

# Skyboarders

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## Arc 1

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### Episode One:

Jelka

#### *First of Akoamoth, 1277cc, Skylord's Day*

The grasses of the Northern plains sped by at over eighty miles per hour, an undulating sea of wild wheat and barley toasted by the summer sun. Day had just vanished over the top of the Western mountains, painting the sky with furious colors of fire dimming to bruises.

They 'boarded like a group of hornets in black: a rangy, wild band of twenty-one who had fought together, bled together, and eaten the same crummy food together for nearly four years.

In the lead was Tarek. He had no other name. He was a child of the glare pits, a scavenger who had learned to fight with bare knuckles over scraps of bread dropped in Glare City by the patrollers. He'd grown up like an animal in a zoo where all the animals were kept in the same cage. The wildness of his past could still be seen in his eyes, which were golden-hazel, the same color as the sun scorched fields. A long jagged scar ran across his face from forehead to cheek and his uncut sun-bleached hair whipped behind him in snarls and tangles, never combed and ragged to hang down in his face. His jaw was forever set in a determined line of anger.

At his side was Jarvis. She had no other name because she wouldn't tell it. Her white-blonde peroxide hair was shorn on the sides of her head to within a half-inch of her skull, the top spiked up to just over an inch. She wore silver mirrored goggles, and had tattooed the Jelka pack symbol down the right side of her face. She wasn't beautiful, but she didn't care. Every day she silently lifted her body in pull-ups and worked out brutally until she had larger muscles than Tarek, her official man, and could trounce anyone who challenged her.

She rode a medium-weight battleboard that the famous old hermit 'boardmaker Charlie had custom-made for her, white on one side and black on the other with a jagged line down the center. It flashed with chrome battle-racks and its name was scrawled in red across the bottom: "Paine."

She 'boarded like she didn't care: right arm trailing, loose, left foot leading, slouched back to let Paine carry her. Tarek 'boarded like he was constantly at war: forehead-first, eyes on the target, body curled forward with his arms at the ready to grab the handle of the aluminum bat that he kept in a sheath on his back. They were reman and rella, a matched set that had 'boarded together for six years, ever since Tarek had saved Jarvis from a gang of thugs.

Now it was usually she that saved him.

Darkness fell and Jelka base glinted in the distance, a sprawling net of tiny fires and torches on the barren rocky soil of the far northern plains. Here the grass became scarce, the summers hotter, the winters colder than anywhere else. It was the least hospitable part of the Valley of Karr, and James Jelka the founder of their Pack had wanted it no other way. Old Jelka's philosophy was that a true skyboarder pack was forged through hardship, and hardship was what he'd given them.

The pack headquarters was a series of log bunkers sunk halfway down into the rocky dirt, surrounded by a ragged tent city where the packs' glares lived and worked. The Fort in the center of the sprawl alone rose high above the tumbled landscape, three stories above ground with four story watchtowers, one on each corner. The high broad-faced cube building snarled down over its domain, scorched black by fire, a huge red and white Jelka symbol painted across its face: the red skull of revenge, the knife of war, and the white background of death. As night settled over Jelka base, the cube shaped fort was pierced through with a hundred fire-orange windows bright with lantern light.

"Chank it!" A patroller yelled, the whine of his 'board coming suddenly up on the group from the East. In the dark twilight Tarek could just see the little boarder outpost on the edge of the base, a rickety wooden shack high on a scaffold tower a hundred feet above the plains.

Tarek merely sent the patroller an extremely rude gesture and blasted past at full speed. His gang of cronies followed with whoops and crude laughter, Jarvis flipping around backward on her 'board to mirror and amplify his sentiment with a few choice handsigns of her own, and a tiny smirk.

The boundary patrol didn't bother to give chase. Only true Jelka would fly into base like that, and they knew it. Plus, nobody could mistake Jarvis on Paine. She was something of a local celebrity, one of the best skyboarders in the pack, under Tarek.

They came down in an exhausted mass, all of the group tired and happy after a full day of roaming the northvalley on this, the biggest holiday of the year. Tarek had taken them not only to the Litz Line for some well-deserved R and R, but also to the Jelka-dominated Floodtown for free holiday spiced wine and games. It had been an unscheduled vacation, given because Tarek their patrol-leader had decided that his men needed it. They were supposed to have been on Northern Longroad duty, the junk assignment only given to the flunkies of the pack, with a paltry little celebration at supper time. But (although the Jelka were the only pack known for working through holidays) if Tarek had skipped Skylord's Day there would have been a revolt.

They draped themselves unchallenged over Raider Bunker Five, Tarek's little kingdom, landing on the rough stucco roof and checking their skyboards with the leisurely unconcern of men who had come home. All of their steeds were about three feet long and two wide, a few inches thick except for a small air-scoop in the front and a lump for a t-converter engine in the center, matte black but for the odd red or white design, scarred by battle like their riders. Some sported racks or spikes, or large tail-flux flaps on the back which helped them turn at high speeds. Only Paine was perfectly polished smooth, glossy, without a scratch like his rider. Jarvis's leathers were well-oiled and new. She always had two things: money, and cigs, and her reman had no idea where she got either one.

Tarek let his 'board fall to the roof, leaping off casually. The battered ancient Charlieboard skidded to a halt by crashing into the low ankle-wall around the top of the building. It had once been cherry red, but the 'boardplastic had been shattered by the debilitating crash that had ripped it's speedgrid off. Now it looked like it flew: a wreck. He liked it that way.

It rebounded from the wall and skidded toward him, still hovering a foot from the rooftop. When it

arrived, he kicked the flux and flipped the trashed skyboard up to catch it by the stuntgrip with the ease of a man who had done the same maneuver a thousand times at least.

He didn't see the two large, scowling Night Patrol thugs waiting for him on the corner of the Bunker. They rose without a word and walked toward him. Tarek caught a glimpse of them in Jarvis's mirrored goggles as she turned her head slowly to look.

"Caker," he whispered, pivoting on his heel with grudging malice to send them his best glare. His gold eyes pierced with a stabbing blame.

"Griffin wants to see you," thug one told him in a cig-gravel voice.

Jarvis caught his eye. Just the way she turned her head, her expressionless face told him, 'I'll stay with the boys.'

Tarek sighed quietly, and went with the thugs. It was no use to resist. Arguments would not persuade them; he'd tried before, many times. His patrol watched him go, uneasy, glancing at Jarvis who stood watching her reman go without a hint of emotion.

Tarek walked before them to the tunnel access in the side of the bunker, and down into the sunken hallways that connected the outbuildings of Jelka main base together. The tunnel was narrow and damp, walls and ceiling formed by split logs and cement. The floors were paved in flaked shale. His double-thick leather 'boardboots tipped in steel plates made his approach no secret to the one who was waiting for him.

The door was open. With only the slightest hesitation, Tarek entered the office without a glance at the two thugs. He'd been through this routine before.

They shut the door behind him quietly, and stood on either side of it to wait.

Griffin was a short, ugly little man. In the tradition of Jelka high command he dressed himself in high Treetop city fashion, subtle dark silk brocades and the finest deer leather a jarring contrast to his pocked, scarred face and crooked, twice-broken nose. The inside of his cramped underground office was paneled in polished wood, shelves full of books his attempt to convey the impression that he was learned.

