

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### THE BLACK SEA

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Stuart dreamt he was drowning. Through darkness and silence and hours of restless sleep, he sank. The waters of his subconscious were black and cold and when he tried to cry out, the words gargled in his throat like bubbles. Struggling only make him sink faster. The waters were infinite and they called to him endlessly.

He dreamt of someone coming to him in the night, lifting him up with faltering arms and carrying him away like the baby Moses on a bed of reeds. He dreamt of water, sweet and delicious, being poured into his mouth, of delicate hands stroking his head as he tossed and turned, murmuring incoherently in his long-denied sleep.

"This is bad," a voice said from somewhere far away, as faint and whispering as the distant breaking of waves. "It's a miracle he got anywhere on this thing."

There's no such thing as miracles.

"Can you fix it?" asked a second, feminine voice.

"Compound fracture in two, no, three places. See here? The two parts have sheared off completely. There'll be fragments of bone right through the joint." He grumbled and tutted and Stuart felt the hot prodding of fingers upon his leg. "It's already infected here, see? Where the uniform got into the wound. I've never seen it spread so fast. It's like his immune system isn't fighting at all."

"But you can fix it?"

"It'll be expensive."

"I can afford it."

"Very expensive."

Silence.

Neither of those voices was the voice that had aided him during his escape but maybe they knew where he could find it.

"Wh-where..." His voice died in his throat. When he tried to rouse himself, he hit a solid wall of pain. "I can't..."

The cold compress returned to his head, harder than before.

"Shhh," the waves of sleep whispered to him. "You're safe now."

Safe... He clung to that word like a life raft as the fever pulled under once again.

Is this what death feels like?

Sometimes, the waters seemed to lead him somewhere. There Stuart would be sinking through the darkness, lost as always, but then suddenly it was as though the darkness were passing like the opening of a diaphragm and the next thing he knew he would find himself drifting through the corridors of the ship, insubstantial and silent as a ghost.

The rooms of the ship were little more than abstract shapes to him. He found he could push through walls that would have blocked a mortal man and move into parts of the ship that he had only ever seen in passing.

"Where is it?" he called out as he drifted through those barren corridors, though he had no idea what he was looking for or why it was so important. "It should be here! It's supposed to be here!"

He drifted, bodiless, through kilometres of corridors and branching rooms. He called out to people who couldn't even see him, and when he reached out to touch things, it was as though his hand wasn't there at all.

He tossed and turned upon his sickbed, sending daggers of pain lancing through his leg. His skin burned; there was so much pain his mind quailed against it and he found himself tumbling time after time back into the void of dreams that waited ever below.

"Shhh! You're safe now."

He dreamt of a sad face with haunted eyes. Of thick curling hair and pale, narrow shoulders. A skinny woman who smiled at him with cheeks that dimpled, her every movement furtive, shy.

"Where have you hidden it?" he tried to ask her.

"You're safe now," she repeated, her hair a dark halo that followed the slow shaking of her head. "Rest. Sleep. There's no one here but me."

Sleep meant the dark waters. Sleep meant drowning. Stuart fought against going back there but he was so weak and those waters were so inviting that he always found himself back there all the same.

Then he saw it: a brightness, shimmering from the ocean depths. It was so bright it burned the back of his eyes. It was amazing he hadn't seen it until now.

"Is that it?" he asked the waters. "Is that what I'm looking for?"

The waters said nothing but pressed a cold compress to his head.

He fell towards that light all the same, sinking further into his fever dream than he ever had before. He reached out for that orb of brightness that hovered so tantalisingly close in the water. He could almost touch it.

Almost...

Light exploded in his brain.

The wasting, the voice declared, louder and clearer than ever before. The words seemed to burn into Stuart's very soul, so loud it was as though they were coming from all around him, from inside his very head. As though the voice were Stuart's very own and he were shouting it across the waves.

It has returned!

