

6 – Friends

“So, yeah,” Mathews said, locking eyes with Hector before shifting her scowl toward Perry, “it’s not optional. We’re all going to meet up at the swap, get a bite, and shop around. We’ve got a team armory, but if you find something you gotta have, we can talk. It’ll be team property, of course, but—”

“Commander,” Red drawled, grinning in a way that said he considered himself too smooth for mere words, “we get it. I’m dog-tired, though, and if you want me to show up, you gotta let me go home and get a few winks.”

Mathews stared at Red; her fingers twitched as she considered her response. After a moment, she looked at Perry and said, “Congrats, Perry—you just got bumped off the top of my shitlist.”

Perry’s eyebrows shot up. “I did?”

Mathews ignored him and addressed the rest of the team, “So, we’re clear, then? Nineteen hundred at the swap. Be there or suffer tomorrow.” With that, she turned and stalked toward the admin building. With some grumbling and some half-hearted goodbyes, most of the team dispersed—some to the showers, and some straight to the parking lot.

Frederick walked over to Hector, and he braced himself for more drama. The kid’s eyes were still bruised, but the swelling around his nose had gone down. Mathews had tried to give him a tube of trauma bugs, but he’d waved them off; apparently the young Ventress had a full-blown medical nanite battery implant—not surprising, really, for a Royal, especially a member of a Great House.

To Hector’s surprise, the kid held out a hand. “No hard feelings?”

Hector shook the proffered hand, grunting his agreement. “Mathews is the one who made us fight.”

“Right,” Frederick nodded. “Anyway, I underestimated you—saw a common-born and assumed...” He trailed off, and Hector let him off the hook, nodding.

“I get it.”

“Tell me, though—you’ve had some rejuvs? Spent some time in the Guard, or at least did some merc work? The way you took the lead on those capture drills...” He was talking about the team-building games they’d done all afternoon—random draws to form teams, then variations of capture the flag. After ten rounds, nobody was thinking of Hector as dead weight anymore; it wouldn’t make sense, considering the teams he’d been on had won nine out of ten rounds. If the others hadn’t noticed, Mathews had made sure to point it out.

“Sure.” Hector shrugged. “Something like that.” He glanced toward the gym where Perry still lurked, watching him with narrowed eyes as he held the door for Kristina.

Frederick followed his gaze and chuckled. “Big boy’s jealous—of us both, I’d say.”

“Maybe.”

“No maybe about it. His aura is weak as hell. Level fifteen and he can barely form a gauntlet. You ever seen an Aura Blade take that shape before?”

Hector nodded. “Not uncommon with a green.”

“Yeah, but his aura’s *silver*. My uncle’s a silver and his Aura Blade manifests as a *bow*.”

Hector shook his head. “Perry’s not a silver. He’s a gray. You just can’t see the difference clearly because of how his aura flickers.”

Frederick’s eyes widened. “A *gray*! Makes sense now—defensive type.”

Hector could have spent an hour talking about the many nuances of aura shades and how color wasn’t all-defining, but all he did was nod, then jerk his thumb toward the road. “Gonna head out.”

As he started off, Frederick thumped him on the shoulder and nodded. “Later, man. Glad to know I won’t have to carry the whole team.”

Hector grunted and kept walking. The kid was earnest, he’d give him that, but he was also deluded into thinking he was some kind of prodigy. He had a strong aura, but he was slow to trigger abilities and got easily distracted by pressure. After the drills they’d run that day, Hector figured he’d rank Frederick somewhere around fourth on the team. Naturally, he’d put himself in the top spot, but Mathews had some tricks up her sleeve. He’d seen her hold back more than once during the skirmishes.

After Mathews, Hector figured Kristina was the strongest, then Frederick, followed by Red, then Perry, then the two scientists. None of them had aura systems that were half as clever as Evie. He was sure Frederick had a gold-tier system, too, but his AI was young and inexperienced. Nobody had offered up any details like that; Hector was just guessing, but he didn’t think any of the others even had silver-tier systems. Perry’s was atrocious, not even iron—maybe bronze or rust-tech, like Orin’s.

