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**FORTITUDE**

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“He’s a wizard, I tell you.” Old Man Rebbord spit out a brownish gob immediately upon finishing the sentence to punctuate it with his feelings about wizards. His fellow mercenaries looked at one another with a mix of skepticism and fear. The two dozen mercs were the toughest of the tough of the Outlands, but magic wasn’t something you could defeat with a weapon.

“No such thing as wizards.” Crem Jara didn’t bother to look up from the wooden figure she was carving. The old man thought he knew everything, but Crem was always quick to correct him. “He’s just using fancy tech.”

The old man just shrugged, but Forrebart made the foolhardy decision to reply in his stead.

“Yeah, well any tech—” Crem grabbed the lanky alien gunner by the throat, cutting him off.

“If you spout off about fancy tech being the same thing as magic again, I swear by the Seven Titans I’ll be using your sack as a coin purse.” She held the small carving knife close to Forrebart’s eyes to emphasize her point. She slowly let her grip loosen and Forrebart jumped back.

The bespectacled gunner looked away and spoke softly. “Indistinguishable.”

Crem spun him around. "What was that?"

"Nothing."

This time Crem slammed the green-skinned merc up against the corrugated steel wall of the barracks, causing his spectacles to fall off his face. The point of her small knife pierced the underside of his chin ever so slightly and drew a bit of blood. "I told you to tell me... what... you... *said*."

The sweat on Forrebart's brow beaded up quickly, trickling down his temples and onto his cheeks. "Indistinguishable. Sufficiently advanced technology isn't the *same* as magic, it's just indistinguishable from magic."

Crem continued to hold her knife against the alien's chin as the sweat ran down his jawline. Her mouth stretched into a menacing grin. Forrebart returned the gesture with a nervous smile of his own.

"I warned you." Crem used her left forearm to pin Forrebart's neck against the wall as she ripped open the front of his pants with the knife.

Forrebart was screeching like a wounded Eor before Crem's knife had even touched skin. The other mercenaries started egging Crem on and ridiculing Forrebart.

"*Enough!*" Kaden's commanding voice cut through the din of mercenary hoots and hollers, silencing every one of them in less than a second. The others had been so caught up in the afternoon's entertainment that they hadn't even seen their leader enter the barracks. The mercs backed away, leaving a path wide enough for even Kaden's physically imposing form to pass. "Forrebart's an idiot, but he's right. It doesn't matter whether it's magic or not if we can't defeat it. So how about you all quit bickering like kaiote bitches in heat and figure out how to beat him."

"Ain't likely," said Rebbord defiantly.

Kaden slowly approached the old man and stood over him. "Remind me again why I keep you around, you crotchety old bastard."

"'Cuz I taught you everything you know."

Kaden tilted his head in a grudging acknowledgement of the claim.

"Plus, I had your mom so many times, there's a fair to middling chance that my seed beat out the ubiquitous competition, so I may just be your pappy."

The other mercs shared nervous looks, some of them inching their way toward the door. The silence seemed to go on forever.

Then Kaden let out a booming laugh, so loud and sudden that more than a couple of his men pissed their breeches at the shock of it. Once they realized it was safe, all the mercs joined in whether their trousers were soaked or not.

"You better hope so, old man, since I'd never let anyone else talk to me that way and live." He turned to the rest of the group. "Nobody believes in wizards any more—at least I hope none of *you* are that stupid—but we do have a problem. We've been paid in advance to take out Vance Nekro, and every last man I've sent has been returned to us, mutilated beyond recognition."

"W-we could return the quibs." Forrebart looked around for agreement from the others but got none.

Kaden stared hard at him. "Not an option. We always finish a job. That's our reputation and our bond, and I aim to keep it. Any more talk like that, and Crem'll have her new coin purse."

Crem smirked at Forrebart, who swallowed hard. “We could catapult Forrebart into Nekro’s fortress and hope that his cowardice spreads to everyone in there like a plague when he bursts open on impact.”

Everyone except Forrebart laughed at that, including Kaden. “Let’s call that Plan B. I need some real options and I need them soon. First one with a workable plan gets an extra cut.”

