

The Tree Farm

Scriptor Paul Hathcoat



Chapter 7 ~ Early Morning Riser

"Eleni, wake up, rise, and shine," I sing and gently knock on her cabin door. She didn't get to bed until after midnight. The poor thing must have been exhausted.

"What's wrong?" Eleni cautiously answers from behind her door.

"Nothing's wrong. Dress in something sturdy and put on a pair of hiking boots."

"Where are we going?" Eleni squeaks.

"Mount Imperium. Let's go. We'll be burning daylight in two hours." I gently but firmly encourage Eleni's best efforts and anticipate a response.

Silence.

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"Eleni?"

I'd hate to pull rank, but for the love of Goddess, get your cute, deliciously plump ass in gear. Technically speaking, our father put Eleni under my command, and she must obey my orders. There are several restrictions, of course. Father gave me a long list and a verbal warning: 'Eleni has her mother's brains and beauty, but she inherited my mean. She's a stick of molecular explosive just waiting to go off.'

I don't doubt for an instant Father's reputation as a 'mean' Sybarinian son of a bitch, but Eleni 'mean'? Please, the girl is a nut-cream cupcake. Eleni senses my fourteen-year-old manly power and is drawn to me like a moth to a flame. My attraction is irresistible, and it's understandable. I am a Seeker. I am a warrior. I fight for Dawn, Goddess of eternal light. Have no fear, gentle one. The King of the Titans will defend his beloved sister with his life!

"Give me a few minutes," Eleni says. A light goes on under her door.

Shower running. Good. "I'll go make coffee."

Returning to the galley, I select a bag of my favorite dark roast blend, measure the coffee beans, dump them in the extractor, and set it to dark express. I dispense a generous dab of greasy black goo in four stainless steel flasks, fill them with boiling water, top with whipped nut cream, and sprinkle with crispy honey. With snacks packed, drink flasks, and water bottles filled, I returned to check on my big squeakster.

"Squeakster, are you ready?"

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No answer.

Pressing my ear to the cabin door, I listen. I hear Eleni doinking around in her dresser. Good, get dressed, my little doinker. I'm glad I got up early. "Eleni," I call to my sleepy, slow squeakster, "I've got coffee for you. Buzzy-bees made it smiley sweet."

"I'm hurrying. Do I need a hat?" Eleni questions from deep inside her confines.

"You need a hat, blast goggles, backpack, jacket, mountain survival kit, walking pike, gloves, food, water, and a swim strap. Do you have any shade-nut oil?"

"No," Eleni replies.

"Look in your bathroom medicine cabinet."

Oh, for the love of Goddess, it's like a dollar waiting on a dime. I will get that girl on a decent schedule by the end of summer, even if it kills her.

At long last, Eleni opens the door to her cabin. She has a quizzical adventure smile on her face. She's wearing a sexy black spider-silk jumpsuit. Her raven black hair is tied in a ponytail and crowned in a matching black service cap. Fuzzy ear flaps up, adorable.

"I found the shade-nut oil. I don't have the other things. What were they again?"

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"No problem, I've got you covered right here," I present Eleni with a sassy new navy survival sack. "It has all your essential gear inside. Try it on. The straps are adjustable."

"Like this?" Eleni slips into her harness with ease and cinches up."

"Give us a twirl. Perfect, boom," I give Eleni the Wog stamp of approval. Nice ass. "You pass inspection."

"Thank you. So do you, little brother," Eleni pinches and jiggles my cheek. Grooming behavior, get off me, you little monkey.

Eleni looks bright, healthy, happy, and absolutely adorable. I love my new sister and future wife. Thank Goddess, she's brilliant, beautiful, and a near-perfect reflection of me, not some hideous mutant half-brother named Blob. I would have to put the little radioactive bastard out of his monkey misery for touching me like this. "Ow, hurt," I meekly complain.

Eleni lets go, kisses her fingertips, and gently pats out the pinch. "Robert, are we climbing to the top of Mount Imperium? It's snowing."

"Not today," I chuckle. "Probably never. We would need spacesuits."

"What's so funny?"

"There's no oxygen. The top of Mount Imperium touches the lower boundaries of space. It is one of the most hostile places on earth. There's nothing on top but bare rock covered in dry ice. The temperature is one-hundred-fifty degrees below zero.

