

A black metal safe door is shown slightly ajar, revealing its interior. The door is set into a wall of grey concrete blocks. On the door, there is a silver-colored digital keypad and a matching handle. The door has a heavy-duty locking mechanism with visible bolts along the edge. The text "HUNTRESS: LEGACY" is overlaid in red at the top.

HUNTRESS: LEGACY

JAYE PATRICK

Huntress: Legacy

By

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## **Chapter One**

“We shouldn’t be doing this.” Tim Houston murmured as he looked over Jane’s shoulder at the comp screen. He brushed a forelock of light-brown hair back behind his ear.

“Why not? Don’t you want to know?” She asked quietly and jerked slightly, as if to look back at him.

“I doubt there’s any information to find and all the great conspiracy theories have been solved.” He replied and looked around the darkened room.

The musty smell tickled his nose and made his eyes water. Who would have thought there’d still be *paper* documentation? There were shelves of it, extending a hundred metres in every direction into the darkness beyond the reach of the lantern’s glow. Files and books and other things he didn’t recognise, all stacked metres tall.

And here, at the short edge of the vast room, near the front door, ten really old screens and metal boxes sat next to each other. He considered it fortunate that Jane was an historian and knew about this old stuff. Him, he’d have tried to access the data through his com device. And when it came up ‘classified’ or ‘unavailable’ or ‘no record’, he’d have shrugged and moved on.

Jane, on the other hand, had a personality that would not be denied. If she couldn’t find the information she wanted through one method, she’d try another. The screen wavered, blurred, until Jane smacked the side of the casing and it steadied.

Tim winced. “Should you smack it like that? You might break it.” He kept his voice low and looked around, you know, in case someone else was in here. The place was starting to give him the creeps with the silence and all...

He had to admit he was both annoyed and impressed. But breaking into a secured facility, that was another thing altogether. In theory, it had been exciting, like cracking a level in a com-game. In practice, he wasn’t so sure.

At least it *was* quiet in this tomb of documents, as if no one had been here for decades, rather than hours. Well, he assumed it was hours, given the lack of air filtration. No one could work down here with all the dust and stagnant air. Maybe they shut everything down when they went home and started it all up when they arrived in the morning?

“So we solve the greatest mystery of all,” Jane mumbled as she stuck her finger on the screen and the text moved upwards.

“Okay, I’m impressed, how did you do that?” Tim asked.

“Secret historian business.” She said softly and read the ancient texts.

Tim snorted. “I don’t think so, Jane, this stuff is so old, and I doubt many people would know how to use it. It would be like... like... us knowing how to use a combustible engine vehicle.”

“I do.” Jane said.

“You know how a combustible engine works? Really? Who taught you?” Tim asked, shocked that anyone would know such ancient technology.

“My dad. He has an antique Ferraro; no, it’s a Ferraree. Italian made. And a permit for mixing up gas-o-lin to run it. He calls it his ‘hobby’. It’s one of maybe ten in the world outside museums.” Jane said and continued to scroll.

Tim silently whistled. “I’ve only seen them in images. The two-dimensional ones, not the 3-D. And that was iced. Now you say you’ve *got* one? That is so rad, I may squee.”

“Well, squee over there, I think I’ve found it.” Jane typed the code into her forearm unit and unplugged the miniature portable power unit.

“No po way!” Tim swung his high-powered lantern illuminating the shelves like daylight.

Jane turned to him, faint contempt in her deep blue eyes. “Yes, it *is* possible, Tim. All information is available – if you know where to look, and know the right key to unlock the door.” She said with a faint smile and rose from the chair.

“Come on, the register books are this way.” And she pointed her own lantern in the direction of one of the aisles.

“Register books?” Tim asked as if she were speaking a foreign language.

“Register books. They were used to list file numbers and their locations.” She led him down a long corridor with shelves packed tight with the aforementioned files.

Tim brushed a hand along the backs. “What are they made of?”

“Dried and pressed wood pulp that’s then coloured or bleached.” Jane said and checked the tags that stuck out of the top of each shelf. Each tag had a number and a letter on it.

Tim shook his head and moved away from the shelves to the centre of the aisle. "Toxic and criminal." He muttered. "Absolutely criminal."

"Lots of things were criminal by our standards, Tim, but it was the way things were done back then. It was cheap and easy to make. Then. Today, we wouldn't even consider using trees for information storage. But remember the time, Tim. The World Council controlled everything, from what people ate, to where they lived, what they did, the entertainment they had. Everything, including information storage." She continued down the aisle.

Tim shuddered. "Allegedly. There's no proof, only speculation. Still, if true, I cannot imagine it." He said. "Not being able to choose anything."

"Like I said, it was the time, and then the rebellion changed everything. Some thought it worse afterwards; but they had been, well, slaves, for so long they didn't know how to make a choice. Dark times, Tim, where only the strong survived to help the lost."

"I am a man of my time. What you're suggesting is inconceivable. And I don't know how you can do what you do." He said as he followed her. Jane stopped and turned to him.

"What? History? Or the archaeology part?"

"Either, both." He shrugged. "What's the point in rummaging around in history? We live in the present, not the past. I can't think of anything important about the past that would interest me."

"Which is why I sometimes wonder why we're dating, Tim. History is important. Your parents, your grandparents and their grandparents, all going back to the year dot, make up who you are. You are the distilled genetic code of thousands of people. Every one of them donated something to you; be it in how you look, your personality, something." She shook her finger at him. "And I believe more than two thousand years ago, someone smart said something along the lines of 'those who do not learn from history, are doomed to repeat it'. I'd say they were right."

Tim snorted. It wasn't that he didn't believe her, it was just that he didn't consider it important enough to him to worry about. Then he shrugged. "I know, I know, but I just can't come at reading dates and about people long dead or events. I guess some of it's interesting, but Jane, I don't have the same fascination as you. That's it and that's all."

“Haven’t you ever wondered what your forebears did during the dark times? Who they were, where they were?” Jane asked.

Tim shook his head. “Nup. I’m in the here and now, and looking to the future.”

Jane nodded slowly and had a strange expression on her face. “I understand, Tim.” And she turned back to follow the numbers.

Tim frowned. He wasn’t sure what she understood, but he had a vague feeling he’d said the wrong thing, and when they got out here, he’d find out the consequences.

But he shrugged off the feeling and followed her. This place was really beginning to give him the wigs. It was too silent, too empty, even with him being surrounded by the shelves, muting their voices.

Tim considered himself a modern man, with light and colour and sound and movement. This crypt, this tomb of history, bothered him on a level he didn’t understand, and all he wanted was to leave.

He should never have come on this expedition, never allowed her to convince him it would be ‘fun’ and get him out of his basement.

Tim stuck out his lower lip. He *liked* his basement, it was his office, where he assisted in creating the virtual reality games that were the most popular in the world!

This was not fun. This was creepy. He thought as he looked around and narrowed his eyes. This was... *interesting*. He could pitch a quest game. They were on a quest right now, weren’t they? He began to picture it in his mind. A cavernous room, where secrets waited to be revealed. But you had to find the right secret to continue. The other secrets could lead to other adventures – he’d have to think on that – and stalking the player were beasties. Hidden in the shelves were weapons... in the advanced level, the player would have to be careful where they fought off the beasties, lest they destroy the secret code they were searching for.

Yeah, that sounds good... He nearly walked into Jane as she stopped at a section of the shelves.

“Here it is.” She said, her voice filled with awe.

Tim glanced at the section, then up. Old books, the wood pulp files and boxes. Boxes and boxes, all stacked up on shelves.

“Holy crap, I’ve found it!” She turned her head and grinned, shuffled her feet in a happy dance.

“What?” Tim asked as his mind whirled with possibilities. “What?”

“The *archive*,” Jane replied in a hushed tone. “The archives of the World Council Hunter and Retrieval Unit.”

\* \* \*

Jane breathed in the musty, old air of the room. She’d spent the last five years searching for this place, and she never really thought she’d find it. Or at least take much, much longer; maybe a decade or more.

But here she was, standing in the cavernous room that once was the heart and soul of the World Council. Here were precious documents detailing the day-to-day life of an era long gone and long forgotten. The documents of the Council and every piece of legislation they passed through fair means or foul – and they were mostly foul, if the few references in history books were to be believed.

Corruption had been rife, with vast fortunes made on the backs of the citizen-slaves. The Council had been run by oligarchs, not legitimately elected officials, even as elections were held. Elected officials, she’d found, were more in name only; controlled by those who wielded the true power: bureaucrats.

And if anyone had any doubts – and some did – all that evidence was here, in this room.

But her focus wasn’t on the nastiness of global slavery and politics, no, her focus was on one particular organisation.

An organisation so secret, the governments of today still denied the Hunter and Retrieval Unit ever existed – even after fifteen hundred years!

She suddenly felt overwhelmed at the enormity of her success and tears stung her eyes.

All those naysayers, the critics of her work and those who thought her a lunatic for trying to find something long-buried, long forgotten and almost mythological. Hell, most of her colleagues didn’t believe the HRU ever existed, that it was a heroic myth told during the dark years of the Council to give people hope.

But Jane thought there had to be some truth to the tales, some evidence to prove at least a small amount of veracity to the stories. After all, there were a lot of vague references in other files she’d located.

She figured there had to be *something* if the references were in such disparate documents, like an old travel brochure she’d found with a warning at the bottom

on the HRU. That if a traveller is engaged by a 'Hunter' they are obligated to assist in any way.

Jane reached out and reverently touched one of the milky sided boxes.

"What are you going to do?" Tim asked from beside her and she couldn't help but grimace. She'd momentarily forgotten she'd brought him along. And then he'd gone and spoiled her joy, her thrill in finding what others had failed to.

She sent him a glance. "Well, I'm going to take it."

Tim's jaw dropped and his eyes widened. "But... but... doesn't it belong to the government? Won't they be back tomorrow and find an empty space?"

Jane pursed her lips and considered his question. He was so clueless sometimes. "Tim." She shook her head. "Tim, Tim, Timmy, Tim-Tim. This facility hasn't seen a human footprint for more than a *thousand* years."

He looked at her as if she were kidding. "Naw, dawg, there wouldn't be any air."

"Look behind you, Tim." She said and he suddenly wore a frightened expression and hunched in slightly.

"Why?" He whispered. "What's there?"

Jane rolled her eyes. She knew him well enough to know he'd been thinking of his gaming, probably thinking up a new one with all manner of horrible animal.

"Because I need you to look at our footprints."

"Oh." He said and straightened with a strained chuckle. "I thought for a moment..."

"Yes, Tim, I know."

He turned around and did as she asked. "Okay, so there are two sets of footprints in the dust, so what?"

"Look at the shelves." She advised.

"I'm looking." He said and glanced at her. "Now what?"

"Gently blow."

A light miasma of dust lifted into the air as he gently huffed out a breath. "Dusty. You'd think they'd keep the place clean."

Jane shook her head. "It's dusty, Tim, because the air filtration units have been off for over a thousand years. Only our footprints show because we're the first people to walk these aisles in over millennia. There's no power down here, remember."



Tim looked at her, but she knew he wasn't really seeing her, he was thinking about her words, then his normally tanned skin paled.

"Holy crap." He said, his voice filled with trepidation. "We should call the government, tell them where all this stuff is!"

Jane thought for a moment. "I suppose *morally*, all of this does belong to the government; all of this *should* reside in a museum, or be scanned into the Global Document Network, or even be conserved as a primary source for historians."

Tim's shoulders relaxed. "Yeah, okay. We'll inform them it's all here, undisturbed. Let them deal with it."

Jane gave him a puzzled smile. "You don't get it, do you? You really don't understand the importance of this discovery. The value. It will take historians and archivists' decades, maybe a century to go through all of these documents."

"The government lost it and now we've found it. I get that. I'm sure they'll be grateful to have it all returned." His expression brightened. "Hey, you said 'value'. Do you think there's a reward? As in financial reward?"

Jane returned her attention to the boxes, shining her lantern from the top of the shelves to the bottom. "I said 'morally', Tim. *Legally*, this entire archive belongs to... me."

"*You?* Are you insane?" Tim gaped at her. "That's... that's... crazy! You can't *own* an archive..."

"Ownership of an antiquity, Tim, belongs to those who discover it if more than eight hundred years have passed since the previous ownership was declared. The *type* of antiquity is irrelevant."

"But..." He lifted his hands as if he didn't know what to do with them. "But..." He looked as if he couldn't comprehend what she was saying.

"As far as the government, any government is concerned, this place no longer exists, if it ever did in their current records." She held out her lantern, guided up and around. "This place and everything in it has been lost for millennia, Tim. And I found it. It's mine, all of it. To do with as I please."

Tim looked at her as if he'd never seen her before. "What are you going to do?"

"Well, swear you to secrecy first."

Tim crossed his heart. "I swear." He said quickly.

“Good, because it wouldn’t do for anyone else to find out about this place. Nor do you want anyone knowing where you’re going to get your gaming ideas from.” She said with a slight smile and watched his expression sink into puzzlement.

Jane tapped the box next to her. “The Hunter and Retrieval Unit’s mission and after-action files, Tim. All here.”

“How do you know that?” He asked and she swung her lantern around.

“Because it says so right on the box.”

“Oh.” He said, then frowned thoughtfully, and then his expression segued into excitement. “Oh!”

“Exactly; but only if you keep a lid on where you’re getting the information,” Jane warned.

“Oh, I’m not saying a word, Jane.” He swung his lantern around at the shelves and shelves of files and boxes and books. “I had no idea this would be worth so much money.” He murmured.

“For you, it’s more the money will come as a secondary result of this discovery. For me, money isn’t as important as the history we’re... I’m going to find.” She felt the thrill of discovery flash through her veins again.

She could spend the rest of her long career writing history, all sourced from this underground cavern. But she’d never read it all, not in two or three lifetimes. Much as she loathed to think it, eventually, she’d have to share.

But she didn’t want to think about that now, she had something else in mind, and this discovery was the Rosetta Stone to the greatest question in millennia: Was Cambria Petersen an alien sent to be Earth’s saviour, or was she sent to upset the natural order and destroy Earth; or was she simply a myth?

## **Chapter Two**

Jane looked around. She needed to take some of the files for examination and walked back to the screens. Behind the desk, she saw a trolley contraption, a flat platform with a bar attached and set onto four solid wheels.

How well would it work after millennia?

Jane set her hands on the bar and pushed. The wheels squeaked, but it worked.

Excellent!

“Come and give me a hand, Tim.” She said and wheeled the trolley back to her loot.

They started at the bottom, and loaded six boxes and moved the trolley to the exit door.

Jane set her power unit next to the alphanumeric keypad. Then she made the connections onto the top of the rectangle.

As far as she worked out – with the help of her Dad – the power for the transporter would come from her destination; all she needed to do was to dial into the right code and some sort of a spatial warp would connect the two, and they’d disappear back to the mansion.

Of course, she needed the power to connect, which was where her portable unit came into play.

“Let’s hope this works.” She muttered.

“What do you mean ‘let’s hope this works’?” Tim asked, alarmed.

Jane shrugged and pressed the power button on the unit. “There was no guarantee my Dad and I had the right theory about this. But don’t worry so, Tim, there’s always another way out of any given situation. And look, we have power.” She punched in the alpha-numeric code her father made her memorise. The light glowed a weak green and she hoped that meant the filament was failing in the indicator, and not that the connection was weak. They might find themselves scattered beyond the stars.

“Come on, Tim, have some courage.” She said with a grin and opened the door. “It’s not as if you’ll know anything about it should the worst happen.”

Tim sighed. “And what’s the worst that can happen?”

“Exactly,” she grinned. There was no point in worrying him, he might refuse to leave.

Tim pushed the trolley into the dark and short entrance.

Jane saw the door at the other end and mentally prepared herself. Then, she closed the door and they were plunged into darkness.

“Just like before, Tim, walk to the end of the room and open the door.” She said in a calm voice. Tim didn’t like enclosed spaces. And yet, he usually hid in his basement.

The trolley squeaked as she heard him start his slow walk. She caught up and laid a reassuring hand on his back until the trolley bumped into the door.

Jane slid past him and opened the metal door that led into *her* basement.

Waiting for them was her father. Charles Mackenzie Winchester Petersen, the Fifth, stood smiling with pride at his daughter as she stepped through the door.

“My darling girl, you found it!” He wrapped her in his arms.

She’d once thought him a giant at 1.95 metres tall, but she’d grown to just less than that, so he wasn’t so tall to her. No, he was a giant amongst the financial world, brokering deals on and off-world to benefit of all.

Oh, she didn’t think he was pure of heart and didn’t indulge in skirting the edge of the law, he did, but she chose not to know about his work. That was his eldest son, Six’s, job.

“Hey, Dad.” She eased back and studied his dark blue eyes. She’d inherited his eyes and his dark hair and his height. But her straight nose and stubborn chin were all her mother’s.

Charles slung an arm around her shoulder. “How was the adventure, Tim?”

Tim poked up. “I can’t talk about it, sir.” He said and tightened his mouth as if someone would try to pry it open and all his secrets would pour out.

“Why is that, son?” Charles asked with a laugh.

“I promised,” Tim said through a tiny gap in his lips.

Jane looked at her father. “I made him promise to keep everything he saw a secret.”

“Then I shan’t ask you about it, Tim.”

Tim nodded.

“I gather this isn’t all of the information?”

“Nope. We’ll get some of it now and sort through it later.” Jane said.

Her father gave her another hug and released her. “Excellent. I’ll leave you to it. I only came down for a bottle of the chardonnay your mother likes. Don’t be

late for dinner, or there will be hell to pay. Again.” He finished with a roll of his eyes.

“We’ll be there.” She promised.

\* \* \*

It took another two hours for Jane and Tim to remove all the files and boxes from the HRU archive and into the basement of her home.

Tired and grubby, they closed the door for the final time and then sat on the boxes.

“Phew, I’m glad that’s done,” Tim said with a cough. “All that dust is going to be a witch to get off.” He patted his trousers and dust rose.

“For the moment.” Jane said and leaned away from the cloud. “You staying for dinner?”

“Thanks, but no. I have an idea for a new game and I want to make some notes before I forget them. And I’ve got that online gaming challenge later on tonight. I need to be at my best.” He said and groaned as he stood up. “Say ‘hi’ to your mother for me.” He leaned down to kiss her cheek and then thought better of it. “You’re all dirty.” He said with a faint smile.

“Squee dumper.” She sneered and slapped his leg. She waved the resulting dust cloud away. “Will I see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, unless your head is a thousand years ago.” He rubbed a hand over her hair and more dust flew. “See you later.”

Jane watched him walk away and up the stairs of the basement.

She thought he might still be in shock over the find, over the importance of it; she did not expect him to hold to his promise.

Once over his surprise, he’d start to think that maybe he’d smoked too much of that funny stuff and it was a dream. Then he’d tell someone. Whether they’d believe him or not, that was the question. But it didn’t matter, he couldn’t get to it.

Only she knew the access address and she wasn’t telling anyone, not even her father; and he didn’t *want* to know. He was thoroughly indulgent when it came to her, so different from her siblings. Even if she was twenty-eight years old.

Jane would have loved to rummage around in the boxes and files and books, but if she didn’t go and shower, she’d be late for dinner; and the last thing she wanted was to be the subject of constant scowls of disapproval sent in her direction.

\* \* \*

“Jane Alberta Fortescue Petersen, you are *late!*”

Her mother, Alberta Francine Petersen, nee Fortescue, frowned from the end of the table. Her long Muscat brown hair perfectly coiffed into a French roll, her heart-shaped face perfectly made up to accentuate hazel eyes, Alberta couldn't abide tardiness. Or sloppiness, dirty fingernails, mismatched furniture and a litany of other things, depending on the day. In short, everything about the household and those inside incurred her mother's wrath at some stage during the day.

She opened her mouth to apologise, but her mother pointed to the empty seat next to her younger sister, twenty-four-year-old, Courtney Minerva Rhodes Petersen. Her third name came from Alberta's mother's maiden name. She had Alberta's hair, Charles' blue eyes and an uptilted nose with a rounded chin.

Across from her sat Six – Charles Mackenzie Winchester Petersen, the Sixth. He was Charles in miniature. At thirty, he was heavily involved with the family financial business and had to be constantly reminded he wasn't at work. Next to him was twenty-six-year-old Adam Rafael Wauchope Petersen, who had hazel eyes and dark brown hair, the straight nose and stubborn chin of his mother. The only time her younger brother appeared civilised, was when around his mother. Otherwise, he wore t-shirts with pithy sayings, blue jeans with holes at the knees and black lace-up boots. He considered himself an anachronist. Jane secretly thought he meant *anarchist*, but who was she to argue?

Jane often wondered why they put up with their mother's behaviour. They were adults; surely if they didn't want to sit down to a nightly family dinner, they could make that decision. But whenever the subject came up, Alberta's eyes would glitter with tears of disappointment and the argument faded away. Even her father didn't dare deny Alberta unless it was dining out with important work colleagues or prospective investors, or she was hosting a party for the same people. On any other night, no excuse was good enough.

They all had gone to the local University of Geneva – even Adam, who had a degree in advanced astro-mechanics but never used.

Jane tried a smile at her brothers, but Six had the look of a man thinking of something else and Adam, as usual, wore his disinterested expression.

Alberta gently tapped the side of her antique cut crystal glass with her butter knife. “I'm pleased you could all join your father and me tonight.” She said, as if

it were a rare occurrence rather than a nightly event. “Tonight’s announcement is that your father has closed the Ragnarok deal and will soon begin construction on the new ski resort next month.” Alberta beamed with pride and looked down the table at her husband.

He raised his glass and then realised it was still empty. “Well, we’ll toast to success later, my dear.” His eyes slide towards Jane and she shook her head slightly.

She wasn’t ready for the arguments she knew were ahead with her mother over dusty and dirty tomes – and the fact they were now sitting in her pristine basement. Jane planned to clean up after dinner.

Morecombe, Harvey and Cornwallis came in from the kitchen that was behind her mother, bearing trays.

No one would speak until dinner and drinks had been served. Jane thought it one of the more ludicrous rules her mother had, but she believed she had to maintain a certain distance from the staff.

Her interest in them suddenly spiked as Six came out of his haze and turned towards the trio now approaching the table. His eyes focused and his whole demeanour brightened.

Now, who would spark up his otherwise absent brother?

Surely not James Morecombe, the chief butler. He was around sixty years old, with silver hair combed back from a narrow and pinched looking face. His pale blue eyes took in everything and if the setting wasn’t up to his standard, he would ream the poor unfortunate responsible. Even now, his eyes cast a critical eye over the table.

He and her mother made a perfect pair, she thought and turned her attention to Britney Cornwallis. She was blonde with dark eyebrows and startling green eyes. She, too, had a narrow face, but she was normally a happy person, and at forty-two, didn’t take life too seriously. She had dimple lines in her cheeks.

*Could be...* Jane thought and regarded the third of the party.

*Ah ha.* She thought and kept her face perfectly straight and respectable, even though she wanted to giggle at the ‘outrage’. Her brother had a thing for Joanna Harvey.

The woman was five years older than Six, tall, with dark hair and soft dark brown eyes, a slightly rounded face and a nose with a slight tilt upwards. She kept glancing at Six and trying not to express any interest as she set down the plates.

“Thank you, Joanna.” Six murmured with a smile and looked up at the maid. And earned a scowl from Alberta.

*Distance, brother mine, keep your distance.*

But Jane looked up at Britney as she slid a plate in front of her. “Thanks, Brit, it looks great.” Jane said and the scowl moved on to her as Britney gave her a brief, but genuine smile.

Morecombe, as the chief butler, served Charles and Alberta. The women went back into the kitchen while Morecombe moved around the table serving wine, the chardonnay Jane’s father chose earlier.

When he returned to the kitchen, Charles lifted his now three-quarters full wine. “Now, we can toast to success.”

All raised their glasses. “To success.”

Jane liked the wine, a nicely oaked, late harvest vintage.

“Now then, Charles,” Alberta said. “Junior, I mean, and you too, Jane. We do not speak to the staff at the table. Am I clear?”

Jane winked at her brother then turned her head to her mother. “A measure of a man is how well he treats his staff.” She said and the scowl lowered even further.

Alberta would need more work done to remove the wrinkles if she kept it up, Jane thought.

“Not in this house, Jane. They are *staff*, paid for their services, not their sparkling personalities. Do please remember that.”

“Yes, mother.” Jane sighed and Courtney laid a hand over hers.

Courtney did not like these dinners where her mother would pick at each of them for some grievance. It usually meant something was out of kilter.

Jane cleared her throat. “I’ll remember for next time.” She said, contrite.

“See that you do, now, this fish will spoil if we don’t eat it.”

And with that, all conversation ceased until the end of the meal.

When it was done, Adam slouched off, his finely woven dark-grey silk suit wrinkled. Courtney rose and kissed her mother’s cheek. “I have an exam tomorrow, so I’m off to study.”



“Work hard, dear, I know you won’t disappoint us. We’re counting on you.” Alberta smiled.

Jane saw Courtney’s expression as she turned away from her mother. Her younger sister looked stressed and out of sorts. Jane promised herself to give Courtney a break from expectations and just simply talk. She might even grab a bottle of Merlot – for medicinal purposes only, of course.

She sent Courtney a smile and jerked her chin, a sign she’d be up later. Courtney winked at her.

Six was once again in his dreamland, but now Jane wondered who was there with him, and she suspected it wasn’t Euro signs. He finally realised his brother and sister had left. He shook himself, rose and wandered away with his head down, his hands in his pants’ pockets and his thoughts far away.

Jane picked up her wine and sipped the sweet and rich port.

“I worry about the boy, Charles,” Alberta said, watching her eldest drift away. “He just doesn’t seem to concentrate.”

Charles slid a glance at Jane and then gave his wife a tight smile. “Oh, he’s probably planning another takeover. He’s exceptionally good at it.”

“But Charles...” Alberta leaned forward. “He’s not *married* yet.” She said as if it was a dirty secret. “Most of his classmates already have children.”

*Oho!* Her mother wanted grandchildren to boss around! Jane thought and her father sent her another glance.

“Ah, yes, well. If you’ll excuse me, beloved parents, I have work to attend to.” She set the near-empty port glass down and rose.

Her mother’s sharp eyes jumped to her. “What could you possibly be working on tonight?” And she scowled again. “Have you been grubbing around in the dirt again? I keep telling what’s-his-name, your boss...”

“Brendan Walker?” Jane supplied with a raised eyebrow and wondered just how close her mother and Professor Walker were that Jane’s work was discussed. She didn’t believe for a moment that her mother had forgotten his name.

“Yes, him. I keep telling him that you are a *historian*, a researcher, who has no business mucking about in the filthy, disease-ridden wrecks of old things! Please, Jane, do stop this and get back to your real work.” She glanced at her father who shook his head slightly.

“Real work?” She asked, ignoring her father’s subtle warning.

“Yes. The *real* work of *teaching*, Jane. How are you to catch yourself a fine young man if you’re always grubby? You will stick with teaching, find yourself a, oh, I don’t know, an up and coming graduate student, or an assistant professor and settle down.” Her mother said with finality, as if Jane had no say in her own career.

In a shocking display of poor manners, Jane leaned her hands on the tabletop and glared at her mother. “No.”

And she pushed off the table and turned away before her mother could get that glimmer of tears in her eyes when denied.

“Oh, Jane,” her mother began tearfully as she walked away, “how could you speak to me in such a way? I only want what’s best for you.”

She heard her father try to console Alberta.

Just another night in the Petersen household, she thought bitterly and skipped down the stairs to her new prize.

She decided she’d work for an hour, and set the alarm on her forearm unit. Then she opened the first box.

### **Chapter Three**

It took ten minutes of reading for Jane to sit back in shock and astonishment.

She'd plucked out a file register book from the box, thinking it a good place to start in finding the more interesting files.

Whoever the archivist was, he or she knew her job. The entries clearly explained what each file contained:

*Investigation into Judicar Malfeasance:*

*Adamson, Parts one, two three – 9781A, 9781B, 9781C; see sub-files 15768-15775;*

*Bolingbroke, Parts one, two, three, four, five, six – 9782A, 9782B, 9782C, 9782D, 9782E, 9782F; see sub-files 16981-17311; also refer Tudor, Justice; also refer personnel files, Bolingbroke, Ranalda; Caparossi, Rafael; Dortmund, Heinrich; De Crecy, Peter, Jones, Excalibur; Montague, Lord Alistair, Petersen, Cambria.*

*Cardigan, Parts one, two - 9783A, 9783B; see sub-files 18892-18895;*

*Elan, Parts one, two, three, four – 9784A, 9784B, 9784C, 9784D; see sub-files 19765-19780;*

Jane stopped reading. Her eyes kept going back to that name; *Petersen, Cambria*.

"Holy Hell, she's *real*." Jane lowered the heavy book and stared at rows of stored bottles without really seeing them. She wasn't sure whether to feel excited or appalled.

She closed the book and set it down on top of the box and finally focused on the bottles. As if in a dream, she chose a twenty-year-old Merlot and took it upstairs with her.

She didn't knock when she reached Courtney's suite of rooms, on the third floor, she simply entered, set the bottle down on the hand-carved coffee table and went to the wet bar for two glasses.

"Jane?" Courtney asked as she turned in her office chair.

Jane gave her a vacant smile and opened the wine. She poured without waiting for the wine to breathe properly, handed her sister a glass and took a big gulp of her own.

"Wow, you're a little out there tonight. Want to talk about it?"

Jane focused on her and grinned. She was supposed to come up here and cheer Courtney up; instead, she felt like the one in need of cheering.

“She’s real,” Jane said.

“Who?” Courtney got up from her desk and slumped into the corner of the powder blue, three-seater couch her mother chose for her.

“Cambria Petersen,” Jane replied with a slight smile.

“Oh, my God! *Really?*”

Jane nodded slowly and dropped onto the couch. Courtney reached out a hand and grasped hers. “You must be so excited! Wow, the University, the Museum... Oh, Jane, that’s absolutely brilliant!”

“Yeah,” Jane breathed and looked down into the jewelled depths of the wine.

“So... this is a *good* thing, isn’t it?” Courtney asked hesitantly. “What you’ve worked so hard to find?”

“I don’t know,” Jane confessed and took another, more moderate sip of merlot.

“What’s wrong, Jane?”

“I can’t work it out, why it was so easy to find?” Jane said.

“Easy?” Courtney protested. “You’ve spent *years* actively looking, and God knows how long before that, searching the Global Document Network for any hint.”

“Ever since I was old enough to hear the legend,” Jane agreed.

“We all heard them, Jane, but *you* took it to heart. A mythical warrior saving worlds and saving people from certain doom.”

Jane chuckled. “Yeah. I remember busting through Six’s door and telling him, ‘I am judge and jury and you must pay for your deeds’! He wasn’t impressed. Neither was Mother when I caught her dusting after the maid had just left.”

“Uh, oh.” Courtney grinned.

“She grounded me for a week and swore me to secrecy,” Jane said with genuine fondness.

“Jane, this is your life’s work. I thought you’d be excited, thrilled at discovering evidence, *actual* evidence that she existed!” Courtney said.

“Well, not quite actual evidence, just file references.”

Courtney leaned back against the corner of the couch. “Did those file references suddenly popped up on a network?”

“Ahm... no.”

“Jane, what did you do and more importantly, what will Mother say when she finds out?”

Jane suddenly looked at Courtney. “Oh, hell, Mother!” She set the glass on the coffee table and bolted, with Courtney close at her heels.

She found her mother downstairs in the basement, her hands on her hips glaring at the boxes and files and books.

“Mother,” Jane said weakly and Alberta turned around, her expression furious. “What...” Jane swallowed. “What are you doing down here?”

“I came down for a bottle of the Napoleon; your father fancied a celebratory drink. Now I’m wondering if this... this... *garbage* has something to do with it.” She folded her arms and tapped her foot. “You will explain and then you will toss this junk out.”

Jane suddenly wished she’d brought the opened bottle with her. “No, Mother, this stays. It is of *historic* importance. As for the what, they are the files of the Hunter and Retrieval Unit. *World Council* files.”

Alberta scowled. “I don’t care for your tone, young lady, and I don’t care for this mess. Remove it. Now, or I’ll have Morecombe take it to the furnace and burn it all.”

“Mother!” Courtney gasped and Alberta pointed a perfectly manicured finger at her.

“You stay out of this, Courtney. In fact, you can go back upstairs and return to your studies. You have an exam, and I’ll not have you failing and embarrassing me or your father.”

Courtney took a deep breath. “I’m here to support Jane.” She said.

Alberta’s eyes started to fill with tears. “How can you say that? How can you turn against me this way? Haven’t we sacrificed enough for you? Given you everything? Sent you...”

“Oh, stop it, Mother.” Jane snarled. “You will not get your own way in this!”

Alberta blinked. “You will not disrespect me this way. Get this junk out of here.”

“I am not disrespecting you, I’m putting my foot down. It is *my* work! It *stays*.”

“I won’t have it in my house!” Alberta nearly yelled. “I won’t have a mess!” And she stamped her foot. “Get it out!”

Silence descended as mother and daughter glared at each other, each determined not to give in to the other.

“What’s all the ruckus?” Charles senior came stomping down the stairs. “Uh, oh.”

Alberta tore her gaze from Jane’s to stare accusingly at her husband. “*You knew?* You knew about this? Knew and kept it from me? Oh, Charles, how *could* you?” Her expression fell into devastated betrayal and tears overflowed.

“Now, Alberta, it’s not like that.”

But she wasn’t having any of it. She dashed past Jane and Courtney, ran up the stairs with surprising grace. Charles reached out a hand, but she dodged and bounded up and out of the basement.

“Alberta!” Charles called after her. He huffed out a sigh but didn’t follow. Instead, he came down and went to the wine racks, selected a bottle and set it on the tasting table next to the first rack. He screwed in the corkscrew and tugged out the cork with a satisfying pop. Then he removed three glasses poured some of the wine into each.

Jane looked at Courtney, then at the glass her father held out without looking at either of them. She shrugged and walked over to take the glass.

Courtney followed her lead.

With another sigh, Charles picked up the last glass and turned to his daughters.

“Alberta... Your mother...” He snorted and shook his head. “She’s always had her own way. From the cradle, I might add.” He swirled the wine in the glass, held it up to the light, and then sipped. “When we met, I’d just made my first billion. So full of myself, I went out to celebrate, and there she was. Golden, sparkly... *dazzling*.” He breathed and looked at Courtney and Jane. “I’m still dazzled. But don’t misunderstand me. I’m aware of her faults, all of them. I know she’s demanding, overbearing...”

“Dictatorial,” Jane added and her father sent her a warning glance.

“That, too. But she’s the love of my life and I simply cannot do without her. I can’t imagine what my life would be like without her.”

Jane frowned, not understanding.

“Your mother is going to punish me.” He waved his glass in the direction of the boxes. “For not telling her, for allowing this, for allowing you, Jane, to bring it

into her house.” He looked at Courtney. “She’ll punish me for allowing you two down here, for your support of Jane, for...” He shrugged.

“How will she do that, Dad?” Jane asked.

He looked up at the ceiling. “I imagine she’s packing right now.” Then he smiled. “Or getting one of the maids to pack for her.”

“She’ll leave you over this?” Jane asked, surprised.

Charles shook his head. “She’ll threaten, she’ll weep and wail until I give in; and I will, eventually. But not because of her demands, it will be because I cannot bear to see her so distraught.” His eyes met Courtney’s. “You know, don’t you?” He said.

Jane’s sister hung her head and nodded.

“Courtney?” Jane asked.

“Mother isn’t well,” Courtney said. “Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Narcissism and growing paranoia.” She took a deep drink of the expensive wine.

“But... you can fix all of that,” Jane said and wondered why her father and sister looked at each other.

Charles turned his attention to Jane. “She won’t seek treatment, she won’t allow a doctor to come here, and she refuses to listen to me when I suggest anything is wrong.”

“Then *force* her.” Jane said through gritted teeth.

“Then she really would leave me, Jane, and never come back.” Charles said.

Personally, Jane thought that might be a good thing, but she also knew how much her father loved her mother.

“But surely after treatment, she’d be better.”

“And she wouldn’t be my Alberta,” Charles said with a deep sigh. “Jane, she’s always been like this, it’s who she is. Take that away and you take away Alberta. Yes, her symptoms are worse, and yes, there may come a day when I have to take her in hand. But not yet. And not now.”

Jane didn’t understand him, didn’t understand why he wouldn’t want her mother to get help, but he’d known her longer than she’d been alive, knew her right down to her painted toenails.

“What do you want me to do?” She asked, resigned.

He flashed her a smile. “I know apologising is out of the question and I wouldn’t ask it of you since you are in the right – and that’s the only time I’ll

admit it, since I am complicit, too – but you need to move these records. To somewhere safe, otherwise, you'll mother will get Morecombe to burn them; and that would be a tragedy of *epic* proportions.”

“It took Tim and me two *hours* to move it all, Dad.”

Charles drained his glass and set it on the table. “Then you’d best get started.” He said and pinned Courtney with his eyes. “Don’t you have some studying to do?”

“Dad, if I don’t know it by now, there’s no hope and more studying won’t help.” She said cheekily.

He shook his head. “Don’t take too long.” And then he slowly walked up the stairs, no doubt to face the music with Alberta.

“How long have you known about mother, Courtney?”

“First year of med school, I had my suspicions.” She confessed. “The more I studied, the more I knew I was right.”

“You didn’t tell any of us?” Jane said and Courtney raised an eyebrow.

“You sound just like her, Jane.” She said with a soft smile. “But don’t panic, there’s nothing OCD about you.” She smirked.

“Are you calling me narcissistic and paranoid?” Jane asked, knowing her sister was making fun of her.

“Well, exhibit A.” Courtney pointed to the boxes. “You never said where these came from. And... Exhibit B.: you’re very protective of them, but you know absolutely that they are yours and no one touches them.”

“Well, jeez, Court, I just got them here and I was about to tell you. And they are mine, by right of discovery.” Jane replied.

“Uh, huh. I’m going to get the lift and the anti-grav pallet. You organise how you want it moved, and to where.” Courtney set her near-empty glass next to her father’s and went to the lift, pressed the button. The doors opened and she gave Jane a little wave before the doors closed.

Where. Where could she store this stuff? Inside the house was out. If her mother caught wind of it, she’d send Morecombe to hunt it down. So, outside?

The estate was vast with many a secured building. The garage was big enough for the dozen cars they used, but little else. The stables?

*Yeah, the stables.* She could store it in one of the empty stalls until she could find a more permanent location.



Courtney returned and pushed the large pallet lifter out before her.

Jane started restacking boxes. It would take maybe four trips to carry it all.

What she needed was somewhere to work, separate from home, the prying eyes of the University faculty and the Museum. She didn't want to answer awkward questions until she'd filed the paperwork claiming the find.

And when word got out, there'd be an almighty bunfight. The University would claim the find because she worked for them – never mind the caustic remarks about her childish 'hobby'. The Museum had a similar attitude, except they'd try to claim the documents in the interests of global historic importance.

Unfortunately for both institutions, they had no claim to anything, because they'd banned her from researching during work hours. She'd obliged them by working at home, using her own resources.

At least, that was the argument she intended to put forward. And if it didn't work and demands were made that she hand it all over, well, she'd damn well copy it first – after a long and drawn-out legal battle, of course.

## **Chapter Four**

“Not that one,” Alberta ordered the maid, “the blue one!” and she rolled her eyes as the call went through.

“Hello, Alberta, what can I do for you?” The warm masculine voice said.

“Just a little update for you: Jane’s found it.”

Silence greeted her pronouncement and she frowned.

“Are you sure?” The voice asked with breathless amazement.

“Oh, yes. Given her focus, those boxes in my basement could mean only one thing: that she’s found the World Council files.”

It started as a chuckle, then a full-blown laugh and Alberta couldn’t help but smile in response. Her plans were coming together nicely. Time for phase two.

“You know what to do next. And I’ll do my part. In fact,” she tilted her head as heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway, “I’ll get started right away.” And she hung up. She was going to enjoy every bit of making Charles squirm; then she’d get to her daughter.

\* \* \*

Moving the boxes and the files took an hour, but only because the stables were five hundred metres away from the house, near the man-made lake.

Since her mother no longer rode, Jane figured everything would be safe. As an added safety measure, she locked the stall and left a big note for the manager and stable hands.

“That’s done.” She said and walked back to the house with Courtney.

“I don’t think they’ll be safe for too long, Jane. You need to find somewhere of your own to work; where nobody will mess with your stuff.” Courtney replied.

Jane paused in her steps, then resumed when Courtney turned.

“You’re right. Maybe it’s time I moved out of the house altogether.” She mused.

Courtney gasped. “You can’t do that! Mother will have a conniption!”

The more Jane thought about it, the more she liked the idea. “For eff’s sake, Courtney, I’m twenty-eight years old, still living at home! I don’t *need* to be here. I don’t need mother’s constant issues with me, my work or my relationship status. Do you know how many times Tim has stayed over?” She demanded and Courtney shook her head.

“Exactly... zero. I haven’t had sex in so long, my bits are rusting!”

Courtney tried not to smile, but she gave up and burst out laughing. Jane allowed a smile to creep up on her. “Yeah, go on, laugh it up, Doc.”

Courtney laid a steadying hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, I am!”

They walked back into the house, arm in arm.

Alberta slowly walked down the stairs, Morecombe at her heels guiding an anti-grav holding three suitcases.

Charles followed the parade.

“Mother? What’s going on?” Courtney asked.

Alberta’s face tightened as she saw Jane. “It is clear I’m no longer appreciated here, so I am leaving.”

Jane looked at her father, but his face remained impassive.

“But this is your home.” Courtney continued.

“And apparently, I no longer have control of it if my ungrateful children think to dictate terms to me.” Alberta glared at Jane.

Jane bit her lip to stop herself from telling her mother what she really thought. Instead, she stepped aside, as if to say, ‘go ahead, and leave’.

Charles stood on a step above them all. He looked at Jane.

“Okay, okay, mother, you don’t have to leave.” She said, unwillingly. “I’ll go. I’ll find somewhere in the city. And...”

Alberta stopped in her tracks. “You... you would leave *me*? Your *mother*? You’d leave your father and siblings?” She turned her head. “Charles, I had no idea we’d brought up such a selfish child!” Then she eyed the sisters and scowled. “Where have you been? Why were you outside?”

Jane opened her mouth, but Alberta rolled over her. “You’ve been out canoodling with boys, haven’t you? Oh, Jane, I am so disappointed in you. Courtney as a major exam tomorrow and you... you try to sabotage her. This jealousy has to stop!”

“Mother...” Courtney tried and Alberta turned her gaze on her.

“Don’t speak to me, Courtney. I thought you had better sense. Go to your room. Right now! I will deal with your sister.”

Courtney’s eyes slid to her father’s; he gave a slight nod and she sighed.

“Yes, mother.”

Jane felt Courtney squeeze her arm before she let go and, with head bowed, she walked up the stairs, as if suitably chastened.

Jane faced her angry and crazy mother.

Alberta folded her hands in front of her body and looked down on Jane. The ever-stoic Morecombe stood at her shoulder and her father two steps up. Jane knew she was going to be dumped on from a great height and braced herself.

“Jane,” Alberta sighed as if she were a recalcitrant child. “I have to confess, I do not understand you. It’s as if you’re a changeling. You were such an adorable and obedient child. Now, you try to bring into my house dirty and old things, you make a mess, you defy me at every turn; and then you try to destroy your sister’s stellar career with truancy.” She took a deep breath. “You are my greatest disappointment.”

Jane felt the arrow hit truly and looked away, hurt, when her father said nothing, did... nothing to defend her.

“My eldest daughter, who should be my greatest pride and joy, does everything she can to embarrass and humiliate me. Who prefers dirt and any common boy, rather than a real career and real men. I don’t know where I went wrong, but it’s not too late to adjust your attitude.” Alberta said.

“I will leave,” Jane said softly.

“You will *not*!” Alberta shouted and stamped her foot. “You will go to your room! And don’t come out until I tell you!”

“I am not a child to be ordered around, mother!” Jane shouted back and Alberta gasped, held her hands to her chest in shock at Jane’s outburst. Tears sparkled in her eyes.

Charles cleared his throat and stared down at Jane. He said two words that turned her world. “The door.”

Jane felt a surge of hot rage course through her veins. For her mother and her acid tongue and for her father who would hold her archive over her head to ensure her compliance; who would hold her prisoner here for sake of her unstable mother.

She knew the door in the basement was the only access point. As far as she knew, or could find, it was the only door in Geneva or anywhere else nearby that had unrestricted access to any other corridor. The public access transports had limited destinations; the museum and university had to apply for addresses before access was granted. But theirs seemed to have been forgotten by the government.

The wine Jane had drunk curdled in her stomach. She had no choice if she wanted to continue her work.

She gritted her teeth and started up the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Alberta asked, suspicious of Jane’s sudden compliance.

“Apparently, I’m going to my room!” Jane snarled and continued up without a further word or look at Morecombe or her father.

She reached the second level and Adam came out of the shadows.

“Ignore her, Jane.” He said in his wonderfully deep voice.

“Don’t talk to me, Adam, I’m about to have a meltdown.” She sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

“Best thing, too. Then maybe you’ll listen to me.”

Jane swallowed, but it did no good, the tears of hurt overflowed and Adam took her in his arms and held her while she wept.

“I had no... No idea she hated me... so much.” Jane hiccupped.

“She hates us all, Jane,” Adam said and she eased back.

“What?”

“We remind her of her lost youth, Jane. The more we grow up, the less she likes us. I thought you understood that.” He gave her a small smile. “No, you wouldn’t. You’ve always got your head stuck in some book or dig, or class.” He grabbed her hand and guided her to his suite.

Inside, he’d set up his own music studio in the bedroom and slept on his harlequin patterned couch.

“Holy Hell, Adam! Where’d all this come from?”

“Mother and I reached an understanding: she doesn’t interfere in my life, and I live in the house. Here.” He offered her a self-sanitizing tissue. “Mop up.”

“God, Adam, I don’t even know what type of music you play.” She slumped onto the couch and blew her nose, wiped her eyes.

He sat in the matching chair across from her and grinned. “I believe the genre is called ‘classical mashup’. It was very popular centuries ago. I’m reviving it.”

“Classical – and you dress like a slob.”

“Sometimes, Jane, you have to play to mother’s prejudices. She thinks of me as a dilettante, unwilling to go out and find a ‘real’ job.” He quirked his fingers in

quotes. “And happy to live at home like a parasite. At least once a week, she ‘washes her hands of me’.”

Jane leaned forward. “But... if she knew...”

“You’re missing the point, Jane: we have an *understanding* and I can live my life in my own way.”

Jane narrowed her eyes. “You’re as trapped here as I am.”

“I don’t dwell on it. And when I have a concert, I tell her I’m off for a job interview with any number of aerospace industries. Manipulation, Jane. We all do it, especially mother, except for you. Now be off with you before she comes upstairs to check on you.”

Jane gaped at him. “She’ll do that? For fuck’s sake, I’m twenty-eight!”

“And you might as well be eight for all she cares. Go on, I’ve got work to do. Your pissing mother off has given me an idea for a new piece.”

Jane got up and leaned over his chair, kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Adam, for the shoulder and the advice.”

“You’re welcome. We’re all prisoners in our own way. You might want to think about that.” He said with a sad smile.

\* \* \*

Jane hovered outside her own suite a hand on the ornate handle. She loathed the suite with a passion.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped into princess land.

Here, in these rooms, were the reasons for her mother’s abject disappointment in her. Every stick of furniture was either candy pink or white: the candy pink couch with broad white stripes, white coffee table, the heavy dusky pink curtains with white lace inner curtains. Under her feet, a pale pink carpet with white unicorns prancing across the floor. *Unicorns*, for Christ sake! And then there was her bedroom.

She opened the door. A canopy bed, with white lace and pink silk curtains, sat against the far wall. Pale pink walls, with the same carpet and the same curtains over the windows made her curl her lip. An ornate and delicate white desk with gold handles sat to the right of her bed. The pink silk upholstered, gilt-edged chair was tucked under the desk.

Even her bathroom had the same theme: pink and white and delicate.

*We’re all prisoners in our own way.* Adam had said.

Her mother was a prisoner of false expectations.

Jane turned around and went to the white wet bar, reached under for the brandy and poured herself a healthy shot. She took it to the couch and sat, kicked off her... pink pumps.

*Hell.* She'd forgotten.

Dressed in a white shirt and pink slacks for dinner, she and Courtney had dashed out to shift her boxes. Now, she had straw sticking out of her hair, and dusty smudges all over the white and pink.

No wonder her mother thought she'd been rolling around in the hay! Jane hadn't given it another thought.

She gulped a swig of the brandy. Lucky for her, Cornwallis – maid to both her and Courtney – kept a stash of brandy or whiskey for her. In the mini-fridge were bottles of white wine; suitable for a lady of elegance, which Jane was not.

And therein lay the problem.

Jane was well aware the Petersen's were a planned family. The children were born twenty-five months apart, all carefully choreographed so Charles could have his junior to guide into the family business. Then Jane for Alberta to bring up in a manner which she thought appropriate as a socialite. Then Adam as a spare for Six and Courtney as a spare for Jane.

All cold-bloodedly planned and executed.

The only flaw in their plan – and she suspected it was her father's idea, not her mother's – was that each child had a distinct personality, not necessarily in line with what they wanted and it was all falling apart on them.

Six was in love with a maid! Adam wrote and performed classical mashup music. Jane preferred dirt to diamonds, but Courtney showed no sign of rebellion. Yet, Jane allowed.

No wonder her mother was disappointed. Alberta expected a princess and got a frog.

She looked around the room with disgust. She'd been forbidden to change anything. Even her rough wear had to be hidden behind the glittering gowns and fashion labels.

Jane tossed back the drink and set it on the coffee table.

Yeah. Her mother was a prisoner to expectations, and constant disappointment, when her plans went awry.

Well, tough shit. Jane decided. Tomorrow, she'd arrange for the removal of the boxes and documents to a more secure location. Tomorrow, she applied for her claim and then the shit would really hit cooling device.

But first, she had a bottle of brandy to finish...

\* \* \*

Jane was awoken by someone throwing back the curtains to the windows to allow bright morning sun into the room.

"Oh, man..." she groaned and rolled away from the light as a headache started up behind her eyes.

"Best be up, Miss Jane, and dressed." Britney said with humour in her voice.

"Why?" Jane snuggled deeper into the warmth of the bedclothes.

"Because your father will see you in the study at precisely nine o'clock and it is now half eight."

Jane rolled onto her back as the previous evening's events unfolded in her mind. "I don't want to see *him*." She said.

"He said you might resist, so he mentioned a door?"

"Fuck me." Jane snarled. "The *asshole*!" She threw the bedclothes aside.

"And what does that make you, Miss Jane?" Britney grinned and held out a delicate cup of coffee.

"You don't know what he's done, Britney." Jane grumbled and took the coffee with her into the bathroom.

"The whole household knows what happened last night." Britney replied with sympathy.

Jane showered and then wrapped a towel around her and came out. Britney had laid out a sundress in white, with white underwear and white sandals.

"No, Britney, not today."

Britney tisked as Jane dragged out pressed jeans, a blue shirt and scarred work boots.

"You'll only upset your mother."

"Ask me if I care." She said and grabbed the underwear, dropped the towel.

Britney scooped it up and went into the bathroom to hang it up, without comment.

"I'm tired of her dismissing me and my work, Brit, absolutely fed up with her trying to make me into someone I am not. She refuses to allow any of us to be the



people we were meant to be, instead trying to mould us into images of her and Dad. Well, I won't do it." Jane stood in the middle of the room.

Britney came out of the bathroom. "Nor should you. But in the interests of peace in the house, perhaps you might consider this a business meeting, rather than a rebellious confrontation of personalities." Britney handed Jane her coffee.

Jane eyed her suspiciously. "Are you trying to manage me?"

"Yep. And who knows? It might be to your benefit. Besides, you can always change when you come back." Britney grinned.

"Jeez, woman, don't smile at me like that, you make me feel like I've been kicking puppies all night." Jane rolled her eyes, then drank the coffee.

"You mean instead of drinking so much you act stupid?"

"Fine! Fine. I'll wear the damned dress."

## **Chapter Five**

Jane took the lift instead of the stairs. She didn't think her ankles would cope with the steps they were so high – and she hated them. She didn't care that everything she wore was a fashion label, only that it was all so... uncomfortable!

Outside her father's home office, she smoothed the white dress and then knocked at precisely nine o'clock.

"Come in, Jane." Her father called.

Jane licked her lips, admonished herself not to lose her temper and opened the door.

Charles sat behind a large glass and steel desk. He had his keyboard connected to the forearm unit and was studying the three-dimensional image that swirled in blue above it.

He glanced at her, then slowly took in her dress.

Charles shut down the unit and leaned back in his black leather ergonomic chair. Then he nodded. "Your mother will be pleased." He said.

Jane felt her eyebrows lower and deliberately raised one. She would not learn to scowl at the drop of a hat, not like her mother.

"I don't have to justify my actions to you, Jane, you can either accept them or not."

"I..."

"Last night was for your mother's benefit. She needs to feel in control at all times. And you provided the opportunity." He leaned his elbows on the desk. "I suppose I should thank you for deflecting her attention away from me and my sins." He met her gaze with a seriousness she'd never seen before. "What happens next is up to you, of course, but I would suggest that, after you storm out of here on the verge of tears, you head up to your room and trash it."

Jane gaped at him. She was about to reply, but the door opened behind her.

"Ah, there you are, darling." Her mother said with a smile in her voice and glided around to hug her. Jane stiffened.

Alberta slid her hands down Jane's arms. "Don't you look nice? I've made an appointment with Francois for a full day of girl time. Oh, we're going to have such a rave."

Jane looked at her father and tilted her head.

He cleared his throat and Alberta turned. "You haven't told her yet, have you, Charles?"

"I was about to when you arrived – a little early I might add."

"Charles, it's better to be early, than late." Alberta said and stepped away from Jane, walked to stand by Charles, her hand on his shoulder to show solidarity.

Charles looked down and away, as if what he was about to say was as painful to him as it was to Jane.

Alberta squeezed his shoulder and he returned his attention to Jane.

He drew in a deep breath, as if to prepare himself, then slowly let it out, shook his head sadly. "Jane. It's time to put away childish things and obsessions and to grow up." He began and Jane raised her eyebrows.

"To that end, I have removed the boxes and files from the stable."

"You..." She said faintly.

"Quiet!" Her father barked and scowled as Jane started at his ferocious tone. "You will now focus on your teaching job at the University. You will no longer work for the Museum and no longer go on field trips. You will dress like a lady at all times and act like one! You will not see Timothy Houston and your mother will supervise your schedules in the evenings when we go out. You will meet an appropriate companion this way."

"We will have such fun together, Jane." Her mother said gleefully. "And I have just the man for you." Alberta said with a warm smile.

Jane stood there, stunned. "You... took my stuff." She said to her father, ignoring her mother. "Where is it?"

"At a secure location," Charles said. "Where it will stay until your mother and I are satisfied with your behaviour."

"It is mine, father." Jane said with a lump in her throat and took a step forward, her hands out as if to plead with him.

"And now, it is not."

The pain dug sharp talons into her chest, made it difficult to breathe. She pressed a hand to her chest, as if she was about to have a heart attack – or hyperventilate, she couldn't decide which, so great was the sense of betrayal.

Alberta smiled at her with such delight that Jane felt her stomach churn with sickness. "Morecombe found it after I told him to search the stables for the miscreant who laid hands on my daughter. Then he went to your father. Rather

than burn it as I said, your father wisely decided it would make a better.... carrot. Now, you can be the daughter I always wanted – if you want to see your trash again. And when you're safely married, you and your husband can manage whatever is in that garbage."

Jane could feel the rage build, felt the flush of it on her cheeks, the sparking in her eyes and the fists she'd formed with her hands.

"That 'trash' is a lifetime's *work*, mother..." She bit out.

"It's a hobby." Alberta spat. "A distraction from your true goals."

"And what *are* my true goals, mother?" Jane ground out.

"Why to find a suitable husband and give me grandbabies to spoil, of course."

Alberta beamed.

Jane didn't think she'd ever felt such fury, never knew her whole body would vibrate with the violence of it. In an effort to control herself, she turned away, walked stuttering steps to the door and laid her fingers on the handle.

Then, shockingly, it locked.

"We haven't dismissed you yet, darling." Alberta said, as if this were a normal conversation.

That her parents would treat her like this, as an incompetent staff member, hurt more than she ever thought possible. They'd taken away everything that made life bearable here, taken away her choices and she slowly shook her head, disbelief warring with an overwhelming need to perpetrate violence.

"I cannot express in appropriate words," she said as she turned and stared at her parents, "how very much I hate you both right now."

"That's all right, darling, we'll get you some anger therapy, maybe a prescription, too, and you'll be perfect," Alberta said tightly.

"You go too far, mother, if you seek to drug me into compliance."

"The door." Her father said and Jane looked at him with a narrowed gaze. That he would hold the vault over her head to ensure her compliance broke something inside her and her expression went blank.

"What's that, Charles? What door?" Alberta asked.

"It doesn't matter, Alberta. What else did you want to say to Jane?"

"Say?" Alberta frowned, then turned to Jane, her expression prim and arrogant.

"Oh, yes: I'll have your apology now, Jane."

“For what?” Jane was surprised at how calm she sounded when inside she churned and burned.

“For your behaviour of last night, of course. My nearly leaving was your fault. The disaster of dinner was your fault. And if Courtney fails her exam today, it will be Your. *Fault! You hateful child.*”

Charles laid a hand over his wife’s. “Alberta.”

Her mother drew in a bracing breath and eased it out. “Your apology, Jane.”

Jane knew she wasn’t getting out of here until she did, but it didn’t have to be sincere. What did Brit say about this being business?

She looked at her mother. “I apologise, mother, for my behaviour last night. It was unspeakably rude and provocative.” She said without emotion and her mother nodded, as if pleased, but Jane went on as she heard the lock disengage behind her. “I apologise for failing to be the daughter you desired, for the disappointment and shame you must feel. I apologise for being unable to understand your neediness and ambitions for me, for my inability to let you live your life vicariously through me. But most of all, I apologise for growing up into someone you despise and loathe, rather than the princess and carbon copy you so desperately wanted.”

Jane couldn’t go on, she turned, opened the door and fled, tears finally breaching to run down her face.

Why did it hurt so much? Why did she still desire her parents’ approval? And why did she keep thumbing her nose at them when that approval was in reach?

She was twenty-eight! Not some child. And yet a small voice inside her wailed at the punishment levelled at her. She knew it was unfair and bordered on the criminal, hell it *was* criminal.

Jane threw open the door to her suite and bile nearly choked her.

The suppressed rage broke free. Jane marched to the curtains and tore them from the railings with a small cry. She upended the couch, picked up the coffee table and threw it at the wall, denting the material underneath. She stripped the twee paintings of pretty unicorns and other mythical creatures and smashed them, kicked over the white side table near the door. It didn’t break so she picked it up and bashed it against the wall until it splintered.

She saw something that didn't belong in this princess suite, something that meant someone expected this meltdown. A heavy, steel cylinder attached to a long handle. She picked it up, judged its weight.

Then Jane eyed her bedroom.

\* \* \*

Downstairs in his office, Charles watched his wife use her dainty wrist unit to call for tea. Then she sat on his couch and crossed her ankles.

She blew out a happy breath. "I'm so glad we've come to an understanding, Charles. Jane always was the rebellious one. And now she is not. All it took was a firm hand."

"Three for three, Alberta." He said and rubbed his chest. He hurt for his daughter, hurt in knowing how she felt and he hurt for doing it to her. The betrayal in her eyes cut him deeply, the crushed expression seared him, even though he was trying to help her, trying to...

"What do you mean, Charles?" She asked, puzzled.

Morecombe arrived with an anti-grav trolley, giving him time to think of an answer.

He said nothing as the butler set the tray on the coffee table and poured tea into two delicate antique cups. He offered a cup and saucer to Alberta, who took it without a word. Then Morecombe set the other near the edge of Charles' desk.

"Thank you, Morecombe." He murmured.

"Sir." Morecombe said and left the room.

Charles didn't like tea, he preferred a more robust blend of Arabica coffee.

"You were saying, Charles?"

"What will you do, I wonder, when Courtney rebels?" He asked.

"I don't know what you mean. Courtney is perfect. She's beautiful, talented and a genius."

"I agree, but that won't be enough for you. What if she doesn't make head of the bio-medical department within your timeframe?" He slid the tea closer.

"Of course, she will." Alberta scoffed. "You should have more faith in her, Charles, it's not like you to be so doubting."

"You have alienated three of your four children, Alberta, and *I'm* the one without faith?"

“Oh, pooh. Six works happily at the firm, Adam is...” she frowned, “Adam; and now Jane will be the dutiful daughter and fulfil my ambitions for her. And, as a bonus, I will have a doctor for a daughter; no, that won’t be enough, she’ll become a professor of bio-medicine, be the leading expert in the field.”

Charles rubbed his forehead. How had he let this happen? Why did he constantly pander to her needs at the cost of his children’s? And when did it start? He looked at his wife. God, he loved her, but this had to stop.

“Enough, Alberta.” He said and rose from behind his desk.

“Enough of what Charles?”

He looked down into her guileless eyes and nearly faltered. He’d given her everything, given in on everything; let her manage him, manipulate him and the children for far too long.

