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**Date Unknown**

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The battle raged about him, fires burning unchecked everywhere, the dead and dying littered the ground. Explosions and the resounding warcries of the combatants echoed in the massive chamber; yet he heard none of it.

Like a mountain of battered steel, he stood frozen, unyielding and unmovable. Dents and scorch marks marred every inch of his dark power armor, and blood dripped from the jagged rents; yet he felt none of it.

The tides of the battle shifted back and forth, commands were screamed across the entirety of the great melee. Victory or defeat was balanced on a knife’s edge; yet he knew none of it.

Before him stood that which had haunted him all of his life; from ten meters away he could clearly see those eyes. He knew them well, large and deep set, with dark black centers; eyes filled with nothing but anger and hatred. They were the eyes that he had seen in more nightmares than he cared to remember; tracking and tormenting him, filling him with dread throughout his young life. They were always there just beyond his awakened mind too, ready to intrude in moments of weakness or confusion.

It was also those eyes that had unknowingly helped to mold him into the man that he was today. His will to endure, his determination to succeed, his steadiness in calamity; all could be directly attributed to that haunting. Today he was whole; that part which has been missing for many of those years was finally returned to him. It was what would fuel his anger, energize his core, and carry him to what… victory or peace? Both, for in one, he would finally be able to realize the other. Today, yes today, was the day he was going to close those dreadful eyes forever.

He grimaced fiercely from his many wounds, and with a conscious effort of will, he pushed away the pain. He gripped the twin power blades tightly as he released the burning fires of wrath that were finally raging inside of him. He triggered his Talent again, scorching hot adrenaline surged through his tired and wounded body. With renewed, almost berserk-like power, he surged forward as a fierce scream was torn from his throat.

Finally… Today was the day…

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**CHAPTER ONE**

**2844 A.D.**

**Haldane Manor, Dumas System, Haldane Hold**

The bells sounded, and for the life of him, Kertis wanted nothing more than to run and hide behind his father’s legs. Instead, he stood, stiff and regal at his father’s side. He was trying his hardest to appear to have what his mother had called “Gravitas.” “Gravitas demands respect and instills confidence in those around you,” she had instructed him the other day during one of his lessons. “Gravitas is the opposite of doubt, and a Sovereign of Haldane never *ever* appears doubtful.” Kertis didn’t really know what respect or doubt were. Few seven-year-olds did, but he knew one was good, and the other was bad. So instead, he just watched his father closely and tried his best to do everything he saw him do. He knew his mother, standing on the other side of his father, would be watching him, somehow. Though she never seemed to be looking directly at him when they stood in line and acted with “Gravitas,” she always seemed to know everything he did.

Across from him, two people entered the room and bowed deeply to the Haldane Sovereign and his family. Kertis knew that bowing deeply like that was a sign of respect, but he didn’t like it very much; you could never see someone’s eyes when they bent down like that. He preferred to see a person’s eyes; Colder, another of his instructors, had told him that the eyes were the doors to the soul. Kertis didn’t know about that either, but he could always tell if someone was his friend or not by looking at their eyes.

“Senior General Kilgore,” his father said in greeting. Tall and fair, Arthoris Haldane, at a different time and in a different place, could easily be mistaken for a fierce Sea-Reaver. “Welcome to Haldane Manor.” Kertis’ father seemed really pleased to meet this man, and when the senior officer finally looked at Kertis, he knew why. This man was honest and loyal, a good man, a friend.

“Thank you, my Sovereign,” he had a scar on his left cheek that made him look almost evil, but somehow Kertis knew better. His hair was cut short in the modern military style and was all steel gray.

“I am so glad you….” Kertis lost track of all the words that followed between the men as he then saw the second visitor in the room. She was standing behind the first man’s legs and was peering shyly around them. Kertis saw her eyes at the same time she saw his, and it was all he could do to keep Gravitas. He had no sisters, and little girls usually scared him speechless. In an instant, he knew this pretty little girl would be much, much better than a friend; she would be his very BEST friend.

She smiled at him, and even in the faint light of the greeting hall, her bright green eyes seemed to sparkle like stars. For a second, Kertis allowed the Gravitas to slip away, and he smiled back hesitantly.

“—and this is my daughter Nadia Victoria.” With a gentle nudge, he brought the little girl to his side and presented her to the Sovereign’s family. She was dressed in a crisply tailored burgundy colored uniform, the exact duplicate of Kertis’ own except with a pleated skirt instead of pants.

Suddenly his mother was at his side. “She is adorable, Sten.” She placed her hands on his small shoulders. “This is our son, Kertis Andor,” she said proudly, and then very un-gravitasly crushed him in a hug. Also tall and regal like her husband, Loraine Devereaux instead had the look and dark coloring of her long-ago Corsican ancestry.

“Mom—” he complained and slightly pushed himself away with his elbow.

That seemed to get everyone laughing, and in the next instant, everyone was walking down the corridor to the informal dining hall. Kertis found himself walking next to Nadia, and they both said “Hi” at the same time.

“I have a cool bug collection,” Kertis told her. “Do ya wanna see it?”

“Definitely,” she nodded vigorously. “But first, I think our parents are going to make us eat.”

“Boring,” they both said together again and giggled as they enjoyed their own private little joke.

Loraine Devereaux-Haldane walked behind her son and couldn’t help but smile at the two children talking to each other. It was difficult finding other children Kertis could interact with in the Manor, and it wasn’t just because of his place in the Hold. Little Kertis tended to take one look at someone and immediately make up his mind whether he wanted anything to do with them or not. Couple that with his uncanny ability to know if someone was lying to him, and it drastically narrowed down the list of prospective playmates. Arthoris’ bodyguard, Cali, believed Kertis was Gifted with Talent, and she had her husband halfway convinced of the possibility. But Loraine put a firm, and loud, end to that argument; she downright refused to have her little boy tested by some quack doctor, or any of the other, too numerous, “spook” organizations. If and when Kertis came into any Talents, like the Haldane are prone to do, he would be taken to the Sisterhood for testing.

Dinner went well, and Loraine was content to allow her husband and Stennor Kilgore to carry most of the conversation together; she focused on trying to get the two little ones to eat something green. She tried to guess whom it was that had the more animated conversation during dinner, and she believed it was probably Kertis and Nadia. She had never seen her usually hesitant and cautious child take to anyone so quickly.

