

THE TEMPERED STEEL OF
ANTIQUITY GREY
BY SHAWN SPEAKMAN

CHAPTER 1 & CHAPTER 2

1

The fingers and thumb stuck out of the desert, unmoving, waiting.

Antiquity Grey bit her lower lip—a habit her grandmother scolded her for daily. It was a dangerous situation. The mech hand was more than just some slag the wind had brought to the surface. It had likely been buried since the Splinter War, when mechs battled over the planet's ore reserves during her grandmother's childhood. Chekker said shattered metal fell from the sky like meteors during the most violent of battles, burning hellfire that pockmarked the desert into glass. The wastes had once been a graveyard of broken mechs and plating but no longer; those who pirated the past had scavenged it over the decades for profit, leaving almost nothing behind. Metal arms, metal legs, metal weapons. To be melted down and reconstituted on world as well as off.

But no one had discovered this. *This* was hers. The people of Solomon Fyre would sing her name long into the night when she returned with it, a treasure worth years of rummaging the sands.

And who knew what else was attached to the hand, buried beneath the desert of this part of her world.

An arm.

A shoulder.

A torso.

Dare she hope possibly an entire body?

Excitement moved Antiquity toward her airbike. She would ride down to the mech hand, blast away the sand, and see for herself.

"Wait! You are not going down there, Grey-child."

Antiquity stopped, glaring at CHKR-11. The spherical bot spun in the air but was still safe behind the giant rock outcropping that hid them from metal scavengers who might be surveying the sands for an easy kill.

"You don't know what I am going to do, Chekker."

"Grey-child, I know you." Chekker whirred, slowly spinning and stopping as it considered her. Its soccer sport-paint was once proud but now faded with decades of time. "The moment you came upon this mech I knew your actionable intentions."

"There is no one around, Chekker!" She pointed in all directions, to the High Dringlam Mountains at her back and across the entirety of the desert, to its north, east, and south. "Look to the wastes! I see no dust movement. None!"

"That is true. None. For now." The bot flew nearer her face in emphasis, his voice the static of his kind. "But I have been privileged to teach the children of your family for more than a century. None of them have possessed your proclivity for attracting danger."

Anger rose up inside Antiquity. She was no longer a child in need of a nursemaid. "Do you see what's down there, Chekker? Are your sensors shot? Look!"

The bot was unimpressed. "I do. I see trouble."

"Trouble finds me all by itself, you old bot!"

The ancient floating ball did not reply. It just spun in front of her.

"What do *you* think we should do then?" she asked, waiting for the fight.

Chekker wasted no time. "We return to Solomon Fyre. And inform the Elders."

"No!" Antiquity argued, wanting to hit the bot. She had done it before and it had been like hitting a rock face. "No. No. And no. Why should they take what I have found? Why should *they* get to own what *I* find?"

"Because of your family's past. And they are the Elders."

"They are thieves!"

"Maybe," Chekker said. "But your family is no longer in the position they once were, Grey-child. Grey has become your surname. And Grey is your legacy now. We will return to Solomon Fyre. If not the Elders, we will certainly tell your matriarch."

"No, we will not," Antiquity declared.

Before Chekker could respond, she gained the airbike's seat, released the grav-stabilizers that kept it from floating away, and punched the throttle. No electric tase from Chekker stopped her as she thought it might; he obviously did not think leaving her immobile would be safer than letting her reach the mech. Instead, the old bot followed as he was programmed, meant to teach but also protect. She did not know how he arrived at his decisions but she was glad he did not stop her.

Taking a final scan of the wastes and finding no evidence of scavengers, Antiquity rocketed down the mountain to the sands and pulled her airbike up next to the mech hand, its fingers resting on the ground longer than she was tall. Up close, she could see there might be more of it beneath the desert surface, lumpy hills of sand that could be other parts of the giant robot. Using her airbike's thrusters, she began blasting away the desert, revealing a forearm, an elbow, a shoulder. The sun beat down on her, blisteringly hot, but she kept at it, her excitement fueling her adrenaline even while sweat became the glue that adhered grit to her tanned skin. The shifting of the sands over time had reduced the mech from a painted dark blue to a grayish one, but the metal retained its make, unmolested by wear.

As her work continued through the afternoon and with enough desert removed, Antiquity could see the mech had landed on its stomach—and the white-tinted faceplate of its massive head stared right at her.

"Help me, Chekker." Antiquity could not see beyond the glass. "Run a diagnostic on the mech."

The bot flew to where she stood beside the head.

"I cannot, Grey-child."

"The mech is dead then."

"Quite the contrary," Chekker answered. "Its fuel cells are depleted from decades in the sand but they are not extinguished. It lives. But it is blocking my attempts."

The mech still had power. Antiquity stood stunned. It was still a mystery what had brought down the giant warrior. But it hadn't been a lack of power.

"Can you access its last moments?" she asked. "See why it crashed?"

"I can try, Grey-child. Security will have been one of its primary functions. It is technology not unlike my own though, built at the time of my own creation. There is a chance, no matter how poor the odds."

CHKR-11 began spinning this way and that, each change in direction accompanied by a click as if unlocking a multi-number lock. Antiquity waited. She ran her hand over the smooth glass of the faceplate, wondering how the ancient treasure had been brought so low so long ago. After more than an hour and Antiquity's patience with the bot spent, a series of clacks reverberated through the glass. Shocked, she jumped back from the mech, trying to figure out what was happening.

Then an explosion sent her flying through the air.

She landed hard. Fighting the darkness swimming before her eyes, Antiquity gazed up at the massive head. The faceplate had shot open, knocking her aside.

Revealing the mech's cockpit—and a corpse.

"Are you safe, Grey-child?" Chekker asked, now hovering over her.

Chekker had somehow instructed the mech to open its cockpit. The heat of surprise still coursing through her, Antiquity waved the bot away and, regaining her feet, warily approached the giant robot again. Its driver remained strapped in his harness, twistedly slumped to the side, his long hair pulled back into a single platinum braid similar to the one Antiquity wore herself. She had seen dead bodies before, but not like this; the skin of the driver had sunk inward, paper pulled tight over his skull. Mummified, she thought, like one of the horrors told to scare children before bedtime.

To get a better look, Antiquity half-stepped into the cockpit.

That's when she saw the crest on the driver's dark blue uniform.

"I had to copy and insert my system to gain access to the mech," Chekker said, hovering behind her. She barely heard him.

"What?" she asked absently, mind a swirl.

"Why are you not listening to me, Grey-child?" the bot said, annoyed. "I had to copy my system. Great skill built this mech. I believe it belonged to a person of high import. Its systems mirrored that. The security features did not allow access to the mech. Therefore, it required replicating my system. Two against one are better odds." Chekker went silent, a shadow at her shoulder. "If the deceased has left you unsettled, you may vacate the vehicle. Although it is my opinion you should have been prepared. These machines did not operate autonomously. All had drivers. You know this."

"It's not that, Chekker," Antiquity said, pointing at the crest—an insignia featuring flame between unfurled angel wings.

"As I said, Grey-child, danger finds you all too easily."

Antiquity thought Chekker meant their find—and maybe he did—but he had already disappeared from her side, flying toward the edge of the wasteland where her mountain home met vast desert distances. She scrambled over the sands, fearing to see what she already knew was there.

"Dust rising," she growled, barely able to breathe.

"It is."

"Scavengers?"

The robot gained altitude, just enough to get a better view without compromising their whereabouts. "Too far away. But the dust pattern suggests it."

"Close that cockpit, Chekker," Antiquity ordered, already moving to bury the giant mech again with her airbike. "Remember this location. And let's get out of here. Now."

"I could not agree more, Grey-child."

Antiquity went to work.

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Eyes watched Antiquity as she returned to Solomon Fyre.

She knew whom they belonged to. This was not the first time. The Dreadth boys, who thought they were already men. Those who thought she was lesser than sand for being a Grey, despite that surname not belonging to her ancestors, her true family name once bearing the highest regard on her world. She cursed inwardly, as they darted from alley shadow to second story broken window to burned out machinery. The road bristled with the Dreadths, more than a dozen. It was not the beating that they might try to give if they caught her that worried Antiquity. How long had they been watching since she realized they had been following her? Did they know where she had gone? If so, her find and its relevance for her family were not safe. If not, they knew the direction she had returned from and were just curious enough to track her grav-trail into the wastes below Solomon Fyre.

To possibly discover and steal the mech from her anyway.

She slowed her airbike to a stop, touching the ground to observe a desert flower that had broken through the shattered streets of the once bustling desert city—trying to act as if she didn't know of their presence.

If she surprised them, there was a chance at escape.

She needed that surprise.

"The Dreadth are watching," Chekker shared at her shoulder.

"Shut it. I know," she growled, viewing the tiny purple petals, remembering a time when she had done this with her mother so long ago, using her side vision while trying to come up with a plan.

As if the Dreadths could sense her thoughts, four airbikes larger and more powerful than hers glided out at the same time—two in front of her and two behind.

She looked up then—the ruse done—and brought out her best two weapons.

Her fists.

It would not be the first time she brawled to blood with the Dreadths.

The two airbikes in front of her then parted to let a third through, this last one finer than the others. Manson Dreadth sat its seat easily, his large blue eyes piercing her like a hunting desert hawk. Antiquity stared back; she would show no fear. Manson was the oldest of the group, tall and rangy. Soon he would join his father, Jackson Dreadth, as a vice-Elder, to one day take his father's place as an Elder of Solomon Fyre.

Today that did not matter to him though. The sinking sun highlighted Manson's smug smile. She was trapped.

And he knew there was nothing she could do about it.

"Where you been, Antiquity Grey?" the eighteen year old questioned, his last word a drawn-out sneer.

"That is none of your concern," she said, anger rising.

"With you Greys, it is always my concern." Manson looked around at his kin who slowly melted from the city to surround her. He got off his airbike then, a coward made strong by numbers, and strolled toward her with his maddening smile. "You must be watched. You cannot be trusted. It was your great-grandmother who failed to protect Solomon Fyre when it needed it most. It is the reason even *speaking* your family's old name is punishable by *death*. Or have you forgotten history?" He smiled without a hint of humor. "Tell me, half-breed. What have you been up to? Mellex over there saw you leave this morning. And you've been gone all day, outside the safety of the city. So where? Where did you go, little *Grey* girl?"

