Darien’s eyes drifted back to the sword. *Jet has a weapon. Maybe I could…*

“Oh, yeah.” Jet struggled to maneuver the book into a large pocket on his thigh. “I’m sure a sword would be *so* useful.”

“More useful than a feather!” Darien marched over the debris and snatched the sword from the wall. It was much lighter than he’d expected, and the ribbon that criss-crossed its hilt was pristine. *Hey, it’s just like that samurai guy’s from Final Combat 4.*

Jet groaned behind him. “Please work on focusing aether in your mind like I taught you the other day. Your thought process is a constant barrage of stupidity.”

Darien swung the sword and grinned at the whooshing sound it made. “Your face is a constant barrage of lame.”

#

Jet glared through the flawless windshield of his X-7. *Levi, you son of a d’hakka.*

His fist tightened around the stick shift. *Of course it's her. Of all the people in the world, it has to be Sorvashti of the oh-so-honorable Ironhide clan.*

She sat in his passenger seat like something straight out of a magazine cover. Slim dark legs were too long to comfortably fit under the sports car’s dash. Her sleeveless beige tunic and shorts, though modest, had an exotic style that complimented the light-ink tattoos that patterned her shoulders.

The combination would have toyed with any man's pulse, and Jet was no exception. So he refused to look at anything but the highway’s lane stripes as they flashed by.

*She hasn't changed at all.*

“It is good to see you again, King,” Sorvashti said.

Jet grimaced. “I don't go by that anymore.”

Only the soft wind could be heard for a long moment. Then, “You wish me to call you Jet, then?”

Jet’s jaw clenched. *I don't want you to call me anything.*

Sorvashti shifted in his peripheral vision. “Before you tell me I must use the call sign, yes? But now I must use your name?”

*Well, her Arisian has improved.* Jet hit the brakes and dodged an empty car in the middle of the road. “I'm not in the military anymore.”

“I see this.” Sorvashti folded her arms. “You are angry to me.”

“No,” Jet said. “You saved my life. I'll never be angry at you.”

“But this saving was…” She trailed off.

A thought brushed against his shields, tentative and innocent. Her golden aether was like spiced honey, and her meaning transcended language through his arbiter gift.

*Just like old times.* Jet glanced at the rear-view mirror to ensure that Darien’s blue beater was still behind him.“Mutual.”

“Ah! I thank you!” Sorvashti beamed a smile. “Moo-tu-al.”

Jet suppressed a grin. “No, it's *mutual.”*

“This is what I say.” Sorvashti straightened and said nothing else.

*Really?* Jet gave her a sidelong glance. She was grinning at him as if she'd just caught him in a carefully-laid trap.

*God, she's beautiful.*

Jet sighed and relaxed in his seat. “Look, it's good to see you again.” He looked back at her. “You haven't aged a day.”

“Oh! This is very hard for the kingsnake to say. Does this hurt you?”

He smirked. “Seriously, don't call me that.”

“Then I will call you *shlanga.”* She leaned forward and studied the dash with a furrowed brow.

Jet frowned. ‘*Snake’?* He checked the speedometer and accelerated. *Well, whatever.* Anything was better than his old call sign. The memories it evoked were so sweet that they hurt.

Sorvashti gawked at the X-7’s bright screen that rivaled the width of his laptop monitor. *Well, I guess there's one good thing about her riding with me.* Now she could see exactly how much she'd missed out on when she'd chosen another man.

“Like it?” Jet said.

“Yes, it is much beauty,” Sorvashti murmured. “Many hungry children in Illyria could have food with this.”

Guilt skewered Jet like a spear. “I… it was a gift.”

Sorvashti’s amber eyes widened. “Someone gives you this?”

“Yeah, my…”

Jet bit his lip. The last thing he wanted to talk about was his father, especially with her. The man could buy him a dozen sports cars and not scratch the surface of forgiveness.

#

*He blames me.*

Tera forced herself to look at Jet’s face. Streaks of blood ran from his mouth and stained his eyelids where Darien had closed them.

*What have I done?*

Noruntalus’ words echoed from her memory—from their first training session in the old temple in Jade Glen. “This is the true power of the sage gift,” he’d said. “We find the best outcome and we make it happen, no matter what… We choose who lives and who dies.”

Tera reached into her pocket and withdrew the keystone. It absorbed into her skin in a brilliant wave of light, chasing away the room’s shadows and returning its colors.

Futures snaked out before her like streams from a mountain. Tera selected one and snatched it from the flows of time.

“Aleah.” Tera’s voice reverberated as she stepped forward and knelt at Jet’s side. “I need your help.”

Aleah lifted her head from Jet’s shirt. Her olive face was stained with drying blood, and her emerald eyes slitted. “Please just go.”

“We can bring him back.” Tera pulled a knife from her belt and sliced into her palm. She held it out to Aleah and placed her other hand on Jet’s chest. “Heal this.”

Darien took hold of her wrist. “Tera, if you—”

“He’s losing oxygen! If you don’t heal me now, he’ll have brain damage.” Tera stared at Aleah with all of the strength she could muster. “Trust me.”

Aleah watched a drop of blood fall from Tera’s palm and join the stain on Jet’s shirt. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and grasped Tera’s hand.

Healing aether flowed into Tera’s skin, but she diverted its course. She directed it up her arm and into her core, and the keystone magnified it like a prism. It shot down her other arm and into Jet’s skin.

The sheer magnitude of power nearly fused Jet’s organs together. *Creator, help me!*

Tera fought through the maelstrom of energy and focused on the wounds. Aleah’s energy lanced out in precise bursts, cauterizing tissues together with the expertise of a surgeon.

*Who’s doing that? Aleah…?*

But Aleah’s jade aether was being manipulated by a different energy—something powerful and bright and pure as snow on the wind.

The keystone warbled and cracked inside her soul. The flow of power welled up and burst, and Tera knew nothing more.