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**“Hessian Saves the Universe”**

By N. Silber

“I think I just stepped in something,” Hessian complained.

“I believe it’s called the Ghertos Market, dear,” a cheery voice chided in his comm.

Hessian sighed grandly and for the benefit of no one save a passing Keren-Kar-Lan trader who, having no cultural equivalent for a sigh, mistook Hessian’s histrionics for a rude comment on his mother’s mating habits.

“I’m serious, Delurie. It’s green and sticky and…” He lifted his fiberglass clad boot experimentally. “I think it’s still moving.”

“An exaggeration, I’m sure.”

“Am I even in the right sector? I mean, this place is…” He cast a look around, taking in the corrugated metal maze, the neon-light illuminated labyrinth, ringing with a cacophony of voices in every known language (and a few unknown) of the Three Galaxies, calling out their wares while brandishing what could optimistically be called “goods”, stretching endlessly in all directions until the horizon curved upwards, over the heads of the barterers and barterees, looping dizzyingly to collide with the opposite horizon, the entire ordeal a massive ring adrift in space, holding its despicable denizens to its scrap-metal floors through sheer will and centrifugal force. “Huge,” Hessian finished, in one of the greatest understatements the Three Galaxies have ever known.

To an enterprising realtor, this aimless satellite of disreputable discounts could be misleadingly referred to as Karat Duin “adjacent”. But any prospective buyer interested in property close to the Herald Galaxy’s core of entertainment and culture would find themselves egregiously hoodwinked, because despite its convenient locale it was, in fact, the Ghertos Market. Infamous across Herald as a harbor of ill-repute, home to none but the lowest of the low, the filth of filth, the scum of scum, and injury lawyers. It also happened to be the last known location of a certain thief currently in possession of a certain item looking to unload it for a tiny sum - or so Hessian’s client had informed him. She’d been rather cagey about the details.

It was no skin off his nose though (is that how the saying goes? Does one often loose skin off of one’s nose?), it wasn’t Hessian’s first job whose info was on a strictly need to know basis. And right now all he needed to know was “grab the guy (whoever he/she/unspecified may be), make sure he’s got the thing (whatever *it* may be), get them back to the ship, and return both thief and booty to Her Loutness the Honorable Aju Aju Romma on Kanderbak 17 in the Journey Galaxy. And it wasn’t Hessian’s place to question a client, of course. That was for noobs and rubes. But if he *were* of a mind to question his clients, he might’ve asked for just a *smidgen* more detail on just who or what he was looking for and if he could get a location for said looking that was more specific than “Sector UUQ!! of Ghertos”.

“Do we even know how long our mark is gonna be here?” Hessian whined shamefully. “What if he - they - manage to sell their whatever and hightail it out of this cesspool while I’m still down here stepping in Maug doodie?”

“I’m sure you didn’t step in Maug doodie,” Delurie chimed unhelpfully, her heavy Ralnian accent making her sound charmingly rustic instead of rural and uneducated. “You’re just grumpy because you haven’t gotten any ‘action’ since Mert.”

Hessian found himself flushing hotly under the collar of his chrome plated armor, mouth opening and closing several times before he managed to form a sentence. “Have you… have you been keeping tabs on my sex life?”

“Honestly, darling,” Hessian could tell by the tone in her voice that she was leaning luxuriously back in her seat aboard their ship, *Jaxa*, her two pairs of arms behind her head and a playful grin tugging at the corners of her green mouth. “If I don’t take an interest in your sex life, no one will. How long has this last dry spell been? Seven standard months?”

“That is disturbingly accurate.”

“She wasn’t half bad, that girl on Mert. What was her name?”

Hessian cleared his throat, making a show of checking over his gun, despite the fact that he’d done so six times already. “AnCorlain.”

“Riiiiiight,” she dragged the word out, fond and only slightly sarcastic. “AnCorlain. She was delightful. Why’d you break it off with her anyway?”

Hessian cleared his throat injuriously once more at the risk of causing himself a vocal chord polyp. “She broke it off with me.”

“*Riiiiight*,” Delurie’s smug tone made it clear she hadn’t forgotten the reason for the break up in the slightest. “Because?”

Cottoned on to her angle, Hessian was even less inclined to answer her questions. He unseeingly scanned the irregular horizon for any suspicious (more suspicious than usual) activity and wished he didn’t have to keep his comms open. “She thought I was boring.”

“Boring?” Her mock indignance was chafing. “*You*? However could anyone come to such a conclusion! What about that bloke on Ismelda? The one with the pretty eyes and the wandering hands?”

“Kel.” As if he hadn’t already been annoyed by the code violating aerocraft exhaust fumes and the nose-hair-curling smells of unidentifiable substances splashed liberally into the moldering gutters, now he had to suffer through Delurie’s judgemental rehashing of his less than stellar love life.

“That’s right! All bronze and muscles. And he broke it off with you *because*…?”

“I’m boring, alright!” He snapped in the direction of a passing school of Gems, who briefly dispersed before once more coalescing and floating off on their way with only minimal disdain. “I spend my day chasing down people - and things that can only be loosely defined as “people” - that don’t want to be found, so much so that they usually take it out on me by trying to cut my already short life even shorter. So maybe when I get home I just want to put my feet up and watch celebrity gossip on the Comm VAs! So sue me!”

“I’m not saying your terrible taste in entertainment is the problem -”

“*You’re* my problem.”