“I should never have agreed to your schedule, never allowed you to dictate the order, the timing and the sex of our children. I should have stopped it then. But I was so beguiled by you, I still am. But you have devastated this family.” He said and Alberta, as he expected, clutched her hands to her chest.

“Charles, how can you say that? I have sacrificed everything for you and the children.” She said and tears welled.

He wasn’t giving in this time. “What, Alberta, *what* exactly have you sacrificed?”

Alberta rose, the image of a betrayed wife. “I have sacrificed my life for them, my career, my friends, my figure, *everything*. And they are ungrateful, so determined to follow their own rules instead of mine! And now, instead of supporting me in my endeavours, you turn on me!”

She marched to the door and flung it open.

“If you leave before this conversation is over, Alberta, you can keep walking out the front door,” Charles warned.

Alberta gasped and turned around, her expression one of genuine shock.

“That’s right, *wife*, so sit down, pick up your tea, and pay attention.”

Alberta suddenly looked so hurt, so lost, with her big hazel eyes shimmering with tears, he nearly caved. But all he need do was remember the devastation on Jane’s face, and he braced himself.

“Well, Alberta Francine?” He raised an eyebrow. “What’s it to be?”

## **Chapter Six**

Jane sat on the floor of her wrecked suite, guzzling fine brandy straight from the bottle.

She eyed her door as someone knocked, then had another drink and ignored them.

Her father opened the door and looked around with raised eyebrows.

“If a job’s worth doing...” He began.

“Fuck off, Father, I have no wish to see or hear you.” She raised the bottle again, only to have it plucked from her hand. “Hey!”

“All I can say, Jane, is at least you chose the best brandy to get shit-faced on.” He handed the bottle back and resumed his study of the room.

Everything in it was either smashed, ripped or otherwise destroyed. Even the walls had holes punched into them. She eyed him as he nodded with approval as he moved into her bedroom.

She heard him whistle.

And then he returned.

“I fucking hate you.” Jane slurred.

“For now.” He replied and looked around for somewhere to sit.

“No chairs. I broke them all. The prissy, pink monstrosities.”

She watched as her father lowered himself to the ground and rested his back against the wet bar she’d left alone.

“It’s not even midday, Jane.” He said and nodded in the direction of the bottle.

“Don’t care.” She said and drank the last finger down, threw the bottle against the wall where it shattered.

“No,” he agreed, “not at the moment you don’t, but later, when the hangover kicks in, you’ll care a whole lot.”

“Nope.” Jane said and reached around behind her for one of the bottles of white wine. She uncapped it and drank a mouthful, swirled it around and spat it onto to white unicorn on the carpet. “I’m staying drunk until that bitch of a mother of mine...”

“Careful, Jane, that’s my wife you’re talking about,” Charles warned.

Jane snorted with bitterness. “While I am your indentured slave.”



“No. You are my daughter whom I love very much.” Charles said softly and she glared at him. “I am deeply sorry for hurting you, Jane, for so many things it would take a lifetime to confess.” He took a breath. “You know you’re...

“Go away. I don’t wanna hear it. You destroyed my *life*.”

“And where one life ends, another begins.” Her father replied and nodded. “You’ll need to...

Jane gaped at him. “You think I’m going to... You think I’ll cave. You *want* me to be her little princess? To be the perfect society hostess, with the perfect husband and perfect children for her to screw over? No, father, I will not marry and bear children just to see them fucked up like she fucked us up. I’d rather be barren for the rest of *her* life!”

“Not what I meant.” He winced. “And one of your mother is plenty enough, thank you. No, I meant that this has provided yet another catalyst for change in the house.”

Jane gulped more wine, uncaring if any dribbled down her chin.

“Both your brothers understand, because they’ve been where you are now. They’ve had cruel and devastating confrontations with your mother as well. Six, for example, wanted to marry a most unsuitable woman. She worked in the cafeteria on the first level of our building. Your mother had her transferred to Beijing and then confronted him about his choice. He, too, rebelled, said he was following her, but she told him... Catherine, I think her name was, that Catherine confessed to trying to snag him for his money. She even had a surveillance tape to prove it. Six was devastated. I didn’t find out until I received a bill from an actress who looked just like Catherine. I tried to fix it, tried to get her back but...” He lifted his shoulders. “Catherine refused to budge. Told me my son was a vicious, lying womanizer and she was happy where she was, thank you very much.”

“How’ she figure that?” Jane asked. Six was the most quiet and honest man she knew.

“Alberta arranged for the same acting company,” Charles said with a tight mouth. “I was furious with her, but she’d done the job too well and threatened to leave me if I didn’t believe she meant no harm.” He cocked an eyebrow, mocking his younger self. “In those days, I would forgive her anything. But Six hasn’t been the same. He turns up to dinner and eats. He goes to work and does his magic, but there is no life in him, none of the excitable, energetic boy he once was.”

Jane saw the sadness in his blue eyes and tried not to feel anything for him. At least they didn't know about Joanna.

"What about Adam?"

Charles sighed. "He wanted to attend Juilliard. He was certainly good enough, but your mother... tore up his invitation, in front of him, and said she'd be damned if any son of hers was going public embarrass her with his musical twittering. Then she rang the school and accused them of inappropriately touching her son and to leave him alone or she'd call the lawyers."

Jane's jaw dropped. "She *didn't*."

"She did. And when Adam called in his acceptance, they said they were no longer interested in his application."

Charles hung his head. "Again, I was too late to save a son's dream. She did all this while I was at work, but that's no excuse for not taking her in hand."

"And me?"

Charles looked at her with a half-smile. "With you, she went too far; she involved me in trying to crush your dreams. Again, she threatened to leave me. It wasn't until I saw your face, saw how your brothers must have reacted that I truly understood what she'd done to my children. And all for her own selfish needs to absolutely control you all, like she'd been controlled by her parents. Damn me, I let her do it." He said and held out his hand for the bottle.

Jane handed it to him and he took a swig. "Jesus, girl, that's got bones in it." And he manfully swallowed. "Anyway. She will not get a shot at Courtney. I will see her committed to an institution first. And she now knows it."

"Where is she now? Packing, I hope."

"Maybe. But when I left her, she was weeping and wailing about the injustice of it all and how no one in the house loves or appreciates her." He said and drank some more.

"You left her alone."

"It will do her good to know I meant what I said." He reached out the bottle and Jane took it back.

"And if she leaves?" Jane asked.

"Then I shall be very, very sad, but I won't stop her. It was just your bad luck last night coming in looking like the wreck of the Hesperus. She was actually going to leave and I wasn't going to stop her; you gave her a reason to stay."

Jane scowled, felt the surge of anger churning in her belly again. “None of this is my fault, father, and you know it.”

“I do. So I’m fixing it.”

“How? Mother expects me to spend the day with her being pampered and primped.” Jane sneered.

“Not when you’re this drunk, you’re not.” He said with a smile. “No, you are going to continue to get trashed, should you chose, and when you’re done, you are going to clean up – you’re bleeding by the way - and go downstairs to the basement.”

“Why?” Jane looked at the gash along her right forearm and frowned. She didn’t remember getting cut. Then she looked back at her father.

He suddenly looked guilty and she knew her mother had done something he *couldn’t* fix.

“What did she do, father?”

“Ah... called the museum and submitted your resignation via the net.” He confessed.

“I can call them back, say it was a mistake my mother made.” She shrugged, but he was already shaking his head.

“Not with the language ‘you’ used.”

Jane blinked, as if not understanding, but she knew all too well, given what her father had just confessed about what Alberta had done to her brothers. She put it down to exhaustion and the alcohol she’d consumed that she didn’t rant and rave and *do* something.

“Did she contact the University, too?” She asked and felt strangely disconnected from the whole thing, as if none of this was happening to her, but some other Jane Petersen.

“Not yet, but I wouldn’t put it past her and then deny all knowledge.” Her father said with a tight expression.

“Okay, so what’s in the basement that I haven’t already seen?” She asked.

“I’ve set up an office for you.”

“I already have an office at the University.” She narrowed her gaze. “Don’t I?”

“As far as I know, but you can’t take those boxes to the University, they’ll confiscate them and your find will be lost.”

Jane didn’t reply. She just stared at him.

Charles sighed. "You are too drunk to think. So," he levered his body up. "I'll just leave you to it. Go downstairs, Jane, once you're sober, that is. You'll know why."

He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "And get that cut seen to."

Jane brooded after he'd gone, brooded over what her mother had done to destroy the family unit.

Hate churned, turned the wine and brandy to acid that burned hot.

She stumbled to her feet, staggered to the bathroom and vomited up a bottle of wine and half a bottle of brandy and more.

Jane flushed the toilet and washed her hot face. She went back into the wrecked lounge room and resumed her seat, stared at the holes in the wall. It looked like a pimpled face, she thought and giggled.

She'd never asked her father if he was responsible for the heavy-ended mallet.

Then she tipped over onto her side, onto the unicorn she'd spat wine on, and went to sleep.

\* \* \*

Jane rolled onto her back and stared up at the square of the light fitting on the ceiling.

She didn't know what woke her: the acid churning in her stomach, the pounding her head, or the weird assed dream she had that was fading.

"Blech." She smacked her lips and crawled to the bathroom since getting to her feet seemed like too much of an effort.

At the shower, she crawled in and turned the cold water on full.

"Ow, shit!" She cursed as she lifted her forearm. "Oh, fuck." She said more quietly. She'd thought it a graze, but it was a full, straight cut from near her elbow to the side of her wrist. Jane didn't remember acquiring the cut, but she vaguely recalled her father telling her she was bleeding and to get it fixed.

She'd gone to sleep instead. Well, she was awake now, fully awake with a waterfall of cold gushing over her.

Jane got to her feet and stripped out of the bloody white dress. It was ruined, and she stared at the bloodstains.

The cut still bled, sluggishly and she wrapped her hand around it, used her elbow to shut off the water.

Dripping, she looked around the wrecked room. She'd done a number on it and regretted the destruction since Britney would be the one to clean it all up.

She'd cut up the pink and white towels into small pieces, but picked up a white piece and stuck it to the cut. She used two and tied them on with the belt from her pink robe.

Then she went in search of Courtney, dressed only in wet and blood-stained underwear.

Courtney was asleep but awoke when Jane dripped water on her.

"What the... Jane! Do you *know* what time it is?" Courtney reached over and turned on her bedside lamp, squinted at her. "Oh, shit, Jane, what did you *do*?"

She threw back the powder blue covers and grabbed Jane's hand, dragged her into the bathroom.

"Sit!" Courtney ordered and pointed to the commode while she rummaged around in her powder blue vanity. She tugged out a medical kit and dragged a chair over. "Well? We missed you at dinner and mother said you weren't feeling well."

She winced as she unwrapped Jane's impromptu bandage.

"I got drunk and trashed my rooms, or I trashed my rooms and then got drunk," Jane said and Courtney flicked a glance at her. "Or it could be I did both at the same time, it's all kinda hazy."

"Mmmm," Courtney said. "And for your sins, this is going to hurt like a motherfucker."

She pulled out an antiseptic spray from the kit and liberally used it, clamping down on Jane's elbow as she tried to pull away.

"You ain't wrong, sister." Jane breathed at the fire rippling across the flesh of her arm.

"Hold still, I'm not done yet." Courtney snarled and sealed the gash with the careful application of her laser.

Jane didn't look, this was her sister's field, and she closed her eyes. "I feel like shit." She said and kept the tears behind her eyelids.

"Well, that's not surprising. I'll bet there's blood all over the carpet and it looks like someone's been murdered. Then you get drunk and what? Pass out?"

"Yeah."

"And all this is because?"

Jane drew in a shaky breath and told her sister of her traumatic day. She left nothing out.

“So here I am, beat to shit, feeling more than a little light-headed and very, very sorry for myself.”

“An exhausting day.” Courtney said as she returned from packing the kit away. “I did wonder why dinner was more subdued than usual. More... stony in silence, than anything else. Mother kept scowling at your chair.”

“Something you’ll never have to go through,” Jane said and brushed her fingers over the bandage Courtney had wrapped around the throbbing wound.

Courtney put her heels on the side of the powder blue bathtub. “I can’t imagine her doing all the things you said, but it explains a lot.” She looked at Jane and tilted her head. “What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m missing a few details father mentioned, but I feel totally wrecked. Inside and out.” The tears brimmed again.

“You look like it, too.” Courtney turned her head and checked the time on the powder blue analogue clock. “It being nearly five-thirty in the morning, I think what you need is a big nose bag of bacon and eggs, a bucket of coffee – with the option of upchucking it all – and then you need to settle down and plan.”

Jane’s stomach growled and churned at the thought of food.

She looked down at her state of undress. “I cut up all the clothes mother bought me.”

Courtney snorted. “You were busy. And bottles of rum?”

“Half a brandy and nearly an entire chardonnay.”

“How long did it take you? To trash your room?” Courtney asked and looked around her own bathroom, then back at Jane. “For future reference, of course.”

“Hours. But it was most satisfying.” Jane said with a tired smile.

“Come on, we’ll get you dressed and invade Morecombe’s space.” Courtney helped her stand. She got dressed in dark blue slacks and a pale blue shirt, and then they went back to Jane’s suite.

Her younger sister’s jaw dropped when she turned on the light. “Holy shit, Jane!” And she gave Jane a nervous glance. “This took some serious rage, girl.” And then she spotted the drying pool of blood on the unicorn. And yes, it did look like someone had been murdered, the body handily removed.

“*Oh!*” Courtney brought her hands to her mouth in a way that reminded Jane of their mother when she was distressed.

Jane touched her sister’s shoulder. “I’ve never felt so angry in my life, Courtney, but I’m okay now.”

Courtney looked at her, at the carpet, at the busted walls and furniture. “Let’s get you dressed.” She mumbled and went into the bedroom.

Jane followed. Courtney stood amongst the wreckage, staring. “I hope I never feel this, Jane. I really, really hope I never feel this.”

Jane went to the wardrobe and pried open the smashed door. “We’re all capable of it. It’s a matter of control and I lost it.” She dragged out fresh underwear, jeans and a shirt.

“You did. You absolutely did.”

Jane got changed. Courtney kept eyeing her as if she had some serious mental problem.

Downstairs in the kitchen, all was silent. The staff weren’t expected to provide breakfast until seven; ten, in their mother’s case.

Courtney turned on the lights and went straight to the fridge for the bacon and the eggs, then she unhooked a frying pan and set it on the gas hot plate and began to make breakfast.

“Courtney?” Jane asked, interrupting her sister’s humming.

“Yes, Jane?”

“Why do you know how to cook?”

“Get the orange juice out of the fridge, would you, please? Because I was interested enough to learn.”

Jane slid off the stool and got the juice, poured two glasses.

“How could you possibly find the time?”

Courtney gave her smile filled with secrets. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

Jane eyed her with suspicion.

“I mean it. Do you honestly think I spend sixteen hours a day working at the hospital, and then come home to flog myself at study?” Courtney deliberately shook her head.

Jane felt a sinking feeling in the region of her stomach. “You didn’t...”

“Quit medicine? No, of course not. I love it, but...” She gave Jane a wink, “everyone needs a hobby.” She turned out the perfectly cooked rashers of bacon and delicately fried eggs onto a plate. “This happens to be mine.”

Jane found the breakfast perfect. It settled her stomach and she felt more alert. She lined up her knife and fork and then crossed her heart with a finger. “I will never breathe a word of this to anyone.” She promised.

Courtney whisked her plate away and washed it, the flatware and frypan in the sink, then she dried everything off and put it all back in its proper place. Then she wiped everything down.

“There, all done.” She said brightly. “And now, for the coffee.”



## **Chapter Seven**

Jane sipped the coffee as she stood outside and watched the dawn creep up the sky. Courtney decided she needed more sleep and returned to her room, leaving Jane to ponder what she'd be doing next.

What she should do is walk away from it all: the documents, the family, the house and the University. With her skills, she could find something else to do. She'd earned her own way for years, so she didn't need to draw on her trust fund, even if it was still available to her; she wouldn't be surprised if her mother had fiddled with it to spite her.

It would grieve her to leave her newly discovered information behind, but now she knew Cambria Petersen had existed, she could search out other databases.

Still, her father knew the value of what she'd found, he'd see it kept safe. If she could find her trust in him again.

Jane sighed.

"Now there's a soul-deep sound."

She turned to Six. She'd not seen him standing in the shadows. He came forward and plucked the mug from her hand, drank half the mug and handed it back.

"I hear you are *persona non grata*." He said.

In the dim light, she could now see the sadness he usually kept hidden.

"I am, but what brings you out so early?"

He looked over his shoulder, at the kitchen as the staff began their day's work.

"Ah," Jane said, "Joanna."

Six reared back in horror that she knew his secret.

"Calm down, Six, I'm not telling anyone." She said and he relaxed slightly.

"No one can ever know, Jane. I mean it." He growled and she smiled. Here was the brother she'd missed. The determined, forceful one.

"It might be an idea, though. Put the cat amongst the pigeons." She said softly and sipped her rapidly cooling brew.

"I think you've shaken this family up enough, Jane."

"Oh, yeah. I've missed you, brother." She snorted and gave him a one-armed hug.

"I'm always here."

“In body, but not spirit, not for a long, long time.” Jane said and settled for an arm around his waist when he didn’t return her hug and rested her head on his shoulder.

Together, they watched the sun peek over the mountains.

“I need to get tidied up.” Six murmured and kissed the top of her head. “Get ready for work.”

Jane released him. “Thanks for sharing the sunrise with me, Six.”

He gave her a strange smile and went in through the kitchen door.

And she thought of Tim. He’d never given her a secret smile, or a casual touch. She recalled the first time she’d snuck him into the house. He’d taken one look at her bedroom and turned around. “No.” He’d said and walked out. They’d made love at his place instead, in his basement studio amongst monster models, computer games and other hardware.

Jane lowered her gaze, hung her head. She deserved better than that. She deserved the secret smiles, the touches, and the making love no matter where it was. And she wasn’t going to get it with Tim.

Disgusted with herself, for the hint that her mother might be right about her taking up with ‘common’ men, she headed around the house and went inside via the front door.

She set the mug on the entry table and went towards the basement elevator. Her father had mentioned the basement some time yesterday, but she couldn’t recall if it was good or bad.

Her finger hesitated over the button, then she pressed it.

The doors opened and she stepped in, pressed the button for the basement and the doors closed.

At the sound of the bell, the door opened and Jane stepped out of the elevator.

The basement was as she and Courtney left it: empty of boxes and neatly swept. On the left and right were the long racks of wine. Across from her was the metal door that led to galaxies and planets.

All was in its place. Immediately to her right were the stairs leading up, further to her right... another door, the closet that held the equipment for blending wines or decanting.

And pinned to the door was a note written in her father’s scratchy handwriting: *In here.*

With a shrug, she opened the door, pushed it wide and frowned.

Here was the equipment, neatly stacked on shelves, but across from her was another door and another sign flashing in pink neon writing: *Yoo-hoo!* And a flashing pink arrow pointing to the door handle. She studied the door and could have sworn it was brand new. She could even smell the freshly bonded paint. The brass handle shone with polish.

“Okay, I’ll play.” She murmured and opened the door.

She pushed it wide. Darkness greeted her except for the occasional flash of pink light from the sign on the door.

Jane set her hand against the wall and felt around for the flat infra-red panel.

The lights slowly came up, dispelling the darkness and the shadows.

“Oh, *Dad*.” She whispered as she took in the material she’d taken from the vault, a desk with a com system and screen, the shelves awaiting her books or documents, an automated coffee machine and auto-cook, in case she forgot to go upstairs for dinner, or lunch or breakfast.

There was also an opening with a mini bathroom. She could see a shower, a toilet and hand basin, all done in dark blue shot with gold.

And over the dark blue four-seater couch in the main office, he’d hung a four-metre square screen on the opposite wall from her desk.

She moved to look at it and it suddenly came to life with a starscape. She gasped at the beauty of it, as if she were in a ship moving through the galaxy.

“Do you like it?” Her father asked from the doorway and she looked at him without reply. He was dressed for the workday in a white linen suit, perfectly pressed, with a dark blue, high collared shirt and white shoes. He tossed her the remote, which she caught. “You can go anywhere with this, on any known planet during any season, any continent.”

“Why? When?” She asked in a husky voice.

He stepped inside and closed the door. “Why? I knew your mother was becoming... disturbed over your lack of respect for her plans. I’d seen it before with Six and Adam. As for when, about the same time. If I could convince you to toe the line, with her...”

The joy seeped out of Jane. “This would be my reward.”

Charles sighed and shook his head. “From the disappointed expression on your face, I think I’ve explained it wrong. This was always meant to be yours, Jane, to

do with whatever you wished. It is a..." He frowned in thought, then brightened. "It's a sanctuary. Only you and I know of it – well, the tradesmen who built it for me, but they won't say anything. I knew, when you started asking about the transit door, that you'd need somewhere private, secret, if you will." He stroked his hand along the handcrafted oak desk he'd ordered for her.

"More than anything, I want my children to be happy. I'm trying to make amends for all the years I knew you, all of you, were unhappy and did nothing about it."

Jane didn't know what to say. Suddenly, her father had become a stranger. From a happy-go-lucky dad that was so proud of her when she discovered the vault, to the tyrannical overlord who told her how it was going to be yesterday, to the 'hail fellow, well met' drinking with her, to this... apologetic and remorseful father.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" He asked.

Jane cleared her throat. "I don't know *what* to say, Dad." She said, feeling a little helpless with shock and he grinned.

"You calling me 'dad' again is all I need." He wrapped his arms around her.

Jane couldn't unwind enough to hug him back. His words and actions yesterday, along with her mother, had broken something within her; something special had been torn away from her and she didn't know if she'd ever get back.

Her father released her, a little uncomfortable. "Breakfast will be ready, shortly, and since you missed dinner, I guess you could do with some food."

She nearly said she'd already eaten, but she'd promised Courtney and *nothing* would make her betray that trust.

"If nothing else," Charles said when she hesitated, "it will help you recover from yesterday's binge drinking." He said with a faint smile.

He held out his arm. "It will all still be here when you're done."

\* \* \*

Jane sat behind her desk after her second breakfast of light, fluffy pancakes and sugary dark syrup.

She set the coffee machine brewing and eyed the boxes.

Somewhere in there were the actual stories of the Hunter and Retrieval Unit. Did she take pot luck on the files, or be responsible and read them in order, like a real researcher would?

Oh, but she couldn't wait.

"Responsibility is overrated." She muttered and grabbed the nearest box, ripped open the top and stuck her hand in. "Pot luck, it is." And dragged out one of the middle files. She walked to the couch and lay down, made herself comfortable and opened it to the first page.

"Huh. A supply order for knives." She flicked through. "Hell of a lot of knives." She muttered and got up to choose another file, this time, more carefully.

Jane tugged out each file and checked the label. Most in this box was for supplies, weapons, clothes, stationery, and she shut the lid, set it aside and chose another box.

Frustratingly, the next box also dealt with supplies. The next was filled with files on some sort of reconstruction and expansion. It included plans and authorised expense accounts.

She stacked the three boxes against the wall and designated it the 'supply' pile.

Jane tried to recall how she and Tim removed the boxes. From the bottom up, she thought. But that made no difference now as her father had removed the boxes from the stable and brought them here, piled them up willy-nilly. She'd have to continue the way she was and chose the fourth box.

Inside, she found more files, but she felt a frisson of excitement as she read the first label:

*Mission report:*

*Nexus True*

Papers, bound with... some sort of fibre, slipped out to crash to the floor.

Jane picked it up and read the title: *Me*.

"Me? Who's 'me'?" She asked.

But she took the handwritten work and set it next to the couch. Then she grabbed her coffee from the machine and lay down. She made herself comfortable, picked up the loose sheets and began to read.

\* \* \*

Two hours later, her coffee had gone cold and her belly was rumbling with hunger.

She lowered the last page.

The grammar and syntax were odd, but it was a good read, even if it was an explanation.

Adam, a clone of Excalibur. Born on Nexus True. It also gave her an insight into Cambria Petersen, from another perspective.

Jane rebound the work and sat up. She could eat, she decided and put the manuscript in her desk drawer. She'd copy it, and then mark up the interesting parts of the text.

Upstairs, she raided the buffet for smoked salmon with dill sauce sandwiches and a couple of imported bananas. Then she dashed downstairs before she saw anyone.

For the rest of the afternoon, she searched the boxes, made a note of what was in each and stacked the boxes against the wall.

She got down on her knees and lifted the lid on the second to last box, expecting to find the mission files, but she realised the two boxes couldn't possibly hold all the missions the Hunters and Retrieval agents completed. They had to be somewhere else in the vault.

Jane drew out the first file and nearly dropped it. She set it aside and checked the rest of the files in the box. They all bore the same name: Cambria Petersen.

"Holy shit." She murmured and dragged the lid of the last box. More files all bearing the same name. "Oh, my God." She said and slumped to the ground feeling as if she'd found the Holy Grail.

And for her, she had. A lifetime of work to find the myth and she was looking at another's lifetime of work, in truth.

Jane simply sat and stared at the two boxes.

For centuries the government denied all knowledge of this woman and her crew, had looked at her as if she were insane. They'd even demanded to know where she'd heard the name. She replied that she'd heard stories since she was a baby and they relaxed.

Jane knew that the old World Council building had been torn down and covered up, but no one knew what happened to the archive held within. The consensus was that all the files had been moved, but no one could say to where.

She suspected that someone high up in the government chose to lock the files away; so people wouldn't have access to all the dirty little secrets of the World Council. They lived in peaceful times, with intergalactic trade and intercontinental trade. Everyone, or almost everyone, was content. People worked hard and drew a fair pay. If they wanted to succeed, they worked for it.

Rumour had it that the World Council, at one time, held sway over everyone and everything. Corruption was so entrenched that it took decades to unravel.

A Second Dark Age, it was called because no one really knew the truth of the time. Jane suspected she held the key to one of the world's greatest mysteries: that of the World Council itself and its operations. And the greatest myth of the day was Hunter Cambria Petersen. She'd taken on a persona of indestructibility, of completing missions that no one else could; her legend grew to such a size as to be impossible. Like Hercules or Jason, or Odysseus.

But adding Petersen to the list just didn't sound right.

And, as a historian, it was her job to dispel or confirm events in history; and her focus was Cambria Petersen.

She leaned forward for the first file, but her desk com chimed.

"God damn it."

"Ah, Jane," Courtney's voice came over the voice-activated intercom.

"Dinner's about to be served, so you need to get dressed. Don't forget to wear a smile."

"Bitch." Jane muttered.

"I heard that." Courtney giggled and ended the call.

Jane blew out a breath. She jammed the lids onto the boxes and shoved them underneath her desk. That way, she'd be able to start on the files, right after dinner.

Jane closed and locked her door, and the closet door. She took the lift to her suite and when she stepped out, she paused.

She'd trashed everything, including the evening wear.

Jane had no 'dinner' clothes. She shrugged and returned to the main level. If her mother was pissed at her attire, she could go and blow smoke, for all she cared.

Jane walked into the dining room and took her seat. Her mother refused to look at her, refused to look at any of her children and Jane glanced at her father. He shrugged.

Dinner was a silent affair, which suited Jane fine.

Her siblings were lost in their own thoughts, as were her parents.

Then Six pushed back his chair. "I have work." He said and wandered away, a look of concentration on his face.

Jane also pushed away from the table. “I do too,” she said and laid a hand on her father’s shoulder as she passed.

She heard Adam and Courtney also make their excuses.

How had they come to this? This silence and inability to talk. Her mother had a lot to answer for, she decided.

She paused at the stairs.

Jane suddenly felt tired. She’d been up a long time and those files needed her total focus.

Jane trudged up the stairs, knowing she’d be sleeping in a wrecked room.

She opened the door.

Her room was no longer wrecked; it was empty: of furniture, of curtains and carpet. She walked across the bare, wooden floorboards to her bedroom door.

Jane pushed the door open and snorted. Someone had set up a mattress on the floor, nicely made up with... pink.

She was too tired to grumble and she stripped off, climbed under the pink and drifted off to sleep.



## **Chapter Eight**

The next morning, Jane was up early again and, following a quick breakfast, she headed downstairs to her new office.

Inside, she felt the shock and the thrill of the place. She now understood what Adam had meant by coming to an ‘understanding’ with Alberta. She didn’t agree that this type of family dynamic was healthy, not by a long shot. Her father should have insisted her mother see a doctor long before these confrontations ever had a chance to fester.

The idea that it took a knockdown, drag-out, emotionally charged fight where her parents always had the upper hand over adult children was so wrong. What type of people devastated their children to such an extent, they lived their lives lying and sneaking around?

And now she was a part of that family dynamic. At least Courtney wouldn’t have to go through the same thing.

Jane snorted. Maybe Six and Adam had the same idea about her. If they did, epic fail.

They all lead separate lives now, but in the same house. And how tragic was that?

Jane sat at her desk and bumped into the boxes. She pushed back and picked up the first, lifted it onto the desktop and removed the lid.

She took a deep breath, drew in the musty, stale scent of history. Then she pulled out some of the files, set them to the side and put the box behind her chair.

Jane thumbed the remote, aimed it at the blank screen. The star-scape came up and she let it play. It was as if she were on the bow of a ship, gliding through the darkness of space.

Only Six had travelled further than London, or Paris, or Berlin. Adam and Courtney were continentals, and proud of it, but as she stared at the white dots of stars, the plasma clouds, she wondered what it was like. Her father had travelled, but she couldn’t remember to which planets. She recalled her mother saying, ‘Daddy is away on a business trip, off-world, he’ll be back soon’.

Now that she thought about it, her father had spent more and more time working from home. To keep an eye on mother?

Jane blinked. The screen was entrancing and she hit another button to find another less hypnotic view. Instead, she heard music, a soft blend of strings and... Was that some sort of piano?

And then she knew: Adam.

She smiled and left the view and the music on, settled down to discover the true Cambria Petersen.

The first file was for 'recruitment'. Interestingly, Petersen was registered with the Hunters, but not with the World Council. Jane thought they had to be registered with both.

Maybe the registration took place later, she decided, or maybe Petersen worked outside the government.

Jane read through all the legalise, the responsibilities of becoming a Hunter.

"Wow," she murmured, "not judge and jury, but judge, jury and *executioner*!" The responsibility must have been awesome. It would take a morally strong person to reject the temptation of corruption. Any Hunter could become a legal killer, for the right amount of money.

What must that have been like? To know you held another's life in the palm of your hand? To stand in front of that person, to look into their eyes and pull the trigger? To see the life fade and die? And then walk away.

How many did she kill? How many could have been saved with a custodial sentence? And how hard was it after the first kill? Did it get easier?

Jane kept reading. Ah. There it was: the consequences of executing someone without a warrant, without an official reason, death.

*So, get it right, or die yourself. Okay.*

And there, at the bottom of the last page, the blue inked signature of Cambria Petersen and one Lord Montague.

Jane brushed her fingers over the signature.

Real proof. She thought. Real, unimpeachable proof that Cambria Petersen wasn't just a legend, but a living, breathing person.

Her fingers shook with the discovery and she closed the file, set it aside and picked up the next.

This one was thicker and she opened it. It was a long, involved briefing of events leading to the Retrieval of a group of prisoners from the planet Tudor.

Jane frowned. She'd seen that name before, and then her eyebrows rose. The register book mentioned it in regard to investigations into judicar corruption. What was his name?

She got up and went to the register books, found what she wanted on the first page. Bolingbroke. She'd have to do more research there, she decided and returned to her reading.

Cambria's testimony took up most of the file as she detailed how she'd been falsely sent to Tudor. What happened to Cambria on Tudor astonished Jane.

Could she, Jane, manage to survive for so long on a planet of *men*? Could she kill them if they tried for her? And the beasts, the 'pillars and komatsus... simply awful. And yet, Cambria was a product of her time, a second Dark Age. Few people, if any, knew what went on then. Jane expected a time of brutality and violence and injustices.

She read of the serial killer, Excalibur Jones and Cambria's strange relationship with him. And then her rescue. The rest of the file detailed the comments of other inmates.

Jane could see they tried to protest their innocence in being sent there, but few were actually innocent.

She closed the file and moved on to the next. Again, her eyebrows rose as she saw the big red stamp across the file in a diagonal. Eyes Only and the signature underneath of Lord Montague.

Intriguing.

Jane opened the file to the first page and then rolled towards the coffee machine. She set her mug under the tube and pressed the button.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee overwhelmed the mustiness of the files. Once her mug was full, she rolled back to the file.

The hot drink cooled as she read of Cambria's mission to Nomad, hunting her nemesis and lover, Excalibur Jones.

She really needed to access his file, read of his misdeeds to explain why the Hunters were so hot for him to be executed.

Jane shook her head at the Nomadian's illegal insertion of alien technology into Cambria.

"Bastards." She muttered and continued reading.

And then she read of the shooting, or wounding, she allowed. Jane frowned at the brackets and read of murder charges to be levelled against the woman who shot Cambria. Murder? That must be a mistake since Cambria survived.

The file ended with Cambria detailing the end of the human enclave and the enslaving, mysterious aliens.

She closed it with a sigh. The file must have been misfiled. Cambria had a lot of legends attached to her. Could it all be a lie?

No, surely not. Two missions did not a legend make.

Jane grabbed the next file. It, too, had Eyes Only stamped across the front.

*Ragnarok.*

She sat back. Her father was building a resort there.

More history, then, of how Ragnarok was back then.

Cambria was hunting the woman responsible for... no, wait a minute, that can't be right.

Jane checked the dates on the file and the previous one. Something was seriously out of kilter here. There was no way Cambria could survive an explosion that took out kilometres of forest.

Between the two files, there was no explanation of how Cambria survived the bunker busters she and First Officer Karesh set off. In fact, there was just Cambria's notation that they set them off together, with no protection.

Jane drummed her fingers on the desk. A clone? Like Adam was a clone of Jones? That was the only explanation she could come up with. And it would explain the Eyes Only. No one would want anyone else to know. A prototype? She'd already read Lord Montague's comment that they couldn't find enough Hunters to satisfy the World Council's needs. So, why not make them? Nexus True could do it. Maybe that's where they got the idea of cloning Jones.

Satisfied with her reasoning, she continued with the file... until she came across the part where the shuttle carrying Cottington-Blake went down.

Cambria freely admitted she'd been gravely injured, and yet... then there was the next shooting and the theft of her gear.

At least the rest of the mission went well. Jane mused. And she was interested to note that Cambria chose to return Cottington-Blake, rather than execute her. The woman deserved it for what she'd done on Nomad.

Jane reached for the third file. The Hunt for the Gardishans? Who were they?

She read the précis.

“Oh...” She breathed as she read of the resale of faulty transporters. Scary. She couldn’t imagine stepping into a transporter and thinking the weird warping was natural. But she’d be thinking about it the next time she travelled to the vault.

And so she began reading the story of how Cambria brought down the Gardishans.

By the time she finished, she found her hands shaking and moisture on her cheeks. She used the heel of her hand to wipe them dry. Then she got up and left the office.

Jane marched upstairs and into receiving room. She went straight to the liquor cabinet and poured herself a healthy dose of straight bourbon.

After drinking it down like water, she poured another.

“That won’t help.” Her mother said from behind her. “But pour me one anyway, would you, darling? On the rocks.”

Jane mixed the drink and turned, handed it to her perfectly turned out parent.

Alberta cupped Jane’s cheek. “What has you so upset, Jane?”

Jane looked into her mother’s eyes. They were clear, concerned, with no sign of any neurosis or feral paranoia.

“One of the files I found.” She said softly.

Alberta frowned and dropped her hand. “Your father, of course, gave them back to you.” Alberta lowered herself into a wingback chair in front of the anachronistic fireplace. Jane took the seat across from her.

“I wish you could understand how important they are, Mother.”

Alberta snorted. “They are old and nasty and look at you, all teary-eyed and grieved, after reading just one.”

Jane leaned her head back and closed her eyes. “I don’t want to argue with you, Mother.”

“And I don’t want to argue with you.”

Jane looked at her mother. She was staring into the fire as if it held all the answers.

“What is in the file that has you so upset?” Her mother asked and turned to her. She seemed genuinely interested.

“I’m working on Cambria Petersen, Mother.” She said and Alberta snorted.

“That woman. She’s a myth, Jane, someone made popular by a novelist centuries ago. She’s a character in a series of books or a vid or something!”

Jane looked at her mother, met her disapproving gaze. “She’s real. And I have the proof.”

Jane watched as her Mother’s face paled and her expression grew uncertain. Then she scoffed. “She can’t be...”

“Oh, she’s real all right, Mother, and I’ve just read a tale of rape and torture, of murder and execution and the slaughter of innocents, of profiteering and slavery of...” She put a hand over her eyes, blew out a shaky breath and drank another slug of bourbon.

“Then stop, Jane, if it upsets you so.”

Jane dropped her hand. “I can’t. This is too important.”

“Why? You’ve been obsessed with this woman since you first heard the stories. Why is this so important to you?” Alberta said. “I’m trying to understand.”

“Mother... I... I don’t really know.” Jane confessed. “Maybe I wanted to know, wanted an answer as to whether anyone could do what she did. She seemed so fantastical, larger than life, but I couldn’t find anything. There are no listings anywhere of the books or author or vids or any other media. She’s a part of our traditional oral history still remembered. How amazing is that?”

Alberta nodded. “It’s always been accepted she never existed, that she was a character written in ancient tomes, or some such thing. No one believed in her, Jane, she’s like Rambo, or Frodo, or Harry, or Darth what’s-his-name; they’re not real.”

“No, I understand that Mother, but this is different; she has the same surname as we do, and I think that’s where it started.”

Alberta gusted out a sigh. “How many times do I have to tell you: we’re not *related*.”

“I know, I know, but it was the beginning.”

Jane finished her drink and set the glass down on the table. “I think I need some sleep.” She sighed and rose.

“Well, it *is* after midnight, darling,” Alberta said. “I think I’ll just sit here for a while.”

“Goodnight, mother.”

Jane went downstairs to the office. She put all the files back into the box and slid it under her desk. Then she shut down the screen, the coffee machine and left, locking the doors behind her. She could have slept the night away on the couch, but she didn't think she'd be able to, with *that* file so near.

Tired and emotionally drained, she took the lift up to her suite and stumbled to her bed.

## **Chapter Nine**

Deep into the early morning, the nightmares came. It was as if Excalibur Jones used the knife on her, then pressed a reset button to bring her back and do it all over again. She saw the dead alien children and smug Gardishans.

Not even the satisfaction of the death of Jones broke her out of the loop and she awoke feeling as tired as when she went to bed.

She was due at the University today, to teach two first-year classes on Database Diving and the Definitions of History.

In the pre-dawn light, she stumbled to her closet and dragged out her usual jeans and shirt, then added a pair of boots. She liked to look like she got down into history, rather than be an ivory tower historian like some of the other lecturers.

She took her clothes into the bathroom and had a cold shower to try to dissipate the nightmare and to wake her up.

It worked, to a degree, and she towelled off, got dressed and cleaned her teeth.

Jane stumbled through the dark of her bedroom, through her suite and out into the hallway. She used the lift.

In the dining room, she was surprised to see her father, sipping coffee from a mug and reading the daily news on his forearm unit. She couldn't remember where she'd put hers but thought it might be downstairs.

"Good morning, Dad, why are you up so early." She said in passing and went to the buffet. Jane decided she'd do with cereal this morning.

"Early conference call with Ragnarok, I'm afraid, what about you?" He asked and glanced at her. "You look a little rumpled this morning."

"Rough night." She grumbled and sat next to him.

"Want to talk about it?" He asked.

Jane shook her head. "Nightmares. I have to get my head in the game today, I'm teaching."

"Fair enough." He nodded and shut down the forearm unit. "What's on?"

Jane lifted a shoulder. "Oh, you know, first-year history, followed by first-year history. Then I need to come back and go through more files – if I can bear it."

"Tough reading?"



“The toughest, Dad.” She said and set her spoon back into the half-eaten cereal, pushed the bowl away. “Think of the most heinous acts, then double or triple them.”

“I don’t think I want my digestion to become upset, so I’ll not be thinking of anything other than my upcoming ‘call.’” He said with a sympathetic look. “But, you know history has some nasty stuff in it.”

“I do. The Brazilian Expansion springs to mind.” She said and she was back discussing history with her father, like she used to do before finding the vault.

Half an hour later, she felt much better and discovered she’d eaten her cereal after all.

Charles pushed back from the table. “I’ve got to go, sweetie, but you have a good day today.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “Oh, you said you were reading files this afternoon?”

“Yep. Although it makes for harrowing reading, it is fascinating, too. Why?”

“We haven’t seen you at dinner.”

She looked up at him. “Do you want me there?”

He smiled at her. “I know you, Jane. When you get your nose stuck into something, you stay there until you’re exhausted, or someone interrupts. So while it would be nice, I can honestly say I understand when work takes over everything. If we don’t see you, we don’t see you. It’s your choice.”

“Thanks, Dad.” She said and he gave her a wave on his way to his office.

Jane took the cart down to the front gate of the estate and caught the shuttle downtown to the university.

She was greeted by several early risers – or late-nighters – as she went through the pillared entryway of the two millennia-old building.

The guard greeted her with a lift of his chin and she used her thumbprint to sign in.

She went up the broad, white marble staircase and to the second level.

“Good morning, Dr Petersen. You’re in early.” Professor Cameron Steele walked towards her. He was five years her senior, with black curly hair and intriguing blue-green eyes; handsome, she thought, tall and broad across the shoulders. He also taught Modern European History. Jane and he sometimes got into friendly arguments about what lead to his modern history.

And now, she had the answer at her fingertips.

“Morning, Cam. I thought I’d get a jump on the day. First years.” She grumbled as he turned to escort her towards the shared history offices.

“Ah, well, all those eager sponge-like minds ready for soaking up whatever you tell them.” He breathed wistfully and then smiled. Dimples appeared in his cheeks

“Cam, you teach graduates. What do you know about it?”

He put a hand on his heart. “Oh, you wound me. I didn’t always have the graduates, you know. I had first and second years in London.”

Jane opened the double doors to the history department, set the doorstops – no automatic doors, here. No, indeed: live in the history, be the history. “What about you, Cam?”

“What about me what?” He asked and she turned slightly. Had he been staring at her?

“Why are you in early?”

Cam blinked. “Oh, um, I was accessing the GDN for information on how technology affects the human condition in the modern-day.”

“Huh,” Jane said and made her way through the cubicles to her desk. The message light blinked red. “Well, good luck with that, Cam.” She said and dropped into her seat. She hooked on the headset and reached out to press the button for the first message.

She saw Cam watching her with a slight frown. “Something else?” She asked and pink dusted his high cheekbones.

“Ah... yes. No! It’s... nothing. I’ll... see you later.” And he hurried away. Jane leaned to the side to watch him go.

His slacks fitted him quite nicely she thought and turned back to her messages.

The first one was from her boss, Professor Brendan Walker. He wanted to set up a meeting with her, to discuss the new semester’s syllabus.

Was it her imagination or did his voice sound warmer and more intimate than usual? She shook off the thought and continued through her messages. Most dealt with students and their work, but her thoughts kept going back to Walker.

He must be twenty years her senior, with oak coloured hair greying at the edges and cool hazel eyes.

She had a purely professional relationship with him; didn't think of him at all outside of the meetings they had. On a shrug, she returned her attention to her upcoming classes.

\* \* \*

After four hours of teaching students the definition of history – which was everything – and why – everything was an example of the age in which it was produced – and explaining how to dive for information in the vast depths of databases, Jane found she had a headache brewing.

She went to the cafeteria and ordered a coffee; maybe she just needed a shot of caffeine to settle her.

All day, Cambria haunted the back of her mind. How did she stand it, the rape and the torture? Why did she ally herself with that maniac Jones? She must have known what he was like after Tudor.

“A Euro for your thoughts.”

Jane looked up in surprise to see Professor Brendon Walker smiling down at her. Walker wore a tweed jacket and leather elbow patches, rounded glasses that made his hazel eyes seem large, a strong chin and jaw. He poked the glasses up his thin nose.

“Just a puzzling, private research project, sir.” Jane said and Brendon sat down across from her, set his cup of tea down.

“Maybe I can help?” He offered with a friendly smile.

“I'm afraid not, sir.” She said with an equally friendly smile.

He laid a hand over hers. “Jane. I've been studying history for a long, long time. I rarely come across a problem that I can't solve – whether Faculty related, or... private.” He said. Jane frowned at the... intimate tone, the warmth in his eyes, the slight smile.

She slid her hand from beneath his and reached for her coffee.

“Sir, I can't tell you, because it's not University related. I'm only a little confused is all, nothing to worry about.”

Brendon leaned back in his seat and lifted the teacup to his lips. “And the puzzle?”

“Timeline. Consecutively dated files, but contents that make the dates impossible.”

“Ah, I see. A conundrum indeed. And you're sure of the dates?”

“Yes, each page is folioed and dated.” She said and drank some of her coffee.

“Then I would suggest to you, that the dating has been done later, to cover someone’s neglect in proper file keeping.”

Jane frowned. She supposed it was... no, it couldn’t be because the register would then have to be in error, and that was impossible.

“No,” she sighed, “That’s not it.”

“Now you have me intrigued, my dear. Where did you say you found these files?” He asked with a tilted smile.

“I didn’t, sir.” She said and this time, she didn’t smile.

“Must be a deep, dark secret, then. I thought I knew where all the bodies were buried, so to speak.” And he laughed at his joke. “But seriously, where did you find the files? Perhaps I can give you an explanation if I know the location. For example, the files found in the basement of London’s War Museum were scattered at some time and re-folioed by an idiot who thought he knew a better way of archiving.” He shook his head. “It took them years to sort them all out into the proper order.”

Jane drained her coffee and stood. “I’m sorry, sir, I just can’t tell you. But thank you for the offer.”

“Well,” he said and looked up at her with that warmth in his eyes, “you know where to find me should you need further assistance.”

She gave him a vague smile and weaved her way through the tables.

Outside on the concourse, Cam hailed her from behind. She turned and watched his long legs bring him closer.

“Hey, there, Jane.”

“Back at you.” She said and resumed her walk to the shuttle.

“What did Walker want?” He asked.

Jane eyed him. His jaw was tight, as if he were angry.

“Just a chat.” She shrugged.

“Uh, huh. I don’t think so.” He said and she frowned. “He’s after a lot more than just a chat, and from the way he watched you walk away, you told him something that’s piqued his interest in you further.”

“It’s private, Cameron, nothing to do with the Faculty or the University.” She growled.

“Now, don’t go all defensive on me, pal of mine, I’m just concerned. Walker is rumoured to be a bit of a womanizer. That’s all.”

Jane barked out a laugh. “Him? Really?”

Cam nodded.

“You don’t need to be concerned, then, because I have absolutely zero interest in him. And if he comes onto me, I’ll slap him down. Gently, of course.” She lifted a shoulder. “Besides, I’m already in a relationship.” *I think.*

She hadn’t seen Tim in days. Maybe she should call him since he hadn’t called her.

“Congrats on that, but I don’t think it will matter to him.” Cameron said bitterly.

Jane glanced at him. He looked fit to burst a blood vessel.

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

“Oh, I *am*.” He said with a short nod.

“Then all I can say is that *she* wasn’t worth it, if she could be lead astray so easily by a much older man.”

Cameron didn’t reply and she knew he was thinking about it.

“This is me.” She said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah.” He said softly and she climbed aboard the shuttle, took her seat.

She gave him a wave as the shuttle lifted and scooted down the street.

*He really is a good-looking man*, she thought and then turned her attention to the problem of the timeline for the files.

## **Chapter Ten**

Back in her basement office, Jane took a pain blocker and settled down to the next file. She opened the cover, then closed it and accessed the com system, pressed the bookmarked section.

“Tim Houston.” She said and the voice-activated system connected her.

“I’m busy. Leave a message.” Tim’s disgruntled voice said and she smiled.

“Hey, Tim, it’s Jane. I thought I might come over later, see how you’re doing on your new project. I should be there in, oh, a couple of hours? See you then.” She said and turned the com system off.

When Tim had an idea, it took a power bar to pry him away from it; they were alike in that aspect and she smiled. It made their relationship that much easier. But... were they still together? Should they be? Jane shook off her thoughts and returned to her work.

She studied the cover of the file, with its Eyes Only stamp. If she started it, she’d be too focused and forget to go around to Tim’s.

Well, nothing was stopping her from going around right now, she thought and put the files away. She wasn’t in any hurry to delve back into the horror.

Jane locked up and took the lift to the main level.

Since she wasn’t going to the University, she decided to take one of the cars downtown instead.

The Mark 7 TRX 35L was probably too powerful for an urban environment, but she loved the feel of power as she drove the convertible.

And it impressed Tim’s neighbours.

The car purred as she coasted down the long driveway to the gate, which majestically swung open.

Jane gunned the engine and grinned. The Mark 7 was the only vehicle on the market with the new compressed plasma battery. The energy was silent, but who wanted that? So the makers inserted an interactive sound system. Press the accelerator and the engine growled.

It gave her a thrill every time she drove it. Late autumn air nipped at her cheeks and brought colour to her skin.

Pedestrians downtown turned to watch her drive by in the dark cherry coloured vehicle.

Jane parked in the underground of Tim's high rise building. She set the over-the-top security system and pocketed the key.

With a slight smile on her face, she took the lift to the basement level and walked the quiet hallway to Tim's door. Only four people lived down here, and it was soundproofed against the above car park.

Curiously, the door was slightly ajar. He must have received her message and known she'd come by early.

"Hey, Tim, working hard?" She asked as she pushed open the door. She closed the door behind

A man she didn't know came out of the bedroom to the left, wiping his hands on a dark red cloth. He was tall and broad through the shoulders of his finely-crafted suit. "Hello," he said, "who are you?"

Jane frowned. "Tim's... friend." She said, rather than admit to being his girlfriend. She didn't know why she said that, but she didn't want this man to know about her relationship. "Who are you?"

"Me? I'm one of Tim's uncles. Brad's the name. How do you do?" He said and reached out his hand.

Jane took it, briefly shook his damp hand. "What brings you to town, Brad?" This was wrong; *he* was wrong.

Fortunately, Brad turned away before he could see the disbelief in her expression.

"Please, have a seat. Can I offer you some coffee?" He said and dropped onto Tim's saggy brown couch. Jane took the opposite arm and leaned against it.

"No, thank you. We were supposed to meet at the University's cafe for coffee. I had some there and decided to roust him from his gaming." Jane lied. She did not like this man. "Is he in?"

"Ah, no, I'm sorry, he's not. I think you may have missed him in transit. He bolted out of here like his ass was on fire." Brad tilted his head. "Are you a student?" He asked and his gaze run over her.

"Yeah." Jane lied again. "Third year gaming, but I'm stuck on the interactive three-dimensional module. I just can't seem to get the P-17 weapon sub-routine to aim straight." She snorted an embarrassed laugh. "Damn bullet keeps coming out the side, and the shell casing then follows. I've run through the debugger, but it says I'm missing a line of code."

Brad said nothing.

“So, what brings you to town, Brad?” She asked and tried to think of a reason to leave.

“Business. I’m in the search and recovery business.” He said with a slight frown and studied his fingernails.

“I don’t know what that is,” Jane said.

“Well, when things get lost, a client hires me to find it. So I’m in Geneva tracking down some items for my client. I thought I’d drop by to see how Tim’s doing.”

Again, silence descended. Brad seemed perfectly at ease, but Jane grew increasingly nervous.

She licked her lips and looked at the door, then she checked her watch. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to catch him later.” She said with a sigh. “Damn it.”

“Perhaps it’s better this way.”

Jane scowled at him.

“This way, when you work it out, you’ll learn something rather than someone telling you how it’s done.” Brad smiled. “You’ll learn through experience.”

“I hope you’re right, Brad, because if I fail this, I’m out.” She pushed up from the arm and went to the door. “When he comes back, could you give him a message from me?”

Brad rose, too. “Sure.”

“Tell him he’s an asshole for standing me up.” She said and Brad grinned. His teeth were very white and even. “And tell him I’ll try to work it out myself. If I’m still having problems by the weekend, I’ll give him a call.”

“Roger, I’ll tell him that, Ms...” He raised his eyebrows at her.

“Fortescue, Jane Fortescue.” She said and opened the door.

“Ms Fortescue.” He tilted his head. “You called earlier.”

“I did.” She said and tried to recall what she’d said and slipped out.

Jane made herself walk down the hallway as if nothing was wrong. She pressed the button of the elevator and refused to turn around, even though her neck crawled with the sensation of being watched. The feeling grew worse, as if Brad were sneaking up on her, reaching out with his big, damp hands, ready to grab her around the throat.



She swallowed against the sudden dryness in her mouth and listened hard for any stealthy movements.

The door pinged and slid wide.

Jane stepped inside and turned. The hallway remained empty and quiet. Brad remained in the apartment and she was alone in the lift.

Her breath gusted out and she pressed the button for the car park.

As soon as the lift reached the level and the doors opened, Jane ran to her car. She turned off the security at a run and dived into the driver's seat.

She backed out, tried not to slam her foot on the accelerator.

*Do not draw attention to yourself. Do not draw attention to yourself.* She repeated as she drove out of the underground.

Then she remembered what she was driving.

Jane looked in the mirrors as she drove. But what did she know about being followed?

"Engage com system." She said as she continually checked behind her.

"Com system engage," the feminine voice crooned, "to whom do you wish a connection?"

"Law enforcement, urgent." Jane pulled up at a red light and silently cursed it.

"Geneva Police, Sergeant St Germaine."

"Sergeant, I'm calling in a possible... um." She had no proof that 'Brad' had done for Tim and yet...

"The vehicle you are driving is registered to Charles Petersen, is that correct?" His terse question centred her.

"Yes, sir, this is his daughter, Jane. I've just come from my boyfriend's place. Tim Houston. The door was ajar and a strange man was in there."

Sergeant St. Germaine cleared his throat. "And?"

"He was wiping his hands, said he was Tim's uncle Brad."

"Go on."

"I've met Tim's family, including extended, he doesn't have an Uncle Brad, let alone one who is in the search and recovery business." She said and squealed the tyres as she took off from the stoplight.

"Keep to the speed limit, Ms Petersen." The sergeant admonished.

"Yes, sir." She slowed down. "And he wanted to know who I was. I didn't feel comfortable so I lied, and he wanted to know what I was doing there, so I said we

were supposed to meet at the University cafeteria and he said I probably missed him in transit, but that's impossible because we didn't make a date. I called him and said I'd come over, so he lied about Tim."

"Take a breath, Ms Petersen." The officer said calmly.

Jane realised her hands were shaking. "Engage auto-drive." She said.

"Auto-drive engaged. Destination?" The voice asked.

"Home station."

"Good thinking, Ms Petersen. Now, do you have any reason believe that harm has come to Mr Houston?" Sergeant St Germaine asked.

"Well, no, but it's highly suspicious, don't you think?" She said with a frown.

"Do you know of anyone who would harm Mr Houston?"

"Um... no." She confessed.

"I understand he is a successful games developer, could a rival be after his programming?"

"I don't... know." She said, deflated. "I've never met his work colleagues."

"Thank you for your call, Ms Petersen, we'll try and contact him tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But it might be too late by then." She protested.

"I'm afraid, Ms Petersen, that the best I can do at this stage is to register your call and make a note for an automated search and call after twenty-four hours." The officer sounded regretful, but she wondered if it was practised.

"Is there nothing I can do?" Jane asked.

"You could try calling his family and friends, see if they know of his whereabouts. Other than that, no, ma'am. If he has met with foul play, the last thing you need is for this Brad character to think you are a witness." He said and now Jane felt scared.

"Thank you, Sergeant St. Germaine, I'll await your call."

"Thank you, Ms Petersen." And he hung up.

The car sped along the streets until she saw the gates to home. They swung open with annoying slowness and she desperately wanted them to hurry.

Once again, she checked all her mirrors but didn't see anyone paying close attention to her. Of course, she'd never know whether she'd been followed because she didn't know what to look for.

The gates finally opened and allowed the car through. The Mark 7 moved up the driveway like a heavy sedan, rather than a powerful sports car.

Jane ground her teeth as the car moved slowly. She would love to have jumped out, but the seat belt wouldn't disengage until the car had come to a complete stop.

Finally, the car pulled into its parking space and the garage door closed. The lights came up to dispel the burgeoning darkness.

Jane heard the click of the engine shutting down and nearly ripped off the seat belt. She jumped out of the car and through the connecting door to the house.

And there she stopped in the mudroom, surrounded by coats and boots. What did she do now?

She opened the door onto the back entry foyer.

Jane listened. The house was silent, too silent. Where was everyone? And then she heard the clink of flatware on china.

Suddenly in need of company, Jane walked into the dining room where her family sat consuming the entree of oysters with Margherita dressing.

Morecombe sniffed his disapproval and set a plate before her. He poured a pale Semillon into her wine glass.

Jane gave everyone a small, brief smile and lowered her head to her food. She wasn't particularly hungry, but for now, she needed the company of familiar people – even if it was her silent family.

By the main meal of roasted wild boar and sour cherry gravy, with *potatoes dauphinoise*, and green beans with almonds, Jane could feel her heart rate return to normal. At least her hands had stopped shaking.

In fact, she was wondering what all the panic was. So a man called 'Brad' was in Tim's apartment. So what? Tim was an attractive man. Brad wouldn't be the first man Tim invited home, and he wouldn't be the last.

That she felt threatened by Brad was nothing more than imagination, and she'd called the police on him.

Heat flushed into her cheeks. Tim would never forgive her if the police busted down the door and found him *in flagrante delicto*...

Morecombe and his crew whisked the plates away and set a slice of *Tarte citron* before her.

"Thank you," she murmured and her voice seemed overly loud. Enough was enough with these people. Jane scooped up a tangy piece of pie on her dessert fork and ate it. Delicious.

“So, Dad, how was your meeting this morning?” She asked.

Her siblings looked at her, her mother gasped and her father’s head jerked up from his dessert.

“It, er, was good, fine.” He said with a glance at his wife and then deliberately looked away to smile at Jane. “I think the Ragnarok ski station will come online on time and under budget. And how did you go with your students?”

“Oh, blah. Eager minds and all, but explaining why and what is history gets a little tedious year after year. I think I’ll apply for a graduate program next year. What do you think?”

Her brothers’ head’s turned like watching a tennis match and Courtney, next to her, tried to suppress a smile.

“I think it’s an excellent idea, Jane. A step up and maybe you could try for a professorship.” Charles said and turned to his younger son. “Adam, congratulations on the music contract.”

Adam flushed. “I, er... ah, thanks, Dad.” And both men engaged in an animated discussion about music.

Jane slid a glance sideways. Her mother looked appalled but was also trying not to be interested. She kept glancing at Adam as if she didn’t know him.

“You’ve done it now,” Courtney whispered to her.

“What?” She whispered back.

“Broken family tradition.”

“Hah. It’s not a tradition if it makes people unhappy.” Jane replied. “And it’s time Dad stepped up to the plate and made this a family affair rather than six people eating together.”

Courtney nodded, but Charles asked her about her day, and then the conversation moved around the table.

Morecombe cleared the table and set out cheese, hand-rolled chocolate truffles and fruit. Then he poured port for everyone while the conversation continued.

In the end, a typical one-hour dinner took two hours.

Charles checked his watch and lifted his eyebrows. “Well, much as I have enjoyed this, I have another call to make. So you’ll have to excuse me.” He sent Jane a wink and she smiled back.

Six rose, but instead of wandering off, he headed straight for the kitchen.

The feminine squeal that came from behind the swing door had Jane biting her lip.

Adam also gave her a wink before heading to his suite.

Jane turned to her mother. Alberta had tears in her eyes that she blinked away when she realised she was being watched. She delicately dabbed at her lips and rose, then regally walked out, her back rigid.

“Mother is pissed at you,” Courtney said.

“Nah, she just doesn’t want to show her interest, that’s all. Don’t forget: appearances are everything.” Jane replied and pushed away from the table. “I have some reading to do.” She said.

“Ah, in your secret place, you mean?” Courtney asked.

“Not sharing, Court, not yet.” And she dashed away to the stairs before Courtney could get up and follow her.

Jane locked the closet door, as well as her own office door. She *wasn’t* sharing.

She tried Tim’s number again, but it went to messages and she hung up. The police said to wait twenty-four hours, and so she would, she decided and took out a file.

*Huh.* Cambria had gone to America.

No, she’d been kidnapped and *taken* to America. Jane read, and settled in for a mission brief that once again, appalled her in its cruelty.

Jane closed the file and stared at the starscape without really seeing it. Slavery. Violent subjugation of the population, starvation and re-education.

And the referral to other files: Colonel Rafael Caparossi, Global Rebellion? Assassination: President Peter De Crecy, Global Security Unit and others.

Jane tried not to feel astonished, or overwhelmed, or plain shocked! What type of era *was* the Second Dark Age? As brutal and violent and ill-educated as the first?

She knew who to ask: Brendon Walker, but she was loathed to raise the subject with him and couldn’t think of a good enough reason to broach the subject with him.

She set the question aside and moved onto the next file. At the front, she read the description. This was most puzzling. Cambria went back to America to, wow, assassinate people! The local leaders and the governor.

Jane blinked in surprise at the note – Caparossi was Cambria’s *husband*!

She sat back in her seat. More wow. Caparossi and Cambria. Married!

“Holy crap. If they were married... did they have children?” She asked herself.

Jane dragged out the second box and rummaged through it.

“Personal file, where is it? Recruitment for the Hunters, patient files, where is it?” She turned to the box she was currently reading through and skipped ahead.