The only reason he was certain Frederick had a gold-tier system was because he’d been so pissed and frustrated after Hector beat him in their little sparring match that he’d threatened to scrape Bobby during their first team drill. Mathews had quashed that talk right away. Hector grinned, remembering the kid’s face when the commander told him she’d order the team to take turns scraping him if he ever did anything like that.

That was Rim justice, and it shed some light on Mathews and her former career; she’d probably done privateer work, hunting pirates out in the belt. Experience like that would explain her preference for the “Commander” title, too. Sighing, Hector shook his head. *Doesn’t matter.*

//It’s healthy to show interest in your team.//

Waste of time. Show me your archetype language on the Reaver again.

Evie took his rebuke in stride and opened a window on his AUI. A few days back, she’d finalized her analysis of the archetype she’d uncovered. As usual, she didn’t have a lot of information—it

was uncharted ground, after all. Still, it was enough to interest Hector, enough for him to know he wanted to aim his development in that direction. He focused on the window and read her almost teasing description again:

//The Reaver – awareness sharpened, violence perfected—hunter, destroyer, relentless predator.

Archetype transition cost: 40 aura potentia.

Potentia available: 1.//

You don't have any idea what abilities it will open up? What attributes it will primarily enhance?

//I know it will broaden pathways discovered by your Berserker archetype, but not in every direction. You were unhappy with the Berserker's mental influence and your subsequent loss of control, but the Reaver archetype steers those mental lines in a different direction. I'm hopeful that it will, in fact, enhance your focus.//

And the attributes?

//You should expect a blend of Watcher and Berserker influences on attributes and abilities. I don't think you'll be displeased. Judging by the broad nature of the new pathways, this is a high-tier archetype that we've discovered—perhaps even elite.//

Hector nodded, smiling. The Berserker had been strong, but, as Evie said, he was reluctant to give up control of his emotions—not after spending decades learning to keep a leash on his temper. It wasn't as though he hadn't gotten anything out of the archetype; he'd gained significant attribute improvements, he'd walked away with the Berserk boost intact—if he ever wanted to use that again—and it had opened the door to the Reaver.

"Now I just need potentia," he said, heaving a sigh as he lengthened his stride toward the house Lemon had rented.

He was about halfway home when a vehicle hummed by—a small, silvery, arrow-shaped passenger car. It slowed and then stopped a few meters from him, and when he walked up beside it, one of the tinted windows retracted. Kristina stuck her fox-eared head out, grinning. "You walk everywhere?"

Hector shook his head. "I live close to the compound."

"Come on." A gull-wing door lifted, exposing a plush black and red interior. "I'll drop you."

Hector almost refused. He opened his mouth to speak, but then he closed it. *What are you trying to prove? Don't be such a hardass.* He wasn't sure why he was surprised; his inner monologue was always judgmental and biting where he was concerned. He ducked through the opening and sat in the seat across from Kristina.

As the supple synth-leather seat hugged his body, she smiled, touching a button to close the door, and the little sedan hummed into motion. "Sharp car," he remarked.

She chuckled. “Is that a pun from Mr. Dour? It *is* aerodynamic.” She smiled, rubbing the soft material. “It’s comfortable and fast. My father bought it for me—said if I was going to be living out here for a while, I’d need some wheels.” She shrugged. “Doesn’t trust cabs.”

“Well, if he can afford it...”

“My family’s nothing like Frederick’s, but we do okay. Dad’s an administrator at the Tharsis Spaceport.”

Hector grunted, nodding. Tharsis had been a sizeable city even back in his old life. If her father was an administrator at the spaceport, he was probably very wealthy—not from his Imperial salary, but from grift. Hector could only imagine the amount of corruption in an operation of that size.

“So...” Kristina dragged the word out. “What’s your deal? You’re a hell of a fighter, you know squad tactics, and you can shoot as well as Red. I think your aura system’s pretty damn high-end; only saw you use it once today, but that was a hell of a fast boost activation. And the speed was good, too—not up to my level, but *good*. Still, you said yourself that the system is low-level. How do you get experience like you’ve got and have a *low-level* system? Is it a reinstall? You didn’t like your old AI?” Her eyes widened. “Or someone jacked it? You got rolled?”

