

Urgent Message

Third Phrase – 5640 A.E.

City: Saroth Kang

Planet: Mih'schrell'aka

System: Vespilles

Region: Mih'schen Expanse

“Trust me. When we save their lives, they’ll overlook these minor transgressions. Now get your bindara out and be ready. That attack force is gonna be here within the hour!”



Khalen Daedark stepped back and squared his shoulders, drawing himself to his full height. He could not exactly stare down his mentor, but few races could see eye to eye with the Faluvinal whose heights typically neared eight feet. Right now Khalen needed Riveruun to act and not debate. Riveruun’s hair, which resembled blades of grass, was standing taller than usual, a sure sign he was worried. Despite his misgivings, Khalen was at least thankful the Faluvinal was heeding the instructions. Riveruun removed the bindara case from his shoulder and cradled it with his lower pair of arms while his upper hands began opening the latches.

“Yet, I remain deeply concerned,” Riveruun stated as Khalen finally succeeded in opening the protective housing around the portal inhibitor device. “We abused the special security clearance I was afforded as an Arranger, and we clearly broke several laws by entering a restricted area. I am not convinced this is a wise course of action.”

Khalen growled under his breath at his companion’s strict code of ethics and conduct. While he admired his friend’s convictions and even believed in them, at least in theory, he struggled to apply them to his own life. Fighting back a stream of curses, he spun around to face the Arranger.

“If we have any hope of stopping this attack, we have to see Governor Gabrimon,” Khalen stated through gritted teeth. “We already tried the polite approach and got the door slammed in our faces for our troubles. Now we try it my way. Just get ready to open the portal.”

Khalen reached into the compartment and placed his hand on the manual power switch of the portal inhibitor. A second later, the slight bending of pitch told him Riveruun was tuning the six primary strings of the musical instrument. Khalen knew the tuning was essential but still cast an impatient glance at Riveruun. As the Faluvinal’s hands deftly turned the pegs while plucking the strings, Khalen saw the thin, twisted strands of vines growing from Riveruun’s arms quiver with sympathetic vibrations beneath the cuff of his shirt.

Once the task was completed, Riveruun nodded, his expression fixed in a mask of uncertainty. Praying for the best, Khalen flicked the switch on the portal inhibitor, shutting it off.

He cursed under his breath as an alarm blared throughout the building. Fortunately, the grating noise did little to break Riveruun’s concentration. The first strains of music from his bindara filled the air as he played the instrument with his lower hands. Ribbons of colored light accompanied the sound and flitted around the instrument as the strings produced the tones. After only a few moments, the Faluvinal music master used his upper arms to conduct the triple meter of the song as he began to sing.



Using the talent inherent in all beings in the Twin Galaxies, Riveruun split his voice into three distinct pitches. One of the pitches sang the melody, while the other two sang harmony and blended with the tones of the bindara. The solfege syllables sung by Riveruun shaped the light and energy created by the song. As Khalen watched, the Faluvinal used his upper arms to cause the energy to swirl until a circle eight feet in diameter formed in the air in front of them.

Although it only took fifteen seconds for the song to become established enough for the portal to be stabilized, it seemed like an eternity to Khalen. A heavy pounding from the door behind them heightened his anxiety and added to the bizarre concert of peaceful song and blaring alarm.

Khalen noted the expression of concern on Riveruun's face, but to the maestro's credit, he continued the song without interruption. Crossing over to the portal, Khalen looked through it to the other side.

The elegant meeting room was dominated by an oval table with a dozen plush chairs set around it. Standing behind or beside those chairs were ten figures, all with shock and alarm etched on their faces as they stared back through the portal.

Khalen hated corrupt, bureaucratic, political leaders. And in his experience, all political leaders were corrupt. Yet if there was one thing he could count on them to do, it was to save their own hides and fight to preserve their power. Right now, he was counting on Regional Governor Tabreth Gabrimon and his cabinet to do precisely that.

Khalen raised his hands in a posture of non-aggression and strode through the portal. As expected, the security guards grabbed his arms roughly from behind and shoved him to the ground the moment he entered the room.