This set the mercs to murmuring as Kaden left the barracks.

\* \* \*

Kaden looked over the map of the desert outside of Gravity City and stabbed his dagger into it in frustration. Nekro’s citadel was marked in red, nestled up against the Daeger Peaks, whose sharp, jagged edges made it impossible to approach from any side but the front. And the strange energy barrier—which the locals swore was magical—caused any flying craft to fall out of the sky before they got within a hundred meters of the fortress.

Energy weapons were useless as well, even when one was lucky enough to get right up against the ebony walls of the stronghold. There were reports that even simpler technology such as rifles and guns was rendered inert somehow.

Nearly a year ago, Nekro had murdered Lord Tolbert, Baron of the Daeger Peaks, and taken his title and lands for himself. Technically, that meant he should now be referred to as Lord Nekro, but any attempt to do so caused bile to rise in Kaden’s throat, so he decided he’d rather ignore tradition in that regard.

It wasn’t because of Tolbert’s murder that Kaden’s mercenaries had been hired to take him down. Nekro had every right to his claim now, regardless of how devious his method of obtaining it had been. Nor was it due to the various heinous crimes that he’d been alleged to have committed both inside and outside the walls of Gravity City. Law enforcement had no interest in any of it, especially now that he was outside of their jurisdiction. It was the corporations who were calling for Nekro’s head on a platter.

And there was only one cardinal sin that would cause the corporations to ally themselves against someone in such a way: patent infringement.

Nekro had somehow stolen the blueprints for some of their most advanced technology and either hired or kidnapped some of their best engineers and programmers. Now they were holed up with him in his citadel creating wonders that were both new and dangerous.

But the powerful corporate security forces and everything at their disposal had been useless against Vance Nekro, which is why they called in Kaden as a last resort.

He turned as Crem entered his small quarters. “Didn’t your mother teach you knock?”

“No. But she did teach me to sneak in and slit a man’s throat before he knew what was happening, so consider yourself lucky.”

“It’s too bad I never met her.”

“If you had, you would have ended up at least broke, if not dead. It’s probably for the best.”

“What do you need?”

“I don’t *need* anything, but there is something I’m in the mood for.” She gave him a suggestive grin. Kaden didn’t consider Cremalia Jana beautiful in any traditional sense, but

he was certainly attracted to her for a myriad of other reasons. Plus, he was no prize himself, with his scarred face and graying hair.

“Sorry, you know the rules. I don’t fraternize with underlings.”

She grabbed his belt and unbuckled it with an ease that suggested familiarity. “Then it’s a good thing I’m superior to you in every way.”

“I don’t know about that...”

“You have ten seconds to drop your pants before I go find someone else who will. And you know there’ll be plenty of takers.”

*Whoa.* Was that a twinge of jealousy he felt? That wasn’t good. Kaden’s pants were around his ankles immediately. “Satisfied?”

“Not yet, but hopefully soon. And, by the way...” She kissed him hungrily. “When we’re done, I’ll tell you all about my brilliant plan to defeat Nekro.”

“Does it still involve catapulting Forrebart over the walls?”

“Of course it does.”

Kaden smiled as they fell onto his cot.

\* \* \*

The attack began at midnight. Kaden never understood why anyone would launch an assault such as this in the middle of the day, when the enemy was prepared and could see it coming. Even if all of Nekro’s guards and soldiers had some warning and were awake by the time they reached the fortress, most of them would still be groggy from sleep and unprepared for battle.

They rode for hours through the desert sand, then stopped a couple of miles from the citadel. Because anything that ran on energy was useless near the fortress, the mercs made the rest of the journey by other means. Some rode on the backs of brazelles, while others used vehicles powered by their own muscle. The largest of the troop carriers moved by sail, taking advantage of the scirocco winds that constantly pummeled the Daeger Peaks, ever sharpening their points. Kaden had ordered the sails painted black to help camouflage them in the night.

They moved forward without lights in order to maintain the element of surprise as long as possible, but that also made the trek more dangerous. A couple of the vehicles overturned, and one pedal-powered dune buggy smashed against an unexpected rock outcropping, killing the occupants. But nothing, not even the death of their compatriots, slowed down the killers as they approached their target.