Loraine’s head shot up when she heard the word “Evertine” spoken by her husband, and she cleared her throat elegantly. “Art, my love,” she smiled beautifully. “Business should not be discussed in the Dining Hall.”

The Sovereign of Haldane paused and looked quickly about the large hall. Two attendants stood on either side of the swinging doorway to the kitchen, and two guards stood motionless at the glass windows covering the far wall. The staff and guard detail of the Manor went through the most vigorous screening in all the Imperium; the Sovereign trusted them implicitly. Nevertheless, he smiled brightly at his beautiful wife and nodded his head in agreement. “You are quite right, dear. Very improper of me….” He stood, and General Kilgore stood with him. “My friend, I’m sure you had a long trip…” he paused and seemed to change his mind, “but if you would, I have an excellent Alutonen Whiskey that needs sampling in my study.”

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The best friends played games for hours and ran around the expansive manor, exploring every nook and cranny of the centuries-old structure. Security and staff would smile and shake their heads whenever they saw the duo run or skip by. Kertis could never catch Nadia if she didn't want him to; she was two years older and with her longer legs she was much taller. She constantly had to slow up to occasionally give him even a chance to win a race. He knew she was faster, and he knew she would slow up once in a while for him to catch up. Well, he thought to himself, that’s what friends should do for each other, isn’t it? On the other hand, even at seven years old, Kertis had more mass than Nadia and was already far stronger than she was. Using his greater strength against her never even entered into the young boy’s mind.

He showed her all the secrets he knew of the manor, which was a manor house in name only. When Dumas Prime was first settled 700 years ago, it was a manor house, complete with a barnyard and a hen house. Since that time, the Manor had grown into a vast, sprawling fortress-complex of the immense Haldane Holdings. Elegant white spires and turrets reached into the clear blue sky circling around the main central spire that rose 600 meters above the buildings below. Some estimated that the Haldane was the leading Hold in the Imperium, but at least three other Holds vied for that distinction, and another five or six had some claim to one supremacy or other. But to two young kids, such concerns were still many years away, even as everyone tried to teach them otherwise.

For the next seven days the two were inseparable; Kertis was knocking on the Kilgore rooms with the early dawn, asking if Nadia could come out to play well before school started. When first receiving their Hold Charter, Farrell Haldane, Kertis’ far distant grandfather, had seen education as the great equalizer, the one thing that leveled every playing field. “An educated man or woman is well equipped to handle and balance the inequities of today’s Imperium,” was the Founder’s famous quote. Ten years of free education was required on all Haldane planets, and sixteen strongly encouraged. There were two things that the citizens of Haldane were fanatical about, education and eliminating corruption. Kertis and Nadia were early in what would be many more years of learning.

“The Emperor Gilroy the Unchained established the Holdings Charter in 2575 to relieve the bureaucratic pressure on the Imperium infrastructure. Fully one-third of all inhabited planets were subdivided into ruling Holds to better administer the exploding population galaxy-wide.” Colder Gaines took a deep breath before continuing on with his lecture; he was a very busy man but often made time as a guest teacher. The faint whirl of the processors implanted in the back of his head was distracting for the little Kilgore, as she had never met a Datra-Superior before. “The Holds have been a successful and loyal part of the Imperium ever since, with full representation in the Emperor’s Senate. There are extensive benefits to being a member of a Hold: central governance is closer, more responsive and accountable; taxes are collected and spent on a local planetary basis—”

“Is that why people from the Imperium call us Charter-scum?” Trevor, one of Kertis’ distant cousins and a few years older than even Nadia, asked. “I have heard the term used during a news feed on a Video Channel.” The last class of the day was always a joint lecture with all sixteen students of various ages sitting together. The class was intended to have real-life applications, and many various instructors were brought in with diverse backgrounds. The older students usually ignored the younger ones like Kertis and Nadia in the typical arrogance of youth.

“We are all of the Imperium, Trevor. Every member of the Hold is first and foremost a citizen of the Imperium.” All of the desks in the room were occupied, and three-dimensional keypads and bright holo-screens floated before the students, showing the partial history of humanity. Aside from two things, the classroom looked very much like any other would from any age in the past; the glow of the modern reading and communication devices, and the amount of planetary posters and diagrams hanging on the walls. Astronomy was now a core subject, right alongside reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Kertis raised his hand before asking, “Then why do they hate us so much?”

“*They* do not hate us any more than we hate *them.*” Anthalia Devereaux said, as she entered the classroom and nodded in greeting to Colder. The Datra bowed to Kertis’ grandmother and stepped aside as he yielded the lecture floor to the older academia. “Do you hate anyone? Miss—?” She looked at Kertis’ friend and paused, waiting for the name to be supplied.

“Nadia.” She smiled with uncertainty at the stern-looking woman. She was intimidating, despite the smile on her face. “Nadia Kilgore. I do not hate anyone.”

“You see,” the tall, elegant woman confirmed with a gesture. “It can be assumed by someone living in an Imperium-governed world that people from a Hold world have nothing but hatred for them; the same can be true in reverse. In every society, there is a vocal minority that functions disproportionately with the actual size and influence they actually have, or deserve.” She paused and looked at her grandson to see if he was understanding what she was saying. “Despite all the centuries of human development, hatred and bigotry are still with us today; some people think it is their universally appointed right to spread these corrosive assumptions.” Anthalia again looked at Nadia. She had actually come to this classroom to see her grandson’s little friend everyone was talking about. “Is it, Nadia? Is it someone’s right to hate?”

Nadia sat back in her chair and folded her arms; she didn’t like being singled out like this in class. Without knowing who this new teacher was, she knew instinctively that she was being tested and evaluated at the same time. “Hate is an emotion. How can you say someone is wrong for the way they feel?” Her father had told her if you don’t know the answer to a difficult question, ask another question instead.

“Very good!” Anthalia startled everyone as she clapped her hands together. “A long time ago, a wise judge named Louis Brandeis said, ‘*the greatest danger to liberty is for people to do nothing.’* When we hear hatred and bigotry, we must address it immediately; it must be countered with wisdom and understanding. It cannot be allowed to be accepted as the norm in society; it is like cancer, it festers and corrupts. We cannot make someone feel a certain way, and when they spew out the hatred they are feeling, we cannot stop them from that either.”