But the dark, sly eyes of the Drake of Jelka Raid Patrol were the eyes of a man who had learned to win by cheating, and his hands were the kind that could break a man's neck with one grip. Despite his unsavory appearance, his smile for Tarek was real, if calculating.

"Tarek." His voice was hoarse and low, as if he'd once screamed himself raw and it had never healed.

"Somehow I knew you'd go south." He leaned back in his desk, no windows in the half-sunken office.

The green shade of his brass lamp was the only light, glinting in his black eyes.

The younger man sighed and cast his gaze to study the tiles of the floor. His narrow, chiseled face was set in the same rebellious pout he'd had since he was fourteen years old. Tarek never changed. "It's Skylord's Day, Griffin. You honestly can't expect the men to miss the holiday."

"You left our northern border open," Griffin steepled his thick, scarred fingers together before his chin. "I told my peers that you would be on the north today. It was a special patrol, Tarek. A special holiday patrol. We drew lots for it. The lot fell on you, it wasn't personal. We all have to do our part. I expected you to be an adult about this."

Tarek's amber-brown eyes flashed up to meet Griffin's, angry. The older man had treated him like a child since he was a glare in the glare-pits the better part of a decade ago, and he was sick and tired of it. "Nobody was anywhere near the northern boarder, for the Skylord's sake, it's the biggest holiday of the year!"

"It would be the perfect time for our enemy to attack," Griffin snapped, his velvety voice suddenly gaining a hint of gravel.

"The Eagles haven't attacked us in decades..."

"I am the Raid Drake, Tarek, not you," Griffin slammed his massive hands down on the desk with a startling thump. "I would appreciate it if you would respect my office for once! If you had done your duty, I would have let you off early this afternoon for the holiday, but you decided you would follow your

own schedule. The Tarek schedule. You caused me to disappoint my fellow officers and drakes, Tarek."

Tarek stared stonily at the floor, irritated. He had nothing to say. He knew Griffin too well: obedience was rewarded, often with gifts that Tarek didn't want. Disobedience was not tolerated. The older officer would figure out something unpleasant to do to his favorite little star.

The chair scraped on tile as Griffin stood, pulling an expensive southern cig out of a gold case and lighting it with a gold Treetop City made lighter. He puffed on it a few times, narrowed his eyes at Tarek, and began to pace slowly back and forth behind his desk. "Discipline, Tarek. Discipline is where you are lacking. I expect more from you than this. You're Drake material, or at least you could be. You could be the next Champion of the pack, Tarek."

Here we go again, thought Tarek, trying to stifle his sigh. He'd heard this for years and nothing had ever come of Griffin's promises.

"You should be Champion. As I was telling Drake Racaster the other day..."

Tarek shut his eyes, inwardly wincing. Great. Now papa Griffin was telling the high drakes of the pack about him, nagging them, which would push his dream of being Pack Champion even further away.

Griffin didn't seem to realize that nobody in the upper command structure trusted him, and his endless promotion of Tarek was doing more harm than good. With friends like Griffin, he didn't need enemies.

"You're a blazecube, Tarek."

You're just saying that, Tarek replied silently in his mind.

"You're going to the Games, and you're going to rank blazecube."

"Not with this 'board," he grumbled.

"I'm not the one who scragged that 'board." Suddenly Griffin's contemplative, soft voice hardened.

"You don't appreciate fine things. You're an animal, Tarek. You have to learn to respect your skyboard. How am I supposed to keep you in a 'board if you go through them like this? I can't get on the list to get another Charlieboard for half a year! And don't even think of asking me for the raceboard, this one's mine. I've been flying this shoddy Duraflrier for years because I gave you my last assigned Charlieboard." The young man rolled his eyes, shifting restlessly. He crossed his arms. Griffin could scold him for the better part of an hour, reminding him of everything Tarek owed him, and Tarek was hungry. Dinner was in a few minutes.

"You're not listening to me." Griffin grew quiet with a scowl, the cig smoke rising before his black eyes slowly. "Alright. Fine, Raid Five, have it your way. You are going to pull double shifts until you learn to be more respectful. That means you go up with both Raid Five and Night Nine from now until I feel better about you. Have I made myself clear?"

Tarek didn't say a word. Silently he counted his heartbeats, hoping to the Valya that was all the punishment Griffin had for him. Obviously Griffin was expecting someone... he never let Tarek off so light unless he was busy with his secret meetings that weren't so secret. Honestly, Tarek loved going out on patrol... any excuse to be in the air. Cutting his sleeping time down to four hours may have sounded like hell on earth to Griffin, who was a notorious sluggard, but Tarek would hardly notice.

"Now get out of my face and keep that slamming 'board in one piece."

Tarek turned and left, slamming open the door with an impulsive show of exasperation. He stomped away, shaking his head and then allowing himself a wry smile. Let Griffin think Tarek hated pulling double shifts, fine. It all worked out for him in the end.

Jarvis was waiting for him with a sour expression when he returned to Raider Bunker Five. His men were quiet, knowing that Tarek had taken punishment yet again to give them a break. They loved him for it, but it made them feel guilty. More than that, it made them all angry at Griffin.

"What was it this time?" Jarvis asked, leaning casually against the metal-frame bunk bed that they shared.

Tarek tossed his skyboard onto his bed, a sagging hammock of springs and wire that had seen continuous use for nearly eighty years. He flopped down after it for a few minute's rest, since he would

not be sleeping tonight. "Night patrol." He shut his eyes. The springs creaked as he made himself comfortable. Around him in the bunker, the poor little bed was surrounded by opulent embroidered curtains, rolls of furs, tapestries, piles of luxury trade goods still in the crate which looked completely out of place in the dirty old hall. A pirate den for a pirate king.

"You want me to get you something to eat?"

"Yah, a biscuit and gravy or something."

Jarvis smiled slowly at Tarek, the only hint of real affection she usually showed. They were officially a couple, reman and rella for survival's sake but nothing more, as were all such matches in the Jelka. She'd chosen him because he was a 'boarding god. He'd chosen her because she was a tarring good sidekick and had never let him down. Plus, she had a lot of strange useful contacts when he needed them. Down deep, they stayed together because they had always admired one another.

"You gotta stop taking this skorry from Griffin, Tare."

One golden eye cracked open to look at her. "What am I gunna do? The man owns half the lower drakes."

"That's a constructive attitude."

"Look, he's always going to see me as a fourteen year old kid. He thinks he saved me and gave me everything I have."

"Did he?" Her sarcasm was pointed.

"No!" He glared fully at her, glancing behind her at the men, then lowered his voice. "You and me, we worked for this and you know it. That man can't 'board worth skorry."

"He's a pretty good racer."

"Anyone can go fast in a straight line."

Jarvis smiled at him again, the expression cold on a face that rarely used it. Cold, but sincere. "I'm just saying you have to throw him off someday, Tarek, become your own man. He's not your father."

"No, really Jarvis?" Mock amazement. "Holy Valya, I didn't know that!"

"Stuff a roll in it."

"What am I supposed to do, jump on the guy and beat him up? He's got fifteen goons in shouting distance, I can't take them all."

"I don't mean leaping on him and beating him senseless."