"Dreadth-child, quit your advancement toward this position," Chekker ordered, still at Antiquity's shoulder. "It would be wise."

"I am no child, bot," Manson spat. "But you are right to worry."

When Manson would not stop his approach, the robot—originally built to coach sport but also protect those it tutored—flew to confront the boy. Manson did not slow. Just when Chekker was about to tase him, rocks thrown by the other Dreadth boys slammed into the bot. He went spinning through the air.

Giving Manson the space he needed to lunge at her.

Antiquity was ready. She threw the contents of her right fist—gritty sand she had gathered while looking at the flower. The boy fell back and raised his arms but it was too late. Manson roared in surprise and then pain, momentarily blinded. His Dreadth family members froze, not knowing what to do.

This was her chance.

Antiquity hit the throttle on her airbike to escape.

Manson was faster. Before the airbike powered up, he grabbed her by the wrist and flung her from it like a rag doll. "You Grey bitch!" Manson yelled, standing over her, his eyes red from the sand. The other Dreadth boys cheered. "You have no power over me. Not any more. Your family is dust. Just like you are going to be if you don't tell me what I want to know."

"I will *never* say," Antiquity hissed from the stone of the street.

"We will see about that."

Manson grabbed her again, his grip like steel. She fought and kicked and spit but it did her no good. She could only watch as his fist punched into her midsection, sending her back to the ground and gulping air.

"Desist, Manson Dreadth!" A voice boomed, powerful and as unmistakable as a desert lightning strike. "Now!"

Manson stood over Antiquity, fists clenched in rage. But now he looked for the source of the command. Antiquity knew it all too well.

It was her grandmother.

Matriarch Vestige Grey walked slowly toward Antiquity and Manson as if she had all the time in the world, passing the two Dreadth boys and their airbikes at the top of the street like their threat didn't exist. Eyes, blinded during childhood, surveyed the scene with the intent of a thundercloud, her bitter lips deepening wrinkles already aged craggy. Three tiny balls of white light hovered around her: navigation bots, touching her lightly when obstacles entered her path. The leader of the Grey family did not deviate from her course—each step prepared, methodical, and precise.

To those who did not know her, she would seem serene as she glided down the ruins of lower Solomon Fyre.

To Antiquity, her grandmother had never been so angry.

"Manson Dreadth, you and your family will leave with the faculties that brought you to this moment," Vestige said coldly. "If not, you will find it difficult to do so. And once your father hears of this, I doubt he will be pleased with you."

Manson did not move despite Antiquity crawling back toward her airbike. "You have no power over me, you old crone," he laughed. "My father—"

"Your father knows I see beyond my lost sight," Vestige said. "If I stand before the Elders—especially at a time so close to your ascendance into their ranks—and reveal the video record of your assault upon my granddaughter, you will lose favor among many of them. Worse, you will weaken your father's standing as leader of the Council. Are you willing to risk that and your future over so pert a girl?"

Manson looked at Chekker, who floated nearby. The bot possessed the ability to record events. The Dreadth boy gauged the blind woman. Were her words true? Antiquity did not know. It did not take long for Manson though. He grinned a nervous smile.

"I will be watching you, Antiquity," he said, pointing at her. "And watching for your secret out in the desert."

With that, he whistled at the Dreadth boys.

In moments, they were gone.

"I am fine," Antiquity said, dusting herself off while her grandmother stopped before her. The punch to the gut lingered.

Matriarch Vestige Grey gave her a disapproving scowl. "You are a Grey. You have to be."

"How'd you know they'd attack me? Know where I was?"

"Know? The blind always know." Vestige took a deep breath. "And I worry about you constantly, Antiquity. You are the last of us, our family buried beneath the power of history's Dreadths." The old woman paused, hands behind her back. "I worry because I know of your forays outside Solomon Fyre. I know you yearn."

"Yearn?"

"For something more. Like I did in my own youth."

Frowning, Antiquity turned away, preferring the ruins to her grandmother's always discerning gaze. The wasted city, after all, could not judge her. A century earlier, Solomon Fyre had been a bustling community, its roots deep and expansive mech eyries rising high above. These lower levels of the city had long been abandoned, though, much of it destroyed and left to decay when the Splinter War had come to their planet. Most of the inhabitants now lived in the upper city away from the numerous dangers prowling the desert. The ruins she now stood within were a graveyard, its ghosts silencing all.

Vestige Grey waited, leaving Antiquity further unsettled. Her grandmother always knew how to make her talk.

"Do you think they would have killed me?" Antiquity asked.

The old woman squinted. "Maybe. The Dreadth family has always delighted in violence against others. And that Manson... he likes it more than most his age."

"Why though?"

"Men teach boys, who eventually become men fathering more boys," Vestige said. "It is a vicious cycle. And it is the way of the world now. Perhaps it always has been."

"It wasn't always so," Antiquity pressed. "We once ruled."

"True. It wasn't always so. And yes, our family did once rule, my mother the last. Before the Dreadths took over. Before we became Grey-shamed." The old woman frowned, looking at a fading sun she could not see. "The past. It is ever present in the now. Yet neither the past nor the present should be sacrificed for the future. You are that future. You have to be *smarter*, Antiquity. We will not be Grey forever. The time will come when we regain our true name. But giving those in power reason to kill us is not the way to that end. We will bide our time." Vestige gripped Antiquity's shoulder then. "Do not give Manson Dreadth a reason to *ever* attack you. Ever."

"He's older than me. Almost on the Council, if street rumors are true," Antiquity said, shaking her head. "No one becoming an Elder should be so cruel."

"Rebelling is what youth does when faced with adulthood." Vestige gave her a look, and Antiquity couldn't tell if her grandmother meant the Dreadth or her. "Do not forget, Antiquity. Manson is his father's son, protected by him. You do not have that luxury," Vestige said. She paused, cocking her head. "Do you have a secret I should know about, my granddaughter? Manson mentioned such a thing."

Antiquity cursed inwardly, unsure of what to even say. She hadn't had time to figure out what she was going to do with her find.

"Antiquity unearthed a mech, just east of Solomon Fyre, Matriarch Grey," Chekker answered for her, the bot hovering over the airbike.

"Chekker!"

"A mech?" Vestige Grey asked, brow furrowing. "That can't be possible."

"It is quite possible," the bot replied. "We found it this morning."

Her grandmother's grip on her shoulder lost its tenderness. "Is this true?"

She couldn't hide her discovery now.

"It is."

Vestige had gone as still as a statue. Antiquity couldn't read her.

"The mech is complete, unmolested," Chekker added, hovering now before the matriarch. "Treachery brought it down, its systems compromised by a source from the outside, before it could even join the Splinter War. That's why it is intact. It never made it to the battle."

"I told you to stay away from these wastes, Antiquity, this very morning," Vestige said, voice low. She shook her head, thinking to say something more and deciding against it. Instead, she looked toward the desert. "How did you find this mech?"

"The wind storm yesterday. Must have tore enough sand away from one of its hands. And we came upon it," she said, giving Chekker a dark look but the sharing of her secret giving rise to excitement. "I uncovered enough of it and Chekker opened its cockpit. I covered it back over with sand, to keep it safe."

"Antiquity Grey speaks the truth, Matriarch," the bot said before Vestige could comment. "I opened the faceplate. The driver is one of your house and, based on uniform and biologic presence, it is my belief that it is your mother, Laurellyn Grey."

Chekker had not told Antiquity that. She had assumed the driver had been a man. Fresh excitement replaced any pain Manson had given her. Had she actually found her great-grandmother?

The blind woman did not respond at first. She had let go of her granddaughter's shoulder and folded her hands before her. Those hands were shaking a bit.

"Her surname was *not* Grey, Chekker," Vestige murmured finally.

"It is the surname I am charged—"

"What proof do you offer?" Vestige asked, cutting the bot off.

"None. The proof remains buried in the sands," the bot admitted. "I did not have time to copy the mech's system and data."

"Chekker broke into the mech. I can verify what he saw with the uniform, at least. It was of our family." Antiquity took a deep breath but tears sprang into her eyes anyway. "They killed her, didn't they? The Dreadths. It's the treachery Chekker mentioned. That's why she never joined the battle. She didn't run away as the Dreadth's charged."

"Our two families have hated one another for a long time," Vestige said, fully composed once more. "And the one family that most benefited from her disappearance was the Dreadths. My mother was a strong woman. A stronger leader. I was young then, younger than you are now, and even I knew how dangerous she could be—and how precarious her position. We thought her mech obliterated, no evidence left. The Dreadths have ruled ever since that day, under the yoke of the Imperium. And they have worked hard to destroy our family name, erase it from history, and ensure it never rises again."

"If that's true, and the data inside the mech can be gathered, this could change all of that, grandmother!" Antiquity said, her excitement returning again.

"How?"

"If the people of Solomon Fyre know the truth—"

"They will what, child? Revolt?" Vestige shook her head. "This is a hard life with harder lessons. They would find a way to kill us before such information could be used." The grandmother moved before the granddaughter and, taking the younger's hands in her own, gave Antiquity a solemn look as if her eyes could see all too clearly. "Once women held high offices on Erth. Women flew through its clouds. Women were every bit as strong as men. Especially in our family. Once," she said. "No more. Remember those days, Chekker? The strife. The blood. The death. The women of Solomon Fyre have been ground beneath the boot heel of Dreadth men for decades now. And there is nothing we as Grey women can do about it that won't lead to our destruction."

"I am ordering you, as your matriarch, to leave that mech buried. For now."

Antiquity pulled free of the other's leathery grip. It was all she could do to keep from screaming.

"No. That is the very thing we should *not* do."

Vestige darkened. "You are naïve and foolish, Antiquity. I have seen what happens to those who challenge the Dreadths," the old woman hissed, growing angry. "The men, gone. Buried in the mines. Women too. I have lives to keep safe beyond your own. If you do this, I will have to denounce you as a Heretic, in public before the Elders. You often do the opposite of what I tell you. It will be the only way to keep the few of us left alive. There will come a time when your discovery will matter. For all of us. That time is not now. Not yet."

"History has proven Matriarch Grey's words as correct," Chekker agreed, the bot now hovering before Antiquity. "I too have witnessed it."

"I will break that history then," Antiquity said defiantly.