They stopped a couple hundred meters from the black walls of the fortress, which were nearly invisible in the dark but for the small fires burning along the battlements. There was still no indication that Nekro or his sentries were aware of their presence. Perhaps this techno-wizard had grown complacent in his stronghold after easily defeating anything and anyone sent up against him.

Kaden stood at the bow of his largest sandship. “Prepare the catapult.”

His men unchained the catapult arm from its moorings as Forrebart moved forward nervously. Crem checked the large pack slung on the gunner’s back and went over the instructions one last time. “Remember to pull the ripcord as soon as you see the top of the ramparts coming fast. The wind will catch your chute and take you over the top, then angle yourself to come back around and into the gate control room at the top of the wall.

“Why was I chosen to do this again?”

"You're the lightest one. The rest of us are too heavy to get high enough."

"But aren't they going to see me and shoot me down?"

Kaden stepped in. "We'll be making a hell of a ruckus down here. They'll be too busy to even notice you."

Crem continued. "You'll be safer than any of us. You should be able to take out the gatekeeper in the control room from behind before he even knows you're there."

Forrebart nodded, his long face filled with terror. But the mercs standing nearby slapped him on the back and congratulated him, which caused a slight grin to creep onto his face. He'd always been unpopular and the object of ridicule, but tonight was his chance to be a hero.

A couple of the larger mercs helped him up onto the seat that was attached to the end of the arm while the strongest men they had pulled the restraining ropes back and tied them to the post at the rear of the ship.

Rebbord stood nearby, smoking his pipe.

"You're sure your calculations are right, old man?" Forrebart asked.

Rebbord spit over the side of the sandship. "Never been wrong before when it came to catapulting."

Forrebart settled in and looked forward, reassured by the old man's confidence. He pulled his goggles down over his eyes. "I guess I'm ready, then."

Crem addressed the men. "As soon as he's off, we make the biggest racket we can to draw their attention away from Forrebart. And be ready to fight."

Kaden nodded at Forrebart. "Fly like the wind, son. Everything depends on you."

Forrebart nodded back and held on tightly to the straps of his chute pack.

Kaden lifted his arm, then dropped it. "Now!"

Crem slammed her sword down onto the ropes, and the enormous arm of the catapult moved forward with far greater speed than anyone anticipated. As the mercenaries shouted and cheered at the tops of their lungs, Forrebart rocketed forward at blinding speed, little more than a blur.

And smacked against the wall.

The alien burst like an overripe fruit and stuck to the fortifications for a moment, then slid slowly down the side, leaving a dark smear along the way.

The desert went completely silent.

Every eye turned back toward Rebbord, who shrugged nonchalantly. "What the hell'd you expect? I don't know shit about catapults."

It was then that the arrows started raining down upon them from the direction of the citadel. Most of the mercs were fortunate enough not to get hit or to just be nicked in a limb, but several took arrows to the torso or even the head.

Kaden bared his teeth and growled at Rebbord, then turned and held his giant battle-axe high, pointing toward the fortress ahead. "Attack!"

The mercs shouted again as they moved forward, once again yelling as loud as they could. Most rode forward on their vehicles or mounts, while others chanced racing on foot. The next volley of arrows took out fewer men, as many of them had shields ready or took cover within their vehicles.

As they got closer, some of the mercs attempted to shoot at the guards atop the ramparts with various firearms, but the projectiles seemed to bounce off some unseen

barrier. Crem nocked an arrow and let it fly from the front of the sandship, piercing the eye of a sentry who then plummeted from the top of the wall.

"Some kind of kinetic shielding that blocks anything moving too fast," she said.

Kaden grunted. "Then it's a good thing we train for anything. I was never one to rely on fancy gadgets anyway."

As Crem continued to shoot down more guards with her longbow, Kaden opened his pack and removed a special crossbow with a grappler attached to a coiled rope.

Crem looked at it and let out a small laugh. "So much for having confidence in my plan."