Data blasted through his mind like static. The light held him in its grip. Pain was everywhere.

Dexter is dying.

The certainty of the information terrified him. In 23.9 years Dexter will be gone with a margin for error of 12%.

The truth of the words shaped themselves out of those streams of data so clearly it was as though he were circling words in a book.

You must tell the others.

"They won't listen!" Stuart cried out.

They will. You just need to find it first.

The light was terrible. It seared his mind like acid, peeling away the layers of him one by one until only his core remained intact, cowering away in some tiny corner of his mind screaming at the agony around him.

Still the data continued, a stream of endless information that rushed over him, boiling away his conscience piece by blubbering piece as he floated above it and stared, horrified by what he saw.

Find it! the voice demanded. You must find it. Use it!

"Use what?"

The astral chamber! And just like that, Stuart saw (or was it remembered?) a circular room that blazed with light. The cosmos itself was projected on the walls around him in glorious detail while the rooms next door were filled with domes of glass that swirled with all the colours of the Ulysses.

Hundreds of years' worth of memories rolled over Stuart's mind; the same room seen from a hundred different pairs of eyes stretching right back to the day of the ship's launch.

"What is happening to me?" Stuart asked but the voice simply ignored him.

This is where you belong. Your home. The home of the Metapath.

"Metapath?" Stuart felt as though he almost knew what that word meant.

The voice was fading now, the light dimming and Stuart found himself once more drawing away from the waters, and the agony of the data stream.

All around him was a rushing, upward feeling as the waters dropped away and all the old pains of his tired battered body settled around him once again.

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Stuart woke.

His first thought was that he must have still been dreaming for it was so dark in the room he could barely make out his own hand in front of his face.

But no, this was real. The air was close; hot. He smelt sweat which was his own and food which wasn't. The stale scent of old finebrew lingered in the air.

When he tried to move, his body responded only with pain. When he tried to speak, his voice came out as little more than a croak. He blinked, his tongue working against the dryness in his mouth.

Where was he?

One thing at a time, Stu, he thought. He was pleased to discover that the thought was his own. The voice of his dreams had been so dominating in his dreams, there were moments when he'd almost forgotten who he was. For now, at least, it was nowhere to be heard.

He lay like that for some time in the darkness, his eyes growing slowly accustomed to the gloom around him. His mind, groggy after so long without stimulation, ran a quick inventory of his body.

There was still pain, his body reported, but less than there had been and the pain that was there was more of a dull ache than the shooting inferno of before. That was good, his body decided; it suggested someone must have pumped him full of painkillers of some description, which in turn meant he'd received medical attention. The fact that he wasn't dead yet reinforced this hypothesis.

His limbs must have slightly atrophied during his long sleep because every movement felt stiff and awkward, like he were trying to move something by remote control. His skin tingled beneath his touch.

He tried to wriggle the toes of his foot, failed, tried again, and succeeded only in causing his whole leg to cramp up. Fresh pain shot through him at that and - almost as though the shock of that spasm had reawakened the rest of him - the other parts of his body started protesting as well.

He gasped, moaned. Even to his own ears he sounded pitiful.

He threw his arms down to try and calm the spasms. Then he lowered them farther. Then back up. Then he froze.

His left leg was gone!

He threw the blanket away in a frantic blur, the scent of his unwashed body hitting him like a fist between the

nostrils. There, his eyes could just make out the gap below his knee. The absence where his left leg should have been.

Holy shit, his leg was gone!

In that moment Stuart became aware of two things all at once: one, that he was lying in a bed he didn't recognise, in a room he didn't recognise. And that two, that there was another person sharing the room with him. A woman that he surprised to see he recognised.

She was the woman from his dreams.

"What the fuck did you do with my leg?" he demanded, his voice dry and strangely gravelly in his throat. It broke easily into coughing.