“We have an urgent message for Governor Gabrimon!” Khalen cried out as the guards pinned him and bound his wrists. “There’s an attack coming!”

Although he was unable to see what was happening behind him, he guessed by the scuffling, grunting and muffled cries, and by the sudden ceasing of Riveruun’s song his companion had also passed through the portal and was similarly staring at the luxurious carpet.

“Krust, let them up,” a commanding voice said from somewhere to Khalen’s left. A moment later, the pressure eased from his back and the guards lifted him to his feet.

“Master Riveruun?”

Khalen turned toward the speaker and was surprised to see a Solemsiel couple staring in shock at Riveruun, whom the guards had now moved into position to stand on Khalen’s right. The Faluvinal offered an expression to the pair which was half-smile and half-grimace. “Masters Roakel and Saryn. Khalen, the Great Composer smiles upon us indeed.”

The Solemsiel couple were easily as tall as Riveruun, and, like the Faluvinal, they each had four arms. But the similarities ended there. Both Solemsiels wore beautiful robes of silver with purple trim, which contrasted with the bluish tones of their skin. Saryn’s slender arms had tiny musical notes and symbols painted on her skin in a glittering gold dye. Her light green eyes sparkled



with wisdom and intelligence as they shifted from Riveruun to examine Khalen. Many of the thin strands of her dark blue hair were wound together into smaller braids streaked with splashes of light pink. Like all beings of her race, her hair seemed to flow as if blown by a soft breeze, although none was present. Khalen knew the effect was due to some peculiar trait which caused the hair follicles to repel each other, yet he still found the motion hypnotizing and somewhat distracting.

In contrast, Roakel's blue skin had swirls of green throughout, which was most prominent on his neck and the backs of his hands. Although his left hands were empty and hung at his side, his right pair held a staff that was just a foot shorter than him. Khalen recognized it as a windstaff — a musical instrument used by some maestros. It was comprised of numerous long, thin wooden tubes rolled into a cylindrical shape. Complex mechanisms made of metallic keys covered dozens of holes spaced throughout the staff.

“Who are these intruders, Master Roakel? What's the meaning of this intrusion?”

Khalen turned to see Governor Gabrimon leaning forward with both hands on the table, his face filled with a curious mixture of outrage and fear. The sight of the pudgy, richly-clad politician made Khalen's ire spike.

Roakel turned to address the governor. “Your excellency, while my wife and I have no knowledge of the reason for Master Riveruun's presence, we can vouch wholeheartedly for his character. He is an Arranger from the Faluvinal people and servant of the Great Composer. If he felt it necessary to interrupt our meeting, I am positive his actions are not accomplished needlessly. I implore you to hear him out immediately.”

As if to punctuate his words, the blaring alarms ceased, leaving behind a heavy silence.

“Very well,” the governor said as he leaned back. “Explain yourselves.”

Riveruun placed his four hands together in front of him and bowed toward the governor while Khalen simply crossed his arms in front of his muscular chest.

“Governor Gabrimon, the esteemed Arranger Roakel is correct,” Riveruun stated. “We beg your pardon for this unseemly and unorthodox incursion. We attempted to follow the normal channels of protocol, but we were turned away by your staff — whom, I must say, were most discourteous. But owing to the critical timeliness and urgency of our message, we were forced to find other means to reach you.”

Khalen scanned the faces of the governor and his advisory council as Riveruun spoke. To his utter lack of surprise, they appeared disgruntled and impatient. Yet he knew what was coming, so he pushed past his own desire to wipe the expressions from their faces with a few swift kicks. Instead, he relished the moment Riveruun dropped the “bomb” on them.

“We bring word that the secret forces from the neighboring city of Corcoran have been launched! They will reach the East border of Saroth Kang in less than one hour!”

Khalen was not disappointed. Reactions ranged from paralyzing shock, to outrage, to incredulity. Had the situation not been so serious, he would have relished the moment. He knew from experience how those in power felt invulnerable. It felt good to see them squirm.

“How absurd!” one of the advisors blurted out, interrupting Khalen’s musings. “Our agents in Corcoran would have notified us.”