“Oh.” She said as she pulled out the file with Cambria Petersen’s name written on the cover.

Jane dragged it out and opened it. And stared at the image of the mythical Hunter Cambria Jaxentia Petersen.

Cambria Petersen wore a grim visage and stared unhappily into the camera. She had navy dark blue eyes, dark hair and a firm mouth. But she also had a long and thick scar on her jaw.

Tudor, Jane thought, this was taken after her return from Tudor.

Underneath was another image. She didn’t look so pissed off.

And her eyes, they had flecks of gold in them now. The scar was gone, too. The clone? It must have been, this image was dated five years later and apart from the scar and the gold-flecked eyes, she hadn’t changed.

There was a third image. Another fifteen years, and still, she hadn’t changed. Cambria still had the gold in her eyes, but Jane couldn’t find a wrinkle on that fine skin. Didn’t clones age?

She read the birth date and parent information, the school information, from kindergarten to university with a referral to another file, recruitment into the Bureau of Political Security. Those years were blank of information and referred to another file. Then the date of recruitment into the Hunters and a referral to the file she’d already read.

Jane flipped the page and saw the date of cohabitation after the appropriate amount of time. Co-habitation? De-facto, did the file mean? She read the details, the legal requirements of co-habitation.

To the next page and the hair stood up on her neck. A request for maternity leave and then the announcement: A girl, Saskia Cambria Caparossi.

Jane turned the page, another request for maternity leave, eighteen months later. This time a boy. Nathan Jack Petersen.

Was that a tradition of the day? To name the boys after the mother and the girls after the father, or a pact between the parents.

Another page and another baby boy, after two years: Alexander Montague Petersen.

And finally another girl: Sheridan Nero Caparossi.

The file didn't have images of the children, but perhaps that was all for the best. The file wasn't a family album, after all...

No one knew any of this. She thought. No one, but her.

The enormity of her discovery hit her all over again. She had to protect the information, from all comers.

Jane knew she still had to make the claim, but she still had time. The first thing she had to do was secure the Petersen information, every last file. The references, though, she wasn't averse to having other historians find them; it would add legitimacy to her work, and to the book she planned to write.

She blew out a breath. A book. The true story of Cambria Petersen-Caparossi.

And more. The descendants. She'd track them down and ask what it was like to be the descendant of a myth.

She didn't read much more. There were more references to other files and then the file ended.

"Where's the retirement notice?" She asked and flicked through the file again. Nothing.

She laid the file aside and returned to the mission in America. But... she couldn't concentrate, couldn't help but think of the children and their lives.

With a shake of her head, she looked over at the boxes stacked at against the wall.

*Caparossi.*

What sort of man would 'co-habit' with a woman who went out and executed felons, who assassinated politicians? What kind of a man slept next to, made love to a woman who knew more about violence and hate and crimes than he did?

Jane found herself at the stack she'd labelled *People*.

If she was right, Caparossi's personnel file was in the top or second from the top box.

Jane dragged them to her desk, opened the first and flicked through. There he was: General Nathan Caparossi.

She read of his birth, of his military education, his recruitment into the Retrieval Unit.

Jane was astonished to read that he and Lord Montague organised and initiated the rebellion against the World Council. Referrals directed her to several files and registers. Nero, Major Cesar, was also referred to as was Sheridan, Lieutenant Timothy and Montague, Lord Alexander.

Caparossi rose through the ranks quickly – and he would with a Lord for a mentor. He'd become a military advisor to the government that took over from the World Council and retired, with his family to... Ragnarok.

Why did that name keep popping up? What was its importance?

General Caparossi, Rtd, died at the ripe old age of one hundred and five and was buried at an unnamed cemetery on Ragnarok.

Jane wondered if the tomb was still there, whether Cambria was buried with him. And whether the estate still existed.

She looked at her locked door but saw the transit door in her mind.

Did she dare take a trip off-world?

A smile twitched at her mouth. Her father had given her the freedom to go anywhere she damned well pleased – especially since he'd built her office right next door to the transit door. Had he known? Or had he guessed she'd need the freedom to roam to wherever she wished?

Did she dare?



## **Chapter Eleven**

Jane trudged upstairs at three a.m. in the morning. She'd read the America file until her eyes blurred and her head drooped.

Realising she wasn't taking anything in, she decided to head for bed. Tomorrow was soon enough for her to decide on the next step.

The thought of travelling to Ragnarok – on her own! – no longer sent a thrill through her and she understood just how tired she was.

She opened the door to her suite and stumbled to her bedroom, barely registering the shadows of the room.

Jane flopped onto her bed and sank into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

\* \* \*

"Well, then, aren't you the slug-a-bed." Britney's voice penetrated Jane's sleep. "Come on, up and at 'em or you'll be late for class."

Jane groaned and rolled over on to her back. "You sound like a mother, Brit."

"I *am* a mother, Miss Jane," Britney said and drew the curtains on a rainy, sleety day.

Jane opened her eyes. "You are?"

"Yes. I have two boys, twins: Marius and Darius. Aged eighteen and now at the University of Paris studying Gastronomie at Le Cordon Bleu and viticulture at the Mumm winery respectively."

Jane turned her head. "Really? You named them..."

"Yes, yes, I know. My former husband named them. If they'd been girls I'd have named them Ariana and Zelda – the A to Z of children." She grinned.

Jane sat up, thinking about the Petersen-Caparossi children. "Is that traditional? The mother names the girls or boys and the father the same?"

Britney turned to her, a faint, indulgent smile on her face. "It was something between George and me, but it's by no means rare."

"Huh." She said and then focused on her surrounds. She was in a bed, not a mattress on the floor, with a cover bearing a sketch of the pyramids of Egypt. The curtains were of dark navy blue, with white sheers.

She tossed aside the duvet and set her socked feet on the matching dark blue carpet. Not a unicorn in sight.

"Britney?"

"Yes, Miss Jane?"

“When did all this happen?” Jane turned to her maid.

Britney gave her a weird look.

“Over the past couple of days.” The maid’s eyebrows rose and she wore a wicked expression as she took in Jane still wearing the same clothes from yesterday. “Have you not been sleeping in your own bed, Miss Jane?”

Jane curled her socked toes into the carpet. “I have, actually, but I’ve been... distracted.”

“Ah, drunk again, Miss Jane?” Britney moved to the wardrobe for the day’s clothes.

“Nope. I was...” Tim. Caparossi. Ragnarok. “Working.” She said and stood.

Jane looked around at all the Navy blue. “It’s a little... darkish, don’t you think?”

Britney turned with an armful of fresh clothes. “You can always change it. The remote is next to the suite door.”

Jane’s eyes widened. “No way. He didn’t...”

“Yes, he did,” Britney said with a frown and offered the clothes. “Shower, then play, Miss Jane. And don’t forget to thank your father.”

Jane glanced at her serious expression, then stomped into the bathroom to clean up.

She showered in record time, thought that some parts of her body probably didn’t get wet, but she wanted to lay her hands on that remote.

Jane emerged and saw her forearm unit on the glass and chrome bedside table. She wrapped it around her left forearm, secured it and headed for the door. Britney already had the remote in her hand.

Jane looked around at the suite. More Navy blue: carpet, curtains, walls, couch. At least the coffee table was glass and chrome. The walls were bare of any artwork, but she could find something around the house, to temporarily break up the monotony of colour.

“Spectrum reactive photo-chromatic bonding, with reflective capabilities.” Britney said and wiggled the remote. “That means...”

“I know, I know: I can change the colours of the walls without changing the colour of the furniture, and vice versa. Or I can match everything, like it is now. Gimme.” She made a grabby motion with both her hands.

Britney gave it to her. "Since you've been so good lately, and not caused a ruckus, your reward, Miss Jane."

Jane studied the square, palm-sized device with a softer square in the centre. She pulled out a filament from her forearm unit and plugged it into the device. A holographic colour pallet swirled up twenty centimetres tall above her arm. Jane held the remote in her left hand and placed her thumb over the soft square.

With her right index finger, she touched the holographic square of white and pressed her left thumb down. The navy blue on the walls faded to pure white as did the carpet and couch.

"All very bright," Britney said. "A little too bright."

Jane manipulated the colour pallet, tried numerous shades until she settled on a pale sea-green on the walls, a rich emerald with navy flecked carpet and a blue-green sofa. She matched the curtains to the wall.

"What do you think?" She asked Britney pleased with her efforts.

The maid lifted an eyebrow. "I think the first time you stumble in here loaded up on booze, this will make you sea-sick."

"Spoilsport. I think it is light and airy and not dark and gloomy. And certainly not teeth achingly pink." Jane shut the remote down and put it down on the glass and chrome entry table. The filament slithered back into the forearm unit.

"May I... make a few minor adjustments, Miss Jane?" Britney asked demurely, with her hands folded in front of her.

Jane knew her maid well, and 'minor adjustments' could be anything from reversing the colour scheme to a better blending of the hues she'd chosen. In the end, no matter what Britney did to the colour scheme, she could always change it back.

"Feel free, Brit – but minor adjustments only. I like this colour."

"Yes, Miss Jane." Britney said with a lowered gaze, but then she spoiled it by flicking Jane a cheeky grin.

"Going now." Jane said and left her suite with a wave.

Downstairs, the dining room was empty. She helped herself to bacon, fluffy scrambled eggs and lightly browned toast.

Morecombe came through the swinging doors with a coffee pot and poured coffee for her.

"Thank you." She said.

“Miss Jane.” Morecombe said and returned to his kitchen.

She had breakfast alone, saw no sign that anyone had eaten. Maybe her father was already in his office. Jane needed to talk to him about Ragnarok before she headed into the school.

Jane knocked on the office door and waited for her father to call her in.

He sat at his desk, leaning back in his chair and turning a three-dimensional diagram of his new ski lodge.

He sent her a glance and smile. “Hey, sweetie, what can I do for you?”

Jane sat in the visitor’s chair and leaned her chin in her hand as she watched the blueprints. “Thank you, Dad, for my room.”

He sent her another smile, then used his finger to zoom in on a particular level.

“Really, Dad, it means a lot to me. I know I’ve been a little empty-headed lately and I suspect you did this yesterday or the day before. I should have noticed before this morning, Dad, and I’m sorry.”

Charles lowered his arm but did not shut down his work. “You’re welcome, Jane.”

“Ahm... there’s something else I need to talk to you about.” She said and then paused.

Charles raised an eyebrow in question.

“Um... Ragnarok.”

Again, her father waited patiently.

“It’s where Caparossi is buried.”

Her father blinked at her with incomprehension.

Jane dropped her hand leaned closer. Charles tilted his head and leaned towards her. “Cambria Petersen’s... *husband*.” She whispered.

“Husband?” Charles asked with a narrowed gaze.

“Yep. And there’s more, Dad. They had an estate on Ragnarok. I want to try and find it.” She said.

“You want to go to Ragnarok?” Charles asked surprised. “By yourself?”

“I do. I want to know what I need. This will be my first trip off-world.” She said.

“So it will,” Charles said and shut down the diagram. “Ragnarok still has some wild areas, Jane, and extreme weather conditions. It gets bitterly cold and even

during the summer, it's not uncommon for a blizzard to sweep across the townships and cities."

Jane made a note on her information unit. "Warm clothes. Check."

"When did you want to leave?" He asked.

Jane shrugged. "Ideally, right after class, but I know this will require some careful planning."

"You'll need to take some Terran dollars, so transfer some funds for yourself. You'll need to buy food, find a place to stay and hire a vehicle. All-terrain will see you right."

Jane made the notes and then her alarm went off.

She stood up. "I've got to go."

"Classes?"

"Yep. Thanks, Dad. If you have time this afternoon, can we discuss my trip further?"

"Sure thing, sweetie. You have a good day." He said and turned his work back on.

\* \* \*

Jane couldn't, quite, suppress the buzz of excitement rushing through her veins every time she thought of Ragnarok.

Her two classes went easy and she sat down in the cafeteria with a large coffee and to make notes on what she might need for her trip.

Maybe she should pack like she did on her forays to Egypt, or China or Spain – light. The first thing she did was transfer funds into her forearm unit. It was probably too much, but... you never knew when you might need money and it was better to have a surplus than a deficit.

"You look excited, Ms Petersen." Brendon Walker sat down with his tea cup and saucer. "Anything you want to share?"

"Hmm?" She looked up from her notes. "Oh, I'm planning a trip off-world. My first." She said with a small smile. Brendon's eyes glittered with something she couldn't decipher.

"And where are you headed?"

"Ragnarok." Jane said and Brendon's eyebrows rose.

"Interesting. I didn't realise you were taking a vacation so soon."

Jane felt the heat rise in her cheeks. She had to be more careful. “Weekend trip.” She said weakly. “Dad’s building a ski resort.”

“Ah. A family trip then.” He said, as if disappointed. Brendon lifted his tea cup and sipped. “So, any luck with your time puzzle?”

Her *what?* Oh. She remembered yesterday’s conversation. “No, not really, but it will sort itself out, I’m sure, with a little extra hard work and research.”

“As it usually does.” He leaned forward. “You said this was a private research project.”

Jane nodded.

“Then maybe we could... meet after the school day and I can help you. I’m sure you’ll find my experience... compelling.” And he laid a hand over hers, gently squeezed.

“Sir... are you *hitting* on me?” Jane asked.

Brendon smiled and had an intimate look in his eyes. “If you don’t know, Jane, then I must be losing my touch.” His thumb brushed over her knuckles. “I think you and I would make a dynamic team, both professionally and personally.” His voice was smooth, seductive and his gaze touched everywhere and Jane nearly shuddered. She’d rarely had any contact with the man, and now he was chatting her up, two days in a row.

Cam’s words came back to her about Brendan being a womanizer and it seemed the professor had found his next target.

“Why don’t you tell me of the connection you found between Ragnarok and your private research project, Jane?” He asked and she wondered if he were guessing or whether he knew.

She tugged her hand free. “Because both are personal and have nothing to do with the Faculty or the University. Or,” she tapped a finger on the table, “each other.”

“I think you’ve found something... spectacular.” He said and her eyes widened.

How could he possibly *know?* And then she realised she’d confirmed his question with her reaction.

“Something very, very important.” Brendon continued softly and lowered his eyelids slightly. “Something to do with the Second Dark Ages, maybe? Yes, I think so. You can’t hide your excitement Jane. I want to know what you’ve found

and then I want access.” He leaned back, picked up his cup and sipped. “No one need know. In fact, I’d prefer it that way. Just between us.”

Jane stood, kept the revulsion off her face, and then leaned down. “No. Sir.” She said and turned, walked away. She needed to make the claim now and be off-world while the paperwork went through. The find was hers and hers alone. She wouldn’t be sharing it with anyone, let alone a grasping, greedy, ambitious asshole like Professor Walker.

Fortunately, Walker did not follow her and she made it outside without meeting anyone. She found a seat under cover from the light chilly rain that was falling and activated her forearm unit.

Jane concentrated on finding the right form to fill in. It came up and she zoomed in to read the instructions. The claim was three screens long and she carefully and laboriously filled it in with a touch of her finger and using the interactive, three-dimensional keyboard.

Jane pressed the form checker button. The system went through and checked each entry she’d filled in. A red square appeared over one slot she’d missed and she carefully input her information.

When the form turned green she took a deep breath and held her finger over the submit button. It was now or never. Fame, fortune, glory and years’ worth of work was ahead of her, she thought.

Her finger shook. Then she touched the button and the form cleared.

*Submission complete.*

The blue words hovered over her forearm and her breath eased out of her lungs.

“The World Council Vault.” Brendon said from behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders. “Darling, that is wonderful!”

Jane froze. Why didn’t he sound surprised, why did he say that as if he already knew?

He began to massage her shoulders, pressing his fingers into the muscles. “The Holy Grail of my speciality. Oh, what a find, Jane.” He said softly. “And you are going to share it with me, share the treasure. We will be the toast of the academic community, you and me.”

Jane swallowed, felt his thighs brush her back and the feeling of revulsion returned. “What are you talking about? Why would I want to share? It’s a private discovery by a certified archaeologist. It’s *mine*.”

“Because if you don’t, I’ll ruin you and your family.” He said and dug his fingers into her shoulders.

“What!?” Outrage suddenly segued into dread and she shook him off. Stood and turned to him. “You have no claim on me or mine, Professor Walker!”

His smile turned smug.

“Your mother has already approved of a match between us, Jane, has already started planning the nuptials. Oh,” he said and she heard the smile in his voice, “it is criminally easy to forge a signature these days, my dear. And your dear, *dear* mother provided a DNA match. You’ve already agreed to the match and that means, anything of yours is mine. It says so, right in the nuptials contract.”

“Walker, you’re forgetting one teeny-tiny detail.”

He smiled indulgently at her. “And what’s that, my love?”

“You don’t have the transit address. And Hell will freeze over before I’ll ever give it to you.”

His smile vanished and anger flared in his eyes. “You will, Jane, even if I have to beat it out of you.” His hands fisted by his sides.

“You just fucking try!” And she turned and ran across the rain swept quadrangle.

She knew Walker didn’t indulge in any meaningful exercise and he wasn’t as young as he used to be.

Jane swung around the side of the Library and then skidded to a halt on the gravel. Coming towards her from the car park, was ‘Brad’. He saw her and reached into his jacket, pulled something out.

“Hold it there, Ms Fortescue!” He called.

Jane took a step back, then another.

The stone block near her head suddenly shattered. Dust and stone chips exploded out. Jane jerked her head away.

He was *shooting* at her?

Her legs shook, and then she backed up further saw the edge of the building and ran back the way she’d come.



Brendon was slowly walking towards her, a sly smile tilting his mouth. He and Brad? But how? Why? And then she knew. Either Tim had recovered from his shock and told someone he shouldn't have or... her *mother* had discussed the 'filthy trash' with Walker when she set this up.

"Kill me and you get nothing!" She shouted at him.

Jane looked around. Where the hell was every one? The students, the lecturers, the admin staff?

Oh, hell. She'd forgotten it was a half day!

She reached the external door to the cafeteria and found it locked. She spun away just as Brad raised his weapon and fired. The glass exploded all over her. But she wasn't going to give in to either man, no matter how shit-scared she was.

Jane used the opportunity to bolt through the busted door.

She shoved chairs and tables out of her way and shouldered her way through the far door.

The silence in the corridor was eerie. She had to hide. She had to *hide!* But where?

Jane kept moving, saw the stairs and went up a flight. She didn't know where she was heading, but anywhere was good as long as it was away from Brad and Walker.

Jane ran up another flight of stairs and dashed down the hallway before she realised where she was: the History faculty. She didn't want to be here! She needed to be away from this place!

"Jane?"

Cameron Steele came out of the Faculty tearoom and closed the door. She heard the click of the lock

"What the... Jane! Your face is bleeding." He strode towards her.

Jane lifted a hand and touched her cheek, stared down at the red smear. Her vision wavered.

"Hey, there." Cameron caught her, steadied her. "What's going on?"

"I... I have to go. Walker is after me with some gunman."

"Walker?" He held her at arms' length. "Why?"

"I don't have time to explain, Cam." She looked over his shoulder and saw Walker and Brad come up to the level. "Let me go!"

"Why thank you, Steele." Brendon called. "I can take it from here."

Cameron scowled and turned. He glanced back at Jane, then at Walker. "I'm just taking Jane home, she seems to have hurt herself." He said and Jane found herself pushed backwards a step.

She backed up. Cameron was using his body to protect her, even though he didn't know what was going on.

"No, that's fine. I can take my fiancée home myself." Walker said in a tone that chilled Jane's blood.

Cameron, to his credit, never hesitated in their backward movement.

She came level with the lift and pressed the button. The doors immediately opened.

"Well, then, it will give me a chance to congratulate her." Cameron said.

Jane used Cameron's big body and slid into the lift.

"No, Steele, we have things to discuss. Now step aside." Walker growled.

"Hey, now, why does he have a..." Cameron ducked into the lift and slammed his fist on the close button as a metallic projectile pinged off the inside rim of the door at head height.

The doors slid shut and he pressed the basement level.

"Jesus, Jane, what the fuck is going on?"

He flicked out a clean handkerchief and pressed it against her bleeding cheek.

"Oh..." She said, her voice shaking. "So much more than I can say at the moment."

The doors slid wide and Cameron took her hand. They ran the length of the grey stone hallway to the corner.

Jane glanced back. The lift doors slid shut, called to another level. They were coming.

Cameron jogged to the end and turned the corner, shifted sideways into an alcove.

Jane's eyebrows rose. "A transporter?" She said. "Here?"

Cameron didn't reply. He punched in an alpha-numeric code into the pad. The light went green. He pulled open the door. "C'mon." He said and dragged her inside, strode to the other door.

Outside, she had time to look at the odd, Asian influenced architecture, before Cameron punched in another series and dragged her through the door again.

This time, they emerged at a public transit area. The air was warm and humid, as if she'd stepped into the tropics. The sky was a painful blue after the dankness of Geneva.

"Keep your head down, Jane." He urged as he walked across the concourse and out into the street.

Jane didn't recognise the language spoken, but it didn't matter. She was just relieved someone else had taken charge.

Cameron kept her hand in his as he walked down the footpath and then into a book store.

He waved at the owner as he rushed by the shelves filled with old-fashioned, antique books.

Cameron dragged her down the stairs and into the basement.

"Why does a book store have a transporter?" She asked, but he shook his head, entered an address and pulled her through the door.

They came out in Jane's basement and she felt a chill skate down her spine.

"Cameron? Why do you have my home address?"

He didn't reply. Instead, he took the square cloth from her face and winced.

"Do you have a medical kit nearby?"

Jane nodded. "Yes." She said and unlocked her office. "Come in." She invited and went into the bathroom for the kit.

"Holy shit!" She heard Cameron say.

*The boxes of files.*

She grimaced and brought out the kit.

Cameron stood staring at the files on her desk. He lifted his head, tried to say something, then shook his head.

Jane offered him the kit and then sat on the edge of the desk. "Fix me up?"

"My God, Jane! Where on Earth did you *find* all this?"

She looked at him, anger brewing. "I'll *never* tell." She said and he blinked, blew out a breath and opened the kit.

"Not that you need to tell me, Jane, I'm just in shock." He said and lifted a mini spray can. His fingers turned her head. "This is going to hurt." He said and Jane closed her eyes while he worked on her.

"Are you going to tell me what I've just stepped into?" He asked gently.

Jane sighed and told him about going to Tim's place and finding Brad, about her confrontation with Walker, about her flight from him and Brad shooting at her, and then running into him.

"I always knew he was an avaricious prick." Cameron muttered. "But your mother? Wanting you to marry the slime? Where did that come from?"

Jane didn't reply, but she knew. Oh, she *knew*. Her mother had just acted all quiet, while she'd already had plans in action. Probably *before* the confrontation in her father's office. She'd suggested a match with a professor, now she knew which one. Her mother was nothing if not ambitious for her children.

"There, all done."

She opened her eyes and looked at him, looked into his concerned blue-green eyes framed by thick black lashes. "I need to see my mother." She said softly.

"And you can't leave me here with all this loot." He nodded. "I understand, Jane. Really, I do. If I had found what amounted to the missing Library of Congress, I'd be protective, too." He ran a finger down the side of her unmarred cheek. Then he stepped back. "I'm interested in meeting your family, too." He said.

Jane slid off the desk. She reached up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Cam. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Probably be in Walker's hands right now." He said with a strange expression on his face.

"What do you know about this, Cam?" She asked cautiously.

"I can read the labels on the outside of the boxes as well as anyone, Jane. And while I'm more interested in Modern History, I know about the World Council. Hell," he snorted, "*everyone* knows about the World Council; just not what went on!"

Jane locked up and took the lift to the ground level. Her cheek throbbed and her temper bubbled.

Cameron took her hand again and squeezed it, then he released her.

## **Chapter Twelve**

Jane marched into the dining room where Morecombe was just serving the first course.

Her mother looked at her in surprise.

“Late again, I see.” She said and then saw Cameron behind her. “And who is this?” She demanded with a scowl.

“Mother, who he is, is none of your business. I want to know if it’s true that you arranged a marriage between me and Professor Walker.”

All movement stopped. Even the ever proper Morecombe stopped serving and turned towards her.

Her mother smiled. “You’re going to make a beautiful bride, a wonderful wife and a perfect mother.”

Charles nearly choked. “Alberta? What did you do?”

“Oh, pooh, Charles. It’s time someone got married in this family, and I chose Jane. It’s not as if she’s doing anything of note. So I contacted Professor Walker.” Alberta leaned forward. “He is the head of the History faculty. He’s handsome, experienced and he is a perfect match for Jane.” She frowned a little. “He took a little convincing, but when I mentioned the trash Jane found, why he nearly fell over himself with happiness.”

“You...” Charles began and then stopped as if he couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“I won’t be marrying him, mother. I will *not* share my work with him.” Jane said and tried to keep a hold of her temper. “You had *no* right.”

“I had *every* right!” Her mother barked and stood. “You are my daughter, and I’ll do what *I* see fit to ensure your happiness!” She turned her shoulders. “Now. It is done. The paperwork has been submitted, and I’m making the arrangements for the commitment ceremony. In a week, I think.”

Jane took a step forward and her mother’s eyes widened. Cameron put a hand on Jane’s arm and she stopped.

“Father?” She ground out and turned to him. “Did you know about this?”

Charles eased out a breath and then sighed. “Alberta, how did you manage to get the paperwork approved?”

Alberta resumed her seat and picked up her wine. She smiled at her husband as if pleased to tell him how clever she’d been. “I simply forged Jane’s signature and

handed over a DNA sample. The silly girl cut herself destroying a perfectly good room. I just took advantage of that. We must have order, Charles, and respect for property.” She sipped her white wine. “I think Professor Walker will be able to teach our Jane both.”

Charles shook his head and then looked at the butler. “It’s time, Morecombe.” He said sadly and the butler nodded, finished serving and then returned to the kitchen.

“Why, Alberta?” Charles asked and Jane’s mother looked a little uncertain at his soft tone. She sipped her wine. “Why did you do this, when I...” He glanced at his children, all of whom were riveted to the conversation. “After the conversation we had in my office?”

Alberta cheeks flushed a delicate pink. She lifted a shoulder. “I’d already spoken with Brendon, and he’d agreed.” She leaned forward. “It’s a perfect match, Charles, surely you can see that?”

“What I see, Alberta, is a woman who has committed fraud. A woman who would sell her own daughter into slavery, into a loveless marriage built on greed. A woman who cares not a jot for her children, but only her own reputation in society. What I see, Alberta, is a woman who bears no resemblance to the girl I married!”

Alberta clutched at her chest. “Charles! Don’t you dare speak to me that way! I have raised these children! I have sacrificed *everything* for them! I *deserve* my reward for all my hard work, and I will not stand by and watch you wreck everything I’ve fought for!” She threw down her napkin and stood. “Jane *will* marry Brendon Walker, and that’s *final!*” And she flounced out of the room.

Morecombe came through the swing door. “They are on their way, sir.” He said and her father’s expression turned sad. “Will the young gentleman be joining us for dinner?”

Jane turned to Cameron and he nodded.

“Yes, thank you, Morecombe, he will.”

“I think you’d better explain what happened to your face, Jane.” Her father said.

\* \* \*

Jane had barely finished telling her story, when the doorbell chimed.

Her father's face flashed with pain, then he wiped his mouth and stood. "That will be for me." He said and reluctantly left the room.

Jane's siblings looked at her with varying degrees of shock.

"This is..." Adam began and then shook his head as if he couldn't find the words.

"I knew mother was crazy-assed manipulative," Six said, "but this is beyond any idea of reasonable. I don't know how she expected to get away with it." He looked at Cameron. "Thank you for being there for my sister, Doctor Steele."

"I'm glad I could, Charles, otherwise..."

Jane's brother grinned and glanced at Jane. "Call me Six."

"Why would I do that?" Cameron frowned.

"Because I am Charles Mackenzie Winchester Petersen, the Sixth. Six." He explained and Cameron chuckled.

"Fair enough. Call me Cameron, or Cam."

"If you boys have finished your male bonding," Courtney said with a shy smile towards Cameron, "we need to talk about what happened to Jane! How do we fix this?"

"Charles?" Jane turned at the sound of her mother's plaintive voice. "Who are these people? What are they doing here?"

She rose and went to the dining room door.

Alberta stood on the lower step, glaring at the three men wearing beige paramedic uniforms.

Jane felt heat behind her and knew her siblings had joined her at the door.

Her father looked at his wife. "They are here for you, Alberta."

"Me? But there's nothing wrong with me. I think you mean Jane. She looks awful. She has to look perfect for her wedding; no scars." She shook her finger at the paramedics.

"No, Alberta. I had Morecombe call them. They are here to escort you to the Matterhorn Health Clinic." Charles said.

Alberta stamped her foot. "And I tell you, there's *nothing* wrong with me!"

Charles stepped forward, picked up Alberta's hands in his. "Honey, there is so much wrong with you, that I don't know where to start." He said and gripped Alberta's hands when she tried to pull free. "You'll go to the clinic, and you'll feel better, feel more in control."

Alberta wrenched her hands free and stared at him, tears in her wide hazel eyes. "I'll never forgive you for this, Charles." She said softly.

Charles looked away from her, as if it hurt his very soul, and stepped back. "I know." He said and nodded to the paramedics.

Alberta struggled, she screamed and begged, but against three paramedics she didn't have a chance and they dragged her, weeping and pleading, from the house.

Jane left the safety of the doorway and walked to her father. She wrapped her arms around him and he lowered his head to her shoulder. "It was all I could do." He said.

"I know, Dad." Jane said. "I know."

Courtney joined them. "She'll be fine, Dad. They'll make her better."

Charles lifted his head. "How do you fix something you've been born with, Courtney?" His eyes pleaded with his youngest daughter, the doctor.

"With time, with therapy and drugs, and if that doesn't work, with specific surgical procedures. She'll be *fine*."

"Excuse me, sir," Morecombe said and the group split apart, "there's a call for Miss Jane."

"If it's Walker, I'm not home." Jane snarled.

"No, Miss Jane, it is a Sergeant St Germaine for you."

Jane felt the blood leave her face. She'd forgotten all about Tim!

"Take the call in my office, Jane." Charles said and Jane fast walked to the office.

She accessed the net on her forearm unit. The image of a robust, silver haired police officer swirled up and then solidified. "Sergeant St Germaine. Have you found Tim?"

"Yes, Ms Petersen. Unfortunately, he was deceased when we arrived at his abode."

For the second time in one day, Jane felt light headed. And for the second time in a day, strong arms held her up. Cameron.

"Oh, Tim..." She whispered.

"We have a suspect, Ms Petersen, a man matching your description was seen earlier in the day." He said. "And fortunately, we also have an image. We'll soon have him in custody."

"Thank you, Sergeant St Germaine." She said softly.



“You’ll need to come in and make a full report, a witness statement.”

“Yes, sir, I will.” She said and ended the call.

“I’m so sorry,” Cameron said and wrapped his arms around her.

“He knew about the files, about the Vault.” Jane said against his shoulder.

“He’s dead because of me.”

“No, Jane. He’s dead because someone wanted what he knew. He didn’t tell them either.”

Jane leaned back. “He never knew the address, Cam, they killed him for no reason.”

“Because only you know it.”

Jane heaved a deep sigh. “He only went with me because I didn’t want to do it on my own. I wanted to share something with him, something of me; but... he didn’t get it, didn’t understand what I was giving him. He eventually came around to the idea that the Hunter files might give him new ideas for gaming, but...”

A knock on the door cut him off.

Jane eased out of his arms and opened the door.

“Ah, there you are, my dear.” Brendon Walker said with a smile.

Jane stared at him in shock. “What are you...?” Her words were cut off as he slid an arm around her waist and down to her bottom, hauled her close and laid his mouth on hers, hard. His tongue thrust into her mouth, once, twice and then a third time before she wrenched her mouth from his.

She felt his heavy erection press against her lower belly and threw herself backwards, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Fucking hell! You *bastard!*”

Walker reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun, aimed it at Cameron as he took a step forward. “Right there, Steele.” He snapped and Cameron paused.

“Get out of my house, you evil prick!” Jane spat.

Walker turned to her and smiled. “Not yet, my sweet, not until I’ve got what I’ve come for: the files.”

“Never.” Jane sneered.

“Really? Then I suggest we take it up with your family.” He backed up out of the door and then indicated they should come out with the barrel of the gun. “The foyer, if you please.”

Jane eyed him and the gun as she slid by. She did not want him to touch her and he smiled as if he knew what she was thinking.

Cameron followed her out, his expression lethal and promising retribution.

She gasped as she saw her father and siblings kneeling on the tiled floor. Behind them, Morecombe and Britney, but Joanna was nowhere to be seen.

Brad and two more men aimed guns at them.

“Now then, Jane, maybe this will change your mind?” Walker smirked behind her.

Helplessness filled her and tasted bitter in her mouth. She stared at her father.

*Run*, he mouthed. *Run!*

Jane’s eyes widened as her father pushed off from the floor and his shoulder caught Brad in the belly. Seeing her father act, her brothers dived at the other two men.

Jane spun around. Walker was slack jawed with disbelief, then his eyes narrowed and the gun came up.

Cameron turned at the same time. He brought his fist up and hammered the side of Walker’s head. Then he grabbed Jane’s hand and dragged her past the falling man to the back stairs and down.

Jane shook off her shock, pulled her hand free and bolted down the stairs and to the metal door. She punched in the first address that came to mind, hauled open the door and ran through to the other side.

### **Chapter Thirteen**

Jane gasped at the view beyond the concourse. A vast white plain of snow spread out beyond the floor to ceiling windows. All around her, people wore thick thermals, while she and Cameron wore long-sleeved shirts. Cameron wore beige slacks and jacket, while she had jeans and boots.

“Where are we?” Cameron asked.

“Ragnarok.” She breathed.

“*Ragnarok*? Where the hell is that?”

“We have to go back.” She turned to him, looked into his eyes. “We have to call the cops!”

Cam gripped her upper arms, held her still. “Calm down.” He said.

She shook him off. “Don’t try to pacify me, Cameron. My family is being held hostage by a maniac!”

“Just... Hold on, okay? I need to catch my breath, even if you don’t.” He shook out his hand, flexed his fingers. “Punching people hurts.” He said and studied his swollen knuckles.

Jane spun away from him. “I need a drink.” She said and marched towards the bar.

She entered the rustic, low beamed room and slid onto a stool in front of the bar. Cameron came in behind her.

“Hot chocolate, please.” She said tersely and the barkeeper nodded.

“I thought...” He began.

“You thought wrong.” Jane griped.

“Two please.” Cameron said and the barkeeper walked away to fix the drinks.

Cameron slid onto the stool next to her. “Look,” he sighed. “I’m sorry about what happened, but you need to think about it. What is the best outcome?”

“My Dad and brothers kick some ass and call the cops.” She said.

“And the worst?”

“They get their asses kicked by Brad and his pals.” She thrust out her bottom lip and then frowned.

“And if they do? What happens next?”

Jane nodded her thanks to the barkeeper for the drinks. She pulled out the filament and connected to the payment device he held out.

She’d already transferred funds in preparation for the trip.

The device accepted the payment with a beep and she retracted the filament.

“What happens next?” She mused and sipped the rich and creamy chocolate.

“They hold my family hostage until I give them the files.”

“And if you’re not there?”

“They can’t get to them. I re-coded my office door and Dad will never tell them of it. My siblings don’t know about it, either, nor do the staff... the staff.”

She said quietly. “Joanna wasn’t with them. She was free, I think.”

“Mmm, and no doubt able and willing to call the cops on them.” Cameron said from beside her and she glanced at him. He was enjoying the chocolate as much as she did. “So, we give them twenty-four hours before we go back – and not to your basement; we’ll use a standard transport and find out what happened without risking ourselves.”

*Twenty-four hours.* Could she wait that long? She felt desperately worried. The men were armed, and her family were not. She needed to go back, but... Cameron was right. They would be walking back into a trap and then she’d have to give up the valuable files. She’d do it in a heartbeat if it saved her family, but she knew of Walker’s ambition and Brad’s murderous ways. If they could get away with it, they’d kill her family and Walker would claim the files as his own.

And inside those files was the address of the World Council Vault.

She might have claimed it, but he would ransack it before she could stop him. He’d kill her. She decided. Kill her and, thanks to the commitment agreement her mother had made for her, he could legitimately claim all that was hers.

The asshole.

Even if he had a moment of clarity and agreed to nullify the agreement, he could ask for compensation, since she’d be the asking for the nullification. And she knew exactly what he’d ask for.

No wonder he hadn’t pressed her on the private research project. He’d been waiting, probably monitoring, too – for her to claim the vault’s contents before making his move.

“Fuck.” She muttered.

Then there was the agreed commitment ceremony in a week’s time. If she failed to show, compensation could be claimed. Again, she’d lose the files and the Vault.

“Shit.” She sighed. The only way out was if she could prove the engagement agreement was submitted under false circumstances. She could give up the Vault and its contents, or... send her mother to jail.

“Bitch deserves it.”

“Is this a one sided swear fest, or can anyone join in?” Cameron asked.

Jane explained her thinking.

“Well then, we have a deadline. And I expect Walker is well aware of that deadline. All he has to do is wait.”

“He could, but he’s going to be in jail by next week.”

“I wonder why he pre-empted the date?”

Jane shrugged. “Maybe he thought he’d be able to smooth talk his way into seeing the prize for taking me off mother’s hands.” She rubbed a finger along her lower lip as she thought about it. “Or he was coming to meet the family. No. He came armed, as if expecting to be rejected. I don’t know.” She shook her head and drank more of the chocolate.

“Maybe he has a deadline we don’t know about.” Cameron said and drained his drink. “That was spesh.” He said with a satisfied sigh.

“If that’s so, if he needs those files for some reason and he’s not in custody, he’s going to be coming after us.” She said and turned on the stool as if expecting Walker to be right behind her.

“Then we’d better leave.” Cameron said and swivelled on the stool. “Why here, anyway?”

“I was planning a trip here. And Walker knows it.” She said and spied a vehicle hire company through the door of the bar. “Come on, let’s go.”

She hopped off the stool and went to hire an all-terrain vehicle.

\* \* \*

The black vehicle hovered on its anti-grav plates nearly half a metre off the ground. She supposed it was to clear any rocks.

Cameron whistled. “Nice.”

“I’m driving.” She said and nipped around to the driver’s side.

Cameron climbed into the passenger seat and secured his harness. “Since you know where we are going and I do not... yes, you’re driving.”

Jane secured herself into the seat. “Actually, I’m not entirely sure of where we’re going.” She extruded the filament and plugged it into the console. Then she typed in a command.

“Destination, please.” The car’s mellow and masculine voice inquired.

“Nice.” Jane smiled. “Activate voice control.” Jane removed the filament.

“Voice control activated.”

“Location of any and all items of interest, regarding: Caparossi.” She said with false calmness.

“Current or historic?” The car asked.

Jane turned to Cameron. “I am so calling this car George.”

“Your inquiry requires proper syntax.” The car said.

“Historic and current references.” She said. “Pause interface, continue search.”

Jane ordered.

“Interface paused, search in progress.”

Cameron raised his eyebrows. “George?”

“I’ll hug him and squeeze him and call him ‘George’.” She said and then clicked her tongue. “It’s an ancient reference. Pre-21<sup>st</sup> Century popular cultural reference.”

“I’m modern history, remember?”

Jane shook her head and rested her hands on the steering wheel. “Resume interface.”

“Interface resumed.” George replied.

“Search results.”

“Caparossi: six references at one hundred percent relevance; Caparossi-Petersen: two references, sixty five percent relevance; Capra-Rossi: three references, forty percent relevance.” George replied in his sexy voice.

“List Caparossi references.” Jane said and squeezed the wheel.

“Caparossi: General Nathan – tomb. Freyaville. Caparossi: General Nathan – memorial statue. New Breckenridge. Caparossi: Sheridan Nero – tomb. Freyaville. Caparossi: Christian Jaxentia – tomb. Freyaville.” George replied.

“Looks like we’re going to Freyaville.” Jane said and released her grip on the wheel.

“Looks like, but who are the Caparossis? Are they...”

Jane turned to him with a grin. "General Nathan Caparossi is... was Cambria Petersen's husband."

She felt a surge of satisfaction at Cameron's surprised expression. "Petersen. As in the mythic Hunter?"

"Yep." She nodded. "Engage auto-drive. Destination: Freyaville."

The vehicle glided forward and began its descent down the mountain over the flattened ground carved into the mountainside.

"Bugger me." He breathed. "But... colour me confused here: why is this information freely available on a tourist brochure and yet not be widely known in academic circles on Earth?"

"Information restricted." George said.

"Restricted?" Cameron asked.

"Direct inquiry only."

He rubbed his forehead.

"Information: list number of inquiries of the name 'Caparossi' since your service began. Excluding current inquiry." Jane said.

"Zero inquiries." George promptly replied.

"Search server database, same information." Jane said and leaned back in her seat.

"Zero inquiries." George said.

"Search archives, same information."

"Two inquiries. Inquiry one: 7. 12.2417. Inquiry two: 13.9.2745."

"Wow." Cameron breathed. "It's been centuries since anyone asked."

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Jane said.

"About what? Long dead myths? Not really." Cameron shrugged.

"Okay. It makes *me* wonder. It's taken me years to find the Vault – and even that was an accident, an obscure address in an ancient diary of a long forgotten secretary. It was just a side note, as if to remind the woman to send a file off and she jotted the address down so she wouldn't forget. And now this."

"This? This, what?"

"The vault was deliberate erased from all Earth references, the building above it destroyed, the land remade and sealed. Another building on top of it, expanded, rebuilt. The records lost on its construction. Centuries pass and no one, *no one*, Cameron, knows what's underneath. Here we are on Ragnarok, General

Caparossi's home. His *children's* home. And, again, it's all very vague and obscure, as if he's an ordinary person, not worth history remembering. I think some organisation has deliberately and patiently tried to erase everything to do with Hunter and Retrieval Unit, the World Council, the rebellion, Cambria Petersen, everything of that era from the pages of history."

Jane frowned at Cameron's expression. "What?"

"Back up to the bit about the children. Are you saying there are descendants of Cambria Petersen running around?"

Jane shrugged. "Maybe. Probably."

"Jeez. When you get into history, you really get into it, don't you." He said.

"And you don't?"

"I don't go after myths, I go after facts." He grumbled.

"Cambria Petersen *is* a fact, Cameron. I have the proof in those files."

"You know, maybe that's why Walker is so hot for those files. He's the leading expert in the Second Dark Age. What if he's wrong about it? What if the destruction of so much of civilisation wasn't the result of a plague, or Visigoth-like uprising with no purpose, but a genuine popular uprising to overthrow the government of the day, with rebel leaders and insurrectionists? Walker's reputation would be ruined; he'd be the laughing stock of academia."

"So he would." She closed her eyes and smiled.

"What are you doing?" Cameron asked, suspicious.

"Enjoying the imagery of Walker's disgrace." She sighed. The comfort of the car seat, the quiet hum of the engine all conspired to slip her into sleep. It had been a long and emotional day – night when they'd left Earth, morning on Ragnarok – and she let the sleep take her.

\* \* \*

"Wake up." A deep, sexy voice said in her ear and she smiled.

"Not yet, George." She murmured and suddenly she was jolted awake as Cameron punched her arm. "Hey!"

"We're here." He grumbled and she rubbed her arm as she sat up and looked around.

Freyaville was a thriving, sprawling metropolis of low rise six and seven story buildings with towering mountains as a backdrop. She rubbed gritty eyes.



Everywhere she looked, there were signs for hiking, riding, extreme skiing, mountain climbing and extreme sports.

“Tourist town.” Cameron said with a yawn.

“Destination.” Jane said. “Caparossi: General Nathan, tomb.”

“Confirmed.” George said and she smiled as the vehicle cruised down Freyaville’s main street.

“I love that voice.” She said.

“Too smooth.” Cameron said.

“Very sexy.” Jane brushed her hand over the console and missed Cameron’s sultry glance.

The car drove through the town, to the outskirts and into the suburbs. The houses weren’t especially shabby, but they had an air of neglect about them. The snowscape merely emphasised it.

The vehicle pulled up on the side of the road, outside the open gates of a cemetery.

Jane got out. The air was sharply cold in her lungs and she shivered.

“Brr... You sure you want to do this?” Cameron got out the other side.

“Yep.” Jane marched through the gates. She turned to the right, to the information booth and used the filament. The directory came up in a swirl of blue and she concentrated on finding Caparossi’s tomb. “There.” She murmured quietly.

It was towards the back of the cemetery and she disconnected. “This way.”

She didn’t know if she was disappointed or not, when she reached the section. It was no great edifice of marble, didn’t trumpet the occupant with angels exhorting the sky. It was a simple slab of some sort of material that melted the snow as soon as it touched the surface.

“General Nathan Caparossi,” Cameron read. “Father, husband, soldier, hero. A life lived well, but heartbreak was only ever a moment away.”

“I wonder what that means.” Jane asked at his shoulder.

Cameron shrugged. “Maybe to live every moment because it can be taken away in an instant?”

“Odd, given he was a hundred and five. I’d say that was a long and satisfying life, wouldn’t you?”

Jane turned her forearm unit to face the grave and used the imager to take photos for later examination.

Cameron gave her a strange look. "Maybe for those days, but not today."

"Huh. I suppose so." She agreed and stood straight. "I wish there was more information, though, like where they lived and stuff."

"Well, Ms doesn't-know-about-current-records-held-at-the-local-archives, why don't we go searching?"

"Why don't we?" She said and shivered. "It's damned cold out here, and look, we're not the only ones here anymore." She indicated the figure at the far side of the cemetery. The stranger was dressed all in black, from head to foot and standing completely still, a contrast to the white snow.

"Come to grieve in private." Cameron said. "Let's leave them to it."

He draped his arm around her shoulders and she felt his warmth seep into her chilled skin.

Back at the car, she felt the loss of heat as he dropped his arm and climbed in. She walked around to the driver's side and slid into the warmth. "Brr. It's colder here than in Geneva in mid-winter. Engage temperature control: twenty threes degrees Celsius." She said and warm air gusted out of the vents. She turned her head to warm her face, stared across Cameron's body.

The stranger stood over Caparossi's grave, or close to it. Another tourist? A researcher, maybe?

Jane turned her face in the other direction, then leaned back. "Destination: archives."

"Confirmed." George said and the vehicle moved off.

Jane rubbed her eyes. As much as she wanted to continue searching, she was exhausted and the heat only served to lull her into lassitude.

"Hey." Cameron said softly. "Why don't we book into a hotel and get a good night's rest before we tackle the archives?"

Jane turned her head and gazed at him sleepily. By her reckoning, it must be about two or three in the morning in Geneva, and yet here, the sun shone brightly. "Yeah. Sounds like a plan."

He tilted his head towards the console. "Better ask George for a place."

"Recommendation: hotels rated good to excellent."

"Recommend: The Excelsior, The Hyatt, The Sheraton, Renaissance..."

“Pause recommendations. Book us into the Hyatt, please.” Jane said tiredly.

“Booking confirmed.” George said.

“Destination: the Hyatt.”

“Confirmed.” George replied and accelerated the vehicle into town.

“I could listen to you all day, George.” Jane said sleepily.

Cameron leaned over and whispered in her ear. “And instead, you only have me.”

Jane felt a shiver rippled down her spine at his words. They were just as soft and seductive and sexy, like George, and yet, they came from a real flesh and blood man.

But Cameron was her friend and her colleague. It wasn't his fault he'd been forced to come along on this expedition; she'd planned to come alone. The best she could do was let him stay overnight and then send him home in the morning.

He probably had classes he'd miss if he stayed any longer, and it wasn't fair on him to keep him away from his job.

“Destination arrival: Hyatt.” George said.

Jane opened her eyes at the majestic building. It wasn't one of the high rises, but spread out in a single storey over acres of land.

A liveried doorman opened the car door and touched the peak of his black cap.

“Good morning, madam. Are you checking in?”

“Yes, I am.” Jane said and climbed out of the all-terrain.

“Very good, madam. I shall retrieve your luggage.”

Jane shivered in the cool air. “No luggage, I'm afraid; this is a flying visit.”

“Of course, madam. This way.” He held out his arm and she walked into the warm, interestingly historic atrium of the Hyatt.

The concierge didn't bat an eyelid as Jane and Cameron approached the desk.

“May I help you?” He asked politely, his dark brown eyes professionally blank.

“Checking in, please. Petersen.” Jane said and the concierge spun up his computer unit.

“Yes, madam. Payment in full. Will you be extending your stay longer than one night?”

Cameron leaned on the desk. “Yes. We'll be staying a week.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Cam...” She began.

“Later.” He replied.

“You’re booked in for a week. Suite seven.” He touched a finger to an old-fashioned, actual, bell and a young man arrived dressed in a short-waisted red jacket, red pants with a knife straight crease, and a ten-centimetre tall cylinder hat with a black chin guard.

“Suite seven, please.” The concierge said and the bellboy held out his arm.

“This way, please.”

Jane and Cameron followed the young man across the atrium to the left of the concierge and through glass framed wooden doors and into a broad hallway.

They turned right at the end and continued down the hall. The bellboy stopped at a set of double doors. He glanced at them, then pushed the doors wide.

“Your suite.” He announced and preceded them. He walked across the room and drew the ruby red curtains back.

“Wow.” Jane murmured as she took in the vista of the towering, snow-capped mountains. She skirted the sunken couch and entertainment area to stand in front of the windows.

“Wow, is right.” Cameron said as he came up to stand beside her.

Jane turned to the bellboy, but he’d disappeared, or nearly. She saw the double doors snick shut and then they were alone.

“I’m going to hit the shower and then grab a few hours’ sleep.” Jane said and turned away from the view. “Then you can explain why we need to stay a week.”

She found the bathroom off the master bedroom. Pale grey tiles with terracotta inserts greeted her.

Jane went to the mirror. “Well, then.” She murmured and touched her puffy, red cheek. The skin felt hot and throbbed.

She stripped off her stained clothes, the forearm unit and had herself a nice, long, lusciously warm shower.

The hot water conspired to make her sleepy, so she shut it off and stepped out, wrapped her body in one dove grey towel and used a second to rub her hair dry.

She found a comb and moisturiser, used both.

The curtains were still drawn in the bedroom, so she tossed the towel, climbed under the covers and shut off the lights via the voice controlled unit.

Just a few hours, she thought and fell into sleep.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

An arm was draped over her waist as Jane slowly awoke. She snuggled back into the heat behind her and then paused, opened her eyes.

The furniture wasn't hers and she spied the towel on the grey carpet. Ragnarok. The Hyatt.

*And that meant...*

She turned her head, eased around.

Cameron stared at her with sleepy electric blue-green eyes, more blue than green now. He didn't say anything, didn't smile; just watched her.

Jane turned back, then sat up. His arm slid down over her hip and away in a deliberately slow move. She ignored him and turned to sit on the side of the bed.

Then she rose and walked to the bathroom. She could have sworn she heard Cameron groan, but thought it was her imagination.

Inside the bathroom, she shut the door and took note of her stained clothes, still piled on the floor. "No Britney." She grumbled and used the facilities. Then she dressed in the clothes.

She strapped on the forearm unit and emerged.

Cameron was sitting up, his muscular chest bare, and the bed clothes pooled in his lap. He gave her a glance as she passed on her way to the main room.

Jane sat on the long, four cushion couch, and accessed the local stores on her com unit. She flipped through the catalogue of a local store and ordered clothes for both her and Cameron.

Once the order was confirmed and delivery set for an hour's time, she changed her focus to accessing the local library and archives.

She was referred to the Customs Service and found an entry for Cambria Petersen's arrival and departure. She downloaded a copy and saved it to a file for future reference. She also found records for a shuttle ticket, car hire and a hotel stay, all paid for by the Hunters.

It all added to what she knew, but it wasn't what she wanted.

Another entry from Customs detailed the arrival of the Caparossi-Petersens and all four children – who were now adults; the Immigration database listed them as permanent residents, but not citizens.

Jane sat up from the slouch she'd slipped into.

A smile lit up her face and she downloaded the information.

“And what’s got you grinning like a maniac?” Cameron asked as he walked into the room.

Jane looked at him, briefly admired the chest he was covering up by tabbing his shirt. “Oh, nothing... except an address for the Caparossi Estate!”

“Excellent! Where is it?” Cameron asked and tucked his shirt into his slacks.

Jane brought up the GPS position. “Ah.” She said. “It is deep into those mountains, which, by the way, are called the Asgardian Range.”

“Is the estate accessible by vehicle, or are we going mountain climbing?” He asked and slumped onto the couch across from her.

Jane made a face at him. “We can drive, but it will take time, like about eight hours.”

Cameron sat up. “Then we should get going. Daylight’s wasting.”

She shook her head. “Not so fast, pal. I want to know why we’re booked in for a week. *You* don’t need to be here. This is *my* trip.”

Cameron rose and came to sit next to her, a little too close for her comfort. But she didn’t let it show, she simply raised an eyebrow.

“Do you honestly think I still have a job to go back to after punching Walker out?”

“Ah.” She allowed and leaned her elbow on the back of the couch. “Well, there were extenuating circumstances.”

“I don’t think it’s going to play that way.” He slowly shook his head and his gaze dropped to her mouth.

“Why not?”

“I’ve given it some thought, and all he has to say is that he came to talk to his fiancée’s family and they attacked him; his men defended him, I assaulted him and both of us left the premises before the local law could arrive.”

Jane snorted. “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

He gave her a brief smile. “No, but I can see Walker trying it.”

“You can go back and explain your role.” She said.

“I’m not leaving you here by yourself, Jane.” He said softly. “Even if Walker and his pals are in jail, all it will take is one call to back-ups and you are in trouble.”

“You *have* been thinking about this. I can agree with your... arguments, but I don’t agree with your conclusions, Cam. I don’t think I’m in any danger and thus, there is no reason for you to stay.”

“No?” He asked.

“No.”

He leaned across and settled his mouth on hers. It was just a touch, but fire ricocheted through her system.

The tip of his tongue touched her bottom lip and she opened her mouth to him. Heat flared across her skin and suddenly, she was kissing him back, her hands running through his curly hair.

Cameron eased her back onto the couch cushions, his hands held her head as he tasted her. Jane did her own tasting and shifted her body sideways so she lay flat.

He slid his mouth from hers to glide down her throat. Jane gasped for air as the heat rose between them.

“Oh, God, what are we doing?” She arched her throat to give him better access.

Cameron’s hand slid to the smooth skin of her waist and skipped upwards under her shirt.

“If you don’t know,” he said softly, “then we really need to have a talk.”

She felt her nipples tighten before he reached them with his fingers.

He slid his other hand under her butt and pressed her against him. More fire seared her nerves as she felt him, hard and strong against her.

Her hands drifted down his back, pulled him against her and he obliged by gently thrusting against her.

He lifted his head. “Too many clothes.” And he ripped open her shirt, lifted her bra out of the way.

Jane arched into him as he used his mouth on her, sucked at her.

*Oh, Lord, he was going to make her come with just his hot mouth.*

His nimble fingers undid her pants, undid his, even as he thrust against her.

He grabbed her hand and she wrapped her fingers around his erection, while his fingers dipped into her underwear.

Then... the doorbell rang, a long chime that couldn’t be mistaken.

Cameron froze, then continued lavishing her breasts with his tongue.

The chime came again and she released him, pushed against his shoulders until he lifted his head.

“No?” He asked hopefully.

She cleared her throat. “They’ll just come in.” She said hoarsely and he raised up to allow her to escape.

Her eyes went to his groin and she sighed with disappointment at missing out. Well, not for long.

She arranged her clothes as best she could, ran her fingers through her hair and went to the door.

“Yes?”

“Bannister’s House of Fashion, madam.” A male voice said with pride.

Jane opened the door and a tall, very lean man came in bearing bags. He wore loose shirt and pants, with slippers, all a bright shade of green and yellow. Jane thought he looked like a clown.

She turned and pointed to the armchair. “Please put them there. I’ll go through them shortly.” She noted that Cameron had tugged down his shirt and had one hand over his lap, and his arm stretched along the back of the couch.

“Thank you for your custom, Ms Petersen, and please, *do* shop with Bannister’s House of Fashion again.” The man took Jane’s hand and kissed the back before giving her an intimate smile and leaving.

Jane closed the door with a sigh and leaned her head against the wood. She heard a noise behind her and turned.

Then Cameron was all over her again, pressing her against the door.

His mouth was hot on hers, his tongue swept in and out, and she found her ardour hadn’t cooled at all.

She toed off her boots, held on to his waist as she did so. His pants slid down and she gripped his firm butt as he undid her pants again and shoved them down.

Her shirt was ripped open, peeled off her shoulders and her bra shoved up.

Jane stepped out of her jeans and Cameron tore her panties off. His mouth came down onto her breast and he sucked her into his mouth with near painful intensity.

“*Oh, God!*” She moaned as fire ricocheted through her system.

She held onto him, lifted a leg around his hips and he drove into her with one firm thrust. She cried out at the hot, thick invasion and he lifted her other leg around him.



Cameron held her shoulders against the door and slammed into her. His mouth found her throat and he bit down, as if to eat her whole.

Jane felt the heat rise, the vibrations as he moved inside her. She concentrated on moving with him and suddenly, he touched the right spot and she closed her eyes as she came. Stars exploded behind her eyelids.

Cameron lost his rhythm and then thrust once, twice and held himself still as he came with a growl.

His knees weakened and he brought them both to the carpeted floor.

Jane dragged in gulps of air, waited for her heart rate to slow and stared up at the ceiling.

Cameron eased out of her and rolled onto his back, stared up at the ceiling, too.

Since she was closest to the door, she was the one who felt the draught of cool air first. She didn't mind, she needed something to lower the heat.

Cameron shifted beside her. He reached out and grabbed her hand in his, but he didn't speak.

Jane was still beyond speech herself. Cameron was a much better lover than poor Tim and she got the impression that he'd wanted to go slow – and probably would have if not for the doorbell – and then he'd just... lost it.

So had she. And she smiled.

"Squee." She said and he chuckled.

"Squee." He replied and then rose up to lean over her, brushed a finger down the centre of her chest and lower. "More?" He asked with an expression of hope.

She looked down his body. "Definitely."

\* \* \*

The couple didn't start out for the Asgardian Mountain Range until the following morning. They'd made love on carpet, on the couch, in the shower and then in bed.

Then hunger kicked in and they ordered room service.

She awoke early in the morning with Cameron nudging her and she'd smiled.

They didn't leave until two hours later – after they'd packed their new clothes.

Jane buckled into the driver's seat, Cameron beside her. He looked around the vehicle with more interest.

"You are kidding." She said, the thrum of arousal shot through her even as she was appalled by his appetite for her.

He gave her a smile. "Well, why not? We'll be out on the road for hours." He said and then winked at her. "And there is an auto-pilot."

"You are insatiable."

His smile faded. "For you, I am." He said solemnly.

Jane looked away and gave George the directions; the vehicle took off in the direction of the mountains.

"I don't know much about you, Cam." Jane said, and realised the truth of her statement. All she knew was that he taught modern history, he was in his early thirties and he made love like a dream.

"Well, what do you want to know? My life is an open book." He said.  
"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

Cam dropped his gaze, then gazed at her demurely. "A guy's gotta have *some* secrets. For later."

Jane didn't know where to start. She opened her mouth to ask a question, then closed it when another question arose.

"How about I give you some facts and then it's your turn?" He said.

"Okay." She agreed.

"Let's see." He pressed a button on his seat and it retreated, the back rest lowered slightly and he put his booted feet on the dashboard. "I know you're twenty-eight. I am thirty-three. You have three siblings, I have two." He gave her a glance. "Maydof, with a 'y' and Tempered."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "Maydof Steele and Tempered Steele. I don't think so."

"You're right." He grinned. "Madeline and Temperance. The others are nicknames. I sometimes wonder what my parents were thinking. Mad is an accountant, she's older than me and Temp works construction, she's younger."

"What do your parents do?" Jane asked.

"Dad's a Colonel in the Civilian Guard and Mum's a freighter captain – starships, if you don't mind."

"Really?"

"Yep. Dad mostly brought us up, while Mum sailed the seven galaxies." He said with a wistful smile.

"I think there are more than seven galaxies." She said.

“And so there are, it’s a... what did you call it? A popular culture reference. Anyway, both wanted at least one of us to fly or join the Guard, but none of us had ambitions in those directions. They’re happy, if we’re happy.”

Jane stared out of the front of the vehicle as it whizzed along the broad highway. “Such a contrast to my own family.”

“Yeah, I got that.” He said. “Anyway, to continue: I like modern history, I teach graduates, and I like hot chocolate and a fine white wine with seafood. I like to read romance fiction and travel magazines. I like hotels and dining out. I like futuristic and Armageddon vids, I listen to mash music – I have your brother’s album, by the way – I don’t much care for exercise unless it involves a partner and sweat. And I don’t mind sex with men, but they pale against the soft skin and scent of a woman. So. How about you?”

She stared at him, tried to take in the information. As she watched, the front of his pants began to tent with his erection and her eyes widened.

“Ahm... I teach ancient history; pre-second Dark Age. I teach first and second years. I like hot chocolate and any wine except dessert wines. I read historical fiction and history mags.” She swallowed as he undid his pants and slid a hand down into his underwear. She felt the moisture gather between her thighs. “I, ah, um... like the same vids as well as comedies. I won’t listen to loud music.”

Cameron slid his pants down and she had a full view of his rigid staff gripped in his hands.

