



Prelude

2 November, 2059

The lights scalded my borrowed eyes. I was still inside a different body, standing on the same floor, but everything had changed.

There was a smile on his lips. That old gleam in his eye, like I'd just brought him good news from the auction house. He wore a black waistcoat embroidered with interlinked gold anchors, and a scarlet cravat was tied at his throat. One silk-clad hand grasped an ebony cane.

'I see you have mastered possession at a distance,' he said. 'You *are* full of surprises.'

The cane's handle was porcelain, shaped like the head of a white horse.

'I believe,' Nashira said, her voice soft, 'that you are already acquainted with my new Grand Overseer.'

I let out my first breath since laying eyes on him.

He had tried to stop me. The scheming worm had silenced me for weeks, kept me from telling the world about the existence of the Rephaim. Yet here he was, looking as easy with them as he was with his own shadow.

'Oh, dear. Have you swallowed that pilfered tongue?' Jaxon let out a deep laugh. 'Yes, Paige, I am here, with the Rephaim! In the Archon, wearing the anchor! Are you aghast? Are you oh-so-scandalised? Is this all a terrible *shock* to your fragile sensibilities?'

‘Why?’ I whispered. ‘Why the hell are you here, Jaxon?’

‘Oh, as if I had a choice. With you as Underqueen, my beloved syndicate is doomed to self-destruction. Consequently, I have decided to return to my roots.’

‘Your roots?’

His smile widened.

‘You have chosen the wrong side. Join this one, darling,’ he continued, as if I hadn’t spoken. ‘I can’t tell you how it hurts me to see you in the pocket of those despicable Rephaim who call themselves *Ranthen*. Unlike the Rag and Bone Man, I have always believed you could be saved from their indoctrination. From Arcturus’s . . . seduction. I thought you had more sense than to blindly obey the man who was once your master.’

I stared at him coolly. ‘You’re asking me to do that now.’

‘Touché.’ A fresh bruise cast a shadow on his cheekbone. ‘To Terebellum Sheratan, you are a convenient pawn in an age-old game. Arcturus Mesarthim is nothing but her lure. Her bait. He took you under his wing in the penal colony on her orders, to entice you into the Ranthen’s net. And you, my darling – you fell for it . . . and everyone but you can see it.’

A chill warned me that something was wrong. Elsewhere in the citadel, someone had touched my body.

‘This is a fight you cannot win. Don’t mutilate the syndicate, O my lovely,’ he purred. ‘It was never meant as a weapon of war, and you were never meant to rule. Step back from the brink. All any of us in the Archon want is to protect you – you, and the wonder of your gift. If we must pull off your wings to stop you casting yourself into the fire, so be it.’ His pale hand reached out. ‘Come to us, Paige. Come to me. All this can be avoided.’

He had shocked me. We both knew it. If he thought he could scare me, he would have to try harder.

Another shiver. I felt myself falling out of the stranger’s dreamscape, back into the *ether’s embrace*.

‘I’d rather burn,’ I said.

My brain was liquid, slithering out through my nose and down my front. I had to get out, get air into my lungs . . .

A hand took hold of my arm, but my skin was taut with goose-flesh, excruciatingly sensitive. I clawed off the oxygen mask, got the door open, and spilled out of the car in a jumble of limbs, gasping. The jolt peeled open the stitches in my side, wetting my shirt.

All of my composure fell apart. Jaxon was many things, but I couldn't believe that he had gone to Scion. He had made his career out of living in their shadow, not their arms.

My wounds from the scrimmage flared, white-hot in my torso, deep and throbbing in my back. I pitched into the night, down the moss-slick steps to the Thames, and fell to my knees at the water's edge, where I gripped my head between my hands and cursed my own stupidity. How, *how* could I have not foreseen this? There must have been some clue. Now he would be our most formidable enemy, a vital asset to the anchor.

I will find other allies, he had told me after the scrimmage. *Be warned: you have not seen the last of me.*

I should have killed him in the Rose Ring. The blade had been against his throat, but I'd been too weak to cut.

A very old ally, Nashira had said. *One who returned to me . . . after twenty long years of estrangement . . .*

A shout in the distance stopped time, or started it again. I hunched over the water, holding myself.

I have decided to return to my roots.

'No,' I breathed. 'No, not you. Not you . . .'

He had been standing so comfortably alongside the Sargas. Not like someone who had only laid eyes on them for the first time a few hours ago. And there were other things I had brushed off, that I hadn't seen from behind the blindfold. He had always been wealthier than other mime-lords. Absinthe alone cost a fortune on the black market, and he drank it almost nightly. How had he leapt from pauper to prince? Surely not just from his writing; there was no money in pamphlets. Then there was the fact that he had spear-headed my rescue from the colony with no exit plan – senseless. It wasn't in his nature to go blindly into anything. But if he had left the colony once before . . . if he had *known* there was a way out – or if the Sargas had *allowed* him to take me away . . .

An old ally. Twenty long years. Those were the only words I needed to work out who Jaxon Hall had once been, and who he was. I had no absolute proof, but I knew – I knew, in my heart, that my instinct was right.

He wasn't just a traitor. He was *the* traitor.

The man who had betrayed the Ranthen twenty years ago to buy his freedom from the Rephaim.

The man who had left the scars on Warden's back.

The man who was responsible for the deaths of every prisoner he had left behind in the colony.

And I had been his mollisher. His right hand.

The sound of footsteps broke through the white noise in my ears. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Warden sink into a crouch beside me.

I had to tell him. I couldn't carry this knowledge alone.

'I know who betrayed you twenty years ago,' I said. 'I know who gave you the scars.'

Silence. I realised I was shivering.

'It is not safe out here,' Warden finally said. 'We can discuss this at the music hall.'

The thoughts tangled like barbed wire in my head. I was everybody's puppet, caught in a thousand strings.

Nick ran to the railings above us. 'Vigiles,' he shouted. 'Warden, bring her up here!'

Warden stayed where he was. I was afraid he would lack the ability to read my expression – that I might have to say the name myself – but as the moments ticked past, I watched it dawn on him, just as it had on me. A fire entered his eyes.

'Jaxon.'