"It wasn't your plan I doubted. But if I spent my life counting on Rebbord, I would've been in the ground a long time ago." He aimed his crossbow and shot it toward the control room at the top of the wall above the gate. The hook grabbed onto an outcropping and he pulled on the rope to test it. "Watch for the gate to open and be ready to lead the men through."

"I won't hold my breath." Crem smiled as she shook her head. "You're insane, you know."

"You're just now figuring that out?" Kaden paused. "Do I get a kiss for luck?"

"Not from me, you don't. Try Rebbord."

The old man puckered up, and Kaden flashed him the universal sign for fornicating with oneself. Rebbord returned the gesture. "May the Titans be with you, Kaden. But if not, I call dibs on your quarters."

With that, Kaden strapped his axe to his back and began the long climb toward the top of the wall. While he was exceptionally strong, he was also one of the largest men in the desert, so it was no easy feat to hoist himself up the rope. As he approached the top, one of the guards noticed him and turned, aiming his bow.

Kaden quickly wrapped his left arm around the rope above him and pulled out his dagger. With a flick of his wrist, the blade flew end over end and lodged itself between the guard's eyes. The guard next to him witnessed this and, rather than chance the same fate, ducked behind the battlements as he ran away. Kaden considered himself lucky, since that had been his only knife.

The merc leader reached the top of the wall a few minutes later and swung over the parapet at the top of the rampart. After pulling his dagger from the face of the fallen guard, he entered the small room nearby where the gatekeeper stood watching the scene below. The guard turned and raised a crossbow too slowly, as Kaden snatched it out of his hand and struck him across the face with the butt of the weapon.

Kaden then lifted the man above his head and tossed him through the window looking out over the gate. He tried to figure out the controls, pulling levers and pushing buttons to see what happened. Finally the locks disengaged, but Kaden realized that the brace would have to be moved by hand since it was still barricading the door and preventing it from opening.

He left the room and kicked a guard who was nearly at the entrance to the gatekeeper's room. He watched the man go over the edge of the inner battlement and fall into the interior of the fortress fifty feet below, and knew there was no chance of jumping down. He saw a ladder nearby, but several of Nekro's men were climbing up.

That led to an idea.

Kaden jumped down from the top of the ladder and landed on the highest guard, who quickly lost his grip. Then the two of them fell together and hit the guard below him, with Kaden on top. This continued down the line, with each guard momentarily slowing the fall of the ones from above, until they hit the ground and Kaden found himself standing on a pile of mostly-unconscious guards. He grabbed the heads of the two who weren't quite out and slammed them together so they would join their friends.

It was so much fun that he let his guard down and paid the price. He let out an angry roar as an arrow pierced his leg all the way through. He turned around to see the archer nocking another arrow, but the man had signed his death warrant with the first. Kaden threw his giant axe at the man and it cleaved his skull in two.

Kaden snapped the head off of the arrow in his leg and yanked it out from the other end, another gravelly bellow escaping his throat as he did so. He tore off a piece of tunic from the closest fallen guard and tied it tightly above his wound.

Limping toward the giant gate, he pulled his axe from the archer's head and used it to dispense with a couple more sentries on his way. He placed himself under the giant brace that held the gate shut and tried to lift it. Although it should have taken several men, Kaden managed to move it slightly. He clenched his teeth and put his shoulders under the brace, then pushed up. This time it slid over the brackets holding it against the enormous gate and crashed to the ground.

Crem and Rebbord were shocked to see him as he opened the gate and welcomed them inside the fortress.

\* \* \*

The slowly dwindling mercenary crew worked its way through the dozens of guards and troops inside the fortress. Even killing ten or twenty of them to every mercenary, Kaden's numbers were starting to run low.

Still, it was difficult for Kaden not to feel confident. His men had trained with hand-to-hand weapons for years, while the guards were mostly used to using projectile and energy weapons. He started to have more fun than he should fighting alongside his comrades, but it was what he loved to do. Life in the desert was hard, and everything was scarce—food, weapons, companionship—but if you enjoyed a good fight, that was the one thing that was always in abundance.

Kaden paused to check on his friends. Crem was obviously enjoying herself as much as he was, if not more. And Rebbord's smile showed that he was having the time of his long life.