Vestige stood tall and straight, like a blade about to fall.

Long moments passed.

Then with her three guiding balls of light swirling about her, she turned and walked back the way she had come.

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Antiquity sat with elbows on table and chin on hands, bored.

The vid-view taking up the entire wall splashed vivid images of Erth's past, the lesson her grandmother gave Antiquity in a hidden room of their eyrie home. Vestige stood in the room's corner, talking about the Old Era's climate crisis and how it began, her three balls of light swirling about her head and notifying her of what scenes came across the vid-view. Antiquity sighed, fidgeting in her chair. All she wanted to do was sneak away and revisit the area where the mech remained buried. If it took sitting through a lesson to placate her grandmother so Antiquity could avoid suspicion of her true intentions upon waking, she would do it. But she didn't have to be happy about it.

"Antiquity, please pay attention," Vestige said, pulling her granddaughter back into the present lesson.

Antiquity stopped fidgeting and sighed again. "You should be telling me more about the mech," she said before she could take it back.

Rather than getting angry at her, Vestige took a deep breath. "Why do you think we are talking about all of this?"

"I meant how the mech works and the Splinte—"

"I know what you meant," Vestige cut her off, pausing the vid-view featuring the oceans of Erth rising as the polar ice caps melted.

The two said nothing more, at an impasse for how to proceed.

"You aren't mad at me?" Antiquity asked finally. "About finding the mech?"

Vestige gave her granddaughter a reproachful look. "Do try to focus, Antiquity. This is an important lesson, and it's one I have not taught you in many years. It is always wise to return to a lesson if it is important to do so."

"I don't understand why we are going over this again. What could be important about this one?" she huffed. She looked at the vid-view, with its grainy Old Erth footage. "It's not like it matters. It's ancient history."

"All history matters, dear heart," Vestige said. "Especially now. What is past may yet become prologue."

Antiquity looked down and picked dirt from beneath her fingernails.

"Whatever *that* means."

Vestige moved from the vid-view's corner and sat next to Antiquity. "It means pay attention. It will matter one day," she said, gesturing to the wall she could not see. "Now, let us look at the Old Era." The vid-view resumed, featuring an Erth that was quite different from the one they knew. The land masses were much larger while both poles featured massive glaciers. As the ice shelves retreated from a warming Erth, the melted water entered the oceans and land masses shrunk. "How did the Imperium come to be?" Vestige asked.

Antiquity gave into the lesson, knowing she had to complete it before her grandmother would let her go. "The Imperium is not an alien race as so many think. They were once us. They were an exploration colony sent into space to discover a new planet if our own could no longer support life."

"That's right," Vestige said. The vid-view changed to footage of an enormous colony spaceship traveling into the void of space. "Worried about planetary extinction, the Erth's people united to search space. There were life-sustaining planets discovered to be visited. These brave explorers traveled far into an unknown. But those left behind did not succumb to Erth's climate changes. They survived." She paused. "Meanwhile, space became a crucible for those who left and,

after millennia, they evolved into the Imperium, ruled by an iron fist to survive among the stars, warped by fascist principles."

"And the generations in space without Erth gravity and our sun changed their appearance," Antiquity shared.

"Yes, they are our kin but altered," Vestige said. The vid-view shimmered again, this time showing Solomon Fyre during the time it was Erth's capital city. "Before the Imperium decided to return to this planet, much changed during the millennia of their absence. Humanity survived on Erth too, adapting. Solomon Fyre became the capital city, although it maintained the sovereignty of other cultures like the *arabi*, the *persai*, the *cathari*, the rarely seen *atlanti*, and others. By the time your great-grandmother came into power, Erth had already harnessed the great power of mech technology, but Laurallyn Angelus continued to lead that effort. Until merchants from the Imperium reestablished contact with Erth. We now know the merchants were merely spies, used to learn how Erth fared before the Imperium's massive army retook the planet. Thankfully, your great-grandmother did not wholly trust those merchants, making her readier for the assault that would follow. It was all for naught though, obviously."

"Is that why the Imperium attacked Solomon Fyre first?" Antiquity asked, trying to understand why her great-grandmother was such a threat. "Because she was the leader capable of rallying Erth's other groups?"

"No one really knows," Vestige said, clearly pleased that Antiquity had decided to take part in the lesson. "We know they wanted the planet's natural resources, to maintain their empire and grip on us all. Most of the planet's mech might existed here, in Solomon Fyre. It makes sense they would eliminate the most difficult threat first. It's what I would have done, no doubt. Especially with the other ruling families here."

Antiquity nodded. "So why did the Dreadths sabotage my great-grandmother? Surely they are just as blameworthy as the Imperium. All the more reason to reveal their treachery to the world."

"I said to not provoke the Dreadths," Vestige said, darkening. She took a deep breath, holding her anger at bay. "Remember who the true enemy is, Antiquity. It is not the Dreadths. They merely took advantage of a situation. The Imperium took control of Erth and destroyed our way of life. Remain focused on the present and the future it may lead to in time."

Antiquity stared hard at her grandmother, not that the other could tell. "And what is that future, grandmother, if we do not first take back what is ours from the Dreadths?"

"The Dreadths are only a part of the problem. The Imperium rules from Eroda, Erth's new capital. There, Sentinel One resides. It is the only mech allowed by law on the planet and it is controlled by the Imperium Royals who live there. If Royal Ricariol Wit discovers what you found in the sands, Sentinel One will likely raze Solomon Fyre to the ground," Vestige said. "Trust me. I am old and have seen much. I have a plan to deal with the Dreadths. Always."

"What plan?"

"In time, you will come to know it and see as I do," Vestige said. "In time."

Antiquity nodded. But she hated feeling like a beaten dog. She wanted to fight back, tired of being Grey-shamed and all it meant.

"Maybe you should go play with the twins," Vestige added, switching off the vid-view. She stood, hands folded in front of her. "I can tell that you care little for this day's lesson. Be safe. And stay away from the Dreadths. We will resume this line of study tomorrow. It is important to do so."

Antiquity leapt out of her chair, excited to be free. But she wouldn't be going to see her friends Kaihli and Elsana as her grandmother suggested.

She had plans of her own.

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As the heat of the day began to take hold, Antiquity Grey had already uncovered the helmeted head of the mech.

She had departed Solomon Fyre after yet another lesson, Vestige finishing the history lecture about the Imperium's origins begun the previous day. Antiquity had left her eyrie home then, heading for the desert and its secret. It had not taken Antiquity long to remove Laurellyn Grey from her harness and gently place her within a mort-shroud. She had done so with special care. The mummified remains of her ancestor were light, nothing but skin, hair and bone. She would be given honorable rest—fired to ash and loosed upon the winds of her former eyrie. Given the freedom she had earned.

Now, with the sun beating down on them, Chekker continued to copy what the mech knew. The gathered information would help Antiquity disprove the history that had resulted in the shaming of her family.

"The mech is named Saph Fyre."

"What?" Antiquity asked, pulled from her thoughts.

"The mech," the bot said from within the cockpit. "Its name is Saph Fyre. Quite clever, really, given its home and original appearance."

"Yes, that is the name of my great-grandmother's mech," Antiquity said, remembering Vestige's history lessons. "Hard to believe this is the last mech of Solomon Fyre. A lost treasure."

"When I was created, so long ago now, the eyries were occupied by more than a hundred mechs," Chekker shared, spinning while he continued his work. "Each one served a different secondary purpose, with distinct capabilities. But every driver was charged with the defense of the city. You have seen video of them taking to the skies." Antiquity nodded. "Even for one such as I, a machine, it was a marvel."

"Maybe the skies above Solomon Fyre will see it happen again," she said, imagining it.

"There is functionality here."

It took Antiquity a few moments to realize the bot had changed subjects. "What do you mean?" she asked.

Chekker left the cockpit and flew toward the mech's arm. There he began to spin, the hexagons of his round body become a blur, until light emanated from him.

On the steel plating, images appeared.

The interior of the cockpit. The view as the mech flew from a younger, brighter, and more civilized Solomon Fyre.

And its driver, Laurellyn Grey.

"The last moments catalogued by the mech," Chekker explained.

Antiquity watched as a woman, with younger but all too similar features to those of her grandmother, flew through the skies above her eyrie, to confront an invading force intent on pillaging Erth's ore resources. Before her, battalions of mechs flew, while she remained behind, orchestrating their efforts. When the Splinter War's first engagement arrived above Solomon Fyre, explosions tearing apart the skies as the two forces met, Laurellyn Grey was ready. She yelled orders and her commanders reacted, pushing the enemy back. As the battle continued beyond its

initial clash, it was clear to Antiquity that the leadership of Laurellyn Grey would see them through the worst of it.

But then the interior of Saph Fyre went mostly dark. There had been no attack, nothing to warrant the cause. Laurellyn Grey panicked as the gear and goggles that allowed her to control the mech detached from her without permission. Saph Fyre immediately began to plummet. Tears filled Antiquity's eyes. She watched her great-grandmother scream into her com-apparatus for aid. Dead air. No response.

As mechs exploded in the sky above, the rain of burning metal a storm falling to the desert, Saph Fyre plowed into the sands, her visuals of the battle going black, a void of misinformation.

The images Chekker had pulled from the mech died.

Antiquity felt ill, the kind of sickness that would never wholly go away.

"That is the end, Grey-child."

"Did you find out why that happened to her?" Antiquity asked.

The bot stopped spinning. "A hidden molecu-virus, activated when she gained a certain elevation."

"Sabotage then. The Dreadths?"

"The Dreadths are the probable culprits, given the time period. But no certainty can be gained from the evidence."

Antiquity wanted to punch something. She had wanted real proof that the Dreadths had been behind her family's fall. The video and the existence of the molecu-virus corroborated that Laurellyn Grey had been murdered. The effect of her death could not be ignored; leaderless, the mech corps lost the battle for Erth's capital city. The planet fell quickly then and resulted in her family's removal from power. Antiquity could clear their name and be Grey no more, but the Dreadths would still lead the Elders.

She suddenly realized how difficult all of this would be.

As she thought about what to do, Chekker gained elevation in a sudden burst, the bot sensing something.

"Danger approaches, Grey-child. Enter the mech cockpit. Now."