Most of the remaining advisors nodded in agreement. Khalen guessed they wanted desperately to believe anything but the truth. Frustration at their idiocy welled within him. He could remain silent no longer.

“I told you they’d be too stupid to believe it,” Khalen said to Riveruun. He stifled the lopsided grin that fought to make its way onto his face at the sounds of gasping from the council. Turning his attention to the governor, he pulled out a data stick he had stored in his pocket and held it up. “Maestro Riveruun and I have spent the past year working in the slums of Corcoran helping the poor. Without boring you with the details,” he said sarcastically, “we saved the life of a soldier who told us of the attack. Of course, we—”

Khalen was forced to stop as laughter from the same advisor interrupted him. “This is your proof? The word of a soldier from the slum? Really?”

Khalen flicked his wrist and the data stick bounced off the man's chest, silencing him and causing him to stumble back as surely as if it had been a knife. Immediately, Khalen felt his arms

pinned to his sides once more as the guards restrained him. “There’s your proof! And if you’d shut up long enough for me to finish, you might just have enough time to save your precious city!”

Governor Gabrimon glanced first at the Solemsiel couple, then at Riveruun, a questioning look on his face. “Master Riveruun, it is only because I respect our distinguished Solemsiel Arrangers and their judgment that I am even willing to hear what you have to say. But I will not tolerate the impudent agitation of your associate and find myself forced to question the counsel of an Arranger who travels with such rabble.”

Khalen gritted his teeth and was about to respond when a warning look from Riveruun silenced him. Biting his tongue, Khalen closed his eyes and forced himself to release his anger.

“Governor, please forgive the outburst from my colleague,” Riveruun said. “His anger stems from his passionate desire to stop the coming assault. I assure you, the data disc contains video proof showing Mayor Derler ordering the attack. Our soldier friend managed to smuggle the video to us but paid the ultimate price in doing so. We barely evaded the forces of Corcoran ourselves. I implore you to overlook our desperation and manner at this moment and soberly consider this imminent threat. According to our sources, they are set to strike the eastern section of the city and have been planning this attack for several months.”

The advisor with Khalen’s data stick pressed the button on the device, sending the information streaming into a nearby computer. A moment later, a holographic projection appeared over the table. For the next several moments, those in the room fell silent as they watched the recorded scene play out in front of them.

When it had finished, one of the aides closest to the governor turned to him, her voice filled with both fear and outrage. “This vid has to be a forgery! Mayor Derler wouldn’t *dare* attack us! There has been peace between Saroth Kang and Corcoran for nearly thirty years! The entire *region* has known peace for twenty years, since the signing of the Kirmani Peace Accords. The Assembly

would never allow such a blatant violation of the treaty. Derler would be removed from office immediately.”

Riveruun interjected. “I cannot speak to Derler’s motivations in this attack. I can only assure you of its certainty. You will find the data stick contains further forms of corroboration. Many of the files hold the personal seal of Mayor Derler. However, I advise you to peruse the documents rapidly. Time is of the essence. The ‘why’ of the attack can be sorted out later. It is imperative you raise the defenses at once. Due to the enhanced strength and speed afforded to the Corcoran Augmented soldiers by their armored suits, your regular soldiers will be no match for them. You will need to meet them with equal force. I would suggest sending in your own Elite Augmented troops.”

As one, the governor and his aides began sifting through the files on individual screens embedded in the surface of the table. Silence reigned in the room for several tense minutes.

Finally, to Khalen’s relief, Regional Governor Gabrimon looked up, then reached out and pressed the comm button in front of him. “Get me an open channel to General Skeans!” Once the channel was connected, he continued, his tone forceful. “General, move all available troops to the eastern border of the city immediately. Prepare all units to engage Augmented troops within the hour!”

A stoic voice crackled through the open channel in response, “Copy, sir. To clarify: you said Augmented troops?”

“That’s correct. This is not a drill. I repeat. This is not a drill!”

Lost Relics and Winged Beasts

“You see, Riveruun? I told you my plan would work,” Khalen stated, a smirk spreading across his handsome features. “Those in power always fight to preserve their power. All we had to do was convince them the threat was real.”