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Add to that hurricane-force winds and intense ultraviolet radiation. Exposed skin is sunburned and frozen in seconds. But, we can fly over the summit sometime. The view is spectacular."

"Robert," Eleni sighs, "that's fine. Where are we going then?"

"We're parking at the upper temple trailhead and hiking a short distance to the tree line, but first, we'll pick up Sara and Motta. Try this." I offer Eleni a shiny stainless-steel thermal flask filled with warm, creamy, liquid golden amber delight. Take it, be grateful.

Eleni cautiously sips from the steaming cauldron. "This is delicious, thank you." She smacks her lips. "Does Sara know we're coming?"

"We made plans last night," I sip from my flask and reseal the lid.

"She didn't say anything about a plan."

"I told her to keep it a secret."

"Why?"

"I wanted to surprise you. Are you surprised?"

"I am surprised, you little dickens. We talked about you last night, and she didn't mention any plans."

"Me? What's there to talk about?" I pry open her can of secrets.

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"Sara told me she loves you. Are you surprised?" Eleni pulls back her hair and retightens her scrunchy-bunchy with much self-satisfaction.

"Of course, she loves me. She always has and always will."

"Robert, Sara has been through hell, and I'm only going to tell you once: be nice to my little sister, or I'll bite you," Eleni bears her teeth.

"You will?"

Eleni's tone intensifies. "I will. Daddy permitted me to hurt you if you step out of line with my sisters or me. So don't."

Eleni gets up in my face. Her teeth are pearly white, and her breath is sweet and minty fresh. Her pinched green eyes are lit with fuses of molecular explosives. She promises to bite and distrust me, which makes me sad. I very much doubt that she could bite me without my permission, but she could stab, shoot, or poison me. I will reassure her simple, troubled mind.

"Dear sister, I love Sara. I know her terrible sadness. I saw what happened."

"You weren't there," Eleni alleges.

"Yes, I was there; it is pictured in the mirror of souls," I stare into her eyes. "All that is was, or ever will be. I see sadness in your eyes, too, sweet sister. Tell me what is wrong."

"Don't look at me," Eleni averts her eyes.

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"Tell me," I plead on a bent knee.

"Robert, get up, don't be a dork," Eleni attempts to pull me up. "Come on, get up."

"I know, I'm heavy." I stand on my own. "What's wrong?"

"I had a dream. I saw pictures of matchstick men marching into an inferno. I'm worried about Daddy and Magnus."

"Nytmares! Damn her, she put that spunk in your stupid brain. Don't let Nyt fool you like that. Magnus and Father will return," I reassure.

"Who is she, and how do you know?"

"Eleni, I'm an Atlantian-Sybarinian hybrid. I see, hear, know, and read the signs. It is written: Magnus and Father will return." I don't mention that Magnus will return to the arms of another lover.

Eleni steps back and relaxes, "They will? The dream seemed so real."

"It was real. You were shown what awaits those Goddess-damned, Zumans once Father gets to Caesuria."

"Don't swear, Robert."

"Father taught me."

"Daddy doesn't swear."

"What?" I challenge. "He swears all the time."

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"No, he doesn't. I want to believe you, but" Eleni hesitates.

"I would never lie to you," I lie. "Please believe me."

"I'll try."

Good, fire out, molecular explosion averted. "All better? Don't bite me, little biter-bee."

"All better." Eleni sips her coffee and crunches a piece of crispy honey.

"Good, ready to go?"

"Who's she?" Eleni asks.

"Who's who?"

"You said 'she' put Nytmarens in my dreams."

"Did I say that?"

"You did," Eleni insists. "Who's she?"

"Oh, right, 'she' is just a dimensional figure of speech."

"I've never heard that one. I guess I'm ready to go. How are we getting up the mountain? Daddy left me a T-bus pass," Eleni pulls out a Gold Multi Pass Transport Ticket from her breast pocket.

"Don't need it. Father left me the keys to his transvertible. You ride shotgun on the way to pick up Sara. Then Sara rides shotgun, and you ride six."

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"What's ride six?" Eleni straightens her service cap and pulls the fuzzy ear flaps down.

"Rearguard," I say.

"What's ride shotgun?"

"It's the seat next to the flight captain," I patiently explain.

"Why do you call it shotgun?"

"The officer next to the flight captain serves as co-pilot, auxiliary navigator, armed guard, and if the tactical situation dictates, carries an MSG."

"MSG?" Eleni looks puzzled.