"Is there another way?"

Jarvis had to smile. So typically Tarek. "One of these days," she promised him, and turned to leave.

Tarek watched Jarvis for a moment, listening to his men laugh and joke with one another as they relaxed, then curled to prop himself up on his elbows. "Why don't *you* do something about him?"

That stopped her cold. She looked at the long communal room, her men pulling off boots and lighting cigs, unwrapping leather padding and getting comfortable. She returned to her reman, their bunks crammed into a semi-private corner behind a few storage cabinets, hidden by rich curtains. Owning the entire bunker was a perk of being Raiders, a step above normal Patrollers. "What do you mean?"

He became wry. "Come on, Jarvis. Don't play innocent with me. I know you're more than you seem.

You've been playing a game I've never seen with pieces I can't pin down, but I know you can snap your fingers and skorry happens. That incident with the kitchen maid? The Eagle's traitor?"

Jarvis glanced at the other men and made a quick, terse sign with her hand. "Outside, if you want to talk about this Tarek," she whispered. Then she left.

Her reman scowled, climbing out of the creaky bed with curiosity. Was she finally going to tell him something? Jarvis had been mysterious since the day they'd met, but at first Tarek had assumed it was because he was also withholding information. The truth was that Tarek didn't remember his past, he'd been hit on the head at the age of thirteen so hard that it had erased his entire childhood. With nothing to tell, he'd pretended he didn't want to talk about it.

She on the other hand had secrets in her midnight black eyes, deep things that flowed and connected without a sound in the underground tunnels of Jelka base, moving at her command. She was running an operation and had been for years. It irritated him somewhat that after all the years of flying and fighting together, all the blood they'd shared, she still couldn't quite trust him with everything.

She waited for him on the edge of the roof, staring upward at the star-bright sky with a newly lit cig in one hand. For once her mirrored perfectly round goggles hung around her neck, revealing wary dark eyes that had gained a permanent squint against the sun. The goggles were some kind of Oldage artifact that had optical enhancers in them, so she usually wore them even in the dark. Tarek knew they had another purpose as well; she was for some reason always trying to disguise her features.

He sat down on the low wall at the edge of the roof, slouched, with raised brows. The tattered, dusty old black coat he always wore fluttered in the cool breezes. "So?"

"What do you want me to do about him?"

"Dumping him in the Southside reservoir would be nice."

A slight smile. "I remember how we used to sit and plan his demise together when we were young. It was cute."

"I'm still planning it."

"You don't mean that."

"Look, the man's a criminal; he should at least be brought before the Northvalley council and imprisoned." Tarek didn't say it too loudly. "Tell me you have caker on him."

Jarvis blew smoke toward the first visible stars after the twilight, reading their positions, considering the glowing bodies of three of the seven planets that hung in the sky like gods. She'd taken up skycasting as a hobby a long time ago and was often seen staring at the sky.

When he got no response Tarek pressed the issue. "Jarvis, we know the man is a murderer. He's killed in cold blood. I watched him do it once."

"When you were fourteen?"

He glowered at the rooftop. "Griffin was just a little gang-leader back then. He caught me and another guy, an old glare that was helping me, stealing from his supplies. We had to, we were starving. I didn't know the old glare very well, but he'd told me he knew the way in and the way out.

"Evidentially Griffin knew him too. He'd stolen from him many times. This time he didn't get away with it. Griffin caught us both. He only beat me until I blacked out, but the other guy..." He clenched his fists, knuckles showing through the ripped gloves that had no fingers. He looked at them, pale white scars on his knuckles. A lot of scars.

"I'm not saying he doesn't deserve ultimate punishment," Jarvis agreed quietly. "I'm just saying I can't do it right now."

"But you're saying you can do it." Now they were whispering.

"Possibly. But not now."

"Why?"

She smoked, looking at him. Her eyes were just an icy glint in the starlight. "Because I need him."

"Oh?" Tarek stood to confront her, crossing his arms at his full six foot three inch height. He frowned down at her, wisps of his wild hair throwing sharp shadows across his face. "And what the Von are you doing with Griffin behind my back, rella?"

Her smile was mischievous. "Are you jealous?"

"If your taste is *that* bad..."

She snorted. "I've got a deal with him, that's all. Running trade. Why do you think I always have cigs?"

"He's running cigs for you?" Tarek said in disbelief, disgusted. "Why not use our guys in Eden? The ones we fence our take through?"

She shrugged loosely. "It's business."

He shook his head, shuffling away without direction. "Slam it, Jarvis. Why bother? I wouldn't do business with that drak if... if..."

"If it makes you feel any better, Tarek," Jarvis said softly, her voice barely carrying in the cool night air, "he's redeye as soon as I don't need him anymore."

"And when will that be, huh?"

She stared upward at the planets, the faint scattering of mackerel clouds, watching her smoke rise. "The rack is barred. It's going to be a prestigious day tomorrow for promotion."

He huffed. "Yah. Right. When the Imperial Heir shows up." He walked away, fuming.

She watched him go, a slow sad grimace pulling on one side of her mouth. "I'd tell you, Tarek, I'd tell you everything," she whispered. "But I know you. You'd lose your head, and you'd blurt it out in a moment of anger. I can't afford that. Everything balances on the point of a knife right now, my friend, everything. My future, your future, and the future of the Jelka."

She turned back to the stars. Idly she pulled a foot-long Jelka-knife out of a sheath on her leg and flipped it end for end, a nervous habit. It was the symbol of her pack, something she always had with her, a knife older than she was, nicked and scarred. If only she could tell him that it wasn't just a Jelka-knife... it was the original.

Her eyes traced constellation lines and the scarred luminous surfaces of the heavenly bodies that were rising above the eastern cliffwall, searching among them for the moment she'd been waiting for all of her life.

Tarek yawned as he rode the ice-cold wind up to Night Patrol bunker, a little warren carved out of the living stone of the sheer Eastern cliffwall. The little dugout cave was just a pinprick of torchlight midway up, now and then blacked out by a passing figure invisible in the darkness.

He arrived on the hanging porch of the small cavern complex without challenge, flipping his damaged skyboard expertly into his hand without looking at either it or the ground. Behind him the view of a drop of three hundred feet to the northvalley floor was cloaked in cobalt darkness, torchlight flickering on the face of the cave.

"Hey, Tarek," Sand greeted him sleepily, the sweet smell of the Plant he was smoking on the breeze.

"Pulling another double shift?"

"Patrol nine again," Tarek sighed, walking through the entrance, down three stone steps to the inner cave. Here several small tunnels branched off left and right to the individual communal rooms. Before he got to one of them, an extremely short wide little man swaggered out. He had a squint and a pointy nose, and needly teeth that had grown in far too small. "Hey, Tarek! I could hear you coming for half a mile on that screechy 'board of yours! When are you going to trash that thing and get a real one? I swear it's gunna blow up under you one day."

"Evening, Ratt," he grinned, giving the short man the palm of his hand.

Ratt slapped it. "You with us tonight, man?"

"What's left of me."

"That's plenty. I heard you had a good time, ran off to Floodtown. See any laze tizzas? How was the Festival?"

A huge hulking brute squeezed himself out of the night patrol tunnels, his overhanging brow lifting a little with delight to see Tarek. "Hey, man, when are you gonna switch jobs? You're here more often than you're down there."