“- More like your heinously boring serial monogamy is the problem.”

“*You’re* heinously-- What? What are you talking about?”

“I’m saying you’re young, you’re not unattractive -”

“Gee, thanks.”

“- and you’re Dorun. You should be out there playing the field. Wait until you’re old and ugly to settle down and put your feet up and watch *The Real House Brides of the Ffeldd Sultan* tear each others’ tentacles out.”

“I don’t watch *The Real House Brides of the Ffeldd Sultan*,” he argued but without heat, not only because he was lying (Sshell was his favorite Sultan bride) but because Delurie had a point.

Once the Dorun had been the most populous race in the Three Galaxies, completely ordinary in every way with their relatively short life spans, their limited range of height and weight, bipedal plantigrades with two arms, two eyes, one nose, and one mouth. In these ways they are mostly unchanged. However, thanks to an incredibly malleable genepool and what most other races agree is a species-wide inability to “keep it in their pants”, the Dorun were able to procreate with a vast variety of races, species, and sentient cloud formations, resulting in the most diverse species in the Universe.

Now, Dorun are classified in loose racial subcategories, such as the proud, scaled Dorun of the Endon moon of Clovis who trace their lineage back to the lizard people of Zezjeza Zez, or the feline Dorun of Karat Duin who trace their ancestry back to a rival faction of Tempur originally native to UnfinSwa. The Dorun are so common, in fact, that there are hardly any “mostly pure” Dorun left, making Hessian one of the scant few “mostly Dorun” in the Galaxies. His direct ancestors’ general lack of inter-species gallivanting may have, in Delurie’s opinion, contributed to Hessian’s currently stagnant love life.

Like the Dorun of old, Hessian was not particularly tall. Unlike the Dorun of old, he was not particularly strong or sturdy, but rather what Delurie had described as “pleasantly slight of build”, with a pale complexion and black hair that was so fine it floated on even the gentlest of breezes. While he was aware that he wasn’t most people’s cup of tea (or other pleasant beverage), he had been known to turn a few heads and ocular extremities in his time.

It was clear that physical appearance wasn’t his problem in securing a mate. And it couldn’t be his charming personality either - he knew for a fact that he was delightful company and a witty conversationalist. So Hessian was drawn to the inevitable conclusion that Delurie, much as it pained him to admit, might be right and his instinct to cling tightly to a newfound romance and believe firmly that it would be his only one for the rest of his life might somehow be scaring off his romantic partners.

Unable to bring himself to let his pilot know she might actually be right, Hessian hedged the subject argumentatively. “What am I supposed to do then? Fall into bed with the next person who makes googly eyes at me?”

“I think they say ‘goo-goo’ eyes.”

“That’s ridiculous. ‘Goo-goo’ eyes aren’t a thing.”

“Yes, but ‘googly eyes’ are the ones you stick onto things to make them look silly.” This should be taken as proof that googly eyes are, in fact, a Universal truth and exist across all realities.

“Well,” Hessian felt himself flushing with embarrassment. “Whatever. You know what I’m trying to say.”

“I’m not saying you should set up shop on the street corner, but maybe let your dalliances have more ‘dally’ in them?”

“And less domesticity.”

“Now you’re getting it, love.”

“I don’t know…” Hessian belabored. “I’m just so busy. I mean, between work and travel, when do I have time to go around starting new relationships? Getting out there is so *hard*-”

“-Only if you do it right-”

“-And really, after slogging across the Galaxies chasing neer-do-wells, I don’t have the energy to go to a bar and scope out potential conquests.”

“You have a holiday coming up though, don’t you?”

“Yeah, a couple of weeks worth. I was thinking of just staying home and getting caught up on the new season of *Law and Order*-” (*Law and Order* is also a Universal truth)

“-Boring! Can’t you just picture it now? The beautiful white sands and black waters of the Lakes of Twilight, boys and girls and everything in between scantily clad and getting bombed out of their minds on Tychem wine, just aching for a little company. Doesn’t *that* sound like a holiday?”

“Son of a bitch.”

“I know! I’m tempted to take off myself-”

“No, it’s Quae’oquos -”

“Son of a bitch! He’s here?”

“You better believe it.”

Quae’oquos, while not literally a son of a bitch, was two stories leeward and one story down from Hessian’s present location. He was very nearly unmistakable, being a rare blend of Dorun and Mavish. His dusky, brick toned skin and golden hair, pulled into a high tail in the traditional style, stood out even at the best of times, but were all the more distinctive to Hessian, who had at one time counted him as a colleague and, dare he say it, friend.

“This can’t be a coincidence,” he mused aloud, watching as the half-Mave charmed his way infuriatingly through the market crowds, a sea of heads and ocular extremities turning appreciatively in his wake. And Hessian was right. It was no coincidence.

Out of all the places in the Three Galaxies, his former business associate just happened to be in the same market, in the same sector, as Hessian’s current bounty? Hessian had been around the galactic sector one too many times not to know that in these Galaxies there was no such thing as coincidences.

Hessian felt himself blanche with barely controlled rage. He was so overcome that instead of stopping to think, finding a stealthy approach, and apprehending the half-Mave unawares, he found himself bellowing out, “Hey, asshole!”

This was a mistake, for a few obvious reasons. First of all, several hundred heads (and ocular extremities) turned in Hessian’s direction, convinced that they surely must be the ‘asshole’ to which he was referring, while another dozen or so, secure in their lack of assholishness, turned out of pure curiosity as to who this unnamed asshole might be.