"Multi-Shot Gun, very effective when fighting Zuman mobs at close range."

"I didn't know that."

"Now, you know."

"I don't know how to use an MSG," Eleni admits.

"Few people do. It's a Sig Special Forces weapon. They're fun. I'll let you shoot mine someday, but not today. It's a lot to handle."

"What's so fun about it?" Eleni asks.

"Think of an MSG as a handheld blast furnace that spits bursts of pulsed plasma. It slices and dices at close range. At

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night, it looks like dancing purple fire. That's how Father got the name Devil Dancer."

"That's a silly beer name. I've never heard Daddy called that."

"Long story short, after Zumans raiders murdered my mothers, Father and his hunters tracked the band to Caesuria and found a whole colony. Caesura was uninhabited only twenty years ago. It is only an ocean and a primordial coal jungle; it's a galactic heritage site. Father, Miss Daisy, a Sig squad, and thirty Thaumium marines waited until dark and attacked the colony. They surprised the swarm and killed all without mercy."

"Who's Miss Daisy?" Eleni inquires.

"His customized MSG."

"Who's Daddy dancing with?" Eleni asks.

"Miss Daisy."

"I don't understand," Eleni puzzles.

"It's simple. Witnesses said Father swept a path through the hive in a graceful fire dance, running, spinning, and leaping in a burning ballet of death. I was not among them; I was only five years old at the time, but multiple witnesses said Father transformed into a dancing fire spirit as he cut down swaths of screaming Zumans with his sword of purple fire. His crew named him the Devil Dancer."

"That's an amazing story." Eleni stares in wide-eyed fascination.

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"It's true. If you don't believe me, ask Magnus. He was there. He saw it."

"That explains so much about Daddy. He never tells me his icky war stories."

"Father tells me that kind of stuff. I've never seen him perform the Devil Dance, but I've seen Devil's dancing in his eyes. He killed thousands of Zumans that night. When he got home, they named a beer after him, Devil Dancer. Father is a sworn enemy of the Zumans. There's a bounty on his head. Haven't you ever read a Devil Dancer label on a beer bottle? The legend is on the back."

"All I see are the empties you and Daddy leave them everywhere."

"I leave empty beer bottles lying around?" I try to look stunned. I thought my empties, if not recycled, were well hidden.

"I found one in your laundry basket last week, and I found other things," Eleni says.

"What did you find?"

"I found this in a jumpsuit pocket," Eleni flashes a factory-sealed five-pack of Sybarinian Sweet Flower.

"Mine, give it here," I grab in vain.

"No, they're mine." Eleni takes a step back. "These are illegal for children under eighteen. Where did you get this young man?"

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"Answer me."

"Well, as you know, Father smokes."

"He smokes way too much," Eleni adds.

"I know, and he nourishes his habit by collecting rare cannabiniol and tabacum cultivars from around the quadrant. He grows them in our greenhouse. I discreetly trim the plants and package the rest to sell to tourists. What are you going to do with my smokes? They're valuable, don't throw them away."

"I'm not throwing your cigarettes away. You are going to smoke one with me." Eleni tucks the pack into her breast pocket.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I say.

"Robert, please," Eleni begs.

"Okay, but I decide where and when. What else have you found, tearing my room apart?"

"I found a secret storage compartment full of guns."

Snap. "You are not to touch those! You'll blow your Goddess-damned head off," I scold.

"I didn't touch them," Eleni shrinks away.

"Don't ever. I'll teach you how to shoot when you're ready. And when you're ready, I'll stop by the naval arsenal some night and pick out a weapon your size."

"You can do that?"

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"Sure, they've given me complete unrestricted access. Hold your hand up next to mine. No, your right hand, hold the coffee in your left."

"Like this?" Eleni spreads and wiggles her fingers atop mine.

"Yeah, you need a Colt Palomino. It's a small frame, six-shot, pulsed plasma pistol. They're light, accurate, easy to shoot, easy to conceal, small blast radius, low recoil, deadly at short to medium range, and they come in designer colors."

Eleni's eyes open wide, "Deadly?"

"You must learn how to defend yourself. You cannot just bite an attacker and expect them to go away. You must learn how to kill without thought or hesitation. I can't be with you every second. Evil lurks in the shadows of Nyx. The women of our world learned long ago that those without knives can still be cut. Do you carry a dagger?"