“So you can say anything you want, no matter the consequences?” Trevor, being a teenager already, was following the socio-political lesson a little better.

She clapped her hands together again. “And that is the answer,” she said, confusing them all. “Consequences are actions, not words. Someone cannot be punished for what they say; that is still a protected right. What they can be held accountable for are any actions that are caused by their words.” Anthalia saw that she had lost the young students with her explanation of freedom of speech. She was saved from the need for further explanation when the hour chimed on every holo-screen in the classroom, signaling the end of the school day.

All the students sat patiently, as was expected of them. Anthalia could not help but smile at the promising future leaders of the Haldane Hold. “We will continue this discussion tomorrow; you are dismissed.”

For the rest of that day, they finished going over Kertis’ last box of dead bugs when Nadia put it aside and looked at Kertis seriously. He looked into her brilliant green eyes and felt the same friendship he had the first time. Only once before did he look at someone and feel a change in their eyes. From one instant to the next he remembered seeing the change. Big Paul Dondey had been Kertis’ friend one day, and then, all of a sudden, after Kertis had beaten him at checkers, he was not. At the time he didn’t understand what had happened to change Big Paul as Kertis was not jealous by nature. The two boys had argued and fought over everything for the next few hours, to Kertis’ confusion, until Big Paul finally turned around and pushed Kertis to the ground. That was also the last time he ever saw Big Paul.

“Kert.” She always called him Kert. “My Dad says we’re leaving tomorrow morning,” she said slowly.

Kertis stopped immediately and turned towards her. “Where are you going?”

“Some place your Dad wants my Dad to go to fix something. A place called Evermore or Everless or Ever-something.”

“Evertine,” Kertis corrected her. Once he heard a name, he never forgot it, and he had heard his father talking about problems at a place called Evertine many times. “They found humans already living there, but they call themselves the Farlewden and really don’t seem like us at all.”

“Okay, so, wherever that is.” Nadia was sharp for her age, but universal geography did not yet spark her interest.

“It’s eleven Jump points away from here, the most distant of all Haldane Holdings.” And Kertis could name every single Holding from memory. Dumas, Bohr, Tresendt, Evertine, and the newest, Middenlore, he ran through them in his head.

“That sounds far away.”

“It is,” he was making himself sad thinking of not seeing his new bestest friend again. He counted slowly on his fingers for a second. He wanted to impress his friend with how much he knew. “It would take 27 days to get there, but my Dad says it would actually be 81 days. I don’t really understand the difference.”

“Don’t worry,” she smiled cheerfully, and Kertis immediately found his sadness lifted away somehow. “We will see each other again; best friends always get back together.” She was right, and somehow he knew she was telling the truth; it was like when he knew if someone was a friend or not. He could just tell…

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That night his mom *and* his dad tucked him into his bed; it wasn’t that his dad was never there at bedtime, just far less often than his mom. His dad, the Sovereign of Haldane, kissed his forehead goodnight, and his mom said the same thing she always did as she kissed him and turned out the lights, “Dream of the stars, sweetheart.”

But it wasn’t stars in his dreams that night but an old and scary face that had him tossing and turning. In his idyllic, young life, he had never had a real nightmare before. A scarred and skeletal head was floating off in the distance, and even from far away Kertis could see the eyes. The eyes were large and centered with blackness, blood red veins ran all through them. He usually loved looking into people’s eyes, but these eyes filled him with fear. The floating head darted here and there, moving this way and that, and Kertis knew it was looking for him. He wanted to run away, to hide somewhere safe; he could not move, not understanding what frozen in fear was. Maybe if he kept real still and real quiet, it would not find him and then decide to leave. It did seem to be moving further and further away from him. But then Kertis felt a stabbing pain in his head, and he could not help but cry out. The decaying head became very still and slowly turned, the blood-filled eyes focused on Kertis. With a hideous shriek, it was hurtling towards him. The nightmare head smiled evilly as it got nearer and nearer. Sharp jagged teeth seemed ready to tear into him. Terror gripped Kertis firmly, and with a sudden scream he was sitting up in his bed.

Still in a panic, he looked desperately about his room, but as he saw nothing in the dim light, his breathing and his rapidly beating heart slowly began to ease. His nightclothes were sticking to him as he realized he was completely soaking wet with sweat. Already the bad dream was starting to fade from his memory when there was a loud thump against his wall, quickly followed by another, louder thump. Kertis rolled out of his bed, carefully avoiding the toy castle sitting on the floor, and walked over to the door to his room. His mom and dad slept in the room right next to him, and in his current confusion he really wanted his mother.

With a wave of his hand the door slid open, and little Kertis was momentarily blinded by the bright light of the hallway. He rubbed at his big blue eyes for a second, but another really loud crash from his parents’ room piqued his interest. Scratching at his thick brown hair with both hands, he started up the hallway to his parents’ room. Down at the far end he could see the two guards that always stood there, but now they were lying on the floor sleeping, and he knew his father would be very mad at them. He stopped in front of his parents’ door and listened for a second, and then he heard his mother scream out, “Art!”

What were they doing in there? Kertis thought to himself as he waved the door to his parents’ bedroom open.

The room was destroyed, but the first thing he saw was his mother backed up against the wall with a long knife in each hand, and his father lying on the floor closer to the door. They were in their nightclothes as well, but they seemed to be torn and ruined. Something bounced against the wall closer to Kertis, and with confusion he saw that it had his father’s face on it. He heard his mother gasp as she saw her little son standing there. “God no, Kertis, run!” But then there also came a familiar shriek that Kertis had heard before in his nightmare.

At first, all he saw was a mass of billowing darkness filling half the room, but he quickly saw it for what it actually was. A tall thin man dressed in black robes, and when he turned briefly as the door opened, Kertis had seen that skeletal head before. It was the head that had been looking for him in his dream, and just like before, it smiled evilly at him with sharp, jagged teeth.