"Shhh," she said, coming over, cup of water in hand. She was a pretty woman, it a little beat up around the edges. She had a strange smell about her, like that of old alcohol mixed with fresh soap and he could see the faint lines of age lining the corners of her eyes. "Here." She pushed him back against the pillow, gentle but firm.

The spasm in his leg slowly subsided.

Stuart was left with only a dull ache in his remaining leg and the strange feeling that his other leg was still there even though he knew it wasn't.

"I dreamt of you," he whispered as she sat back to regard him. Anything to take his mind off the loss.

"You slept a long time," she said. She worried her hands against a damp rag. For all the world she looked just like a cornered animal that might bolt at any moment. She spoke

exclusively in High English, which was strange for a woman as clearly low-born as she. "For a while I wondered if your mind was gone. But I knew it couldn't be. You were speaking too much."

"Speaking?" That concerned him.

"Nonsense mostly." Still the woman didn't relax, though she didn't bolt either. She seemed to be expecting something from Stuart but what it was he had no idea.

He coughed again. "How long...?" He was about to ask how long he had been asleep but then he found he already knew the answer. It flashed into his mind, a bright pulse of knowledge that left him with the strangest feeling of vertigo. "Two weeks," he said over the sensation. "I was asleep for two weeks."

The woman frowned. "How did you know that?"

I have no idea, he wanted to say but he knew that answer wouldn't serve. "My beard," he said instead, the lie coming easily to him. When she continued to stare at him he added, "When you're a scientist you learn to observe things."

"A scientist?" If anything, she looked even more suspicious at that. "Your uniform said you were from security."

He remembered the dead body of the guard he'd left in the ducts and shuddered. "Stolen," he admitted.

"And the original owner of said uniform?"

"Dead." He paused. "I think I killed him."

"Well, I admire your honesty even though it does little to help your cause. What is a scientist is doing this far from the labs?"

"Engineer," he corrected. "My name's Stuart, of House Leighton."

She just frowned at that. "There is no House Leighton anymore."

The voice murmured its agreement in his head. There is no record of such a House ever existing on this ship.

"Not anymore there's not."

"Then I'm honoured," the woman replied, just the slightest hint of sarcasm in her voice. "Forgive me for not giving you the full VIP tour but I'm afraid I'm still too busy trying to work out what you're doing in my quarters."

"Your quarters?" No, that couldn't be. These rooms were clearly abandoned: empty places of dust and degradation that had somehow been forgotten by the march of time.

It wasn't unheard of: areas of the ship sometimes fell out of use and were then forgotten about amid the chaos of bureaucracy. Such places tended to become havens for squatters and other unsavoury folk who couldn't afford to pay of proper lodgings in the habitation district. But this woman couldn't have been one of those people.

For one thing, her English was too good: higher than he'd ever heard anyone use in natural conversation outside the Priesthood. So high that Stuart was actually finding it difficult to keep up with her.

"I live here," she insisted, and Stuart guessed it must have been true for who would ever want to lie about living in a dump like this?

"I, uh..." He suddenly wasn't sure what to say. The gravity of Stuart's situation seemed to hit him all at once. He was alone in the middle of God-only-knew-where. He was a wanted man, possibly mad considering the voices in his head, and his leg was gone. As in, actually gone. Forever.

He would never walk again.

Stuart fell back against the pillow, palming his face. He tried to ignore the space below his left knee.

"Does it matter why I'm here?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm still deciding what to do with you."

Now that Stuart's eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom, he could see that the room he was in was nothing like he'd imagined. The map in his head told him he'd crawled all the way to the north pole of the ship. That map told him that he was - or at least should be - very close to the Captain's quarters themselves. And yet the room he was in was a cramped and squalid circular space of shadows and dust. Vague bundles of rags that might have been clothes sat in piles against the wall. The rest was rickety, second-hand furniture, dust and decay. Old circuitry lay in sad little piles where it had been torn out of the walls. In the middle of the room, large dome-

like machines sat covered in old dust-sheets, their inner mysteries hidden from view.