His companion looked away from the governor and his advisors, who were scurrying about to make preparations for the defense of the city, and glanced down at him. Khalen had traveled with Riveruun long enough to recognize that although his friend was glad their message had been delivered successfully, he was still concerned about the outcome of the coming battle. “Yes. You were indeed correct. However, beware of generalizing the actions of all people. I have known many politicians who sincerely seek the welfare of those under their administration. And it speaks well of Regional Governor Gabrimon’s character that he has chosen to overlook our intrusion into his meeting.”

“He had *better* overlook our ‘intrusion’! We’re saving his city! But, at the same time, let’s not push our luck,” Khalen added dryly. “If things turn south, political types are wonderful at keeping fools in their back pocket to take the fall. I’d rather it not be us. And, by the way, I noticed you didn’t mention I happened to be undercover and involved in aiding Kryton in discovering the attack.”

Riveruun nodded. “I reasoned that, based on your rude behavior, mentioning your involvement might have given the governor and his aides more reason to doubt our story. If you had controlled your emotions more efficiently, I would have been forthright with giving you credit.”

Before Khalen could say anything more, the conversation was interrupted when the Solemsiels crossed the room toward him and Riveruun. As they approached, they offered the typical Faluvinal greeting by steeping the fingers of their lower hands together while spreading wide their upper hands. Riveruun returned the greeting, then wrapped first Roakel and then Saryn in a warm embrace.

Never having been one to show physical affection, Khalen was thankful the couple did not extend their hugs to him. After several moments, Riveruun stepped back from the couple and gestured toward his companion.

“Masters Roakel and Saryn, please allow me to officially introduce my companion, Khalen Daedark.”

The Solemsiels inclined their heads toward Khalen in greeting. Saryn gazed at the hooded jacket buttoned asymmetrically on his left breast and nodded. “You wear the attire of a maestro. It is always a pleasure to meet a fellow musician, particularly one who travels in the company of one of our Faluvinal associates and is willing to place his own life in jeopardy to save the lives of others.”

“Yes,” Roakel said, his tenor voice colored by the seriousness of the situation. “You do honor to the Mih’schen race.”

Khalen winced at the comment. Collectively, the Faluvinals and Solemsiels were known as the Perfect races. Unlike the other four Major races, they never rebelled against the Creator according to the teachings contained in the Sacred Songbook.

Although Khalen had lived in the company of Riveruun and numerous others from the Perfect races for the past several years, he still found some of their ways, beliefs, and customs to be foreign. While he appreciated Roakel’s words, he wondered if the Solemsiel would change his opinion if he knew the dark secrets Khalen kept.

“Thank you for defending my character,” Riveruun offered, steering the conversation back to the matter at hand. “It was indeed providence the two of you were present. I do not believe the governor would have believed us so readily had it not been for your intervention.”

Saryn nodded. “The Great Composer once more conducts our paths.”

“Yes, and the harmonies in his symphony draw us together,” Roakel said. “This time, we are the ones in need of assistance.”

Riveruun raised his eyebrows questioningly. “Indeed? How so?”

“After you delivered your message, I approached Governor Gabrimon and asked that you be allowed to accompany Saryn and I on an errand of cultural and religious significance here in the city.”

Although Khalen was relieved the governor was allowing him and Riveruun to leave, his burning desire for self-preservation made him want to get away from the city as soon as possible. The last thing he wanted was to get dragged into another mission, especially considering the streets of Saroth Kang were about to become a battle zone.

Saryn took over. “While it is true we came to Mih’schrell’aka and to Saroth Kang in order to serve as peacekeepers and to aid in negotiations between several of the cities involved in the current conflict, we were also driven by another purpose. Over the past three years we have tracked the location of a collection of rare and priceless artifacts, several of which could be of historical importance to followers of the Great Composer.”

Saryn paused and took a deep breath before continuing. “However, before we could procure the necessary clearance to inspect the collection, we discovered that the government’s Council of Antiquities decided to move the relics to the Great Star Song Cathedral, located in the eastern quadrant of the city!”