Antiquity struggled out of the mech's hole instead, first looking toward the desert. She saw nothing there. When she turned back toward home, her heart leapt up into her throat, pounding so hard she could feel it. Sand dust. Lots of it. It swirled up into the sky, higher than any one airbike could kick it.

"We have to get out of here, Chekker!" Antiquity yelled.

She reached her airbike. The sand dust that had come from the direction of Solomon Fyre whipped about her even as several airbikes flew past, circling the location of the mech in a blur. There were at least a dozen, maybe more. She looked over at Chekker, who hovered by her shoulder. The bot did not move, waiting. She did the same. Her grandmother always said keeping calm was the most important aspect in life; she knew panicking now would avail her nothing.

There was no doubt though. She was in more danger than the previous day.

"Look, boys. A mech!"

Above her, on the sands overlooking Saph Fyre, Manson Dreadth sat upon his airbike, pulling back his goggles and looking at the mech. When his eyes finally met Antiquity's, he grinned all the more. She saw avarice there. And conquest.

"And look at this!" he said, laughing. Other Dreadth boys joined him, all of them snickering with evil intent. "Antiquity Grey and her broken-down soccer ball bot. Out here in the wastes where

anything can happen." Manson gestured. The other boys spread out, taking up positions about the hole in the desert that contained the mech. "I wonder. Where is your *bitch* of a grandmother now, hmm? She certainly wouldn't leave the city, as crippled as she is." He paused, grinning all the more. "That means you are alone. That means you are *mine*."

"Manson, you now know my secret," Antiquity said, turning to look at Saph Fyre and thinking quickly as she backed into the hole again. "You can have all of this. Impress your father with it. And the Elders. If—"

"If I let you go," the boy finished.

"This is a major find," she continued, taking a risk. She hoped Chekker had finished copying the mech's files. "Think about it. You would be the hero of Solomon Fyre! Remembered forever!"

"I will be anyway," Manson said, getting off of his airbike. "Especially if my father can use it against the Imperium. But none of that matters because you won't be around to see it." Antiquity saw he would do more than beat her. "You are a Grey," he continued, pulling a knife. "There is nothing you can do to stop what comes next."

Violence in his eyes, Manson approached her.

"Grey-child, prepar—"

"No!" a small boy screamed. "Look!"

Manson spun around, pulling a lance-shot from his side belt. All Dreadth eyes turned toward the vast wastes of the desert. Antiquity could not see what had caught their attention. But she knew terror when she heard it.

"They are upon us, Manson!"

"I will *not* leave this to *scavengers*!" Manson snarled.

Danger outweighing their leader's wishes, the Dreadths scattered. Most gained their airbikes and were already jetting toward Solomon Fyre's safety. Three others were not so fortunate—either cut off from their airbikes by the approaching threat or following the direction that Manson chose to take, they jumped into the giant hole with the mech.

With Antiquity.

"Do you *have any weapons?*!" Manson thundered in her face.

"Just Chekker," she stammered.

"Then we both die today, Antiquity Grey. Make it count," Manson growled, the large boy already leading them to confront what approached.

"What are we going to do?" Antiquity whispered to Chekker.

"You will fight. And so will I. Kick me into the midst of the scavengers when they appear," the bot ordered. "I will do what is necessary."

"You will be destroyed!"

"Trust in me, Grey-child. And after, enter Saph Fyre's driver seat."

Confused and frightened, Antiquity did as the bot asked. Grabbing Chekker from the air, she ran up the dune to view the desert. She almost dropped him. Scavengers were converging on them, undoubtedly drawn by the dust storm the Dreadths had kicked into the sky. Seven large air-trikes were approaching fast. She could see the desert-hardened men, women, and even children, their skin tanned to leather by the sun, their matted, greasy hair wild and tattooed bodies enhanced by off-world cybernetics. They reaped the sands for metal, killing all they crossed. They would be upon them in moments.

Down on his belly, Manson fired his lance-shot, over and over. Where he struck the air-trikes, armor sizzled and rent apart. But it did nothing to slow them down. They just kept coming, over twenty scavengers strong. All willing to kill for the metal they desperately needed to survive.

When the scavengers were almost upon them, so close she could see the implants in their eyes, Antiquity took one more look at Chekker.

And kicked him.

The metal ball flew through the air as he had been originally created to do, faster than his own flight could ever take him. All eyes watched as he arced and fell back to the desert. When he struck the sand in the scavengers midst, he exploded, the detonation deafening and tearing apart the air, sands, and scavengers. Three of the air-trikes were blown off their grav-stabilizers, passengers screaming, dying, and flying in all directions. Antiquity and Manson both hid behind the dune as survivors shot back, their phase-cannons turning swaths of sand to glass and smaller hand-held flash-fires discharging Antiquity's direction.

She did not wait. Antiquity followed Chekker's final order. With tears stinging her eyes—tears of sadness for her friend's loss, tears for the frustration of being unable to save herself—she tore back toward the mech, hoping she could figure out how to close the faceplate and have protection.

When she entered, the faceplate closed by itself.

—Strap in, Grey-child. It will enhance your safety—

"Chekker!" she yelled, wiping her eyes. "Is that you?"

—It is—

Sorrow changed to hope. "But you just blew up!"

—You saw a copy of me end, the one I made to unlock Saph Fyre today. I am very much here, in this new form. As is my duty, I will protect you at all costs. The mech does possess power, though limited. Strap in. And make it count—

She did just that. As Laurelyn Grey had once done a hundred years earlier, Antiquity strapped herself into the harness. It felt right, taking her great-grandmother's seat. The moment the last buckle clicked into place, the wall behind the chair opened and various pieces of gear settled onto her—the apparatus that would give her control over the mech. The mech adjusted for her smaller stature, the controls tightening about her, making her one with it. When the final piece of gear, a set of goggles, clicked into place over her eyes, a hum vibrated through Saph Fyre, its engines and machinery coming to life even as it kept her from death.

She was no longer Antiquity Grey. She sensed that. She was not the girl who had been raised to ignore hope. She was not the girl who had been subservient to all Solomon Fyre families, recompense for her great-grandmother's false failure. She was not the girl who hid from the Dreadths at every turn.

As she merged with the mech, feeling its energy joined with her own, Antiquity realized she had become so much more.

And never again would she turn back.

"Chekker, did you remove the molecu-virus?" Antiquity asked.

—I removed it when I discovered it—

"Good. I am free then."

Moving her limbs inside the cockpit, Antiquity drove Saph Fyre to rise from the desert that had been her grave for so long, the mech returning to the world even as sand slid off her to fall like rain. Antiquity could feel resistance in the mech's joints but Saph Fyre's systems were already

expunging the decades of grit that had accumulated, giving her more freedom with every moment. Through her goggles, Antiquity saw what Saph Fyre viewed, the scavengers frightened and already firing whatever weapons they had at her. She also saw Manson and the other Dreadth boys still hiding, the looks of awe and hope on their upturned, sandy faces gratifying to her.

Still learning how to operate her, Antiquity got Saph Fyre to her hands and knees just as the scavengers attacked, their air-trikes spreading out and launching a barrage of cram-missiles and spike-rips.

—Incoming fire, Grey-child—

Antiquity braced herself. The blasts slammed into the side of Saph Fyre, knocking her sideways. To her surprise, they did little damage. Apparently the weapons were a negligible threat to her superior design.

Making a fist, she hammered the closest air-trike. It and its occupants vanished deep into the wastes.

—The Dreadths are about to be attacked—

Antiquity turned to look. Chekker was right. Two air-trikes had circumvented her counter-attack, driving behind her to where the boys hid. Before she could do anything, one launched spike-rips at her knee and the other fired cram-missiles at the boys.

She didn't hesitate.

While the spike-rips hooked into her knee plating, rending parts of the joint, Saph Fyre batted the cram-missiles away, to explode harmlessly on her palm, far from where the boys hunkered.

They would remain in danger until the scavengers left or were destroyed.

"Do you trust me, Manson Dreadth?" Antiquity questioned, voice booming from Saph Fyre.

The Dreadth boy made no move, even as the others gripped him in panic.

"Who am I?" Saph Fyre thundered. Manson looked back toward the desert, where the scavengers were regrouping.

"Antiquity Grey!"

"No!" she said, "What is my *real* name?"

The scavengers were drawing closer, their numbers more than Antiquity could completely stop at one time. In a few moments, Manson and his kin would be killed. Darkness and understanding furrowing his brow, he stood, fists at his side.

Angered by his only choice.

"*You are Antiquity Angelus!*"

Hearing her true surname exhilarated her as never before. It was all she could do to focus on the present. Saph Fyre used both of her massive hands to gently scoop the boys from their perilous situation. They were scared—more from her action than what transpired below—but Antiquity didn't care. It was the only way to keep them safe. And safe they had to be kept for this to succeed. She stood, the mech towering over the desert wastes. Kicking an air-trike that attempted to rope Saph Fyre's feet while the others circled about her, she took one step and crushed it, killing the murderous thieves within.

She did not feel sorry for them.

Unlike her family, they had chosen their crime.

The remaining scavengers, understanding they were outmatched, sped away, leaving their dead behind, to vanish deep into the wastes again.

Antiquity took a deep breath. "Was all of that recorded, Chekker?"

—Every moment—

She lowered the Dreadths back to the sand. The three smaller boys did not wait to thank her. They jumped on their airbikes and were already speeding back to Solomon Fyre, without even a look backward.

All except Manson. He stood staring up at Saph Fyre's faceplate. He said nothing. There was nothing to say. She had saved his life and the lives of his brothers and cousins. And she knew he was trying to figure out why.

He would know all too soon. When his father and the Elders watched video of the sabotage that had murdered Laurellyn Angelus. When his father and the Elders watched video of him illegally screaming her true family name.

As well as saving his life.

Shaking his head, Manson left, riding his airbike back the way he had come, the small, singular trail of dust a reminder of the path she must take as well.

"I did it, Chekker." She smiled. "We did it. For our family."

—For our family —

If Antiquity could have hugged her friend, she would have. "Do you think grandmother will be pleased by this?" she asked.

—She will be angry. And immensely proud—

"Do I have enough power to make it back?"

—Saph Fyre does. As long as you do not return by flight—

Delicately picking up the mort-shroud containing Laurellyn Angelus, Antiquity walked home, moving her legs in her cockpit, the mech matching her step for step. She had no idea how to use the other systems of the mech—its firepower, its flight—but she would one day. All of that would take time, time she had won for her entire family.