Hector pointed out the angular window. “That’s my place.”

The car slowed, but Kristina didn’t relent. “That’s all you can say about it?”

He looked at her as the car pulled up to the curb outside the rental. A dozen replies warred for space on his tongue. Some were rude, some were dismissive, some were self-effacing. For some reason, he settled on something that was almost too close to the truth for comfort. “I got betrayed.” He shrugged dismissively. “Had to start over from square one with my system. Anyway, I don’t like to talk about it.”

Her eyes widened as she slowly nodded. “Well, a lot of puzzle pieces just fell into place. I bet there’s a lot more to that story.”

Hector touched the button to open the door. “Thanks for the ride, K—”

“Call me *Kristy*, would you? None of my friends call me *Kristina*.”

Hector looked at her for a few seconds, mentally reviewing the day; he hadn’t heard *anyone* call her *Kristy*. Perry had called her *Tina* and earned himself a few insults, but that was it. “We’re friends now?”

“You told me something you didn’t want to talk about, didn’t you?” She held out a fist.

Hector nodded, bumped her knuckles, and then got out of the car. “See you later.”

“Yep!” The door closed, and the car sped away, humming down the road, a silver dart shimmering with the last rays of the swollen, orange sun.

“Made a new friend?”

Hector looked up to see Lemon leaning against the gate, peering through two of the rusty iron bars. He walked toward her, nodding. "One of my team members."

The gate squealed in its rusty hinges as Lemon pulled it open. "Just a team member? Did you make any *friends*?"

Hector thought about it for a moment, moving to stand closer to her, just on the outside of the gate. *Had* he made any friends? The Ventress kid had been friendly, but could Hector afford to make friends with someone whose family had probably had a hand in his betrayal? What if they *were* the culprits for what happened to the Contis? Could he be Frederick's friend if his goal was to destroy the kid's House? He pushed the thought aside and nodded toward the road. "I guess she's a friend—name's Kristina."

Lemon nodded. "That's good; it's hard when you're the new person." She took a step back, making room for him to pass. "I wasn't sure what time you'd get done."

"Me neither." Hector looked at her. He'd been surprised by how quickly she'd changed her style—maybe it was more that she'd left her whole "doll" persona back in the city. Since coming to Helio with her little brother, she'd been wearing casual outfits that would have been more at home in a corporate office—slacks, blouses, and even an occasional blazer. She was still *Lemon*, though; her shoes never would have fit in the corpo world—bright pink sneakers with thick, grippy soles.

"Hungry?" she asked, taking half a step back.

He nodded, but then frowned, shaking his head. "I'm supposed to go out with the team in a couple of hours. Mandatory."

"Oh." Lemon nodded, looking down. In the long shadows of the afternoon, her eyes looked almost blue rather than their usual pale gray. "We were going to have a cookout—none of us have ever had a *yard* before, and Orin found an old grill in the back."

Hector tilted his head as his mouth began to water. "What kind of meat?"

"Chicken and beef. It's fresh, too—well, frozen. But still, it's not preserved."

"Where'd you get that?"

"Orin got it! There's a market near the university—Oh!" She slapped a hand to her pants and dug in the pocket, producing a small data chip. "I got that research—the communication protocol data your AI wanted."

Hector smiled, taking the little black plastic rectangle. "*Nice*, Lemon!"

Some genuine excitement crept into his voice; he was more than a little eager to find out what the drive-core cipher was saying—where the ship had last reported its location. He figured it was his tone that made Lemon smile and look up. Her eyes caught the red and orange in the sky behind him, turning them into little pools of flame. "I don't think I've ever heard that kind of enthusiasm in your voice."

“Well...” Hector trailed off as different responses once again waged war, fighting for the chance to march off his tongue. Eventually, he said, “It’s something that could be pretty great. If it pans out, I’ll tell you about it.”

Lemon smiled, nodding. “So, anyway, I’ve never seen you turn down a meal. Are you telling me you can’t eat two dinners?”

He grinned, putting his hand on her shoulder and steering her toward the house. “Now that you mention it, I *did* exercise pretty hard today.”