

## Marcus

From the inside of the capsules, everything looked green.

For the first thirty-six years of his life, that colour was the only thing *Tel-Ur 3864621* had ever seen. That and the bubbles that sometimes rose to sparkle before his eyes.

Time had no meaning inside the containers; each day and night passed unchecked. Sometimes shadows would shift behind the curved glass, but *Tel-Ur 3864621* did not see them.

He only stared out through the lime-green solution with wide eyes; and he waited.

The Violet Empress paced through the corridors of dark steel. Containment units were set into the walls on both sides of her and each of them contained a man. The Empress found it quite unsettling being watched by so many eyes as she passed.

“Don’t worry,” said the balding sales representative who was walking ahead of her. “They can’t see anything. Once they’re activated, they don’t even remember being in there.”

The men in the capsules were mostly similar in build, but each of them possessed different facial features and skin tones. Some sported beards or moustaches and others had long hair that floated lazily around their faces. There were bulbous noses and high foreheads and all manner of chins.

But despite these differences all of the men in the capsules had one fundamental thing in common: all had been cloned from the extinct tribe of human warriors that had called themselves “Tel-Ur”. And all of them had been built for war.

The salesman ahead of the Violet Empress was puzzled. Usually when a foreign dignitary visited the Tel-Ur production planet they were seeking to assemble an entire army, or at least an elite taskforce. But when the Empress had arrived, alone except for a single bodyguard, she had made a most unusual request:

“I only require *one*,” she had said.

“Any one?” The salesman had asked her. “They would all make fine warriors, I assure you.”

“The *right* one,” the Empress had responded and that had caused the salesman to nod knowingly. It seemed that the Violet Empress was not seeking a soldier afterall... but a consort.

And that is how the Empress and her most trusted companion—the silver-haired bodyguard named Fourcore who had been protecting her since birth—found themselves walking through the seemingly endless maze of metal corridors on a production planet where men were grown in tubes.

Each container had a corresponding code number engraved into its base and the Empress glanced at them as she passed, hoping that one of the numbers would appeal to her intuition. But they had passed row upon row of near-identical capsules and even Fourcore was beginning to grow weary.

Then she came to *Tel-Ur 3864621*.

Visions flooded into her mind as soon as she saw the first two digits. Those figures rose huge in her mind, blocking out everything else. She clenched her teeth and placed one pale hand against the cool glass of the capsule. The man on the other side only stared.

“What did you see?” Fourcore asked, but the Empress did not answer.

“This one,” she said to the salesman. “I want *this* one.”

The first sensation that Marcus felt was cold. Then the green was falling away from him and he clutched for it desperately. Until now it had been the only thing he knew.

He fell to his knees and watched the liquid drain away into the grating beneath his feet. Not until the last trace of the stuff was gone did he look up and see three faces peering in at him from behind the glass.

“Are you *sure* about this?” Fourcore asked the Empress as they studied Marcus. The man was shivering and naked. A newborn. And yet there was a strange ferocity about him that appealed to the Empress and—if he was honest—appealed to Fourcore as well.

Perhaps the seers had been right.

“What happens now?” Liah’Na asked the salesman.

“We will take him for processing,” said the balding man, who was rapidly thumbing digits into a handheld computer. “He will be ready within the hour.”

The Empress was directed away from the capsule as two armoured guards stepped up beside it. The salesman punched a code into the keypad beside the canister and the glass split open down the middle. Marcus came out swinging.

“One day they’ll realise it’s not worth it,” said the salesman as he watched the guards descend on the newborn, knocking him to his knees and injecting him with something that made his body fall limp.

“ONE,” said an electronic voice and images of buildings and swimming pools and jungles raced in front of Marcus’s eyes. He had been prepared for this day—nanobots had already

constructed many of his thoughts. But the most important pieces of Tel-Ur knowledge needed to be activated.

This was a necessary precaution, lest the Tel-Ur production planet ever fall into the wrong hands. Five “keys” were applied to each soldier upon birth, each one containing vital knowledge about what it was to be uniquely *Tel-Ur*. Without the keys the soldiers were useless—two-bit mercenaries no better than clones available on the black market for a fraction of the cost.

Light shone down into Marcus’s eyes and he tried to move his body, but the bonds around his wrists and ankles were tight and he could not get free.

“TWO,” boomed the synthesised voice and the bright light vanished only to be replaced with a repeating pattern of holograms depicting various weapons.

*Wood, stone, fire, bright fire.* The entire history of murder played out before his eyes. This was arguably the most important key. Although the Tel-Ur were known to be gifted at all aspects of warfare, they were most renowned for their ability to wield weapons. It was said that anything in the hands of a Tel-Ur, could become a weapon and it was for precisely this reason that Liah’Na and Fourcore had travelled across space to find one.

Then Marcus was again plunged into darkness. He gasped where he lay on the table and jerked from side to side.

“THREE,” came the synthesised voice again and this time the images were of different languages, scripts and page upon page of flashing arcane symbols.

“Get me out of here!” called Marcus, now that he was able to speak.

“FOUR,” said the synthesised voice and Marcus was overwhelmed with a collection of images too terrible to conceive of. His forehead dripped with perspiration, tears stained the side of his face and his muscles bulged with exertion from trying to tear himself free of his bonds. He would rather die than watch another moment.