The days to come held promise.

And Antiquity Angelus would forge her own destiny.

2

That promise dwindled over the next week.

Antiquity fidgeted while her grandmother glared darkly at her. The two were with CHKR-11 in an antechamber just outside the Hall of Elders, where the leaders of the city met. Few words had been spoken since they arrived that morning. Given new form after his destruction in the desert, Chekker hovered to her right, also quiet, his sentience now held within a new chrome sphere without blemish or markings. Vestige Grey and her robot companion crowded either side of Antiquity, as if to prevent her fleeing. It only left her feeling more annoyed.

They had been summoned by the Council of Elders. Antiquity guessed the reason easily enough. Saph Fyre. She had driven the mech through Solomon Fyre, excited to share her discovery with the city. It had not gone as she imagined. No cheers. No fanfare. Only fear from those fleeing before her. Whether the city remembered the mech or thought it part of the Imperium, it didn't matter. By the time she returned Saph Fyre to its former eyrie bay, only a few suspicious onlookers watched from the shadows.

Vestige had remained quiet since Saph Fyre returned home, choosing to focus on the moment rather than the events leading to it. She had touched the mech's faceplate for only a moment before sequestering herself with other Grey leaders who lived in the eyrie with them. Antiquity knew why. Having marched Saph Fyre through the city, the Imperium would undoubtedly learn of it, putting them all in danger.

Thinking it all through again, Antiquity bit at the already shorn fingernails on her right hand.

"Stop that," Vestige snapped.

Antiquity did but glared at her blind grandmother anyway.

"And don't stare at me so, child," the old woman said, smoothing imaginary wrinkles from Antiquity's dress for what had to have been the hundredth time. "Or I will slap those eyes back front again."

Chekker lightly tapped her shoulder with his round body.

Even a robot could empathize.

Antiquity stared ahead once more, cutting off any number of angry retorts that sprang immediately to mind. One thing was for sure. The dress she wore did nothing to improve her mood.

"Why are you making me do this, grandmother?" Antiquity asked again. She had not heard a good answer yet. "Why are we here? Why the dress? The Dreadths *cannot* be trusted. They will destroy our fami—"

"Every action has a consequence, Antiquity," Vestige answered. "And your actions in the desert have more consequences than most. Especially now."

"But I did nothing wrong!"

"No?" Vestige smiled tightly. "Yet here we are *anyway*. Although I foresaw this moment and have set plans into motion to remedy it."

Silence fell over the room, as thick as a sand storm. Antiquity hated the feeling, hated the waiting. She had no idea what her grandmother meant. She also never would have thought that the discovery of her great-grandmother's powerful mech would result in such turmoil. The debating. The fear. And paranoia. The Elders, with Jackson Dreadth at their head, had moved to acquire the giant battle machine first. For the betterment of the city, they had all decided. When Antiquity—with her grandmother and family standing by her side—had not given in, Jackson Dreadth tried to take it by cunning. Several spies attempted to steal the mech from its berth. For naught. Members of their Grey community fought off every clandestine assault, leaving Saph Fyre safe. For now.

All while the Elders remained neutral, waiting to see how events played out. Politics. She hated the word now. Politics were the practice of influencing others for personal gain. Before discovering the mech, Antiquity had known nothing of politics. Over the last week she had learned all too quickly.

She wanted to roar her frustration like the dragons of old.

Instead, Antiquity did not do so. Like her grandmother had advised, she waited to see what new ploy Jackson Dreadth now attempted to gain Saph Fyre for his own. "Let us leave, Grandmother," Antiquity pressed again, no longer caring what the elder Dreadth was up to after waiting several hours. "We've been summoned but no one is seeing us."

Just as Vestige Grey seemed uncertain for the first time that day, the heavy mechanisms of the great steel door unlocked and it opened finally. High Chamberlain Braun Pierce emerged, his long robes officious, his steely eyes as sharp as his role's reputation. She hated his pomp immediately.

"Family Grey," the young man said with gravity, his hands steepled before him—an odd display of respect for a family so long shamed. He only acknowledged Vestige. "The Elders await your presence within the Great Hall."

Antiquity and her grandmother shared a brief look. Vestige patted her then on the lower back, more of a push forward than encouragement. They walked through the door and entered the large hexagonal chamber beyond, its walls burnished steel and adorned with vid-views of the city's past, its ceiling lost to the darkness. Antiquity suddenly itched with how small she felt. All seats at the semi-circle taken but one, the Elders of Solomon Fyre turned their gaze on her from their high seats, adding to the feeling.

And one gaze was harsher than all the rest. Jackson Dreadth. He sat in the high-throne center seat while the Elders to his left and right remained one step below. A large metal fist rose behind him, once a part of a mech, a showing of strength. Antiquity did not shy from the Dreadth's

gaze, she would not show weakness in front of him. It was the only power she had. The leader of Solomon Fyre stared thoughtfully at her, handsome in the way that a desert rattler could be, arrogance in his very manner. Manson Dreadth, who looked a great deal like his father, sat in the last Elder seat on her left, his inclusion in the proceeding unexpected since she had not heard of his ascendance to the council. Unlike the last time she had seen him—when Antiquity saved his life—Manson looked everywhere but at her. That suited Antiquity just fine.

The Elders sat in power, men who had ruled Solomon Fyre for years if not decades. No women were allowed on the council in that time. Not since her great-grandmother's era when Laurelyn Angelus ruled and supposedly failed the defense of the entire city.

"This day is one worthy of recording in the High Histories of Solomon Fyre," Jackson Dreadth began, his even voice filling the chamber. He looked to Vestige and inclined his head in recognition. "It is with great joy that I welcome a Grey family no more, but one proudly reinstated to Angelus."

The Elders lightly tapped their gem-rings on the table, a sign of agreement and respect. Antiquity could not believe it. Her family had been like lepers for a hundred years, relegated to the lowest status in the city. To have the honor of the Angelus name reinstated was a dream not only held by her but all her relatives and forebears as well. Maybe there was hope for her family after all.

Yet it all rang hollow. It made no sense why Jackson Dreadth would allow his family's sworn enemy to regain respectful standing in society.

Antiquity held her breath.

"It is time to let the past remain there, for the betterment of all," Jackson Dreadth continued. He gestured to the High Chamberlain. The vid walls in the room came alive, each one showing various conflicts around the universe. "In some ways, the Imperium is at war with itself. As well as with those between the dark of the stars. These are difficult times. We have felt the effects of the chaos off-world. The planets of the government are fractured, and those larger conflicts draw the Imperium's gaze. We have an opportunity. For Erth to return to a role of prominence, this time within the Imperium. To be more than a speck in history." He paused. "The Grey-shame that has tainted one of the great ruling families of Solomon Fyre weakens us, not strengthens us."

Braun Pierce, whose role it was to record such meetings, was doing no such thing, his eyes piercing like a desert hawk's as he watched Antiquity. Some of the other Elders looked her way too from time to time.

"Vestige Angelus, I welcome your family returned to the Elders of Solomon Fyre. The vacant chair to my left shall now not be so. You bring wisdom to our city, with your years and your insight. Take it when you are ready, with all of our blessings. For it is not without giving up a piece of your own heart that you gain it." Jackson Dreadth gestured to the seat and then turned his gaze upon Antiquity. "Antiquity Angelus, in time, my dear child, you will be welcomed as the newest daughter named Dreadth."

Confusion at what had just been said crystalized into clarity when she looked at Manson Dreadth and saw his obvious misery.

He had known what she now knew.

New anger flooded through Antiquity. Her grandmother had used the sixteen year old's life to barter. For societal standing. *Used her.*

One word echoed inside her.

Betrayed.

"The families of Dreadth and Angelus shall be wedded through the union of my son Manson and Antiquity," Jackson Dreadth said. "And in so doing, begin the revival of Solomon Fyre, to take its place once again among the powerful cities of Erth."

"No!" Antiquity yelled, finally finding her voice. Vestige gripped her arm in sudden iron, but Antiquity pulled angrily away. "This can't be!"

"It is already done," Jackson Dreadth said.

"This is how you repay me for saving your awful son?" she raged. Shock worn off, the words would not stop. "By enslaving me to him?"

"Hush child," Vestige hissed in her ear.

"You did nothing of the sort, young one," the Elder leader said.

"I kept him safe!" Antiquity blurted, ignoring her grandmother's warning. The grip on her arm tightened, bony fingers filled with urgency. Antiquity did not care. "The scavengers from the wastes would have killed Manson and other members of your family if it were not for me and Chekker! We saved them all even though I didn't have to. It is you who should be *thanking* me, not *ruining* my life!"

"If you had not left the safety of our city, to cavort in the desert wastes for your own amusement, he would not have followed you to keep you safe."

"To keep *me* safe?"

"That's right," Jackson Dreadth leaned forward. The smile remained but it had lost all of its humor. "He found the mech once known as Saph Fyre just as you did. It is a shared event. And in that event, we will share our families."

Antiquity now understood. The marriage allowed the Dreadths to claim Saph Fyre as their own. In return, the Angelus name would be restored and Vestige would gain a seat on the city council. Antiquity looked upon the Elders now, looking for help. She did not find it there. Even Prather Anil—the oldest and thinnest among them who had always been kind to the Grey-shamed family—looked away. The men before her knew enough of the truth by now and would not go against Jackson Dreadth. Worse, the leader of the Elders had likely promised each of them whatever they desired in return for their silence.

None of her discovery mattered, it turned out. The mech had been found and, with it, an uncovered lie about her family decades old. All for naught.

The lie and evidence would be buried now in a different way.

With politics and marriage.

"A great philosopher once said, 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards,'" Jackson Dreadth continued. "We must *live*. This is a union that will invigorate Solomon Fyre's future. The past is the past and we have learned from it. Discovery of the mech is a fortuitous turn of events. *You* have the mech. *We* still possess the technology to replicate it, once proper stores of titanium are discovered. I have begun that undertaking. Putting aside this petty feud is the first step, though. The mech belongs to the people of our city. To us, and our future."

"There is no us," Antiquity argued, hating the words and their selfishness the moment she said them. "It is mine. I found it!"

"You aren't capable of driving it. Of doing what is necessary," Chat Higgum chimed in, a portly Elder whose family also hated the Grey-shamed. "You are just a girl."