"Here," Eleni pats her hip pocket. "Daddy gave me a Sybarinian Survival Knife™. He said to carry it at all times. Do you want to see it? It's pink and has a few tools that fold into the handle. Robert, it has a tiny pair of scissors. It's so cute!"

"That's a good start. Survival knives can be useful, but you will need something more deadly. You need a switch dagger."

"Is it like a kitchen knife?" Eleni asks.

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"No, it's a knife like this." I unsnap my service pocket, remove my dagger, and offer it, blade retracted, safety on, to Eleni to examine at her leisure.

"It's beautiful." Eleni admires the fine craftsmanship.

"Burnt bone handles with a razor-sharp thaumium-titanate blade that automatically extends to ten inches. It will take a Zuman's head off in one swipe. I'll put one on my armory shopping list for you."

"I don't know how to use one." Eleni hands back my dagger. "I don't want to learn."

"Trust me, you do. I will teach you, and you will learn."

"Why would I want to learn your death art?"

"Defensive skills will carry you on past Tinnion. The people you see will leave you be, and because your Daddy, my Father," I emphasize, "asked me to teach you self-defense. You must trust me, dear sister."

"I trust you, Robert, and I promise not to touch any guns or daggers until you show me how."

"Good, see that you don't. What else have you found poking around in my room?"

"I found dirty dishes, cigarette butts, clothes, towels, sperm-stained bedsheets, and I found a pair of ladies' panties."

"Sperm-stained bedsheets, panties?" I blush.

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"Robert, I was raised in the Prancing Pony. Mimie taught me about men at an early age. Before I learned how to dance, I had to clean rooms and toilets, do laundry, and cook."

"What did she teach you about men?"

"She taught me they are not to be trusted, and she taught me what they want."

"Really, what do I want?"

"You want to mate with me," Eleni teases.

"I do. It's funny you should mention that. I was telling Father the very same thing last night."

"Father said you're old enough to mate with me, but not mature enough. Whose panties were those? They're cute. I washed them. I'm wearing them now."

I almost choke on my coffee. "Eleni, why did you come to Sybaris?" I skirt the subject of Haley's skimpy silk thong.

"To get away from Port Dawn. I didn't want to spend the rest of my life dancing naked at the Pony. So, I came here. Daddy let me stay at the VOQ until I decided what to do. You said I could stay with you, and that's why I'm here. If you don't want me, I'll move back to the VOQ," Eleni sulks.

"No, don't go. I'm happy you're here." I take her hand. "I love you. I want you."

"So am I," Eleni smiles brightly. "Robert, why are we climbing Mount Imperium so early?" asks Eleni.

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Childish curiosity, I love you. Eleni is the perfect portrait of Father mixed with an exotic green goddess and me. I'm happy with my physical manifestation, but if I were a girl, I'd want to look exactly like Eleni, only taller, stronger, shapelier, and prettier. "I'm taking you and the girls to the Holy Temple of Dawn," I say with tidings of comfort and joy.

"It's dark outside. Why are we going to the Temple of Dawn?"

"Good question. It isn't Sunday, and who in their right mind would want to go to the Temple of Dawn when it's dark outside? One," I count on my fingers. "I want to watch the sunrise in the sky. Two, I want to thank Dawn for my beautiful sister, Eleni. Three, I want to thank Dawn for sending Sara. Fourth, I want to pray for Sara's healing and happiness. Five, to pray for Motta's healing and happiness. Six, I want to pray for the safety of Father and his crew." I recount the prayers on my fingers. I left one out. "And seven, I want to pray for the screaming bloody death of all filthy Zumans."

"Oh, dear brother," Eleni is overwhelmed. She hugs me, "That's so sweet. I didn't expect that from you." There are tears in her eyes. I understand. Eleni hates Zumans, too. Eleni's never had a loving little brother to protect her. She's got one now. I wrap my strong arms around her, give her a firm, reassuring hug, and kiss the tippy top of her head. Her hair smells like jungle flowers and tastes like soap. I adore my sister.

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"Don't cry, Eleni. After morning prayers, we'll get some breakfast and see Father off at the dock. There'll be lots of people there."

Eleni looks up with smiling, hopeful eyes.

"Be happy, honey-bee, the sun is rising." I grab Sara and Motta's backpacks and throw them over my shoulder. Eleni dutifully follows me out of the south-side service hatch into the dark Sybarinian night.