Secondly, while Quae’oquos, known by friends and the less-eloquent as Whey, might be accurately described by most as, indeed, an asshole, he happened to be a remarkably clever asshole who recognized Hessian’s voice almost immediately, stole a quick glance in our reluctant hero’s direction, and promptly turned on his heel and ran away at full speed.

Hessian cursed foully enough to make a passing Gleïbagnn trader blush. Delurie began scolding him on his choice of insults but was cut off mid-sentence as he silenced his comms. He’d had enough of her for one day. Night. Whatever the hell time it was in this stupid place.

He leapt inelegantly over the catwalk handrail, landed heavily on the grated floor below and began sprinting almost from the moment of impact, shoving aside those few gaping shoppers who still couldn’t eke out whether or not they were the alleged aforementioned asshole.

Hessian could see flashes of gold weaving through stalls and display cases but for the most part staying well above the heads of the throng. Unfortunately, while Whey was easy to spot, he was faster than Hessian by more than he’d care to admit, especially weighed down as he was by plated armor and a rather unwieldy double-barrel laser gun. Whey, thin as a whip, body made of taut, corded muscle, dashed gracefully through the mob, doing no more than rustling a few shopping bags or knocking off a hat or two. The overencumbered Hessian, by contrast, clamored through the crowd like a fever-mad Rhoo, pushing and shoving people aside, sending unsuspecting bystanders sprawling into carts of Maug Melons. Despite the carnage left in his wake, the sight of Whey’s swinging hair-tail bobbing and weaving through the crowd was getting farther and farther away. He knew he’d have to act fast or risk losing sight of the former bounty-hunter entirely.

Looking down through the grate that blurred under his boots, Hessian espied a line of traffic just two stories below, traveling parallel with his chase. He planted a thick-padded glove on the handrail and vaulted over it, falling nauseatingly for a long second before landing like a ton of bricks on the hull of an aerocraft, the treated steel denting under the impact.

The craft’s density was thick enough that the driver probably didn’t even notice. Regardless, Hessian didn’t feel obligated to leave the driver his insurance information. The way he saw it, if you take your aerocraft into the Ghertos Market, you do so expecting someone to land on your craft sooner or later.

With his heart hammering in his throat, Hessian balanced in a crouch, steadying himself with a hand pressed flat against the hull and reholstered his double-barrel in the sling across his back. He muttered a silent prayer of thanks to the Ancient Ones that the traffic was thick and the crafts, while still traveling fast enough to be a nuisance to hitchers, puttered along slow enough that Hessian could clearly make out shop signs, market goers, and a particular red-skinned, golden-haired thief descending a spiral staircase between storefronts.

Hessian’s makeshift transportation came level with the outlaw in the time it took to unbelt and cock his grapple gun, aim it, and shoot. The grapple struck Whey in the chest hard enough to send him reeling backwards over the staircase railing, spending one dizzying half-second airborne before the grapple’s tines closed around the black fabric of his too-tight tunic.

In one more breath he’d be out of Hessian’s sight and if he retracted the grapple too late Whey would collide fatally with the corrugated metal wall of “Vam-Vam’s All Purpose Screwdriver and Spiggle Spong Emporium”. Before he lost his window or his nerve, the Dorun bounty-hunter held his breath, steadied his gun with a two handed grip, and retracted the grapple.

Whey hurled through the air like a ragdoll, and, in the time it takes to blink, he was colliding bodily with Hessian. Though it didn’t hurt Hessian much, clad in armor as he was, it did knock the air from Whey’s chest with an undignified “Oof!” and sent them both careening off the unsuspecting aeorcraft, Whey’s fingers scrabbling ineffectively at the reflective surface of Hessian’s chest plate, Hessian’s arms locked around the bare skin of the half-Mave’s exposed midriff like he was pulling him into a dance. They both braced for an impact they knew would appear in tomorrow’s obituary as their “untimely demise”.

Or it would have, had their fall not been broken by a tarp only three stories below them. The respite was short-lived, however, as the tarp readily gave way under their combined weight (let’s be honest, mostly Hessian’s weight, even though he’d splurged on the lightest, but most expensive, fiberglass armor he could find). They plummeted maybe thirty standard feet through scaffolding, brittle metal and frangible wood, until they finally landed on solid, unforgiving ground in a thick cloud of dust.

For several long moments the two young men laid on the filthy floor, unable to regain their breaths and unable to move. Hessian had absorbed the majority of the impact, but the lanky half-Mave’s ribcage had endured yet another painful collision with fiberglass plating and his lungs were surely beginning to feel the strain.

At long last, Hessian gasped like a swimmer resurfacing for air and coughed fitfully, jostling Whey into motion. With more ease than was fair for someone who’d just fallen three stories, the half-Mave levered himself onto his elbows, his infuriating smirking face close enough to Hessian’s own that he could feel the young man’s labored breaths ghosting across his skin.

“Well,” Whey began in his odd Mavish accent, vowels extending roundly and consonants falling away like autumn leaves. “If you’d wanted me like this, you could’ve just asked.”

Hessian’s face heated up like a well-stoked forge, sputtering, “Like this? Like how!”

He shoved Whey off roughly with an affected grimace even as the other laughed. Instead of being shoved like a normal person, Whey just *had* to roll liquidly off Hessian’s body and onto his feet in one graceful motion.