In his dream his mother had not been there, and when her assailant briefly turned away, with a savage scream, she launched herself at the monster. With blinding speed, she struck high and low, and both of the knives tore into the black-robed figure. Piercing shrieks again came from the throat of the monster, but this time they were from pain. Hands that each ended in long jagged talons came up rapidly and warded off his mother’s next flurry of attacks. Metal scraped and clashed against metal as Loraine kept coming at the assassin. Desperation lent her extra speed and strength; she was now fighting for something more important than her own life. She forced the creature back a few steps with her furious assault, but neither blade came near to wounding it again.

Seconds passed in a blur of countless attacks with a speed that was far too fast for little Kertis to follow. Kertis saw tears streaming from his mother’s eyes as she fiercely swung her blades left and right to defend herself. She was hit, and then hit again; blood began to pour from her many wounds as those jagged deadly blades continued to seek her life. There was a low mumbling sound coming from the monster floating before his mother; power was swirling around in the air around it. Tendrils of dark Talent were reaching out and impairing his mother’s reactions, slowing her down and hindering her movements.

Kertis finally began to understand what he was seeing, and his eyes blurred up with his own tears as he looked again at his father’s face on the head at his feet. His mother cried out again in pain as she was struck, and one of her knives went spinning away. She waved her last weapon before her in intricate patterns, desperately attempting to block all the attacks she could.

In the next instant Loraine was thrown back against the wall with a heavy thud. Five long blades had pierced through her chest and pinned her to the wall behind. Her head sagged towards her son. “Kertis, run,” she said as she breathed out her last.

Kertis had just watched his mother die; her torn and bloody body slumped to the ground when the monster jerked back his deadly hand. Loraine’s body fell down only a meter from Arthoris’ own, their still and motionless hands only centimeters away from touching.

“No,” he cried in denial, shaking his head rapidly. And then something inside of him snapped; it was like someone just clicked on a bright light in his head. For a few long seconds, his mind was filled with chaos and confusion, but then suddenly things just seemed to fall into place. The killer slowly turned to him with that familiar evil smile. It was in no hurry now as it only faced a scared little boy. “No,” Kertis repeated quietly, feeling strong emotions stirring down deep. The monster paused in its approach and turned its head to better hear the child, thinking to enjoy his sobs of fear. Then Kertis felt something familiar brush against that new bright spot in his mind, and the slowly building emotions became a roaring wave. He felt rage and hatred like never before rise up and threaten to choke him; fierce and hot, it was overwhelming in its intensity. Hotter and hotter, his emotions raged and all the while that gentle familiarity was there stoking the fire.

“NOOOOO!” he finally screamed again and put every emotion he could into it. But this time he let all the rage and hatred go in a stormy rush; all the while, he remained intensely focused on his parents’ killer. Like an unstoppable tidal wave, his rage surged forward and slammed into the evil thing. The killer was picked up and thrown about in a swirling cyclone of physically manifested emotion that was rapidly tearing it apart. With an explosion of concrete and stone, it was fiercely thrown back against the far wall. The attack had come on so suddenly and with such chaotic force that Kertis stumbled backward against the far wall of the hallway. He was no longer able to control his arms and legs as his whole body felt on fire, and he fell to the floor in a fevered daze. Gradually, in the room before him, the whirlwind of dust and debris began to settle, and the first thing he again saw was the severed head of his father on the floor before him. The head had rolled out into the light of the hallway, and the image was burned into his mind forever.

Gone was the tide of anger and hatred of just a few seconds before, realization returned, and now Kertis began to sob in earnest; his tears mixing with the sweat from his little burning body. He lost track of time, but it couldn’t have been too long before his sobbing was interrupted. He heard something stirring from the dark bedroom before him, and for a brief second, he hoped that maybe his mother was still alive. He slowly stood back up and wobbled slowly back towards the doorway, ready to go to his mother’s embrace.

Instead, the tall, dark figure pushed itself away from the shambles of the back wall and started stumbling forward. It fell to its hands and knees, moaning raggedly in what could only be pain. Gone were the black robes, revealing the rotten, emaciated corpse beneath. One skinny arm ended in a stump, the sharp blades having been torn away by Kertis’ attack. The other skinny arm was bent and twisted at strange angles, the blades hanging limply. Half the skull was cracked open and hanging loosely down the side of its head. Numerous cuts and scrapes crisscrossed its bone-white body, overlapping the many older scars. It looked frail, about ready to fall apart; but nowhere, anywhere, was there any blood.

“Well, that was unexpected,” came a dry, raspy voice.

A chill of fear ran down his spine and his knees began to shake. Kertis desperately tried to get angry again, to repeat what he had done earlier. He could feel the rage and hatred somewhere down deep, but it refused to surge up again. There was also no gentle nudge anymore to help guide him; that familiar caress was now gone.

“No,” it chuckled weakly. “It will be some time before you can do that again.” The corpse before him slowly, painfully, rose to its feet and began to mumble incoherently again. With a skeletal hand, it pushed its skull back in place, and Kertis could see, as it continued to mumble, that color began to return to its flesh. The cuts and tears were closed up; it was healing itself. “You would have been truly dangerous to me if you had been allowed to live any longer.” With the shredding of metal bending, the remaining blades started to straighten themselves out.

It raised its one thin bony arm, the one minus the blades, and slowly stumbled towards Kertis. The torn stump was pointed directly at Kertis as it began to chant in a high screeching voice. Kertis backed away again and, with a thud, came up against the far wall. A little swirling green ball appeared at the end of its desiccated, corpse-like arm and for a few seconds continued to pulse and rapidly grow larger.

“This is not personal, but I intend to live forever,” and drew its arms back to throw its conjured ball at the helpless little boy.

Just then, something hard slammed into his side, and he was picked up and carried farther down the hall in a blur. He struggled briefly in the firm grip about his waist before looking up in shock; large purple eyes stared back at him from behind a red veil. Cali Adain, one of his father’s Life-wards, had finally come. Back up the hallway, where he had stood just a second ago, was a smoldering green hole in the wall. The little Haldane heard a thunderous shriek of rage from the monster still in his parents’ bedroom.

Cali lowered her veil. “I am so sorry, Kertis,” she whispered sadly to him as she gently lowered him to the ground. His little hands grabbed onto the black straps that crisscrossed her tight black armor, and he held himself close to her side.