“Erm... where was I?” She asked and swallowed against her dry throat. “I don’t exercise, and I don’t have sex with women. I like the hardness and solidness of men. I like to feel the glide of them inside me.” She said and his penis jerked at her words. He ran his own hand up and down the length.

“Come and fuck me, Jane.” Cameron invited and he lifted his shirt to reveal flexed abdominal muscles. “Let me glide inside you until I come.”

She quickly stripped out of her boots, jeans and underwear. Then she crawled over to him, set her knees on either side of his hips.

He reached out a hand and cupped her, slid two fingers inside her and began to rhythmically probe. It didn’t take him long to hit the sweet spot and she came in his hand. “That’s my girl.” He murmured and grabbed her hips, lowered her onto him.

Jane rested her hands on his shoulders and rocked on him. She rotated her hips and he gasped, gripped her hips harder and jerked up into her.

Lord, he fitted her like a glove, rubbing everywhere. She closed her eyes, loving the thick, hot slide of him. He finally arched up and jetted wet heat into her. Jane held herself still as the orgasm rolled over her.

She leaned over and kissed him gently.

Cameron's hands cupped her face and she drew back.

He had an expression in his eyes she didn't recognise, nor did she ask, for fear of what the answer might be.

Then he drew her in again, laid his mouth on hers. The kiss turned hot and she felt him inside her, hardening.

"Jesus, you are hot and wet." He murmured against her mouth and began thrusting hard. He held her hips down against his, his mouth hot on her nipple. He bit down and she arched back as another orgasm screamed through her.

"More, take more." And he addressed the other nipple. His hand slid between her legs to where they were joined. He pressed hard, even as he thrust and she rocked. Another star-spangled orgasm surged through her, but this time, Cameron came, too. He arched his hips and held still as he came in a wild rush that dimmed his vision.

"Warning. Proximity alert, please secure your person."

Jane lifted her head from Cam's shoulder, looked out the back window of the vehicle.

Another all-terrain, but low profile, car was closing fast, its windows blacked out so she couldn't see inside. She got off Cameron and struggled into her clothes. Then she secured her harness.

Cameron, meanwhile, slowly drew up his pants with shaking hands and raised his seat to stare behind them. "They're gaining."

"George, contact the vehicle and ask their intentions." She ordered.

"Negative response; auto-pilot disconnected."

"What? But the windows..."

The vehicle behind pulled out, drew level and then accelerated.

"Identify vehicle."

"Negative. Transponder offline." George replied. "Stealth engaged."

"Stealth?" Cameron said. "But we can *see* it!"

“Information:” George said, “Stealth mode renders vehicle invisible to any and all satellite surveillance.”

Jane watched as the vehicle grew smaller and then it vanished around a corner that led up into the mountains.

“Weird.” Cameron said.

“Dangerous.” Jane said tartly. “I mean, driving with blacked out windows? What kind of idiot does that?”

“Information: probability on board sensors – ninety-nine percent.”

“And the other one percent?” Cameron asked.

“Information: probability no on board sensors – one percent.”

“They’re using the sensors to drive manually, rather than auto-pilot.” Jane said.

“Confirmed.”

Jane shook her head. “Like I said: an idiot.” She blew out a breath. “I need coffee.”

“Information: Cafe Freya fifteen point three five kilometres.”

“Great! We’ll stop there, George.”

Cameron gave her a look. “That gives us just enough time too...”

“No.” Jane said and he sent her a sad look. “No.” She said again and she turned away from him.

He was a sex maniac, she was sure.

The vehicle climbed into the mountains without slowing for the corners. The vehicle performed without hesitation, and soon, the cafe came into view.

Café Freya was a long low white-painted building built on top of a cliff to take advantage of the spectacular view below.

As soon as the car came to a stop, she was out and stretching her legs. She strode the length of the car park and back again. The black car wasn’t here, but there were plenty of others, most all-terrain.

Cameron waited for her by the car with his shirt half undone and his dark hair ruffled. He looked totally sexy.

Jane walked back to him. “Come on, it’s coffee time.”

He picked up her hand and they walked into the single-storey building together.

The warmth and happy noise hit her as soon as she opened the door.

She found the abundance of people relaxing. Groups of young people in a rainbow of ski gear laughed. Families sat around circular tables consuming food and there was equipment: backpacks with ropes and odd, metallic circles hanging from the fronts, short power skis, and folded snow boards.

“Find us a table, Cam, while I... er... clean up.” She said and went to bathroom.

When she emerged, she noted where Cam sat and then sauntered to the long food and beverage counter. She studied the menu and ordered two bowls of beef stew, with bread and two coffees.

Jane paid and the customer server slid her tray across.

Cameron stood near a smaller table to the side of the front door.

Jane eased her way through the crowd and slid the tray onto the table.

“Smells great.” Cameron said and removed the bowls, the basket of bread and the coffee. Jane slid the tray into the cavity beneath the table.

Jane scooped a cube of beef with gravy into her mouth. “Oh, yeah. It tastes great, too.” She sighed and closed her eyes. Then she opened them and began eating in earnest.

When she was nearly done, she used a chunk of fresh, yeasty bread to mop up the gravy. Then, when the bowl was clean, she leaned back with her coffee.

“I should get the recipe.” She said to Cameron, then looked over his shoulder.

Two men entered wearing black ski gear. They looked around the room, their gazes resting for moments on the people inside.

One looked towards their table and moved on, then back again and continued around the room.

Jane felt a sudden chill scoot up her spine as the two men leaned in to speak with each other. Then they turned around and left the cafe.

“Jane?” Cameron asked and turned to look over his shoulder. He turned back. “What?”

“Two men. Looking for someone. Then they left.”

Cameron shrugged. “Maybe their pals aren’t here and they’ve moved on.”

Jane leaned towards him. “And maybe they were looking for *us*.”

“No one knows we’re here, Jane.” Cameron replied.

“I’d like to keep it that way. Maybe we should go. We’ve still got a long way to go.”

Cameron's eyes lit up.

"What is it with you?" She demanded.

"You. I can't get enough."

"Well, put a hold on it pal, or it will fall off."

Cameron shrugged. He drained his coffee and stood, held out his hand to her.

Reluctantly, she took it, and he guided her through the crowd and out into the car park. The men were nowhere to be seen and she walked towards her vehicle.

Then, from between two parked cars, one of the black clad men stood, his dark gaze on them and his hand reaching into his jacket.

Jane slowed her pace, as did Cameron. She looked over her shoulder and saw the other one, also reaching into his jacket.

"Still think they're not after us, Cameron?"

## **Chapter Fifteen**

Cameron squeezed her hand as he glanced at the two men. "Let's give them the benefit of the doubt." He said and angled her towards their vehicle.

The man ahead moved to intercept them and Jane saw he'd removed a black object.

She knew it was a gun, just *knew* it. Jane squeezed Cam's hand, then released it. He looked down at her.

"Just in case we need to run." She said in a low voice.

"Ms Petersen." The man nodded in her direction. "Dr Steele." He appeared even larger in his black ski jacket. His dusky skin hinted at a North African heritage. He had very short dark hair, almost spring like, and black eyes.

"Who are you and what do you want?" She demanded with false bravado. She was scared spitless.

"We are... representatives of a consortium, Ms Petersen. We believe you have something which does not belong to you. We'd like it returned."

He sounded like he was reading from a poorly written script.

"Which is?" She asked.

"The World Council Files, of course. You have the key, the address." He said with a smile. His teeth were very white against his skin.

"What on Earth do you want with thousand year old files? Their only value is historic!"

He tilted his head. "You'd think so, but obviously you haven't explored the Vault properly. Give me the address and we'll let you go on your way."

Cameron snorted beside her. "Why would you expect us to believe that?"

All humour left him. "Because I'm an honourable man and killing people without cause isn't required, nor is it necessary." His expression took on an intensity. "Of course, we don't need you, Dr Steele, just Ms Petersen."

Jane felt something prod her lower spine. "And I'm wondering about wounding you. Or him." The second man whispered in her ear. "Harmed or unharmed, Petersen, it's your choice."

A third voice suddenly sounded. "How about you gentlemen leave these nice tourists alone and be on your way."

"Madam, this is none of your concern." The first man said with a frown. "We are having a *private* conversation."



Jane longed to turn around, but the man behind her prodded her again.

“No,” the woman sighed, “a private conversation does not involve guns and threats. Now, I will ask you, nicely, to leave these people alone.”

“Or what?” The second man said and Jane felt him turn.

“Or, I may have to take extreme measures.”

“Lady, you don’t know who you’re messing with.” The second man snarled.

“Sir, do you agree with your comrade here?” The woman asked.

The first man shook his head. “I don’t actually agree with him, no. Violence is often the last resort for me. However, we have been employed to retrieve a key. And Ms Petersen has that key.” He said.

“Did she steal it?”

The man shifted. “No.”

“Did she acquire the key by any illegal means?”

He shook his head. “Not that I know of.”

“Then she is the legitimate owner, wouldn’t you say?”

Jane was becoming a little pissed off at being the subject of the conversation, but not a part of it. Yet, she didn’t want to set any of the armed people off. And she was pretty sure the woman was also armed.

“I don’t know that, madam. I was tasked in retrieving the key. I was given to understand that I could use any measures necessary, and that the... consortium were the true owners.”

“And what does the key unlock?” The woman asked from closer behind Jane.

“None of your business.” The second man snarled. “Now, fu...”

Jane heard a fleshy thunk and then another. She kept her eyes on the first man. His eyes were focused on someone over her shoulder, then they dropped.

“Should I repeat myself?” The woman’s voice said, mockingly.

“No, madam. The key unlocks the World Council Vault.” The first man said and the woman sighed.

“Oh... dear.”

The man blinked. “You know of it.” He said.

“Yes.”

“Do *you* know the address?” He demanded.

“Leave these people alone.” She said instead. “If I see a hint of you around them, I *will* kill you, and your colleague.” She stated with absolute sincerity and without a trace of regret.

Jane finally built up the courage to turn around. The woman was walking away. All she saw was a slim figure dressed in black from head to toe.

The second man groaned on the ground. Jane shifted away from him.

“Now, we have a conundrum.”

She turned back to the first man.

He brought his hand around and held it front him. He pointed the black barrelled gun to the ground, cupped the barrel with his other hand. “I was hired to do a job, Ms Petersen, and it disturbs me that a stranger should interfere. Especially one I cannot identify who has... skills in unarmed combat.” He raised his eyebrows in question.

“You’re... asking us if we know her?” Jane asked. And he nodded.

“No, sir.” She said and Cameron nudged her. She looked at him. “Well, we don’t!”

“So.” The first man said. “There is another player.” He looked past Jane. “Amir, with me. We need to consult.” He said and turned and walked away.

The second man was breathing hard when he finally got to his feet.

“I will see you later, Petersen, and your boyfriend.” He sneered in her ear, and then he followed the first man.

He wasn’t as tall, nor as broad, but he walked with an arrogance that hadn’t dimmed by his confrontation with the mystery woman.

Jane’s breath gushed out of her and her knees went weak. She lowered to the ground, planted her hands on the gritty surface.

Cameron’s arm came around her.

“We need to get going,” he said, “in case he changes his mind.”

She nodded and let him lift her up and guide her to the car. He settled her in the passenger seat, while he jogged around to the driver’s side.

“Information: resume journey.” He said and the engine started, the vehicle backed out of the space and turned onto the highway.

Jane couldn’t seem to keep warm. “Temperature: twenty-six degrees Celsius.” She said as her teeth began to chatter. She wrapped her arms around her body, huddled into the seat.

“Confirmed.” George said.

The increase in heat made little difference. Cameron looked at her with a helpless expression.

“I’ll be fine.” She said through gritted teeth. “J...J...just... give me a moment.” And she shuddered.

“He was... going to... hurt us.” She stuttered.

“Not if you told him.” Cameron said and laid a hand on her arm.

“The second guy. I think he likes to hurt people, whether the first man agreed or not.”

“Yeah, but who was *she*?” He asked.

“A guardian angel.” Jane breathed and shuddered once more. Then she felt more stable and loosened her hold on her body.

“Yeah.” Cameron agreed.

Jane threw up her hands. “This is crazy! What’s in that damned vault that Walker is willing to risk his freedom for, and those two are willing to torture for?”

“Don’t forget the woman is willing to hurt to protect.” Cameron mused.

Jane sat up. “Yeah.” She agreed. “But... how did she know we were in trouble? And why was she so sure neither man would continue to intimidate us?”

“My guess is that she didn’t. And Amir isn’t the type of man to easily forget being slighted.” Cameron said. “We’ll be seeing them again, sooner or later.”

\* \* \*

The vehicle pulled onto the side of the highway. “Destination: arrived.”

Jane looked around, then she got out of the car.

An icy wind blew, nipped at her cheeks, but she didn’t notice. The view entranced her. She looked out over a valley. Black rock rose in towering, jagged and snow-smeared peaks on either side of the view. In the distance, she saw a plain of yellow and above, an astonishing blue sky. The intensity of colour nearly made her eyes water.

She turned around. More towering peaks of black rose above her, but she saw no sign of any habitation.

Jane returned the vehicle.

“Where is the Estate?”

“This pass represents the border.” George replied.

“Is there a house?” She asked.

“Affirmative.”

“Destination: Caparossi Estate House.” Jane said with a sigh.

“Confirmed.” George said and the car pulled out onto the highway again.

They travelled further into the mountains and the snow began to fall; first in fat flakes and then in smaller, more intense clumps.

George’s progress continued without pause. Darkness slowly crept across the mountain range and the headlights came on.

It took another hour of twisting turns and cut backs, but the vehicle came up over a ridge and onto a plateau.

“Destination: arrived.”

“Wow.” Jane said and nudged Cameron. “I’d say that was a wow, wouldn’t you?”

“I don’t recognise the architecture. Do you?”

“No.” She said. “But it blends in with the surrounds in perfect synchronicity.” She said.

The structure was multi-storied, sweeping up in a curve on the cliff face. It was difficult to see the entire building through the swirling snow, but Jane could see lights gleaming on various levels.

“Shall we see if anyone’s home?” Jane asked with a cheeky grin.

Cameron looked at her. “Remind me again why we’re here, invading a total stranger’s privacy?”

“This, Cameron, is a piece of history! Aren’t you even the littlest bit curious?”

“I’m more concerned about someone’s right to privacy, than storming into their home demanding to see historical things.” He said.

The vehicle came to a stop in front of the house; although mansion would probably be a better description.

“Fine.” She shrugged and reached for the door handle. “Stay in the car.” She said and got out.

She hugged the thermal coat around her, raised the collar around her ears.

Jane approached the black door, stepped onto a black square, curiously clear of the snow. As she studied the block, the soles of her feet began to warm. “Cool.” She murmured.

She reached out to press the doorbell and an awning extruded from above the door to protect her from the blizzard. It, too, was black.

While the contrast between black and white was spectacular, it was beginning to feel funereal to her.

Warm air gusted down from the awning, melting the snow on her jacket. She pressed the button again and listened, tilted her head, but she couldn't hear if it went off inside.

Of course, a house – mansion – like this one, would be completely sealed from the elements, soundproofed probably.

Jane looked around, turned her face up to the warm air blowing, then dropped her head as the door opened.

"Yes?" A tall, statuesque blonde woman said in an unfriendly tone. She wore an ice blue silk dress and didn't seem affected by the cold at all.

"Oh, ah," Jane hadn't really thought about what she would say. "Is this the Caparossi Estate?"

The woman sighed. "No, it is not. It is *my* estate."

"But it used to be."

"I have no idea what the history of the house is, now, if you'll excuse me." And the door closed.

Jane chewed her lip. After so many centuries, it wasn't surprising the occupant didn't know. The house had probably changed hands hundreds of times.

The warm air shut off and the awning retreated into the house. Jane felt the loss of warmth.

Still, people left parts of themselves in the houses they occupied. Small things, forgotten things. And she stepped off the warm black square to walk around the house.

She discovered she couldn't go around the house at all, because it had been carved into the rock face itself.

Disappointed, she returned to the car and a warm Cameron.

"Well?" He asked.

"Destination: Freyaville," she said, "location: the Hyatt."

"Destination confirmed, location confirmed." George dutifully replied and drove the vehicle in a circle and then started the long descent.

"Nothing." She replied to his question. "The lady of the house didn't know anything about the history of the building. I got the impression she didn't care, either."

“So, we head back to the hotel and... what next?” He asked.

Jane shrugged out of her coat and Cameron raised his eyebrows. Then he gave her a slow, seductive smile.

“No, Cameron. I have to review my notes.” She said and accessed her forearm unit. The menu screen swirled up like a blue sparkler. And she went to work.

The darkness deepened as she looked over the information she’d accessed from the archives.

George automatically matched the internal light with daylight.

Cameron slept.

*Maybe I’m going about this the wrong way. What is it I’m trying to do?* Jane asked herself.

*Prove Cambria Petersen existed.* She’d done that. Everything she needed to prove the Hunter’s existence lay in the files she’d recovered. So, what *else*?

Find where she is buried. Find any descendants. Tell the world a story they haven’t heard in a thousand years.

She concentrated on the first. But the Ragnarok archives didn’t have a death date. She searched through the customs database. If she didn’t die here, then she died somewhere else; obviously.

“Yeah.” She murmured as she found a departure date. Ten years after the death of Caparossi.

Cambria would have been near his age when she left – even clones aged. But to where? Oh, there it was, at the bottom of the page.

*Nexus True?*

And she thought about it. The clone returned to her makers, but to what end?

Cloning Caparossi, maybe? That fit. She’d buried the original; maybe she wanted another clone of herself and him. Younger versions, so they could live their lives over again without the stress and danger of the Hunter and Retrieval Unit. They could have an ordinary life.

Whoa, scary. That would mean more descendants.

Jane accessed the public transport system and booked... she glanced at the sleeping Cameron. She didn’t think she’d be able to get rid of him. And if he did chose to return to Earth, she could always get a refund. So she booked two tickets, departure in eighteen hours; she could get a lot done in the meantime.

Jane turned her attention to the descendants of the Ragnarok Caparossi-Petersens, or maybe she should call them the 'Earth' Caparossi-Petersens, since all were born there. Only Nathan senior and Sheridan were buried here. Sheridan, she read, died in a ski-ing accident at the age of ninety-two.

Who skied at that age? Jane wondered. An adventurous old woman, she thought with a grin. *Go, granny!*

The only other record she found, was of the other three siblings departing Ragnarok for Earth.

Jane knew she'd have to return, eventually, to track Saskia, Nathan junior and Alexander, but not too soon. Her priority was finding the tomb of Cambria and a reason why she wasn't buried beside a much beloved husband and daughter.

Her next port of call would be Nexus True and their database. But would the records be a matter of public knowledge? Could they be, like the World Council Vault, off limits to ordinary people, even historians?

She wouldn't know until she got there. She shut down the unit. There was little more she could think of to look up, and she felt the day's stress weigh on her.

Jane looked out beyond the windscreen. The world was a dark, white speckled place. No streetlights out here in the wild.

They wouldn't reach civilisation until morning.

"Dim lights." She said and made herself comfortable.

"Confirmed." George murmured.

Jane closed her eyes and dropped into sleep.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

“Why are you so interested in her?” Leah Wilkinson turned to her companion after watching the vehicle turn in a circle and begin the long journey down the mountain.

“Because she is the *only* one to find the Vault.” Hunter Cambria Petersen ran her fingers over the flat keyboard. “And she’s following a trail that will lead her right to me.”

“What do you want to do about that?” Leah asked and elegantly sat in the brocaded wingback chair across from Cambria’s work station.

Cambria turned. “You sound as if you think I should terminate the girl.”

“You have kept your own secret for a thousand years. This ‘girl’ will expose you.”

“First: no one would believe her and second...” She went back to studying what Jane Petersen was accessing.

“Second?” Leah asked.

“Never mind.” Cambria grumbled. “That is another secret that, amazingly enough, has yet to be discovered, or even researched. This one, though,” she tapped the screen, “she may very well uncover it and that *will* cause enormous disruption. On an inter-galactic scale.”

“You’ll have to convince her not to pursue whatever it is she’s trying to find, then.” Leah said tartly.

“Even if I thought I could succeed, there are others out there who know that she has the address to the Vault. I think I’ve partially delayed pursuit while the parties unknown try to work out who interfered in the recovery of that address, but they’ll be after those two very shortly.” She said and chewed her bottom lip. “I should probably do something about that.”

Those two thugs were the get-in men; somewhere there were others who wanted access to the Vault for their own benefit. They were the people she should be focusing on.

“I think I will make a little trip back to Earth.” She said.

“And do what?” Leah asked.

“Add a little fail-safe to the Vault. Jane worked hard to find it, she’s entitled to keep it. So...” She hacked deeper into the woman’s information unit and found her home address. “I’ll just see what she has, go to the Vault and fix a few things.



That way, if she's forced to give it up, access will only be granted from the Petersen Estate corridor and only those with my DNA." She smiled at the thought. "Now, where shall I send the interlopers, Leah?" And she turned to her companion.

Leah gave her an evil smile. "I know just the place."

"Oh? Somewhere I haven't been?"

Leah's smile broadened. "What was the name of the planet that ended Bolingbroke?"

Cambria laughed. "You're right: that is evil!"

\* \* \*

Cambria used her own corridor to access the Hyatt. No one batted an eyelid as she emerged from the private door. Nor should they since she owned the hotel.

She was dressed in photo-chromatic jeans that could change colour should she need it for camouflage, the same material made up her shirt. She'd also donned her traditional ankle length Hunter coat with its many pockets and her hard wearing boots. Hand-made shades covered her eyes. People would not see the gold flecks in her eyes, only the dark blue.

"Ms Weir," the young concierge said faintly and swallowed. "How may assist you?"

"You have a young woman staying with you, Jane Petersen and companion."

His expression turned uncomfortable. "Ma'am..."

"It's okay, Ross, I don't want access. I want you to tell me if anyone else has been asking about them." She said with a warm smile.

Ross hesitated, and then nodded. "Two men. They didn't look like the type of people we usually service, but they said they were to meet with them in the restaurant." He said.

"Hmm." Cambria said. "And what did you say to them?"

"I said it wasn't policy to divulge guest lists, ma'am, and suggested they contact their friends by com to arrange a time."

"Good, Ross, good." Cambria said. "When Jane returns, they'll be leaving. Give them a refund on the remaining days they've booked and tell them the hotel will return the vehicle to the hiring agency. Then insist they use the private cor... Private transporter to access their destination. Then I want you to cancel their *public* booking to Nexus True. Do you have all that?"

“Yes, ma’am.” Ross said and repeated her instructions. “But... they’ll want to know why we’re going to all this trouble.”

“Tell them... tell them,” her expression brightened, “tell them there was a system’s malfunction and the suite is double booked from today. Since they are already leaving, all you can do is offer them the free, *private* and *untraceable* transit – and maybe a free booking in the future.”

Ross’s eyebrows lowered. “This is a state of the art system, it never...”

“Ross,” Cambria sighed, “it’s important. Life and death important: theirs.”

“Oh.” He replied and his expression cleared. “Those two men.”

Cambria nodded.

“I will expedite their check out, ma’am.” He said.

“Thank you, Ross.”

Cambria turned toward the all night cafeteria. She’d just check it out before she left for Earth.

She ordered coffee and then looked around the room.

A few people sat at various tables, dressed in evening wear; one last night cap or coffee before retiring. And there, in the corner, nearly hidden by the potted palms, the two men she’d roused earlier in the day.

The more violent man was leaning back against the couch, with his arms folded and his eyes closed. The other, more intelligent one, was reading documents on his information unit. Both faced the doorway. They knew their business, but they’d trapped themselves in the corner, so they weren’t as professional as she first thought.

She accepted the mug of milky coffee and made her way over to the table.

Quietly, she came around left side of the palm, not a direct approach. She slid the mug onto the table top and sat across from the men.

The first man blinked at her, while the second continued to sleep.

“Keeping watch?” Cambria asked and picked up her mug.

The man shut down his unit. “I do have a job to do.”

“Why?” She asked.

“Why?” He raised his eyebrows, then shrugged. “I suppose everyone has to do something, and I happen to do this.”

Cambria indicated the sleeping man with her mug. “And him?”

The man's mouth turned down. "Amir is a thug; muscle. I wish I didn't have to work with him, but orders are orders."

"You'll probably end up killing him." She said and he nodded.

"But not until he does something outstandingly stupid."

"Very tolerant of you." She replied.

"I'm a very tolerant person... ah, how do I address you?" He asked.

"Louisa Arabella Ingram Weir. At your service." She said and held out her hand. He took it and gave her palm a brief squeeze.

"Abraham Rufus Shaw." He said.

"And shortly, we shall know all we need to know about each other." She said with a smile. He returned her smile and Cambria knew they'd come to an understanding. "To give you a head start, I own this hotel."

"And a fine one it is, Ms Weir."

"Thank you Mr Shaw." She returned and lifted her mug.

"Now that we have introduced ourselves, may I ask what brought you to my table?" Shaw asked.

"I thought it might be nice for us to gain a measure of each other. You want the address to the World Council Vault, and I intend to stop you and anyone who tries."

"Ah." He said and leaned back. "So you believe Jane Petersen is the rightful owner of all that wealth purely because she discovered it?"

"I do. She already claimed it; and, I should add, the claim has been approved."

Shaw chuckled. "Good, good. It will make the job that much easier. And in the spirit of fair play, Ms Weir, I should tell you that there is a fiancée contract in play."

Cambria tsked. She doubted Jane would be running around with her current companion if she had a fiancé back on Earth. But she could easily think of the scenario that resulted in the confrontation at the car park, why Shaw was hot to get the address first.

"And the fiancé's name?" She asked and he pursed his lips.

"Ms Weir, no other names will be exchanged. That would take the fun out of the chase and the challenge." He said.

"Of course." Cambria drained her mug and stood. Shaw did, too. "Enjoy your stay, Mr Shaw, I'm positive we will meet again."

“Thank you, Ms Weir, I’m sure we will.” He bowed his head slightly and she walked away.

An interesting character, she thought. Polite and reasonable and up for a challenge.

She stopped at the front desk. “Ross, as soon as Ms Petersen and her companion arrive, please have them escorted by security at all times.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He said.

“Good night.” She said to him and he replied in kind.

Cambria went to the private door and punched in the code for the Vault. Time to set the trap.

\* \* \*

“Warning.” George’s seductive voice woke Jane out of a dead sleep.  
“Approaching destination.”

Jane sat up, yawned and looked around. They were entering the outskirts of Freyaville.

She stretched out her arms and legs.

“Cam.” She said and nudged him.

He slowly opened his eyes and studied her. She felt the heat sweep over her, but she firmly suppressed it.

“We’re back.” She said softly and he blinked, disappointment in his eyes.

He sat up and looked around. “Shame,” he said, “but I can wait until we get back to the hotel.”

“You might want to wait for an invitation.” She said.

“As if you’d refuse me. You love it as much as I do.” He replied.

“True enough.”

The car glided down the main street and onto the boulevard where the Hyatt was.

“I could use a long, hot shower and a meal.” Cameron said. “I’m sure we missed one.” He rubbed his belly and her eyes followed the movement.

“Or two,” she agreed. “Let’s save water and shower together.”

Cameron sighed. “Oh, well if I have to.” He said with a lecherous glance at her.

The vehicle smoothly came to a stop in front of the Hyatt. The doorman approached, and then paused, turned his collar to speak. Then he opened Jane's door.

"Welcome back to the Hyatt, madam. I trust you had an entertaining trip?"

"Yes, thank you, we..."

Three big, broad shouldered security guards approached. One went around to Cameron's door and opened it, all the while studying the surrounds.

"...did. What's going on?" She asked as two of the guards stood on either side of the doorman.

"A security measure for you, madam."

"But... we don't need one, we don't know anyone here." Jane protested.

"The, ah, owner of the hotel ordered it, ma'am and what she says, goes, I'm afraid." The doorman said, slightly embarrassed.

Cameron came to stand next to her. "I guess we'll have to accept, Jane." He said.

"This way, please." The doorman held out his hand and the group walked into the hotel.

Jane was a little uncomfortable about how close the security guards walked with her. She glanced around and then... saw the two thugs from the car park.

Amir leaned against the door jamb leading into the cafeteria. He saw her watching him and gave her a smile. The other one sat in a comfortable chair, reading a document on his forearm unit.

Jane turned away, now thankful for the guards. But how had the owner known she'd need a guard? Then she found out:

"I'm sorry, Ms Petersen, but your suite has been double booked." The tired looking concierge said. "Systems failure, I'm afraid."

"Well," she sighed, circumventing the hotel's plan to escort them off the premises, "we are leaving today, anyway."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed, "I'll just make up your bill." He said with a faint flush to his cheeks. "These gentlemen will escort you to your suite."

Wow, they were tossing them out like unwelcome visitors. As embarrassed as she felt, she knew they'd need to clean the room before the mysterious guest arrived. Still, they could have offered an alternative – even if she and Cameron were leaving.

Cameron unlocked the door to the suite. Two of the security guards stayed outside, while one came in.

“Can we at least shower before we go?” Cameron asked, annoyed.

“Yes, sir, of course.” The guard said, as if Cam really needed to bathe.

“Come on, Jane, we have an appointment to keep.” He said.

\* \* \*

If the guard was pissed at the one-hour delay, he didn't show it. When Jane came out of the bathroom, buzzing from Cameron's attention, the guard still stood in front of the double doors.

It was as if he hadn't moved. His eyes still moved around the room, as if looking for a threat.

Jane collected and packed her gear, Cameron arranged his own stuff. Jane took one last look around the suite, checking to make sure they hadn't left anything.

“We're ready.” She said and the guard nodded.

He tilted his collar. “We're coming out.” He said and the doors opened behind him.

At the front desk, the concierge presented the bill. Since it was already paid for, all she needed was to set her thumbprint on the bottom.

“The hotel apologises for any inconvenience, Ms Petersen, and asks that you make use of the private transporter to take you immediately to your next destination.” The concierge said.

“Thank you for the offer, but we need to return the veh...”

“Already taken care of, ma'am.” He cut in.

“But...”

The concierge nodded to the security guards. They ushered Jane and Cameron to the door marked 'private'. “Input your destination, ma'am.” The big guard said.

With a frown of discontent, Jane accessed her information unit for Nexus True's address. Then she put it into the alpha-numeric pad.

“Have a good journey, ma'am, sir.” The guard said and opened the door for them.

She had no other recourse other than to step through, with Cameron following.

He opened the door at the other end and for the first time, they set foot on a truly alien planet.

\* \* \*

Cambria hadn't been back in the vault for centuries.

It smelled musty, looked dusty and disused – except for the footprints in the dust. Jane's she thought, and one other. The silence of the place was like a tomb.

Here lay many secrets – the good and the bad. Some she knew of, others she had no interest in.

She walked to where the Hunter files had been. Jane had cleaned them out, but Cambria knew there were other files in here that Jane would need if she was to do what she'd planned on doing. There were also the files still at the Hunter headquarters; and those, Jane had yet to find. She probably didn't know about them, not yet.

Did Cambria hide those files, take them, or leave them where Jane could easily find them, if she had a mind to?

There were many items in here that others would be interested in destroying. Political secrets didn't hold sway these days, they were too old. Although she imagined they'd be of interest to historians.

She and Caparossi, along with the new, separate, governments, conspired to keep this vault a secret. No one government should have access to everything from the past; there was too much anger, too much animosity towards those responsible. And so, they decided to hide it all away, destroy the building above and seal the vault.

In time, people stopped asking about the vault, about the lost files and the entire archive became lost in history, became a myth, an impossibility of size, hidden. Of course no one could hide such a large volume of work, so it must not be true. The files must have been scattered into other archives, or destroyed; maybe both - that was the consensus and Cambria was happy to keep it that way.

And then Jane Petersen decided she wanted to *know*.

Cambria had no right to keep her from the archive, the historian had legitimately found and claimed the Vault. But others were after it for their own ends, be they fair or foul. Locating the vault was the greatest discovery of any since they'd closed it down.

She wandered down the aisle, brushed her fingers over various boxes and books she knew of, ignoring the ones she didn't.

The walk took her back to a time she'd thought forgotten. She could almost hear the voices of her past as ancient conversations repeated in her mind.

Cambria found she was finally comfortable with the memories. For a long time, she refused them, blocked them for fear of the pain that would follow. It took her *decades* to move past Nathan's death. Every now and then, she felt a pang of regret, but she'd rebuilt herself. Painstakingly, deliberately rebuilt her shattered emotions.

They'd known the day would come when she'd have to say goodbye to him. He'd apologised for the coming pain. It was all he could do. He wasn't the type of man to ask any promise of her – to find someone new, to forget him and go on with her life. No, he'd simply said, 'I'm sorry I'm going to hurt you one last time'.

"Heartbreak," she said as tears choked her, "was only ever a moment a way."

"I don't understand." He whispered.

She cupped his wrinkled cheek. "My love, I could have lost you at any moment: to bad health, an accident, design. I knew that and chose to stay knowing this day would come. Nathan, what joy would I have had if I cut myself off from all the happiness and pain love always brings?"

He gave her a smug smile.

"Besides, I'm going to live for a very, very long time. You might be my main love now, but I might just find myself another."

His smile eased away.

"In a few centuries." She finished and brushed his white hair off his forehead. "I'm going to be missing you too much, Nathan." She leaned down and kissed his forehead.

They spoke of their shared history, the good memories, the terrifying and the bad. She kept talking to him, even though she knew he'd breathed his last and lay silent.

"Good times, Nathan." She murmured now as she walked the empty, silent aisles. "And time to see what young Jane is made of." She went back to the corridor.

Jane had set an alternative power source into the alpha-numeric pad. Anyone searching for the source would find it too easily.

Cambria shut it down, and replaced it with her own, stealthier model. It was more powerful, but the power cells were hidden behind an impenetrable case. No outward emissions would anyone detect with this little baby.



It was time to see what young Petersen had purloined, and whether those files were secure; it wouldn't do for just anyone to read them.

She pressed the buttons for Jane's home and hoped the residents didn't mind her sneaking around. But then... did she really care? Nope.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

Cambria opened the door into the Petersen's basement. She peeked around the corner and saw she wasn't alone.

Two men were trying to force their way through a door.

Cambria closed the metal door quietly. She walked up behind the two and cleared her throat. "Excuse me?"

They both spun so fast she wondered if they hadn't cricked their necks.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?" The bruiser on the left demanded and reached into his black jacket. A red jewel glittered on his lapel.

Cambria backed up. "There's no need for any violence, I just want to know what you're doing."

"None of your business. Where have you been hiding? We searched every inch of this house."

"You did? Well, how strange." Cambria had a sinking feeling she'd just discovered why Jane and Cameron were on Ragnarok. "I don't suppose you'd forget you ever saw me?"

He shook his head. "I might consider letting you live, if you know how to access this door."

Cambria shook her head.

"Then I'm going to have to beat it out of your father; again." And he glanced up, his meaning clear.

"You... have the family as hostage." She said and he frowned.

"Well, yeah, aren't you the missing daughter? Jane or something?" He scowled.

"No, I'm not." Cambria said.

"Well, who the fuck are you?" He lifted his weapon, aimed at her.

"Someone who's about to kick your ass." Cambria said and turned sideways as he took the shot.

The ambient projectile hit her upper arm, but the coat, a new design, blocked it. She still felt the punch of it and staggered slightly, but it also served to hide her movements.

Cambria reached for her own gun. It held dual magazines: one loaded with fast-acting tranquilisers, the other with hyper-velocity, razor-sharp projectiles.

Since she might need to interrogate the guards, the tranquilisers were first. She drew and fired as she went into a crouch.

The man dropped the gun, fell to his knees, the dart protruding from low in his throat. Then the bruiser fell to the side.

The second man immediately threw up his arms. "I'm unarmed!"

Cambria used her alternative vision to scan him. Unarmed her aunt Fanny, if she'd had one.

"If you don't divest yourself of all the weapons I can plainly see, I shall kill you stone motherless dead." She said and slowly drew bead on him. "And if you think you can reach the weapon in the back holster, go right ahead." She finished softly.

"Multi-spectrum glasses?" He asked.

"If you like." She said. "Disarm."

He continued to eye her, as if waiting. She wasn't buying anything he wanted to sell. Then he glanced at the ceiling.

Cambria shook her head when he returned his gaze to hers. "I won't say it again."

He slowly lowered his hands and began to slowly take out various weapons. But she saw the calculation in his eyes. He thought he still had a chance.

All he needed was the right angle to expose the sliding gun he had up his sleeve. It was a one shot deal, but one shot was all he needed.

He took a step forward, his hands filled with small, multi-shot pistols. "I need to put these down to access the rest." He said.

"Just drop them. Open your palms and drop them." She ordered and kept her eyes on his.

She saw just the tiny hint of triumph in his eyes as he did as she asked.

The small pistol shot out into his left hand and he fired.

Cambria felt the burn of the projectile carve a path along her cheek. She flinched and he charged her, scooping up a pistol as he did.

She shot him before he'd taken two steps.

His legs went out from underneath his body and he dropped onto his back.

Cambria stood over him and his companion. They'd be out for hours. He, too, wore a red jewel and she looked closer. It was a pin, in the shape of a visored helmet in profile with rubies filling in the silver rim.

She rolled each man over and secured them with titanium alloy zip-ties.

Cambria stepped over the two men and checked the lock they'd been trying to access. So far, they'd failed to make an impression. She left it alone. Yes, she could have accessed it with one of her gadgets, but as long as it was secure, she could leave it for the moment.

It seemed the family upstairs needed her assistance and she was happy to oblige.

She took the stairs. On the landing, she scanned the entire floor. She had yet to come up against anything that could obstruct her alternative visions.

She saw a number of signatures, human, sitting on the floor of what looked like the dining room. The table had been shoved up against the wall, along with the chairs. Surrounding the group, were four others, standing; all of them armed.

Keeping watch, and keeping them out of trouble.

She searched further. Someone else, next door to the stairs, sitting behind a desk. An office.

Cambria searched further and took note that people were patrolling the residence and the grounds.

*Interesting. I wonder what they've told the people who expect the residents at work or other appointments?*

"Why don't I ask?"

With the guards occupied elsewhere, Cambria eased open the door and slid out. She sidled up to the office door and opened it, walked in and closed it.

With a flick of her fingers, she locked the door, to the surprise of the man sitting behind the desk reading documents he probably shouldn't be. He had greying dark brown hair and hazel eyes. And the left eye had a rather splendid blackness to it along with prodigious swelling.

"Hello." Cambria said.

He looked up, startled. "Who are you? How did you get in here?" He set the documents aside and rose, anger blazing in his eyes.

"Somehow, I don't think you're supposed to be in here."

Those hazel eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "You're a relative of the family." He said.

Cambria said nothing.

“You bear too much of a resemblance to my Jane not to be. So what are you doing here?”

“You must be the fiancé.” Cambria said. “Don’t you think you’re a little old for her?” She asked with a raised eyebrow.

“True love knows no barriers.” He said with a curt nod.

Cambria smiled, then chuckled. “I might even believe that if I didn’t know better.”

“You know nothing. And now, I think you should join the rest of the family in the dining room. I have work.” He said dismissively.

Cambria turned her head to scan outside the room. Two guards approached the door.

“And I suggest you stop what you’re doing if you ever want to see the Vault.”

He looked at her sharply. “You know of it?”

Cambria nodded.

“Tell me the address, and I’ll let you go.” He said quickly.

Cambria looked at him with disbelief. “*Let me go?* You haven’t caught me, so how can you let me go?” She marched forward, suddenly tired of this greedy man. She shoved him back, into the chair and picked up the document he’d been reading.

She set it down and turned to the man as he righted himself. “A thief.” She said.

He curled his lip. “It will be mine soon enough. I’m just checking on the value of the estate.”

Cambria felt a red haze turn her vision. She willed it away. “Thief, fraudster, kidnapper and, I suspect, you intend to add multiple murder to your list of sins.”

He adjusted his jacket, tugged the short waist down and the red jewel glittered on his lapel. “It’s nothing personal. If Jane had just given me the address to the vault, none of this would be necessary. I can’t allow any witnesses to my success.”

“Huh. What is in the Vault that is so important to you?” She asked.

He stared at her. “The files of course! My God, woman, the vast wealth of knowledge! I’m considered an expert on the Second Dark Ages, but with the information in the Vault, my position shall be unassailable! I shall set up a company to allow access to documents – at a price, of course – to those willing to

pay for the knowledge. I will know everything there is to know about the World Council, how it came to be, how it ruled the world and how it was brought down. I will have that knowledge. And knowledge is power!”

“Yes, it is.” Cambria said.

“And now that I know you have the address, I don’t really need Jane any more – although I’ll keep the fiancée contract.” He laughed. “I can claim it a fraud and send her mother to prison for the rest of her life. Or I can claim compensation when Jane doesn’t turn up on Sunday for the commitment ceremony.”

“A winning hand all around; for you.”

“Yes. So, what do you say? Would you like to be my partner in this enterprise? I can offer you wealth beyond your wildest dreams, mansions, jewellery, the life fantastic!”

Cambria knew well of this type of man. He thought that, as a woman, she was incapable of seeing through his charming deceptions.

“What’s your name?” She asked she reached into her coat.

“Emeritus Professor Brendon Walker. I am the Goldman Chair at the University of Geneva, Dean of the School of History, and...”

“... and you just messed with the wrong family.” She said and drew her weapon. She aimed it at his forehead.

Walker’s eyes widened with fear. “Oh, wait! *Wait!* There’s no need for any of this! I can give you anything you desire!”

“I have everything I desire Brendon, but there is always something more...”

“What? Tell me, I can get it for you, please don’t kill me!” He said and swallowed hard.

“Justice. Brendon, there is always more justice to mete out. It just never stops.” Cambria said and she unhooked her shades, stared right at him.

He blinked with confusion at the sight of her dark blue eyes with the gold flecks – flecks that were a part of the organic mechanism inserted so long ago. She discovered they were receptors that enabled her to change her vision. They also fed into the organic repository of a galactic database that continued to grow as she experienced different things.

“I’m the woman Jane has been searching for.” She said, and cocked the weapon. “I am a Hunter, *the* Hunter on some worlds. I am Judge. Jury. And Executioner. I am the Legend. I am the Myth. I am... Cambria Petersen.” She said

and then frowned at his incredulous expression. “That did sound quite pretentious, didn’t it?”

“There’s no such person.” He said faintly.

She blew out a breath; that’s what she got for being pissed at miserable excuse for a human: doubt and denial. It didn’t matter.

“Quite right. Just call me a homicidal maniac, cleaning up the scum of the universe, then.” And she pulled the trigger just as he opened his mouth to speak.

The tranq hit the professor at the base of his throat. He went with momentum and fell over backwards. Once again, she caught the glitter of a red jewel on his lapel.

“I think I know just the place for you, while you consider the consequences of your choices.” She said and put her shades back on. Then she went to the door.

Cambria unlocked it and pulled it open. The two guards looked at her in surprise – and they collapsed with the same expression as she shot them. Once again, she used zip ties to secure them.

She had no qualms about taking a life; once, she would have hesitated, but that was when she was still getting used to being resurrected every time she died. She learned to act fast, without pause, learned to integrate her vision, her skills and information net before going into a dangerous situation. And those she killed had earned it.

The men who guarded this building did so with the full knowledge of the outcome. One or two or all of them would be the executioners, but they *knew*.

But... she had no warrants of execution, had no proof of murder. So all she could do was detain them.

Cambria looked through the wall and into the dining room. Three guards, equidistant apart, stood a couple of metres back from the family.

She walked the hallway, turned the corner and came to the closed door. From here, she could see that the guards were almost lined up, one blocking the next target.

Cambria rolled her shoulders, brought the pistol up in her right hand to near eye level and then opened the door.

Her finger brushed the trigger as each man turned to look at her. And each man fell with a dart in the throat or neck, without getting a shout or a shot off.

She holstered her weapon, and took in the scene.

The father, bloodied, bruised, with broken bones in his face and hands, lay in the arms of a young woman. Next to the pair, two men – brothers – also beaten, but nowhere near as badly. Behind the four, she saw a thin man with a pinched expression. He had silver hair and ice blue eyes. Two women were with him, brown hair and brown eyes with a tear-streaked face and blonde hair with green eyes glaring at Cambria.

Cambria surveyed the surrounding rooms. The rest of the guards were all outside on the grounds. They would not come in unless called or it was a change of shift.

She stepped inside and looked at the bodies on the floor. All were near the walls. “Well, then.” She said. “I can see some of you need assist...”

One of the brothers, the one with dark blue eyes, shot up off the floor. His shoulder caught Cambria in the midsection and they both sailed out of the door.

She landed on her back with two hundred pounds of furious Petersen on top of her. He leaned back and threw a punch. Cambria turned her head and he slammed his knuckles into the marble floor.

The pain of it shocked him and Cambria took the opportunity to push him off. She rolled away, on to her knees as he clutched his probably broken hand.

“For fuck’s sake! I’m here to *help* you!”

And then she heard the cocking of more than one gun.

Slowly, she turned her head. The young woman, the other brother, the older man and the woman with the brown eyes all aimed pistols at her; the pistols their guards had.

“What?” She demanded. “You’re going to kill me for taking out those snakes downstairs, that greedy asshole Walker and for the men who held you prisoner?” She climbed to her feet.

She must have startled one of them with her rise, for a bolt of ambience struck the outside of her shoulder. Cambria turned with the shot, then back again.

“Please do not shoot at me again.”

“The cops are on their way.” The brother said.

“Well, good. Did someone warn them about the guards outside?” She asked and the four looked at each other. “No? Then I suggest you lock the doors, because as soon as they hear the sirens, they are coming in here.”

No one moved.



“Unless you like being hostages?”

“Joanna, get Brit and lock all the doors. We’ll hold this one here until the all clear is given.”

“Well,” Cambria smiled. “I suppose I can stay for one cup of coffee, but no more. I need to get back to Jane.”

The boy raised the weapon, aimed it at Cambria’s forehead. “What have you done with her?” He demanded.

“She and her companion are on Nexus True.”

“Companion?” He scowled.

“She must mean Cameron Steele, the modern history guy.” The young woman said.

“Look, if you want explanations, why don’t we discuss it over coffee. I need to secure these assholes. And I think this young man needs a medic for his hand.”

## **Chapter Eighteen**

Jane clutched at Cameron's arm as she stepped out of the transit door and onto a clear platform. She stared right down towards the planet.

"Holy Hell." Cameron gasped as he stared down.

"Move along, Gentle Sir, Gentle Fem." A mechanical voice said from behind. "More passengers are arriving."

Together, they lifted their heads and focused on not looking down. Still, the grip they had on each was strong – just in case.

Jane was finally glad to step off the clear concourse and walkway. All around her, she could see other people, alien and human...oidish, found the view more disturbing than spectacular.

She hugged Cameron's arm and looked around. "I think we need to pause a moment, catch our breath."

"You got that right." He breathed. "Look, a cafe. Let's get something to eat and drink. It's been hours since we last ate and we didn't get the chance at the Hyatt before they tossed us out."

With their arms wrapped around each other, they walked into the cafe. It wasn't large, but she saw a number of them dotted around the concourse.

Inside, she looked at the menu. Each item scrolled through various languages and strange glyphs. She truly was on an alien world, not colonised by humans.

"Hamburger, with everything and a large coffee." Cameron said from beside her.

"Sounds good." She said and gave the order to the identical twins behind the counter. The one on the right looked at her.

"Do. You. Not. Share?"

It was a question? She held up two fingers. The twins eyed each other and then shrugged.

Jane paid with the filament.

Cameron guided her to a table just inside the door. From here, they could watch the foot traffic and come up with a plan of action.

"I think we need to go down to the planet." Jane said as she took her seat across from the door. Cameron sat with his back to it.

"You never asked if I wanted to go home." He said.

“We were a little pushed, literally, and I figured you’d fight me anyway.” She replied.

He chuckled. “You figured right.” He reached out and picked up her hand. “I want to be with you, Jane, and not just for this... adventure.”

Jane slowly shook her head, as if not understanding her own emotions. “And you make me crazy.” She said. “You make me want like no one else, fog my mind and distract me. I can’t focus when I’m around you.” His smile slowly grew, pleased with her words. “I need my focus, Cam, I need to find a way to make sure my family is okay. I haven’t forgotten them, you know. I have two days and then I have to return or lose it all to Walker. You know that.”

He eased back. “I do. But do you really expect to find any information here?”

She was about to reply when their meal arrived. “But... we ordered the hamburger.” She said and looked up at one of the twins.

“Yes. Hamburger, with everything. Coffee. This is it.”

Jane and Cameron stared at the rounded roasted... something, with an array of strange coloured vegetables? The coffee came in a glass and was white.

“Who-beast.” She said with a grin and Cameron looked at her. “Roasted who-beast. Another popular culture reference.” She shook her head. “I’m not going to be able to eat all this.”

Cameron picked up the implements. “I’m going to give it a damned good shot at it. There’s no telling when we’ll get to eat again.”

Jane agreed, but picked up her ‘coffee’ and took a sip. “This isn’t coffee.” She said. “It’s milk. I don’t know what type, but it’s definitely milk.”

“This is good, whatever it is.” Cameron said around a mouthful of meat.

Jane turned her attention to the roast and carved off a piece, popped it into her mouth. Whatever it was, the flesh was juicy and tender. “You’re right, it’s damned good.”

\* \* \*

Cambria tilted the mug towards her, hoping she still had some coffee left, but she’d drunk it all.

She sat on a stool in the kitchen, surrounded by Petersens and staff. They’d finally introduced themselves and she’d told them of her contact with Jane. “I expect they’re having a... curious time of it.” She said with a smile and placed the

mug on the bench behind her. “The Nexians have a peculiar way of doing things, and it can be damned slow at times.”

“Do you mean she’s stuck there?” Adam, the younger brother asked.

“Ah, no, she can leave at any time, but whether she’ll get access to their archives or not, that will be entirely different. You see, the Nexians do everything by consensus, and I mean everything. I recall me and... a companion ordered coffee at a cafe. We got milk. Turns out the Nexians discussed the issue of ‘what is coffee’. They argued about it for a few months, may be even years, and came up with the consensus. Ergo, milk to them, is coffee.”

“I don’t understand.” Charles junior said.

“I mean *everything* is discussed, from what coffee is to whether to allow off-world exports, which passengers to allow on planet; everything. The Nexians don’t do anything unless an agreement is reached. The art of compromise gone wild.”

“We can go and get her, then. Tell her she doesn’t have to marry that asshole after all.” Adam said, his dark expression clearing to one of hope.

“I don’t know about that, young Adam. This, as you said, is her first off-world experience. If you were in her place, would you enjoy having that fun cut short and dragged back?” Cambria asked.

“No,” he sighed, “you’re probably right.” Then he brightened. “She doesn’t know about Walker, so she thinks she has to be back by Sunday, or lose everything she’s worked years on achieving.”

“Travelling to other planets is a strange thing; it screws with your idea of time. It might be daylight here, but the middle of night somewhere else. It’s a relative thing. Does young Jane recognise the difference?”

“You keep saying that.” Charles senior said carefully.

“Saying what?”

“Young Adam, young Jane, and yet you don’t look much older than Six, here.”

Cambria smiled at him. “Thank you for that, Mr Petersen, but I am much, much older.”

“Good genes.” Young Courtney said with a critical eye.

Cambria gave her wry smile. “You could say that.” She looked around the group. They were solid and when the cops arrived, safe. But... she needed to disappear Walker.

She tilted her head, just made out the top note of the siren. She accessed the satellite system and she heard the Petersens gasp. Her eyes would have turned black behind the shades; no more blue, but totally black, but she wasn't wearing the shades. "Shh." She said and hijacked the satellite to zoom in on their impending visitors.

The guards scattered. They didn't, after all, head towards the house.

Her eyes returned to their normal state and she focused on the staring group. "I'll explain another time. The cops are about to arrive and the outside guards have gone."

"What about them?" Adam indicated the unconscious guards.

Cambria reached into her pockets and pulled out a couple of the restraints, tossed them to the boy. "These aren't on the market yet, so you could say you overpowered them and restrained them. You lot look beat to shit already, so the cops may not doubt you. Still," she indicated the men, "you might want to give them a lick or two – just to back up your story of a fight."

The boys grinned at each other.

"No killing, okay? Love taps only." She walked over to each man and removed the darts.

"What about Walker." Six asked with murder in his eyes.

"Don't worry about him. I have a... special place. He'll live or die there – it will be up to him. He won't be bothering Jane again and.... Sadly," she said without a trace of remorse, "he won't make the nuptials, either." And she grinned. Eden was about to get another colonist.

"You haven't even told us your name." Young Courtney said.

"I have many names, young Courtney." She said and looked into Courtney's shocked dark blue eyes, so like her own. She leaned forward to whisper in the youngster's ear. "But you can call me... 'Cambria'." She said and moved through the family blocking her way.

She could not afford to be questioned or even detained, not if she was going to Hunt down whoever was after Jane and the Vault.

Cambria returned to the office and hauled Walker up in a fireman's carry. For such a bony-assed prick, he sure weighed a lot.

Downstairs, she glanced at the locked door the two men tried to break through.

Another time, she thought and punched in the alpha-numeric code for Eden. She'd put him in the pre-fabricated house, untie him and leave him to it until she could muster more supplies. She had a feeling he wouldn't be there alone for long. Then she'd head to the Police Headquarters on Nexus True.

\* \* \*

Jane and Cameron stepped out of the transit door and into a concourse filled with Nexians and the occasional alien. They were the only humans.

"It feels weird." Jane said and looked around for an information booth.

"What does?" Cameron asked as he looked around, too, but in interest at the people.

"Being the aliens." She said as she spied a desk with twins behind it.

"I guess we are." Cameron agreed.

Jane walked up to the desk just as a green, six limbed creature moved away. She wasn't unaccustomed to aliens, they frequented Earth seeking trade agreements, but she'd never seen them up close.

The identical twins had flat faces, as if pushed in, with eerie grey eyes. Tufts of hair sprouted from their ears and they had tiny, human baby-like teeth.

Jane saw the translator box sitting on the counter and approached. She used the filament to encode it to English.

"How may we assist you this morning?" The one on the left said, but the monotone voice came out of the box.

"I am inquiring as to accessing this planet's historical archives." She said.

"What is the nature of your inquiry?" The one on the right asked.

Jane pursed her lips. How did she frame a polite inquiry? Like she addressed George? It was worth a shot.

"Information: Cambria Petersen. Information: Cloning practices. Information: Nathan Caparossi." She said.

Two sets of grey eyes blinked at her in unison, as if programmed. Were they androids then? She wasn't going to ask, she didn't know what the customs were here and she was determined not to offend anyone with the ability to help her.

"Information on Cambria Petersen is a classified archive secure; see local law enforcement office for further approval. Information on the cloning of Nexians is available from the public information access point. The Nexian database has no

information on parameter, Nathan Caparossi, in total or partial.” The twin on the left said.

“Thank you.” Jane said and stepped back.

“Well, that was interesting.” She said and Cameron turned from his study of the various Nexians wandering by.

“Mm?”

“The information on Cambria is classified, I can look up cloning, but there is nothing on Caparossi.” She said.

“If they were telling you the truth, that is.” Cameron said. “Have you noticed that the Nexians always travel in pairs?”

“No.” She replied, but now she saw that the Nexians did, indeed travel in pairs; and that those pairs were identical. How odd. But she shrugged it off, it wasn’t what she was here for. She spied one of the public information access points and walked over, connected the filament and brought up the keyboard.

Jane went for the easier inquiry first: that of cloning since it was available and here. She tried a number of questions, but the answer kept coming back that no alien species were allowed to be cloned.

“Liars.” She muttered. She already knew they’d cloned Excalibur Jones, even if it was illegal. What’s to stop them from doing it under the table again for someone for whom they held in such high esteem?

She tried Caparossi, but nothing came up. And she tried Cambria’s name, but again, it told her the information was classified and she’d have to ask for access.

“Okay, then that’s what I’ll do.” She murmured and withdrew the filament.

She turned at the tug on her shirt. “What is it?” She asked and Cameron stopped tugging. She leaned back to look around him. “Hmm, interesting.” She said as two Nexians, tall, with a shadow of dark hair on their scalps, marched in perfect step towards them. “I guess asking about Cambria Petersen is a no-no.”

“Please for you to come with us, Gentle Fem, Gentle Sir.”

\* \* \*

Cambria watched via the live surveillance feed. “She’s a bold one.” She said and wiped the sweat from her brow. She’d made a fast transit to the HQ and still felt the heat of Eden on her face. She’d gone back for the other two guards. There was no way the Petersen’s could explain their detention. For now, there were three new colonists on Eden.

“I do not understand why you wished them detained, Hunter.” Officer Qirian Inkerishan said.

“No, we do not understand.” Qerian, Qirian’s Pair, said.

“It’s more for their safety. These two are so focused on the hunt for information, that they’re ignoring everything else. I’m not sure about this Cameron Steele fellow, he seems too interested in Nexian Pairs, as if they are a freak of nature.” Cambria said.

“We know of Terran... unease... with aliens, Hunter, except it is here that they are alien. Do they not understand that?” Qerian asked.

“No, not really, not unless it is painfully brought to their attention. We’re a bigoted lot, underneath, and sometimes on the surface, too.”

“Where do you wish them to be held, Hunter?” Qirian asked.

“Take them to the conference room, give Jane whatever information she desires.” Cambria said. “It’s not as if I’m such a big, bad secret here.”

Qerian smiled, showed off his baby teeth. “No. You were a secret to begin with.”

“Yes, a secret already, no need to explain.” Qirian said.

The Nexians never wanted knowledge of their ‘imperfections’ to become public knowledge, nor of the traitorous Gardishan and Bandirashan families. To be less than perfect, to take action outside of consensus, was the mark of madness – or poor cloning technique.

To have a human, an *alien*, point that out to them and then hunt down the perpetrators, was something the Nexians would never admit. And they never had. To do so, was to admit their way of governing, their entire cultural system was fundamentally flawed – and no one wanted that; they, as a government, wouldn’t even admit that their lack of genetic variation needed adjusting. They had an officer ask Cambria for Excalibur Jones’ remains, instead of an official approach.

“Is there a Milldarishan Pair available?” She asked.

“We can ask.” Qerian said and turned to his Pair, who nodded.

“Yes, we must ask. Did you want a specific Pair?” Qirian asked.

“I do. I would like to invite a Pair to whom the stories of the past were told, who know of that day and the days before.” Cambria said and watched the officers escort the couple out of the transit lounge.

“We will see to it.” Qerian bowed.



“Yes,” Qirian said, “we’ll see to it.”

\* \* \*

Jane and Cameron were taken to a building, exactly the same as the other buildings around them. No one spoke until they reached a room with a long table and tall backed chairs.

“Please for you to sit.” One of the identical officers said.

“Please for you to make yourselves comfortable.” The other said and then the twins left them alone.

“Well, I guess we’re not under arrest.” Cameron said and went to the window. “But there’s no escape out this way, either.”

“I wonder what I did wrong? It was a simply inquiry.” Jane said and stepped up beside him to look out over the city. Every building, exactly the same as the next.

The door behind them opened and a pair of twins came in bearing a tray each.

“We have coffee for you.” The one of the left said.

“Yes, genuine Earth coffee.” The other replied.

Jane looked at Cameron and shrugged. “I could do with some caffeine, how about you?”

“Better check it, first.” He said and eyed the Nexians with suspicion.

Jane picked up the strangely shaped carafe. It looked like a ball, with knob on the top and a spout of the bottom between three spikes.

She held it over one handle-less cup and turned the knob. Hot, black liquid ran out of the spout.

It smelled like coffee, looked like coffee. She turned the knob in the other direction and the liquid stopped.

She set the ball aside and lifted the cup to her lips. Jane tasted it.

“Nice. It’s coffee, all right.” She sighed. “Want one?”

“Yeah, sure.” Cameron said and she poured him a cup, handed it to him.

He sniffed at it, and then tasted. “Good.”

“Thank you.” Jane said to the Nexians. They bowed and left the room. “Funny, they speak English.”

“We have an extensive language database.” A Nexian said as he came in.

“Yes, a very extensive language database.” The second Nexian came in.

Both Nexians were old, with pushed in, wrinkly faces and very white baby teeth.

“Hello.” Jane said. “I’m Jane Petersen and this is Cameron Steele.”

“We are Gersart and Girsert Milldarishan, at your service.” The twins bowed.

“At... *our* service?” She asked.

“We are here to answer any questions you may have.”

“Questions?”

Gersart tilted his head. “Did you not inquire about Hunter Cambria Petersen?”

Jane felt her jaw drop. She snapped is shut and glanced at Cameron. He looked out the window, drinking his coffee, as if he were disinterested. And she guessed he was; this was her trip, even though he wanted to be with her.

“I do, did. Inquire, I mean. What can you tell me about her? Are there files I can have access to, or copy...?” She felt like she was babbling, but the Milldarishans waited patiently for her to finish.

Jane finally subsided. She took a drink from the cup and then blew out a breath.

“I guess the best place to start, is at the beginning. So, when did Cambria Petersen arrive?”

## **Chapter Nineteen**

Cambria listened as the Milldarishans wove a tale of adventure, of missteps and mistakes, of discovery, murder and everything in between.

She had to admit they told the story well; but made her sound as if she was a woman who saved the galaxy; not true: she'd only *saved* it from a nasty piece of humanity.