Hessian shamefacedly struggled to his own feet with much heaving and grunting, the experience made that much worse by Whey observing him with bored nonchalance. Except if you looked closely you could see that the half-Mave’s muscles were taut, body coiled like a stalking Tempur, ready to spring away at any sudden movement or loud noise.

Once standing, having regained a modicum of dignity, Hessian looked Whey levelly in the eye and repeated, “Hey, asshole.”

Whey laughed a sharp, humorless laugh designed for cutting. “Hey yourself, Hass.” The esses sounded like a venomous hiss, the nickname painful in Hessian’s ears. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Cut the crap, Whey.” He was rewarded by seeing that smug smile falter. “You know why I’m here.”

Hessian wasn’t sure when exactly they’d started moving. It had been like an instinct, like starting to sway when you hear music. At some point they’d begun circling each other slowly, two asteroids caught in each other’s gravity before colliding.

“In the market for a refurbished Spiggle Spong?” Whey quipped. “I hear they’re wicked fun at parties.”

“Just hand it over, ok?” Hessian’s fingers itched at his sides, ready at a moment’s notice to swing back and make a grab for his rifle. He tried to school his voice into something less spiteful. “Look, I don’t care about what happened last time. That’s all in the past. Bygones, and all that.”

“Bullshit.” It didn’t even sound like an expletive coming from him, the word foreign and clumsy in his mouth. It filled Hessian with an unexpected wave of nostalgia. “I heard you wanted me dead.”

“I was angry. Wouldn’t you be? If I’d betrayed *you* and taken off with *our* mark? Not so much as a phone call? Not even a denket *note*?” His last few words echoed off the walls of the hollow, abandoned building and he realized belatedly that he’d been shouting. He felt the blood rush to the tips of his ears in embarrassment.

Whey’s smile was not a kind one. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? I never *called*. If I’d known you were as fussy as a Duinian courtesan I would have left roses and a forwarding address.”

“Go to hell!” Hessian found himself trembling with emotion, recalling the bridges that Whey’s little stunt had burned, having to flee the sector with gunships on his tail, all while holding out hope that his frie-- that his *business partner* would call at any minute, ready with an explanation, *any* explanation. He would’ve been angry, hell, he’d have been furious, but he would’ve forgiven him eventually, just so long as he knew he was okay. But days passed, weeks, two standard months, not a single word. Not until he was having a drink at a pub on Tigriss and he overheard two Mandragean mercenaries talking about a sly half-Mave who’d sold them a stolen Quarter ship for twice its worth. He’d known who they were talking about before he’d even inquired on (forced to reveal at gunpoint) the details of the transaction. And yes, he *had* put out the word that anyone who brought back a certain half-Mavish former bounty-hunter’s head would receive a sizeable reward - but it had only been out of spite, and, honestly, he’d known they’d never be able to catch the wily bastard anyway.

Hessian took a steadying breath. He had to remind himself that this wasn’t the same man that had rescued him from the mercy of the Two Times gang, or had gone with him to his sister’s wedding, or had raced against him through the Anchor Bridge after five bottles of Lantean brandy. This man was a stranger. This man was a thief. This man was his mark.

“I’m not looking to start a fight, Quae’oquos.” He saw the half-Mave flinch at the use of his formal name, though he didn’t know if it was because he hadn’t called him that since they’d first met or because Hessian had completely butchered the pronunciation. “I know you stole from the Grand Lout.”

“Reappropriated, really.”

“Trying to be smart about it just insults us both,” Hessian added harshly and it had the desired effect of making the other man purse his expressive mouth into a thin, angry line. “I’m supposed to bring you in. But if you just hand over the goods, I’ll let you walk out of here. What do you say?”

“How sentimental of you.”

“Hardly. I can nab you, but we both know I can’t hold you.” *You slippery bastard*, Hessian declined to add.

“Not without causing me serious injury.”

“Exactly.”

“I reiterate, how sentimental of you.”

“Or I can just shoot you and not have to listen to your smart-ass mouth anymore.”

Whey grinned dangerously, light glinting in his deep, amber eyes. “You don’t frighten me, Truliage. You’ve already let slip you’re not willing to injure me, which means you’re either hopelessly fond of me or you were told to bring me in unharmed. Seeing as that expression on your face says you’d rather see me at the bottom of an unmarked grave, I’m going to have to say that it’s probably the latter. So it seems we’re at a bit of an impasse.” He held his arms aloft in a theatrical shrug. “I have something you want and I don’t want to give it to you. To take it from me you’ll have to hurt me and yet you *can’t* hurt me. Quite a conundrance.”

“A conundrum.”

“Whatever.”

“And you’re forgetting one thing.”

“Oh?”

“If I’m willing to take the goods and let you walk out, it means I can still get a commission at half the agreed price for bringing back half the bounty. Meaning you don’t need to be there. Meaning,” and here his itchy fingers deftly retrieved his gun from its sling and leveled it at the smug bastard in a movement so swift and graceful that the half-Mave might’ve been proud of him were he not suddenly succumbed to a dreadful sinking feeling. “I can blast a hole through that pretty face of yours and her Honorable Loutness will be none the wiser.”

He watched Whey’s dusky crimson skin blanche an unappealing grayish red. “I always knew you thought I was pretty,” he attempted to joke but it fell flat and hollow in the wake of the double-barrel.

Hessian was proud that his gun hand was steady, even though his heart clenched at having to aim it at someone he’d once considered if not a friend then a strong ally. “Make it easy on yourself and hand it over.”