Khalen felt his stomach twist as he finally realized where the story was heading. “You want us to waltz into a war zone to retrieve some relics for *historical* purposes?” Khalen asked incredulously. “With all due respect, Riveruun and I have risked enough already.”



Roakel turned his full attention to Khalen. “Master Daedark, if they were merely trinkets or baubles, I would never disgrace myself by asking such a thing of anyone. But if the research Saryn and I have conducted is correct, and we are certain it is, then there are items or instruments of great power within this collection — instruments which could be used by evil beings to sow discordant harmonies and chaos throughout the galaxy. They must not fall into the wrong hands. In fact, we are both experiencing a growing sense this sudden attack may be related. The timing of the assault is disturbingly coincidental and seems overly aggressive, don't you agree?”

Riveruun looked down at Khalen, then back to the Solemsiel couple. “While I cannot speak for Khalen, you may rest assured I will join you.”

Khalen raised one eyebrow. “Really? You can't speak for me? You've been getting me into messes ever since you saved my sorry hide twelve years ago. And I've been repaying the favor ever since! You're welcome, by the way.”

Riveruun smiled at Khalen's bravado. However, the Solemsiels failed to pick up on the humor between the two friends.

“It is by the will of the Great Composer that you both live,” Saryn said. “Without his protection, even our most sincere efforts—”

“Maestra Saryn,” Riveruun interrupted with a knowing sigh, “you misunderstand Maestro Khalen's poor sense of humor.”

Khalen laughed. “*My* poor sense of humor? Yours was drier than a borta tree in the middle of the Kolimaga Desert the first time we met. It took five years just to get you to understand sarcasm!”

“Ah yes. Sarcasm,” Saryn stated with a smile of her own. “Although I now recognize the jest, we should return our focus to the trial at hand.”

Khalen barely suppressed a groan as he gave the ever-serious Arranger the sober response she sought. “Yeah. Well, I’ll need to get my weapons. I didn’t bring anything with me on this trip. I thought it might be just a *little* harder to convince Governor Gabrimon we were friendly if I was armed.”

The Solemsiel couple frowned at the obvious statement before a slow grin spread across Saryn’s face. “You were making an exaggeration, am I correct?”

Khalen gave her a lopsided grin. “Of course I was. See that, Riveruun? She picks up *my* quicker than you ever did. My guns are only ever a portal jump away. Let me grab them and we can meet at the cathedral.”

Roakel’s expression became apologetic. “Unfortunately, portal travel will not be possible at this time. Governor Gabrimon has activated the city-wide portal inhibitor.”

Khalen winced. “Of course. I should have seen that coming. Well, I’m certainly not running headlong into a war zone without some kind of weapon. Maybe you can talk to your governor pal and see if he has an extra one lying around somewhere.”

“I will speak to one of the governor’s men about procuring a weapon for you,” Roakel said.

“Good. Then let’s get moving. The sooner we get those relics, the sooner we get out of here,” Khalen said, resigning himself to the situation.

“Very well,” Roakel said. He turned and spoke with one of the governor’s private guards. After several moments of intense negotiation involving the governor and three guards, Roakel returned to the group and handed Khalen a large rapid-fire laser rifle.

Khalen hefted the weapon in satisfaction. Although he preferred hand-held pistols, he appreciated the weight and power of the device. He continued to inspect the rifle as he followed the others out of the conference room and into the hallway.

Roakel started leading the group down a passage to the left when a sudden disturbing thought struck Khalen. “Wait a second. With the portal inhibitor in place, how do you intend to get to this cathedral?”

“By Wind Song, of course.”

Khalen shook his head emphatically. “No thank you.”

Roakel looked down at him curiously. “What is the matter? We Solemsiels use it all the time.”

“Khalen has a fear of flying,” Riveruun interjected.

“No, I don’t. I’ve got no problem flying in a machine or on the back of an animal,” Khalen corrected. “I just don’t like floating through the air with nothing under me but a long drop to a quick death.”

Roakel smiled at Khalen reassuringly, yet the tightness in his face revealed his impatience at another delay. “I understand your concern. Could you perhaps make an exception in this instance? Every moment we delay could mean the difference between success and failure.”