Cambria could barely remember Excalibur Jones and his clone, Adam. She recalled the grey eyes, because they were everywhere on Nexus True. The Nexians – excluding the Bandarishans – had done well with the serial killer's DNA. More Nexians were taller, slimmer, had hair and different eye colour. Yes, it had taken a thousand years, but the Nexians were happy with the re-introduced diversity.

They were, in fact, seeking out other donors in particular areas, and their focus was purely on humanity. She had declined the invitation, given her own uniqueness in the known universe. She'd preferred the... natural way of spreading her DNA.

She returned her attention to the conversation. It had come to the critical stage.

"And when was the last time she was here? Where did she go?" Jane asked.

The Milldarishans looked at each other.

Cambria had not spoken to this Pair – ever – and was also curious at what the response would be.

"We did not meet." Gersart said. "Our paternal and maternal influencers spoke of her, but we did not meet."

"Wait." Jane rubbed her forehead. "Are you saying your *parents* met her?"

"We are not gestated in the same way as humans." Girsert said. "We are clones. But we are given to an older Pair of the same family unit for education and nurturing."

"And this older Pair, they met her." Jane pressed.

"Yes." Both Milldarishans said.

Jane cleared her throat. "Um... excuse me if this is impolite, but how old are you?"

The Milldarishans quietly consulted with each other, then turned to her. "We are two hundred and twelve of your years."

Cambria grinned at Jane's expression of shock. She could do the math as well as anyone else. But then, the young woman ruined it and Cambria had an idea of the direction Jane's research was following.

"So... the Cambria Petersen the older Milldarishans met *was* a clone." Jane said with satisfaction.

The Pair drew back, offended. "We do *not* clone alien species, they are flawed!" Gersart protested. Both rose. "The Bandarishans brought shame upon their house by cloning Excalibur Jones; no other alien has ever been cloned for fear of the same *shame!*" He said and both turned and left.

Cambria watched Jane tighten her mouth and then shook her head. The Milldarishans were escorted out of the building by the Inkerishan Pair. The Inkerishans soothed the Milldarishans on the way out and the rapid pace of the offended Pair slowed to a calmer and more sedate pace.

By the time they stepped out onto the footpath, the aggrieved Pair had been mollified.

The Inkerishans returned upstairs and came into the surveillance room.

"They are most offended." Qirian said.

"Yes, most offended, but we have convinced them that not all humans are as polite or understanding as you, Hunter."

"Thank you for that, Inkerishans." Cambria said and drummed her fingers on the desktop. Her problem now was what to do with Jane and Cameron. She knew Jane would not give up her search for Cambria's non-existent tomb and eventually she'd find her way back to the house at Ragnarok.

The last thing Cambria wanted was her private domain invaded. If Jane knew how close she'd come she might have been more insistent with Leah.

Maybe she should let Jane lead the way, simply keep a watch over the young woman. She still had to find those who would conspire against Jane. And the best place to start... Was Earth.

\* \* \*

Jane decided that for a cloned society, the Nexians were amazingly sensitive about the subject and said as much.

"What do you think, Cam?" She asked.

"I think you are right." He turned away from the window. "But we have no clue as to where to go next." He sat down and poured himself more coffee.

“You’re right.” Jane nodded. “I can only think that the next clue is within the files I took from the Vault. I’ll have to read all of her mission files, and that’s going to take time.” She chewed her lip.

“And you still have to decide what to do about Walker.” Cameron reminded her.

“I know.” She sighed. “But I have to go back and decide whether to sacrifice my mother, or the Vault. And I have no idea what I’ll do.”

Cameron smiled. “I don’t envy you, Jane. It’s not a decision I would like to make.”

“No, it’s not a decision anyone should make.” She stood. “I think we have all the information we need. It’s time to go home and face the music.”

\* \* \*

The Inkerishans were politely disappointed that Jane and Cameron weren’t going to stay and enjoy all that Nexian True had to offer. But Jane suspected they were relieved they were leaving.

Jane thanked them again and she and Cameron stepped into the transit to the station.

And then, as they stepped out of the transit, they were once again, looking down at the planet.

“I really don’t like the view, no matter how spectacular.” Jane said as she gripped Cameron’s arm.

“I’m with you. I will be relieved to be back on Earth. I don’t think I’m the traveller sort.”

“Come on, Home Body, it’s time to return.” Jane walked up to the booking station and paid for two tickets. This trip had been expensive and she wasn’t looking forward to seeing her statement.

Still, it had been worthwhile. She now had a better idea of who Cambria Petersen was, even if she hadn’t located where she was buried.

Even if she lost the Vault, there was still plenty of information on Petersen’s descendants. That was freely available on the Global Document Network. And she now had names to track down. Maybe, if she found the right descendant, they’d have historical personal documents she could look at. Didn’t every family have a keeper of histories?

She snorted. She didn't even know her own history. And it was in the Vault that the clues lay. Okay, then, she could spend some time there, even if she had to share with that evil prick Walker.

Jane turned and gave the second ticket to Cameron. "Let's go."

Cameron picked up her hands. "I'm hoping for the best, Jane. Hoping your family is okay and Walker and his crew are in custody. But I... I fear the worst."

Jane squeezed his hands. "We'll face whatever we find together, Cameron, so you'd better man up."

He smiled at her. "Okay. I'll put my grown up clothes on and face the bastard down."

They lined up with the other passengers. Then, they handed in their tickets and the transit officer punched in the alpha-numeric code for Jane's basement. She figured that if anyone was in there, they were toast, but if they weren't, well, they could call the cops if anything was awry.

"Here we go." She said as the door opened. She and Cameron stepped through and the door behind them closed.

\* \* \*

Cambria walked through the customs gate as Louisa Weir, hotel owner. The agent flicked a glance at her face and then the ID card and handed it back without really taking her image in. That was good, she didn't want to stand out.

She stepped onto the concourse. Here, on Earth, she had very few contacts – except as a hotelier and that wasn't why she was here. Fortunately, she didn't need any nefarious contacts for what she intended.

All she needed was a public information booth to look up Abraham and Amir – and hope the inquiries didn't raise any red flags with the local cops.

Cambria strode through the open doors of the concourse and out into the busy street.

*Ah, London, you never change.*

She breathed in the scents of the city, the old buildings, the grimy streets and the chilled rain that lightly fell.

She felt her smile crease her cheeks. She'd missed Earth, missed the people and places. For too long she'd felt hunted, even though that was centuries ago.

Maybe it's a psychological thing, she thought. As Louisa Weir, she had no problem, as Cambria Petersen, she was suspicious and wary of everyone.

She decided to walk, to look around, see how much the city had developed, or not, as the case may be.

London still had narrow alleyways, with cobbled streets, still had ancient buildings that had been shored up to maintain the city's personality – at least the World Council hadn't touched it, no matter how much they'd wanted to upgrade and destroy the trappings of wealth and history of the place.

The Royal Family had done well to deflect their attempts at remodelling.

Cambria found a pub, the sign hung over the doorway, with a picture of three bells in a triangle. She nodded with approval and ducked inside.

The place had low, exposed beams turned black by age. Lanterns hanging on support posts glowed golden and added to the cosy and warm atmosphere. The flagstone floor also reeked of age, with the stone showing wear marks from centuries of feet walking across them. A light dusting of chemically coated sawdust gave the floor grip for those in... delicate footwear, as well as an element of historical accuracy.

Cambria went up to the bar.

"Mornin'." The busty blonde said. "What can I get you?"

"Good morning to you. May I have the Devonshire Tea?" Cambria asked.

"Cornish Cream or substitute?"

"The real cream, please; raspberry jam if you have it, and Orange Pekoe."

Cambria smiled.

"I think we can manage that. Have seat, I'll bring it out in a jiffy." The woman said.

Cambria chose a table by the dirt smeared window. It wasn't real dirt, but sprayed on, she saw, to add to the authenticity of the place.

Set into the old stone wall, was an information hub. Cambria rolled up her sleeve and activated her own version of the Forearm Information Unit. She attached the filament and the blue haze spiralled up.

The first inquiry was into Abraham Rufus Shaw. The information proved enlightening.

Abraham was a recovery specialist of repute. He rarely failed in his task, if his statistics were to be believed – and she had no reason not to believe it – and he charged a high fee for his services. He was known as being relentless, even his failed cases were still open.

Very PR friendly, but she wasn't done yet.

With light fingers, she typed in a long string of code and inveigled her way into the sub-routines of the Global Document Network and reloaded the search parameters.

As the pages loaded, her morning tea arrived.

"There you go, luv. Enjoy." She said.

"Thank you." Cambria said and smiled at the two freshly baked and golden scones, the ceramic tub of rich, ruby jam spotted with seeds, and small bowl filled with the famous clotted cream.

Cambria poured herself a cup of tea, broke open one of the scones and scooped up a teaspoon of jam. She dropped the sweet blob onto the scone and used a second teaspoon for the cream.

She bit into the confection and groaned. "Damn, that's so good."

Cambria returned her attention to the documents.

"Not such a good boy, after all, are you, Abe." She murmured as she read his police investigation file. He'd never been convicted – witnesses disappeared – but remained under suspicion for a number of high value thefts, burglary and murder.

Next, she turned her attention to Abraham's own files. He had to contact his employers somehow and Cambria figured he'd have some serious security to protect those files.

She was right, but the multiple firewalls, misdirection and reverse tracking Trojans were no match for her own alien-based tech. She sat a small, black cube on the table, extruded a filament from her forearm unit and stuck it to the top of the cube.

While the two systems waged war against each other, she enjoyed her tea and scones, watched the battle of attack and counter-attack codes. The blue haze flashed with red and green and blue as her technology went after Abe's.

The result was inevitable – and couldn't be traced – and she had access to Abe's personal files.

Oh, yeah, the mother lode. She thought as she read his diary. The cops might just be interested in an anonymous donation of information, and she sent an info dump. Might as well let the cops get started while she focused on the contracts.

On the surface, he took a number of contracts of genuinely lost documents and people; he had a near perfect record. Three of those contracts failed when the



person he hunted died –either through natural causes or accident. And another two disappeared off-world – the clients no longer wished to pursue the contract. Yet, Abe kept the cases open. Maybe he thought those deaths were faked and those who left would return when they thought it safe.

Underneath, however, was a different story.

His contracts wove a tale of murder for hire, of blackmail for hire, kidnapping and, when required, torture.

And he took contracts for only the wealthy. Damn them. Did they not learn the last time? Was she going to have to sort them out....?

No. Earth and its' people and how they governed themselves were no longer her concern.

She and Caparossi and their allies had done it once. And out of that morass, entrepreneurs had arisen. People with ambition for a new world order rose out of the ashes of the old and made profits.

Some, unfortunately, still wanted what wasn't theirs to bolster their coffers and would pay handsomely for someone else to get it for them: thus, Abe's extremely profitable black market business.

She sorted through the contracts, sent the more heinously criminal ones to the law enforcement agencies of that country. Abe would be arrested as soon as he stepped through a corridor and the fight would be on for jurisdiction. Interestingly, he did the majority of his work via an organisation called Red Knight International and was a member of the Red Knight Brigade. Cambria made a note to look up the Red Knight Brigade – it could be a terrorist group or something equally nasty.

Abe had a filing system all of his own. He'd filed the contracts alphabetically, rather than by date. She'd send the entire file to Interpol, they could start their investigations with more information than they probably knew what do with. But she needed a name. A name at the top of Red Knight International to start her own investigation. No need to go through the lackeys if she could start at the beginning of the chain.

It took another pot of tea, but she finally found what she was looking for. And smiled.

\* \* \*

Jane hesitantly opened the door into the basement of her house. She looked around the edge and stood straight, moved clear of the doorway to let Cameron through.

He quietly closed the door and set their gear down next to it in case they had to run again.

Jane listened. She couldn't hear any noises from above and she moved to the stairs.

Cameron hissed behind her and she turned. He was pointing to her office.

Someone had tried to get into her office, but since all she saw were tool marks, she figured they failed.

She shrugged and pointed to the stairs.

Both took the steps slowly, even though they knew none would squeak. At the top, Jane pressed down the brass handle and eased the door open. Silence. Everywhere. And darkness. All the lights were out, which never happened.

She ducked out to across the hallway, laid flat against the dark wood panelling and waved to Cameron. He joined her against the wall.

"They must have them tied up somewhere." She whispered to him and he nodded.

"Call the cops?" He whispered back.

Jane shook her head. "Not until we *know*, Cam."

"We'll get *caught*."

"Not if we're careful! If you don't want to be here, then leave!" She whispered harshly.

"Look, they'll be armed, neither of us has a weapon; we can't fight them off and we'll be in a worse position than before." He replied.

Jane gently knocked her head against the panelling in frustration. Then she turned to look at him. "Then stay here and keep watch." She said and slid along the wall to the corner.

Nothing moved in the dimness. She saw that the dining room doors were open and she snuck around the corner and into the room. No one.

Jane moved to the swing door of the kitchen and peeked through the window. Polished surfaces gleamed under the light from the stove.

She turned slightly and gasped at the shadowed hand about to fall on her shoulder. Then she recognised Cameron.

“You scared the spit out of me, you asshole!” She whispered.

“Come and look.” He whispered back.

Jane followed him into the foyer. Cameron pointed to the digital read out of the wall clock. 3.27 glowed blood red as did a.m.

It had been early afternoon when they’d left Nexus, now it was early morning here? Her internal clock was so screwed up.

Jane shook her head and made for the stairs up to the next levels. She moved quietly, as did Cameron.

Jane reached Courtney’s suite. She opened the door and went in, moved towards the bedroom.

Courtney lay in her own bed, asleep, and relief poured through Jane. If her younger sister could sleep peacefully, then Walker and his crew were under arrest somewhere.

Jane didn’t wake her sister, she backed out of the room, and the suite.

“Well?” Cameron whispered.

“All good. Courtney’s asleep.”

“Great. I think.”

Jane lightly punched his arm. “Of course it’s great! Courtney doesn’t sleep when she’s stressed. Come on. I’m tired.” And she held his hand, guided him to her own suite.

She opened the door, turned the light to low.

Britney had done an excellent job of blending the sea colours she’d chosen.

Exhaustion weighed her down. She dragged Cameron into the room and shut the door.

He lifted an eyebrow.

“Sleep first, then... whatever.” She said and he followed her into her bedroom.

## **Chapter Twenty**

Jane awoke with Cameron's arms around her. She smiled and stared at the blank sea green wall. It needed a seascape, she decided. Something calm and peaceful.

But first, she needed a reunion with her family.

She slid out from beneath the covers. Cameron mumbled in his sleep and rolled over.

Jane took a long overdue shower and dressed in her usual jeans and shirt, with boots. Then she left Cameron sleeping and went into Courtney's room on silent feet. She didn't feel over confident that the rest of the family were unaffected by the previous week's activities, but she knew her sister would be straight with her.

Courtney came out of her bedroom, tying her dark hair back into a pony tail. She glanced up, then down, then up again and froze.

Her younger sister then squealed and threw herself into Jane's arms.

"Jane! You're safe! Oh, God, *Jane!*" And she burst into tears.

Jane let her sister cry herself out, rubbed a hand up and down Courtney's back.

"Hey, now, it's okay. I'm okay. I'm here." Jane crooned.

"Oh, Jane, it's been awful." Courtney said tearfully.

"I'm sorry." Jane said. "I should never have abandoned you to Walker and his thugs."

"No," Courtney sniffed. "You did the right thing. It sent him crazy, when he woke up, that is. He was furious." She bit her lip. "He took it out on Dad."

Jane felt a surge of alarm. "Is he..."

"He's okay, got busted up some, but he's fine. He'll be home from reconstructive surgery tomorrow."

The alarm turned to rage and she dropped her arms from around Courtney. "I'll make his life a living hell!" She swore.

"But..." Her blue eyes swam with tears as she looked at Jane. "Of course, you wouldn't know. Jane. Walker is gone. And some of his thugs got themselves arrested."

"So the cops finally came; who called them?" Jane nodded with satisfaction.

"No cops. Some woman shot the guards with tranquilisers, and then told us to call the cops. They found that Walker was in the act of trying to syphoning off billions of dollars into his own account. Luckily, he didn't have the access codes

so the transfer was never approved.” Her eyes filled up again. “He was going to kill us all, Jane.”

“So... who was she?”

Courtney hesitated and frowned. “She said I could call her... Cambria.”

“Strange.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Courtney shuddered. “She had the strangest eyes, all blue, like ours, but with tiny solid gold bits.”

“Tiny... gold...” Jane suddenly felt lightheaded. No, *impossible!* There was only one person she knew who had the strange eyes and yet...

She grabbed Courtney’s hand and hauled her out of the room.

“Jane... what..?”

“I need you to see something.” Jane said and dragged her down to her secret office.

Jane decoded her door and dashed to the files she’d left open on her desk.

She opened the one on Petersen. “Here. Look at these images.”

Courtney came over to the desk and studied the photos. “That’s her.”

“It can’t be, Courtney, she’s been *dead* for a thousand years.”

“It’s *your* image, Jane, but those eyes are unforgettable.” Courtney said.

Jane slumped into her seat. “This can’t be happening, *can’t* be true.”

“I don’t know about that, Jane, but this office is magalicious. No wonder you didn’t want to share.”

Jane grunted. How could a human live for over a thousand years? Answer: they couldn’t. The Vault files had to be doctored somehow. By someone with access. The woman who saved them on Ragnarok? She said she knew the address.

Jane chewed her lip. Just because she’d *said* she knew the address, didn’t make it true. And no one had been there in centuries for that layer of dust to appear. So. Conclusions?

She sat up straight. The woman was a descendant! *Oh, wow!*

“You met one of her descendants, Court.” Jane turned to her sister. “You *actually* met a descendant of Cambria Petersen! Here, in this house!”

Courtney turned from her inspection of the file and frown. “Nah...”

“Unless you can come up with an explanation as to why and how a more than millennia old woman managed to break into the house and rescue you?”

Jane frowned. "How did this woman know you needed help? Where did she get the address from?"

Courtney shrugged. "Maybe you have a stalker."

"Or maybe she's a part of Walker's group."

"You are most definitely reaching. And since you didn't meet the woman, I think you should refrain from making judgements like that. It's not like you."

Courtney was right. She was a researcher, she checked her facts *before* developing a theory or conclusion. She rubbed a hand across her eyes. Maybe she was still tired from her trip, from the adrenalin rush of being off-world for the first time, from...

"Oh, hell." She muttered. "Come on Courtney, I've got to lock up."

"Okay," Courtney sighed and went to the door, "but I want to know more about all this."

"After your exams." Jane said and locked the door.

"Agreed."

\* \* \*

Jane heard the murmuring of voices when she arrived at the landing. The sound of a masculine laugh had her lifting her eyebrows in surprise. People didn't laugh in this house, so who...?

She walked into the dining room.

Cameron sat at the table, drinking coffee while Six finished off his breakfast. Both men looked at ease.

Jane walked in, kissed the top of her brother's head then laid another brief kiss on Cameron's mouth. She poured herself some coffee and sat next to her lover.

"You had a busy time of it." Six said with a smile.

"We did, but nothing compared to what happened here. How's Dad?"

Six lifted his shoulders. "He should be back with us tomorrow. Personally, I think he should have a good long rest, but of course, he thinks the business needs him too much." His mouth turned down.

"Maybe between now and tomorrow he'll reconsider. He knows you do a good job, Six."

Her brother sighed then tilted his head at the subtle noises coming from the kitchen. His eyes lit up. "I have work." He said and stood, every inch the serious businessman. Then he gave Jane a mischievous grin. "I'll be in the kitchen."

Jane smirked at him. "Go get her, Six."

When he'd gone, Jane turned her attention to Cameron.

She didn't say anything, simply studied his handsome features until colour appeared across his cheekbones.

"I woke up alone." He said.

"You needed your sleep more than you needed me." Jane replied still looking at him.

His fingers brushed against hers. "That is debatable."

She didn't disagree.

"I can't seem to get enough of you, Jane. You're in my every waking thought. I think about getting you naked again, of feeling your warm skin against mine. I think about when I'll next hear your voice, see your face, touch you, *feel* you against me." He shook his head. "You scare me right down to my marrow." He looked down into his coffee. "I don't know that I like that."

Jane absorbed his words. Did she feel the same? She didn't think so. She enjoyed his company. The sex was the best she'd ever had in a long time, but she didn't think about him all the time, didn't long for him. Maybe that feeling would come the longer they saw each other, but it wasn't now. Her focus was on other things. But it didn't stop the thrill from coursing through her veins.

She cleared her throat, took a swig of coffee. "What will you do now?"

"I need some fresh clothes and then I need to go and see the Dean, see what's what."

Jane nodded.

"You?"

"I still need to find the Tomb of the Hunter." She said and then grinned when he did. "If I can find it, it will give me absolute proof of her existence."

"But you have all those files. Surely they are primary sources."

"They are, but I'd like to point to her tomb and say, 'there lies the greatest Hunter this world, or any world, has ever seen. This tomb proves beyond a shadow of a doubt she was real and here are the back-up documents.' Then I'll write a book, or two, maybe three." She lifted her shoulders. "It depends on the files."

"What about the rest?" Cameron asked.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to consider what to do with it all. I know most will have to go to museums, it’s the discovery of a generation, but I need to think of whom I can trust to access it.”

Cameron leaned back in his chair. “You must have contacts around the world. Is no-one worthy of the collection?”

“Ahm... I don’t think you understand just how... vast this ‘collection’ is. No one museum could hold it all, or even a quarter. The Library of Congress is a bookshelf compared to this collection.”

Cameron gave her a slight smile. “You must show it to me.” He paused and she scowled. “Sometime.”

He pushed his mug away. “In the meantime, I need to sort out whether I have a job or not.” Cameron rose, held out his hand. Jane took it and walked him to the door where he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

Jane hummed, heat coursed through her veins. Then she broke the lip lock.

He brushed a finger across her mouth. “I will most definitely see you later.” And with that, he left.

Jane watched him walk away and leaned on the door jamb. She could easily fall for the man, she decided on a sigh. But was he the man for her?

\* \* \*

Jane’s intercom chimed as she typed in yet another name into the family tree she was building.

“Yes?”

“Ms Jane.” Morecombe’s sonorous voice said. “You have a call on line three. It is Vice Chancellor of your University.”

“Thank you, Morecombe.” She said with a frown and drew the filament back, touched a button.

“Yes, Professor Khan?”

“Ah, Jane. I called to express my concern about the report of your missing fiancé.”

Khan was a spritely seventy-year-old, white haired with lively blue eyes. He never lost his glee at new discoveries. Jane admired him enormously as an academic.

“Thank you, sir, but he wasn’t...”



“I know it hasn’t been long since he disappeared,” he said over her protest, “but we must sort out this accursed will of his. Just in case... ah... something... erm... well, I’m sure you understand.”

Ice coursed through her veins. “Will?”

“Indeed. Until you, he never showed any inclination towards such things, but since he said he was about to become extremely wealthy in his own right, he thought it only right to make out a will. The problem is, we know nothing about this, and I quote ‘artefact of global significance’, unquote. Since we are named as beneficiaries, the law firm sent us a copy for our files. I thought you might be able to shed some light on this issue.”

“Sir...” Jane hedged.

“I believe I’ll see you in my office this afternoon at around, hmm, three o’clock. Don’t be late.” And he disconnected.

Jane stared at the blue button, then she dropped her arm.

She needed her father.

\* \* \*

Jane felt as if steam would come out of her ears, she was so furious. In her state of mind, she set the car to auto-drive and headed to the hospital.

She tried to modify her anger as she strode down the corridor to her father’s room, but she was still seething as she opened the door to the private suite.

Her anger drained away as she saw him, pale and bruised as he rested against the gel pillow. He looked so tired, so worn out, she nearly backed out of the room. Surely she could work this out herself? But...

“Dad?” She said cautiously and his eyes opened as she came in.

“Ah, good.” He said and sat up. “You’ve come to spring me from this joint.”

Her shoulders slumped in relief. “Oh, Dad.” And she all but flung herself into his arms.

“Oh, hey, now. I’m *fine*. Really.”

He brushed a hand down the back of her head, repeated the soothing gesture and she eased back.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.” She confessed and sat on the side of the bed.

“I’m not.” His eyes darkened. “If it wasn’t for that woman, we’d all be dead.”

“And poorer for it, too. That evil prick was trying to strip your bank accounts.”

Humour gleamed in his eyes. “He’d have found it near impossible. But he’s gone now, so we don’t need to worry.”

“About that...” She chewed her lip.

“Yes?”

And she explained the phone call. “This isn’t over yet, and I’ll be damned before I hand one page across to anyone not of my choosing.” Jane finished.

Charles sighed. “It looks like it’s time to bring in the lawyers.” He said.

“But Dad, if you do that, Mother goes to jail for fraud!”

He shook his head. “Since she’s... resting in a restricted facility, she won’t face any charges. No, don’t worry about that. What you should do, is make that meeting, see what Walker has actually written down.” He gave her a slight smile. “It works both ways, you know.”

“What does?”

“Wills. If he bequeathed *your* discovery to the University, without your knowledge as his fiancée, you have grounds – good grounds – for contesting his will.” Charles shrugged. “Personally, I think it’s a moot point given the illegality of the contract.” He grasped her hands. “Don’t worry so, Janey, we have the capability to make this right.”

“We do?”

Charles chuckled. “I only employ the best and brightest – it’s the secret to building and maintaining a Universal Corporation. Now, put it all aside and help me get out of this place. It gives me the willies.”

“You should take it easy, Dad, let Six take over for a while.” Jane brushed back a lock of greying hair off his forehead.

“But...”

“You need a hobby. You know Six can deal with anything that comes along. You should let him. Give him a chance.”

Charles scowled. “Working *is* my hobby, Jane.”

“Well, you need a new one.” She said. “You could... play golf.”

Charles rolled his eyes. “I’ve never seen the point in chasing a little white ball all over the countryside.”

“Fishing?”

“I get sea sick.”

“Skydiving.”

Charles grinned. "See the above comment: re seasickness applies to airsickness."

Jane huffed out a breath. "There's nothing for it then, you'll have to help me."

His eyebrows shot up. "You? What on earth could I do to help you?"

"I'm working on a family tree," she said, "and you're going to help me search the databases for people."

"I don't know anything about..."

"Come on, Dad, what did you just say about 'employing the best and brightest'? I don't think there's anyone bestest or brightest, than you." And she leaned over to kiss his cheek.

\* \* \*

Indecision wracked Jane as she dressed for her meeting with Professor Khan.

"You need to look professional." Britney said as she eyed the deep blue suit with a critical eye.

"I'm not sure I want my old job back, Brit." Jane said and reached into the closet for a long sleeved shirt. "I've got lots of research to do."

"You haven't lost the 'old' job, Miss Jane, just skipped a few days." She held the suit up against Jane's body. "I think this will do. Just remember you'll need the sponsorship of the University to give your book any legitimacy."

"But Brit..." Jane whined and the maid's eyebrows rose. Jane grabbed the suit. "I'm only doing this out of respect for Professor Khan. And no other reason."

"Of course not, Miss Jane." Brit said smugly.

Jane striped off her jeans and shirt, dressed in the suit.

"You might also run into that nice Mr Steele."

"Doctor."

"Even better." Brit said and used an electrostatic wand over the jacket.

"What do you mean by that?" Jane asked and studied her image in the mirror. She did look terribly professional and her image grimaced.

Brit shrugged. "I just thought it weird that, after all that's gone on in this house with your mother, why'd you'd be acceding to her wishes."

Jane gaped at her. "I'm... *what?*" and then she thought about it. Alberta wanted her to marry a 'suitable' young man and set her up with Professor Walker. Now she was sleeping with a colleague!

“I must be insane.” She murmured. “But my sleeping with Cameron has nothing to do with Alberta!”

Brit simply looked at her through the mirror.

“It doesn’t! Really!” And she wondered whom she was trying to convince: Britney or herself.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

“Wheels within wheels.” Cambria murmured as she studied the six metre wide sheet of paper. While she would preferred to use something electronic, nothing but paper had the flexibility and reach.

“What’s that you say?” Leah came into the study with a tray holding a carafe of coffee and biscotti.

“Do you believe in destiny?” Cambria asked and turned.

Leah snorted. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yes, well, not for too much longer I should think.” Cambria said and turned back to the chart. Leah came to stand next to her, handed Cambria a cup and saucer.

“No. But then I could have zipped off to see the universe instead of staying here, with you.”

“Mmm, yes, you could have, but you’re not that adventurous, never were.”

“I get that from the Caparossi side, I think.” Leah sipped from her own cup and studied the chart. “Interesting. And you’re thinking...?”

“That someone,” and she pointed to a name at the bottom of the chart, “wants to control what’s in the vault.”

“What’s in there that’s so important? Surely it’s just a load of old files, none of which could possibly have any relevance today.”

“It’s called ‘the Second Dark Age’ for a reason. Anyone who has access to the information can fill in all those blanks; it will no longer be the Dark Age, or,” Cambria allowed, “it could be known as the Second Dark Age for what happened during those times.” She turned away. “The... archivist – can’t recall his name – told me the vault contained everything. From the genesis of the World Council to its fall. Every decision ever made during those times is in that vault.” She went to sit on the brocade couch and contemplated the flames in the fireplace. “When the Council fell and Nathan and I decided to close the Vault, it meant humanity could start again, from scratch. There was turmoil, rebellion, civil wars, destruction on a grand scale. Fortunes made were lost and remade.” She looked over to Leah, still studying the family tree she’d developed.

“A little history lesson.” She said and Leah groaned. “Back in the twentieth century, a group called the ‘Nazis’ tried to extinguish another group called the ‘Jews’. Those Jews were stripped of their assets and purged in gas chambers. A

despicable thing to do, but at the same time, those same Nazis looted museums and banks and all manner of buildings of treasure. Now, fast forward to after the war and people searched for the lost treasures. Their value had increased by a hell of a lot. Imagine, then, the claims that could be made against the government for treasure ‘confiscated’ from families during the World Council’s take over?”

Leah turned to her. “But that was...”

“Yes, it was, but the files are still there. In the vault. Anyone who can trace their family tree back to before the World Council will have a legitimate claim on more wealth than even I can imagine. And all that lovely information is in the control of one woman.”

“Jane.”

Cambria nodded.

“But there’s worse. You can’t imagine the thievery that went on, Leah,” Cambria continued, “and on an epic scale, of resources like gold, silver, platinum, iron; ancient artefacts, weapons, technology. And where should the files be, that tell of fortunes hidden away in underground areas, or off-world in banks?”

“The vault.” Leah said and paled.

“And there is more, so much more in there.” She shook her head. “The irony doesn’t escape me: wheels within wheels, destiny and fate, the Great Circle of Life. When news of this discovery gets out, Jane will be the most hunted woman in the world, maybe even the universe.”

\* \* \*

Jane tugged down her jacket, again, and eyed the oak door of Professor Khan’s office.

“Come on, Jane, how hard can this be?” She blew out a breath and knocked.

“Enter!” Came a muffled voice.

She turned the brass handle and stepped into an office she hadn’t seen since her graduate days. It was terribly organised, with books – by author – neatly stacked in book cases around the room, except for the empty stone fireplace. Behind Khan were two eight drawer filing cabinets filled, she knew, with the information flimsy of every student he’d ever taught.

He was the only Professor she knew who kept his office neat.

“Come in Jane,” Khan rose from his leather chair and came around his desk. He reached for both her hands, held them tightly as he leaned in and kissed her

cheeks. "I can't tell you how sorry I was to hear of Brendan's disappearance." He shook his head and guided her to the visitor's chair.

"It's all so hard to believe." He commented as he resumed his seat. "But I expect the police are doing everything they can to find him. He was last seen at your house, wasn't he?"

Jane nodded. "But sir, I think I need to clear a few things up for you." Jane said.

"Indeed. I'm certainly interested in what he'd found, what would provide him with the sort of independent wealth that would beggar your father's." Khan said and looked down at the papers on his desk. "I have to say I'm a little startled that he chose to leave whatever it is to the University, even it will take five years to declare him dead."

"Sir, I need to explain..." He glanced up at her, with a subtle warning in his eyes not to interrupt him.

She was familiar with the glance and subsided into silence.

"This Will was certainly fast work for him. And I confess I did wonder what a lovely, clever and rich young woman such as you would see in a much older man." He lifted a shoulder. "None of my business, of course, however, it did make me wonder." He studied the paper again. "I always thought him a confirmed bachelor." He murmured then pinned Jane with his light blues eyes. "And I thought you had more sense than to fall for such a man. Yes, yes, I know, rebellion is in the heart of every wealthy girl, and one as clever as you could easily fall for his charms. He certainly spent a lot of his time sowing wild oats amongst the staff and students!"

Jane shrank into herself as he chastised her. Then she shook it off. Professor Khan was not her father and had no right to go after her this way.

She straightened. "Professor..."

"To this bequest of Brendan's. We need to know exactly what it is, how important it is and how to access it."

"It was never his to give away, sir." Jane said and Khan arched a white eyebrow.

"You are his fiancé. All assets to be shared once the contract is confirmed. And it is. Officially. And given that, his Will is also an official document. You must tell me so arrangements can be made.

Jane got to her feet, put her hands on the edge of the desk and glared at the old man. "Sir, the wedding contract is fraudulent and so the Will is null and void where it pertains to my assets. I do not care what happens to Walker's part, but I will keep my own."

Khan leaned back in his chair. "I don't understand. Are you refusing to tell me of Brendan's discovery?"

"It wasn't his. It was *mine*." She said and went to the door. She paused and then turned. "I'm sorry, Professor Khan, but Walker is a criminal, after what wasn't his. And now, I suppose, you'll be investigating."

"The University will, I'm sure." Khan agreed. "This is most irregular, but I'm sure it will all be sorted out quite nicely in the end."

Jane didn't think so, but she left him to deal with the impending fallout however he may.

Outside the Chancellery building, she dragged in a deep breath. All around her, students walked or ran to their next class. She should have been teaching some of them today, but she supposed the University had found someone else.

It didn't matter, she thought and walked to her car, she had bigger things to do.

Cameron leaned against the bonnet, his arms crossed, and watched her walk towards him.

She gave him a slow smile. "Hello, lover." She said and walked into his arms, let him hold her for a moment.

"I didn't think you were back teaching." He murmured.

Jane eased back. "Khan. Wanted to discuss Walker's Will and the bequest he'd given the University."

"I didn't think he had that much." Cameron said and then saw the look on Jane's face. "He didn't..."

"Oh, yes, he did. Bastard wanted to cheat me out of what was mine and gave them the vault!"

"What are you going to do?"

Jane eased out his arms. "Since the wedding contract was never legal, that part of the Will isn't either. It was never his to give away. But that's okay. According to Courtney, this mystery woman took Walker away to where he'll never escape. He won't be at the nuptial ceremony and neither will I."

"Phew." Cameron said. "What are you going to do now?"



“Now, I’m going home to research Cambria Petersen’s family tree. If I can find a living relative, maybe they will have more information on where she is now.”

“I’ll let you get on with then.” He opened the car door for her.

Jane one arm on the door. “Why are you not interested in my find?” She asked.

“Dust, for one thing. It’s not modern history, for another. And third, you’ll show me when you trust me.” He leaned forward and kissed her, a light brush against her mouth. “I can wait.”

Jane cupped his jaw. “You’re a strange man, Cameron.”

He grinned at her. “When you’re ready, you’ll show me. Until then... well, can I come over later for...?” He paused for a moment and she filled with heat at the look in his eyes. “Dinner?”

She leaned in and gave him a searing kiss. “I’ll even provide dessert.” She whispered and ducked into the car.

Jane watched him in the rear-view mirror as the auto-drive headed to her home. The car turned the corner and he was gone.

He confused the hell out of her, made her blood sing with anticipation and she imagined how the night would go all the way home.

The car slowed as it neared the gates and she was shocked to see a swirling throng of media and police.

The gates slowly opened and the uniforms wrestled the crowd away from the gate. Lights flashed and remotes hovered in front of the windscreen. Voices shouted questions at her, but she heard only two words: The Vault.

Word was out. But she knew it would happen since she’d lodged the claim. It must have been confirmed, for until it was, the information couldn’t be released to the public.

The car parked itself in the garage and she slowly got out.

What did she do now?

Jane walked into the house. It was silent, as if no one was home. She went upstairs to change into her jeans, shirt and boots. Maybe an afternoon of research would settle her nerves.

Once in familiar, comfortable clothes she went downstairs and saw the corridor door was open. On a frown she went to close it.

“I wouldn’t do that, Jane.” Her father sat in a wooden chair near the closet door. He had a glass of golden liquid in one hand.

"I saw the media at the gate." She said and he poured her a glass of wine.

"They also managed to get a hold of our private corridor address." He said and held out the glass.

"How could they do that? It's a breach of our privacy!"

"The media have no understanding of the word." He said bitterly. "We can't even change it, hence the open door."

Jane hoisted herself onto the table. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"Yes, well, nothing we can do about it now."

"Maybe it will die down."

"Not until those vultures have dragged up every dirty secret they can find. Including about your mother."

Jane gulped down the sweet wine. "How much is this going to hurt you?" She asked.

Charles snorted. "I always thought your brother, Adam, would be the one to achieve rock star status with groupies hanging around." He poured another glass. "In answer to your question: I don't know. But you're going to have to give them something."

"Dad, no, I'm not ready."

He drew himself up. "Ready or not, you will give them something." He tossed back the wine. "Time to put away childish things, Jane. If you do nothing, you will be branded a liar and a fraud, and it will affect my business in the worst way. If you give them something, a piece of paper, even, it will tantalise them, make them wonder and the shit storm will only grow." He looked at her, a calculating gleam in his eyes. "I wonder if you truly understand what you have found."

"I don't understand. All I'm looking for is..."

"Yes, I know that, but what *else* is in the vault, Jane? Think back on what you know of those days, of the Second Dark Ages, what else could be hidden in the vault?" He asked seriously.

Jane set the glass down and lowered her gaze. "I don't know, Dad. I was so focussed on Cambria Petersen, that I didn't even look."

Charles drained his glass and set it down. "This is what you're going to do: you'll present a part of your findings to the media. Nothing too sensational, something as boring as a shopping list even. Give them something to study, to test: *prove* you've found the vault. Spend a day or two talking about the find, not

the vault, *never* the vault or every academic in the world will want to get close to you. Then, you are going back to the vault and find out what else is there.”

Charles blew out a breath.

“I’m sorry.” Jane said again.

Charles rose and gave her a hug. “Oh, Jane. We’ll get through this, but it will take management. I’ll be hiring bodyguards for us all, just in case.”

“Is that necessary?”

“I’m afraid it is.” A woman’s voice said from the top of the stairs and Jane and Charles turned. The tall blonde woman looked familiar to Jane as she walked down the stairs.

“The door was unlocked. I remedied that.”

“I’m sorry, have we met?” Charles asked with a frown.

“No, Charles, we haven’t, but I believe Jane has seen me. Leah Wilkinson.” She held out a long fingered hand. Charles took it, still puzzled.

Jane shook her hand as well as she tried to remember. “Ragnarok.” She murmured.

“Yes. Shall we repair to more comfortable surroundings while I explain my presence?”

\* \* \*

“I need a universal power converter.” Cambria said to the wizened Osupu male. His three eyes, set in a triangle above two breathing slits receded further into the wrinkles of his pale green and brown mottled face. The more wrinkles, the more aged the Osupuan was.

“Such things are illegal, Gentle Fem.” He replied through a translator. Cambria heard whistles and pops coming from the small trumpet bell of a mouth.

“Mmm...” she nodded, “as are so many things in your place of resale.” She gave him a smile, without showing her teeth, that would be a sign of aggression; and the last thing she needed was a fight with an eight-limbed creature. She would lose. Badly.

“If it helps ease your mind, Gentle Mal, He Of A Cunning Nature sent me.” The name came out as a variant of hisses, as did all Osupuan names. The trick was the nuance.

The eyes emerged slightly. “I would not trust that basket weaver as far as I could...” the translator dropped into squeals and burrs as it struggled to translate, what Cambria could only imagine, was a long line of expletives.

Three eyes came out of the folds of skin and the bell-like mouth flattened. “Universal power converters are military; I don’t know if I can get one.”

“You mock me, Gentle Mal. There is one in the cupboard behind you.”

“You cannot know that.” The Osupuan said.

“And yet, there it is, sitting on the second shelf, its power down, but not completely off. I see why whomever sold it to you, wanted to get rid of it. Can’t have leaking power, now can we?” Cambria said and the eyes receded again.

“No, which is why it is in the cupboard. I am trying to fix it!” The mouth pursed like a lemon, discontent clearly on the Osupuan’s face.

Cambria leaned her elbows on the counter, coming close enough to the alien to see the individual age spots and wrinkles. He was a venerable age indeed. “Tell you what,” she said, “you sell me the power unit, I use it, analyse its workability, then come back here and give you an in-depth analysis on what’s wrong with it. You can keep the money and the device. How does that sound?”

“Even more illegal.” He grumbled. “I would be reselling military hardware at a discounted price.”

Cambria rummaged around in her left-hand side pocket and drew out her Hunter ID – still valid, since a lot of the aliens she dealt with had much longer lives than humans and held her in a reverence that was usually reserved for their own deities – and showed it to him. He visibly deflated.

“How about you’d be legitimately turning it over into the custody of a law enforcement official, on official business and who really, really needs it?” She held up a palm. “I do so solemnly swear to return the aforementioned universal power converter to you once I have finished with it.”

The Osupuan eyed her, then the ID, then back at her. He finally nodded and opened the cupboard.

The converter wasn’t much larger than her fist. He set it on the counter for her to examine. The device was a perfect silver sphere with lines two centimetres from the top, around the middle and two centimetres from the bottom. Four vertical lines separated the device into quarters and in each segment was a recessed dot.

“How does it work?” She asked without touching it.

“My sincere regrets, Gentle Fem, I do not know the technical details of such a device.”

Cambria flashed him a smile. “That’s twice you’ve lied to me, Gentle Mal. How did you intend to fix it if you don’t know the technical details?”

The Osupuan whistled plaintively.

“It does not matter, Gentle Mal, all I wanted to know was how to *use* it.”

The sound that came from the bell like lips closely resembled someone blowing a raspberry. Cambria could only assume it was relief, like ‘oh, is that all, my mistake’.

“Place it near the power conduit of the device you wish to convert the power of. It will automatically do the conversion.”

“Does it have a power source of its own that I can use to power a device?” Cambria asked and held her breath.

The Osupuan nodded. “Yes, Gentle Fem, it is a most useful device for that.”

Just what she needed. “How much?” She asked.

The Osupuan named an outrageous price and her eyebrows rose. “Not very sporting of you, since you are addressing an officer of the law.”

His price dropped dramatically.

“That will do nicely.” Cambria rolled her forearm and extruded the filament. “Transfer?”

Cambria tucked the globe into her right-hand pocket and gave the Osupuan a short bow. “Pleasure doing business with you. I should be back in an Osupuan week with the device.” That gave her nearly two weeks of access before she returned the piece. Hopefully, by then, this whole business would be settled.

Outside the shop, she walked along the dusty and sandy street in the growing twilight. Here on Osupu, there wasn’t much motorised traffic, the Osupuans being able to move faster than anything evolved she’d seen. Eight-limbed propulsion was faster than anything else on this planet.

Once they’d opened their borders to alien investment and development, however, all manner of transportation had bloomed, including the spaceport. Like anywhere else in the galaxy, spaceports had their own population of down and out spacers, looking for the next job on a freighter or passenger liner, anything to get away from being planet-side.

Robbery was always a good pastime for them; if they couldn't work their passage, then paying for it was always an option, through fair means and foul.

And speaking of foul, up ahead she could see a member of a cat-like species casually leaning against a stone wall. By his dark markings on pale lemon markings, Cambria deduced he was a male. He looked nonchalant enough, as if waiting for a companion to come out of one of the many shops, but he just wasn't relaxed enough. Parts of his fur were matted, as if he couldn't be bothered to groom and she wondered if he was an Abuser of Narcotics.

The furred head kept swivelling left and right as if looking for a mark. Cambria met his gaze then focused on the building two blocks down. The sign above the door read 'Instant Passage Inc.'

He stepped in front of her. "Wanna buy..."

"Too obvious." She said and went to step around him.

"Obvious?" He asked and then gave a deep growl. "I'll show you..."

Cambria turned and drew her favourite knife. The Bowie blade was as long as her forearm, snugged into a brass knuckle-duster handle. She had the point of the blade at his throat before he finished the word 'obvious'.

"Show me what, exactly?" She asked pleasantly.

The cat took an exaggerated step backwards. "Have a nice trip, Gentle Fem, and please, be mindful of the environment. Place your garbage in the appropriate receptacle." He gave her a toothy grin.

"As you say." Cambria said and turned her back on him, sheathing the blade as she went. She didn't expect him to jump her, he just wasn't that courageous.

She reached the corridor terminal quickly and unmolested. As she opened the door, she glanced around. The cat was back to leaning against the wall, but no one else seemed interested in a human.

Cambria dialled in the address for Ragnarok. No way was she risking the address of Jane's Vault.

She stepped through the door of her home and then narrowed her eyes in the darkness. Leah wouldn't be home for days, if not weeks, but she knew something was amiss.

All her senses were suddenly on red alert. She closed the door as quietly as she could and then scanned the entire house with her thermal imaging. Not that she needed to go far.

In the next room, one red and orange signature lounged on her couch, and one was at Leah's desk.

The bulk on the couch had to be Abe, the other, Amir.

Cambria walked through to the room. "Can I help you, gentlemen?" She asked quietly.

Amir jumped, guiltily, but Abe simply reached to the side and turned on the lamp.

"Interesting that you should have the same name as Jane. Related?" Abe asked.

"Not that I know of." Cambria replied with a shrug. "Although, I should mention that most surnames have a common ancestor. You, for example. Are you related to George Bernard?"

Abe smiled with acknowledgement. "Who?"

"Writer, twentieth century. May have even been a poet."

Abe laughed, a deep, rolling sound that had Amir wincing with disgust. "A poet, you say? Nice of you to think I should have such artistic talents."

"Just proving a point." She turned to the other man. "Amir, you might want to keep your sticky little fingers out of there."

Amir's lip curled. "I don't take orders from you. I'll do whatever I damn well please." He turned back to the drawers he was riffling through and suddenly jerked like a marionette as Leah's security system kicked in and buzzed him with a shot of electricity.

Amir wrenched his hand out and fell to the ground shuddering.

"Warned you." Cambria said and walked forward slowly. She sat on the opposite couch from Abe. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

"The code to the Vault?" Abe suggested.

"Umm... no. Sorry."

Amir got to his feet, using the chair to assist him. His face was... ugly with rage.

"I'm gonna beat it out of ya." He snarled, but the intimidation was somewhat blunted by his muscles shaking and cramping spasmodically.

Cambria turned to Abe. "Put your boy on a leash, or I will *hurt* him."

Abe inclined his head. "I do believe you would. Amir, stop your bitching and go outside for ten."

"I..."

“Will do as I ask before Ms Petersen does something nasty to you with that pig-sticker.”

“What...” he began.

Cambria waved her knife at him and Amir paled. He glanced at his boss, then turned and walked... hobbled away.

Cambria heard the door slam. “It’s a might chilly out there.” She said.

“Maybe it will cool him down.” Abe shrugged. “It might also help with the tremors. But tell me, why do you have a shock alarm in those drawers?”

“Keeps the mice out and deters sticky fingered interlopers. It’s also an obvious place to search, so, once bitten a thief might be more circumspect about what other traps might be around.”

Abe stretched his arms out along the back of the couch. “I like you, Ms Petersen, but I was surprised at how easy it was to find you, given our... previous conversation.”

“I’m not hiding, Abe. I live and work here. Everyone down in the city knows who I am, all you needed to do was ask.”

“And they have really nice things to say about you, too.” Abe acknowledged. “But to business: I really need the code, Ms Petersen.”

“For the Red Knight Brigade.”

Abe’s smile disappeared. “How do you know about them?”

“Well,” Cambria said with a smile playing around her mouth, “I could say I heard it on the grapevine, around the water cooler, but the truth is,” and her smile vanished, “your security is no match for mine.”

“I see.” Abe responded. His fingers tapped on the leather of the couch as he thought about what he had in his files. He looked up at the ceiling then blew out a breath and returned his attention to Cambria. “In that case, I should probably not only find another line of work, but do it elsewhere other than Earth. *Touché*, Ms Petersen, *touché*, indeed.”

“I’m glad we understand each other, Mr Shaw.”

“Your reach is long and powerful.” He slowly rose, eyes on the blade in Cambria’s hand.

“The Red Knight Brigade?” Cambria rose with him, sheathed the knife.

Abe shook his head. “Oh, no, Ms Petersen, that I’m not giving away anything. If you can breach my security, I’m sure you can discover the facts for yourself.”



Cambria snorted. “Well, it was worth a shot.” She walked him to the door.

“If you ever need anything, Ms Petersen... Cambria, give me a call. I have a feeling your life is so much more interesting than mine, and that’s saying something.”

“Mr Shaw, I’d be delighted to use a man of your many... talents.” She looked beyond him to Amir, still shuddering in the cold breeze. “But without your, ah, colleague.”

“Don’t worry about him.” Abe promised and he touched a finger to his forehead. “Bye for now.”

He and Amir disappeared into the darkness.

Unless Abe found a solution to Amir, Cambria knew she’d be seeing the rat face little shit soon enough.

Cambria closed the door and went through to the corridor. She paused and looked at the keypad. Had Abe put a trace on the device? Some sort of detector that would give him the address?

Better not risk it. She decided and punched in the address for Nexus True. From there, she could choose any number of corridor. Maybe she’d stop in and have something to eat, too. With a grin, she opened the door.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

"I've brought help." Leah said as she sat on the lounge and crossed her legs.

Morecombe brought in refreshments. He set the tray on the buffet and poured coffee into the delicate cups, went around the room handing the drinks to Leah, Jane and Charles.

"My boys are outside, patrolling the grounds. It seems you have an infestation of media units."

Jane heard a bang and jumped.

Leah smiled. "Not to worry, dear, that will be someone's expensive remote camera unit going up in smoke. I imagine the others are now beating a hasty retreat to the gate." She took a sip of the rich coffee.

"Ah," Charles began, "not to be rude, but who are you and why are you in my house?" He didn't say 'uninvited', that *would* have been rude.

"I, and the boys, are here to help you, of course." She said and set the cup and saucer onto the coffee table. She folded her hands in her lap. "I could say it's the gathering of the clan..." She lifted an eyebrow and looked at Jane.

"Old pop culture reference, Dad, twentieth century. Clan McCleod and..." She shook her head at his blank expression. "Family gathering." She finished weakly.

"Yes, just so. We are gathering the clan to protect you, Jane." She gave Jane a gentle smile.

"Me?"

"We are, of course, aware of your research, but you haven't been able to, quite, connect the dots. I believe it is an old saying that once you eliminate the possible, the only remaining truth is the impossible." She waved a hand. "Or something like that."

"I'm sorry, Ms..."

"Call me 'Leah', we are, after all, family."

Charles cleared his throat. "Excuse me, but I don't recall any relatives called 'Leah'."

"No," Leah sighed, "you wouldn't. I am from a long, long, *long* time ago. But before my accident, I was called Sheridan. Sheridan Nero... Caparossi."

"That's not possible," Jane said, "unless you're a descendant."

Leah's expression turned pinched. "While I appreciate your modern thinking, Jane, it remains the truth. I can only surmise that you have yet to access my mother's medical records."

"I..." Jane frowned. Did she have them? No, she didn't think they were in the group she and Tim had brought back. Oh, wait a minute, yes, they were; she just hadn't been interested!

"I suggest, young Jane, that you locate them. But be warned: they are not for public consumption, in any way, shape or form. Should you decide to ignore my advice, you will, no doubt, be locked up in a sanatorium."

"A... what?"

"Like your mother, Jane." Charles said. He had a strange look on his face as he stared at Leah.

"Dad? Are you alright?" Jane asked.

"I am. But go and go now."

"Dad...?" Jane said and he finally turned to her.

"Just a story I heard when I was a boy, one I never told you because it came under 'fantastical tales'. I'd forgotten about it until now. Off you go. Find the file." Charles ordered.

Jane set her cup and saucer on the table and rose. "I'll be right back, then."

Leah and Charles ignored her, but as she headed through the door, she heard her father say: "It's true, isn't it."

Morecombe came out of the dining room. "A call for you, Miss Jane. It's the Chancellor of the London School of Economics. Line two." He said and went back into the kitchen.

Jane accessed her wrist unit. "Yes, sir, what can I do for you?"

"Ah, Miss Petersen, congratulations on your discovery."

"Thank you, sir."

"I'd like to offer you a position on our staff, as a professor of antiquities, of course."

"Um, thank you for the offer sir, may I think about it?" Jane felt as if she'd been hit between the eyes. A professorship? At the LSE?

"Yes, of course. I'll send the offer to your link – I think you'll like the remuneration package. We'll talk soon." The chancellor ran off and she took a step forward.

Morecombe cleared his throat. "A call for you, Miss Jane. It is the Dean of History at Oxford."

"Oxford?"

"Line one, Miss Jane."

She took the call. "Hello?"

"Ms Petersen, Emeritus Professor Margaret Throckmorton-Warwick. I called to congratulate you on your discovery." The woman sounded brusque, business-like.

"Thank you, professor."

"I'm wondering if you had made any agreements on the disposal and study of your discovery."

"Ah, no, not as yet." Jane confessed.

"No, perhaps the discovery is too new and you are still excited about what you've found. In any event, Oxford is willing to enter into such an agreement, once we have studied a sample of the work." The professor said.

"Um... I'll have to sort through some of the files to see what can be released, ma'am." Jane said.

She heard the smile in the Professor's voice. "If I may be so bold, perhaps something innocuous. At this time, the veracity of the find could well depend on the age of the documentation. Easily established and would not compromise the secrets of the vault."

"Thank you, professor. I've made a note and will contact you in the near future."

"You're welcome, Ms Petersen. And... if I may say... I'm terribly excited, too, that this vault has finally been discovered."

"Professor?" Jane said, shocked.

"I have never been of the community that subscribed to the mythical school. Too many oblique references." Jane heard the professor sigh. "I only wish I was younger, then I would have undertaken a search myself. In the end, I hope you'll allow me to study certain aspects of the World Council."

"Which part?" Jane asked, suspicious.

"Agriculture. I may be Dean of History, but I do love the dirt."

Once again, Morecombe cleared his throat once she'd rung off.

"Who is it this time?" She asked.

“Berlin. The Dean of Political Science.”

“Tell whoever it is that I’m unavailable.” Jane said.

“You are standing in front of me, Miss Jane, available to take a call.”

Jane bared her teeth. “And in about two minutes, I will be unavailable!” She marched away and ran down the stairs. Morecombe could be such a stuffed shirt.

She closed the door of the corridor and held her fingers over the keypad. The light went immediately red and the door opened.

“Hi there,” A perky, young blonde woman said and came through. She shut the door.

Jane immediately opened it again, before someone else came through.

“I’m Ellen Gardener from Channel Two news.”

Jane crossed her arms. “And?”

“I’d like to talk to Jane Petersen about her astonishing discovery. Are you her?”

Jane glanced at the closet door.

“I am. Why don’t I give you the scoop of a generation?”

Ellen’s hazel eyes lit up.

Jane turned back to the open door. She studied the alpha-numeric pad and then inserted, ZZZ000. Then she shut the door. The light turned green. Jane thought hard. Where could she send the obnoxious reporter? Ragnarok was nice and she suppressed a grin, input the co-ordinates.

“Here we go.” Jane said and turned back.

“Here we go... to where?” Ellen asked with a frown.

“The vault. It’s what you wanted to see, wasn’t it?” Jane lied.

“Oh, my, God! Really?” Ellen gasped with delight.

Jane nodded and opened the door.

“After you.” She said and the reporter dashed through.

Jane closed the door and put in the ZZZ000 code, locking the door to all incoming signals.

“Jane,” Leah said from the top of the stairs, “I’m glad I caught you.” She walked down the stairs with an elegance Jane couldn’t hope to match. “I had a thought that if you used the door, it would allow unauthorised access from all manner of media.” She held out a small black square. “This will lock the access to you.”

Jane grinned. "Already caught one. She's on Ragnarok now."

"Oh?"

Jane shrugged. "I also put in a locking code: triple zed, triple zero."

Leah tilted her head. "Good thinking."

"Thanks, Leah. I'll be in my office..." She nodded towards the closet. "If anyone needs me."

Leah's eyebrows rose as Jane opened the closet, then the door beyond.

"Makes a nice hidey-hole." Jane said.

\* \* \*

Cambria rested her boots on the coffee table and leaned back on the couch. It was a comfortable apartment, with a hint of masculine. She liked it. The big screen, deep couch, the expanse of a king sized bed in the bedroom, the nicely appointed kitchen with utensils that were obviously used.

The man liked to cook rather than use the auto chef.

She changed her vision and looked through the walls. Someone was coming down the corridor, and by the swagger, it was her target.

The man paused outside the door and used his wrist unit to unlock the security.

The door swung wide.

"Come in, close the door."

Cameron stiffened in shock. His eyes tracked to where she was sitting. "Who are you? What do you want? How did you get in here?"

"We'll get to my name later. I'm here for a discussion and I have my own ways of getting around."

He lifted his wrist unit. "I'm calling the cops." He said.

"I'm sure Jane would be most interested in your heritage, Cameron, and I don't think you've told her about it, have you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Cameron kicked the door shut. "I've done nothing wrong, but you, lady, have broken into my home."

Cambria crossed her ankles. "Tell me, how did your uncle get you to leave your long term significant other and take up with Jane?"

"My relationships are none of your business." His blue eyes flamed with fury.

"Still hurts, huh?"

His mouth tightened.

"But he was never going to set the world on fire, was he."

Cameron's expression suddenly went blank. "You know."

"About Paul Tyler?" She flashed him a humourless smile. "Oh, yes. I know *everything*."

He blew out a breath and lowered his wrist. "Everything?"

"Everything." Cambria confirmed.

Cameron sighed. "Damn."

"Why don't you make yourself comfortable and tell me about it?"

He resisted for a moment as he studied her expression. Then he gusted out a resigned breath. "I knew he was no good from the start but..." he lifted a shoulder and sank into his easy chair, "I just couldn't resist, even when he kept asking for more and more money. He was *gorgeous*. We met at a fundraiser." His eyes took on a distance. "Man, he looked good in a tuxedo. Blond hair, green eyes and all muscle. He was an Olympic swimming champion." Cameron eased out a sigh. "I never believed in love at first sight, but Paul came close."

Cambria took her feet off his coffee table. "And now he's doing life for killing a cop."

Cameron gave her a short nod. "Drug deal gone bad."

"And you did six months for not reporting a drug user."

Again he nodded, but his gaze slid away from hers. "Uncle James never approved of my relationship, said it reflected poorly on him; that it was time I grew up and became respectable, marry a good girl," he gave her a wry glance, "one preferably with money, lots of money."

"Mmm." Cambria said. "Good for an election campaign."

He scowled at her. "All he did, was suggest I take a closer look at the Antiquities Department. He didn't point me at Jane."

Cambria leaned forward. "Oh, but he did."

"Explain."

"That will take some time." Cambria said and he raised an eyebrow. "Okay, if that's what you want."

"It is." He checked his wrist unit. "But I'm having dinner with Jane tonight, so you only have an hour or so." He got up and went to his fridge. "You wanna beer?"

"Sure."

He came back with the canned beverages, set hers on the table and resumed his seat. “Right then, to continue?”

Cambria opened her beer. “Your mother divorced your father when you were five.”

“So?”

“So, his brother stepped in to assist in your upbringing. It was he who recommended you go to the best schools, regardless of your own wants; sent you to university to study history.”

“It was what *I* wanted.” Cameron protested with a frown. “Uncle James had nothing to do with it.”

“But you chose Modern over Ancient – which is what James and your mother wanted.” Cambria said and Cameron’s frown deepened.

“You can’t possibly know that.”

“I can’t access archived link messages? Oh well, back to the story. Once you graduated, then went on to get your Doctorate, James and Denise thought it a good idea for you to involve yourself in your uncle’s political ambitions, hence your presence at numerous fundraisers.”

“Since he paid for my education, I thought it only right I repay his generosity.” Cameron put in.

“Agreed. A noble and mature gesture. However, the plan went deeper. Having you volunteer to help wasn’t enough. They had to make sure you remained faithful, so faithful that you would do anything they asked of you – including returning to university to study the Second Dark Ages.”

Cameron laughed. “They never mentioned anything about that. I’d just been appointed to the faculty at Manchester University.” He took a swig of his beer then pointed the can at her. “They were thrilled, by the way.”

“Actually, they weren’t. If you took that posting, you’d be away from their control, and they couldn’t have that, oh, no. So, they hired Paul...”

Cameron shot out of his seat. “*They did not!*”

“A fundraiser, a handsome, irresistible man, drinking, drugs...”

“It’s a lie. I want you to leave.” Cameron demanded.

“Oh, yes, they made sure you were in tight with Paul. Did you know that once Paul’s swimming career ended, James hired him as part of his PR staff? That was



before James knew of Paul's drug habit, but once he found out, he decided to use the boy. On you."

"I don't believe you."

"And yet, you declined the Manchester post for one he arranged for you here, in Geneva. Funny that, don't you think, that you ended up at the same university as Jane Petersen, daughter of one of the wealthiest people on Earth?"