When Whey made no move other than to dart his eyes furtively for a quick exit, Hessian pulled back the rifle’s engage, the harsh mechanical hum of the charging laser ominously filling the silence of the dimly lit building. Whey’s eyes stilled, round as saucers, hands going up with wide-splayed fingers, as though he could soothe the gun into passivity like an angry beast. It was almost pitiful. “I’m not joking around, Whey. Hand. It. Over.”

“There’re three ways!” The former bounty-hunter suddenly blurted out. Confused, Hessian lowered his gun a fraction. “The way I see it, there’re three ways out of here,” Whey barrelled on. “One, I give you what you want, but there’s no guarantee for me that you won’t shoot me anyway, so you can see how this scenario might not appeal to me. The second way, you shoot me and take what you want from my lifeless corpse - a threat I’ve heard before from better men than you, but a threat all the same, and another untenable scenario for me, as I’m sure you understand.”

Hessian raised his gun once more.

“The third way!” Whey cried out, almost desperately. “You get something more valuable than whatever Her Honorable Lousyness is paying you, I get to keep what is rightfully mine, and we both walk out of here with all our limbs attached and our faces intact.”

“That sounds like a pretty good plan. Too bad it’s complete bullshit.”

“It’s not,” Whey practically pleaded, and there was something in his earnestness that gave Hessian pause.

First, he’d never known Whey to plead, beg, or otherwise demean himself before, certainly not in front of Hessian. Secondly, his own act must be far more convincing than he’d thought, because while he did indeed harbor a great deal of resentment towards his bygone partner, he never for a second intended to actually shoot him. *Well*. Maybe in a leg. Just enough to inconvenience him for a few days. And third, he knew first-hand what a practiced liar Whey was, so if this offer was a lie then it was the most pitiful lie he’d ever concocted in his entire despicable life. So yes, it gave Hessian pause.

The young Dorun flipped off the engage of the gun but didn’t holster it. The ensuing silence was stifling. “Talk. Fast.”

The half-Mave lowered his hands but didn’t unclench his taut muscles. “Do you know what it is I took from the Lout?”

“Something expensive.” Then he gave it greater thought. “Something irreplaceable.”

“She never told you, did she?” Hessian didn’t deign that rhetorical question with a response. “That’s because she never even knew what she had.”

“I said talk fast. I’m not hearing an offer here.”

“The stone, what I took, it’s called a Corslo stone.” Here he reached into a pouch hung from the belt around his narrow hips. What he held was hardly impressive. It looked like a milky composite crystal with red veining, small enough that if Whey closed his hand around it it was lost entirely from sight.

Hessian’s breath caught in his throat. What was Whey *thinking*? He was trying to bargain his way out, but here he was, brandishing the very thing Hessian had been sent to collect, casual as you please. If Hessian weren’t half as honorable as he was he would’ve backhanded him with the butt of his rifle and just taken the damned thing. Whatever business Whey’d gone and gotten himself mixed up in, it must be turning his brains to Gefkin jelly.

“It’s not just irreplaceable, it’s…” Whey searched for the right word, came back empty handed and tried a different track. “Do you believe in The Ones Who Came Before?”

“The Ancient Ones?” Hessian’s head spun at the drastic change in topic. “Sometimes. What does that have to do with the price of Daub fruit?”

“No, The Ancient Ones are the ancestors of the Keren-Kar-Lan, of the Suul, of the oldest races in the Galaxies. Those Who Came Before are the Gods of old, the writers of rules, the Great Teachers, the Lan-Zerai.”

“I didn’t know you were so religious,” Hessian said slowly, with no small amount of suspicion.

But Whey ploughed on, oblivious to the looks Hessian was casting his way, looks that clearly questioned whether or not he’d recently been abducted into a cult. “Do you remember the prophecy? The one about the Nameless Soul? The Master of the Serkehsalai?”

“That magic sword mumbo-jumbo?” He asked, eyebrows raised incredulously, unsure how this conversation had managed to devolve so quickly.

“*And lo shall He come whose soul has no name*,” Whey quoted, further worrying Hessian. Maybe this had been his strategy all along? Make him believe he’d gone around the bend and when Hessian would try to get him the help he so clearly needed he’d take advantage of the moment and skedaddle. It was more believable than suddenly going all… *religiousy*. “*And the Corslo shards of the Sword of No Master will be gathered and mended / And He will wield the Sword of No Master and so will the Sword look into His soul and find no name / And lo He will be the Sire of the Serkehsalai, the Wielder of the Seer Sword, the Master of the Sword of No Master.*”

His face had taken on a dreamy, far away quality as he’d recited from memory, something akin to peace momentarily smoothing out the features Hessian was so used to seeing twisted in irony. For a moment he was almost beautiful.

And then Hessian remembered he was trying to retrieve stolen goods from his former business partner who’d offered him a deal to betray his client and was instead spouting passages from the Kel-Zerai. Color him perplexed. “Ok, that’s great. Very pretty. Very… ancient sounding. What are you trying to tell me? That that little rock has something to do with a prophecy about magic soul swords?”

Whey seemed to come back to himself. He blinked big amber eyes at Hessian, then looked down at the cataract crystal held reverently in his open palm. He said simply, “Yes.”

“Yes?” Hessian was dismayed by how dismayed he sounded.