Khalen scowled. “I’m *not* flying by Wind Song. You go on ahead. I’ll just have to find my own way to meet you there.”

“Khalen, please reconsider,” Riveruun said.

The conversation was brought to a momentary halt as several guards came around a corner and shoved their way past the small group. Khalen's expression shifted as the men headed down the hallway. "Wait a second. This is a Mih'schen city. There's gotta be a ruuq kennel nearby. They're used all the time because of their ability to evade radar. Knowing Gabrimon, he's probably got a full kennel in the building somewhere near the hangar with his military craft. You three get out of here. I'll catch up. Ruuqs can fly faster than your Wind Song anyway. You're going to need all the head start you can get."

His mind made up, Khalen left Riveruun and the Solemsiels standing in the hallway and sprinted after the guards. Although he was thrilled by the prospect of being able to ride one of the magnificent ruuq steeds, he found himself frustrated by his current predicament. He made his way to the nearest stairwell and nearly collided with a pair of passing aides.

"Is there a ruuq kennel in this building?" Khalen asked. When the two aides exchanged glances with each other in shock, Khalen tried once again. "In case you hadn't heard, there's an attack coming! Now don't waste my time. Is there a kennel?"

"Yes. On the floor below us. Take the stairs over there. When you get to the next floor, go left."

"Got it." Khalen ran in the direction of the stairs and fought once more against his rising frustration.

Why do I allow Riveruun to get me into these messes? Khalen asked himself irritably. I never should've let him drag me to Corcoran in the first place. He seems to have a knack for sniffing out trouble. If I didn't owe him...

Several minutes and a few brief wrong turns later, he reached the security area just outside the kennel. He was forced to wait for Roakel's request to be approved, but at last, he was through.

The kennel and launching pad looked similar to a small hangar bay with more than a dozen cages—each containing a large beast—lining the three inner walls. The ruuq's were winged canines whose muscular, feathered backs stood five feet from the ground, and whose thick necks supported proud heads another foot above that.

Khalen entered the room and strode over to one of the beasts with a deep blue and black pattern in its feathers. As he reached its side, he called out to the nearest worker. “I need you to get this one saddled immediately.”

“Hey, get away from that animal! It hasn't been tamed yet. Who do you think you are, a maestro?”

His irritation spilling forth, Khalen let out a brief curse. “As a matter of fact, I am. Now get it saddled for me!”

The woman glanced at his hooded maestro's jacket and nodded. “Right. But you're going nowhere without some sort of clearance.”

“My name is Khalen Daedark. I've been cleared by Regional Governor Gabrimon to take one of the ruuqs for an important mission. Check the log!”

Khalen felt the press of time as the woman pulled out her scroll and studied the screen. Moments later, she offered him a brief nod and rushed to saddle the animal. Several minutes later, she opened the kennel door and led it by its bridle toward Khalen. As the beast drew near, he set his laser rifle on the floor in front of him and began to sing and conduct. The solfege syllables combined with the three notes produced by his vocal chords to create a stream of light and energy that he directed toward the animal.

The animal's pointy ears perked up as the vibrations from the music reached it. The ruuq strode forward and bowed its head in obedience to Khalen. He kept the song going for a few

moments longer as he placed his hand to the canine's long snout to allow it to take in his scent. When he was confident the bond had been established, Khalen brought the song to an end.

"Thank you," he said, taking the reins from the worker. "What's his name?"

"Stermer," she replied as she handed him a pair of flight goggles.

Khalen offered a nod of thanks as he took the goggles and placed them over his eyes. He was impressed by their quality the moment he activated them. In addition to complete night vision, they also contained a digital display and military message feed.

Khalen grabbed his weapon, then slid his right foot into the stirrup and lifted himself into the saddle with ease. One of the workers activated the pulleys to raise the hangar door and Khalen felt his insides clench at the sight before him. The launching pad was at the top of one of the tallest buildings in Saroth Kang. From his vantage point near the opening, he could see the entire northern portion of the city.

The night sky was filled with lights from the numerous military craft and other ruuq riders already on their way to the eastern side of the city. Far below, convoys of military transports and combat vehicles flooded the streets, some working to evacuate the citizens from that section of the city and others continuing on to join the coming battle.