Cameron shook his head. "This is bullshit. You make it sound as if they've conspired against me all my life! My mother loves me. So does Uncle James. They only wanted what was best for me! Now get out. I won't tell you again."

Cambria set her half-filled can of beer on the table and rose. She held out her arm and brushed a few buttons. "Here is the answer to your first question." A blue miasma grew out of the unit until it was three metres wide. "I had to get the power boosted so I wouldn't lose clarity, but this is your family tree."

"My..."

A red dot appeared. "This is you." Two more red buttons appeared. "This is your mother, and the separate one is James. James' tree first." She slowly highlighted each generation until it went all the way back to Major Adam Bartlett, of the Presidential Security Unit.

"Now, you, through your mother's line." And she shifted the view. It went all the way back to... her.

Cameron's face drained of all colour. "That's... impossible."

"Oh? Why is that?" She asked as Cameron studied the tree.

"Because... because..."

Cambria sighed. "Everyone has to come from someone else. You just happen to come from, well, *me*."

"You're not on this tree. I'd know if I had any *extra* siblings, or if my mother had an extra one, I think."

Instead of replying, Cambria brought up the photograph when she'd first been assigned as a Hunter. She put it next to her face and boosted the clarity.

"I'm sorry." Cameron said. "But whoever you are, you cannot be her. She's been dead for a millennia."

Cambria shut down the unit. "You have proof of that?"

"Not yet; Jane and I working on it. And we'll find her, too."

She blew out a breath. “Good luck with that. Really. Good luck.” She went to the door. “I’ll leave you now, Cameron. Think on what I’ve said. We’ll be talking again.” And she left.

Well, what did I expect? That he’d believe me?

Cambria shook her head. Time to talk with James Bartlett.

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

Cambria stood outside the office of James Bartlett, MP. Since Parliament was in session, she expected James to be working in his office. There was an important vote on economic restrictions on industry assistance.

She knocked on the door.

“Come in.” A near familiar voice said.

Cambria shook it off. Adam Bartlett was a long time ago.

She went in. “Good evening, Mr...” She stopped as she caught sight of the artwork hanging on the wall behind the MP.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” James turned his head, brown hair gleaming under the lights. “One of my forebears found it, rescued it. It’s been in the family for generations.”

Cambria felt a shiver run through her as she stared into the arrogant eyes of Peter de Crecy.

“We’ve catalogued the campaign medals, of course, and this guy was an astonishing hero. Not entirely sure about his rank, there seems to be some discrepancy about the type of medals he has versus the rank of colonel, and we’ve never been able to decipher which regiment he belonged to. Still, it’s a striking piece.” He turned back to her, brown eyes questioning. “So what might I do for a constituent?” He gave her a smile.

Cambria moved closer to the portrait. “It still has the cut, not so well hidden.” She murmured.

“Erm... yes, well, we couldn’t find anyone who could fix it and so we decided it added character. I’m surprised, nay, shocked, that you know about it.”

She nearly said she’d put it there, but refrained. She wasn’t here about past... glories. Still, she could give him some information about it.

“You’re looking at a former President of the World Council, Peter de Crecy.”

“President, was he?” James rose from his chair and moved it out of his way to study the portrait more closely. “What else do you know?”

“He never served in the military, but liked to portray himself as if he did.” Cambria said tightly.

“But... why?”

Cambria shrugged. “Why does anyone pretend service when they haven’t served?”

“Indeed.”

“The cut in the painting was from an assassination attempt, one he survived, but not for long. He was eventually killed by a... rebel.” She said. “It was, I guess, the beginning of the end for the World Council, or maybe the end of the beginning...”

James eyed her. “You seem to know a lot about it, are you a historian? I’ve heard of this new discovery, everyone has. It’s causing quite the buzz.” His expression suddenly froze. “You’re not...”

“No, Mr Bartlett, I’m not the one who discovered the Vault. I’m here on another matter.”

“Pity, but have a seat and tell me what I can do for you.”

“I’m here about Cameron.”

Bartlett’s eyebrows came down. “What’s my wayward nephew done now?”

“Nothing illegal – that I know of. I’m just wondering about your reasoning behind his having a relationship with my... with Jane Petersen.”

“I don’t understand. What’s your connection in all this?”

Cambria found her gaze constantly shifting to de Crecy. It was like being watched by a ghost.

“I’m concerned about their ability to have a genuine relationship, without your interference.”

James smiled. “I haven’t...”

“You have, and you did and I have proof of that. From directing him into history, to raise funds for you, paying Paul Tyler to ensnare Cameron in a relationship, setting both men up to be sentenced to jail, to getting him a job near Jane. You’ve had your sticky fingers in Cameron’s life since his mother’s divorce.” Cambria said.

James’ face flushed. “How my sister-in-law raised her children is none of my business.”

“And yet you paid for his expensive education. You paid for his lawyer – who, by the way, told me you directed him to lose the case. You’ll not find Mr Murray, he decided to retire rather than face malfeasance charges and now lives off planet. What was so important, that you would screw up lives to achieve?”

James folded his hands on the desktop. “He needed direction in his life; his mother and I provided it.” He said.

“So, you paid Abraham Shaw... for what, exactly?”

James didn't respond, merely watched her.

“Hmm. I think you bought yourself the best of information recovery specialists – and a thug, that's Amir – to coerce Jane into giving up the address to the vault. I think you found out about it from Brendan Walker, who found out about it from Tim Houston. Tim was murdered recently, so you'd better cover your tracks there or the police will be at your door sooner than you think.”

James said nothing.

Cambria got to her feet. “Just as an FYI, the ancestor who rescued that portrait? His name was Major Adam Bartlett. He was head of the Presidential Security Unit. His job was to protect de Crecy come hell or high water. He failed and lost a lot of his men in that failure. I'm equally certain that the portrait isn't the only thing he stole from de Crecy's office.” And with that she left.

She was sure either one of two things would now happen: Bartlett would pressure Cameron into making a commitment to Jane, or he would set Abe and Amir onto the trail and go after Cambria. She hoped it was the latter rather than the former. If Cameron caved in on orders from James, Cambria would have to directly intervene and the last thing she wanted to do was hurt either of them.

\* \* \*

Jane decided she had to get a grip, stop her mental sprinting. It led her off in impossible directions. Yes, she'd made the discovery of a generation; yes, it was enormous, and yes, she was responsible for it all. But... her focus had always been Cambria Petersen, not what else the Vault contained. Of course, it all fascinated her, but she could not see everything, not in her lifetime.

But... she could catalogue the registry, that would be a start.

Satisfied with her reasoning, she decided she needed a drink and stepped out to select a bottle. A nice merlot would do the trick!

She was about to close the door when Courtney came scuffing down the stairs. Jane stuck her head out.

“Hey, Courts, how did your exam go?” She asked.

Courtney grinned. “It was the best.” She nodded to the wine racks. “Just getting some celebratory vino. You coming upstairs to join in?”

“I thought I'd have a red, first.” She said and entered her office.

“I’ll have one, too.” Courtney said following her and wandering around the room. She picked up the remote control and keyed the screen. “Whoa.” She said as the star scape appeared. “That is definitely dizzying.” And flicked through a number of scenes until she settled on the Swiss Alps. “Much better.”

Jane handed her a glass of ruby-red wine, flicked a glance at the view and frowned.

“Why that one? She asked and sipped her brew.

Courtney shrugged. “Familiarity.”

Jane sat behind her desk and studied the moving image. The camera panned all the way around the mountains, settling on the white covered slopes, followed down into the valley and then up again to cross the blue-tinged peaks. She shivered as she remembered the cold of Ragnarok.

“You ever think of travelling?” She asked her sister.

“Not much. But when I become a doctor, I suppose that’s something I should consider.” She kept her gaze on the mountains. “I’m sure there are a lot of people around the world who need my help – natural disasters and the like.”

“What about further?”

“Further?”

“Yeah, you know, other *planets*.”

Courtney snorted. “I’m studying bio-medicine, not xeno-medicine.” She shook her head. “No, I think I’m much happier right here on Earth.”

“But if you don’t travel, how will you know?”

Courtney looked her at with a smile. “I’m just not... well, I don’t have a lot of interest in going off planet.” She lifted a shoulder. “I guess I’m more like mother in that regard – and if you tell anyone I said that, I’ll deny all knowledge!” She finished her wine and set the glass into the cleaning unit. “You, on the other hand, have a more adventurous spirit, like Dad.”

Jane nodded. “I guess Six is like mother, too, but Adam is like Dad.”

Courtney shook her head. “Hah, that much you don’t know about our brothers. Six has been zipping off planet for years.”

Jane felt her eyebrows rise. “Really?”

Courtney sighed. “We’ve never really paid much attention to each other, have we? Adam wanders off to play his concerts, Six goes off-world for his empire building; but you and I have remained planet bound – until recently, that is.” She

finished with a frown, then shook her head. “I have a bottle of wine to grab. Come up soon or there won’t be any left.” She said and left Jane alone.

Her sister was right: they’d never really paid attention to what each other did, hadn’t since completing compulsory school. Once university beckoned, each of them had gone their own academic way.

Jane’s eyes dropped to the image of Cambria Petersen. With the image in hand, she went to the bathroom, held the picture up beside her face.

The resemblance was uncanny, except for the eyes - Cambria’s eyes gleamed with the gold flecks – and Jane’s own chin, that was pure Alberta.

She lowered the image and grimaced. What was she looking for? And why was she looking for it?

Disgusted with herself, she went back into her office, put the image back into the file and lifted the remote to shut down the screen. The image was zooming up another valley, the grass impossibly green. Ahead was the wall of the cliff that rose suddenly out of the verdant carpet. The camera zipped up the side of the near vertical cliff.

“Wait.” She murmured and her eyes dropped to the remote. While the images were live, she could still pause and rewind, which she did, frame by frame.

The camera backed up with almost infinitesimal slowness. Jane sped it up, moved it forward, backed up and then forward again until she saw what unconsciously caught her attention and paused the image.

“What on earth is that?” She asked of no one as she zeroed in on what appeared to be bricked up hole in the cliff. Not ordinary bricks either, but chameleon bricks; bricks that used old-fashioned nanotechnology to replicate its surroundings. The only reason she saw it was that one of the bricks flickered, as if it had shorted out.

Jane was no scientist so couldn’t think of why that would happen. She zoomed in further, scanned the entire surface but could not see the patch edge, where the true rock finished and the chameleon bricks started.

She reached out to the screen, touched the still flickering brick and wondered what was so important that someone had used stealthed building materials to seal it away, ostensibly, forever.

And what was she going to do about it?

Jane was still contemplating the shimmering stonework when her forearm unit vibrated. She flicked the communicator pad. “Yes?”

“A call for you, Miss Jane.” Morecombe gravely intoned.

“Thank you, Morecombe.” She said in a matching tone, “Put them through, please, voice only.”

“Ms Petersen... Jane...” The deep voice hesitated and her lips quirked at the thought of the seven-foot tall, massively thewed former line-backer for the Athens Hopliters football team being unsure of himself.

“Vice Chancellor Osage, to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I, ah, I just called to express my, our, the faculty’s... um... the university’s sympathy on the disappearance of your fiancée.”

She was about to issue a hot denial, but paused. The caveats on her still remained. If she denied the contract, her mother went to jail; and yet... it burned to think her name would be linked with Walker’s in any fashion.

“We, the board, I mean, understands if you would like to take more time off to, ah, adjust.” He paused and she heard him take a deep breath. “Of course, should you need anything, Jane, all you need do is ask. Any support, emotional or psychological, we are here for you.”

His sincerity touched her. “Thank you, sir, your call means a lot to me.” She murmured, and wondered if there’d been a determination about Walker. But then he went and spoiled the moment.

“Professor Walker was the outstanding historian of his generation and will be greatly missed, Jane. We are all diminished by his disappearance. I can only hope that we can live up to the example he set.”

Jane felt her lip curl with distaste, but she didn’t let her feelings colour her voice. “Thank you, Professor Osage,” she said, “I’m sure we’ll all try, but...” She sighed dramatically.

She imagined the big, dark skinned Vice Chancellor shifting uncomfortably in his seat. Osage wasn’t a man of overt displays of emotions. He could stop a fight with a look, forge his path through a crowd with his sheer size, knock down a door with a well-placed kick, but put him in a situation where he had to express an emotion and it tangled him up.

Jane wondered how he ever managed to relax enough to find a wife, but Gemma was an intelligent, sparkling, dry-humoured dynamo who taught astrophysics. She probably hunted him down and told him how it was going to be. He’d simply agreed out of sheer relief.



“Yes, well, take all the time you need Jane, I’ll get Dr Steele to take over your classes... if I can track him down.” He muttered and hung up.

Mmm. She lowered her arm, caught sight of the screen and sighed. There was simply too much to do!

There were the files to catalogue, research to be done, the question of Cambria Petersen to solve, find out what lay behind the chameleon bricks, the Vault to explore, Cameron to... what? What *was* she going to do about the good Doctor?

She shook her head. He was a question for later. Maybe she’d be better off resigning from the University. The Vault itself was enough to keep a hundred historians busy for two lifetimes!

Where should her focus be? The Vault or the Hunter? Both were going to be earth-shattering announcements. Cameron, she decided, could wait, or at least, settle into the background... sort of... But she doubted he’d allow her to concentrate on her work and not him. Ah, well, she sighed and looked around her office.

Fatigue. She was suffering from fatigue. The past week had mentally and physically exhausted her. Maybe she should take some time away from the work and just... be.

She should engage with her family. Now that her mother was getting the help she needed, the family could, perhaps, find some common ground and build a meaningful and lasting relationship.

On that happy thought, she shut the screen down, organised her files into the boxes and then left her office, locking it on her way out.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

Two sets of footprints, lit up by Cambria's mega-wattage head lamp, led away from the corridor, clear tracks in the brownish grey dust caused by hundreds of years of disuse.

Cambria hadn't set foot here in just as long. When she'd set her trap, she set it to the corridor's operating panel – and, with no need to go any further, had simply returned from whence she'd come.

Now though, she had to find out what was of interest to the so-called Red Knight Brigade. She'd tried to nut out what the name meant.

Red could mean power, or passion or blood. A knight was a member of a chivalrous order – although the history books suggested they also drank much and womanised even more; when they weren't fighting each other, that was. And brigade was a militaristic term of maybe five thousand men, commanded by a brigadier. Did that mean there were five thousand people involved?

With her current information, the name meant nothing. What they were after, however, that was worth hunting down. And damn, that was what she was good at.

The Vault was silent. Absolutely silent. No muffled street noise, no dripping taps, no subterranean creatures chewing on the paper files, nothing, not even a breath of a breeze disturbed the underground library.

It gave her the creeps.

But as she looked around, the memories came flooding back. What was his name? The archivist. Cambria could barely recall, his face had been smudged by time, which was a shame since he'd been a former lover; long dead now, though, and his wife, whatever *her* name was... had been the daughter of that evil prick Bolingbroke.

Anyway, he'd worked down here, been happy to do so. And she remembered thinking he might like it to get away from his family and wondered if he ever thought he'd made the wrong choice. The rest was lost in the blur of time

Not that it mattered; that was, indeed, ancient history for her. The important thing was that L... Lenny? No. She shook her head. L... had enjoyed the work, the structure, the knowing everything had its place in this vast underground cavern.

But L... Lonny? No. L... had to have a method to the filing system. Something simple, so he could lay his hands on whatever the Councillors needed at a moment's notice. If he didn't, there would have been Hell to pay, so L... Louie? No. *Yes. Louis.* That's what his name was, Louis... *damned if I know what his surname was.* Louis would have a filing system that not only enabled him to locate the file, but access it quickly.

Cambria looked up at the towering shelves stuffed with books and files. Each shelf was at least twenty feet long and twenty feet tall. These were the files themselves and the registration books. It would take her too long to try and find the right ones – and she snorted at the thought of a time limit. Not for her, she allowed, but for young Jane. For her sake, she had to hurry.

To the right of the corridor, lay the administration area. No towering, shadowed shelves here, just work stations that had no power and hadn't had any in centuries. Although Jane had to have used at least one of them to find the Hunter files.

Cambria wondered if any of the equipment would crumble if she even breathed on it. But no, the com stations would be made of sturdy stuff; nothing cheap for the Council, she'd learned that much.

Her lip curled at the thought. No, the Council never skimped on any expenditure even as its slaves were fed a nutrient based gruel and nothing else – that would cut into profit margins, and the Council couldn't possibly have that.

So. State of the art equipment meant it should last a very long time. All it needed was power.

There were ten work stations, not including Louis's. That was about ten feet in a straight line from the corridor, if she recalled correctly.

These work stations were for the drones, and Louis had been promoted out of this drone pool. She wondered how he'd done that, given he'd once been *persona non grata*.

Oh, yes. He'd been recruited by the rebels when she'd been sent to Tudor, worked in *their* archives. But it never occurred to her to question why he'd been in the World Council archive the day she'd come to murder the President. Funny. She'd never asked him, either.

Not that it mattered. If he'd been a traitor to the rebel cause, he'd failed; if he'd been a traitor to the government, he'd equally failed. Maybe he hadn't the

opportunity to do anything, since she'd gone upstairs to De Crecy office and... well, history again. Adam Jones had actually killed him; she'd just been the dumbass who stalled and stalled and stalled until the Presidential Guard had busted in. She shouldn't have wasted the time, just shot the homicidal maniac dead as soon as she walked through the door.

To this day, she couldn't work out why she hadn't. Maybe to give him a chance? The bastard had already had her executed on false evidence – and he'd known it; he'd kept the majority of the world's population in slavery or abject poverty – deliberately to increase the bottom line of his own accounts and those of his sycophants.

Then again, she'd always allowed her targets to show a modicum of remorse or a redeeming feature – those, she let live. People like de Crecy and Excalibur Jones, she simply killed because to let them live would mean more deaths and she couldn't allow that.

No, it had been a dumb thing to do. De Crecy had shown he was a liar, a cheat and a megalomaniac, wanting to take his brand of governance out into the galaxy at large. He'd even wanted her as a brood mare – once he'd seen her resurrect and heal the damage he'd inflicted with a knife.

Cambria shook off those particularly nasty memories and focussed on her surroundings. Before her was a set of double doors, locked. She left them alone and sat at the desk to the left of the doors.

Whoever sat here most definitely had a clean desk policy. Nothing, not a pen, a piece of scrap paper, or notepad lay on the dusty surface. She glanced to the left. The other desk had office detritus on it. Pencils or stylus, covered in dust, raised pads, also covered in dust, a stapler, glue, and what looked like a stack of empty folders. The whole set up looked like it was ready to go, waiting for its occupant to return.

Cambria went to that desk. The leather chair lay under a thick blanket of the brown-grey dust. She wasn't sitting down. The desk and everything on it also had dust.

She picked up the stylus, brushed off the grime. Somewhere on the desktop was the control panel that would give her access to everything contained in the vault. She just had to figure out how to access it. She tapped the cleaned stylus against her lower lip and thought hard.

Cambria pulled out the power converter and set it on the desk top. And waited. Nothing happened.

Maybe everything had been turned off for too long? Or maybe the power converter simply wasn't able to breach the technological gap?

She moved the device closer to the power connection. The sphere felt warmer than when she'd set it down. Was that a good sign?

The screen on the desktop began to hum, then whine. The dark grey flickered then went blue. At last!

Cambria sat down and waited for the interface to appear. Nothing happened with the blue screen and Cambria rubbed her chin. She touched the screen. Nope, still nothing.

She shifted the sphere to another desk. After ten minutes, she got the same result – a blue screen. She moved onto a third, then a fourth. On this one, the dark grey suddenly bloomed with white text. It moved too fast for her to read, but she read 'boot' and 'sys' and 'file' and 'cmd' before the whole screen went black and then a bucolic picture appeared of rolling green hills and blue sky.

"Huh." There were beige blocks and she squinted at one of them: Registry.

Okay. She'd found what she was looking for. Time to look up whatever the Red Knight Brigade was after.

The task proved more difficult than she ever imagined. Even when she was a Hunter here on Earth, she'd hated the paper work – the report writing, requisitions, leave forms...

Inside the Registry folder were sub-folders. And inside those sub-folders were more sub-folders, and more, and more and more!

Cambria rubbed her forehead. How was she going to find what she was looking for when the Registry folders alone held petabytes of information?

There had to be method to this madness, some sort of logic to the files.

Louis had been meticulous; he would not complicate anything, nor hide anything. It would be straight forward, simple. All she had to do was follow the bread crumbs, but where to start?

What would be so important that the Red Knight Brigade would hire an assassin?

Cambria drummed her fingers on the desktop and wished she had a coffee. Or a stiff drink. Something in here... something she was missing. Something obvious.

What did she know about this place? It was the repository of everything the World Council did, all the decisions made, all the proposals, in draft form and in final decision.

That didn't help... or did it?

She needed a starting point, and what better starting point than when she'd worked for the Council.

Cambria hunted around for the search function. Damn, but it had been a long, long time since she'd used such a system. She finally found it at the bottom of the screen and touched the oblong. It bloomed larger and below it rose a keyboard. With her index finger, she typed, 'Bolingbroke'.

\* \* \*

Leah, Jane saw as she accepted a glass of wine, had disappeared.

Adam thought she said she had somewhere to go and something to do as a matter of urgency.

As Jane toasted her sister, a big grin on her face, Morecombe came in from the foyer. She thought he'd be refreshing glasses, but no.

He cleared his throat and reached into the top pocket of his suit. "A letter arrived for you this morning, Miss Jane."

"A letter? You mean a pulped wood type actual paper letter?"

Morecombe sniffed. "No matter what changes are wrought in the world, the legal profession simply *refuses* to change with it." He held out the pale cream rectangle to her. "I doubt even the Second Dark Ages stirred them much."

Jane took the letter, felt the silky smoothness of the paper. It was heavier than she expected. She set aside the wine glass.

"An actual letter?" Courtney asked, puzzled. Her brothers gathered, too.

"Who would send you a letter?" Six asked. "Especially from a legal firm?"

"What did you do, Jane?" Adam asked with a lopsided grin.

She turned the envelope over. "Besson, Le Havre, Grigson and Stone."

Six whistled. "Top firm that." He said and set his own glass aside.

Jane looked up at him. "Ours?" She asked but he shook his head. "I guess I'd better open it, then." She tapped the letter on her hand and then grinned at her

siblings. "On my own, people. You stay here and toast the new doctor." She nodded at Courtney.

"Nearly, but not yet. One more exam to go." Courtney said with a pout.

"Is there coffee on?" She asked Morecombe.

"Indeed, Miss Jane, I shall fetch you a pot and bring it to the morning room."

"Thank you, Morecombe." She murmured and studied the envelope as she walked into a room off the foyer, across from the dining room.

Here, her mother's hand was evident in the fine rose silk covered furniture and lace curtains. Everything was antique, as antique as money could buy. This was her mother's room, her retreat; a place from which all children were forbidden, no matter their age.

But no longer. A point Morecombe had just made.

Jane gingerly lowered herself onto a spindle-legged chair. She felt as if the chair would break if she put her entire weight on the seat, but it held.

On the front of the letter was her name, nothing more. On the back, was the address of the one of Geneva's top and longest surviving legal firms, Besson, Le Havre, Grigson and Stone. She used one of her mother's silver letter openers. It had a carved knight's helmet, inset with rubies on one end and narrowed to a stiletto point.

The paper parted easily as she drew the knife along the edge. Inside was a single cream coloured sheet.

Jane slipped it out and opened the letter. It was hand written, she saw, in a beautiful, cursive hand.

*Dear Ms Petersen,*

*Please accept our most heartfelt condolences on the death of your fiancée, Professor Brendon Walker.*

Jane started. *Death?* Didn't everyone say that a strange woman had simply taken him away? Now this legal firm was announcing his *death*?

*Something wasn't right.* She thought and continued reading.

*On this most tragic occasion, it is, however, our most solemn duty to request you attend our offices for the reading of the late Professor Walker's will.*

*Once again, please accept our condolences on your loss.*

*Regards,*

*Jerome Le Havre*

*Senior Partner*

“Huh.” She said and folded the thick paper, slipped the letter back into the envelope and laid it flat on the desktop.

“Your coffee, Miss Jane.” Morecombe said and lowered the tray onto the coffee table.

Jane turned in her chair. “Thank you, Morecombe.” She said with a frown that caught the butler’s attention.

“Is there a problem, Miss Jane?” Morecombe asked as he straightened.

“I don’t know. Professor Walker’s lawyers want me at their offices for the reading of Walker’s will.”

“And why is that a problem?”

“As Brendan’s fiancé, I would have thought the police, or the coroner, would advise me if he was dead, don’t you think? But the lawyers are sending their condolences. The ink was barely dry on the marriage contract when he... disappeared. Now the lawyers are involved? Walker couldn’t possibly have named me his beneficiary so soon and he definitely didn’t know he’d... disappear. He didn’t know me well enough...” She held up a finger.

“That you know of.” Morecombe said and shot his cuffs.

Jane held up a second finger. “He couldn’t have known Mother would offer me to him.”

“That you know of.” He tugged down his jacket.

Jane frowned and held up a third finger. “Well, there is no way he could have known I had found what I found!”

Morecombe adjusted his royal blue tie and looked at her.

Jane frowned. “I’m missing something, aren’t I?”

“As you say, Miss Jane,” Morecombe said enigmatically and withdrew from the room.

\* \* \*

The offices of Besson, Le Havre, Grigson and Stone took up the entire twentieth floor of the Credit Suisse Bank building. Just inside the door, Jane read the list of other companies who occupied the building: Lloyds of London, Goldmans, Kimberly Diamonds, and De Crecy Incorporated. All very old and respected companies.



Jane swept the dusky pink shawl over her shoulder as she entered the foyer. Her entire outfit had been chosen by Brittany, and was impressive in its elegance and formality. The dusky pink silk of her near skin-tight body suit felt rather sensual against her skin and she mentally thanked her maid that she knew more about impressing lawyers than Jane did. A number of appreciative male eyes lingered as she walked by.

The heels of her slim-fit leather (*cow leather*, if you don't mind!) boots clicked on the brushed marble floor as she walked over to the reception pod.

Jane struck an impersonal, professional pose as she addressed the young blonde man.

"Messrs Besson, Le Havre, Grigson and Stone, please."

The young man looked up at her from his workstation. "Level twenty, ma'am, it takes up the entire floor."

Jane's eyebrows rose. She'd expected to be escorted up, but perhaps the modern era of business didn't do that anymore.

"Just take the grav-tube." The young man encouraged.

On a mental sigh, Jane turned away and walked slowly to the tubes. Patrons stepped in and out of the dark, but spacious tubes. A large sign decreed that patrons should stay to the left to avoid accidents.

Jane thought that was stating the obvious.

She stepped into an up tube. "Level 20, please." And she was suddenly whisked skywards as if she were a feather. She certainly felt that way, until gravity began to press down on her again as she reached the required level.

Jane stepped out onto beige carpet. The colour was everywhere, offset by the occasional white frame around the portraits that lined the hallway. She supposed it could look elegant, muted against the rampaging current fashion of clashing colours and materials of today's wardrobe.

Jane thought it looked insipid.

But... she wasn't here to be an interior decorator. She was here to find out what more Walker had done to her life.

She walked slightly to the left, to the receptionist who was staring at her outfit with envious eyes.

"May I help you?" She asked politely when Jane stopped at her desk.

"Yes. I'm here to see Jerome Le Havre."

The woman glanced down at her wrist unit. “Ms Petersen. Please have a seat. Mr Le Havre is just seeing to a client. May bring you some coffee?”

“No, thank you.” Jane gave her a brief smile and turned away. The couch nearly blended into the carpet it was so beige. Jane lowered herself and leaned back. The couch material dutifully conformed to her position.

Twenty minutes later, the receptionist rose and came around the desk. “Mr Le Havre will see you now, Ms Petersen.” She said, oozing sympathy.

Jane stood up. She’d been considering just walking out. She despised people who thought their time was more important than their clients, who let clients wait, as if the lawyer was trying to impress upon her that she awaited his pleasure.

And then she stopped her mental grumbling. The method could also be used to unbalance someone, to put them into a mood that would make them more intemperate, open to manipulation.

It wasn’t a tactic her father used; he played fair with all, which was why he was wealthy, well respected and usually got his way when it came to negotiations and construction.

And given that she’d seen no other client – coming or going – she was of a mind Le Havre had kept her waiting just because he could.

Jane took a quiet, deep breath to calm her nerves and followed the receptionist down the hall to a double door. The receptionist opened the left-hand door and held out her arm to indicate Jane should precede her.

“Thank you.” Jane said with a small smile and stepped into a more opulent office.

Mr Le Havre’s office had floor to ceiling windows framing downtown Geneva. He sat behind a large glass desk tapping away at his wrist unit. The desk itself was almost empty except for an antique pen set and, on his left, a sheaf of the thick paper; on his right a tri-folded set of papers. In front of the desk were a pair of comfortable chairs, no doubt the form-fitting kind.

To the left was a book case, with what appeared to be leather bound books with gold script. They were all of a uniform size and thickness. On the right, another door, closed. To Jane’s immediate left was a pair of couches separated by another glass table.

She turned her attention to the man. Dark hair had been pulled back into a tight bun, exposing the clean lines of his face. He didn’t look too much older than Jane.

“Ms Petersen, Mr Le Havre.” The receptionist said quietly and Le Havre grunted, shut down his unit and stood. *Then* he looked at her.

“Jane.” He said with a smile that didn’t reach his hazel eyes. “Please, have a seat.”

Jane narrowed her eyes. Le Havre was expressing a familiarity that wasn’t there. She tilted her head, but his expression remained.

“Have we met?” Jane asked with a raised eyebrow.

“We are meeting now.” Le Havre replied.

“And yet, you presume to call me by my first name.” And yes, she thought, she did sound as stuffy as she thought. Le Havre wasn’t fazed.

“My apologies, Ms Petersen.” He said with a nod. “Please, take a seat and we’ll get started.” Smug humour gleamed in his eyes, as if allowing her small rebellion.

This was not an occasion for humour, and yet Le Havre seemed to find the whole situation – and Jane – as a source for amusement.

Jane took her seat and the material conformed to her body. She must not let this lawyer get to her, she must maintain her dignity and rat cunning. Nothing good could come out of this, but, by law, she was required to attend since she’d been named in the will.

Le Havre resumed his seat. “Brendon said you were of a feisty nature, but he didn’t mention your... formality.”

Read: stuck-upedness, arrogance, take your pick. She thought grimly. She didn’t like the idea of the two men discussing her at all; it smacked of conspiracy.

“You were friends?” She asked politely. Since she was watching his eyes, she saw them twitch as if to roll.

“For many years.” Le Havre said with a nod.

“How is it that you send me condolences when the police have yet to inform me of my fiancée’s demise?”

Le Havre tilted his head, as if he approved of her question. “He was very specific in his note to me that, should he not make contact within twenty-four hours of meeting your family, I could conclude he was dead.” His expression turned sombre. “Those notes are now in the hands of the police.”

Jane’s eyebrows shot up. “You’re accusing me and my family of doing away with him? For what purpose?”

Le Havre folded his hands on the desk top and addressed her as if she were a recalcitrant student. “He was about to come into an incredibly large inheritance. Perhaps someone sought to... steal it from him. Perhaps there was an... accident.”

Jane kept quiet, asked no further questions, even as her temper bubbled beneath the surface. This was Le Havre’s conversation to control.

He waited, as if expecting more questions from her, but she simply looked at him. She knew how to hold her peace, especially in a situation she was unfamiliar with. In this, she thought, her mother’s teachings worked. And that was something she never thought she’d confess to.

“Well,” Le Havre finally said, “enough small talk. It’s time we got down to business.”

Jane had to admit she was curious about what kind of ‘business’ he thought they had together.

Le Havre slid a couple of pieces of papers across the table. Jane looked at the pages and then at Le Havre.

“The marriage contract. I just wanted to refresh your memory of what lay within the document.”

Jane dropped her gaze to the papers, then slowly leaned forward to take the pages. She didn’t really want to take them, or touch them in any way. They represented the most fundamental betrayal a parent could perpetrate on an adult child: taking away choice. That it was typical of her mother, mattered not. By touching the pages, she gave them legitimacy.

But she also knew she would have to look if she had any chance of getting out of whatever trap her mother and Brendan laid for her.

She drew the pages to her, picked them up and stared at the archaic black handwriting on the front:

*Herein this legal document, by the hand of Jerome Jonathan Le Havre, I do solemnly swear that all parties agree to the contract of marriage between*

*Below that was her name, Jane Alberta Fortescue Petersen*

*And then his: Brendan Augustus Cesar Walker*

Jane set the page aside, it was only naming the participants. The second page was much more interesting.

*I, Jane Alberta Fortescue Petersen, do agreed and affirm the contract into which I enter freely and without fear or favour. Further, I do agree and affirm*

*that the confirmation ceremony of this contract take place expeditiously at a time and place of my intended spouse's choosing. Further, from this date, all and any assets shall be shared between myself and my spouse, decisions as to their disposal shall be made by my intended spouse in order to protect said assets for future offspring.*

Below that was her signature. It was a very, very good forgery. Then there was her mother's light, lacy signature and the date. For all intents and purposes, this document was legitimate, but Jane knew damned well it was not. But that was a moot point.

This contract handed over every decision of the marriage to Walker. She would have had no say in it since this document *proved* she'd agreed. And if this was anything to go by, the will would be just as restrictive.

"Do you agree this contract was signed by your hand and witnessed by your mother?" Le Havre asked into the quiet.

*And there was the first trap*, Jane thought. She could deny it and all this would go away. She would be entitled to nothing in Walker's will. She didn't give a damn about that. But it would also mean her mother would go to jail for fraud. And what a fraud it could be – if Le Havre could prove it as much. It really was a very good forgery of her mark.

So, she gave the only answer she could: "I don't know."

"You... don't know?" Now she had him off balance. "Is that or is that not, your signature?" He asked tersely.

"Please read the will." She said as an answer.

"I can't read the will if you are not who you say you are!"

She lifted her head, set the pages on the edge of the desk. "Of course you can. It is a reading, nothing more. You invited me to the reading of Walker's will, nothing more, nothing less. So, please, continue."

Le Havre glared at her, as if she'd caught him out in some psychological game of cat and mouse, as if he was trying to catch her out in a lie, as if... he needed proof of something. But for that, he'd also need to... record this conversation to use in a court of law.

There was no such thing as client-attorney privilege, hadn't been since the end of the Second Dark Age. She learned in her first year at university, that such a privilege had to be abolished to make sure all the guilty parties of oppressing the

world's population into slavery could be properly assessed. Worse, a lot of the lawyers were complicit in the schemes as well, in cover ups, in document destruction, in money laundering and outright theft. When it came to the World Council, there were no laws. The only way to ensure criminality could be proven, was to take away the client – attorney privilege. If the prosecutors had enough evidence, then they presented the case to a jury. The defence attorney had to have some compelling evidence to get his client off.

Open access to information was the order of the day and you couldn't decide on a case if half the story was 'protected'; so, the much-abused privilege disappeared.

Lawyers had the option, of course, to erase any recordings, but they were now held to a higher standard of absolute truth-telling. If they were caught out in a lie, jail was their next stop. It wasn't complicated.

Le Havre glowered at her, but he knew she was right. He'd asked for the meeting – the marriage contract was not a part of that request – to read the will. There was no decision-making process authorised by any party.

"Very clever, Ms Petersen." He murmured and picked up the tri-fold.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

“Ms Weir, welcome to Geneva and the Gascoyne.” The concierge gave Cambria a warm smile. “Is this your first time in our fair city?”

Cambria smiled back and shook her head. “No, but it has been a while.” She took a deep breath and looked around. The Gascoyne had the appearance of a modern, upscale resort hotel. Men and women and a few aliens strolled the concourse wearing the latest – garish to her eyes – fashion. Bright colours burst around her, long flowing robes and skirts with thick-soled chunky boots and sandals.

She preferred a more... conservative, business-suit style. Still colourful, but not as... airy. Of course, some of the hotel’s clients looked her up and down, dismissed her as not being of their ilk. And they’d be right. Still, live and let live, she thought.

“Here we are, you’re booked into the penthouse suite, Ms Weir.” She leaned forward and extruded the filament to him. He plugged it into the computer and gave her the code to her room. Unbeknownst to him, he’d also given her access to just about any system on the planet.

She gave him a smile, checked his nametag. “Thank you, Andre.”

“Enjoy your stay, ma’am.” He nodded

“I’m sure I will.” She murmured as she turned away to survey the crowds.

It was habit, really. After so many centuries of Hunting, knowing every element of her surroundings became second nature. She saw everything, took everything in, *felt* the environment and gave herself a slight nod as no danger registered. In time, it might, if what she sought came to the knowledge of certain parties. But... that’s why she was here: to lure out those would do harm through greed and jealousy; and through sheer lunacy.

She rose up the anti-grav tube to the thirtieth floor and accessed the door to her penthouse. The floor to ceiling shimmering silver curtains had been drawn back to reveal a spectacular view of the Alps. Cambria barely spared the mountains a glance; she’d seen more awesome mountain ranges in the galaxy at large. Earth had its own beauty, but on a minor scale. The worlds she’d seen dwarfed anything her home world could offer.

Cambria closed the curtains with a few taps on her wrist unit. The curtains slowly drew together then snapped taut as soon as they touched.

“Nice.” She murmured and typed in the commands to bring up the communications screen on the interactive silver.

Leah had been awaiting her call and Cambria’s great-great-great-granddaughter looked back at her with a disgruntled expression. “I hope you realise it’s zero-unspeakably-early.” She said.

Cambria gave her a lopsided grin. “Come on, it’s barely two a.m. where you are. You are already working.”

Leah grimaced. “Doesn’t mean I want to be disturbed. I’m into the last hours of the Ysiddril Cascade. It doesn’t come around every year, you know.”

“There will be another melt in five years, what’s your hurry?”

Leah cleared her throat. “If you recall, five years ago, you had me meet with the Consort of Grevott to convince them to shut down their slave trade. Five years before that, I was consulting with the Nexians on expanding their genetic genome. Five years before *that*...”

“Yes, okay, I get the point,” Cambria said, her grin dimming. Sometimes she forgot that not all of her descendants were blessed with long life. It was pot luck for them all – and there were thousands.

Only Leah had demonstrated longevity – that Cambria had found - and she had streaks of grey in her hair; that made Cambria wonder.

And that sometimes saddened her. She’d been alone for a long, long time and would be for a long, long time to come. She lowered her gaze.

“How long until it begins?” She asked.

“At about four thirty-two. I’ll be on my way shortly.” Leah said with a sigh. “It’s not everyone who gets the opportunity to study the breaking of the northern ice. Can you imagine if it didn’t happen? Why...”

“Yes, Leah, I can. I’ve seen it myself.” Cambria shook her head. “Five years of drought follows.”

“Climate is such a sensitive thing...”

“And it always recovers. But that’s not why I called. Although, when I get back you can ask me anything you like on the Cascade. I, at least, can give you first hand, eye witness testimony.”

Leah arched a brow.

“I’m on the trail of some nastiness...”

“Aren’t you always?”



“Speaking of nasty.”

“Any time now, *mother*,” Leah said impatiently and Cambria winced. She hated the term, could not reconcile the idea, not looking and feeling like she did.

“Any more lip, Leah, and I’ll ground you until your forty!”

Leah grinned at her. “I am way past *forty*! Try again.”

“Right, I keep forgetting. Anyway, in your recent travels, have you ever come across the Red Knight Brigade?”

“Red Knights?” Leah’s eyebrows rose, then lowered as she sank into thought.

Leah had a near-photographic memory, something Cambria occasionally wished she had, but was mostly glad she didn’t. When Leah was younger, Cambria took her everywhere – not on Hunts, those days were long gone, as far as Leah knew – so she could have real-world experience to go along with her book learning. As a result, Leah had several advanced degrees from numerous universities, both on Earth and other worlds.

Cambria waited while Leah went through her prodigious mental files. After nearly ten minutes, Leah slowly shook her head. “No, I don’t seem to recall the Red Knight Brigade. Is it import...?” Leah snorted. “Of course, it’s important, otherwise you wouldn’t be calling. Did you want me too...?”

“No, Leah, go off to your Cascade. It can wait until you get back. I just thought you might have come across them in your travels. Have fun with melting ice and exploding ice blocks.” She gave Leah a little wave.

“Oh, I will, and I’ll be back in a month or so; but if you need me, call. I *mean* it!”

Cambria disconnected and opened the curtains. Those mountains were the reason she rarely travelled to Earth: they held too many memories, the good and the bad and the emotionally crushing.

She’d ordered the Hunter facility sealed up at the same time as the World Council Archives, but unlike the archives, she couldn’t order a mountain destroyed – people would notice.

All that remained were empty rooms and echoing memories. Although she supposed, the corridor still worked. She hadn’t even thought to get the Nexians to remove it. Maybe she should have. She hadn’t been back in maybe a century or more, no longer tempted, no longer chased by the memories.

The Hunter unit had kept going for a further fifty years after she and Nathan had brought down the World Council. All those evil, corrupt councillors had eventually had their day in court, but some escaped and the Hunters went after them. None of them escaped justice. And when the last pleaded guilty, when the last miscreant had been Hunted down, the new Ambassador's Committee had asked her if the Hunters were needed any more.

She'd considered all she'd done, all the work the Hunters had accomplished and advised for the shutdown. Oh, she went out on request from the Committee for particularly nasty criminals, but on the whole, the Hunters were a spent force.

And so, she and Nathan had finally retired to Ragnarok to spend the rest of his life in peace and quiet – except for the occasional request to find someone. The years that followed Nathan's death were a blur of despair and self-destructive behaviour, even as she knew nothing she did would destroy her.

Every now and then, she still felt the shadow on her heart at his passing and she supposed she always would.

Cambria turned away from the vista, settled down at the communications station and plugged in her wrist unit. It would take time to find this Red Knight Brigade.

It was odd she'd never heard of them, not even a whisper. Odder still that Leah hadn't heard of them either. And yet, Abe was in their employ to find the key to the Vault.

She'd failed in her first search; all it brought were memories she'd rather not revisit, and she'd left in disgust. But there had to be something! Or... maybe not. Maybe the Red Knights started after she and Nathan shut down the Council?

But the fundamental question remained: What else was down in the Vault that would require the services of an assassin?

\* \* \*

Le Havre's words sent a chill down Jane's spine. Clever? All she did was divert an answer to a question he had no right to ask. What was clever about that?

"The Will?" She said, keeping her expression suitably professional.

Le Havre continued, as if he hadn't heard her. "Well, no matter."

He flicked open the remarkably short Will.

"There are bequests to various charitable organisations, some to friends – but I'll inform them later. Ah... here we go, 'I hereby bequeath my not insubstantial

artefact collection to both the Geneva Museum of Natural and Political History and to the University of Geneva, to be divested and shared as they see fit'. That means the Deans of various faculties will have to negotiate on that one." He looked up at her with a smug smile, then continued reading, "'Pursuant to the marriage contract between myself, Brendan Augustus Cesar Walker and Jane Alberta Fortescue Petersen, should I pre-decease the aforementioned Jane Alberta Fortescue Petersen, all goods, chattels and assets will be put into Trust to be administered by the Red Knight Brigade in good faith to provide for the care of Jane Alberta Fortescue Petersen-Walker.' I think that's the crux of the will in regards to you, Ms Petersen." Le Havre finished.

Jane felt every drop of blood leave her face as she took in the shocking words. She even felt a little light-headed. "Are you telling me, that everything I own, everything I'll ever own, is now in Trust to this Red Knight Brigade?"

Le Havre gave her an evil grin. "I guess that means you get absolutely nothing. How you managed to inveigle a good man like Brendan into a marriage proposal, I'll never know. But I made sure you would receive none of his wealth."

Jane stared at him, incredulous. "You have no idea who I am, do you." She said. "Or how much money I'm actually worth." She got to her feet.

"I don't know what Walker told you about me, but *poor* isn't one of them. You might like to look me up, find out my true worth."

Le Havre scowled at her with disbelief. "It no longer matters. Everything you own now belongs in Trust. I'll be drawing up the paperwork, so maybe you should get used to being poor." He snarled.

Jane rested her hands on the edge of his desk. "I don't think so."

"This document is unassailable in a court of law. You've lost; get used to it."

"That document might be, but the contract? What's the penalty for filing a false document, Mr Le Havre?" She asked and had the satisfaction of seeing him pale.

"It's your signature on the contract, your mother and Brendan witnessed it."

"Is it?" She asked politely and he looked down at the signature as if it would tell him the answer.

Then he looked at her with a narrowed gaze. "This document was submitted to me by your mother and Brendan. You would send your mother to jail for this?"

"Yes, Mr Le Havre, I would." And with that, she turned around and strode to the door of his office, wondered at the sudden feeling of lightness and satisfaction.

She turned back, hand on the doorknob. "I think I'll file a fraudulent documents complaint. The court is in this street, isn't it?"

\* \* \*

Jane was feeling pretty pleased with herself by the time she opened the door to her home. The feeling didn't last long.

She went to her father's office. He reclined in his office chair, staring at the ceiling, his face, newly reconstructed wore the expression of a man who'd been pole-axed by the news.

"Dad?" Jane asked, but he didn't respond. She stepped further into the office. "Dad? Are you okay?"

He slowly turned his head towards her, gave her a slow blink. "I don't understand what's happening." He said hoarsely.

Jane came around his desk, crouched next to him and took his hand. Charles eased forward until he was leaning towards her.

"I'm glad you're safe, Jane, you always had an adventurous spirit; you just needed the opportunity." He drew in a deep breath. "The police were here."

Jane nodded.

"You knew?" He dropped her hand and leaned back in his seat.

"I went to the reading of the Will, Dad," Jane said and explained what it contained. "It was either lose *everything* or..."

He looked at her and she saw the pain in those blue depths. "Honesty compels me to suggest that you certainly have your mother's sense of selfish self-preservation," he said and Jane flinched. She hadn't thought of how it would look. "But... given what the contract contained, along with the Will, you had no choice." He subsided into silence. He seemed strangely exhausted of will power, of his usual energetic self.

"Dad, what's wrong?"

"The police were here looking for your mother. I explained to them that she'd been... committed for evaluation at the Monsford Clinic. They contacted the Clinic. She's gone."

Horror streaked through her. She squeezed her father's hand. "*Gone?* She can't be gone; she was still young! There was nothing wrong with her that therapy and medication couldn't cure!" She paused for a breath, her eyes rounded with shock.

“Oh, crap, she had an allergic reaction to the medication! They’ve killed her, Dad!”

“What? Killed? No, Jane.” He gripped her shoulders. “Gone as in, not there anymore, has vacated the premises, has left the facility. *That* gone.”

“Well, fuck.” She slumped to the floor.

“Language, Jane.”

“Really?” Jane raised an eyebrow. Then she snorted. “Gone as in disappeared, not gone as in dead.”

“Yes. But where would she go? This is the only home she’s known since our marriage. Before that, it was her parents, and they haven’t seen her in months.”

Jane stood. “We need to file a missing person’s report.”

“Jane.” Her father sighed and rubbed his hands across his face. “She’s a grown woman, able to make her own decisions...”

“But she’s not *well*!”

“No, but you know what she’s like. She’d be able to charm her way out of the facility, be able to charm the doctors into thinking she’s fine and it’s all been a mistake. Worse, she could call on the best people, Dr Frazer, for example,” his lip curled at the name of her usual doctor, “would do anything she asked.”

“Then what do we do?” Jane lifted her hands, helplessly.

“We can only wait. Someone will see her, hear of her, and get back to me.” Again, he sighed. “I can only think she’s doing this to get back at me, for revenge.” He said quietly. “I can only think this is what she’s doing because the alternative doesn’t bear thinking about.”

Jane felt a chill go through her.

“We need to find her.”

“We do.” Her father agreed.

“So, how do we go about that?”

Charles shrugged. “I have no idea where to start.”

“Well, maybe someone came to collect her. Maybe we should start with Dr Frazer.” Jane scowled.

“Maybe we should let the police do their job, for the moment. You and I need to concentrate on our work.” He looked up at her and gave her a fragile smile. “If they can’t find her within another day, I’ll hire a private detective.”

Jane eyed him, doubt in her eyes.

“You need to concentrate on this legal action, too. It won’t be easy to undo what your mother has done. And our name will not protect us from the scrutiny of the media.”

She hadn’t thought about that, but yeah, a case like this would definitely hit the media. One of the awkward things about coming out of the Dark Ages was freedom of the press, and they’d run with it for all they were worth. Every media hound would be demanding to know everything about the case, about the lead-up, the reasons, both good and bad; the whole family would be under the microscope from the courts and the media – and there was no way she could undo the application or the lawsuit for fraud.

\* \* \*

To keep herself distracted from her mother’s disappearance, Jane read through half a dozen of Cambria’s mission reports. They certainly told a harrowing tale. She shook her head, wondered how anyone could survive. Yet Cambria had, earning her a reputation for taking on the roughest, toughest Hunts known to the service. It got to a stage where, while she was respected, she was also feared.

Hunters, as a rule, did not last long. Cambria had come back, her equipment beat to shit and yet she would succeed beyond all odds.

Jane leaned back in her chair. She needed more files and she eyed the pile stacked against the wall. They were not the files she was looking for. What she should do was read Cambria’s medical file; but all that dry, incomprehensible language dissuaded her. Maybe Courtney could help after her last exam? And maybe she should go back to the vault and see what she’d been missing.

Well, she hadn’t been back for a while, so... why not?

Her belly chose that time to grumble. “Ha, good answer.”

She eyed the half-filled bottle of red. It would keep, her hunger would not.

Jane closed the file, stacked it with the others and headed to the door.

Upstairs, she heard the sound of laughter and paused. The last time she heard anyone laugh in this house, Cameron had been here.

She went into the dining room.

Her father gave her a gentle smile, all her siblings wore smiles of one sort or another. Courtney, relieved; Six, secretive and Adam grinned like a loon.

They were all about to eat. Morecombe and his staff came through the doors as Jane grabbed a seat.

“Excellent timing, Miss Jane.” Morecombe said and indicated the staff should serve.

They had just finished the entrée, Morecombe, Brittany and Joanna arriving to remove the plates, when Jane thought she heard the front door. It should have been locked, with security staff patrolling the grounds. As far as she knew, only those people in this room had a key.

Morecombe stood straight, as if he’d heard it too. He met Jane’s eyes and took a step towards the hallway.

Alberta swept into the room, wearing a long flowing red gown, as if off to a ball.

Behind her, came six heavily armed men, including ‘Brad’.

“Alberta...” Charles began and Alberta glared at him.

“Charles.” She said and her gaze took in all her children sitting and the standing staff. She looked over her shoulder at the men. “Shoot anyone who speaks.”

Jane felt her blood run cold as the gunmen fanned out to surround the family.

Alberta slowly walked around the table to her husband. She brushed a hand under his chin. He had a look of horror on his face. “Charles, my sweet, I did warn you; but you chose to ignore me, to have me locked away like some criminal.” She turned her cold gaze to Jane. “And you. My biggest disappointment. You just couldn’t do as you were told, just had to rebel. And now, this legal action you’ve brought. Is that any way to treat your mother?”

Jane opened her mouth with a hot retort, but the man behind her father raised his gun and she clamped her lips shut.

“Good girl. Obedience, at last.”

Her gaze shifted to every one of her children. She looked at them without emotion.

“This will be a short visit since Jane has set the dogs onto me. They won’t find me, of course, I am much too clever for the likes of the local constabulary.” She turned to Jane. “You, my dear, have exactly one week to give me the code of the Vault, or I will kill everyone at this table. Starting with you, Six.”

Her firstborn gaped at her.

“Then Adam, and then Courtney, then your father.”

Jane slowly raised her hand, as if she was in the classroom.

“Yes, Jane. You have a question?”

Jane looked at the gunman.

“He won’t shoot. Yet.”

“Why?” Jane asked and Alberta clicked her tongue, shook her head.

“I thought it was obvious, isn’t my gorgeous dress clue enough? Or are you simply not as smart as you think you are?”

Jane took a guess. “The Red Knight Brigade?”

Alberta gave her a slow clap. “Well done, my baby girl, well done.”

Jane gave her a blank look and Alberta’s face fell with disappointment.

“Always stuck in books and never looking at the bigger picture,” Alberta said sadly. “You have no idea what you’ve found. All you see is the historical significance of the Vault.” She turned away and poured herself a red wine from one of the bottles sitting on the sideboard. She took a sip and grimaced, set it aside and poured a white.

“Much nicer.” She stared into the golden depths as if gathering her thoughts. Then she looked up at her henchmen. “Maybe I have time after all. Lower your weapons, boys, it’s time for a lesson followed by a short Q&A.” She took her usual seat at the end of the table from Charles.

“Isn’t this nice. We’re all here together again, and silence rules the table.” She smiled benignly, but no one was fooled and no one spoke.

On a sigh, Alberta continued. “Now then. To history.” She raised her glass in Jane’s direction. No one moved. “That was a toast, children. Shall we start again?”

Everyone grabbed a glass. Courtney, nervous around so many armed men, knocked hers over. She earned a scowl from her mother.

“I hope you’re not this clumsy in surgery, Courtney, I would prefer you not bring shame to my name.” Her gaze went ice cold and threatening. “I’m sure you would prefer not to embarrass me, either. Do I make myself clear?”

Courtney nodded, jerkily.

“What was that? I couldn’t hear your apology.”

“I’m sorry, mother, it won’t happen again,” Courtney said hoarsely, watching her mother as if she were a snake.

“I’m glad to hear it. Morecombe, another glass for our young doctor.”



The tension in the room ratcheted higher as Morecombe slowly went to the sideboard to pour another glass of wine for Courtney. All eyes were on him as he moved carefully, with no sudden movements to attract the attention of the gunmen.

Morecombe placed the glass in front of Courtney and she gripped it in both hands.

“As I was saying: to history.” Alberta raised the glass. Everyone followed and took a sip, murmuring the toast.

“For the benefit of everyone here, let me just say, congratulations Jane, for finding the biggest treasure trove in the history of mankind.” She snorted out a laugh. “In fact, it may be the richest treasure in the galaxy.”

Jane looked at her, puzzled. All she’d found was a bunch of files. Dusty, administrative, political files. There were files on supplies, on trade, on agriculture and manufacturing, on construction, on crimes, on management, education, anything needed to run a government. How could they be interesting to anyone other than historians?

“You still don’t see it, do you?” Alberta said with a frown and Jane shook her head.

“Well,” Alberta sighed, “I don’t suppose you’ve managed to go through all the files you brought back with you, so I’ll give you a heads up on *one* of them.” She grinned maliciously. “It is a registry file, but I think it was misfiled, perhaps deliberately, perhaps not. A rather thick file, too, one of two hundred files of page after page of names and file numbers.” She looked at Jane expectantly. Jane looked back, but out of the corner of her eye, saw Six twitch.

Alberta turned her attention to him. “Charles junior? Did you have something to say?”

He cleared his throat. “Without knowing the title of the file, I would suggest they are file numbers with their attendant person. I would hazard a guess to say they lead to files with banking details.”

“That’s my boy. You are absolutely correct. They lead to banking files.”

Jane frowned. “But... they’re fifteen hundred years old. Of what use would they be now? The owners are long dead and their assets divested amongst the heirs.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? A logical conclusion, too, but you are forgetting one tiny important thing: off-world banking does not work in the same way as Terran banking laws do.”

Jane, to her own dismay, still couldn’t connect the dots. Her father and Six had though. Their eyes had widened with shock.

“Six, why don’t you explain it to your little sister?”

Jane turned to her brother.

“Jane... In all likelihood, a lot of the money from the Councillors fifteen hundred years ago is still there; still accruing interest.”

“But... how can that be?”

“Mother is quite correct in this...”

“Thank you, Charles,” Alberta said with a regal dip of her head. Six ignored her.

“If the heirs didn’t know about the off-world accounts, they wouldn’t be touched. Aliens have a different lifespan to us, so, depending on where the deposits were made, those accounts are still active. The banking authorities would have no reason to think they are unclaimed after all this time because it isn’t a long time to them.”

“Why would there be off-world bank accounts in the first place?” Jane asked.

“And you call yourself a historian.” Alberta sneered. “*Of course* there were.”

“Mother, they were called the Second Dark Ages for a reason. There is very little known about it; that’s why the Vault is so important, so we can finally know what went on.”

Alberta snickered, then laughed out loud. “Oh, Jane. Jane, Jane, Jane.” Her laugh cut off. “There is a lot of information out there... if you know where to look.”

Jane firmed her mouth in disagreement. Everything that was known on the Second Dark Ages was freely available and it was not that much. Universities and museums worked together to fit all the information and it was precious little. That was why, to her, the Vault was a gold mine. It would settle any arguments other historians had on the subject.

“Fine,” Alberta said and rose. “Be obtuse.” She finished her drink. “But I’ll give you one last clue: Oral and privately held family histories.” She paused, pursed her lips. “In fact, wait here.”

She left the room and came back five minutes later holding a heavy, thick paged tome and set it in front of Jane. “My family history. One that has information collected for... well, I let you discover that.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

The discovery of the Bolingbroke files were merely a curiosity to Cambria, a means to an end. But she couldn't help but go in search of them. They were, after all, where she started – or more precisely, where her current journey started.

She walked down the cavernous hallways of files, searching for the right one. More than once, she had to backtrack and take another alleyway.

The place was thick with dust and age. So much age. But the files were still as fresh as when they were first placed on the shelves, saved by the application of sealants.

De Crecy, she recalled, had every intention of creating a dynasty and the World Council would become the Galactic Council and last for thousands of years. She put paid to his ambitions... or rather, Adam, Excalibur Jones's clone had destroyed him and his plans.

At least in this, he'd had the right idea. To save this information for future generations.

The Bolingbroke files took up two generous shelves. Remarkable really. A man of his stature and conviction rate only took up two shelves of a vast arena of files.

"How galling for you." She murmured into the silence. She pulled out the last one. It was much thicker than the others. The last page was a handwritten note by his main minder. She couldn't recall his name, but he'd put down that the Judicar had taken an unexpected leave of absence and was filing for early retirement.

He'd disappeared, but if her memory served her right, he'd retired to a world he'd discovered where he'd be treated like a god. What he hadn't known was that he would be treated like a god until the people of the planet celebrated their holiest of days and the 'god' was sent to look after those who had gone before – in the afterlife.

She returned the file and selected another. And the memories poured in. The beginning was her case, the case that sent her to Tudor and Excalibur. Her mouth twisted as she saw, at the end of her case, the paperwork she'd put together on the work rate of the Judicar. The paperwork that exposed Bolingbroke as the corrupt bastard he was.

Cambria shoved the file back into its slot, no longer interested.

She had what she wanted – a way to find out what the Red Knight Brigade was interested in. Now she just had to find and remove whatever it was they were after.

\* \* \*

“As much as this has been fun, I must leave you now, my dear, dear family,” Alberta said with a *moue*. “Remember, Jane, one week from now...” She set the chrono on her bejewelled wrist unit, “you will give me the code, or I’ll kill you all. Ta ta.” She said with a bright smile and swept out, guarded by her gunmen.

The door slammed, then opened again.

All eyes went to the door.

Had she forgotten something?

Cameron walked in, looking over his shoulder. “Wasn’t that your mother, Jane?”

“Yes.” She breathed and laid her head on the table.

“Jeez, Dad.” Adam croaked.

Charles grabbed his wine and drank it down. “Fill it up, Morecombe, this is going to be a long night.”

“What are we going to do?” Courtney asked and held her glass in two hands while she drank it down.

Six rubbed his hands down his face and then got up from the table. He wrapped Joanna in his arms and held on for dear life.

“We need to call the cops,” Adam said. “Get them to place a guard on this place.”

“Or leave. We could all head off in different directions.” Courtney put in and Morecombe filled her glass.

Jane watched him move around the table, filling glasses. She knew what he was doing: making sure they all got hammered. Then, in the morning, cooler heads would prevail. Hopefully.

“Jane?” Cameron asked as he took the seat Alberta had used. “What’s going on? Weren’t those men taking her into custody?”

“No. They were her bodyguards.”

“Bodyguards? Why would your mother need bodyguards?”

“I’ll catch you up later,” Jane said and he lifted a shoulder.

Charles tapped his knife against the glass. "Okay, everyone, settle down." He turned to Morecombe. "See if you can salvage anything for dinner. We don't want to get trashed on an empty stomach."

"As you say, Sir," Morecombe said and the staff retreated into the kitchen. Six released Joanna and resumed his seat.

"This is one hell of a cluster fuck." He said. For once, Charles senior did not admonish his son.

"It certainly is." He said and then looked down the table at Jane. "Our lives are in your hands." He stated.

Her siblings turned to look at her.

Jane knew what he was thinking. Knew it, but went through the motions anyway. "We could scatter." She suggested.

"I think she'd be planning on our doing that," Charles said and turned his attention to Cameron. "How many bodyguards did you see?"

"Ah, ten. One at the front, one at the rear and four on each side, as if making sure she wouldn't escape."

"Or she was being protected," Charles said. "So, we had six in here. What were the other four doing?"

Six grimaced. "Two guarding the door. Two downstairs placing a tracer on the address panel."

"Probably. We'll check later."

"She'll have people watching the house, too." Courtney put in and Charles nodded.

"One for each of us." Adam added.

"We could call the police." Jane said.

"We could, but what could they do?"

"They could find her, arrest her, and put the psycho bitch in jail!" Courtney said through gritted teeth.