That's when things started to go to hell.

Rebbord killed a man one-third his age by knocking the sword out of his hand and running his thin rapier through the guard's throat. So, of course, he turned around to brag about it. "See that, Kaden? That's how it's done. You can still learn a thing or two from m—"

Kaden watched as a long blade burst forth from Rebbord's chest, then vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving a gushing, crimson wound. The old man's smile left his face as he fell to his knees. Behind him stood a sneering sentinel holding the murder weapon.

When he saw Kaden's face, his mien immediately changed.

The guard's surprised expression remained even as Kaden detached his head with one swoop of his battle-axe and it flew across the room. Kaden knelt next to Rebbord and helped him to the ground.

"Looks like this is finally it. At least this is how I wanted to go." The old man's voice was little more than a raspy whisper. "I know I gave you a hard time, but I want you to understand I've always known I wasn't really your pappy."

Kaden could only nod as his throat constricted and his eyes welled up.

"After all," Rebbord continued, "You can't get pregnant from polishing the ol' piston." His wheezing laugh turned to a cough, then faded until it became a death rattle.

"Sleep well, you old bastard. You've earned a rest." Kaden pulled Rebbord's lids down over his lifeless eyes, then stood.

The noise from the battle disappeared from Kaden's ears as the chaos around him slowed to a crawl in his eyes. He pulled the guard's sword from its death grip and began cleaving into multiple enemies simultaneously, a two-handed weapon in each hand. Kaden's mercs already had an advantage over Nekro's men in hand-to-hand combat, but now it became a slaughter as the desert's most legendary killing machine went into overdrive.

The stories that had been heard by all about Kaden's fighting prowess were usually dismissed as fables. There was no way, everyone thought, that a man could actually fight like that and kill so many.

The truth is, the stories usually didn't even approach the reality.

Guards ran at him three or four at a time, swinging swords, axes, maces... not one got within a meter of Kaden as he moved with the gracefulness of a dancer, using his battle-axe and newly-acquired longsword to hack away at enemies. All the while, he knocked arrows and crossbow bolts out of the air as easily as swatting at flies.

Kaden worked his way through dozens of sentinels until he reached the throne room of the citadel. While some of his mercs had been taken out in the battle, nearly all of Nekro's own men lay dead or dying in the path between the citadel wall and the entrance to the central tower.

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Some barons took the title more seriously, while to others it was little more than honorary. Vance Nekro acted as if he were some sort of emperor, sitting on an honest-to-gods throne like a monarch from ancient times. He stood when Kaden entered and signaled his personal guards to stand down.

Nekro was nearly seven feet tall, but thin to the point of appearing skeletal, and dressed in shiny black robes with silver accents. His long, black hair was slicked back from a deep widow's peak and his beard was waxed into a point, his hands adorned with large gauntlets covered with tech. "Welcome. I must say, you more than live up to the reputation that preceded you. I had my doubts."

Kaden answered by pulling out two hand cannons and firing multiple rounds straight at Nekro. The projectiles fell harmlessly to the floor a couple of meters from their target.

The baron's dry lips stretched over large, yellow teeth. "Surely you understand by now that such weapons are harmless against me."

"I had to try, didn't I? Couldn't forgive myself if I wasted the effort of gutting you like a fish if I could've just plugged you full of holes."

"How charming. You actually still believe that you can defeat me."

Kaden snarled and charged at Nekro, his two-handed weapons back in his grip and held high above his head. When he reached the place where the bullets had fallen, he was thrown back by an invisible force. He fell to one knee as he slid back to prevent himself from landing on his rear end.

"You're wasting your energy. You won't get past my spells."

Kaden scoffed. "Spells. Just because you've improved on energy shield technology doesn't make you a sorcerer."

Nekro shrugged. "I prefer *technomancer*. And it certainly bolstered my reputation and dramatically increased my recruitment efforts. Although I'll definitely have to step it up quite a bit after tonight's losses. Perhaps your surviving men will join me after I kill you."

A commotion in the hall outside the throne room drew the attention of everyone there. "Speaking of which..." Nekro gestured toward the hall and the baron's personal guards left the room to see what it was about. After a few moments, everything went silent.