"Hi, Dave," Tarek punched him in the shoulder. He'd served so many terms of punishment with Night Patrol Nine that Dave and Ratt had become two of his best friends. "Where we going tonight?"

"You're lucky. We have a special mission. Skylord's present on Skylord's night. Some kid thought he saw Eagles setting up weird monitoring equipment on the Southwestern boarder. We're gunna sneak down there, gather intel."

"You? Sneak?" He couldn't help snickering.

"Come on, we're Night Patrol! We're the ghosts of darkness, the stealthy of the stealthy, invisible bats of doom!" Ratt made a sliding gesture with one hand flattened like a swooping bird.

"Hey, maybe we shouldn't tonight, Ratt," Dave's bass voice rumbled. He was still sleepy, rubbing the crust out of his puffy eyes. "Tarek's with us. He always picks a fight, and we're not supposed to be seen."

"Hey, I can sneak," Tarek swore.

"Never seen it," Dave replied drolly.

"I can sneak!" He insisted with ire.

"Sure. Well, get your crappy 'board together, and grab a biscuit and coffee if you want it. We're gone in

five.” Ratt wandered back into Bunker Nine to finish putting on his boots.

Remembering his stomach, Tarek headed for the old rickety table that the Night Patrol guys always had set up in the kitchen with food on it.

The Jelka Night Patrol were a strange fraternity, some of the largest and oddest members of the barbarian hoard they called a pack, ‘boarders who never saw the light of day. There were only about sixty men who lived in the cave, broken into ten small units. According to legend they could hold off an enemy attack alone until backup could arrive, and had several times. They lived separate from the others and had nothing to prove. They, alone of the entire Jelka mob, were quiet and peaceable in their curious way. Tarek preferred their company to any other in his small and unhappy nation.

The young sun-bleached man sat down on the top of a solid stone half-height wall inside the cavern kitchen to cram two biscuits into his mouth. He pulled out an old dull butterfly knife, flipping it around his fingers without a glance. The metal caught and flashed the colors of the torchlight that illuminated the sunken stone hallway. The wind that moved from outside through the small windows pulled at his ragged flyaway hair, the edges of a long black leather coat with ancient faded patches sewn on, so scarred and abraded that parts of it had been worn gray.

Tarek was never seen without the coat. On the upper left hand breast was a Top ‘Board patch faded by the sun, ruined by a hard life, but still recognizable. Anyone who tried to take the jacket away from Tarek because the rank did not belong to him would feel the heat of the aluminum bat he wore in a sheath on his back. No one in the Jelka had ever accomplished the feat.

“Plant?” The heavysset man on lookout offered.

“Thanks, Sand.” Tarek took it, and inhaled several long pulls on the bluish dried leaf before handing it back, appreciating its smooth melon flavor. “Good stuff. I didn’t know the lame-masters made it all the way out to Floodtown.”

“You ain’t the only one who’s been to the Line today.” Sand grinned, all of his upper teeth made of steel which gleamed like silver.

They came out grumbling, ten men in a slouching group walking closely together in a way that spoke of how seldom they were ever apart. All of them carried folded camouflage netting, some were wrapped in it like a blanket.

“C’mon day-walker, get your crap ‘board in the air and keep it quiet, this is a scouting mission!” Ratt, the shortest of the bunch and the leader, tossed Tarek some netting and climbed onto his thick miniature Charlieboard without grace, lifting off into the cold dark sky.

They flew low over the ground away from Jelka base, glowering and sleepy, yawning brutes gulping down the last of their breakfast and sipping coffee from thermoses. The three planets above reflected in the dry grasses below them as if it was water; cobalt-blue Myduna with its crossed rings, small gray Visser, and Jervis the reddish Lady of War (which his rella had been named after) painting the plains vaguely blue-violet. Along with the thick field of stars above the scattered clouds they needed no aid to their vision. They watched their little black shadows flit across the rough and broken ground in triplicate, shivering ghosts of darkness.

‘Down,’ Ratt ordered with a hand gesture. The small patrol broke up and spread out, slowing as they lowered to within a few feet of the ground, pulling camouflage around them. Tarek nursed his broken skyboard, grimacing as it rained sparks when he stepped wrong on the mangled speedgrid. Dave scowled at him, shaking his head.

Ahead in the distance they could see James’ Arch, a lone finger of stone standing tall against the early night sky. Beneath it on its strange little mesa was the black granite tomb of James Tep Jelka, the founder of the pack that bore his name and the Valley’s last true military genius.

The odd formation stood almost exactly in the middle of the northvalley plains and had served for almost a century as the dividing line between the territories of the Eagles and the Jelka, marking the southwestern-most corner of the Jelka’s domain. The monument was unquestionably Jelka territory however; the whole pack would fight to the last man to keep possession of the grand General’s remains. Under the arch, they could see the tiny glints of torches or lamps just for a moment. The patrollers swept forward quickly but without a sound except for the low throaty humming of their large armored



skyboards. Then as they came close to the base of the butte itself Ratt gave the signal and they dismounted, hefting their heavy 'boards to their backs and running the final distance to the shadow of the rocks. There they crouched, allowing Ratt and a few of the others to climb quietly up toward the summit of the mesa for a good look.

Tarek followed without being told, though Dave gave him a frown and a jerk of the thumb to stay down. Voices hushed behind the sound of the breeze through the high arch and the chorus of cicadas and crickets that sang for miles to the planets above. Low men's voices, speaking confidently without fear of being overheard. There were only about eight, all of them wearing the distinctive dark gray robes of the Sodren priesthood, the time-honored emissaries of the Skylord and His Valya. One of them, the lookout evidently, stood boldly on the very top of James' arch with his robes flying in the night wind.

"Some lookout," Tarek heard a patroller whisper. "He didn't see anything!"

"He's too busy staring at the sky."

Jelka were, by nature, atheists though the ancient faith had begun to reemerge in the pack recently due to an influx of Sodren missionaries. From the glance that Tarek and Ratt got of the meeting, it looked like several of those missionaries were oddly enough speaking with their priestly brethren in yellow and blue; priests serving the Eagles, the Jelka's sworn enemy.

They could see two of the men's faces distinctly by the light of small oldage hand-lamps the priests carried; a lean tall man with a face like stone, silvery ash-brown hair flying long and wispy in the breeze. He looked as if he hadn't smiled in his life. He was speaking to a handsome golden-haired muscled giant even taller than he was with an Eagles sash. From the dry smiles and momentary short, humorless laughter, the Jelka spies could tell that these two were on extremely friendly terms. Their faces were similar enough that they could have been brothers.

"What the von..." Tarek breathed, crouched at Ratt's right hand. He scowled at the meeting, feeling his blood heat at the treachery that pricked the air. "Priests owe loyalty to the pack they serve! These two shouldn't be..."

'Hold,' Ratt signed, listening. They could just catch the priest's words.

"...allowed him to fly the nest at last, we never thought Grandfather would let him out," the silvery, cold-eyed priest smiled faintly, the barest hint of emotion. He glanced up at the lookout. They were obviously talking about him.