Whey looked back up at him, a trace of his old sardonic smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. “You don’t have to believe the whole Gods and magic part if you don’t want. I don’t. Most scholars believe The Ones Who Came Before weren’t any more God than you or me. They were just a misunderstood, highly evolved, technologically advanced race.” He tossed the stone into the air, caught it, and held it up at eye-level between his thumb and forefinger.

As he turned it the light caught in grooves on the stone’s facets. They almost looked like words, engraved in the irregular shapes of the crystal’s surfaces.

“The scholars say that the ‘Corslo stones’ were highly advanced nanotechnology, each one a remarkable little super-computer more powerful that the most cutting-edge technology in existence today. When in groups, it was said the Corslo stones could turn into anything The Ones Who Came Before desired. A house, a ship. Likely just thousands of micro-computers linking with each other and conforming to a specified shape. But there’s no way the primitive Ancient Ones could’ve known that. No, to them it looked like magic, and The Ones Who Came Before looked like Gods. Just because something has been misunderstood, doesn’t mean it’s not real.” He grinned a cheeky grin and suddenly cast the stone into the air, lobbing it in a graceful arc toward Hessian.

The Dorun caught it reflexively, his gun clattering noisily to the ground as it fell from his hands. Then he looked at the crystal in his hand, agog. He looked up at Whey, agog. The half-Mave had something of a manic glint in his eye.

“What the hell are you doing?” He couldn’t stop himself from asking. Because *honestly*, what in the world would stop him from walking out with it right now? *Unless this isn’t even what he stole and he’s taking you for a fool*, a jaded part of his mind supplied. *I mean, come on. A rock? And all this religious nonsense? He probably stole an irreplaceable family heirloom like a necklace or some other ordinary junk and it’s hiding safely in his back pocket while you stare at a rock and he talks about magic swords.*

“I’m letting you have a look at it,” Whey supplied succinctly.

So he looked, humoring him until he could find the right moment to knock him out and drag his lying ass back to the Honorable Lout. Surely she wouldn’t object to just a *little* manhandling of the bounty?

Now that he was able to see it up close, he could clearly make out some form of writing on it, practically every angular face covered in a strange, connected script. It was a language he’d never seen before, but there were countless languages in the The Galaxies, surely he wasn’t familiar with all of them. As far as he was concerned, this little stone proved nothing. It wasn’t even particularly pretty. It was just some rubbish Whey had supplied as an “in case of emergencies: use as proof of insanity”.

“You don’t believe me.”

Hessian was getting sick of this game. “Not even a little.”

“How about now?”

Hessian looked up and saw Whey grab the cord around his neck, a simple leather strap he’d always seen him wear. Hessian had always assumed it was attached to some kind of good luck charm or religious symbol, but when Whey tugged it out from beneath his tunic, dangling from the end was a large, burnished-steel locket. His deft red fingers unclasped the dull face and withdrew, to Hassian’s considerable surprise, a small crystal, much like the one currently held in Hessian’s own hand, but with what appeared to be a thin shard of glass protruding from it shot through with delicate veins of red just like the stone from which it jutted.

Hessian saw Whey watching him, an expression on his face like someone ready to reveal a juicy secret they’ve been dying to share for months. Whey held this crystal with far more veneration than the first, cradled between two hands like a fragile Tychem egg. He made a beckoning gesture with his head and Hessian approached tentatively.

Hessian peered into Whey’s cupped hands, the young man’s palms a slightly lighter color than the rest of his skin, like someone had tried to wash him clean but had given up at his wrists. Hessian found himself subconsciously holding up the crystal in his own hand, as if to compare the two. This crystal, Whey’s crystal, while smaller than the first, was still etched in miniature, illegible scripture on each of its tiny facets.

When Hessian held his own stone close it was tugged suddenly from his fingers and snapped to the jagged crystal in Whey’s hands with a ringing sound like a small bell, hard enough that Hessian held his breath, expecting the delicate little stone to shatter. But it didn’t. It didn’t even move when the larger crystal collided with it. In fact, they now appeared to be seamlessly connected. If Hessian hadn’t known any better he would have thought them one single piece. He looked up and found Whey grinning at him like a proud parent.

While he’d admit that he’d been momentarily surprised, just because the stones were magnetic didn’t exactly prove they were the stuff of legend. Hessian prodded the pair of stones experimentally, but they moved as one, without so much as a hint that they had once been separate.

“It was my mother’s, you know,” Whey explained absently, his eyes taking on that distant quality of remembering, his smile souring into something rueful. “And her mother’s before hers. If my sister had lived it would’ve-” He stopped abruptly, his mouth becoming a thin, unhappy line.

Hessian had never heard him speak of his family before, not even when they’d been drinking all night and Hessian had complained vocally and ineloquently to him about being a middle child.

“It’s been in my people’s charge for generations,” Whey said, pushing the memories and his disconcerting vulnerability aside. “The secret at the heart of the Suubael’aen clan. A shard of the great sword. The Sword of No Master.”

Hessian felt his eyebrows rise again. “You mean this is supposed to be a part of the Sirkisalai?”

Whey’s features transformed seamlessly back into a wry smirk, the familiar expression instantly putting Hessian more at ease. “Take off your glove.”

Consumed with curiosity despite himself, Hessian took the tips of his pneumatic glove in his teeth and pulled, freeing his hand. His skin looked unnaturally white besides Whey’s, like a sliver of moonlight alongside a violent sunset.