Into the bright hall floated the deadly assassin. It slowly turned to face them, leathery lips clenched tightly in frustration. It was still a dirty, rotten corpse, but Kertis could see it was slowly getting its power back, regenerating itself. White, slimy and pus-ridden skin was slowly replacing its charred black wounds.

“Why are you getting involved?” it demanded in a rotten hiss as alarms began to sound all about them. It would not be long now before the halls were flooded with elite Manor guards.

Cali’etta Adain simply shrugged her shoulders and shook her head without answering, and she pulled her veil back into place just under her large violet eyes. The tall bodyguard smoothly reached back and, with one hand, pulled her long power-blade from its scabbard on her back. As she held it out above her head in a high guard, it crackled to life with deep blue energy running along its razor-sharp edge. Kertis knew that she had named her deadly longsword *Balance*, “Because we must strive for ‘*Balance*’ in all things,” she had once told him.

“So, your masters finally show themselves,” it hissed again angrily. “They are picking the wrong side.” It paused for a moment and peered intently at the Life-ward with its evil eyes. “Or maybe you are acting on your own?”

Again, Cali simply shrugged her broad shoulders negatively, her long red braid twisting as she shook her head in muted response. She remained poised in her dueling stance, left foot leading right.

“You know he has to die!” it shrieked furiously, shaking with its rage.

“He will die,” she finally responded in her deep, calm voice. She turned to Kertis and abruptly pushed him through the open door to his room. As the door slid closed behind him and locked, he heard her finish, “Just not today.”

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Nadia came awake with a sudden start, a night-globe was floating above the door to her room, shedding a soft glow on the floor below. Something woke her up, and she searched her thoughts and the bedroom she was in to find out what it could be. She saw that Kertis had left behind his box of bugs sitting on the table in the far corner of her room. Everything was neat and tidy, squared away, exactly how a soldier’s room should look, exactly as her father wanted. The only sound was the soft hum of the ventilation in the walls and the soft pounding of her little heart. She found nothing in her room that could have woken her, but something was definitely bothering her. She was feeling worried and anxious at the same time without knowing what it was that was causing it. She picked up Mr. Tims, the stuffed clown she always slept with. She crushed him in a fierce hug.

She calmed herself and sat cross-legged on the bed the way Bondi had taught her, sitting Mr. Tims next to her propped against her pillow. She cleared her mind and allowed her spirit to take her where it would, just as the Mystic had instructed. Her Talent was always there when she needed it, just waiting for her call. It was part of her, and she had been told to trust it completely.

“Kert,” she breathed with sudden understanding; he was in trouble, terrible trouble. She panicked for a second and became confused. ‘Fear clouds the mind, suppresses the Talent,’ she remembered some teacher telling her. Nadia renewed her calm as she pictured Kertis in her mind; she located him immediately sleeping in his bedroom.

He was dreaming. No, he was having a nightmare, but it wasn’t exactly a nightmare either. Something was causing this, trying to connect with Kertis, to use his dreams to locate exactly where he physically was. Nadia felt his very real terror; he was frozen with no idea what to do or what was happening to him. She wasn’t sure what she should do either, so she nudged him with her thoughts, prodded at him to wake him up. It didn’t have any effect on Kertis, so she poked at him as hard as she could; she heard him cry out in fear. It was then that she first glimpsed the skeletal head in his nightmare. She gasped and physically jumped in shock at the ghastly image. She almost tumbled from her bed as Mr. Tims fell to the floor, and she yet again lost contact with Kertis.

Nadia shook her head to clear her mind as she closed her eyes firmly; in desperation, she sought out her best friend again. He was awake now and she watched as he left his room, opening the door to his parents’ room. When the severed head came rolling into view, she again physically jumped and lost the connection for a second time. That was Kert’s father! He was, he was dead! Should she scream for someone to help Kertis? Should she run to her father? No, there was no time, and she was too far away. She had to be brave for Kert. He needed help right now, and maybe there was something she could do.

The little girl was shaking with emotion when she sat back down and attempted to reconnect with her friend. She picked Mr. Timms off the floor and sat him next to her, again propped on her pillow. It took considerably longer this time for her to clear her mind of the horrible images she had just seen. Now she saw Kertis’ mother fighting desperately with a blurred figure that moved so quickly it was hard to follow. Nadia was desperate for any way that she could help the situation; she looked for a way to attack or distract the nightmarish attacker, but every time her spirit moved close to it, she was pushed back violently. At one point, the dark shadow turned, and blood-red eyes looked briefly at her. “Go away,” it hissed, and another force attempted to push her away violently. She easily avoided the feeble, distracted attack, pushing in to come as close to Kertis as she could.

When the sudden end came, she gasped out in shock. “Kertis, run,” she heard his mother gasp out. Tears streamed down Nadia’s face as she watched the nice woman crumble to the ground in a bloody heap.

“No,” she heard Kertis say, and then she saw one of his latent Talents snap open with blinding intensity. Nadia knew this. She knew what was happening, and she also knew what she could do to help him. Like earlier in the day when she had lifted his sadness with her Talent, this time she touched the anger and hatred he was now feeling. She watched it quickly build up and expand into a blaze that threatened to explode out of control. She struggled to contain the blazing cauldron of fierce emotion and feared for a second that she had made a mistake. There was no way of controlling this torrent. Even being as close as she was, she felt the chaotic power. Nadia gave no thought to what damage she might be causing to her friend or to herself. What child ever thinks of consequences? Something had to be done now, and it had to be done quickly; Kertis was a raging furnace bursting at the seams with tremendous pressure. She needn’t have worried about what to do, “NOOOOO!” The boy screamed with all the strength he had, releasing everything inside him in a vicious torrent at the object of his rage.

Nadia was caught completely unprepared by the tidal wave of power. It spiked back at her along the connection she had established with Kertis. Her mind exploded in a brilliant flash of light, and pain shot through every part of her little body. She shrieked in anguish as she fell over on the bed, crushing Mr. Timms under her unconscious body.

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Hours later, Kertis lay on the elaborate operating table, his small chest heaving rapidly with shallow quick breaths. Damp sweat matted his thick curly hair wetly to his forehead, and his dark almond skin glistened with beads of perspiration. A team of surgeons stood around him with all manner of scanning devices pointed at and prodding him. Wires and tubes were attached to his small frame and continued off into the darkness. Holo-screens floated everywhere with blue and red images displaying various parts of his anatomy.