Ratt looked up at the man standing on top of the arch through a pair of very small pocket binoculars. The lookout's face was obscured by the shadow of his hood but for a frustrated scowl on the small thin-lipped mouth. He was staring at the sky. His hair was very long, and looked to be dark crimson in the fire light, trailing down his shoulders and flying unheeded across his face with the wind.

"How is he doing, seeing the sky? Has he pissed down his leg yet?" the large handsome one scoffed.

"Almost. You should have seen the expression on his face when he got his first look at the food."

"Wait until he discovers the toilet room!"

"You mean the pit," the lean silvery one smirked.

"Well it's a good thing, Endler, you can use backup. I think Nixon will do well on the surface, as soon as he grows used to the fact that he doesn't have a ceiling above him anymore." The gold Eagles man crossed his huge arms. "How is your greedy little pet coming along? Has he finally been seduced into helping us?"

"He's our man. He's agreed to all of Grandfather's demands."

"He'll give us full reign?"

"Anything we want to do."

"Is he going to meet Grandfather?"

"Very soon. Perhaps the fourth."

"Excellent, the sooner the better. This business has dragged on long enough, I'd love to be done with all the sneaking around. To be honest, I think the whole thing is unnecessary. With the steps that Grandfather has taken, why do we even need this distraction? I think it shows our hand to the above-grounders."

"At this point it doesn't matter," the silvery one he'd called Endler murmured with a smile. "It will give the

above-grounders something to fear, something to chase. Especially the enemy. I believe Grandfather is just doing it to give the Overlord a bone to gnaw on.”

“How about your men in the South...?” but before he could go on, Jelka and priests both heard the whine of approaching skyboards. It was too late to act, they were coming in at maximum speed. Planetlight glinted against beetle black armor as seven skyboarders dropped out of the stars, completely encircling the tomb, the nearest one hardly two body-lengths from Tarek’s hiding place.

Tarek saw it all in a moment’s flash. They were identical, each man wearing armor unlike anything Tarek had ever seen. It fit close against their bodies, made of silent night-black plates layered one atop another, which allowed them to move as if they wore nothing but leathers.

Beneath their feet were smooth skyboards without tail flux, speedgrid, or even straps to secure their riders to their decks, cold and featureless as black granite.

Strangest of all were the helmets, which covered every face in an unbroken shield without visor or eye hole, as if the men within had – or needed – no eyes.

It took Tarek a mere heartbeat to realize what he was seeing as the armored men pointed thick, snub-nosed rifles toward the priests and fired. Nets leapt from the blunt barrels, spreading into sheets of black mesh which fell over the priests from all sides.

Immediately the outermost priests were engulfed, but the two central figures were fast, leaping onto their ‘boards and rocketing into the sky so quickly that Tarek momentarily lost sight of them.

Three of the armored men flew skyward after the priests who had slipped their snares, while the rest collapsed inward around their cursing, trapped companions. Behind him, Tarek heard shouts from the Jelka patrol as they also realized who, or rather *what*, they were seeing.

“It’s the Night Valya!”

“Dead spirits of the Emperor’s murdered Guard!”

“Don’t let them touch you or you’ll die!”

Most of the patrol took to flight in terror like frightened ravens, dodging the cold black shapes of the airborne Valya and speeding toward Jelka base with trailing screams.

Rat began cursing with his most colorful epithets, jumping to his feet and shouting for the remaining Jelka to rally to him. “Von blasted cowards!” Dave rumbled angrily from Tarek’s other side. “Night Patrol ain’t afraid of nothin’!”

But Tarek’s attention was completely fixed on the priests captured in the Valya’s black nets, for in that moment they proved themselves to be as unearthly as their opponents.

The largest of them stood without struggling. He simply smiled at the Valya, his previously normal eyes flickering into glowing green orbs bright enough to cast shadows. A moment later two foot blades shot forth from the flesh of his forearms, and with a flurry of movement, the nets fell away sliced into pieces. Beside him, another priest lifted his arm to aim his naked palm toward a Valya; an instant later there was a crack of gunfire from his hand and a bullet slammed into the Valya’s armored forehead, knocking him off his ‘board to fall into the grass.

“*Demons!*”

A gaggle of fervent prayers erupted from a group of remaining Jelka patrollers, as they hastily dug feathers out of their pockets to throw toward the unnatural – and obviously unlucky – priests, in an attempt to ward away their evil.

Tarek had his hand halfway to his own pocket of prayer feathers when he was jerked out of his amazement by Rat grabbing his shoulder, and shouting near his ear, “Those are Jelka *traitors* the Sky-damned Valya are stealing!”

Tarek glance followed Rat’s pointing finger to the edge of the skirmish where a Valya was escaping into the night, one of the priests netted like a human cocoon beneath his ‘board. His startled brain snapped back into gear and he cursed, jumping onto his own skyboard and pressing hard against the sparking speed grid to give chase.

Rat was right; no matter what else these priests were, they were first and foremost traitors to the pack he had sworn to serve. They betrayed Jelka trust and so they had to face Jelka justice, and Tarek would be damned if he would let some legendary spirit-men steal them away.

Imagine trying to explain *that* to the pack Drakes.

Keeping his eye on the captured priest, Tarek sucked in his breath as he held himself rigid against the violent rise of his skyboard on full power, the night wind howling around his ears and flattening his hair over his face as he lifted toward the sky. Immediately the chill of the air burned on his nose and ears. Around him he could feel and hear the lightning-fast duels being fought between priests and Valya, sweeping closer to him with every heartbeat.

From his left and below, another Valya shadowing the one with the captive saw Tarek closing in and banked sharply to intercept. He – or rather it – was fast, a mere flicker of a silhouette against the dim plains and then all at once it was right in front of Tarek, snapping its ‘board toward his head. He blocked, kicking his feet up over his head, ‘board and all, feeling it shudder as it connected solidly with the Valya’s strike.

“So much for the rumors that you janglers are spirits!” he growled, tucking his knees to his chest and rolling backward into a fall until his ‘board was once again beneath him.

Immediately the Valya was in front of him again, giving him no time to think. The armored creature was eerily silent as it attacked, raining down a dozen hammer-hard blows in an attempt to separate Tarek’s feet from his ‘board.

“Slammin’ drek fek shanty Trex queenie!” Tarek cursed with frustration, right before the wind shifted just enough to make the Valya pause and compensate.

It was all the opening Tarek needed to stop defending and go on the offensive. He stomped hard on his busted speed grid, hitting his attacker’s front bottomplate with the nose of his skyboard. The abrupt buck of his malfunctioning ‘board was sudden enough to send the Valya cartwheeling into the darkness. Tarek grinned with exhilaration as he jerked his favorite weapon, an oldage aluminum bat, out of its sheath and swung it by the chain connected to its pommel. He saw the Valya like a hole in the night ahead of him, recovering as it swept upward to meet him.

Belting out a Jelka war cry, he swung the bat high above his head, but before he could bring it crashing down, the Valya leapt and kicked Tarek square in the chest with a massive metal-clad boot.

The impact was unholy. It was as if an invisible magic force generated by the boot pushed outward from the kick, throwing Tarek bodily back into the endless span of air, bat and all.