Khalen activated the safety lights on the animal's reins, saddle, and feather attachments, took a deep breath, and urged the ruuq forward.

Although he had ridden numerous animals through the skies across a dozen worlds or more in his lifetime, it had been years since his last flight. The exhilaration of it was overwhelming. Lost in the rush of wind and focusing on controlling the animal beneath him, he found his thoughts wandering back to the past. In his mind he could hear the voice of his maestro tutor, Kunath Pressel instructing him on the finer points of musical communication with animals. Then there was the last time he had ridden a ruuq. The memory brought forth pain that had been long buried.

“These creatures are magnificent, Khalen. We need to do this more often.”

Khalen heard his friend’s voice through the headset and glanced over at him. Belenger Roth rode beside him through the evening skies of Oclion. Although Belenger was a member of the Mib’schen Augmented Elite Corps, he had traded his armor for standard clothing for this particular job.

“I’m heading back to the ship to check on the rest of the shipment. Teg-lakis and Mariska should just about have everything loaded. You and Skaret finish up at the refinery and head back.”

“Got it, boss,” Khalen replied. “See you soon.”

As Belenger steered his steed to the left, Khalen turned his focus to the refinery below. He was anxious for this job to be finished. The Renegades had made quite a few enemies during the sixteen years Khalen had been part of the group. The longer they remained on the planet, the greater likelihood one of those enemies would find them.

Khalen arrived at the refinery and dismounted. He could see lights on in the main offices of the building complex not far from where he landed. If all was still going according to plan, Skaret would be there wrapping up the final details with the owners.

“Skaret, I’m on my way in. Everything still on schedule?” Khalen asked into his commlink.

“Oh yeah. Everything’s going exactly as planned.”

Something in Skaret’s voice felt odd to Khalen. The fighter had joined the Renegades a couple years after Khalen, and although they were never close friends, they had a mutual respect for each other and shared a bond forged from surviving many dangerous and sticky situations together. Yet lately he had been acting different.

It took Khalen a matter of minutes to make his way through the outer factory and into the office space. The instant he opened the door, he knew something was wrong. But his instincts were too late. A stun blast struck him, setting his nerves on fire. His body hit the floor and he almost blacked out from the impact.

“Yes. This one will make a fine addition to our crew of slaves.”

“Just be careful. According to my source, he’s quite a proficient maestro. You may want to keep a mute on him.”

Khalen came to his senses and looked up at his captors. He felt bile rise in his throat at the sight of the Tey-Rakil male standing over him. "Imoleth..." Khalen said hoarsely.

"So my reputation precedes me. Belenger must have shown you a picture or two of me. That means he likely also told you all about how I framed him and his dear Jindara. It was nothing personal. Just business."

"Like selling me into slavery is 'just business'?" Khalen spat back.

"Oh, you misunderstand," Imoleth said, his voice mocking. "I wasn't the one that arranged this transaction. It was my new associate."

The truth of the situation struck Khalen like a physical blow. "Skaret!"

A voice from nearby confirmed his guess. He had been betrayed.

"Thank you, Khalen. I've been looking for a way to regain my rightful land and title for many years now. This transaction and partnership with Imoleth will go a long way in making that a reality."

"Don't get comfortable. Once Belenger frees me, I'll come after you."

"I wouldn't count on it. I'm sure Belenger and the others will be grieved to hear how you and I were ambushed here at the factory. While you fought valiantly, you were knocked into one of the vats and your body was never recovered."

"Skaret, you dirty—"

"Goodbye, Khalen. I hope you enjoy slavery!"

The hopelessness he experienced while a slave on Oclion turned his mind toward Riveruun and the hope his mentor had brought. The Faluvinal prophet had given him life and purpose.

Face it, Daedark. Riveruun may have a knack for sniffing out trouble, but if you stopped traveling with him, where would you go? You've got no home, your family hates you, and the only friends you had haven't seen you in more than two decades. Riveruun is all you've got.

The thought of Riveruun brought his mind back to the present. Giving the reins a tug to the right, Khalen turned the ruuq toward the east.