“He has slipped into a coma,” the lead doctor was explaining to everyone viewing through the glass of the observation room. “His core temperature is 41c and rising, and we don’t know why. We have attempted every procedure we know of to lower it, but his body is fighting our efforts.” He stopped and removed the surgical mask. “Frankly, he shouldn’t be alive. This is completely outside the bounds of normal medical possibility.”

Guyton turned away from the medical specialist in disgust. “Normal medical possibility?” he asked. “If you are thinking of giving up on my nephew, I will have you and your whole team shot and then fired.” The second of the three brothers, he didn’t have Arthoris’ height nor Emerson’s muscles; he was somewhere in-between. But right then, even with his dark burgundy uniform all disheveled and askew, he was more intimidating than either of them had ever been.

The doctor opened his mouth a couple of times before he was able to go on. “Of… Of course not, sir.” He moved to one of the floating holo-screens and pointed at an obvious picture of Kertis’ brain. “This is the child’s hypothalamus….”

“Kertis’,” Guyton corrected.

The doctor nodded nervously. “Kertis’ hypothalamus.” He pointed to a point in the middle-lower part of the brain. “Usually it is the size of an almond: right now, it is three-times larger.”

“And that means…?” Guyton prompted him.

“The hypothalamus is the part of the brain that helps regulate body temperature and certain strong emotions. Kertis’,” he paused and looked at Guyton, “is malfunctioning. It is radiating extreme heat and has not reacted to any form of chemical or electrical stimuli. There are procedures and implants that can be used to control the function of the glands, but we are very hesitant to start cutting into the patient—Kertis’ brain. And,” and he paused for added effect, “we have not been able to penetrate the hypothalamus with ANY scans either.”

“Please, doctor,” Guyton rubbed his forehead.

“Normally, we can see down to the smallest micron of any organic tissue, to see if there are cancerous cells or invasive viruses. But Kertis’ hypothalamus is like a black hole in the middle of his brain.”

“Or like a shielded spacecraft,” Cali spoke for the first time. She stood in the corner with her back to the wall; she looked eager, ready to pounce at a moment’s notice. Her black ceca-steel armor was scorched in a few places from her brief battle with the assassin earlier. Her war-veil was now lowered about her neck, her exotic features twisted with concern.

The doctor nodded his head, but obviously avoided looking at the deadly warrior. “And that is impossible.” The medical expert took a deep breath. “I am simply stating that if we are going to save the little master’s life, we are going to need help from less… conventional means.”

“He means spooks,” a sudden voice in the back put in, and everyone turned to look at the stately woman. “Or witches,” she paused for effect. “Sorcery, but I think the current trending term in the medical field is Talent.” Anthalia Devereaux stepped up and touched the glass separating them from the ICU, tears in her eyes. She had already lost a daughter, little Kertis was her only grandchild, she couldn’t lose him as well.

The doctor took up her word. “Talent. Yes, but many Talents are known and understood, medically explained, if you will. I have studied the field extensively and treated numerous cases. Including many of those in the Haldane family….”

Guyton Haldane raised his hand. “We are aware of the propensity of Talents in the Haldane Hold, thank you, doctor. Kertis is only seven years old. How much Talent could be manifested in one so young, if that is even what is happening here?” He never spoke of his ownTalents. He preferred to think of them as hard-earned abilities instead.

“It’s Talent,” Anthalia confirmed decisively. “Kertis has already been suspected of having multiple Talents.” Guyton glanced briefly at the ex-Sisterhood woman. He was completely uneasy in her presence; she no longer wore the Habit that had been a part of her life for 30 years; instead she preferred long dark dresses. He didn’t exactly dislike her, but there was no warmth there either, and she clearly felt the same.

“If that is suspected, why has he not been Tested?” he asked shortly. Guyton was the late Arthoris’ younger brother, but he was also a General, a Council-member, and Middenlore’s Planetary Governor. He was only on Dumas a handful of times a year, as he was constantly pulled away for one reason or another. He had seen the future Sovereign many times, and always went out of his way to greet the little person, but he could not admit to really knowing Kertis.

“Because he *is* seven years old,” Anthalia responded heatedly. “Loraine….” she choked up with a tearful sob. Everyone in the room was feeling the intense sorrow of the tragedy that had befallen them this day.

“Because Ms. Haldane wanted him to be a child for a little while longer,” Cali finished quietly. Anthalia nodded silently to the armor-clad warrior, she didn’t know the Life-ward very well, but her daughter had trusted her implicitly.

Guyton had to clear his voice himself before going on. Arty had been his brother for 48 years, the Haldane brother had all been very close.

“We must bring in help with this… whatever it takes, Kertis is the priority.” he looked into all the faces about him and without him even knowing it, his own Talent was in use. He radiated a sense of calm, a sense of confidence, a feeling that everything would be alright. Cali could feel it acutely, and though she was well trained to resist unwanted influences, this time she didn’t even try.

“There is a Prioress Catherine currently residing at the Monastery of Saint Alabanc on Dumas’ moon. She is of the Mystic Order.” It seems that Anthalia still had many connections with the Sisterhood after all.

“Get her here asap,” Guyton nodded.

“A shuttle is already on the way,” Anthalia smiled weakly, too drained emotionally to bait Guyton Haldane with her initiative. “I requested her presence an hour ago. She will be here early in the morning.”

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It was 2am and those that could find sleep, were, and those that couldn’t were gathered in one of the Manor’s elaborate conference rooms. Fierce debates and exhausting discussions about the immediate future of the Haldane Hold were being held. There was one intern currently monitoring Kertis, but he was at the end of a 24-hour shift, and the kaffe had stopped working long hours ago.

Kertis came awake with a gasp of air; his head was pounding, and as he reached to his forehead, he was held in place by all the wires attached to his arms. In the observation room, blinking red lights were warning about the little boy’s status, but the sound on the monitors had been turned down. When he started peeling off all the pads and tubes stuck to him, the young doctor never looked up from where his head was lying in light slumber.