All of the air was slammed out of his lungs, leaving him empty and aching as he fell. He barely managed to keep the toe of his boot hooked into his half-frayed nose strap, tumbling upside-down before he could grab the edges of his ‘board with both hands and jam his boot into the speedgrid. Electricity surged through his leg, biting angrily at his nerves as the ‘board’s power source grounded itself in his flesh. Slowly, air began to trickle into his lungs again with a long, pained gasp.

Throwing his body backward he rotated around his ‘board and shot upward again, ignoring the hard rocky plains below. He didn’t care how close he came to pancake. For Tarek, when he was in the sky, there was no ground.

Rapid gunfire exploded into the night from somewhere near the Tomb, as cornered Priests attempted to knock the Valya out of the sky with a rain of bullets.

Two impacted off of Tarek’s opponent’s armor with hot yellow sparks, sending the Valya reeling and diving for the ground to avoid leaving himself silhouetted against the heavenly planets above.

Tarek let him flee, rocketing past in the direction the captured priest had gone.

More shots fired into the darkness, and the sky seemed to swarm with duels and chaos; Valya, Priests, and Jelka patrollers all caught up together in a whirlwind of confusion and combat. Bodies and ‘boards crashed together, yells and shouts and pleas mixing with the snap of gunpowder and cracking of thin, brittle ‘boardplastic splintering under harsh blows.

Then he saw it; the bulky outline of the netted priest under the ‘board of a Valya, who was in the process of fighting off two other priests a quarter mile to the south. Instantly Tarek gave pursuit, riding his screaming skyboard hard, leaning all of his weight on the protesting speedgrid in an attempt to reach the struggle a few seconds faster.

The Valya spun and produced a telescoping bow staff, somehow knocking both of his assailants off their ‘boards with a single graceful twirl. And then Tarek was there, falling out of the sky like a screaming

meteor to meet the Valya's upraised staff with his bat.

He struck hard, letting his bat's chain wrap around the staff as he spun himself and his 'board like a top. His own momentum ripped the staff out of his opponent's hands. Then he was past, looping around and swerving back to face the disarmed Valya with a feral grin.

The Valya turned to look at Tarek, taking in his dying 'board, manic grin, and spinning bat.

"Come on, jangler," Tarek taunted, beaconing the armored man closer, circling him. "Let's shammy."

The Valya shook its head slightly, crouching into better fighting posture on its board a heartbeat before a priest tackled him from above. It was the silvery haired priest, the one called Endler, and he was flying like a man possessed by the wind. He was at least as good as Tarek.

He spun his 'board around himself as if he could fly, defying gravity as it snapped out to catch the falling Valya over and over again in the chest, leg, side, head, and finally a low sweep across the ankles which knocked the dazed Valya off his 'board.

Tarek was there a moment later, catching Endler across the back with his bat and sending the priest right after the Valya into free-fall.

"Ha! *My* traitor!" Tarek crowed, reaching for the Valya's hovering 'board. But it, and its prisoner, were gone.

A moment later he caught sight of the skyboard a few dozen feet below him, once again under the boots of its Valya, and once again being assaulted by a recovered Endler.

"Slam it," Tarek dove, joining Endler in a violently competitive chase after the fleeing Valya.

Another Valya collided into Tarek and the silvery-haired Endler like a lightning strike from heaven, slamming them sideways with a smooth double-blow of his bottomplate. Then he danced away from counterattack, every liquid movement screaming with talent so raw he had to be a blazecube.

The chaos instantly intensified as the blazecube Valya, Tarek, and Endler all engaged in a bloody melee. Tarek lashed out with the bat. It bounced off of the Valya's armor, affecting nothing.

Endler screamed a sound that was not human and clenched both fists, releasing two three-foot blades from the back of his wrists, jagged and evil looking.

The unnatural priest slashed at the Valya, and Tarek jerked himself back, unsure for a moment who to bash... or if he really wanted to touch either of these things. No human could grow blades from their flesh, light their eyes with fire, or make sounds like that! Though there were tales of demons from the underworld which could.

"Valya and von-men," he gasped, voice drowned out by the thunder of the wind as he flew. "By the Skylord, it's a battle between good and evil and I'm right in the middle of it..."

With a blur of blades and sparks, both Valya and priest swept past Tarek at impossible speeds, a wild kaleidoscope of adrenaline and passion overlaid on the backdrop of the three luminous skyward planets. When the priest saw that every blow his blades landed bounced off of the Valya's armor without effect, the two broke apart and eyed one another malevolently.

The priest clenched his fists again, and the arm-blades lit up with an electric-blue glow and hummed with a terrible sound.

"Holy Skylord!" Tarek yelled, quickly distancing himself from the fight with a brand new surge of adrenaline. Dark magic on top of it all! The night could not possibly get any more surreal.

But the facts were still the facts; Jelka priests sharing secrets with Eagles priests, betrayal of Old Man Noswego and all of the Jelka. Whether or not they were human, the most important thing was to take down the priests, then he could fight the meddling Night Valya over who got to drag them home as captives.

The Jelka rejoined the fight, slamming his bat into Endler's leg to knock the priest off balance. At the same moment, the Valya rammed the nose of his 'board into the back of his knees. One of Endler's blue-glowing blades accidentally caught the edge of the Valya's 'board as he flipped backwards, slicing the 'boardplastic as easily as butter.

Tarek growled, swerving under the Valya to chase Endler. He dodged quickly to keep up with the priest's frantic movements, get under him, then reached up and grabbed the sides of the man's 'board, spilling it sideways with all of his weight and strength.

The next thing he knew he was also upside down and falling, a cursing Endler tangled up with his sparking 'board, both of them struggling to get their own 'board out of the other's grip.

The fight didn't last more than a few seconds, before Endler's glowing blades darted out toward Tarek's face and sent the Jelka into a fast retreat.

"You crazy son of a bitch!" the Priest snarled as he recovered.

Tarek was feeling bruised, battered, and absolutely alive. These were two of the best opponents he'd ever fought in his life. There was blood in his mouth, and his 'board was shrieking as though it was about to overheat and explode. It was glorious.

Tarek saw the flash of black against the violet light of the planets, and saw another Valya – a Valya toting a familiar netted prisoner – swooping away from the shadows of the rocks and heading south at full speed. Reminded of his original purpose, Tarek abandoned the fight and streaked southward after his target. Beneath his feet his 'board was screaming with an increasingly unhealthy sound, radiating heat through the deck and into his feet. He was fairly sure he could only get another couple of minutes of combat out of it before it overloaded and surged like a funeral 'board straight up into the deadly Canopy.

Hopefully, a few moments would be enough.

His battle with the Valya leader and Endler had drifted south-west far enough that he was able to intercept the Valya's double-loaded board, although there was nothing stealthy about his approach. As soon as their paths converged, Tarek threw out his arms and tackled the Valya, ignoring the whimpering priest in his net.

The Valya defended his prize by pulling out a second small rod that suddenly telescoped into a full-sized fighting staff, using it to leverage his Jelka attacker off and separate them into a tight, close duel.