"This *girl* was capable enough to kill those scavengers," she shot back.

"The Elders have watched the vid-view of what happened, Antiquity. CHKR-11 had more to do with thwarting the scavengers than you did," Vestige said, her grandmother finally weighing in.

She spun on her matriarch then. "You *sold me*, Grandmother. Betrayed me!"

"Vestige Angelus did no such thing, child. She is a practical woman," Jackson Dreadth said. Her grandmother did not turn toward her but instead kept her blind eyes facing forward. The fact she ignored Antiquity hurt all the more. "Do not let yourself be foolhardy, Antiquity Angelus. It is a weakness I do not condone in my own family, and family Angelus cannot afford it either. Not during this time.

"You will marry my son, Manson. And in turn, we will keep both families and an entire city safe."

* * * * *

Once the assembly dissolved, Antiquity felt the burn of tears.

She fought them, unwilling to show weakness in front of these men. It didn't matter. The Elders departed their Hall, nodding farewells only to Vestige, none of them giving Antiquity another glance. A means to an end, she meant nothing to them now. Only Manson gave her the briefest of looks, the younger Dreadth probably feeling as angry and cornered as she did. Antiquity ignored him. Instead she remained, rage and desperation mingling in ways she had never experienced. Jackson Dreadth had decided the Elders and the two Angelus would reconvene in three days to work out the official details of the forthcoming union. No time would be wasted. She would be forced into marrying Manson as if she were living earlier during Erth's Old Era.

The mech would be taken from her then, transferred to the Dreadth eyrie. The treasure of her past and the potential for her future lost.

All while her future became tied to a Dreadth she hated.

She rarely cried. Being Grey-shamed tended to harden hearts. But as her world collapsed about her, one thing kept her from shedding tears.

Anger toward her grandmother.

"That was unpleasant," Vestige sighed, finally breaking the quiet once the last Elder had left.

Antiquity said nothing. Silence was her only weapon.

"You need to learn to *think* before you speak, Antiquity," Vestige chastised. But her voice carried no reprimand. "If you are to be any use to family Angelus at all."

She bit her tongue.

"Do you not see what I am trying to do for *our family*, child?"

Before she could stop it, her anger rolled out of her. "Apparently, I'm no longer part of that family," she said sharply.

And ran for the door.

"Antiquity!" Vestige called after her.

She didn't stop. Vision shimmering, she fled the Hall of Elders, running through hushed hallways and finally out through the building's arched entry point into the hot afternoon. Dozens of people regarded her hurried appearance, but she paid them no heed, taking three steps at a time down into the primary square of Solomon Fyre, not knowing where she was going but getting there fast. She wanted to disappear. The upper city allowed for that, its populace bustling with cultures from all over Erth. Her own people were the majority, having settled Solomon Fyre's bedrock. The dark-skinned *persai* and their kindred *arabi*—the former in colorful silks, the latter

draped in holy black—walked throughout the crowds too, most of them visitors from far beyond the desert. Even a few Celestials mingled, their tall, lithe figures and milky, transparent skin covered by off-world metallic materials to ward off the burning sun. All about their own business.

She got lost among them. None of them would ever know how important a discovery she had made. Whatever hope she had discovered with the mech had been stolen from her. By the Dreadths. By her grandmother.

Antiquity had never felt so hurt.

Or alone.

Sweat making her even more uncomfortable in the dress, she slowed, to stop in front of the cooling spray of a circular fountain. In the center of it, a dragon statue with wings spread to the sky sat perched upon a concrete mech hand, an homage to the beasts that had once roosted in these mountains. But it was also a memorial to the destruction of Erth's mech capabilities. What she wouldn't give to fly like dragons, to leap into the air and leave the worries of the ground behind.

Then she remembered she possibly could fly. One day. If Saph Fyre was hers.

What would she do now? What *could* she do?

The familiar soft whir of a bot glided up next to her.

"I suppose you are going to tell me to talk to grandmother, eh, Chekker?"

"If you run again, he might."

Antiquity turned. Vestige Angelus stood there, hands folded and blind eyes watching Antiquity with the maddening solemnity that she always possessed, her three light orbs swirling over her head. Chekker floated beside her.

"I might have to," Antiquity said.

Vestige frowned. "I have never taught you to run from a fight."

"Hard to fight when you are sold to the very enemy you are to battle," Antiquity said, feeling the acid on her tongue.

Vestige stepped up to the rim of the fountain, beside her granddaughter. "I want you to listen to me, Antiquity, and listen well," she said, her face as grave as Antiquity had ever seen it. "There is more at stake here than pride. Or family honor. There is more at stake than your heart or a single mech—even a mech as nostalgic and important as Saph Fyre. You discovered a remarkable secret, not only the mech but how your great-grandmother died at the hands of the Dreadth family." She kept her voice a whisper that the crowds nearly drowned out. "But you do not know *why* Laurelyn Angelus died. The true reasons. Or the secrets she kept." She paused. "Secrets she passed on to me.

"It is fortuitous for our family," Vestige continued. "If we are careful, we will no longer be Grey-shamed. You noticed the High Chamberlain did not record our meeting with the Elders?" Antiquity nodded. "This whole thing can be plausibly denied by those men, and we must still tread carefully. The secret you discovered will right many wrongs. But we still do not have leverage quite yet, regardless of finding my mother's mech." When Antiquity didn't respond, Vestige squeezed her granddaughter's arm, a long-time act of affection for the old woman. "You are petulant. And reckless. And how you've lived this long is quite beyond me. Likely more testament to Chekker than anything else. You have a lot to learn, child, and it is now time to grow into adulthood. And quickly. The events put into motion when you found Saph Fyre are a desert storm threatening to scour our lives away. It is not only those in power here that we must be wary of."

"Who else? And what secrets are you talking about?" Antiquity questioned, hating her sudden curiosity and the forgiveness it offered. "Off-worlders?"

"You do not understand. There are secrets long buried here in Solomon Fyre. And in the deserts. And in the great cities beyond the deserts, within the mountains and forests of Erth's mid-line," her grandmother said. "Secrets desired by the Imperium. Secrets that my mother kept safe." She paused. "Secrets I will not speak of while in public. We must discuss this with the other Grey families who we have welcomed into our eyrie home. They have just as much to lose as we do. It should be discussed behind closed doors."

Antiquity heard the worry in her grandmother's voice. Their home had become a refuge for several families, all shamed in Grey like lepers. Antiquity hadn't given thought to them or her twin friends, Kaihli and Elsana.

Lives were at stake, lives her grandmother protected too.

"I understand," was all Antiquity said. "And the marriage?"

"In this, we must be strong. *You* must be strong." There was something Vestige wasn't saying. "We will stand with the Dreadth family. For how long they've been enemies, there are enemies around Erth that make the Dreadth family close allies. Friends, even." Her blind eyes looked up into the sky. She looked almost sad. "And pieces upon a game board that must be moved no other way."

Antiquity didn't like the grim woman who now stood by her side. There were times in the past when her grandmother had appeared in such a way—wistful, tired, and melancholic. Men who had been fighting the fervently religious *arabi* a world away had the same look, one of taking part in a long war that would never end and having seen and done things of which they were ashamed. Such men broke over time in a way that could never be mended, wearing their inner pain on the outside. Vestige Angelus had the same appearance now. It unsettled Antiquity more than the meeting with the Elders.

"What do you want from me?" Antiquity asked, softening her manner.

"I want you to study. Pay attention. To my words now and after. Memorize. Watch. Challenge authority when you must. Walk the path only you can walk. I do not want to relinquish Saph Fyre any more than you do. That mech is our only hope. All will become clearer in the days ahead." She paused. "It is up to you, as my granddaughter and the great-granddaughter of Laurellyn Angelus, to see our family bloom once more in these desert sands. Do you understand that, Antiquity? Do you understand the power you will soon wield?"

"But I will not yield my heart," she whispered. "How can I wield power when I will be married to Manson Dreadth of all people? I will be caged for his benefit."

"Listen to me, please, my dear. It is important. One day all too soon, you will stand before High Chamberlain Braun Pierce with Manson. This marriage is the key to the future. Not only for you, but for Erth." Vestige took Antiquity's hand in her own—and slid a titanium ring upon her granddaughter's finger that she had produced from nowhere. "The young always believe they can see the future. You do not know what lies ahead." She adjusted the ring with tender care. "Chekker will aid your education, of course. Listen to him always. He is a conscience when you have none."

Antiquity looked upon the gift. Four tiny chips of sapphire—the gem of family Angelus—lay embedded equidistant from one another. They glowed in the sunshine and matched the ring that sat upon her matriarch's own finger. "What is this for?"

"A promise. My strength now becomes your own."

"Sounds like you are preparing me for the end of the world."

Vestige Angelus smiled and looked down on her with white-filmed eyes. There Antiquity saw the tough love that had bound them her entire life. Her grandmother kissed Antiquity's cheek with dry, thin lips.

"Be the change of the moment," the old woman said. "My love for you would be remiss if I did not prepare you for the world such as it is, not the world we wish it would be. And that world is coming for us even as we speak."

* * * * *

"Awake, Antiquity," Chekker beeped. "And come quickly."

Antiquity woke from troubled sleep and rolled out of the bed placed in the makeshift living quarters within Angelus eyrie's workshop. The bot swirled in the air, waiting. As she dressed, rubbing her eyes, she looked from her sleeping friends on the floor to the giant standing mech just outside the large wall-window, the head of Saph Fyre level with her floor, its body taking up the rest of the berth below. For over a week the mech had been housed in the ancient manse of her family, in the same position her great-grandmother had stationed it. While she could have slept in her own bed—her room was only three corridors away—Antiquity decided to guard the mech in person. She would die before letting someone thief or destroy the mech in some way.

It also allowed her to closely oversee restoration. All of the tools, diagnostic systems, and repair bots that had lain unused since the destruction of Erth's mech corps in the Splinter War remained in the eyrie. Even Master Mechanic Brox Uphell remained, as an artificial intelligence construct but one working to bring Saph Fyre fully back online.

She knew it was all for nothing though. Finding the mech had started a chain reaction of events in her life, each one worse than the last.

What new event did she have to deal with now?

"Why are you up, Antiquity?" a sleepy voice asked.