Kertis’ mind was in a foggy daze; he was confused and disoriented, and the traumatic events of earlier in the day were locked away somewhere in his young little brain. He felt hot, so very hot. He had been to the beach many times but never had he felt this hot before. And he was thirsty, so very, very thirsty. He scooted off the bed he was in and looked about for a glass of water. In a corner of the room was a sink, but he saw no cups, so he grabbed a weird shaped bowl and used that to drink from the sink. His thirst temporarily sated, he went to the door and left the room behind, walking barefoot down the hall. He knew where he was; now he just stood there not knowing where he wanted to go. His mind kept him in a dense fog even as it led him through the maze of Haldane Manor. He passed no one as the only people awake were security, and they had completely locked down any entrance or exit from the Manor. At one point, he came to a door that was locked and he could not get through. But then he remembered a tunnel he had found once while exploring, and it wasn’t far away. Kertis climbed into the vent and disappeared from the Manor’s security video feed. While crawling in the darkness of the ventilation ductwork, Kertis knew exactly where he wanted to go. He wanted to be with his bestest friend.

For the last few hours, Nadia and her father had been ordered to remain in their rooms. When she had screamed and passed out the night before, her father had come running. He pulled her into his arms and rocked her softly until she awoke. In sobbing tears, she had explained to Stennor exactly what she had seen and what she had done. Her father had always worked very closely with her Mystic tutors to try and understand exactly what was happening to his precious little “cupcake.” But the pragmatic military mind of Stennor Kilgore also wanted to know exactly what she could do with it as well. He understood that if his daughter was going to succeed in life, she would have to be able to use all aspects of her Talents. If she was going to remain free from the Sisterhood and any such organization that imprisoned or exploited the Talented, they were going to have to remain on the edge of the Imperium and keep moving around. That was one reason why he had accepted Arthoris’ commission to Evertine, it would keep them far from the Church. He wanted Nadia to be able to make her own choices and follow the path that she laid out for herself, not one that was brutally forced upon her by some cold and calculating clergyman. So he made contacts in the *Talent* *Underworld* and carefully and quietly brought in tutors to aid in her development. He was always most careful with his little “cupcake.”

When she finally crawled back into bed with Mr. Tims in her arms, her father had been called away to some important meeting. Her father’s most trusted young officer, Marc Dulles, was left behind to keep an eye on her. She didn’t mind though, Marc was also her exercise teacher, and she liked him. In minutes she was fast asleep, still exhausted from earlier in the day. Some hours later she came awake with a slight scratching and banging coming from the walls. She thought for a moment of calling for Marc but quickly realized she could look into the noises better herself. She sat up and prepared herself like she had earlier, when suddenly the grate low on the wall popped open and a dirty, smelly figure crawled out.

“Kert!” she hardly recognized him and he didn’t respond. Instead he quietly stood there teetering slowly at the edge of her bed. He smeared dirt on her pink comforter as he gingerly crawling up beside her. “Are you okay?” she asked as she closed her arms about her little friend, pushing the stuffed clown aside. Kertis still didn’t respond; he closed his arms desperately around his bestest friend and held on tightly. Nadia knew immediately that he was not okay; he was scorching hot in her arms and dripping with sweat. She bit her lip in uncertainty; maybe she should go get Marc to bring in a doctor. Decided, she started to get up, but Kertis clung even harder to her. For the first time, he spoke, “I’m tired, Nadia. I just want to sleep.” She laid back slowly in her bed and cuddled Kert close to her side. He curled up in a feverish little ball and laid his head against her shoulder. His breathing was ragged, and though his eyes were closed, she could see them moving rapidly behind his eyelids.

What was wrong with him? She thought to herself. Maybe this was her fault. Maybe she had hurt him when she had pushed him earlier. Maybe there was something she could do…

She regulated her breathing and prepared the way she had been taught to. One thing every teacher had told her was to trust herself, to trust her instincts. Most of her teachers had been intimidated, even cowed by her Talent. One had even suspected that she had multiple Talents working together; she had called it meta-Talent. Nadia could sense what a person was thinking or feeling, and she could influence both with her thoughts. One they said was called Emoting, and the other was Control. She couldn’t tell which was which. Her father had told her that influencing someone’s thoughts was not a good thing to do. He always preached to her of a ‘Moral and Ethical Balance,’ she wasn’t quite sure what those were yet, but she expected they would be important as she got older.

Her last teacher, Bondi, a scary old woman that really seemed to hate Nadia, had been working on her ability to see things around her and to go places with only her thoughts; they had called it ‘Spiriting,’ or ‘Ghosting.’ The wrinkled old woman had been impressed with Nadia’s quick study, but had warned her not to go into someone else’s body. Well, she had already broken that rule when she helped Kertis with that monster earlier.

She carefully reached out with her thoughts to Kertis; this was now a connection she knew very well. She really didn’t know what she was doing. She didn’t know that Kertis was only a couple of hours at most from dying. If she had, she would never have been able to continue to focus with her Talent. But there was definitely something she could see, and she knew intuitively it was what was hurting Kertis. Inside his head she saw a big red hot mass that didn’t look like it belonged there. She did not know what a hypothalamus was or how it was causing the damage. She recognized it as the thing that had snapped open when Kertis had seen his mother die. Nadia had pushed and prodded that thing to get bigger and bigger, and now it looked like it wouldn’t stop.

So she was to blame for all of this, she should never have messed with it, she thought. Tears ran down her face, and she hated herself for causing Kertis so much pain. At nine years old, she could hardly be expected to be able to reason it all out, to justify actions with possible alternatives. No, it was her fault; she had caused this, it was as plain and simple as that. She almost drew back from Kertis at that point, afraid now that she might hurt him even more than she already had. Hurt him any more than he was hurting now? She asked herself. No, she could fix this; she had to. Nadia had prodded it earlier to make it bigger, and maybe now she could do the opposite to make it smaller.