Tarek's bat and the titanium staff connected in angry staccato, the Jelka patroller snarling and cursing with every single hit incoherently until it culminated with, "...gunna face trial before the Packleader for treason, and you can't steal him and make him disappear back to Valya-Ken! I know that's why you came, you flew down from the Blue World and you're going right back up there but I won't let him get off the hook that easily! If you take him Up There, he *won't stand trial!*"

Tarek swooped, flying around the Valya like an angry hornet until he saw his opening. He swung his bat before thought came, connecting solidly with the side of the Valya's neck in a less protected spot where it looked like armor plates gave way to dark gray leather.

The Valya fell, stunned by the blow, and Tarek snatched the blubbering netted priest away from the eerily self-sentient skyboard, cutting the net's ties with a slash of his knife.

The living 'board hesitated, facing Tarek for a moment as if the skyboard itself would attack him, then dove for its falling owner to save him. It moved fast, as agile as a bird as it swooped beneath its falling master and carried him away at full speeds into the darkness.

All at once, like shadows vanishing into the darkness, the fight was over.

Tarek looked around, panting and ready to pummel anything that moved, to see only a few riled-up Night Patrollers staring around them with the same confused expressions. Both the Night Valya, and the unnatural blade-wielding priests, were gone as if they had never existed. There was no sign of them, except the chilling silence of the cicadas as every creature cowered in fear.

No evidence, that is, except for the quivering bundle slung over the front of Tarek's wheezing 'board, a single treasonous Jelka priest.

Several of the Night Patrollers cursed, made holy signs, and two dug additional feathers out of their jackets to throw into the sky as they prayed. They'd never fought with angels and demons before.

Twenty minutes later, Tarek hammered on the solid steel doors of the Inner Sanctum of the main Jelka-base Fort, hearing the echoes fade as they bounced away into the corners of the vast audience chambers within. He had the traitorous priest by the scruff with one hand, the pathetic man curled up on himself and no threat to anyone. Although those other priests had been von-men with glowing eyes, this fellow was as common as they came. Probably a normal human in the pay of hell.

"They're not in there," Ratt said, squinting through the crack in the doors. "Come on. Top 'Board's office." He ran for the stair, Tarek and the rest of the patrol right behind.

Dave took the priest from Tarek and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"You know the Top 'Board, right? He gave you that jacket?" Ratt whispered to Tarek as they ran up three levels into the heights of the Fort, and dodged through the halls, trying to avoid any honor guard who might stop them and demand to know their business. Things were strange these days in the Jelka, and one never knew which faction any member of the pack was working for.

Tarek and Ratt, they worked for the Packleader, Old Man Noswego, and no one else.

"He gave me his jacket," Tarek agreed, fingering the lapel of the worn garment possessively. "I was just a kid. I doubt he'd remember me."

"Let's hope he does," Ratt breathed, inching around a corner to stare down a long hallway on the top floor of the Jelka Citadel, the main reinforced building of the base. "Ooo, man, Tarek we have the ki. We got all the way here and we ain't got caught yet. Go! Hurry! You four, guard the stairs."

Dave, Ratt, one of their own called Dropper, and Tarek ran for the Top 'Board's office and rapped urgently on the door.

"Sir, sir?" Ratt called, praying the officer was still lurking about even this late at night. He was known to stay up all night working sometimes.

"It's the middle of the night, and there's no light on in the office!" Dropper hissed. "The man's in his rack asleep, we'll have to crash Rat Pack bunker..."

Suddenly the door opened, and the Top 'Board of the Jelka stood looking at them all with a strange expression. His hair was damp and tousled and he was breathing heavily, though he tried to hide it. When his eyes focused on the prisoner they lit with a fierce passion – perhaps frustration – just for a second.

"Sir! We found this sladd meeting with Eagles priests at Jelka's Tomb," Ratt reported instantly.

Thorn, the Top 'Board, gestured him to silence with a sharp motion. "Inside. All of you."

The four patrollers tumbled into Thorn's office with the priest and one of the Rat Pack shut the door. It was dark within, and smelled of fine leather and books, and other things to high and noble for grubby Raiders to own. Behind Thorn in the darkness were three other members of the Ratpack, dressed in fine black tailored jackets with high shiny 'boardboots, all staring at him by the light of one tiny lamp.

For a second Tarek stood humbled, gazing around him at the one place he'd dreamed of standing his entire life. The office was just as tasteful and elegant as Thorn himself. Reddish polished wood covered all the walls and floor, tall bookshelves framing huge hand-painted wall-maps and beautiful weapon's displays.

This was the reality that Griffin was always trying to mimic.

The Top 'Board was tall and dominant with a keen expression under dark brown jaw-length hair in abundant disarray, now streaked with white. He looked younger than his forty-nine years and still 'boarded with strength. But it was his charisma and honor as a leader that made him popular; aside from Old Man Noswego himself, Thorn was the most beloved member of High Command. There were few in the large Pack who spoke Thorn's duelsign with anything less than the highest respect.

He narrowed his violet eyes at Tarek, looking at the jacket as a slow smile crept onto his lightly tanned face. He had been Tarek's hero since Tarek could remember. "You are that kid, aren't you? The one I rescued?"

Tarek fingered the ancient Top 'Board patch on his jacket nervously. "Yes, sir." He introduced himself, "Tarek, commander of Raider Patrol five."

"Just Tarek?"

"I d-don't have a last name."

"Jupe kid?"

Tarek shrugged, feeling strangely awkward and clumsy before his hero. "I guess so."

Thorn nodded at Tarek, looking at the old jacket thoughtfully. Then he glanced at the priest captive, sagging on the floor in exhaustion. "You found this where?"

"Jelka's Tomb," Ratt helpfully repeated, just as awed to stand face to face with the Top 'Board as Tarek was.

Dave attempted to suck in his somewhat large paunch and stand at proper attention, giving the four Rat Pack members a nod of false confidence.

"Eagles priests, hm? Did you hear what he said to the Eagles?"

"Something about... they were talking about one of the Jelka priests, sir," Ratt spoke up again. He was the shortest member of the group, but had the biggest mouth. "Something about how he'd never seen the sky, I don't know what in von they were talking about honestly. Never seen the sky, and would piss himself if he saw the toilets or something."

Thorn shot a quick peculiar look to one of his unit, a keen-eyed woman with the freckled tan skin of one who had seldom spent a day away from the sky. She had a Jelka knife tattooed down one side of her neck and the sides of her head buzzed short, and the expression she returned to him was significant and seething.

All of the other Rat Pack members exchanged looks.

"Then he said something about some contact of theirs meeting 'grandfather' on the fourth."

"That's all?"

Tarek broke in, taking over from Ratt hastily. "The Eagles priest called the leader of the Jelka priests 'Endler' and they were talking about this red-haired Jelka priest and called him 'Nixon,' the one that had never seen the sky. We didn't catch any other names. He said Nixon would do well on the surface."

Tarek narrowed his eyes. "I don't know what that means but I don't like the sound of it considering..." but he stopped. He couldn't tell his Pack's top officer that he suspected they'd seen demons. But it would make sense. Demons came from Von, which was hell, a subterranean world of darkness where one would never see the sky again.

"They kept talking about 'above-grounders' and saying that something they were doing was going to show their hand to them, and they said the Overlord was their enemy. They're planning something.

Maybe you can get more out of this guy," Tarek prodded the sagging priest-captive with a boot.

"I certainly will," Thorn promised darkly. "Overlord, hm? Was that all?"