And in the midst of it all, this woman - this stranger who had apparently saved Stuart's life and spoke in such High English he was surprised not to see the robes of a temple priestess on her back.

I don't know this woman, the voice informed Stuart and again he felt a dull stab of vertigo at the words, an odd feeling of being in two places all at once.

"What were you looking for?" the woman asked again.

He tried to be evasive. "What makes you think I was looking for anything?"

"You kept saying, 'it's not here. It should be here.' That was my first clue."

"I was looking for the way out."

"Clearly you're not much of an engineer then if you fail to realise that the way out is usually the same as the way in."

Deciding that a half-truth would be better than a lie, Stuart grabbed at the part that was easiest to explain. "I was on the run from some security," he said. "I hid in the maintenance ducts."

"A renegade. How dashing. You were on the run for killing the security officer?"

"No, for smuggling parts. From disused systems," he hastened to add. "Nothing primary - I made sure not to endanger anyone - but the chief engineer took it badly."

"I imagine he would. This was for the black market?"

"No. For another officer. He was blackmailing me."

"That makes sense," she said, just a hint of a smile in the corners of her mouth. "I believe your father used that same excuse."

"Who are you?" Stuart asked, unable to keep the question in any longer.

"You're the so-called scientist. You tell me."

Stuart looked.

Who was this woman that had apparently saved his life? A servant? A fellow renegade? She wasn't a happy person, that was for sure. There was a slump to her gait and a far-away look that spoke of a lifetime spent in solitude. She was quite pretty too, perhaps even beautiful if she looked after herself more. But that sadness was such an integral part of her that it seemed to drag her whole appearance down. Depression radiated off her in waves of dour-faced blandness. It sagged the skin and puckered the eyes. She was old beyond her years. The tell-tale signs of heavy drinking were upon her, though she hid it well.

Stuart felt he'd never met anyone so pitiable in his life.

Judging by her outfit and the state of her quarters she wasn't rich, though her language said otherwise. A squatter, he guessed. Some disgraced noble like himself who had somehow stumbled upon this place and hid here from the authorities?

If so, surely she would be sympathetic to him?

Unless she thinks I'm going to turn her in.

Stuart had followed the curve of the ship just like the voice had told him. Right now he should be on A deck near the north pole. He should be... Here! It should be here!

He broke eye contact with the woman and stared up at the ceiling. "You're the person who saved my life," he said.

"Humph." The woman just pursed her lips at that, but Stuart felt his words had pleased her. "That's true enough I suppose. I'm sorry about your leg by the way. When I found you... you had infection like none I've ever seen. God only knows what you'd been up to. Taking a swim through the sewage system on your way up here?"

"Something like that."

"Best curb that hobby while you're here. Another day and the infection would have been in your blood. Then no one could have saved you."

Stuart stared down at the space where his leg had been. In the dark of the room, hidden by the blanket, it was almost possible to pretend it was still there.

That was just wishful thinking, though. Stuart was too much of a realist to give in to it.

"Then I thank you," he said formally. "For my life."

She turned to the side table where Stuart only now saw that there was a plate of food waiting. "Here, eat this," she said. "You should get your strength up."

He took the offered morsel - a small doughy thing that was similar to bread though it tasted like nothing he'd ever eaten before - and ate it without comment.

"Better?" she asked after he was finished. "Good, because now the pleasantries are over, I would like us to try this again. Why are you here, officer-in-a-security-uniform-who-calls-himself Leighton. And this time, I would like you to have the decency not to treat me like an idiot when you lie to me."

"But I wasn't lying!"

"You expect me to believe that you made it all the way from engineering with a broken leg and security chasing you?"

"It's the truth!"

"Where are the parts you stole?"

"I... lost them."

She folded her arms. "Convenient."

"Not for me. They were worth a fortune."

"And how did you find this place?"

"I used a map."