With only her thoughts, she reached out and touched that part of Kertis’ brain that was on fire. She cried out in pain herself when her essence closed about the fiery ball, the heat burned even her thoughts. She didn’t stop though, she saw two things; one, she knew that she was drawing some of the heat out of Kertis and into herself; and two, that wherever her thoughts touched this mass, the color was changing. She whimpered again in pain, but she refused to let go or give up. She squeezed for all she was worth. She gritted her teeth and clenched her little fists tightly. “I will fix this, I will fix this, I will fix this, “ she heard herself repeat out loud. Nadia held on for as long as she could, but finally her strength left her, and in a rush her thoughts fled back to herself. Her breath burst out of her in a gust; she did not even know she had been holding her breath. She was still lying in her bed with her arms protectively circled around Kertis’ shoulders. His breathing was deeper now and less forced, and his eyes had stopped their frantic twitching. She stared at her best friend for a long time; he was very dirty and sweaty and smelled terrible, but he seemed much better than before. She tenderly brushed his dark hair back off his cute little face and smiled faintly as she laid her head back on the pillow. Maybe she had fixed this after all, she thought as she drifted off to sleep.

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For the second day in a row, Haldane Manor was in an uproar, and Guyton Haldane was not pleased. Guards and staff scurried around frantically; everyone had heard about the young intern that Guyton himself had thrown out of the Manor. And not thrown out figuratively, word was that with one hand on the back of his collar, and another on the back of his belt, the young man had literally been tossed out the back door.

In late-night meetings, Guyton thought they had come up with the best course of action they could, with contingency plans in place for various situations. But never, ever, could he have planned for young Kertis Andor Haldane disappearing from one of the most heavily-guarded structures in the universe. To make matters even worse, the Prioress from the Sisterhood and her entourage had arrived an hour ago and was now being entertained by Anthalia in the far corner of the Main Hall. Sister Catherine practically dripped with Talent, Guyton could feel it from across the room, and it made him nervous. He was used to being the most intimidating person in any room and did not like being nervous; it only added to his foul mood.

“Four hours ago, Commander,” he heard Emerson Haldane commenting to the Security Officer a few feet away. “Kertis has now been missing for four hours.” If anything, Guyton’s younger brother was even more intimidating than he was. He was not quite as tall, but he weighed significantly more, and it was all muscle. He and Guyton could hardly be any more of a contrast. Where Guyton was tall and thin, Emerson was the opposite; Emerson was dark and foreboding, and Guyton was foreboding as well, but he was blond and fair. Put the two together and no one would ever have guessed that they were brothers, until you saw them close up; they both had the large hooked nose of their father. Emerson had only just arrived from his command ship, the Heavy Cruiser Paragon. His uniform was neat and crisp.

Guyton had found time to get himself together, but he still looked haggard; it had been a long time since he had slept. His Armored Core uniform was trimmed in white as compared to Emerson’s Fleet uniform, which was trimmed in gold. When Farrell Haldane first established the Hold, he laid the groundwork for the military structure that would evolve over the years. He intended for the Armored Core to be the centerpiece, the ‘*Core*’ of the Haldane military, and not a unit definition as the word Corps would have implied. The hardened, ceca-steel center of a highly trained, supremely professional military. Over the years the name came to denote all of the men and women serving as ‘ground-pounders.’

The commander swallowed sharply. “We know that he exited the room on his own and made his way towards the estate rooms. He could not access one of the security doors along the way, so he then entered the ventilation system.” As the head security officer, his uniform was white, trimmed with the usual Haldane burgundy.

“The ventilation system, yes, yes, every would-be thief and murderer is well aware of the ventilation system.” Here the massive naval officer folded his muscular arms. “What I want to know is why our security team is NOT as well aware?”

“We have teams and drones in there now covering every centimeter,” he paused and swallowed again. “It was never deemed necessary to put surveillance in the duct-work before; we will have it in place before the end of this day.”

Emerson nodded and dismissed the security officer as he turned to his older brother. When he had first arrived, Guyton had met him in the shuttle bay, and they had embraced firmly. Both men fought desperately to keep their composure and not lose it then and there. The three of them, their brother Arthoris included, were only five years apart and had always been very close. There would be a time for tears and mourning, they both agreed, but now they had a Hold to keep together. Guyton had made many plans and decisions in the last few hours, and he would need Emerson’s agreement with most of them.

The Haldane Council was directed and overseen by the Sovereign, which was the oldest elected member of the direct Haldane family. Arthoris had been the Sovereign since their father had passed away 18 years ago. Guyton would most likely become the new Sovereign, but Emerson was equally qualified to run the Haldane Holdings. The truth of the matter was that either one of them would prefer if the other was saddled with the burden. The Haldane Sovereign was not an easy nor desirable position, and both men had their first loves. Emerson was a Fleet Officer who loved the lure of deep space, and Guyton was a General of the Armored Core who loved the cramped interior of a Griffon Battle Tank. They had been more than satisfied to allow their oldest brother to manage the day-to-day tedium of the immense Hold.

“Come on, Emerson,” Guyton said, gesturing towards the far corner of the Hall. “It is time I introduce you to the Sisters.”

They started towards the group of women when a cry went up. The previous security officer came rushing back into the large audience Hall. “Kertis has been found!” he exclaimed.

Emerson beat Guyton back to Kertis’ medical room, dreading what they would find once they got there. Guyton had prepared himself for dreadful news, that they would have found his little dead body in a corner vent somewhere. Instead, the handsome young boy was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, looking significantly better than he had when he earlier left that room. Standing next to him was Sten Kilgore, a doctor was at his other side preparing to reattach the probes and leads. Stennor held up a hand in caution at the mass of people that sought to stream into the little examination room.

“We found Kertis in our rooms this morning. He had crawled out of the ventilation and curled up in bed next to my daughter, Nadia.” He indicated his daughter who was standing quietly in the corner of the room. Sten had taken the time to see both children had cleaned themselves up before the turmoil that would begin. Now they were both dressed in smart little Haldane uniforms; Kertis barely fit in one of Nadia’s spare uniforms. It was too long in the legs and tight in the shoulders.

Kertis had smiled and called “uncle,” when he first saw Emerson and then Guyton enter the room, but it quickly turned to dismay at the flood of people that poured in behind them. Grandmother Anthalia elbowed her way between the Haldane brothers and rushed to Kertis’ side, not quite pushing Stennor out of the way in her haste. She grabbed his little face and looked closely into his eyes before smiling widely and wrapping him in a massive hug. “Grandmom,” he complained in a voice muffled by her loving arms. She had seen all the video feeds of what he had been through, and she knew that little Kertis Haldanes’ life would never be the same again. She tried desperately not to sob in anguish for him as she kissed the top of his head and vowed silently to commit the rest of her life to protecting her grandson.