Hessian waited for further instruction but none was forthcoming. Rather, Whey’s golden eyes twinkled with a light of their own. So the young Dorun did the first thing that came to mind and gingerly lifted the sword fragment between his bare thumb and forefinger.

It happened fast and it happened gradually. It happened, in fact, as though it had always been happening and had never been happening at all. There was no abandoned building, there was no Whey, there was no Ghertos Market, or Duin solar system, or Herald Galaxy. There was nothing and there was everything. All of space and time stretched out before him. But there was no “him”. There was no Hessian. There had never been and never would be a Hessian. There was only existence, endless existence spread out like a vast tapestry woven by the fabric of reality, infinity dancing upon it with the lights of billions of lives, winking into existence and winking out like glittering stars.

And in the howling void one word clung to the Hessian that was not and never had been Hessian. It sang through the voids between realities, it cried in the swirling blackness of the end of time. One word. No, not a word. A name. It saw him, then. It saw him and it knew him. Because it *was* him. Had he eyes he would have wept, had he a voice he would have laughed. It was the most beautiful truth that anyone has ever known in all of existence. It was, it is, it always will be.

And as quickly and slowly as it began, it was over. Hessian was once more Hessian, standing in an abandoned building in the Ghertos Market, in front of Whey, holding a small, unassuming stone with a shard of glass protruding from it. Except it wasn’t unassuming. It was glowing. The veining that ran through it had turned a deep, midnight blue, and emitted a faint pale light like the first rays of dawn. Every miniscule word engraved upon the crystals’ fractured faces glowed sharp and white and blinding, etching their ilegible shapes into Hessian’s retinas. Then all at once they plunged into darkness, the glow failing as though it never was, the only proof that remained were the veins, which stayed the blue of a moonless Torrun night.

Hessian’s legs trembled, as though unaccustomed to his weight. But no, Hessian wasn’t his name… or was it? His head felt strange on his shoulders. He had the oddest sense-memory that he had been weightless, that he had been free, but he couldn’t place when or how. Gravity seemed foreign, his body constricting. But the longer he stood, trying to remember, trying to collect his thoughts, the more these sensations seemed to fade.

He remembered coming to the Ghertos Market, he remembered seeing Whey, chasing him down, falling three stories through tarp and scaffolding (which explained the dull ache in his everywhere), then the dizzying conversation about Zerainism and magic swords. He remembered picking up the stones and then…

Lost, light-headed, Hessian looked up at Whey, and the half-Mave was watching him with all the rapt, wide-eyed attention of a little boy. Hessian wanted to say something, but his mouth couldn’t seem to form the words. His tongue felt thick and useless, wrapped around something he couldn’t swallow. He couldn’t even think of other words. There was only one word. One word alone sitting on his tongue, waiting for him to open his mouth so it could spring forth into the world and be free.

Quietly, reverently, full of awe, Whey asked, “What’s your name?”

“*Asherta*.”

The name felt like hot syrup, it felt like sunlight reflected off a lake, it felt right and infinite, and Hessian knew it was his name, his real name. His soul’s name.

“H-how-” He croaked, fumbling for words like trying to catch Fyr flies out of the air, all words that weren’t his true name feeling wrong and alien in his mouth.

“Serkehsalai means Seer Sword,” Whey explained, taking the joined crystals back with delicate fingers. The veins remained blue. “It ‘sees’ you. Your soul. Every soul has a name. A true name. Mine is *Pevarin*.” It was chilling how right the name felt on him, the tendrils of the name clinging to his form like a thin satin sheet, enveloping him and contouring him and suddenly ‘Quae’oquos’, even ‘Whey’, seemed not only wrong but insulting, like the words were a description of him that had fallen horrifically short of the mark.

The corner of Whey’s mouth tugged in a weak, self-deprecating smile. “That means neither of us is the ‘chosen one’, you realize? The ‘Nameless Soul’. But don’t worry. I won’t hold it against you if you don’t hold it against me.”

“It’s…” Hessian was still finding it difficult to churn his thoughts into words. “It’s real. All of it.”

“Yes. And no. The Serkehsalai is real, that much I know. But the rest…” He shook his head, golden high-tail swaying gently to and fro. Too large now to return to his locket, he pocketed the inseparable stones into a pouch on his hip. “I *am* sorry, you know.”

Hessian just looked at him blankly, entirely unsure what he was talking about. Whey refused to meet his eye.

“Not about stealing the Zazpiak-Bat tiara, I sold it for ten times as much as that denket mercenary was willing to pay us to collect it. I’m sorry for leaving you in the lurch like that. I’d thought if I distanced myself from you, they’d think I’d betrayed you and leave you in the clear. I thought it was the least I could do, considering. It was only a matter of time before my past caught up with me, and just being around me is enough to put you in the crosshairs of some very bad people. I thought I should cut my losses and get out while I still could, while the people I cared about - you, Delurie, Ferghan - were still safe. I never meant to…” His explanation ran out of steam and sputtered to a halt. Whey sighed like a man three times his age, his eyes looking everywhere but at Hessian. “I am sorry.”

“Pevarin-” Hessian cleared his throat. “*Whey*,” he amended. “What are you doing?”

The young man looked up sharply. “What do you mean?”

“What are you doing with this Sirkisalai business? Are you traveling across the Galaxies, sleuthing out possible Sirkisalai stones and stealing them? Why?”