“FIVE,” said the voice one last time and then everything was silent.

Liah’Na sat on a bench in a waiting room. A holographic projection at the centre of the room played Tel-Ur promotional footage on a loop. Muscle-bound soldiers were shown battling hostile aliens: Fat-headed Pukapuka, needle-toothed Elaskan Shades, spindly blade-wielding Ra’Eth and there; a squat, wart-covered Draug.

Liah’Na shuddered. The Draug were loathed throughout the universe. They pillaged every planet they discovered and use whatever they found there to build more machines... mechanical monstrosities fashioned out of chains and huge, grinding cogs.

This was the menace that Liah’Na’s own Empire now faced. The menace that no member of her own race would be able to overcome, if you were to believe the seers.

*THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR. THE PERFECT SOLDIER.*

These words appeared in the universal alphabet just as the salesman appeared through a side door. “He is ready,” the salesman said and stepped aside to reveal Marcus Tel-Ur, who was dressed in a khaki jumpsuit. His feet were still bare, but the vacant stare was gone from his eyes. Now there was pain in them, Fourcore noted. Pain, but not fear.

To Liah’Na the warrior carried in his stance the certainty of change. He would go on to save many more worlds than her own, the Empress reckoned.

“Welcome,” she said and smiled at him.

“Who are you?” He snarled.

Then Fourcore was rising up beside the Empress, as protective as ever. “You speak to Empress Liah’Na, ruler of the Violet Empire!”

“I guess I should act like I’m impressed,” said Marcus. “What do you want?”

*We want you to save our world*, Liah’Na thought and although the soldier—Marcus—remained impassive, she thought that she saw the slightest twitch run across his face.

“The Elderlich spoke to us with the voice of the mountains,” Liah’Na said to Marcus.

“Does she *always* talk like that?” Marcus asked Fourcore, who could barely conceal a grin. The old bodyguard had found something instantly appealing about Marcus—perhaps it was his nonsense attitude, or the fact that he showed now fear even when faced with those that he should have immediately understood to be his superiors. What was strangest though, was the fact that Fourcore had almost immediately *trusted* the Tel-Ur clone—for Fourcore never trusted anyone.

“We travelled here from two galaxies away, riding on the slipstreams of space-freighters in order to reach the industrial zone and the Tel-Ur production planet,” the Empress continued. As she spoke, images appeared on a screen set into one wall of the transport ship. The projection showed swirling galaxies and stars—and it was dazzlingly beautiful.

For a moment, Marcus forgot himself and became the newborn that he was. He gazed with rapt attention at the multitude of glimmering stars and at the shimmering iridescence of nebulae.

“*This* is our home planet,” said Fourcore and a box appeared around one section of stars. The box grew to fill the entire screen and showed a pristine turquoise planet dotted with lush, green continents.

“It’s beautiful,” said Marcus and for some reason this comment made Liah’Na and Fourcore look downcast. The view continued to zoom: the continents looming larger and larger until Marcus could pick out the shapes of individual forests and then, individual trees.

But then the trees became black and Marcus noticed that much of the forest was on fire. The view shifted angles and enormous, hulking ships came into view, belching noxious gas into the atmosphere as they drifted lazily across the skyline. Below them, lumbering robots with chains for feet cut swiftly through the earth.

“We have no transmitters powerful enough to provide a live feed at this distance,” Fourcore explained. “These are pictures from before we left. What has happened since... we have no way of knowing.”

“Our planet is dying,” said Liah’Na. “It is being *murdered*.”

“By the Draug,” said Marcus and now he was wringing his hands together. “But I still don’t understand what you expect *me* to do about it.”

“The Elderlich spoke to us,” Liah’Na repeated. “And the seers have never spoken an untruth,”

“So you say,” said Marcus.

“They told us that no member of the Violet Empire would be able to save our homeland,” Liah’Na continued. “But that it would have to be a *man*.”

“A man,” repeated Marcus after her. Then: “So you expect me to save your planet... alone?”

“Not alone,” said Fourcore. “With *this*.”

The bodyguard thrust the hilt of a weapon into Marcus’s hands. It was the colour of polished bronze and had no visible buttons or triggers of any sort.

“It is called the *Karakuchi*,” Liah’Na said softly and with no small amount of reverence. “It is among the oldest and most powerful artifacts of the Violet Empire. But it was made so that it could never be wielded by a member of our own race, so that none of us could ever directly use it against another.”

Marcus shifted the hilt this way and that in his hands, but failed to see how it could be any use against the Draug. “What... does it do?” He said at last.

“That all depends on *you*,” said Fourcore and as though by saying those words he awakened the knowledge in Marcus of how to use the device, they all watched as a spark of brilliant electric-blue light appeared at the end of the hilt. It wavered for a moment—like a candle struggling to stay lit—and then flickered briefly into the shapes of at least a hundred different weapons.

“Those of the clan Tel-Ur are known to be the greatest warriors in the universe,” said Fourcore. “So who could wield such a blade better than one of them?”

“Will you do it, Marcus?” said the Empress. “Will you use the *Karakuchi* to help to save a race that is not your own, from a conflict that you should not care about?”

And as though he actually had a choice, Marcus stared into the shimmering blue radiance of the weapon and nodded. Just once.