"Well, sir, you won't believe this..." Ratt glanced up at Dave.

Dave continued quietly. "Sir, we saw the Night Valya."

Tarek grimaced. Well, now that the secret was out... "Saw? They almost tore our unit up!" He rubbed his arm where the Valya with the titanium staff had scored a good hit. That angel had been good.

"Night Valya, huh?" the shadow of a smile touched Thorn's face. "So they're not just a myth the Litz jupes made up?"

"No, sir," Ratt said with feeling. "Scary. No faces! Just these helmets, smooth as a rock. Oldage armor, with no cracks and no way to get it off, like they were *made* out of armor, and their 'boards were unlike anything I've ever seen, air intakes and shaped like they had muscles..."

"And they was *alive*," Dave swore. "On my honor before James Jelka, their skyboards could think and could fly by themselves, and they could too, sir. The Valya could fly without a skyboard, but they didn't have any wings. It's real, we ain't drunk, we really saw it!" His eyes were huge.

"Good work, men," Thorn interrupted, looking thoughtfully at Tarek again. "I hear you've been doing well as Raid Leader, Raid Five. I might come by someday and see how your unit is doing. I've been meaning to for a while."

Tarek felt a hot flush all over. "Thank you, sir. I would like nothing better."

Thorn jerked his head toward the prisoner, glancing at his Rat Pack. "Let's get this sladd somewhere we can deal with him quietly. You... what's your name?"

"Dave, sir. Night Patrol Nine, second patroller."

"You don't have a last name either?"

"Uh..."

"Forget it. You've done a great job of lugging him around so far. Keep it up and follow me."

Thorn brushed past the Night Patrol men for his door and opened it, looking both ways down the hall. The base was silent. Quickly the four Rat Pack and the Night Patrollers formed up and left the office, following the Top 'Board for his preferred location.

"Sir," Tarek ran to catch up with the Top 'Board, and with a nod the Rat Pack members fell back and

allowed it. He whispered when he spoke to his mentor. "Sir, um, there's something going on with the Pack, isn't there? Weird things are happening. I hear a lot of things in the Raider's bunkers. Von, even my rella is acting weird. I just... I just want to know; is the Old Man safe?"

Thorn gave Tarek a peculiar glance. "Why would you ask something like that?"

Tarek frowned at his torn, wrapped, falling apart boots as they walked across the smooth wood floors of the top level, feeling out of place. Although he was young and thin, Tarek was almost the same height as the Top 'Board which was why the jacket fit so well. Now they made a matched set: Thorn had replaced the old jacket he'd given Tarek with a new one of almost the same length, with no tatters. Thorn's boots beside him were so polished and elegant, while Tarek's had seen the bad end of a sandstorm more than once. "Just a feeling, sir," the young Raider muttered. "Like everything is falling off the edge of the cliffwall, and I don't know if the Jelka will fly or fall. I don't know if they have the skill."

"Noswego is safe," Thorn told him quietly, "as long as I'm alive. This Rat Pack is the best we've ever had, we can handle anything that might come after him. But I appreciate your concern. And yes, there are things changing and moving in the Jelka right now. Keep your ears and eyes open and if you find or hear anything that alarms you, don't hesitate to come to me with it. Do you understand?"

Tarek nodded, then all of the men slowed to a stop as they saw another group turn the corner headed straight for them. In the lead was the scowling, plump, officious Second 'Board of the Jelka, Devon Bice, with his hair in disarray as if he'd just been dragged out of bed. From the expression on his face, he had been.

"Oh slam," Thorn cursed under his breath, all of the Rat Pack members at his side tensing.

"Lord Helon," the Second 'Board greeted from fifty feet as he quickly closed with the Top 'Board's group. "May I ask what is going on here?"

"Lord Bice. I was just taking a prisoner to detainment, this is none of your concern."

"I may argue that it is," the displeased heavyset man glared, fixing every member of Thorn's group with the same suspicious look. In the back of the Second 'Board's group, Tarek noticed a familiar face smiling smugly to himself. Griffin.

"What the von is he doing here..." Tarek whispered so quietly that only the female Rat Pack member heard him.

"The prisoner was caught outside Jelka territory involved in a meeting with Eagles operatives. That leaves him firmly in my charge, Lord Bice. Now if you would please excuse me..."

"I beg to differ, Lord Helon." Devon Bice planted himself in the middle of the hallway like a boulder with big bushy black eyebrows that stuck out further than his nose, and crossed his arms. He had over twenty guards and a few in the back, watching. All of them wanted to make trouble. "If you'd brought back an Eagles priest, it would be an external matter. But since you brought back a Jelka priest, a member of the pack, it is an internal disciplinary matter as you very well know and it belongs to the Second, not the Top 'Board. I would be pleased if you would hand over the prisoner now, Lord Helon, so that he might be properly processed."

"This is *my* business, Devon," Thorn said quietly, stepping forward to look the shorter, fat man right in the eye. "Don't infringe on my arrest or I'll bring this before Noswego."

"Very well, although I doubt he will be pleased to be roused from bed at this hour, and you know the letter of the law is on my side. We could convene Pack Court about this," Devon sourly smiled and lowered his voice to a threat, "or we can have it out right now."

Thorn looked at Bice's men, seething in silence. The four Rat Pack glanced at one another, messages exchanged through the eyes alone. Subtle shades of politics passed back and forth along the hallway that Tarek could not interpret, but it seemed that Bice had the upper hand. He fingered the well-worn handle of his bat, wishing he could just take on all of the Second 'Board's bully group...

Finally Thorn backed down, grinding his teeth. He looked hard and long at the priestly prisoner, telling him in a thousand unvoiced ways how very much he'd like to personally take him apart. Then he grudgingly stepped to the side and let Devon's men take him.

All of the Rat Pack and their leader watched the priest go with mutual regret, dragged down the hallway by four large patrollers until he was gone from sight.



“Thank you, Lord Helon. I appreciate this kind of cooperation.” Devon Bice bowed slightly, more of a jerk toward mockery than anything. He turned and left, Griffin glancing once at Tarek as he followed. When they were gone, Thorn let out a deep breath and cursed. The Rats of the pack turned, shaking their heads, and started back for his office despondently.

“Sir, is there any way...?” Tarek began, feeling a strange anger in his helplessness.

“Yah, give the signal sir...” Ratt added on top of Tarek. He knew a lot of people in the Jelka, and strange things could happen in the middle of the night.

“It’s not worth it,” Thorn told them quietly. “There are things happening you don’t know about.” Thorn looked once more into Tarek’s eyes, nodded, and smiled just slightly. “Keep yourself in one piece, kid. I may be seeing you soon.”

He looked at the deflated Night Patrollers. “Good work, men. I’ll remember this. But next time...” another glance at Tarek, “...go easy with the bat.”

Tarek watched him go, befuddled. Thorn and his Rat Pack returned to his office, shut the door, and Jelka base settled back into the uneasy silence it usually maintained.

“Well von-curse it all,” Ratt said. “Night Valya, priests with swords inside their arms and Thorn acting weird... what the von is going on around here?”

“The pack is going to von, Ratt,” Dave answered quietly. “And we’re right in the middle of it.”

“And so is Griffin,” Tarek murmured with a scowl.

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