Hessian didn’t know what he had just experienced. He didn’t know what those stones were exactly, and he didn’t even know if he completely believed Whey’s apology, no matter how sincere it sounded - one heartfelt apology couldn’t erase nearly a year’s worth of betrayal. But somehow Hessian knew. He knew it like the name he’d just pulled out of the infinite Universe. He knew those stones were ancient and powerful and real. And in all of that, he knew they held the potential to be infinitely dangerous.

“Now is when we get to the offer I promised you,” Whey smiled brilliantly, the same smile Hessian had seen him use on unwitting merchants’ daughters and factory girls, turning their legs to jelly. “Something far more valuable than whatever the Lout promised you.” Here, ever the showman, he paused dramatically. “The chance to save the Universe.”

“With magic stones?” He said the word less derisively now, but his tone was still heavy with skepticism.

“With the Serkehsalai,” Whey corrected, his charming smile turning effusive. “War is coming, *Asherta*. The other swords are falling into the wrong hands. I may not claim to understand or even fully believe in prophecy and destiny, but I know what I have in my hand, I know what has been passed down for generations to fall under my custody, and I know I have a responsibility as a guardian to make the Serkehsalai whole. Haven’t you ever wanted a purpose, Hass? Haven’t you ever wanted to be part of something greater? I can give you that chance. Come with me. Help me. Together again, just like the old days. What do you say?”

He didn’t do anything so tawdry as hold out his hand, but the invitation hung in the air just the same, waiting from Hessian to reach out and grasp it.

Running away together. Just like in a story. Gallivanting across the Galaxies, collecting legends, weaving myths. Having his friend back. It made his heart race, his breath come short. But could he just walk away from his life? Well, not that there was much of a life to walk away *from*, but he still had responsibilities, bills that needed to be paid, plants that needed to be watered, a client who would take a bounty out on *him* if he took off with the same rapscallion who’d stolen from her…

But what would change, really? Other than the fact that he wouldn’t be getting paid regularly. He’d still be traveling all the time, likely risking his life at every inconvenient opportunity. But instead of hunting down stolen trinkets and undesirables who’d skipped bail he’d be searching out relics that until moments ago he’d believed were pure religious fiction. He might possibly even be “saving the Universe.”

Whey saw his hesitation and his face softened, becoming almost fond. “Why don’t you take some time to think it over? I’ll be here until I can find someone to sell me a fast, cheap ship at a price that won’t leave me creditless.” He took a casual step forward, bringing himself curiously close to Hessian, who involuntarily held his breath at the sudden proximity. He’d never noticed before that Whey’s pupils were slightly ovaled. Or that he had a smattering of brownish freckles across the bridge of his upturned nose. “I’m staying at *The Hobbled Rhoo*. Should you make the right choice.”

The half-Mave ducked forward, his maddeningly smooth cheek brushing against Hessian’s rougher, mildly stubbled one, his breath hot in the shorter man’s ear as he whispered, “Tell Delurie I said ‘hello’.”

When Whey pulled away, Hessian’s breath left him in a heady rush and he realized his heart was thundering in his throat, his face feverish with a flush. He inwardly cursed himself for being so easily flustered. By the time he got hold of himself, his former partner was already halfway done removing the moldering planks of wood that boarded the abandoned building’s ruined door.

The red-skinned youth slipped between two planks as easily as a fleet-footed wild Tempur, without looking back or waving goodbye or flashing even one last cheeky grin. He simply disappeared from sight, the abandoned building feeling all the hollower without his buoyant presence.

For a moment Hessian simply stood, his mind so busy it formed a sort of ignorable white noise. He listened to the sounds of discontented aerocraft drivers honking in vain at the ubiquitous traffic, the distant din of bartering and haggling, the less noticeable but ever present hum of machinery, the breathing lungs and beating heart of the Ghertos Market. Countless steam valves releasing pressure, endless vents recycling oxygen, myriad gyroscopic gears turning as they kept the vast structure rotating almost too slowly to perceive. And somewhere above (or below, depending on your perspective) orbited the *Jaxa*, dodging docking fees by remaining space-borne.

Hessian’s bare fingers touched the cybernetic subdermal implant above the pulse point in his neck, reactivating his comms. His fingers had barely left his skin before his ear was filled with an endless stream of high-pitched accusations.

“Ancient Ones be buggered, Hessian Truliage! Why do I, out of all the girls in the Three Galaxies, have to be the lucky one to get partnered with the only bounty hunter in the Universe who turns his comms *off* when he sights a target? I mean honestly, one of these days you’re going to wind up dead and I’ll be stuck aboard the *Jaxa* twiddling my four thumbs for Ancients know how long before a Gleïbagnn trader tries to sell me your corpse for a handful of credits. And you know what I’m going to do then? Laugh. Laugh right in your smug corpse face and do an ‘I told you so dance’. Which you obviously won’t be able to appreciate what with being dead and all. So? Are you going to leave a girl in suspense? Did you catch that miserable denket Mave or what? Hope you gave him a right whallopping too. The nerve! Cutting out on us, not a word for months, and then he shows up, stealing from perfectly nice, if rather oozey, Mandragean royalty. Well? Hass? I know you’re still alive, I can see your vitals, you know!”

Hessian who was not Hessian but was Asherta cleared his throat, his eyes still trained on the half unboarded exit Quae’oquous, his former partner, former friend, and current potential adventure had disappeared through not moments before. “Whey says ‘hi’,” he offered weakly, one of the other greatest understatements the Three Galaxies have ever known.