"Must have been a very old map then. These rooms haven't been included on any map made in the last 200 years."

Really? Both he and the voice were surprised by that news.

"Was it the Hathaways that sent you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"They've been onto me for a while, I think. Old Jonathan always has been sharper than he lets on. I knew he had his doubts but this is bold even for him."

"I don't know what you're..."

"I could just report you." She informed him. "Breaking and entering. Resisting arrest. You've already confessed to smuggling and murder."

He said nothing to that.

She sighed. "Fine. Let's just imagine for a moment that you're indeed some kind of wunderkind who can somehow travel through the ship while almost dead with fatigue and not only evade capture but do so while following a map entirely in your head. According to you, you wanted to steal parts. Black market. Did you plan to steal anything from here also?"

"Uh..." He tried to be oblique. "I had reason to believe there was some sort of room here..." He struggled to explain the circular room from his dreams. "A kind of control room I think, though it hasn't been used as such for many years."

The Astral Chamber, the voice said, supplying the name to accompany the vision.

"I... must have got turned around though because I see no such room here."

"A control room you say?" the woman asked. There was a slightly worried look on her face. "Like the command centre?"

"Yes."

No, said the voice.

"Maybe."

No.

"I don't know."

"There is no control room here," the woman told him.

It should be here, the voice said.

She looked troubled.

"Tell me Stuart Leighton, of the non-existent House Leighton: would anyone miss you if you never returned to your previous life?"

"Probably not," he admitted. "Likely they'll just assume I'm dead." A lot of them would be happy to hear it.

"Ah. Now there's some more of that honesty we talked about earlier."

He was quickly getting tired of these questions. "You know what?" he said. "Just... it doesn't matter, okay? You're clearly not going to believe me. You've saved my life and taken my leg and this is clearly your home I've stumbled upon here so, I guess that gives you rights over me."

"Just do whatever you think need to be done. I travelled all the way here on the basis of a promise and a lie, a 200 year old map and an engineering hunch. Nothing else. I'm through with being toyed with."

"You want to know how I got here?" He realised that he was shouting, but he found it difficult to care. "It's because I'm a genius, all right? Why do you think they allowed me to keep the uniform when everyone else in my family was cast aside? They stole my commission, they killed my family but they couldn't take my mind. No, that they used. That they kept

all for themselves. And yes, I admit that I might have stolen a few things to make life a little easier for myself over the years and yes, I admit that I ran away from my punishment for those thefts. But that doesn't make me a liar. It makes me bloody good at what I do!"

His cries were met by an uncomfortable wall of silence. Long after his outburst had died away the woman continued to stare at him in silence, her expression unreadable.

Stuart felt like a fool.

I'm doomed whatever I do, he thought. The room isn't here. And this woman won't let me live past recovery to find it.

It was a long time before the woman spoke again and when she did so, her words were hesitant, almost reluctant. "Your story may have some ring of truth about it," she admitted. "I seem to remember hearing something once about these rooms - ah but that was just fairy stories and so long ago..."

"Anything you could do to help would be much appreciated."

"Help?" She glared at him. "Who said I would help you?"

"I just... I mean you've helped me so much already..."

"To get answers. The fact remains that this is still my home here and you are a... stowaway."

"I'm not even that," Stuart said with a laugh. Suddenly this whole situation felt ridiculous to him. He just wanted this conversation over. "If I go back, my life is forfeit. You know this. If not for you my life would already be over. I'm

not a stowaway - I'm the universe's most grateful prisoner.  
And I call upon you for sanctuary."

"Pretty words." She sniffed. "Let's see how much you mean  
them."

She stood up at that and left the room, leaving Stuart with the disturbing impression that one way or another his fate had just been sealed.

Where am I? He thought as he looked down at his body again and saw the emptiness below his left knee where his leg should have been. Where have you taken me?

But the voice didn't answer. In fact, it was almost as though he were asking the question to himself.