"I suspect she's made sure she won't be found any time soon." Charles said and Courtney looked at him with disbelief. "Court, she's an independently wealthy woman. Able to bribe, able to change her appearance and with some serious backup. You'll note she didn't seem too concerned about the authorities."

"They'll find her. I know they will." Courtney said, but she didn't sound very convincing.

“What else, Jane?”

Jane sighed. “The police would want to know everything, including the address of the Vault. If nothing else, to lay a trap.”

Courtney frowned, gulped more wine. “And what’s wrong with that? Let them have it! It’s only a bunch of files! They are not worth our lives!” She ended standing on her feet, tears on her cheeks.

“Jane?” Charles asked.

“The place is a warren. There are plenty of alcoves and alleyways. I haven’t been into the depths, so I don’t know if there’s another exit. She could escape and return to wreak her vengeance. She’s obviously got a significant enterprise. But I don’t know who these Red Knight Brigade are. There could be hundreds or thousands involved. Which gives her unprecedented protection.” She looked up at Courtney. “We don’t know that the cops aren’t a part of the organisation.” She finished quietly.

Courtney slumped back into her seat. “I don’t wanna die!” She wailed. Six put his arm around her shoulders.

“None of us do, Court.” Six said to her.

“Jane?” Charles said again.

She lifted her chin and stared straight at her father. “I can’t give her the address, Dad.” No one said anything and Charles nodded. “Once I do, she’ll kill us all anyway and claim the entire Vault on behalf of the Red Knight Brigade.” Her mouth twisted. “I’m sure she’d have a judge or two in her pocket who would recognise Walker’s will as legitimate and the marriage contract as real. What she cannot allow is embarrassment should the case go ahead. Her revenge on me is coming.” She said softly and Cameron gripped her hand.

“What do you propose?” Her father asked, taking note of Cameron’s action.

“My first instinct is to find whatever it is they want and give it to them. But... the same result. They cannot leave any witnesses.”

“And your second instinct?”

She glanced at Courtney. “To run.”

“But you just said...” Courtney said tearfully.

“I know, but they can only track us so far. After that...” She lifted a shoulder.

“I think with a family as wealthy as ours, the media would be interested if we all disappeared at once. Not even the police could keep a lid on it.”

Charles tilted his head. "Are you so sure?"

"No, I'm just tossing ideas out there, because I don't want any of us to die, either."

Charles narrowed his eyes. "Alright. Here's what we're going to do: Six and I are going off-world on an unscheduled tour of our investments. That will take us away for at least a month." He turned to his younger son. "Adam, it's time for a concert tour. A long one, if you can manage it."

Adam nodded. "My agent's been after me to tour, but I didn't think I was ready. Until now. Now, I'm ready for a six-month tour."

"Courtney," Charles said and looked at his daughter. "Have you heard about your results yet?"

"No, Dad, they won't be out for another month, at least." She hunched in on herself.

"I'll call in a few markers, get those results fast-tracked and arrange for you to join *Medicine Sans Frontieres*. That will keep you away from here for a six-month tour in places where travel is difficult and strangers noticed."

Jane was tense, but Charles didn't look at her.

Morecombe chose that time to come in with plates of beef and salad. He set the plates in front of her brothers and sister.

"Mr Cameron, I didn't realise you would be joining us. I'll just fix up another plate for you."

"Thank you, Morecombe, you are most kind."

The manservant gave a small smile and returned to the kitchen.

"What about Jane?" Adam asked. "What is she going to do?"

Everyone stopped eating and looked down the table at her.

Charles answered for them. "Jane will be concentrating on that book. And then she's going to concentrate on our own family tree. And then..."

"You're staying here?" Courtney asked and Jane nodded.

"Mother wants me to know something. She wants me to know it all before the end game."

"End game?"

"Either she reveals her plans for the entire Vault, or I take her down," Jane promised.



“But, Jane, you know nothing about how to defend yourself, how to escape or anything!”

Jane gave her a smile. “I know how to hide.” She said.

“You’ll be caught,” Courtney said, appalled.

“And it will only be me, should that happen, Court. I’m the one with the knowledge. She can’t kill me unless I give her the codes. And I’m not going to do that. Ever.”

“But...”

“I know you’re imagining all sorts of things she can do to me to make me tell, but there’s one thing you’re forgetting.” She let it hang in the air for a moment. “Our dear mother is not exactly stable. She hates things out of order, bad manners, people who don’t do what she says. She gets frustrated very easily, she wants what she wants now, has no patience.” Jane paused. “Or not much. I imagine she’s sitting where ever enjoying the delicious idea of us all panicking. I expect she thinks that one us will convince me to give up the codes and is expecting a call at any moment. The longer it takes, the more frustrated she’ll become. And then...”

“She’ll make a mistake.” Charles finished for her. “But you have to make sure you are well hidden for the week.”

Jane gave him a confident smile. “Don’t worry, Dad, where I’m going, not even the National Guard could find me.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

Cambria sat at the terminal and tried to think of what important files could be here. There were so many! Where did she start, or, she allowed, where did she go next?

Idly, she typed in De Crecy and wasn't surprised to see the files scroll rapidly up the screen. Her lip curled. Typical. But then the files kept scrolling. She knew he was the President and it would be typical that there would be a lot of files. He made a lot of decisions, some good, but predominantly bad. Anything to line his own pockets or to further his dictatorship.

But she knew one thing about dictators, they were never satisfied with what they had; they always wanted more. Absolute control of everything and everyone around them. And to do that, you needed money. Lots, and lots of money.

So, question number one: where did that money come from? Answer: the enslavement of the majority of the world's population. Question number two: where did he hold such wealth? Unknown, but maybe the answer was in these files. But then, would it still be relevant today? Again, maybe. And finally, where did all the wealth go?

There were so many places. Off-world banking would probably be his thing. If he had access to that, then there was only one place: Grey's World.

She leaned back in her seat. Grey's World was the Terran name for a planet that was unpronounceable in any Terran language. It was also a haven for oligarchs wishing to hide money.

The fundamental problem with the galaxy at large was that there was no overarching authority. Each planet has autonomy, and rightly so in her mind. So far, there hadn't been any inter-planetary wars, and if she had any say in it, there never would be.

But back to the issue at hand. Money. It always came back to money.

De Crecy's money and the Councillors money. Whether it was still being held in banks on Grey's World or not, certain elements would think it was, even after so long. People on other worlds didn't use Terran life spans as their benchmarks. Some aliens, she knew, measured their life spans in hundreds of years, others in a thousand or more.

So, assuming the World Councillors money was still viable, it would be worth trillions. People had killed for much, much less.

Time to go to Grey's World, then. She had allies there. Hell, she banked there!

Cambria shut down the system, picked up the sphere and left the Vault to the quiet and the dust.

\* \* \*

Adam was the first to leave. His agent was thrilled that his impending superstar had finally decided to tour. His first stop was going to be a smaller venue in London while the agent set up arenas of ever-increasing crowd numbers, finishing with a spectacular event in Beijing.

He kissed Jane's cheek at the door. "I'll be surrounded by people. But in six days, I'll be taking an unscheduled trip off-world to star in a film on Tetras. Good luck, Janey, I'll see you soon enough."

"Have fun, Adam, and don't worry about me, I have a plan."

He hugged her. "You usually do."

He climbed into a long sedan, several bodyguards surrounding him. He was well aware he'd be followed and would make sure to keep an eye out so he could identify them.

Later in the day, a beat-up air car settled in the forecourt and Courtney tearfully hugged Jane goodbye.

"You'll be a good doctor, Court. Give what you got."

"I will. Don't die on me, Jane, it would crush me should something happen to you. But whatever else, if you get the chance, kill that bitch."

"Oh, I plan to." Jane promised.

And her sister was off, waving from the window of the aircar as it rose. Curiously, no aircar followed her. Jane watched it until it was out of sight.

Finally, it was Six and her father.

"I don't know, Dad, this seems a little too obvious." Six said as he stood on the door stoop. "Maybe we should have just nicked off through the corridor."

Charles shook his head. "No. I know my wife, and I know she's enjoying watching us run. We'll use the office corridor. That I know she hasn't bugged because she never had any access to it. But that doesn't matter. We are touring our investments. It's time we did, Six and you know it."

"I do, Dad, but I hate doing what she expects."

"Don't worry about it, son, because we are not doing what she expects."

Charles said as he looked around the grounds.

“We’re not?”

“No, but I’ll explain on the way.” He turned to Jane. “You need to be safe. If anything happened to you, I’ll...” his hands clenched into fists.

“I know, Dad, I know. If this doesn’t work...” She left the sentence unfinished. They both knew what would happen.

Jane hugged Six, then her father. “Take care, Dad, Six. I’ll see you soon.”

They took off in a town car, with bodyguards in tow.

Jane watched them go. She was all alone now. Well, except for Cameron. He was waiting.

\* \* \*

Grey’s World. A bustling planet of administrative industry. Here, aliens – and Cambria included herself in the name – went about their business with no concerns or animosity for being different. The Greys themselves were... grey; mottled grey, green-grey, blue-grey... but mostly the grey of a rain cloud.

How the Greys managed that was a mystery to her, but it would be interesting to find out. A galaxy based on common grounds rather than on difference was worth its weight in whatever precious metal was the most expensive at the moment.

In this thriving metropolis, there were many banks, especially investment banks and venture capital banks. If ever an adage, ‘money is made round to go around’ and ‘money is flat to stack’, this planet epitomised it.

She walked the street with a full mask. The atmosphere was toxic to her and many others, so she didn’t look out of place, even in her full body protection suit the colour of terracotta. It marked her blood as red as the suit filtered the air. Others had pale blue, or green or yellow suits, to mark their own blood.

Her objective was a block away: the Imperial Bank.

The door... person glanced at the door, full black eyes gleaming, and it opened inward.

“Gentle Being.” It said.

“Thank you.” Cambria replied, her voice sounded like she was underwater.

She went to the front table.

“Gentle Being, how may I assist you?” The Grey asked. It sounded female, but that could have been the translator.

“I wish to see He Who Is Wise.” Again, the Grey’s name was unpronounceable to her – she didn’t have the vocal apparatus for it.

“I will see if he is free. Whom may I say calls upon his knowledge?”

“Cambria Petersen.”

“I shall have him prepare.” The Grey acknowledged with a tip of its head.

“Please be comfortable in the area of refreshment.”

Cambria went into – what on Terra would be a high-class – café.

Her visor translated the text and she settled for an outrageously expensive coffee imported from the Southern hemisphere of Earth.

She attached the modified straw to her mask and took a sip. It was almost better than her own blend. Almost.

Cambria was nearly finished when her communicator chimed. “He Who Is Wise is prepared. Please attend him.”

Cambria separated the straw from her mask and rose. She took the grav tube up fifty levels.

He Who Is Wise’s office faced the distant mountains. The red tinge of the atmosphere gave it a weird pink look, but she ignored it as she stepped into the first chamber of decontamination. A blue haze settled around her and then cleared. She went into the next chamber.

“Please be at ease.” The voice came from all around her, echoed in the chamber. “The atmosphere is appropriate for your species. You may disrobe.”

Cambria peeled out of her suit and took off the mask. The air had the scent of... green apples? Nice. She ran a hand through her dark hair and pinched her cheeks.

She went through into He Who Is Wise’s office. The grey sat in a hermetically sealed, eight-foot-tall, four-foot-wide box. A pink haze swirled around him.

“Greetings, Hunter. How may I be of service?”

Cambria gave him a respectful bow. “Greetings, He Who Is Wise. I come in search of old knowledge.”

He leaned forward. “How old?”

“Fifteen hundred Terran years.” Cambria said.

He tilted his head, black, tilted eyes blinking. “Not so old, then.” He said and she smiled.

“I wish to know of any Terran accounts you may have.” Cambria requested.

“Any? Including yours? Did you wish a balance, an accounting of your investments?” He asked. He sounded vaguely discomforted.

Cambria shook her head. “No, I am with the best financial institute in the known galaxy. You have my complete and utter trust, He Who Is Wise. It is not my accounts I am interested in at the moment, but other Terrans, especially those dating back fifteen hundred years.”

“Do you wish the values of those accounts?”

“Yes, please. I want names, activity status, investment portfolios and balances.” She requested. “But only those that date back. Anything more recent... I’ll have to let you know.”

The lids of his eyes closed for a moment, then opened. “In what format do you wish the information?”

“Reading cube would be fine.”

“It shall be done. Please let me know of any further assistance the Imperial Bank may render to you.” He tipped his head.

Cambria gave him another bow and went back into the chamber to change.

By the time she arrived downstairs, a cube awaited her, confirming her suspicions.

What she held in her gloved hand was priceless beyond measure; and if anyone on Terra knew she had this information, she would become the Hunted.

\* \* \*

Jane packed, while Cameron paced.

“You can’t do this alone.” He said for the umpteenth time.

“You can’t come with me, Cameron, it would put your life in as much peril.”

Cameron scowled at her, his handsome face worried. “First, it’s my life to imperil; second, it’s already been imperilled; thirdly, I’m involved in this and I can’t be unperilled!”

Jane’s eyebrows rose. “‘Unperilled’? Is that even a word?”

“Jane.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Stop for a moment and think.”

She sat on the side of her bed, looked attentively at him and waited. She figured she had an answer for every argument he could bring.

“Your mother is going to kill everyone you care about until you give up those codes.”

Every argument, except that one.

“I’ve already taken a leave of absence.” He said.

“You can’t do that. You’re already covering my classes!” She stood and resumed packing.

“Of course, I can. I’ve already spoken to the Vice-Chancellor. Who, by the way, sends his best wishes and absolutely understands your need for comfort at a time like this from an unrequited love interest.” He affected a forlorn expression.

Jane rolled her eyes.

“He’ll manage, Jane. I think he hopes the University will get the first crack at the Vault.”

That stopped her.

“He knows.”

“Jane, a lot of people know. Not only was Walker not discreet in talking about it, but someone in the Archaeological Patents Committee Office leaked it as well.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “You’d better be one hundred percent sure the address is secure because every nut job on the planet is soon going to be going through encryption software to find it.”

“No...”

“Yes. This is the greatest treasure in our history, Jane, it’s too good a story to keep quiet about, especially the value of it all.”

Jane turned away and continued to shove clothes into her bag. “Everyone keeps saying that, but they’ve not been there! It’s massive and that’s just the registry! It’s rows upon rows of towering shelves filled with files – paper files and registry books. The filing system for the registry books takes up one wall!”

Cameron’s eyes rounded as he pondered the size. But then he shook off his thoughts. “You’re missing the point, Jane. This is about to turn into the biggest treasure in the world, in history. And to victor, go the spoils.”

“They can’t have it. I have the Patent.”

“Do you? Are you absolutely sure about that? Do you know if anyone has filed a counter-patent? What about your mother? Both your parents are your next of kin.” Cameron asked softly.

“She’s a criminal, she has no say,” Jane said mutinously.

“That hasn’t been proven. All she’s guilty of, so far, is escaping from a psychological assessment facility. And we don’t even know that. She could have walked out of there with a recommendation from a doctor.”

“You are a party pooper.” She said and sealed her bag.

“A...”

“Twentieth-century cultural reference.” She said and walked out of her suite.

Cameron followed.

Downstairs, Jane saw Cameron had already packed a bag. “You knew.”

“I knew you would have to leave at some stage, especially once the Vault became common knowledge.”

Jane set her bag next to his and sat on the step. “I’ve been a bit of a numpty, haven’t I? I just thought it was of historical importance.” She snorted. “Actually, the Vault was secondary to finding Cambria Petersen. All I wanted, all I *ever* wanted, was to prove she existed. I’ve done that, but...”

“You caught yourself a bigger fish than you expected or planned for. Now, you have to reel it in.” Cameron sat next to her, bumped her shoulder.

“I don’t fish.” She said.

“Obviously.” He replied. “Well, sweetheart, to put it in perspective, you went fishing for a Snapper and caught a whale.”

“That isn’t remotely funny.” She rested her chin on her hand.

“Don’t go all sooky on me now. We have six days to find a solution or disappear forever.”

Jane didn’t reply. She was sulking. Again. Her simple life was upside down because of one small and heavily criticised project. Now everyone would want to know her and where the Vault was.

“So. Where are we going?” Cameron asked.

Morecombe came around the corner from the dining room. “Miss Jane, lunch is available and I’ve packed supplies for you.”

Jane levered herself off the step. “Thanks, Morecombe.” She followed him into the dining room. “What are your plans for this unexpected holiday?”

Morecombe pulled out a chair for her. “I’m going to put my feet up and watch a lot of trash on the screen.”

Jane snorted. “Use Dad’s holo-deck, really get into the programs.” She offered.

“Thank you, Miss Jane, I might just do that. The girls are headed off to stay with family for a few days, and then they are headed off-world, as per your father’s instructions.”

“You’re staying?”



“I am, Miss Jane. Someone has to keep an eye on the house. Between myself and the security around the estate, we should be okay. It’s not ‘us’ she’s interested in.”

Following lunch, Jane and Cameron and Morecombe went downstairs to the corridor – the manservant carried the supplies in a backpack.

“These will last you three days, Miss Jane, so make sure you re-supply as soon as you get where you are going, or on the way.” He handed the pack to her.

Jane looked around the room. It wasn’t much, apart from the wine tasting area, but it was still her home. “Look after the house, Morecombe. We’ll be back with a solution and the family as soon as we can.”

“It will be done. Miss Jane.” Morecombe said with a faint smile.

Jane punched in the destination and opened the door. She walked through. Cameron closed the door behind him and followed.

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

The house was quiet when Cambria returned home. Daylight streamed through the windows, but it was obvious Leah hadn't returned yet.

Cambria hoped she was having a hell of a time at the Cascade. She often wondered why Leah stayed with her rather than going out and finding herself a beau.

Even when asked point-blank, Leah never really gave Cambria a satisfactory answer.

She shrugged off her thoughts and went to a reinforced steel door off the kitchen. It, by itself, wouldn't stop a determined intruder for long, but the countermeasures behind the door would.

She attached the filament to the security panel and downloaded the code. The foot-thick door was a chore to open, but that was a security measure in itself. The lights in the stairwell came on automatically and she walked down to a second, heavy metal door.

Behind the door was her haven, when she didn't want to be disturbed or she needed to focus on one of her projects. The door pushed inward and she stepped inside.

The area almost covered the entire length of the house above. Here, she could live in peace and quiet, undisturbed by the outside world – and often had, for months at a time when she needed to disappear for a while.

She went into her 'research' room. On the first monster six-foot by six-foot screen ahead of her, was her family tree, all the way down to the current generation. After fifteen hundred years, she had thousands of descendants.

When Leah had first seen it, she'd simply shrugged. "Everyone needs a hobby." Was her only comment. Leah was all about the here and now, not what came before. But Cambria was interested in much more than that: she wanted to know if any of her descendants displayed any of her own long-lived characteristics. Few did. In fact, less than ten per cent had lived longer than was usual.

At least they all enjoyed good health, she mused. Old age and accidents killed them, not disease, so that was a positive.

Cambria turned her attention to the screen on the left. It, too, was a six-foot by six-foot screen. It was segmented into smaller screens and displayed her security

system. Nothing flashed red, so her home was still secured – and that meant Amir was nowhere around that she could see. She could handle a dumbass like that one.

The third screen was blank. She inserted the cube into the slot.

“Activate screen, activate translation protocols, display header.” She ordered and the screen booted to the title of the cube. “Analysis of Terran finance services.”

“View cube data.” She said and whistled at the size of the files.

“Search De Crecy.” Cambria knew it was a long shot. As far as she knew, De Crecy didn’t have any offspring, but there was that woman... what was her name? Cambria frowned. She’d been on... Eden (now a tourist resort planet with safety protocols). She’d been expecting to be De Crecy’s consort, give him the children he wanted for a dynasty. That is, until Cambria came along and took her into custody on multiple charges of murder.

De Crecy could have impregnated dozens of women for all Cambria knew.

There were no accounts active in that name, but there was a vast repository of wealth that hadn’t been touched in twelve hundred years. So, he did have descendants, for a while, anyway. More than a trillion Euros, locked away, and that didn’t include the interest accrued.

Now the question became: were there any De Crecy family members out there who didn’t know about this wealth?

Not that it mattered to Cambria. This money was rightfully the Terran governments. All of them. They’d been defrauded of it by De Crecy, by the system that enslaved its own population.

She supposed she could request it all be transferred to Terra – including the money from the other Councillor accounts. One last act of justice for people long dead. But what would be the point? It would be a crimp, albeit a small one, in the Grey World’s banking system, but they’d oblige because they were all about honesty and fairness.

Cambria put that ethical question aside.

“View list of account names. Cross-reference, Councillors, last World Council.”

Two hundred names popped up and she shook her head. “Evil bastards.” She muttered.

“View list of account names, cross reference companies.”

Five hundred names came up, some under the parent companies. Obviously, some of the councillors thought they could hide their thievery through shell comp... One name caught her attention: Red Knight Incorporated.

“Too obvious a connection?” She wondered and turned to her control panel. She cleared off the family tree.

“Screen one: list members of Red Knight Incorporated. Screen three, list active accounts.”

Screen three came up first, with no active accounts. Screen one took a minute longer.

“Well, shit.” Thousands of names scrolled slowly up the screen. “How am I going to sort them all out?”

Cambria blew out a breath. “Screen one cross-reference names with family tree dot mtx.”

Some, maybe a hundred, in her tree had been involved with the Red Knights, but none current, that was the good news. The bad news was she had thousands of names to inquire into.

“Screen one, change the text colour to white, all matching names. Narrow list to text colour black only.”

What else? “Screen one: change the text colour to white, all deceased. Narrow list to text colour black only.”

That was better. Her list changed dramatically and was now down to three thousand, two hundred and thirty-four. What else? What else would exclude people? She narrowed her eyes.

“Screen One: split-screen for the search function. Screen One b: search names members of current governments, cross reference Screen One a. Screen one a: highlight surnames.”

The names flashed on the screen, highlighted in red.

The Red Knights – and she felt she could make that connection now – had active members in all the modern governments of the day. In Europe, the Americas, Asia.

“Screen three: pause program, begin search program, Terran Global Network: Red Knights Incorporated.”

The public network turned up nothing. No record of such a company existed, nor did any charities or privately held companies.

“Screen three: engage security protocols Sierra Echo Charlie. Search all electronic communications, Terran Global Network, Red Knights.”

The screen blanked except for one word: engaged.

This would take time and memory capacity since she didn't give a time frame. But she wanted to know who and when; the what would come later - but she had a bad feeling about what she'd discover.

\* \* \*

In reality, Jane and Cameron's journey only took enough time to walk around a city block. They travelled to space stations circling planets, to planets they didn't know of, only choosing the name on an ad hoc basis. Into daylight, night time, early morning, late afternoon, midnight and midday until their sleep clocks were dizzy.

Finally, Jane inputted one last code, out of sight of any eyes or detection devices.

She opened the door and beckoned to Cameron. “Last one.” She said and he nodded, tired.

“Good. I could use a shower, a feed and a nice long nap.” He said and followed her into the darkness.

Jane stepped out of the doorway and into the Vault. The supply pack buzzed and popped in a most peculiar way and she stripped it off. Tiny tendrils of smoke arose from the surface and she set it down on a nearby table.

“Holy shit!” Cameron said from behind. “You weren't kidding about the size of this place!” She heard him take a sniff. “What's burning? It smells like...” She heard more pops and buzzing and turned. More tendrils of smoke rose from Cameron's gear.

“Treachery.”

“No, it smells more like micro tech frying.” He divested himself of his pack and looked at the smoking surface.

Jane took a seat at the desk and put her head in her hands. “Morecombe put tracers on our packs.”

“Morecombe? Faithful man servant Morecombe who's been with you since you were a child, Morecombe? Nah, it had to be someone else.”

Jane lifted her head. "Don't be dumb, Cameron, *of course* it was Morecombe. He packed the supplies, your pack was alone downstairs. Only mine is tracer free because it was with me at all times."

Cameron leaned on the desk next to her.

"And why would he do that?"

"Another dumbass question, Cam. Why else?" Jane looked up at him.

"Looks like everyone's after you."

Jane felt her face freeze. "Even you?"

"Me? No. This is all too much hard work and I don't think there's anything here in my field. Nope, I'm happy to trail along." He said with a straight face.

"Not the money?"

"Not even for the money. All I see here are piles and piles of files. Not one red cent, not one Euro." He sighed and drew Jane to her feet. "Honey, you are all I'll ever want or ever need. So whatever it is you're planning, I'm here right along beside you."

She saw the sincerity in his eyes. But could she truly trust him? A part of her said 'yes', because he'd never lied to her, not once. But another part, the more paranoid, said 'no', because of all he'd said about this being the biggest treasure in human history. And that voice, for now, was the loudest. She'd keep that to herself until later. And whatever that meant.

Jane brushed his cheek with her fingertips. "And I'm glad." She breathed a laugh. "I'd probably go crazy if I was down here by myself for too long."

He hugged her, then let her go. "So, what's the plan?"

"I think I need to check on something before we do anything else." She pulled out of his arms and went to the corridor. There, sitting atop the standard control panel, was another. More sophisticated than anything she'd ever seen. She looked down and saw the boot prints, scuffed and smudged. She followed the first set to the files she and Tim had borrowed. But another set, a single set went further, deeper into the archives.

Cold seeped through her veins. "Someone else has been here." She said and turned around, followed the trail back and into the registry area. "Here, this screen was used to find something. But how could they do that if there's no power?" She asked and looked at Cameron.

He shrugged. "Maybe they brought their own power source."

“This stuff is ancient. How would they know what type of power source to use? And where would they get such an antique?”

“We have no way of knowing that,” Cameron said. “But since you followed the boot prints, what were they looking at?”

“Come and see.” Jane invited and led him to the Bolingbroke files. “This row, these files.”

Cameron selected one and drew it off the shelf. “Paper feels funny, as if it’s got a coating on it.”

“Yeah,” Jane said and drew another file. “They’re in pretty good condition, too, for files that have been sequestered for fifteen hundred years.”

Cameron opened his file and sniffed. “Looks like this Bolingbroke was a judge of some sort. These are case files, dispositions of criminals.” He closed the file and returned it to the slot.

“This one, too. But why would someone be interested in such old cases?”

“No idea. As I previously mentioned, these files would only be of interest to historians. Bolingbroke’s, in particular, would be interesting to say, a legal historian, someone who wanted to know what justice was like back in the Dark Ages.”

“But today? There is no reason I can think of.” Jane said and put her file back.

Together, they returned to the registry area.

“Okay, what’s the plan now that we’re here?” Cameron asked.

“First, I guess, we need to set up shop, explore the area to see if there’s anything of use. A toilet, for example. Then we need to search the perimeter...”

“How very military of you,” Cameron murmured. “I find that very hot.”

“You would, but we need to establish ourselves before we get into a little... hmm... downtime.” Jane said, but her eyes promised much.

He touched a finger to her chin. “I’ll hold you to that.” Then he leaned in and kissed her.

\* \* \*

Cambria studied the list of Red Knight members in the various governments and felt a sense of déjà vu.

She needed to find one of the members, one of the weaker, unsure members. She figured she could start in Geneva since it had become a de facto ‘free’ state. Free as in there was no excuse for corruption in a government office. None.

Caught even once and it was 20 to life, no parole. Every politician knew it when they were sworn in.

Etienne Rousseau looked like a candidate for a bit of pressure. He was the Under Secretary for Finance, a once exceptionally lucrative position.

“Screen one b: Search Etienne Rousseau, Under Secretary for Finance. Authorised personal and government transactions.”

The information came up quickly and she studied it closely. Nothing untoward there. Yet. Nothing in his personal life was out of the ordinary. He was, from appearances, a law-abiding, hard-working Under Secretary who was married with four children in private schools. On his salary, they should be. Was he a greedy little beggar who wanted a nice nest egg?

His government transactions were transparent enough. It was his department that authorised the expenditure of other government departments.

“Screen one b: search Etienne Rousseau, Under Secretary for Finance. Personal and government transactions. Cross-reference global transactions.

“Hmm. Why would the government be playing the stock market? The business of the government is to govern, not to do business. I’m sure Nathan and I did something about that.” She shook her head as she tried to remember. Nothing came to her. “Okay, I’ll ask.”

Screen three was churning out e-communications. It didn’t look like it was going to stop anytime two. “Screen three: pause. Save to cube drive all information. Engage.” And off it went again.

\* \* \*

The receptionist at Parliament House, Geneva, smiled with empty politeness.

“May I help you?”

“Louisa Weir to see the Under Secretary for Finance.”

The receptionist checked her diary. “Of course, Ms Weir. Please follow the blue line. It will take you to Minister Rousseau’s office. Have a nice day.” And with that, she returned her focus to the screen.

Louisa looked down. At her feet were blue, grey, yellow and black lines. Yellow and black went to the right, blue and grey to the left.

Okay, then. Follow the blue line.

Head down, she walked across the atrium of the building and paused at the bronze statue she’d missed coming through the corridor. She tried not to giggle at



the heroic depiction of Nathan, dressed in his uniform in a staggered stance, holding a gun straight at the capitol dome as if to ensure the Parliament's compliance. Cambria faced the other direction, long Hunter coat swirling, a long Bowie knife held in each hand – one high and one low, as if protecting the Capitol Dome from all comers.

It was all rather dramatic, but the sculptor had captured the intent beautifully.

Nathan's expression was one of determination and, as she walked around the statue, her expression was one distant concentration as if she could see the enemy approaching.

"It's called 'Bastion'."

Cambria turned. He was tall, with dark hair greying at the temples and sky-blue eyes in a narrow face. He smiled pleasantly.

"Bastion?"

"Yes. General Caprossi is holding democracy to account for every action under an implicit threat of revolution if they fail in their charge. You'll note he's wearing a uniform which indicates faithfulness to the oaths of the military to defend the people. Thus, he is a bastion of democracy. Strong, powerful, able and willing to die for the cause."

"Interesting. And her?" Cambria couldn't help asking.

"She's unknown."

Cambria felt her eyebrows rise and his well-sculpted mouth smiled.

"Consensus is that she represents female power, gender equality, as she protects democracy from the enemy without. Caprossi protects from within, the woman from without. Gender equality in all things. Teamwork, as Caprossi cannot guard the democracy and defend democracy against those who would bring it down. She cannot defend democracy against those who would bring it down and guard it, too. Hence, both are Bastions."

"Seems overly dramatic and an overly complex description for a statue of two people holding weapons – one on the Capitol, one on the public."

He gave her another smile. "Hello, Ms Weir, I'm Minister Rousseau's administrative assistant; Andrew Phoenix, I've come to escort you."

She took his hand. It was warm and dry and strong. "Thank you, Mr Phoenix."

"If you'd come this way?"

Cambria walked beside him.

"I take it you're not a fan of the statue?" Phoenix asked.

"Meh. I'm sure the sculptor meant well, and it's certainly an astonishing piece of artwork, but... it's big and it's out there." And Nathan would have been *outrageously* embarrassed by it, she thought.

"It is, but it is also a monument to a remarkable man; he saved us all with his courage and determination, brought down a corrupt government and ruling system, brought us out of slavery. Because of him, we now have democracy. We have a choice in everything we do."

"True enough." She said. "You sound like an admirer." She glanced at him and saw the flush of embarrassment on his high cheekbones.

"I am. I did Political History at the University of Geneva. There's not much about the Second Dark Ages, but General Caprossi..."

He kept saying that and she couldn't bear it any more. "Caparossi." She said.

"Excuse me?"

"His name was General Nathan Raphael Caparossi, not Caprossi."

"That's not what the history books say."

"Then the history books are wrong because it was Caparossi."

He arched a brow. "I hope you have an impeccable source for that change, Ms Weir?"

"Mmm." She said. Damn it, she should know better! She'd been without Nathan for centuries and she still couldn't just let it go. "I do, but not one I can share." She said and wished she hadn't just said that."

"Intriguing, Ms Weir. However, we're here." He opened a white painted door and invited her to enter. He followed her into the smaller office.

Phoenix went straight ahead and lifted a hand to the dark wood office door. He paused, then turned. "Perhaps we could discuss your impeccable source over a cup of coffee following your meeting?"

Cambria's eyes widened with surprise. She tilted her head. He was an attractive man and she didn't have any current liaisons, so why not?

Honesty compelled her to admit Phoenix made her nervous in a way she hadn't felt since Nathan. And that worried her.

He was still waiting for her answer.

"I'd like that." She said and surprisingly, she meant it.

Phoenix knocked on the door and opened it. "Ms Louisa Weir."

Phoenix gave her a wink as she went by him into the Minister's Office. She was hard-pressed not to smile.

Minister Rousseau was younger than she expected, barely out of his twenties. He had sandy hair, blue eyes and the beginning of creases at the sides of his mouth, as if he smiled a lot.

He stood as she entered.

"Ms Weir, an honour." He came around the desk and took her hand, leaned over it and kissed the back.

"Minister." She said.

"Please, have a seat and tell me what the Ministry of Finance can do for an intergalactic businesswoman." He smiled expansively.

Cambria wondered whether he was going to try a charm offensive on her. It certainly looked like it and she could see right through him. Although, she could understand how he got voted in, charming, handsome, young, all the traits certain elements of the electorate loved. All she was concerned with, was whether he was malleable.

"A secret isn't a secret if more than one person knows, Mr Rousseau." Cambria said and his smile slipped into a frown.

"I'm not sure I understand you, Ms Weir."

"I'm hoping you can point out to me, the legislation that allows a Minister of the government to play the stock market." She said and his skin paled, even as his smile returned, albeit a more nervous smile.

"Legislation?"

"Uh-huh." She sat up straighter, crossed her legs. "You see, as a businesswoman, I'm most interested in stock markets; both here and... elsewhere. I am, after all, in the business of making money."

"And you do it very well," he replied obsequiously.

"Thank you, Minister." She tilted her head. "However, while doing some research, I came across some interesting: Government transactions on stock markets."

"We don't gamble with the taxpayers' money, Ms Weir, that would be illegal."

"And yet..."

Rousseau rose from his seat. "No, Ms Weir, this government, this Ministry, me, do not play the stock market."

“Sit down, Minister. Your name is listed as a member of Red Knights International and in your name, Red Knight International is listed on the stock exchange. Worse, your government identification number has been used to make transactions. Since only you know that number, it can only be you making those transactions. The money used has come from the Exchequer, transferred via several official channels as budgetary measures for some departments. And I know this, because I traced the codified amounts.”

Rousseau slowly wilted into his chair but did not speak.

“Those amounts,” Cambria continued, “cannot be broken down into component parts until it reaches its final destination. Which it does, but after it’s gone through a bit of laundering. Red Knights International keeps the interest which, given the amounts of money involved, is quite substantial.” Cambria finished.

The smiling blue eyes hardened and he leaned forward, shaking hands placed flat on the desk surface.

“If you had proof of that, you would be talking to the constabulary, not me. Ergo, you are on a fishing expedition. Should this ever come to the media, I will sue you for every Euro you have.” Rousseau said and she smiled.

“Tsk, tsk, Minister Rousseau. Of *course* I have proof. It’s actually out there for anyone with an interest in such things. You have not hidden this as well as you think.”

Rousseau picked up a pen and made a notation. No doubt reminding himself to change the way the transactions were done, but it was already too late, she had the goods on him and several other representatives. When her comp finished with the e-communications, she’d probably have it all.

“You have something else in mind, then. What do you want?”

“Explain the Red Knights Brigade to me.” She asked and he suddenly looked like he was going to faint.

“I can tell you nothing.” Rousseau said, once he’d regained his composure. “There is no such thing.”

“Toe-ing the party line. That’s good. Since they’ve been around for some centuries, they have to be exceptionally nasty to stay out of the public’s eye and away from the eyes of law enforcement. Interesting.” She murmured and then looked at the Minister, speculation in her eyes. Could it be he genuinely did not

know? The identification number of the Minister of Finance had been used to transfer millions, sometimes billions of dollars to departments within the government.

So who knew the number? The Minister, the *receiving* Chief Financial Officers and... the person who issued the number. And when it came to ministerial numbers, that person would have to be high up in the Government side of the Global Network.

Rousseau wasn't blameless in this and she wasn't letting him off the hook.

Instead, she rose. "Good day, Minister Rousseau, I guess I'll be seeing you in the media, probably in handcuffs."

He looked at her with a haughty expression. "You know *nothing*. You do not threaten me, Ms Weir, you have no power here."

She flicked him a smile. "Don't be too sure about that Minister Rousseau. I will find the Red Knight Brigade and, if necessary, destroy them."

His expression didn't change as she went to the door and out.

Phoenix looked up from his desk. "That was a short meeting."

"Minister Rousseau and I have reached an understanding." Cambria replied.

"Ah, good then. Ready for that coffee?" He stood and reached for his pale grey suit jacket.

Cambria paused, suddenly suspicious, and then she let it go. It wasn't as if she wasn't without resources should he not be as nice as she thought. And it might prove an opportunity to gather some intelligence.

"Yes, I am." She said with a smile.

## **Chapter Twenty-Nine**

“There’s no other way out,” Cameron reported. “At least, not down that way, and let me tell you it is a long, long way to go before you hit a brick wall.” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “It is simply staggering how large this place is.”

Jane looked up from the registry book she’d been reading and took in his dishevelled appearance. “It is the repository of the World Council, Cam, the Vault. Here, every decision of every Councillor that was ever made is stored. There are drafts, first and last drafts, that is. There are files on supplies to every collective farm in the world, export and import – like licences to do so and what and when and how much and who. Financial transactions, government business.” She tilted her head. “Anything you can think of in regards to a totalitarian government, it’s here.” She lifted her shoulders in a shrug.

“I can’t imagine,” Cameron said and turned back to the shelved cavern. “Some group actually had to file all that. I cannot imagine what would be in here.”

“That’s the beauty of the registry: we get to find the good, the bad and the very ugly.”

Cameron frowned at her. “The bad? The ugly? Why would they file stuff like that?”

“After reading this,” Jane lifted the registry book, “I don’t think they, meaning the Councillors, knew. The Councillors had comps, to write reports, letters, recommendations, whatever it is they did, they did it on their comps. But the system automatically downloaded everything, printed it out and submitted it for filing. The Archivists’ staffs sorted into categories registered and sent the files to the shelves.” She stroked the book reverently. “Can you imagine the sheer volume of work that would involve?”

“Just listening to you explain it makes me shudder.”

“It’s quite the repository, I don’t know where to start.” Jane sighed and closed the book.

“Well, why don’t you start where you’ve already started?”

“Huh?”

“Jane, you started this journey hunting for Cambria Petersen, to establish once and for all that she existed. You’ve done that, so what did you plan to do next?” Cameron asked.

“Um..., I was going to write a book.”

“And has that ambition changed?” He asked.

“No-o, but... We still have my mother to deal with.” Jane said with a frown.  
“Find the information she wants, give it to her, and maybe she’ll leave us alone.”

“Do you really think that?”

Jane sighed. “No. There would always be something more she wants. If we give in to her, give in to this Red Knights Brigade, we’ll never be free of them.” She looked around at the darkened room. “I don’t want them to control this, Cameron, it’s too big to be under one person, or groups, control. There’s too much here, too much that could be used against others. I think my mother has the morals of an alley cat; she’d destroy anything that has no interest to her.”

“Yet, you plan to control it all.”

Jane glared at him and he lifted his hands. “I’m only playing Devil’s Advocate so you do a bit of critical thinking.

“I don’t know whom to trust, Cam. How do I know the University won’t quarantine some of this information? Or a Museum? How do I know people won’t steal the stuff that interests them?”

“Sometimes, it sucks to be you. Especially when there’s a simple answer.”

Jane raised her eyebrows.

Now it was Cameron’s turn to sigh, a long, must-I-think-of-everything sigh.  
“You come from one of the world’s premier business families and you can’t think of anything else to do other than bitch and moan about your good fortune?”

Jane pouted at him.

“Start your own company, Jane. Hire whomever you need to do the work. Get one of your father’s security companies to vet the applicants. You’ve already applied for the Patent. Once that comes through, you need to have your company already set up.”

Jane paused in thought. “I suspect I’ll have to negotiate with the government on some of the stuff here.” Her eyes sought out the shelves and shelves of files.  
“There must be something of interest to them.”

“After fifteen hundred years? I would say they’ll be as interested as the rest of the population to find out what really went on in the Second Dark Ages. All the world has is speculation and a few written histories. Here, we have unimpeachable primary sources.”

Jane narrowed her eyes. “We need the financial section. They would have banking information, wouldn’t they?”

Hours later, Jane yawned and then rubbed her eyes. The problem with this place was that there was no window, no indication of how light or dark it was outside. She checked her wrist unit. Three twenty a.m.

She looked around for Cameron and found him curled up on a sleeping mat, an inflatable pillow under his head and a micron thin thermal blanket over his relaxed body.

She really should get some rest, too, they would have a long day tomorrow.

Jane left the book open and a ruler across where she’d stopped reading. She’d resume tomorrow. For now, she was tired and she had a perfectly good man’s arms to sleep in.

She looked around at the darkness. Maybe tomorrow, she’d see if Cameron could give them some more permanent light.

\* \* \*

Cambria found she’d enjoyed Phoenix’s company. They’d discussed the history of the statue, but this time, she was more circumspect in her criticisms. She did not reveal her source – he wouldn’t believe it was her anyway, and she certainly wasn’t showing him.

She’d gently tried to pump him for information, and he’d done the same. At the end of the second cup of coffee, they’d called a truce.

“A temporary one.” Phoenix bowed his head.

“Agreed,” Cambria said and picked up her bag. “Thank you for coffee, Andrew, and the conversation.”

“Dinner?” He asked hopefully and then his face fell. “Damn, sorry, I’ll have to check my diary and the Minister’s. Can I call you instead?”

Cambria lifted a shoulder, the feeling of regret rising. “I don’t think so, Andrew, I’m off-world a lot on business and I never know when I’m going to be back here.”

“There must be some way...” He looked at her. “I’ll give you my number, you give me yours and when you’re in town, call me. I’ll get free.”

Cambria looked at him. He seemed almost frantic to keep in touch. But... he would be an excellent source within the government if she could cultivate him



properly. All at once, she was ashamed at her mercenary attitude. Why couldn't she just enjoy the company of a single man? Oh, wait.

"You *are* single, aren't you?"

Red tinged his cheeks. "I hadn't even thought..., but yes, I'm single. Only a madwoman would take on a man who worked the insane hours I do..." The blush deepened as he realised what he said. "I, er... I mean..."

Cambria laughed. "Yes, I do know what you mean. And yes, I'm single, too." Sadness touched her smile and he took note.

"Now." He said softly.

"Now." She agreed. They stood there at the table, staring at each other, a whole lot of unspoken conversation going on. Then she looked away, turned around and walked away.

She was already out of the building before she remembered she hadn't given him her number. Cambria almost turned around, but didn't; she knew where he worked. And, in a couple of hours, she'd know everything else about him, too.

First, she needed to talk to the head of the security for Parliament. She suspected that was going to be an interesting conversation, especially if she suspected him or her of theft and fraud.

She didn't want any more coffee, so she strolled over to the park and sat on a bench in the autumnal sunshine.

The wrist unit booted up and she hooked into the public access network, looked up Security at Parliament House.

She was so engrossed in her search, she was barely aware when someone sat next to her.

"Hello, Louisa." A familiar voice said from beside her.

"Amir." She acknowledged and continued her search. Ah, that's the one.

A prick against her skin made her flinch.

"There's someone who wants to talk to you."

"Tell them to make an appointment." She said without looking up.

"I'm making one now," Amir said and pressed lightly on the blade. If he dug it in any further, he'd really draw blood. Not that she was worried.

"Amir, your problem is that you think you are the baddest badass on the block." She shut down the wrist unit and looked at him. "You are not."

He grinned at her. "I'm the one with the knife."

“So?”

“So, I’m in charge. Let’s go.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I will hurt you until you do as I say.”

Cambria shifted away from the blade. She felt the pull of skin as her body tried to heal around the tip.

“Okay, who wants to see me so badly, they’d send a thug to invite me?”

Amir’s grin broadened. “That would be telling.”

“Yes, it would.”

Cambria stood, Amir close to her. “Let’s go.” He snarled, more confident.

As quick as a striking snake, Cambria’s hand gripped his knife wrist and turned it outward. He had to turn with her and just as quickly, she had his knife and his wrist in a painful lock. He went to his knees.

“Now, see how easy that was? You need to spend more time thinking, rather than acting like an asshole. The first lesson, never get too close to your intended victim. Some people, like me, don’t do victim. The second lesson, never assume that because you are armed, and your intended is not, that your target is helpless.” She released him.

Amir slumped to the ground, holding his wrist.

She hadn’t hurt him physically, but she’d certainly humiliated him and she saw the promise of retribution in his eyes. Again.

“The third lesson, Amir, never telegraph your emotional state. People might want to take you on – and they’ll win.” She looked down at him. “You want to try for a piece of me? Why don’t you try it?”

Amir growled, tensed his muscles, ready to attack her.

Cambria narrowed her gaze as she stared down at him.

“Your time will come, bitch, and I will be there to do it.” He slowly got to his feet.

“The tragedy of this situation, Amir, is that I’m happy to accompany you to whoever wishes to speak with me. All you needed to do was ask.” She studied the blade. Poorly made and ill-balanced. “Piece of shit, this, Amir. Do yourself a favour and buy a proper blade.”

She dropped the blade onto the ground. Amir quickly scooped it up.

“Better put it away, Amir, don’t want to attract the attention of the police.”

His lip curled, but he sheathed the blade.

“Okay, then, lead on, Amir, let’s go meet your boss.”

Amir led the way across the park, to another administration building. He glanced behind him to make sure she was still following. Cambria gave him a bright smile and he scowled.

Amir guided her through the security bollards, up the grav tube to the top floor of the eight-storey building. The building dated back to pre-Second Dark Age, according to the stonework out the front that branded the building, Anno Domino 1952.

Inside the building, all was as high tech as it could get, but then, once she and Nathan and hundreds, thousands of others had freed the world from the domination of the World Council, once they’d retrieved the trillions of dollars stolen, the world had suddenly surged forward in economy, in innovation, in a lot of other areas, too.

As she shot up the grav tube, Cambria thought that, on the whole, he would have been pleased with the outcome.

Fifteen hundred years after his death, democracy still ruled. And that was something to be satisfied about.

Amir led her down a brightly lit hallway to a single, unadorned door. He knocked once and then opened it.

He looked back at her. “In.” He commanded.

Cambria smiled at him. “Such a gentleman.” She said and slid by him as he frowned.

Amir was the type of man for whom brutality and violence meant respect and power; he didn’t know how to deal with politeness or kindness.

*Must have had a sad childhood*, she thought.

A lean man rose from behind a utilitarian desk. He had salt and pepper brown hair, mild hazel eyes and mouth that had smile lines on either side. Cambria decided he looked benign, but this man wasn’t helpless, nor was he benign. You didn’t get to be head of Parliamentary Security by being a milquetoast, nor by being as friendly as he was trying to be. No, you stepped on people, found out where the bodies were buried and used information ruthlessly.

“Ms Weir, welcome to the inner sanctum.” He gave a small laugh and spread his arms to encompass the view outside his windows. “Or should I say, eyrie?”

Cambria frowned. "You should probably say why you had that thug accost me in the street with a knife." She pulled her jacket around. "Look what he did!" She wriggled a finger through the hole of the dark blue material.

"I'll see he pays for repairs. In fact..."

"Repairs? *Repairs?* This, my good man, is *ruined*. You don't *repair* an Armanucci, you throw it out!"

He winced at her tone, but his eyes, oh, yes, in those eyes lurked a predator. He thought he had her under his total control. Time to find out more.

He tilted his head. "I'll see to it that it is replaced."

Cambria rolled her eyes.

"I am the Head of Parliamentary Security, Henrik Fredericksson." He held out his hand.

"A Nord?" Cambria immediately had a flashback to the near destruction of the Hunter facility by a group of homicidal and suicidal Nords. They'd hidden high explosives within their bodies, so even when she and Nathan killed them, they were a ticking time bomb that eventually went off.

That had been a painful and stressful experience for her.

"I am from the North, but I don't know this term 'Nord'." He said and lowered his hand.

"Sorry, Mr Fredericksson, the flashbacks can be terrible." She held out her hand and he took it. He had a firm, confident grip.

"Please, be seated Ms Weir and we'll get this matter sorted out."

Cambria took a seat to the left, the right one remained empty. She felt material mould to her form. Fredericksson sat behind the near-empty desk. It had one comp screen and stylus; nothing more. No pen, no paper, or stapler, or anything personal. This man was all business.

Fredericksson powered up his wrist unit and a square screen appeared.

"You are quite a remarkable businesswoman, Ms Weir. Extensive interests in real estate, development, hotels; mostly off-world. Yes, quite the portfolio for one so young."

He gave her a fake admiring smile.

"Not so young anymore." She replied.

"Then you must have one hell of a beautician, Ms Weir." He said, applying the charm; which was wasted on her. If only he knew it.

“Yes,” she said smugly, “I do.”

“So, when Monsieur Rousseau rings me and demands to know what the hell is going on, well, I have to take a personal interest. Allegations of corruption against a sitting Member of Parliament is a very serious accusation, Ms Weir.” He affected a concerned expression.

“Indeed, it is.” Cambria acknowledged.

“And so, I must demand proof before I take any further action. In fact, I must demand all information you have so I can further investigate your accusation.” Concern shifted into intimidation. “Otherwise, the perpetrators may go free and you will be charged with several offences, including defamation of Member of Parliament, falsely reporting a crime, fraud, intimidation, and those are the ones I can think of off the top of my head.” His expression turned regretful.

Cambria was fascinated by the sudden shift of expressions to match the seriousness of his tone, as if he could command an expression at the drop of a hat. He would have made one hell of an actor.

She gave him a brief smile. “Only if I’d filed an official report. Which I haven’t.”

“Your conversation was recorded, as are all appointments with members.”

“Hmm, I’d like to suggest hearsay, and that audio files can be manipulated, but you’d probably argue... what?” His eyes flickered and she snorted a delicate laugh. “You’d argue that none of the members *knew* they were being recorded. Not very sporting or trusting of you.”

“The democracy must be maintained, Ms Weir. We can’t have Members doing private or illegal business out of their offices. The business of Parliament is sacrosanct. Surely, you must understand that?” His eyebrows rose in question, as if she skirted the edge of the law with her business dealings.

“It must, yes, Mr Fredericksson, but Members of Parliament already know the penalty for corruption. It would be a stupid politician indeed who thought he or she could get away with corrupt deals while serving the people.” And where had she heard *that* argument before? “Indeed, I must wonder at the legality of such recording devices that infringe on a Parliamentarian’s right to privacy when dealing with sensitive matters.

His smile said he was enjoying this challenge to his authority.

“Oh, it’s legal, Ms Weir, and the legislation goes back more than a thousand years.” He rubbed a finger against his temple. “It’s the kind of law that people forget about, even though it was first introduced to guarantee there would be no more corruption while in office. If you care to look, there are many other laws that lie forgotten but are still in force today. This is simply one of them.”

“But is it moral, Mr Fredericksson?”

“Now that,” he inclined his head, acknowledged her charge, “is a completely different question. However, I’m not in the business of dealing with morals, only the upholding of the law and the security of the House and all who work there. The information, if you please?”

“You’ve not heard the recording yourself.” She said and he frowned.

“Just the highlights.” He admitted.

“Then you missed me telling Monsieur Rousseau that the information was freely available on the Global Network to anyone who cared to look close enough. All anyone need do is point to it and the rest of the information and... bad things can happen.”

He settled back in his seat, speculation in his eyes. It was the first genuine emotion and expression she’d seen out of him.

“The Global Network.”

Cambria nodded. “Yes, Mr Fredericksson. Every transaction under Monsieur Rousseau’s identification number, the route the money took before ending up in the budgetary accounts of the departments it was destined for. The interest earned, of course, went elsewhere. To Red Knights International.”

Fredericksson looked like he’d tasted an unripened lemon. “Red Knights International.”

“There are many holding companies, of course, Jack Trade Group, Deckard’s Propriety Limited, Ten Ten Incorporated, Black Fiduciary, Queen Brothers Investment, Flushings Incorporated... There are more, too, but they are all involved in laundering the money.” Cambria shrugged. “As I said, it’s all there if you know where to look.”

“And you do.” He said. Cambria nodded. “What were you planning to do with the information?” He asked and she saw he was genuinely interested.

“I’m not sure, truthfully.” Cambria frowned. “The question, I suppose, is whether those companies actively knew what the others were doing. Did they

know where the money came from? If not, are they innocent victims of a vast money-making scheme?"

Fredericksson slowly nodded his head.

"But I don't see it. That number cannot be changed in any of the transactions. They might not have known to whom the number belonged, but there are ways to find out. The first four numbers, for example, are a giveaway it's government. The second four indicate which department. The *nine* numbers are the identification of the source authority. The last four digits are the source code. They are the only numbers that change. And they only change at the original department – which as we know, is the Finance Department – so they can direct the funds to the requesting department." She gave him a look. "Very simple and very obvious."

"It is now you point it out to me."

"You're kidding, right? It's right there, on the Network!" Cambria protested. "Surely, as head of Security, you'd be looking at... ah." Cambria paused. "The old, there's so much information out there on the Network, no one will notice, followed by the, 'even if someone does find out, what can they do?' And finally, the, 'I'm head of security, I'll deal with them.' Does that about cover it?"

Fredericksson paused as if in thought. "Yes, I think that does cover it."

"Has anyone else discovered this?"

He shook his head. "Nope. You are the first and we've been at it for a long, long time." He smiled like a shark. "So, you see, the investment plan works quite nicely."

"Who are the Red Knights? And what does Red Knights International do?" Cambria asked.

"I should tell you... why?"

"Because you are going to kill me, and I'd really, really like to know."

Fredericksson tilted his head. "You're not afraid."

"No."

"You think there is a way out of this." His gaze lifted to the door behind her as it opened. Cambria didn't turn.

"There is always a way out of any situation; one way or another."

"Henrik, darling, I didn't know you were with anyone. I'll come back later." The feminine voice gushed.

“No, I think you’ll want to hear this.” He rose from his seat and performed the unexpected introductions. “Louisa Weir,” Cambria turned around in her seat to face the woman, “Alberta Fortescue Petersen, my real boss.”



### **Chapter Thirty**

Jane awoke with Cameron's arms wrapped around her. She enjoyed the feeling of warmth and safety. His breath huffed against the back of her neck.

In the darkness, she kept her eyes closed and wondered what had roused her. The silence was all-encompassing as was the lack of light, but something had roused her and it wasn't Cam.

His breathing changed, as if he too, felt or heard something out of the ordinary.

"You awake?" He whispered and she nodded. Cameron eased his arms from around her, and she fell onto her back. His mouth found hers in the darkness and she revelled in the taste of him. Then he lifted his head. "I can't see a damned thing."

She obligingly turned on the lamp on her wrist unit blinding him.

He flinched. "Well, that sucked the life out of the moment."

"Something's wrong," Jane said with certainty.

"Wrong?"

"Yeah." She rolled away from him and got to her feet. Behind her, Cameron sighed and got to his feet, too.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"I don't know. It's too quiet?"

"It's always quiet down here," Cam responded and turned on a camp light. Then he turned on others so the area was lit up.

Jane turned off her wrist unit's lamp. "Maybe you should walk the perimeter?"

"Maybe you've slightly gone off the deep end. The 'perimeter' as you call it, is enormous!"

Jane sighed in frustration. She had the feeling something was wrong, was positive something woke her up. Her gaze drifted around the darkness to the silent shelves, the empty desks, back across the shelves to the metal door... The light. It was red.

"Cameron." She said quietly, yet with an urgency he couldn't miss. Jane pointed to the red glaring light of the corridor in transit.

His jaw dropped. "No. No one knows about this place Jane, you *said!*"

"I know. But... look at it. It's red. Someone's coming, Cam." And then curiously, the light went green for available.

Jane looked at Cameron, and he at her. Then, by silent agreement, they went to the door and studied the device atop the usual alpha-numeric keypad. Neither could read the alien language.

“I don’t know about you, Cam, but anyone with the technology to divert a corridor transit scares me.”

“Yeah, and we know they’ve been looking at files. Do we want to find out who and the why and the what?”

“No.” Jane shook her head and nearly touched a finger to the alien language. She thought better of it – it might be booby-trapped. “I’m more concerned about someone knowing what the address is.”

“And now they don’t,” Cam said and brushed a hand down the steel door.

“Huh? Why not?” Jane asked. “They can always try again.”

Cameron grinned in the dim light. “And when they do, as long as this is connected, they’ll end up where ever they’ve ended up. Every time they punch this address, they’ll be diverted.” He lifted his shoulders. “If nothing else, we should try and find out if your claim has been granted in the first place and in the second, find out who’s trying to jump your claim.”

Jane turned away and fired up her wrist unit. She accessed her mail first, searching for the notification from the Archaeological Patents Committee. Since she’d been away for a while, it took time to find.

She grinned at Cam. “Patent is granted. Congratulations to me!”

Cameron clicked his fingers. “Morecombe.” He said.

“Ah. Yes. I’d forgotten. He’s obviously hacked Dad’s system.” Jane frowned. “But he won’t be able to get any money, not like Walker tried. Dad has an extra special security system that he upgraded. Only he knows the key. And it happens to be alpha-numeric-special keys code. Morecombe will never crack it.”

“He cracked something.”

Jane squinted at the lock, then slapped her forehead. “The access panel. Dumbass me. The panel stores all addresses for three hundred and sixty-five days before purging the memory. Jeez, Cameron, if anyone figures that out...”

“They’ll be sent to where ever this access panel sends them to. Your secret is safe.” He wrapped his arms around her and she snuggled into him. “Your secret is safe.”

\* \* \*

Cambria rose and turned, held out her hand to Alberta, a smile on her face. Instead, she got a mouthful of hard knuckles.

Ears ringing and blood dripping from her busted lip, Cambria felt anger rise at the unexpected attack. She got to hands and knees.

“Alberta!” Fredericksson shouted, appalled. “What are you doing?”

“You won’t get away with this, Jane.” Alberta snarled and Cambria looked up at her, sat back on her heels, her mouth stinging as the sensitive skin drew together.

“Alberta, this *isn’t* Jane. What were you thinking?”

“Get up. I didn’t hit you that hard.” Alberta said in a more moderate tone.

Jeez, if that wasn’t hard, Cambria hated to think what her definition of hard was. Still, it gave her an out. She couldn’t very heal in front of these two.

Cambria used the edge of the desk to get up, albeit slowly. No one had smacked her for a good long while and it came as a shock to her system.

“See? Barely any blood at all.”

Alberta stepped forward with a lace-trimmed handkerchief, intending to dab the blood away. Cambria slapped at her hand and backed away. “Don’t touch me, you lunatic!”

Alberta pouted, then eyed Cambria carefully. “You are the spitting image of my daughter.” She said. “A little older, a few more lines, but the very mirror image.”

“And you assault your child as a way of... what? Saying good morning or good afternoon? Not a very healthy relationship.”

“Discipline.” Alberta sniffed. “Children must be controlled or chaos ensues. And nobody wants that.”

“Of course not. Where would we be without a child’s imagination or energy or unquestioning love?” Cambria said and Alberta frowned.

“In a perfectly ordered universe with perfectly orderly children who know their exact place in the world, with their lives mapped out for their total happiness,” Alberta said with complete honesty.

Cambria looked at Fredericksson. He shrugged.

“Now, then, Henrik, what’s this all about?” Alberta asked and sat on the edge of the right seat. Cambria did not want to get any closer to this woman, so she kept her distance.

Henrik resumed his seat behind the desk.

“Ms Weir was just explaining to me, how she tracked the monetary transfers from Monsieur Rousseau to the Red Knights International company.” He said and sat back so he could see both women.

“Oh. I see. Well, that’s disappointing. I suppose we’ll have to stop, find another avenue.” Alberta nibbled at the end of her perfectly manicured finger. She dropped her hand into her lap. “We could always take the children, force Jane to comply. But,” her expression took on uncertainty, “I did promise her a week.”

“You did.” Henrik agreed carefully, watching her.

“However, what we do is more important than a silly promise, isn’t it?” Alberta raised her eyebrows.

“One might say so.” Henrik again agreed. He had the look of a man who had to tread carefully for fear of setting off a ticking time-bomb.

“And we do have a schedule to keep. I couldn’t possibly put that on hold because of one recalcitrant child with delusions of grandeur.”

“Discipline.” Henrik remarked. “A... teaching moment?”

Alberta beamed at him. “You’re right, of course. It’s a mother’s duty to teach her children life’s lessons, and it’s my duty to teach my children that, should they go against me, their decisions have consequences. I’m only doing what’s best for them.” Alberta said, justifying her argument out loud.

“Indeed, a mother’s love is the most important thing in the world.”

Cambria agreed, but some mothers, like this nut job, needed to stay far, far away from their children. She’d already put two and two together that this crazy person was her Jane’s parent; it remained to be seen what she did about it. But that was for later. Cambria was curious as to what Alberta was going to do next. She still didn’t know what the Red Knights actually did, or what they were going to do.

“It is, Henrik, I’m glad you understand.” Alberta gave him a smile that was more reserved for a lover than a business colleague, Cambria thought. But then Henrik returned the look and she knew Alberta didn’t consider her marriage vows any impediment to her ambitions and pleasures.

“Time to go home, I think.” Alberta murmured and then glanced at Cambria. “Bring her.” And with that, she rose and swept out of the office.

