorry for just coming here.”

“Don’t be, I made this place to be a sanctuary for those needing it, you obviously need it. No one meaning harm can enter,” he promised before going to make up the spare bedroom. Two days later Itachi went to the Hokage with what he knew.

Three weeks later the Uchiha clan was significantly smaller and Harry’s bakery had gained a lot of new visitors. Itachi and Sasuke never left, staying in what had been the spare bedroom. Sasuke was soon friends with the other frequent visitor, Naruto, the young Uchiha making it clear to others the once outcast orphan now had a friend and defender his own age much to Naruto’s awe.
Harry never worked openly among the ninja, but often all that was needed was a nudge for things to work out. A word to Iruka had him watching his childhood friend closer, seeing how he really was, and when he was the sole survivor of his team Iruka took those observations to the Hokage. Mizuki was put under watch and eventually arrested soon after they had become Academy teachers. The amusing thing was that the observant ninja never noticed Harry’s influence, but he preferred it that way. His wards were only ever really tested the once when a man named Danzo tried to enter when Sasuke and Naruto were eating together in the bakery. The man was bounced back, memory of the bakery and his reason for seeking it out wiped and then was teleported outside the village into the middle of a nasty swamp.

When the boys graduated they were put on the same team because they worked so well together and their skills complimented each other. They were an obvious front-line team in the making, both powerful and skilled in blowing things up. So they were made a team with Hatake Kakashi as the leader and Haruna Sakura as their third, the girl being nudged towards healing or Genjutsu to round out the teams abilities. Harry watched over them from the shadows as they grew and then attended the chunin exams… he was there when Orochimaru attacked, stopping the attack dead in its tracks as the kids ran off. He was very well versed in dealing with immortality seeking snakes so the ninja was rather quickly dealt with and without him the planned invasion fell through.

Harry finally stepped forward when Pain invaded, the wards he’d imbedded into the village walls over the years activating to protect those within. He fought off Akatsuki practically single handed to the shock off all except Naruto who watched with a grin before joining him. The Kyuubi had told him there was something odd about Harry, Death itself lingered around him, making the fox wary of him. With Naruto joining in so did his team until the only one left was Tobi…who shocked Kakashi with his true identity. He told of his plan for the world which had Harry shaking his head, why was it those who destroyed always saw themselves as bring a better world?

Harry never got to see Obito’s death, a stray jutsu overwhelming the wards and he stepped in to save a group of civilians, taking the hit for them. Naruto and Sasuke defeated Tobi in the end, saving the village.

Harry got to his feet and looked around, he knew this place alright. Tom Riddles grave was missing… and the Manor was occupied, same with the nearby Gaunt Shack. He vanished from sight and headed for the Manor, feeling something in the air. He found the Riddle’s sitting down to dinner and then the doors opened and Tom Riddle Jnr walked in, wand against his thigh. He knew what had happened here in his world and he would not allow it, Tom Riddle may be a horrible person for abandoning his son but he would not allow them to be killed to create a Horcrux. A quick spell had the young wizard unconscious and then he wiped the mundanes memories. He searched Riddle and found the Gaunt Ring, the Resurrection stone gleaming. He took a deep breath and took the Ring, gasping as it joined with the one on his finger that had been cracked, fusing and repairing before his
eyes. He shook it off and oblviated Tom of all knowledge of Horcruxes before compelling him to go to the Ministry and confess his crimes. He then sent him to London before warding the manor, just to be safe.

He returned to the graveyard, pondering what to do next when the world warped and he was standing in an unending void as someone clapped. “Death,” he whispered as the spectre appeared before him.

“Congratulations my Marked…now Master of Death.”

“That was what this was about wasn’t it? My claiming the Hallows.”

“In part, you have finally completed your destiny in Mastering all three Hallows. Your debt to Us is paid in full.”

Harry blinked…. paid…. “I’m free?”

“Yes Master, you may return to your Samuel now.”

“How long have I been gone?”

“Only a few years have passed for your family and friends. Those years have not been easy and you are needed. Be ready.”

At the warning, he called up his armoured clothing from Asgard, it was bullet proof and magic proof, the two main threats in Sam’s world. Then the world was twisting and shifting and he braced himself even as a room appeared around him. Harry blinked and then instantly drew Gryffindor’s sword, slicing through the pouncing hellhound. He lashed out magically, sending the rest flying back. He planted himself between the demons and their target before glancing back to see who he was protecting only for greens eyes to meet in shock.

“Harry?” Dean whispered, it couldn’t be, Harry was dead but…. this man looked like Harry, only older.
Sam gasped as he heard Dean, it wasn’t possible. Dean was obviously still seeing things. But then the demons holding him were sent flying and a hand was being held out to him. He took it and was helped to his feet only to stare down into familiar eyes. “Harry?” He choked and Harry stared at him hard before slowly smiling.

“Sam.” He stepped closer and kissed him before turning back to the demons and attacking. The brothers watched in awe as Harry tore through them. Lilith and Ruby quickly ran for it, leaving their minions to face one pissed off wizard.

Dean leant against Sam, both in shock at the massive turn of events. “How?”

“It’s him Dean.” Sam whispered. He knew it couldn’t be and yet it was Harry. He just knew it, the pain in his chest finally gone. Finally, the room was empty except the three of them and the sword vanished. The three just stared at each other in silence before Sam strode over and wrapped his arms around Harry, hugging him tightly before kissing him.

Eventually Harry pulled back and gently stroked Sam’s cheek. “I’ve missed you so much.” This was really his Sam, he was home, finally.

“How…I don’t…it’s really you?”

“It’s me Sam, I’m home.”

“How?” Dean demanded and Harry smiled at him.

“It’s a very long story.”

“How long?” Sam asked as he took in the older features, though not much older.

“Fifteen thousand years, give or take. Where are Jim and Bobby?”

“Outside, keeping reinforcements away,” Dean answered, still wary.
“Then let’s surprise them.” Harry grinned, armour melting away to storage, leaving him in comfortable jeans, green t-shirt and black leather jacket. He was finally home! He’d ask what had been going on later, obviously what had been happening was important for Death to have warned him before sending him.

_The End._

_I will do one more story focused on their reunion and stuff at some point._

Chapter End Notes

Final chapter of this story

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