Crem entered the room alone, holding the head of the captain of the guard. She tossed it toward Nekro and it bounced off of the barrier like everything else.

Kaden scowled. "I told you to wait outside."

Crem feigned a slight pout. "And miss the best part?"

Nekro's eyes narrowed as his stare went from Crem to Kaden and back. "Ah. I do believe I've found your weakness."

Kaden did his best impression of someone who didn't give a shit. "Hardly."

"We'll see, then." The techno-wizard lifted his right arm and a blast of electricity shot forth from his glove. It struck Crem in the chest, knocking her back against the wall.

"Crem!" Kaden moved to check on her.

"Uh-uh-uh... touch her and I give her another blast. If she isn't dead already, she certainly will be when I'm done."

"I thought technology didn't work near your citadel."

"It doesn't. Except for me. I'm at the eye of the storm as it were." He caressed his ebony throne and Kaden realized where the field emitter was located.

Kaden thrust himself forward into the invisible barrier again, this time slowly. He pushed on it with everything he had, inching his way forward.

Nekro's eyes went wide. "Impossible."

Kaden's mouth curled back to reveal his clenched teeth as he continued forward, his progress almost imperceptible.

Nekro became visibly nervous. "Back off or I'll kill her!"

He lifted his gauntlet again, but Kaden continued to push forward. The technomancer let loose with another lightning bolt from his hand, this time allowing it to continue rather than fire in one burst.

Instead of deterring Kaden, it only made him more determined. With one last push, he came through the other side of the field and was on Nekro in a split second. As he knocked the baron into the giant throne, the electricity stopped and Nekro looked up at Kaden with terror in his eyes. "All right! I surrender! Surely the corporations want me alive to face trial and show the public what a grave error it is to defy them."

Kaden held him by his robes, fury evident in every line on his face. "Yes. If possible."

Nekro's eyes rolled back as he let out a huge sigh of relief. "Thank the Seven Titans." Kaden gave him a grim smile. "Unfortunately for you, it's *not* possible."

He grabbed Nekro by the sides of his face and there was a sickening crack as he twisted the baron's head around. *All* the way around.

The technomancer's lifeless body slumped to the ground in front of the throne.

Kaden rushed over to Crem, who was still unmoving against the far wall of the chamber. "Crem?" He put his ear up to her mouth and listened for a breath, then checked her pulse. Relieved to find one, he lifted her in his arms.

"Nice try." Crem was barely conscious, but able to speak.

"What?"

"Don't think I didn't notice that you still kept going even after he said he would kill me."

"I knew I'd reach him in time."

"You didn't know jack, asshole." She let out a small laugh, but stopped when she realized how painful it was.

Kaden sat her down on the steps leading up to the dais where the throne was located.

"What are you going to do? The technology in this fortress is formidable. You could be very powerful."

"I am very powerful." He pointed to Nekro's corpse. "I'm a baron now."

She laughed again, then winced in pain. "Yeah. I suppose you would be."

Kaden picked up his battle-axe and moved toward the throne. "But I can't keep this tech. It belongs to the corporations, and they wouldn't rest until I was dead if I didn't return it."

Crem tilted her head. "I guess so. It would be a shame if it were destroyed, though. Then they wouldn't be able to use it or make any money on it."

Kaden looked at the throne. "Yes. Yes, it would."

He smashed the throne with his axe and it broke open, sparks flying. He continued hacking away at it until there was just a pile of plasteel and wires.

Crem looked at Nekro's body. "What about the gloves?"

"Those have to be destroyed, too."

"Do they, though? I think I'd look great in them. I'm sure it wouldn't hurt just to, y'know, keep a souvenir."

Kaden smiled, then yanked the gauntlets off of Nekro and presented them to Crem in a formal manner. "For you, milady, the objects that were nearly the instrument of your demise."

She slipped them on. "Milady? You know where you can shove that. And one more thing..."

Kaden's eyebrows lifted. "Yes?"

"If you think I'm ever going to call you 'Lord Kaden' you're delusional." Crem laughed again despite the pain.

To be continued...

**GRAVITY  
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