“She’s crazy.” Cambria said and Henrik nodded.

“But she has unstoppable drive and ruthless ambition; everything that’s needed in this current environment.” He stepped around the desk. “And, unfortunately, she inherited the position.”

“Are you going to explain?” Cambria asked.

Henrik shook his head. “It’s not for me to explain, and she’d kill me as soon as look at me if I said a word. That’s the ruthlessness. No, she’ll tell you when she’s good and ready.”

“To gloat. To let me know, to let others know just how clever she is.” Cambria put in. Another megalomaniac on the loose, just... dandy.

“Am I going to have to restrain you, Ms Weir?”

“No. I’ve faced down worse and survived; this will be no different.”

Henrik looked confused. “You must have led a most interesting life, Ms Weir, but surely you know Alberta will kill you or have you killed now that you know.”

“She’ll try, but I guarantee she’ll fail.”

“Should I get Amir to search you for weapons?”

Cambria held out her arms. “Feel free to pat me down.”

Henrik gave her a smile. “Oh, no, Ms Weir. If there’s one thing I’ve learned being around Alberta it’s that there is nothing more unpredictable than a female. I’d prefer to stand over here while you take your clothes off.”

\* \* \*

Jane’s communicator chimed and she drew out of Cameron’s arms.

She checked the code on her wrist unit. “It’s Dad.” She said and answered the call.

The screen bloomed above the unit, but instead of her father, she found herself looking into the cool beauty of her mother. A cold chill swept through her veins.

“There you are, sweetie.” Her mother smiled, but there was no warmth in her; Jane wondered if her mother had ever shown her warmth.

“It’s time you came home, Jane.”

Jane opened her mouth to protest, but her mother waved off her impending reply.

“I know, I know, I gave you a week, but things change, darling. A life lesson you should learn now rather than later. And here’s another lesson.” Her eyes sparkled with excitement.

The screen zoomed out and Jane sucked in a short breath. Behind her, Cameron cursed quietly.

Alberta had rounded up all her siblings and her father. They kneeled in a line at the centre of the equestrian enclosure, hands behind their backs, gagged. But there was someone else, too, at the end of the line. The woman from Ragnarok, who'd saved them from those two thugs who wanted the address to the Vault.

What was *she* doing here?

"This is Louisa Weir. She found out about our money-making scheme and so joins this happy band."

Jane swallowed hard. She meant to kill them all, whether she got the code or not. But turning up there would ensure all of them would die, including the unfortunate Louisa Weir. If she didn't, they died. What did she do? What did she *do*?

"It's not just the fate of our family that you hold in your hands now, Jane, but that of a perfect stranger, too. I wonder how you'll choose? Shall I kill her first, to show you I am absolutely serious?"

Alberta turned away from the screen. One of her people – and Jane saw it was Brad, the probably killer of her boyfriend Tim – dragged the woman to her feet.

"Her resemblance to you is remarkable, I have to say," Alberta said. "An amazing confluence of genes, I suppose; but then it is said everyone has a doppelganger. What do you think?"

"Mother... please..." Jane began.

"Quite right, Jane, one of you is enough," Alberta said and lifted her chin.

Brad reached into his jacket and pulled out a pistol. He waved it in front of Louisa's eyes.

Jane recoiled in horror as the man grinned, placed the barrel against Louisa's spine and pulled the trigger.

Blood exploded out towards the screen and the bullet whined as it shot over Alberta.

Courtney, kneeling beside Louisa, fainted. Jane's brothers turned away, but her father stared straight ahead at Jane, twitching his head from side to side.

Silence descended and Jane stared at the body lying face down on the hay floor.

"Get rid of that," Alberta ordered.

Brad holstered his weapon and grabbed one arm. Morecombe appeared, his face bruised and bloodied. He grabbed the other arm and the pair dragged Louisa's limp form out of sight.

Alberta turned back to the screen. She lifted a hand and wiped a smear of blood off her cheek. She studied the stain on her fingers for a moment, then dropped her hand.

"Now there's only you, Jane, no doppelganger. You should thank me for that."

"She should call the cops on you, you sick fuck!" Cameron said from over Jane's shoulder.

The head of temper stained Alberta's cheeks. "You mind your manners, young man, I'll not have such language used in my presence."

"You are one crazy, psychotic little motherfucker, Bertie, and I'm gonna make it my mission to see you locked up for the rest of your miserable life." He said.

Alberta drew herself up. "Since we have not been formally introduced, you have no call to use anything other than Mrs Petersen."

"Yeah, Bertie the batshit crazy ballbuster? What you gonna do about it?"

Alberta narrowed her gaze. "Jane, you need to shut that young man's mouth before I shut one of your brother's."

Jane drew a shaky breath. She'd never seen anyone so brutally murdered before. "He... we're under a lot of stress here, mother, we've never... never seen..." She lifted her other hand and wiped the tears from her cheeks.

Alberta's face when from fury to cold calculation in an instant. "Then it's about time you grew up. There's going to be a lot more of that kind of thing before I finally get what's mine."

"Your's?" Jane sniffed and wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "What was taken from you?"

"My heritage, my inheritance, my history!" Alberta snarled. "And I'm going to take it back."

"It? What's it?" Jane was genuinely confused. Her father had given Alberta everything. So had her parents. She had wanted for nothing, not money, not travel or jewels or real estate or fast cars, nothing. Anything she wanted, all she had to do was ask.

"Everything, Jane. Everything!"

Jane must have looked puzzled. Alberta gave an aggrieved sigh. “You really are a stupid girl. Has all that time at University taught you nothing? All that research of the Second Dark Age? The book I left you, didn’t you *read* it? I told you it had it all.”

“I have it with me.” Jane said, but didn’t look around to where she’d dropped it on the desk. She’d planned to read it... “I just got... distracted.”

“Well,” Alberta allowed, “I do understand sleeping with the help, but do focus on the issue at hand.” Her eyes dropped a little. “You have two hours, Jane, dear. And then, I’ll expect you here. You’ll understand by then.” Her brows drew down. “Two hours, Jane, and then I’ll start on... eeny, meeny, miney... mo. Courtney.” She crinkled her nose, that once upon a time was cute, “Brad likes her. Maybe she’ll like him, too.”

She shut off the communications and left Jane looking at empty air.

Her legs wobbled, but Cameron was there to catch her and lower her to the ground.

“What are we going to do?” She whispered and couldn’t stop the flow of tears.

\* \* \*

*Ah, crap.* Cambria groaned.

*The female returns,* a familiar voice said.

*I don’t have time for this, I gotta save my family,* Cambria thought.

*Family? What is this family?* The voice said and suddenly, fifteen hundred years of memories flowed through her mind. The memories paused here and there, including Nathan’s death and own her self-destructive pursuit of death. It no longer hurt as much as it used to and she could look at those times with distance. The images lingered on her children, their children and their children, all the way to the current crop of descendants; and they were legion.

*You have many... ah...*

*Offspring, children, descendants, take your pick.*

The images ran slower through Jane’s family and where they were now.

*Why does their maternal producer treat them thus?*

*Because she’s mentally deficient.* Cambria thought sarcastically.

*We do not know this term, we must consult!*



Cambria would have rolled her eyes, if she'd had them. Instead, she found herself back in her ruined body, arching as the painful process of resurrection began.

When it was over, she breathed out her entire list of swear words. She'd forgotten how god-awful the pain was, but she remembered now. Remembered why she no longer took suicidal risks.

She slowly opened her eyes and saw she was in one of the horse's stalls – an empty one. "Fuck." She finally said and sat up. She was a long way from home, unarmed. And she still didn't know what the fuck was going on!

Cambria looked down. The front of her shirt had a bloody, ragged hole through it, but the skin beneath was smooth and her heart beat once more.

She had to find a way to save the Petersen's from their crazy mother. If Jane returned, she'd die, too, and Cambria wouldn't, couldn't, allow that. So, how did she save them and Jane, and stop whatever conspiracy Alberta was trying to implement?

She ran a shaking hand through her hair.

First, arm herself. Did she have time? Second, stop Jane from coming back – she had to know her mother would kill them all once she did. Third, find out what Alberta was planning and stop it. Fourth – or maybe further up the list – kill the miserable prick who shot her in the back.

As a to-do list, it wasn't bad. She had to get back to Ragnarok and get some weapons. Then stop Jane, the thugs and Alberta.

She slowly got to her feet and stood at the door to the stall. Tilting her head, she listened hard. Nothing, so she changed her vision and sought out the heat signatures around her. There were the horses in their stalls and she looked further down the alleyway to the arena. There. She pinpointed the Petersens, Alberta pacing up and down, gun in hand. A dozen guards, the big bruiser who shot her and a spindly man... Morecombe, she recalled, huddled up against a wall, as if trying to make himself as small as possible.

No one was around her. She quietly opened the stall door and sprinted outside. Once there, she got her bearings and raced for the house.

Cambria burst through the front door and raced downstairs to the corridor. From there, she went back to her own place to arm up.

No way would that crazy bitch hurt anyone else.

She changed from her ruined outfit into jeans and t-shirt, put on her Hunter coat once more and then looked into the mirror. The lines on her face were gone, her skin had tightened up once more. She looked like she was just out of teenagerhood and she grinned.

Then her smile faded as she realised that it was the resurrection that was keeping her young. Yes, she aged slowly, but being killed and brought back returned her to where she started. And then she thought of her own family tree.

*No.*

*Yes, that had to be it.*

She'd always wondered why her ability to resurrect hadn't been passed on to any generation, they'd all died of old age or accident. But... those accidents... old age... She'd never told her offspring of her nature, so they *naturally* expected to die. Maybe that was the answer she was searching for! Every one of them had a choice, but she'd never told them they could survive death if they chose!

So, if that was true, then all the Watchers had to do was genuinely *believe* they could cease to exist – and they would.

*Huh. If my 'afterlife' is the Watchers, what represented the Watchers 'afterlife'?*

Shit, she didn't have time for this! Cambria turned away from the mirror and marched into her armoury. Time to save the day. Again.

### **Chapter Thirty-One**

“We don’t have a choice, Cam.” Jane said and his mouth twisted.

“She will kill us.” He repeated.

“I know, but what are the alternatives? I don’t want to sit here, in this cavern and know she murdered my family. There have to be some cops out there that aren’t in her pay, we just have to find them.”

“How? We can’t just march in there and demand a non-corrupt cop! Hell, you described Brad to them. Has he been arrested? No. He stood behind that poor woman and shot her dead in front of everyone.”

Jane slanted him a look. “You’re making my argument for me.” She said softly.

“I don’t mean to, Jane.” He rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “I want to live. I want you to live and be with me – I’m going to be selfish that way; but...” he lowered his head to rest his forehead against hers. “I don’t want us to stay here, hiding, knowing that she’d give Courtney to Brad as a plaything, that she’d torture and kill Six and Adam and then your father. It serves no purpose other than appeal to her sick and twisted personality.” He kissed her forehead. “So, we go back. We face her and whatever comes our way.” He shrugged sadly. “Who knows, maybe we’ll think of something that allows us to get out of this.”

“I could hate you for being so reasonable,” she said, “but you’re willing to die for me and I don’t get that.”

His eyebrows rose.

“You could stay here, undetected, knowing everything and wait until it’s all over. Then you could go to the cops, tell them what happened. And,” she waved a hand around to encompass the Vault. “All this would be yours because you’d be the only one who knew the code.”

Cameron crossed his arms over his chest. “I think I should be insulted and angry that you’d think I’d stay here like a coward rather than protecting my girl. Sure, I could avenge you and, yes, all this would be mine to do with as I wished; but, sweetheart, I wouldn’t have you and I won’t even contemplate that. You are mine.” He looked away, to the files and everything else. “Besides that, then I’d be the one hunted. And I wouldn’t have the intestinal fortitude not to give it all away.”

His eyes blazed with emotion and it was her turn to look away. “Okay, Cam, okay. Do we have a plan?”

“Not yet, but we time to come up with one.” He looked around the room. “We need a weapon, preferably more than one.”

Jane snorted. “This is a vault, not an armoury.”

“Ah, yes, but as you know, knowledge is a weapon.”

“Ha, ha.” Jane retorted. “What kind of knowledge could we use against her that would stop her from slaughtering my family? What can we use to turn the tables and guarantee their safety?”

“Is she after something specific in here, and if so, what?” Cam looked around the room, then swore. “The book. Read the damned book! Then we’ll know.”

Jane looked around, then saw it on the registry. She picked it up and brought it over to an empty desk. She took a seat and opened the tome to the first page.

“Odd title.” She murmured turned page, ignoring the handwritten *The De Crecy Dynasty*.

\* \* \*

Cambria felt the clock ticking down. She didn’t know how much time she had, but given the craziness in Alberta’s eyes, the schedule could be done, or she could have an hour or so – she simply didn’t know.

Armed with guns and knives and a bad attitude, Cambria did up her coat, then her boots, shoved stiletto knives down the sides and marched to the door.

Her first stop had to be the Vault. She could not allow Jane or her boyfriend anywhere near Alberta, if she could help it.

She punched the code into the keypad and stepped through the door.

When she opened the door, there was no one in sight and she feared she was too late. But there, over in the registry area, two heads were lowered towards something on the desk.

Neither Jane, nor the man, noticed her until she was almost right behind them. Then the man stood straight, noticed something was off and turned.

Cameron swung at her. “Run, Jane!”

“Stay put, Jane,” Cambria ordered as she moved out of the way of the swing. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Cameron took another swing. “Don’t make me hurt you.” He swore.

“As if.” Cambria said and stepped back, drew her pistol from the shoulder holster and aimed it at his forehead. “You need to calm down.”

Jane got up and stood next to him, put her hand on his arm. “Don’t Cam.” She stared wide-eyed at Cambria. “Aren’t you supposed to be... dead?”

Cam lowered his fists and studied her more closely. “But... *Louisa*?”

“I think those explanations can wait until after I sort your mother and her henchmen out, don’t you?”

“Erm...” Jane began, still staring at her. “We were just reading a book she left for me. It’s called *The De Crecy Dynasty* and...”

Cambria felt a cold chill sweep over her. “The *what*?” She lowered the weapon, slid it into her shoulder holster.

“*The De Crecy Dynasty*.” Jane frowned. “Do you know it?”

“Show me the book.” She ordered and both Jane and Cam got out of her way to reveal the thick book. “Son of a bitch.” She murmured and stared down at the opened page.

The two youngsters had only reached four hundred years after the fall of the World Council, but already she could see a trend in the family tree. She flicked through the pages to the end and she knew it all. “Son of a bitch.” She said in a different tone and looked up at Jane. “All I can say, Jane, is that it’s a good thing you take after my side of the family.”

Her descendent looked thoroughly confused.

“Potted history, then. At the end the World Council, the President was Peter De Crecy, a particularly nasty piece of work who continued the oppression of the world’s population on farms while he and his cronies reaped enormous profits. Slavery. At that time, his power was absolute. Anyone who disagreed with him disappeared or were executed. If he didn’t like you, you were doomed. And finally, he thought to take his form of government to the stars, to create a galactic wide government under his control.” Cambria’s lip curled.

“But how could he do that? The armed forces would rebel, drag him down.” Jane protested.

“He controlled *everything*. Except for the Hunter service. He couldn’t touch the Hunters because they were beyond him, hidden deep within the Swiss Alps in an impregnable fortress. Unfortunately, there were nowhere near the number of Hunters needed to take the President down. And so, a plan was hatched to

assassinate the leaders of the Provinces, and an assassin was sent after the President himself; and succeeded.”

“The Hunters brought down the World Council?” Cam asked, astonished.

“We did.” Cambria said. “But what I didn’t know until now, although I suspected, was he had children. And in this book tells that tale. You, Jane, and your siblings are the descendants of both Cambria Petersen *and* Peter De Crecy.”

“Assassin and assassinated.” Cam said and Cambria looked at him.

“Hero and villain.” Jane put in.

“When we sort all of this out, I will tell both of you the story and much more. But for now, know that I understand what your mother is trying to do.”

Jane closed the book. “And what’s that?”

“She wants to bring back the World Council and she’ll use the Red Knights to do it. But first, she needs money – that plan has hit a hitch – to pay off all the government officials she has registered as Knights. And she needs the information here in the vault.”

“We’ve thought long and hard on what’s here, and we can’t come up with anything that would be so important to the global conspiracy you’re suggesting.” Jane said and sat on the edge of the desk.

“Ah, but that’s because you don’t know the value of what’s here.” Cambria looked at Cam. He shrugged and she smiled.

“In here,” Cambria turned to the acres of darkened shelves, “are not only the records of the World Council but what came before: the United Nations. In here, are the legal documents that justified the formation of the World Council. The how, the why, the who, everything she needs to galvanize the formation of another World Council – what she thinks she has been denied, her true inheritance. More, somewhere in here are the addresses of every corridor on the planet, some that have been lost to time, but still working. Can you imagine being in a country holding out and suddenly an enemy force invades from nowhere? Takes out the leadership so Alberta can place her own, bribed official in charge?”

“But that’s... that’s...” Cam said.

“Audacious.” Jane said. “Crazy, but audacious. No one would go for it.”

“Really? The promise of untold riches, of unquestioned power? What government official wouldn’t want to squash those whom they felt done them wrong? Who wouldn’t want to be wealthy beyond their dreams? And all they had

to do was a little bit of treason?” Cambria held up her fingers and held them close together.

“The people wouldn’t stand for it. Democracy is the most precious thing there is.” Jane protested.

“The problem with democracy, Jane, is that it’s great for those people who can afford it. How many are without jobs, or homes, or money? How many would join the revolution in the name of equality? To bring down those they felt had more than they – whether they earned it or not.” Cambria sighed. “There will always be people who feel they are owed something, just for being born. Democracy might not be perfect, but it beats the alternative. Slavery.”

Cam and Jane looked at one another.

“You might also consider what else is in here: the banking details of every single member of the World Council, from the lowliest clerk to the President himself. And a lot of those accounts are still out there, off-world, earning interest. Can you imagine how much interest an account would make with a thousand dollars over fifteen *hundred* years?”

Jane looked at Cam, then Cambria and finally at the shelves. “And that means...”

“By virtue of the granting of the Patent, Jane, you have become the wealthiest woman in Earth’s history, because those accounts now belong to you.”

\* \* \*

Jane suddenly felt lightheaded. Cam gripped her arm to hold her steady and stop her from falling off the desk. “That’s... I don’t... It can’t...” She blew out a breath and tried to collect her thoughts. “What about heirs?” She’s asked.

Louisa raised an eyebrow. “What does the Patent discovery say again?”

“Eight hundred years.” Cameron put in. “If it hasn’t been used in eight hundred years, those accounts belong to Jane?”

Louisa nodded. “And you can bet Alberta knows it, too. Should something happen to you, she becomes your beneficiary.” Louisa tilted her head. “Unless you have a will?”

Jane shook her head. “And no time to make one either.” She checked her chrono. “We have about fifteen minutes to turn up or she’ll start torturing Courtney.”

“Time for me to get going.” Louisa said.

“You? She’s expecting me, at the very least.” Jane said.

“Agreed, but you are not the only one who knows this address and she can’t kill me.” Louisa grinned. “She’s already tried.”

Louisa went to the corridor.

“How can that be, Louisa, we saw you die and it wasn’t very nice.”

Louisa rubbed her chest. “No, it wasn’t, but I’ll let you into a little secret: I’m not Louisa. Or,” she allowed, “I am, but it’s the name I use now when it’s useful.”

“Then, who are you?” Cameron asked. Jane put her hand on his arm and he turned to her. She was wide-eyed with wonder and they both turned back to Louisa.

“I am Cambria Petersen. And, so far, I am indestructible.”

\* \* \*

The house was quiet when Cambria returned. She closed the door and rolled her neck. It had been a while since she’d done this kind of thing, since she’d gone on a suicide mission; at least a century, if not more.

Unfortunately, she’d spent so much time hunting down criminals, that it was almost instinctive. She could almost hear Nathan, laughing softly in her ear. *You love this kind of mission, bella. The danger, the challenge, the knowing you are right and they are either dead or in jail. It is what you live for.*

“No, Nathan, I lived for you.” She murmured as she made her way upstairs.

“Hunting was a sidebar because I was so good at it.”

*But this excites you, too.*

“You know me so well.” She said. Cambria still missed her husband, but it no longer hurt. She was finally comfortable with him haunting her. She knew, intellectually, that it was her memories of Nathan that created the conversations, but so what? No one was going to call her crazy to talk to her dead husband – she’d been crazy after he died, been crazy for decades before adjusting to it.

Outside, a light rain had begun to fall and promised to turn to snow, it was so cold. She turned up her collar.

Cambria had to think of this carefully, otherwise, Alberta would simply kill them all. She couldn’t have any witnesses to this lunacy. A De Crecy. Cambria’s mouth twisted. She never expected to hear that name again, thought the name had vanished into the history books. Apparently not. And who knew megalomania was a genetic personality trait?



Maybe the Nexians could help her out with that since they were the galaxy's most pre-eminent geneticists.

Since Alberta and her team were in the equestrian arena, Cambria would have no opportunity to sneak up on them. Did she go in bold and gun them down? They might kill the hostages before Cambria could stop them. Walk in and demand their release? Same scenario. Kill Alberta and maybe the gunmen would think their paycheque had just been eliminated?

She would expect more loyalty from Red Knights since they'd been in operation for centuries. The loss of one leader did not mean the loss of the objective, not if De Crecy set this up.

First thing on her list, though, was Brad. Only a coward shot someone in the back.

She reached the door and opened it. Horses softly whickered and she closed the door behind her, the scent of hay and... blood in her nostrils; no wonder the horses were on edge. And it was her blood on the floor of the stall across from the big bay.

Cambria rolled her shoulders. It was a shame none of her alternative visions could pinpoint particular people for her. Brad would be her first target, but others were just as large as he.

A frontal assault then, she thought and made sure her coat was buttoned up. She didn't need a stray bullet hitting her, although if it was a headshot, she'd have to start all over again.

Ahead of her was the arch, painted white, and beyond that, the arena proper. No one looked in her direction, their focus was on Alberta, pacing in front of the hostages. Cambria drew one of her pistols and hid it behind her back.

"Five minutes, Courtney." Alberta said. "Do you think your sister loves you enough to come? Do you? Or do you think she'll sacrifice you all for what she's found for me?"

Why, Cambria thought, *that is just evil*. She stepped into the arena. "Don't you think it's a piss-weak act to taunt people who can't talk back?" She asked.

All guns turned in her direction and Alberta's eyes widened when she lifted her head.

"Why, Jane, I didn't think you'd..." Alberta frowned as she knew something was out of place, but couldn't decide what.

“I’m not Jane.” Cambria said. “And Jane won’t be coming.”

Alberta grinned and looked down at Courtney. “Your sister doesn’t love you after all.” She said and tut-tutted.

“I’m here in her stead, Bertie, and I won’t tell you again not to taunt your captives.”

Brad moved, whether to step closer to protect Alberta, or to Courtney as his reward, Cambria didn’t care. She simply whipped her arm around and shot him in the throat.

He dropped to his knees, clutching at the wound.

Alberta sucked in a breath of fright, clutched her fingers to her own throat. Brad stared at her, trying to breathe.

“Look closely, Brad. You will never shoot anyone in the back again.”

Eyes going wide, Brad dropped forward and lay still, blood spreading out onto the sand and being absorbed.

The other gunmen looked from Brad to Cambria to Alberta, as if they didn’t know what to do.

Cambria looked at them. “So what are you going to do now?” She asked and drew another pistol.

“Oh, pooh, Jane, you cannot be that good a shot.” Alberta said and glanced back at her men. “Kill her.”

“And lose the opportunity to access the vault?” Cambria asked and the gunmen hesitated once more. “What did she promise you? Untold wealth? That’s true. Inside the vault are the account names and numbers of the World Councillors. Accounts that have been accruing interest in off-world accounts for fifteen hundred years.”

The men looked at each other, avarice in their eyes.

“I’m sure she has some plan to divide the wealth, but... unfortunately for you, it won’t be in your favour. I’m right about that, aren’t I, Alberta?”

Alberta snorted. “Of course not. There’s plenty of money to go around.” But she only glanced at the men. “My Red Knights have more intestinal fortitude than to be brought low by anything as grubby as money. They have pride in their jobs, in the ambition to create a better world, with a one-world politic and one world leader.”

“And that would be you, wouldn’t it, Alberta? Except, I’m here to stop you.”

“Pshaw. You? You are one recalcitrant, disobedient child with delusions of academic superiority.” Her eyes turned cold, her mouth sneering. “You are nothing, will be no one. A disappointment to both me and your father, an absolute disgrace to the Petersen name.”

Cambria raised an eyebrow. “Are you done bitching and moaning? *‘Oh, bebe, your life is so ‘ard’*. Really, Alberta, that’s the best you can do? Criticising and belittling people is a sign of a very weak mind and poor self-esteem. You just have to make yourself feel better than other people by trying to drag them down. Well, Bertie, I’ll let you into a little secret about how to deal with people so you *do* feel good: treat them with respect.”

Alberta flushed scarlet. “You know nothing!” She snarled. “All my life...”

Cambria cut her off. “You have been indulged, given everything and anything and it was never enough. Then your parents gave you the book and bam, you had an ambition, an unattainable dream that, if you failed at achieving, would be conveniently someone else’s fault.”

Alberta sniffed. “My plan is all laid out. It will succeed, I just need access to the vault.”

“For what purpose?”

“What do you care?”

Cambria grinned. “Don’t be childish, Alberta, it ill becomes you.”

Once again, Alberta flushed.

“My forebear, Peter De Crecy, President of the World Council, laid out his plan for the future of the people of the world,” Alberta said with a sparkle in her eyes. “He firmly believed that the De Crecys were the only ones capable of maintaining the status quo of the government and so, he set his plan. Unfortunately, he was murdered before he could implement his plan. It would have meant a lasting peace...”

Cambria watched as tears filled Alberta’s eyes. Alberta had been obsessing for a long, long time; building his forebear as someone noble, statesman-like, a martyr.

“He mentions how he did it, how he brought everyone together for a common goal, a common government where everyone was free, had a house, a job, a family. All that potential, gone in an instant, the ambition for global peace, gone, in an instant.” Alberta levelled a tear-filled glare at her. “And because of that

murder, the world fell into ruin. Well, I'm going to fix it, return the world to glory days spoken of by my forebear. All I need is the plan he set down, and that is in the vault."

Cambria stared at her. "Wow." She said and shook her head. "I knew he was a narcissistic, arrogant, murderous, thieving asshole, but I had no idea he painted himself as a hero, the saviour of the world. What a crock."

"How dare you! What do you know of it? Peter De Crecy was a great man, the greatest President this world has ever seen. And I shall be just as great!" She took a step towards Cambria.

"You don't know me, Alberta Francine Fortescue Petersen, but I tell you now that you are just like him. I knew him, made sure he never used his power ever again. Did I kill him? No. I was sent to take him out but failed. Someone else did it for me and I watched." And she'd been shocked when she thought the serial killer Excalibur Jones had cut the man's throat. Only it wasn't Excalibur, but his clone.

Alberta blinked, then burst out laughing. Cambria turned to the hostages. Not one of them thought her crazy. They stared at her with hope in their eyes. The men began to snigger.

"I'm not Jane, Alberta, my name is Cambria Petersen."

Alberta laughed harder. "Someone kill her for me before I die laughing."

The men raised their weapons and Cambria turned around, hunched into her Hunter coat as they opened fire. The impact of the bullets drove her forward, bruised her, but did not penetrate. It was a good coat.

She went to her knees, her head down. Then the gunfire paused. Maybe they needed to reload, maybe they thought they'd shot her up enough. They were wrong. She spun up and turned, shot and killed each of the gunmen.

Finally, she turned the gun towards Alberta who stood wide-eyed, staring at her, with tears shimmering in those big hazel eyes.

"Oh, give it a rest, Alberta, you just not that good." Cambria stuck her gun back into her pocket and undid her coat so the woman could see just how well armed she was. "Don't make me hurt you. I will, of course, because you deserve it, you sick fuck, but I prefer you in jail."

“I will never go to jail.” Alberta said haughtily, all tears vanishing, “because I am too important to the world organisation. We will succeed. If not with me, then with one of my children, who remain loyal always.”

Those children, the three who were present, goggled at her with disbelief.

“I think you overestimate the, ah, feelings, they have for you.” Cambria said and shuffled sideways to untie the hostages. The father first, followed by the sons. They pulled the gags from their mouths, rubbed aching wrists. Then she untied Courtney.

The young doctor dragged the gag out and launched her body at Alberta. “You fucking bitch! I’m gonna kill YOU!”

Alberta let out a surprised squeak as Courtney’s shoulder hit her flush in the stomach and took her down onto the sand.

Then, shockingly, Cambria heard an explosion and blood bloomed on Courtney’s back as she went limp.

“NO!” Cambria turned. She shouldn’t have, she knew it, but Jane’s shout sounded so anguished.

Jane ran forward towards Courtney from the white arch of the arena.

Cambria turned back.

Alberta rose from under Courtney’s body, a wide grin on her face and vacant expression in her eyes. “And one for you.” She shot Cambria in the upper chest, and she was down. She struggled to lift her weapon, clutching the wound to try and stop the pain.

“And one for you.” She heard Alberta say and fire again. “And one for you and you.” Blam, blam. And then silence.

Cambria struggled to stay conscious, she couldn’t allow this monstrous woman, too... Her vision faded, the gun lowered to the sand and she stared up at the white ceiling of the arena.

## **Chapter Thirty-Two**

Alberta tsked and ineffectively brushed at the blood on her white shirt. “See what you made me do, Jane.” She huffed out a breath. “You only had to arrive in time and give me the damned code! Now, look at me, I’m a mess!”

Jane stopped still as she looked down at the bodies of her family. “How could you?” She whispered in horror, tears surging into her eyes. Her knees gave out and she dropped to the sand.

“This is what happens when you disobey your parents, Jane.” Alberta looked at her, disappointment in her tone. “Now, you must obey me.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Alberta asked. “Why, what?”

Jane tore her eyes from Six and Adam to fix her gaze on her mother, she felt shocked, dead inside. “Why must I obey you?”

“Because I’m your mother and your only living relative, of course.” Alberta frowned.

Jane gave a shaky sigh and got to her feet. “Get fucked, you evil bitch.” She said and turned, walked into Cam’s arms. “Come on, we have work to do.”

“Jane, stop right there, or I’ll kill him.” Alberta said and Jane stopped, turned around.

“So, you would truly take everything from me.” She said, heart empty.

“You have nothing for me to take,” Alberta replied with a sniff. “Everything you are, everything you have, is mine anyway, as it is for any parent.”

“What now?” Jane drew a trembling breath. She couldn’t break down, not now, not yet. She would, but she’d see her mother dead first.

“Now, you will take me to the vault.” Alberta said and stepped forward. She didn’t look at the bodies around her, just at Jane. “Morecombe.”

The man curled up against the wall straightened, struggled to get to his feet.

His face was blood caked and he couldn’t stand up straight. One arm held his ribs, as if they were broken.

“As you can see, Morecombe failed in his attempt to access the vault. This is what happens,” she swept her arm around the scene, “when my orders are not carried out to the letter. Morecombe however, firmly believes he found the vault. Is he right? And Jane, make sure I believe your answer.”

Cameron held her from behind.

For whatever reason, Morecombe couldn't access the vault, so Jane shrugged. "Yes." She said.

Alberta nodded. "Good. I do believe you, but do you know why he couldn't get in?"

"No. We saw the light turn red for incoming traffic, expected someone to come through the door. But then, the light went green for operational. There's some sort of advanced alien technology on the keypad. We don't know what it's for but if Morecombe couldn't get in..." She left the assumption unanswered.

"We'll try again. Come along, Morecombe, we'll see if having these two along will make a difference." She wiped the blood off her wrist unit and activated it. "Aaron, bring a dozen men to the tasting room."

With Cameron's arm around her, Jane slowly made her way back to the house and tried not to think of the slaughter left behind. Alberta followed, the gun still gripped in her fist and Morecombe struggled to keep up at the rear.

She could not believe her mother had shot them down without a shred of remorse. In fact, all she was concerned about was the mess that had been made. Her mother truly was a monster. How had they not seen it?

It no longer mattered; all that mattered was either she or Cameron did something. Because as sure as eggs, her mother would kill them both once inside the vault.

But Jane would burn it all down before she died. Burn it and her mother, send her to hell.

She slowly made her way down into the basement where the steel door was. Jane glanced to the right, where her office was. Inside, she still had some of the files, but they would mean nothing to Alberta; she had her focus squarely on her forebear.

A dozen heavily armed men awaited them, all dressed in black.

"Ah, Aaron, good." Alberta said.

Aaron, blond-haired and blue-eyed, and built like an aircar, frowned at her. "Are you alright, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes," Alberta smiled coyly, "the blood isn't mine."

"Very good, ma'am." And he retreated into distant professionalism.

"Now, then, Jane, the Vault."

\* \* \*

“Aaron, take three men with Jane.” Alberta ordered. “I will follow with the rest, once Morecombe puts in the code.” She had an excited gleam in her eyes, but Jane simply didn’t care.

She stepped up to the door, punched in the alpha-numeric code, uncaring that others took note. Jane opened the door and stepped inside, followed by the men.

“We don’t need you anymore.” Alberta said and Jane turned, half blocked by the big Aaron. She saw her mother lift the gun. Cam shifted and met Jane’s gaze.

The door closed as the gun went off and Jane flinched.

She couldn’t hear the men behind her, but she felt their presence as she reached out to the door at the end of the corridor.

\* \* \*

Cambria slowly closed her eyes and then opened them again. The silence in the arena was all-encompassing.

She turned her head. The bodies of the Petersens lay crumpled on the sand and she sighed, sat up. *When will you learn to keep your coat closed? You dumb shit!*

There was nothing she could do for them and there was no torture mean enough for suitable revenge against Alberta. She was a monstrous human being, but maybe Cambria could give her a little terror before she killed the bitch.

And then she saw something in Courtney, something she never thought she’d see as the young woman twitched and then arched as if a bolt of electricity shot through her.

Cambria crawled over to her and waited for the spasms to ease.

Courtney finally opened her eyes. They were out of focus, pain-filled and Cambria waited. Finally, she stopped shuddering and curled in on herself.

Cambria reached out and touched her shoulder. Courtney flinched.

“Don’t touch me.” She said hoarsely.

“Okay.” Cambria said and lifted her hand. “But I need to go and kill your mother now. See what you can do for your brothers.” She got to her feet, adjusted her coat – and she needed to find herself a bullet-proof undershirt; that, or stop being a dumbass and keep her damned coat done up.

“Why am I alive?” Courtney asked in wonder. “And who were those creatures I heard? Was that a dream?”

Cambria glanced at her and then at the dead men. Nothing, no movement at all.



“Because you’re like me. They are the Watchers and no, it wasn’t a dream.”

She said and moved closer to the arch.

“But I can’t be alive!” Courtney wailed. “My mother... my mother...”

Cambria turned around, walked back and crouched before the distraught young woman. She did not have time for this!

“Courtney, look at me.”

Courtney’s dark blue eyes met her own. “I am Cambria Petersen. So far, I’ve been unable to die and can heal any injury. You, Courtney, are a direct descendent through your father’s line. The how and the why of it can wait until I come back. I’m pretty sure Jane is still alive, but she won’t be for much longer if I don’t go and *rescue* her. So put your questions on hold until I get back, okay?”

Courtney nodded, her chin trembling and the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

“Good. Now see to your brothers, Dr Petersen. Do what you can for them, but stay here until I return.”

Courtney’s gaze shifted, then widen. “Oh, shit...” And she scrambled to see what she could do.

Cambria eased up to her feet and strode out of the arena.

She couldn’t remember when she was so, so *angry*! Even her hands shook with the rage. Of all the people she’d come up against, Excalibur Jones included, no one had ever made her this angry... well, maybe President De Crecy. But even *Jones* didn’t make her this angry. For a long time, she’d feared him, been scared of him right down to her toes, even though she was indestructible. That’s what attracted Jones to her. He could rape her, torture her, kill her and then wait for her to revive and do it all over again. But she’d never been this angry at him.

But the De Crecys... with their insane need to rule everyone with gleeful cruelty, who thought they were the smartest people on the planet and deserved everything, simply infuriated her. Maybe it was a genetic flaw. It might be useful to follow that up. Then the question would be what she did about it.

It was their right to be mad and crazy; it was the government’s right to assess them and lock them away should they be needed. Which, she recalled, had happened with Alberta until someone released her.

That person would now come under her scrutiny. She may not have the Hunters creed of Judge, Jury and Executioner, to back her up anymore, but she

had resources the Red Knights only dreamed of, and that dream was about to turn into a nightmare for them.

Especially now she had Courtney.

But she'd think about that later, after she'd rescued Jane. She would not be late or stupid again.

Her thoughts took her to the house. Alberta would not leave the place unguarded and she didn't want anyone to come in after her. So where would they be?

She used her vision. Of course. In the kitchen, six of them, stuffing their faces at the kitchen table. Some back up they were.

Cambria drew both pistols, put them in her pockets and strolled into the kitchen.

Joanna and Brittany stood to the side, quiet as they watched the men. Cambria shook her head. The women showed no gumption whatsoever, but then, the six men looked to be large bruisers.

"Hello." Cambria said. The large man with black eyes and hair at the end of the table lifted his head, chewed slowly as he took her in.

"Who are you?" He asked and bit into another piece of chicken. The other men continued to eat as if she was of no concern. Given the weaponry that was close at hand, she didn't blame them, but she did blame them for being so casual, as if she posed no threat.

"Who are you?" She tossed back at them.

"The new owners of this estate. Now, what do you want?"

"Are you a Red Knight?" She asked.

"Yeah, what of it?" He asked suspiciously.

"And your... colleagues, are they Red Knights, too?"

"Yes." He lowered the chicken leg and wiped his hands on the cotton serviette by his plate. "This is the last time I'll ask, what do you want?"

Cambria shrugged. "Just wanted some questions answered about the Red Knights."

"What about us?" He picked up his chicken again, unconcerned. The other men continued to eat and to drink what appeared to be beer.

Cambria turned to Joanna and Brittany. "Brit, could I get a beer, it's been a long day."

The woman gave her a strained smile, kept an eye on the men and went to the fridge. She pulled out a half bottle of ale. The sound of the fizzy liquid pouring into a glass dried Cambria's mouth out.

Britt brought it over, puzzled as to who she was.

"Thanks." Cambria said and drank a good half glass, belched quietly and looked at the man at the head of the table. He had a bemused expression. "Excuse me." Cambria said.

The man lifted a dark eyebrow.

"So... the Red Knights. Enforcers? Bodyguards? Militia?"

He gave her a brief grin and lifted his stein. "Since you know the name, you should know what we are about." He said and drank down the rest of the beer. Brit quickly refilled it.

"Hmm. Red Knights International. An organisation dedicated to overthrowing the governments of Earth and installing a new, one-world government under the Presidency of Alberta Petersen. That about cover it?"

"Yep." He said.

"Won't work." Cambria said.

He shrugged. "It's already working."

"And I'll tell you why." Cambria said, ignoring his comment. "First, it's been tried before and it didn't work out too well. And second, I'm here to stop you."

He looked at her for a moment and then roared with laughter. "Oh, that's a good one, lady. You're going to stop us." The amusement leached out of his face. "Like I said, it's already working."

"You have people in key positions in government, yes, I know." She finished the beer and handed the empty glass to Brit. "Thanks, I needed that." She said to the woman and then addressed the man. "Enjoy your meal, gentlemen. I'll be back. My advice? Don't be here."

And with that, she turned and left the kitchen. They could make of that what they would. She would return, but for now, Jane waited.

\* \* \*

Jane stepped through the doorway and into the Vault. Behind her, only Aaron arrived.

"What the..." Aaron said as he looked back. "What happened to my men?" He demanded. "Where did they go?"

Jane lifted a shoulder. Suddenly, Aaron grabbed her, pushed her against the closed door and put the barrel of the gun against her forehead.

“I asked about my men?” He gritted.

“How should I know?” Jane replied, her tone lifeless. “Why the fuck should I care?”

Aaron frowned and lowered the weapon, released her. “Go and sit down. Don’t move or I swear, I’ll kill you.” He snarled.

Jane wandered towards the registry area as Aaron turned back to the door. The light was green. It turned red and Aaron stepped back awaited the arrival of the next tranche of travellers.

Jane kept wandering and went into the darkened Vault, disappearing into the Stygian blackness. The place was so vast, it would take hours, if not longer to find her, especially towards the back. By then, she should have found something to set a fire with. She would burn the whole place down, with everyone in it. No one would have access to the vault, it was obviously too dangerous for anyone to have.

And she sure as hell wouldn’t let her mother have the information she wanted. She’d destroy it, the one thing her mother wanted more than anything else. If she died, she didn’t care, as long as she could torture her mother with ‘what if’. It would be best if Alberta roasted along with the files, but she couldn’t guarantee that.

Her fingers brushed along the files, feeling the curious coating they had. The files had lasted millennia and a half. Could she simply light them up? And if not, was there another way to destroy them?

Her wrist unit chimed, but she ignored it. Her mother could fuck off. There were no hostages left, they were all dead. Alberta had no more leverage. Jane kept strolling around in the darkness, her fingers drumming against the files. Her ambition had been to find information on Cambria Petersen, then write a book.

Now, all that was gone, everything was gone, destroyed by the insanity of one woman who was supposed to love her. Was there ever a deeper betrayal than that of a parent against a child? Tears stung the back of her eyes, but she willed them away.

She had nothing left; had no one and she didn’t have the wherewithal to start again. She stopped her wandering, leaned her head against the files. Images of her

father, Six and Adam began filtering through her mind, as did Courtney. All the good times, the bad, the frustration, the careless love they had for her and she for them. And now they were gone. Cameron and his insatiable lust for her and her lust for him. Would they have had a future? She didn't know, but it would have been nice to find out.

Her unit chimed again. Jane's breath hitched, her eyes stung and her heart hurt. She pressed a hand between her breasts to ease the ache, but it would not stop. Her knees wobbled and she sank to the ground, finally allowing the grief to overwhelm her.

Jane curled into a ball and wept for her family, for her lover; she wept silently, dragging in great gulps of air as she did so, as all the hurt she'd endured conspired to choke her.

"Jane, dear," her mother's voice came through the wrist unit, "you really should answer your calls."

Would this day never end? Would she always hear that awful voice?

"Jane, I know you're there, it's not as if you can hide from me. I have always had the access codes to your wrist unit. You can answer your mother, can't you? I'm sure I brought you up better than this."

Maybe it was because she wasn't a good enough daughter? Her mother had always said so, said how much of a disappointment she was, that if she'd only behave. Maybe she'd brought this down upon her head, upon her family's head because... because...

"You'd better come to me now, Jane, or I will kill Courtney and Charles and Adam and your father."

...because... *what?*

"And I will do it, Jane, you know I will."

Jane turned on the wrist unit. "You've already killed them." She said, her voice hoarse from crying.

"Don't be absurd. Why would I do that? They're my family."

"You are totally fucked up. A nut job, a lunatic, insane, a madwoman, crazy..."

"Don't you speak to me like that." Alberta said.

"... Round the bend, out of your tree, off your gourd, not playing with a full deck..."

"Be quiet, Jane!"

But she wouldn't, Jane was on a roll. "The lights are on, but nobody is home, one brick short of a barbeque..." She was surprised by how calm she felt, taunting her mother.

*"Shut up, you little bitch!"*

"One cow loose in the top paddock, a crackpot. You've got a screw loose, just like your ancestor. Peter the president of the nuthouse."

*"I HATE YOU!"* Albert yelled.

"Rah, rah. The feeling is mutual. You want me? Come and get me." Jane said and shut off the wrist unit. She took it off, set it on top of the shelf of files behind her. Then she went further into the darkness. Jane didn't care that she was lost, that she had no idea what direction she was taking, only that she got away from that crazy voice.

\* \* \*

Cambria paused at the bottom of the stairs as she took note of the body. Cameron rested against the closet door, head back, legs outstretched and hands, palm upwards beside his hips.

Jane must be beyond devastated. Her mother had killed everyone she loved.

Dark blue eyes stared off into the distance, a thick line of blood drew down the side of his handsome face, clotted in his thick dark hair, stained his shirt at the shoulder.

Another she'd failed to... She thought as she stared down at him. Alberta had a lot to answer for. Cambria was happy to revive the judge, jury and executioner licence for her.

"Ah." She said and squatted between his outstretched legs. "If you're going to play dead, you need to practice on that stare. A distant stare isn't a dead one."

Eyelids came down over the eyes then up again as he focused on her.

"You're not with them." He whispered and then cleared his throat.

"No, I'm here to kill them." Cambria promised. She tilted her head. "When did you know?"

He didn't misunderstand her question. "Paul." He said with a grimace. "We knew we were in deep trouble and decided on a suicide pact. Only... he didn't take the drugs. There I was, dead on the floor and he... he stripped my place of anything of value. When I... when I realised I wasn't dead and those... things

were talking to me, I was so scared, so absolutely terrified, that I guess I jumped back into my body. Painful shit, that; the resurrection.”

“That it is.” Cambria agreed and stood. “We need to get going.”

He nodded and set his palms against the ground. “I’m going to help you.”

“Do you know how to use a weapon?”

He gave her a smile. “I’ve been around...”

She nodded. “You know.”

“Yeah, since I’m also one of your descendants, it explains a whole lot.”

Cambria rose, stepped back. “I’d love to hear more of your story, but Jane thinks you’re dead and we need to move. When we return, we’ve got those upstairs to deal with.”

“They’ll keep, and I’d be honoured to tell you a story.”

Cambria gave him one of her pistols and ammunition. She offered him one of her long knives but he demurred.

“A little too up close and personal for me.” He said.

“A weapon of last resort.” She said and offered him a small stiletto from her boot. That blade he took.

“Let’s go.” She said and punched in the code.

Cameron followed her into the corridor. She sensed him behind her all the way.

### **Chapter Thirty-Three**

The lock Cambria had put on the vault excluded everyone except those with her blood. Over the generations, she'd expected it to be diluted until it was almost non-existent, but obviously, her blood was stronger than those whose blood mated to hers. Then again, it might have just been a fortuitous confluence of genetic code.

And that was strangely gratifying.

She paused at the other end of the corridor and listened to Alberta yell. That was good; that meant her focus and that of her men was on whatever caused Alberta's ire. Hopefully, it was Jane.

"You need to go after Jane. Protect her. I don't know if it will help, but tell her Courtney's alive."

"Alive?"

"The first resurrection, I suspect. She's a little hysterical at the moment, but I couldn't stay and help her."

"And... the others?" He asked at her shoulder.

"I don't know."

Cambria listened for a moment longer then cracked the door. Beyond the corridor, all was dim. No one had bothered with any extra lights. Good. She opened the door a little wider and slid through the gap.

Cameron followed her, then he disappeared from behind her and snuck into the vault shelves to search for Jane.

Cambria trusted him to find her. For her, Alberta was her focus, as were the four men who stood with her.

It was a shame she had to kill her descendants, but she feared that any one of these five could resurrect. If any of them revived, she'd have to think of something else, because there was no way she was letting them escape.

"Hello, Alberta." She said, once she was sure Jane's boyfriend was away in the shelves.

The woman turned around and looked at her puzzled.

The four men also turned and raised their weapons.

"Do I know you?" Alberta asked, as if she'd never seen Cambria before.

"You killed me, again, not half an hour ago."

The men glanced at each other, the barrel of their weapons shook.



“Well, that’s just impossible.” Alberta smiled, but it wasn’t convincing.

“Sure, it is. Here I am.”

“Ma’am?” The biggest of the men asked.

“Oh, pooh. Look, I don’t know who you are, but everything in here is mine. And I can’t possibly have you here.” She gave a nod and the men opened fire.

Cambria saw it coming and dove for the desks, firing as she did so. Two of the men went down and she hit the floor, rolled and came up firing. The other two men went down. This time, she hadn’t shot to wound, she meant to kill and kill she did.

Now, there was just Alberta. Alberta and her little gun she had hidden somewhere on her body.

“Just the two of us, then.” Alberta murmured. “Like it was before.”

“Before?”

Alberta smiled at her. “Why, yes. You and Peter De Crecy. And now you and me. I certainly don’t expect any of my children to assist you; they were brought up better than to challenge me.”

“I think you’d be surprised.” Cambria said.

“They know the consequences now,” Alberta said. “Although... now that I think about it, maybe I should have killed them more often.”

“Killed them...” Cambria didn’t think she could be more shocked or horrified. “You’ve always known about...”

Alberta’s expression turned gleeful. “Oh, yes. I couldn’t possibly put this plan into action if I didn’t have children to pass on the Red Knights to.” She turned, found a chair and settled into it as if having morning tea. “My firstborn was a disappointment; he didn’t come back and I wondered if I had the genetics wrong.”

“You... murdered your own child?”

“Well, ‘murder’ is such a harsh word, don’t you think?” Alberta brushed off the question. “The child was no good to me permanently dead! Charles, bless his ignorant, stupid heart, was devastated and rightly so! I and my parents were so sure he was the one to give me immortal children. We’d done all the research, all the genetic testing. He should have given me numerous immortal children! For myself, I had two older siblings – none of whom survived the process. Then there was me and my parents decided not to have any more. Still, then came Charles junior and so on.”

“You killed *all* your children just to see if they were like me.”

Alberta laughed, shook her head. “You? No, silly. To see if they were like *me!* How can I have a dynasty if all my children died? Besides, they were babies and they wouldn’t remember the resurrection.” Her gaze focused on the distance. “It’s terribly easy to drown a baby and then pop them into bed. To wait for them to wake, or to hear the maid... scream.” Her gaze met Cambria’s on the last word and Cambria saw the glee.

Nausea crawled in Cambria’s belly. “Charles didn’t know, did he?” Of that, Cambria was sure.

“Of course not – he was just the sperm donor, nothing more; it had nothing to do with him other than from whom we are both descended. This is *my* dynasty, *my* destiny, not his.”

“You are...” Cambria shook her head. “Beyond description.”

Alberta’s expression turned smug. “I know.” Then she rose. “As nice as this chat has been, I really must get on. World domination doesn’t happen in a day!” She said brightly.

Cambria watched her, stepped out from the desks and saw movement behind Alberta.

Then everything went to hell.

Jane charged her mother. Alberta saw Cambria looking over her shoulder and turned around. Jane’s boyfriend shouted “*No-o!*” As did Cambria.

It all seemed to happen in slow motion.

Jane swung her fist and punched Alberta flush on her mouth with as much strength as she could muster. Alberta drew the small pistol and fired at her assailant.

And neither Cambria nor Cameron could stop either of the women in time to avoid damage.

Alberta collapsed to the ground, the pistol falling from her hand. Jane stood over her breathing hard, a red stain growing in the middle of her chest.

Cameron caught her as she began to fall. And Cambria could only watch in despair.

\* \* \*

“Hi,” Jane said as she looked up into Cameron’s eyes. “You’re not... dead.”

“No, Jane, I’m not. I was, for a while, but now I’m here for you.” He said huskily.

“I have to go now.” She said. “I’m sorry, I can’t stay. My mother has killed my family and me. We are done.”

“No, Jane. You have to hang on. Courtney’s alive. She’s like Cambria, like... you and like... me.”

Jane reached up, drew a finger down the side of his face. “I wonder if we would have meant something to each other?”

“Oh, yes,” he smiled sadly, “we would have had a future, many futures with each other. But honey, you’re not ready to die yet. We have too much to do. Come back to me. Once you hear those creatures in your dreams, they’ll jolt you back. Scary as...” And he gave her a smile, kissed her forehead.

*Come back to him? Too much work? Well, yes, she supposed they did...* Jane’s vision greyed and then went black, her body went limp and she didn’t hear Cameron’s wail of grief.

\* \* \*

Cambria clamped manacles around Alberta’s wrists, magnetized them.

As she did so, Alberta groaned. Her hazel eyes opened and then widened at the restriction of her hands. “Ow, that hurts. Take them off.” She pleaded.

Cambria looked at her without emotion and studied the woman. Her lip was split and blood flowed over her chin, but the split was healing. That this woman was here, in this vault, was an abomination to her. That her blood flowed through this monster disgusted her.

“I need medical attention.” Alberta whined. Cambria didn’t move, didn’t speak.

“Don’t you know who I am?” Alberta asked, frowning.

“Yes, I do.” Cambria said.

“Then release me!” Alberta demanded.

“Eventually.” Cambria said.

“No!” Cameron said and lowered Jane to the floor. “She deserves to die for what she’s done.”

“Ah, the help.” Alberta held out her wrists to him. “Release me and you will be handsomely rewarded.”

“*Release you?*” Cameron stared at her in amazement.

“Yes. All this is mine now, and I will give you some of the accounts that are here. You will be wealthy beyond your wildest dreams.” She tried to smile, but her lip hurt and she winced.

Cameron drew the stiletto out of his pocket.

“There’s a good boy.” Alberta held up the bonded bracelets.

“I’m not going to release you, you psychopathic bitch, I’m going to cut your throat. Slowly, so you feel every centimetre of the blade carve into your flesh and every drop of blood leave your body!”

Alberta’s eyes widened in fear at the intent in his eyes and she lowered her hands.

“Stand down, Cameron,” Cambria said and he looked at her, disappointment in his blue eyes. “I have a better idea.”

\* \* \*

Humidity slapped Cambria in the face when she arrived on Eden. Alberta immediately started to complain about the heat, about the moisture in the air, about what it would do to her hair, her skin, and her *haute couture* clothes.

Cambria gripped Alberta’s upper arm and dragged her into the forest.

Eden was now a tourist resort planet, but not here. They were thousands of kilometres from the nearest tourist hub, or even colonial outpost. And Cambria owned the surrounding one hundred thousand square miles of wilderness. No, here Alberta would live or die by her own efforts.

Well, not die – Cambria could do nothing about that, yet – but live a long and very uncomfortable life.

The heat didn’t bother Cambria, she wore her coat that was climate controlled. Alberta, on the other hand, still wore her blood-stained, long-sleeved shirt, matching skirt and loafers.

“It’s so hot here, I want to go home. My family is waiting.” Alberta said.

“This is now your home. You killed everyone in your family.” Cambria said through gritted teeth. Would she never shut up?

“I didn’t, they’re waiting for me... or maybe... did I? No, that’s not possible, my family loves me. I would leave Charles if he ever...”

“Here we are.” Cambria cut in. The colonial bungalow stood as it had for fifteen hundred years, ever since she’d roused De Crecy’s lover... whatever her

name was. The place needed a bit of work, the jungle was doing its best to reclaim the building, but the anti-weed coating kept almost everything at bay.

Cambria opened the door. Interestingly, it was still exactly as she'd left it. It had the antiseptic tang of the building material used, but everything else was still here. The furniture, the knick-knacks, even clothes. She eyed Alberta and then sought the woman of her memory. Maybe the clothes would fit, but if they didn't, she guessed Alberta would be learning how to adjust the clothes. Unless she wanted to run around naked.

Alberta didn't want to come in. "What is this hovel?" She sneered.

"Your new home."

"I refuse to live here. Take me home." She said haughtily. Cambria simply grabbed her wrists and hauled her inside, pushed her down onto one of the couches. Then she shut the door on the heat. The room immediately began to cool.

Cambria put the bag of supplies in the kitchen. They were field rations – just add water, or any handy liquid and voila, instant food. There were also sachets of desiccated milk, coffee and packets of sugar. If Alberta wanted a hot meal, then she could learn to cook.

She returned to the lounge room. Alberta sulked in the corner of the couch.

"Now, you have this room, the kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom," Cambria explained. "You don't need anything more. You have food supplies for six weeks and there is a seed supply in one of the cupboards should you want to start farming."

Alberta sniffed and refused to look at her.

Cambria demagnetised the bracelets, removed them completely. "Should you think to try and escape, let me give you fair warning."

Alberta crossed her arms and her legs, turned away from Cambria and pouted like a child.

"Look at me Alberta, and pay attention," Cambria said. Alberta tightened her stance. "Okay, fine. If you don't pay attention, that is your problem. Number one: stay away from the water because there are animals in there who would love to make a meal of you. Number two: you are about twenty thousand kilometres from any civilisation. Your... partner in crime, Professor Walker, is a few hundred kilometres away to the south, should you wish to attempt contact. Number three: there are no communications devices anywhere near, so you cannot call for help.

Number four: I have locked down the corridor. It will not recognise you as a legitimate traveller. You cannot use it.”

Alberta’s head slowly turned towards her with disbelief. “You can’t do that.”

Cambria nodded. “I can and I have. Alberta Francine Fortescue Petersen, you stand convicted of fraud, of intimidation, of mental abuse and neglect of children, of capital murder, of the murder of your husband, your children and of me. You are convicted of conspiracy to commit fraud, of treason, of deliberately creating a personal militia. You are convicted of theft, of escaping from lawful custody.”

Alberta’s eyes widened. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do, and I’m going to give you time to consider your actions.”

Cambria shrugged. “I’ll be back in a year or so – but you won’t know when.” And with that, she left.

Before she took the corridor back to the Petersen estate, she found herself an observation post behind a giant tree with long green fronds and waited. Sure enough, not a minute after she left, Alberta came running down the track to the corridor.

She punched in a code and waited. Then she pulled open the door and entered, closed the door behind her.

Then the door opened again and Alberta stepped out. “What?” She asked to no one. “I want to go home!” She shouted and stamped her foot. She tried again, with the same result. And again and again. Nothing changed. The corridor would not accept her, and in the weird Nexian-technology way, Alberta walked into the corridor, in a straight line and when she opened the door she was back where she started.

Alberta kept it up for almost two hours, all with the same result. Cambria simply waited her out. When the woman came out of the door and saw where she was, she threw herself on the ground and wept and wailed.

Cambria stepped out from behind the tree. Alberta saw movement. “You!”

And she launched herself at Cambria. “You take me home, right NOW! Or I’ll kill you!”

Cambria slapped her away. “This is your home now.” She glanced up at the canopy. “And you best be getting on. There are some nasty beasties who roam at night looking for food. And you are definitely food.”

“I’m *not* staying here!”

Cambria went to the door. “Goodbye, Alberta.”

She opened the door and stepped through, Alberta close behind. It didn’t matter that Alberta followed her – she could not access the route. Cambria walked to the end of the corridor and opened the door to the basement of the Petersen estate. No doubt Alberta was screaming with the ‘injustice’ of it all when she walked straight out the door to Eden again. Whether the woman lived or created her own personal hell, Cambria simply didn’t care.

Cambria made her way upstairs to the dining room.

All the Petersen siblings, and Cameron, sat at the dining room table, each thinking their own thoughts. There was no conversation, although each had a glass of hard liquor in hand.

“You should have killed the bitch,” Courtney said with a hard glare, then her eyes filled. “She killed Dad. I couldn’t... I couldn’t... He didn’t...” Six got up and wrapped his arms around her as she wept.

Cambria shook her head. “Your mother can’t be killed. Like all of you, she would come back. Adam Jones killed her malicious, psychopathic forebear too soon for him to realise what he’d done – if he ever would. No, I’ve taken away her wealth, her support structure, her ability to move about with freedom, or even to communicate with the outside world. She’ll live easy or hard on her own, with no one around. I call that a rather elegant torture.”

Courtney’s bottom lip quivered, then she refilled her glass with amber liquid and threw it down her throat.

Cambria suspected they’d all get well and truly trashed – or at least try.

“Jane, do you have a plan for the Vault?”

Jane rubbed her chest again, as if she couldn’t believe she was alive. Cameron took her hand and put it in her lap.

“Um... well, the Patent has been confirmed, so I guess I’ll start my own company. There’s a lot of work to do...” Her voice faded as she stared at Cambria. “I have so many questions for you.”

“We have time,” Cambria said softly. “We have plenty of time.”

Jane nodded.

“What about those Red Brigade people?” Cameron asked.

“Well, I guess when I find them, they’ll be joining Alberta, Brendan and the four guards who are also on Eden,” Cambria said with a satisfied smile. “It’s a

tourist planet, sparsely populated, and where they are? Twenty thousand or more kilometres from any civilisation.” Her smile faded to a steely grimace. “They’ll live or die on their own, but I’ll keep an eye on them... once a year.”

“How are you going to find them all?” Six asked.

“I have a rather unique database on them. Every single one of them is going to disappear. I think it will make others in the organisation wonder when or if they’ll be next.” She tapped a finger on the tabletop. “Make no mistake. I will not allow this world to fall into the kind tyranny Nathan and I fought so hard against. Not ever. So, I will check my database and remove the Red Brigade.” She tilted her head; she’d finally found something to do with her time and felt the anticipation of the Hunt course through her veins.

And if she should die on one of her missions, well, she’d just have to tell the Watchers that if they believed they could die, absolutely, without a doubt die, then maybe they actually would.

“What are we? What or who were those creatures?” Adam asked. “How can we be *alive*?”

“How can I?” Cambria said and reached for the bottle. “Jane has my mission briefs available for you to read.”

She poured herself a health slug, leaned back and sipped the smoky bourbon. She studied each of them. “You are all my direct descendent, through your father’s line, may he rest in peace. I suspect there are others out there, who have faked their deaths once they knew.” And she glanced at Cameron. “I may have to hunt them down and ask. But you asked what you are and how can you be alive. Well, I guess it started a rather long time ago. You see, I once worked for a Senator for the World Council. I wrote a report on the Judicar – as it was known – on their workloads. What I found was something else entirely, and then...”





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