

Prologue: Masters of Disguise

What potential for power she had that day still could not satiate her. She held in the palm of her emerald hand the means to shape history, to make her cause known to all by its victory, and yet she desired more. The hunger that Mierdi had felt since becoming one of the last of her people had been growing exponentially for so long now that it obscured her view of all else, compelling her to ensure that his return would be heralded by the perfect launch pad for his undoubtedly glorious scheme. Mierdi owed it to him. As such, as she stared down at the seeds clutched beneath her fingers, she felt an even greater sense of apprehension than ever before, for she was on the cusp of completing her seemingly never-ending quest. Almost everything was in position.

When she wasn't there to maintain a keen eye on them Mierdi kept the seeds locked away either in a secure vault aboard her Chariot or in one of Gryal Repa's treasuries, although the latter was the less desirable of the two options. She could never be too sure of what went on in his domain, even if he was technically a servant of hers. Now was one of those occasions where she had to put aside her prizes, for just then her Gryal entered the bridge, striding in with his cloak of midnight billowing out behind him, an expectant look somehow etched onto his unmoving skeletal features. His yellow eyes darted momentarily in the direction of the seeds as they were being stashed away.

"What news is there of your colleagues' endeavours?" Mierdi enquired by means of drawing his attention away from her prizes.

The skull swivelled round on the top vertebrae to face her directly, "I believe the general feeling of the meeting was that they are having to resort to their backup plan, the one they had conveniently been preparing anyway. It means war is coming to the Alpha Realm, and eventually back out here."

"Fear not. We'll have changed all that before any real damage can be done, damage that does not profit us, should I say," his mistress assured him, the corners of her thin lips curling at the thought.

Gryal took a step closer to Mierdi in her custom-built chair, peering as much as his limited boldness would allow to see if the rage she had been expressing but an hour before had fully subsided. She still gave him that imperious stare that she always adopted to remind those below her of their position, but the return of her precious seeds appeared to have finally subdued her prior negative feelings towards him.

Hoping that he could say what he needed to without her biting off his head once more, Gryal admitted, "I believe that Mordrin has begun to suspect that I am not who I claim to be."

Mierdi's expression didn't falter, but there was definitely a heaviness to the air that emanated from her as soon as he had said this.

"Well you did insist on being impulsive enough to kill one of their number. Has he managed to gather any evidence to back up his claims?"

Gryal hesitated before answering, "If he has anything, he has not indicated so."

"But he suspects you of subterfuge nonetheless?" she pressed, though still without altering her tone of voice.

Their being alone on Mierdi's own ship somehow made their conversations that much more disturbing for Gryal than when they had them aboard the Towers, or on Earth, or anywhere else in the multiverse. Everywhere else he had influence and power, but here in what was technically her domain he, her Gryal facsimile, was vulnerable. Here was the one place in reality where his latest face could not grant him whatever he so desired. He hadn't felt this level of fear since the Entities had hunted their people down in cold blood.

After some grinding of his pointed teeth Gryal said, "Mordrin challenges my authority at every turn..."

"Perhaps that is just who he is. You haven't known them for very long."

Recovering from this unexpected interruption, Gryal continued, "*And* I believe that he is actively trying to turn the other two against me."

"Yet still he has no evidence. How successful do you think he could be?"

"I am merely suggesting that we should keep an eye on him."

His mistress drummed her fingers on the arms of her chair, yet the rest of her remained as still as a statue. But then, without any visibly physical movement on her part, the chair swivelled on its base to direct her gaze through the wide prow window.

"Fly us out," Gryal thought he heard her say, even though he did not catch her lips moving to the words. "There's always a chance that we could be being listened to aboard the Towers. You won't be gone for long, you won't be missed. You will only be absent for as long as this conversation takes."

"I can assure you that this hangar is not under surveillance," the Supreme Lord resentfully pointed out, slowly making his way over to the Chariot's controls all the same.

“But I thought you said that Mordrin could not be trusted. How do you know what he’s done to this place?”

Knowing that he could not come up with a convincing retort, not that he’d want to continue arguing with Mierdi, Gryal arrived at the fourth control display in silence. The piloting stations formed a semi-circle passing through the middle of the bridge, the middle of these in turn positioned in front of Mierdi’s chair. It had originally been designed this way so that all of the races in the Katelnairmn Alliance who happened to have members aboard at any given time were made to work in unison when guiding their craft to its destination, for each of their displays were integrally linked. However now there was only Mierdi and Gryal, so no consideration had to be made for the other metal islands around them.

At the controls allocated to members of his true people, the Ruut, the shapeshifter placed a bony finger in a groove etched into the outermost of thirteen concentric circles, rotating it through one full revolution. As soon as it stopped moving two shallow arches swung over into place on either side of it, with a thin beam descending from the apex back down below the panel’s surface in each case. Gryal clasped the beams, his knuckles enclosed by the arches.