Kaihli sat up, blearily looking at her data-wrist for the time. Her twin Elsana also stirred. They had helped Antiquity guard Saph Fyre, the long-time friends as excited as Antiquity by her find. The eyrie housed several Grey families, most shamed with the surname after the Splinter War. In the twins' case, their scientist great-grandfather had rebelled against the destruction of the city's university and de-education of the entire planet under the new authoritarian rule. It had cost his family their standing. The twins knew Antiquity better than anyone; they also knew how dangerous life had become for the Angelus family and those who lived with them.

"Where are you going?" Kaihli asked.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Elsana rolled out of her bed, the girl flexing her disabled and crooked right hand, dark eyes already searching for her clothes and shoes. The twins were identical but whereas both of Kaihli's arms were muscled from working with machinery, her sister possessed one shrunken and deformed arm given her at birth.

Antiquity shrugged. "I don't know. Chekker?"

The bot flew to the door, obviously wanting them to move faster. "A spacecraft has entered the skies over Solomon Fyre."

"So what? It happens all of the time," Kaihli yawned.

Chekker shot back to the twin, clearly agitated. Antiquity had never seen him like this before. "Not a craft like this. It is not a materials transport from the capital or off-world. It is a Celestial delegation warship."

Antiquity could hardly believe it. "That doesn't happen all of the time."

"No, it does not," Chekker agreed. "Please hurry."

Worry at the bot's adamancy growing sharper, Antiquity followed him with added haste. She was not alone. The twins were already dressed in the colorful silks of the *persai* and pulling their black hair back. "Then we are going too. Maybe a once in a lifetime thing," Elsana explained. "Besides. Someone has to watch over you."

Antiquity grinned at their new joke. The group left the room in a hurry, their pace quickened by the time they came to the ele-lift and called it to their floor. Antiquity couldn't believe it. A delegation warship. She had never seen one—none of them had—since the Imperium no longer needed that kind of might or presence after the Splinter War had destroyed all Erth mechs and the means to make them. The humor left behind by Elsana's joke vanished. For a Celestial delegate to arrive in an off-world warship could not be a good thing. It made Antiquity realize that she hadn't spoken to her grandmother since the return of the mech. Vestige had hinted at family secrets and then vanished into Grey meetings of her own.

Antiquity regretted not forcing her way into those meetings. She had spent her time in the eyrie working with Brox and Kaihli to return Saph Fyre to operational order. Now she worried this delegation had something to do with the mech.

With Chekker leading them, they made their way through the Angelus eyrie. Solomon Fyre butted up against a giant plateau, multiple eyries built into its sheer rock walls, once giving mechs easy access to the sky. Antiquity and her friends moved through corridors featuring doors to family units, eventually coming to an ele-lift. They rode it upward to a secured exit and, after Antiquity unlocked it with a genetic touch only she could provide, made their way into the cool night.

Darkness still lay over the city, its sable shroud pinpricked with starlight. Ascending a thin path, they gained the rocky heights over the Angelus eyrie, giving them a sweeping view of the city below and to the east. There, one of the planet's two moons had risen, white and pregnant. Dawn would waken Solomon Fyre soon.

Movement in the sky caught her eye then. Chekker was right. In the distance moved a shape darker than the rest, sleek and silent. A massive thing pricked with laze-cannons and starbursts, it glided over the city in a grid-like pattern. It did not stop and neither did it repeat its path.

"Why is it not landing?" Antiquity asked. "Not descending to one of the ports?"

"I don't know," Elsana said.

Kaihli shook her head. "It's almost like—"

"Like it is looking for something." A sinking feeling fell over Antiquity.

The three girls continued to watch. Antiquity's uneasiness became a slow-gnawing fear. The events of the last few days had occurred because of the mech. And here was an Imperium delegation warship, a rare sighting, apparently scanning for something. She might not have understood the ramifications of her actions before, but the Celestial visit could not be coincidence. The delegate was here for Saph Fyre.

She suddenly felt really small. Long-standing conflicts with Solomon Fyre families she understood. She had grown up with that reality. The warship, though? If it was here for the mech? Terrifying, due to the unknown.

After almost an hour and with dawn brightening the east, the warship finished its search and began to move toward their location.

"Where is it going now?" Elsana hissed.

No one answered. Antiquity held her breath. The warship drifted over them, emitting a soft hum as it moved, its fold-engines shut down and mag-propulsion engaged. The girls hunkered down behind several boulders. For one moment Antiquity thought it had stopped above them. Then she realized it had slowed further, drifting on the air, to finally stop at the neighboring eyrie directly to the north.

The pinnacle of family Dreadth's eyrie.

"We are too far away," Kaihli said. "We can't see who will disembark from that warship. And maybe who is meeting it."

"We need a better view," Antiquity agreed. "Come on."

They left their hiding place above the Angelus eyrie and sprinted back to the ele-lift, shot down several hundred feet and, taking a different hallway cutting through the mountain's heart, arrived at the remotest ele-lift still within Angelus control. After a quick ride upward, Antiquity and the others were outside again, upon an outcropping overlooking the landing platform of the Dreadth family. Even though they were too far away to hear, they would at least be able to see who exited the delegation warship—and who had possibly come for the mech. It didn't take long. As soon as the ship landed and anchored itself magnetically to the port, a large door at the ship's stern opened and a Celestial emerged, the man's skin so white it almost glowed in the night.

"A high-ranking Celestial," Kaihli whispered. "From the heart of the Imperium. Or maybe Erth's capital. This visit is an important one."

"How do you know that? All Celestials look the same, to me anyway," Antiquity said, frowning.

"Look at his guard retinue."

Antiquity did. While the Celestial elegantly glided onto the Dreadth landing platform—calm and serene, the folds of his white robes billowing—his guards spread out to protect their master, each one carrying high-tech laz-rifles at the ready and wearing a white starburst insignia upon their helmet.

The warship had not come from the stars. The insignia, only used by Erth's Celestials, denoted a retinue from the planetary capital city of Eroda.

"He is part of the ruling family of Erth," Antiquity guessed.

"That's not all," Elsana said. "Look."

It took Antiquity a moment before she realized what her friend meant. Moving to meet the Celestial from the eyrie's port doors came a middle-aged man and a familiar old woman—the latter possessed of three glowing orbs spinning about her head.

Vestige walked beside Jackson Dreadth.

"What is my grandmother doing down there?" Antiquity hissed.

Elsana shook her head. "None of this makes any sense, Antiquity. What have you gotten yourself into?"

Kaihli gripped rock. "Too far away to hear."

"You will. I have been given access to audio from Vestige Angelus's walking spheres," said Chekker. Antiquity continued to watch as the two heads of enemy families stopped before the Celestial, the delegate overlord to both.

After a few clicks, sound emanated from Chekker.

"...honored to meet you, Royal Declaration Wit," Jackson Dreadth said, bowing.

"I am not interested in the pleasantries of Solomon Fyre. Or your forced respect." The man had a high, tinny voice that unnerved Antiquity right away. "I am here for one reason. Residents

within this city have reported the presence of a mech, one that walked through the city recently and then vanished." He looked around, frowning his disgust of the place. He clearly did not like coming to Solomon Fyre. "This is a violation of the Splinter War's compact with those of Erth. I am here to retrieve the mech and all information gathered by its discovery. And to deliver sentences of treason if need be."

"I am unsure of what you mean," Jackson Dreadth said. He stood defiant, shoulders squared, but his hands showed supplication.

"This is your only facility, yes?"

"It is my home."

"I would have ignored one report. Royal Ricariol Wit, my older brother and great lord general of the Imperium's Erth, would have as well," Declarion said, his tone cold. "But there were numerous reports. And my patience wears thin, even now."

"I have not seen this mech you speak of," Jackson Dreadth said. He hadn't, Antiquity thought, so not a lie. "I am the head of Solomon Fyre's Council of Elders. If there was such a mech, I would have seen it by now. These halls and mech ports once contained the mech might of an entire planet but not for decades. Not since—"

"Not since the Imperium quelled your savage ways."

"We are not our rebellious grandsires," Jackson Dreadth pointed out.

"No," Declarion said. He had gone as still as a statue. "But perhaps more devious in bondage."

"Freedom from the soil kills the tree," Vestige quoted, an ancient adage from the *arabi*, looking as solemn as Antiquity had ever seen her. "But in our case, even if there was a mech discovered—and even if the people of Solomon Fyre possessed the ability to mechanize once more—Erth now lacks the precious ores of its former soil to produce the titanium needed. The Imperium is under no threat."

He turned his icy blue gaze upon Vestige. Even from the great distance, Antiquity saw the look Declarion Wit gave her grandmother.

It was the look of a *beij* rattler before it struck.

"Who is this old woman, Dreadth?"

"She is Vestige Angelus, matriarch of her family."

Declarion Wit's eyes narrowed. "A Grey. Is it not also Erth law to never mention the name of a family that has been Grey-shamed?" the Celestial said, eyes lazily ignoring Vestige.

"It still does not change the truth I have spoken," Vestige said. "Grey-shamed or not, Royal Declarion Wit."

"Why do you speak as if you have some say here," the Celestial said. "You waste my time and that of Royal Ricariol Wit. He has ordered me here. To remove the mech. To restore the balance that this planet has enjoyed for generations. Speak again, Vestige Grey, and I will silence that voice."

The threat slithered into the large space between Antiquity and her grandmother. Knowing her grandmother so well, Antiquity dreaded what she knew would come next.

"If speaking means dying, let my death roar into these mountains," Vestige said, pointing with an open palm, her blindness looking upward. She seemed to gaze directly in Antiquity's direction, as if she knew her granddaughter watched there. "And may it echo through our world."

"Dreadth, this crone must be here—in your home—at your behest," Declaron said, his voice carrying no change of inflection with the accusation. He nodded to one of his guards. "We will be discussing more than just the mech, it seems."

A lone blast punctured the air.

Milky eyes filled with surprise, Vestige crumpled like a rag doll, smoke rising from the hole in her chest created by a laz-rifle.

Her grandmother's orbs fell dead with her.

"No!" Antiquity screamed at the realization of what had just happened, voice filling the mountainside.

All eyes below turned toward her. The Celestial was saying something to Jackson Dreadth, but the Elder ignored him, staring hard at Antiquity. Even as the guards split—some running into the warship while others swarmed into the Dreadth eyrie—Antiquity could not remove her gaze from her dead grandmother.