The crescent-shaped ship with its thin bridge extending from the inner curve lifted off from the hangar floor. Upon receiving the required signal from the out-going vessel the room depressurised and the nearest portholes opened, allowing the Chariot to glide out into the vacuum beyond. Even when the crimson light of the top floors of the Tower were getting far enough behind, the ship kept on going, all on Mierdi’s orders. Further and further it went, soaring through the vast nothingness away from the one source of light between them and the nearest universe. Now Gryal and Mierdi were totally alone; there was no way for him to avoid her this time.

“I agree that Mordrin should be dealt with, but before you do something highly regrettable you must understand that he could be integral for my plans,” Mierdi informed him at last, breaking the silence that had weighed upon Gryal since he’d taken his position at the controls.

The skeleton extracted his hands from the arches, stopping the ship’s propulsion so that they continued to distance themselves from the Tower by drifting alone.

“How so?” Gryal replied tentatively, not turning to look her in the eye.

“He...” Mierdi began before casting her gaze around the bridge once more. “Just check once more for security breaches.”

Feeling as though his mistress was simply trying to postpone the moment when she would have to explain anything to him, Gryal obeyed, sending multiple circles on the display spinning.

When no warning lights turned on, Mierdi divulged, “Mordrin, and your other associates, might turn out to be necessary for providing us with a means to an end, Mordrin especially. He’s always been the most resourceful and determined of the

current Lord line-up. I'm obviously not counting you in that, for you're not really a Lord, and I'd hope that you'd remember that."

Yet again feeling embarrassed by his mistress' words, Gryal rasped, "And why would these talents of his be required exactly?"

Mierdi sighed, "There are rumours that some old acquaintances of theirs are tending towards an uprising."

This did what all her threats could not: turned Gryal around, "Who would that be?"

"The devout ones. I should probably specify that, if the rumours are to be believed, their cardinals are still strict in their religious institutions. It is the mercenaries who apparently wish to re-join the fight and are preparing to overthrow the ruling priests."

"And what does Mordrin have to do with this," Gryal persisted, still unsure how much trouble he was going to be in.

"You will know as soon as you allow me to finish," she snapped. "Sooner or later your Lords are going to hear about this and they will endeavour to prevent it. The last thing they need right now is one of the sides making a strike at the others while their own plan is so near completion. At this point they will make contact with their agents, all so that they can perfect their own counterstrike. This is where you come in, my pet."

He took yet more steps closer to Mierdi's chair as the number of potential faults on his part mounted, "How so?"

"Once this process of retaliation has begun, you must ensure that it follows through. They cannot be swayed from their goals. It is vital that they believe in the revolution." Mierdi sounded as though she was aroused simply by the thought of it, "He will return straight into the righteous bloodbath of war, I his hulphor declare it. That is something that I, by which I obviously mean you, must make certain of. You need to keep up these pretences for this assignment only. Once this is over we can both go back to being our true selves."

Gryal might have agreed with Mierdi's plans at the beginning, and true he still wished for their master's resurrection, but all out conflict was not in his nature. They might never have been pure of heart, their original methods might have consisted of larceny, fraud and trafficking, they had been vessels of the sin of greed, but they had never been mass murderers or ones to bring about a war of any magnitude. He wasn't entirely certain that he wanted to be involved in her new enterprise. It wasn't what he'd signed up for all those centuries ago. Gryal also had some hesitations about Mierdi referring to herself as their master's hulphor, a term said master would himself allocate to the Murorviosp member he deemed most valuable. It was not a self-appointed title.

Before he accidentally voiced his true opinions, a faint crackling burst forth from the many speakers situated around the bridge.

As they both inclined their heads instinctively to listen to the transmission, the voice of Petti grumbled, "Gryal, I know you're there. The security monitors registered you entering the hangar and it wasn't a huge leap to the conclusion that you are now aboard

the Chariot. One of the Braknaghs has apparently discovered something amongst our scans of the Alpha Realm that could, in its words, warrant the sending of a probe to physically investigate and report back any potential findings. Please confirm that you'll be there to officiate the level of priority thus given to this news in relation to our other current operations."

Gryal's yellow eyes met Mierdi's, and she said to him curtly through pursed lips, "We're done here."

"I'll be there presently," Gryal replied, speaking into the air in the absence of a face to focus on.

"Good. I shall have the Braknaghs make any necessary preparations," Petti acknowledged before closing the communications channel.

After a brief silence Gryal mumbled, "I will start to bring us back around then."

The skeleton slunk over to the display once more, replacing his hands within the small arches. The Chariot's engines fired up again, the ship gradually turning to face the Tower.

"I assume that, despite the lack of evidence, you *have* dealt with Mordrin in some way already," Mierdi asked coyly, leaning back in her chair once more.

"Of course, mistress."