"You must flee, Grey-child," Chekker said, hitting her shoulder. "Now. The guards of the Celestial will attempt to enter these environs."

"Come on, Antiquity!" Elsana screamed, yanking her hard.

Tears blurring her vision, the death of her grandmother emblazoned into her mind, Antiquity let herself be dragged back the way they had come.

Into the new emptiness of the Angelus eyrie.

* * * * *

"Run, Antiquity," Chekker buzzed in her ear.

Some part of the bot's urgency brought her back to the world and she quickened her pace. But images played over and over in her head. Her grandmother. Murdered. Falling to the ground. A smoking hole in her chest. The orbs that had aided her to walk shattering upon the rock of the mountain. The images played over and over even as her friends to either side guided her along, gripping her arms and stumbling toward the first ele-lift. Once within, a jolt rocketing downward. And hallways. Suddenly at the entrance needing her genetic input to open for all of them, the quickest way back into the safety of her mountain home of rock and steel. But she knew that safety was an illusion. Nothing would be safe again.

The sightless face of her dead grandmother stared after her.

"She's gone," Antiquity choked.

"If you do not run, the Celestial and his retinue will kill you. And your friends. The mech is your only chance," Chekker pushed her in the shoulder.

She barely understood what the bot suggested. The mech? Vestige had been a guiding light her entire life and now that light had been extinguished. She was now lost. Cast adrift. On her own. Tears began to swim again, the weight of it crushing.

She steeled herself from it though. Took a steadying breath. And anchored herself to her friends, who still pushed her along. She would not fail for them.

No one else would die because of her.

"The mech then," she said, now hurrying.

Back in their makeshift bedroom, Antiquity gathered the clothes and supplies they needed. The twins did the same. In a matter of minutes, they were moving into the eyrie berth, crossing the steel walkway to Saph Fyre's head and cockpit. Antiquity was about to yell for Chekker and Brox to get the mech and eyrie ready for parting when she pulled up, her eyes falling on a shadowy figure standing within the opened faceplate.

She knew him at once—and prepared for a fight.

"Let us pass, Manson Dreadth," Elsana growled.

The oldest son of Jackson Dreadth did not move. Instead he looked at them, defiant, gauging them and Chekker. He held no weapons. But there was something in his manner that worried Antiquity, as if a coiled spring lay just beneath his surface, ready for release and violence.

"How did you get in here?" Antiquity growled ready for anything.

"The same way you did, I'd imagine," he said, his humorless smile maddening to Antiquity. "Through the closest outside door."

She couldn't believe it. "The door just opened?"

"It did. And I rode the ele-lift up here."

"You lie."

"*Why* are you here, is a better question?" Kaihli asked, having pulled one of her heavy exacto-wrenches from her pack, their only weapon at hand.

"To wait, of course. For you," Manson snorted, meanness in his eyes. It was then Antiquity saw that the older boy had a large pack upon his back, of a type the residents of Solomon Fyre used when leaving the city for weeks on desert forays. Before she could ask about it, an explosion rocked the mountain, the sound reverberating through the eyrie.

"The Celestial and his guards," Elsana said. "Trying to get in here."

"What's going on? A Celestial did *that*?" Manson asked, pointing back the way they had come. Real fear crossed his face for the first time Antiquity had ever seen it.

"No time for this, Dreadth," Antiquity said, striding toward him. He stepped aside at the last second, the twins following their friend. "You need to get out of here. Now. Hide in the eyrie. Or go back the way you came in."

"If you leave him here, he will die," Chekker said, hovering at her shoulder. "He must come with us."

Suspicion took root in Antiquity then. She sensed a plan, one that had been put into motion long before the events of this night. She looked from her friends to Manson and back again.

"Fine. We will be talking about this later, Chekker."

Elsana grabbed Antiquity's arm. "Are you sure about this?"

"I will explain later," she said, already putting on the mech's control gear. "For now, get below. We have to get out of here."

"I am not going anywhere," Manson said stubbornly. "I am here for the mech."

"Did you question why your father gave you that pack, Dreadth?" Antiquity guessed, seeing immediately in his eyes that Jackson Dreadth had a plan beyond his son getting the mech. She stepped into the cockpit's chair and the harness began to click itself around her. "Don't you wonder how you got genetic access to this eyrie, the enemy house of family Dreadth?" The back wall of the cockpit slid open and live pieces of gear snaked over her limbs, hands, and feet. "We have been lied to, Manson. You now have a choice to make, one that is your own. To live. Or die."

Another explosion shook the mountain—louder and stronger. Giving her worried looks, the twins vanished, scurrying down a side ladder into the crew hold of the giant robot. They knew where to go; they knew where to strap in.

"You don't have much time," she said.

Shaking his head, Manson made his choice. He moved deeper into the cockpit and, giving Antiquity a hard look, disappeared below as well.

She couldn't believe this was happening.

"Chekker! Where did you get to?" Antiquity yelled as goggles slid over her eyes, the hum of machinery and power coming to life, pulsing through her senses.

"I am here, Grey-child," the bot responded in her ear, having joined with the mech's systems.

"Is Brox aboard?"

"He is here with me. Although he is not happy about it."

Antiquity nodded to no one. She would deal with Chekker and Brox later. She powered the mech up, her mind entering its metal skin, making her one with the giant. She was more than a girl; she was more than a machine. As she joined with Saph Fyre, some part of the machine soothed the grief burning in her heart, an echo of some part of her great-grandmother Laurellyn Angelus. Once she had sat in this same place. The continuity of the family line was comforting. Those women were a part of Antiquity. It kept her focused on wielding the awesome might of Saph Fyre to escape.

And even though she had no idea what to do about the Celestial, his warship, and whatever machinations she had been caught up in, Antiquity would at the very least keep her friends safe.

She lifted her hands before her and flexed the fingers to fists.

"Open the outer eyrie doors, Chekker," she said, readying herself.

The massive steel doors slowly split apart. Light from the new day's dawn dazzled her.

Laz-fire struck her titanium skin immediately.

Antiquity could not back away from it, Saph Fyre still pinned within her berth. While she didn't feel pain from the mech's superficial damage, it registered in her mind, bees stinging a thousand times over. She pushed off and leapt out of the eyrie and into the morning, landing beyond the door in a crouch and gripping rock, to gain a better look at her assailant. She already knew what it was. The Imperium warship hovered in the skies just above her, its laz-cannons unleashed. They could not penetrate her hardened titanium with single shots, but Antiquity knew the warship had more capable arms aboard and she could not let them be brought to bear.

Having learned more about Saph Fyre's abilities in the days since the scavenger attack, she fired her own weapons, rocket ports popping out along her arms and ordinance released. The decades-old rockets were still live, slamming into the warship. The craft twisted to the side but continued its assault on the mech, barely daunted.

Saph Fyre had more weapons but Antiquity didn't know how to use them. She realized there would be only one way to end the fight. Antiquity put her mind into flight, willing the thrusters in her feet and hands to fire and launch her into the sky.

Saph Fyre did not respond.

"Why aren't the flight thrusters working?" Antiquity roared into her headset.

"Brox has informed me that they are working. I will double-check him," Chekker replied in her ear, even as the warship shot a trans-harpoon at the mech. Antiquity ducked it, the tearing weapon imbedding into the side of the mountain.

"All is operational," the bot assured a few seconds later.

Antiquity cursed, trying to make the thrusters work again, sending her mind racing into the mech.

Nothing happened.

She sensed it then. Some sort of barrier. Within her.

Confusion became white hot anger. She'd have to find another way to reach the warship. She pulled herself up the side of the mountain, leaping between gaps, gaining elevation. She'd have

one chance at this. Finding what she wanted, Antiquity tore apart a rock outcropping, the boulder larger than her head.

The warship rose in the air to continue its assault, blowing apart the rock at the mech's feet, now trying to unseat her. Antiquity didn't wait. She threw the massive rock toward the top of the warship.

It had the desired effect. The ship dropped in elevation to evade being struck.

Allowing Saph Fyre to jump.

Antiquity leapt from the mountain, driving the mech's powerful legs toward her foes. Those piloting the warship saw their mistake, but it was too late. Saph Fyre landed on the ship, Antiquity plunging the fingers of the mech's left hand into the hull, anchoring to its metal. Gripping with her knees, she pummeled the ship with her right hand—over and over and over—the hull of the ship buckling with every strike. She screamed at the top of her lungs, rage and the sorrow of losing her grandmother mingling together and infusing her every movement. She and Saph Fyre were one, and she would not let those of the Imperium escape.

The warship careened to the side, flying crazily away from the city and its buildings, trying to unseat her. But Antiquity held on. In a matter of only minutes, the warship began losing elevation and control over the desert. Then an explosion ripped open the entire rear of the craft, where its engines were located. Antiquity held onto its shattered front hull even as its remains fell toward the desert they now flew over. With a crash that would awaken anyone in Solomon Fyre who had not already done so, the warship slammed into the sands, a smoking and fiery ruin.

Unsure how much heat the mech could take, Antiquity pushed Saph Fyre off the disintegrating hull and took them to a safe distance.

"You did it!" Elsana screamed from below. Antiquity didn't know what to say. Manson and her friends had undoubtedly been watching vid-view of the battle on screens in the crew quarters.

Chekker buzzed in her ear, barely a whisper.

"It is but the beginning, Grey-child."

Antiquity took a deep breath, gazing into the fire of the burning warship. She knew men and women died within it, but she didn't care. They had helped kill her grandmother. She hoped that Royal Declarion Wit had been aboard, but there was no way to know.

"We must leave," Chekker said. She could hear the anxiety in the bot's voice. "The Royal will have informed his brother."

"I know. Grandmother had a plan."

"She did."

Just mentioning her grandmother brought tears to her eyes, battle adrenaline unable to quell her sadness. There were answers to be had though. Chekker had a lot of explaining to do. But first, she had to keep her friends safe.

And Manson. What role was the Dreadth playing in this?

Antiquity turned away from the dying warship. The Imperium would find it, no doubt. They would hunt her. Fortunately, the sands of her homeland would hide the massive mech's passing.

She turned, and Saph Fyre ran into the heart of the desert.

Rage helped her do so through the day and long into the next night.

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