

LUCIAN: DARK GOD'S HOMECOMING

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LUCIAN: Dark God's Homecoming
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This book is dedicated to the memory of my
grandmother, Katherine G. Plexico, 1910-2009

CHAPTER ONE

Down rained the night, cloaked all in fire and brimstone. Surely the dark forces of Hell were conspiring to bring me down. Me—doubtlessly the darkest of them all!

A faceless figure in black pursuing me, I raced through twisted vistas and realms shot from strange, demented nightmares.

Please do not think less of me for fleeing. Were I a warrior god, I would have squared off against this creature and battled him to the bloody end. Being something else entirely, I did the only thing I could: I fled.

And the Dark Man pursued. Relentlessly, tirelessly, he pursued.

Lungs burning and legs aching, I sprinted the final miles toward the gates of the Golden City.

My adversary struck at me with goutts of flame and fingers of lightning, searing my flesh and dazzling my eyes. I retaliated as best I could, sometimes opening pits of molten lava in his path, other times raining down burning meteors upon his head. Our running battle must have razed portions of a dozen worlds and more, and still the pursuit went on.

Not wishing to abandon all hope entirely, I gave it everything I had. But even the gods tire after a while. I was nearing my physical and metaphysical limits, and I knew it.

And then I topped a rise and saw the City.

My city. The Golden City. Its domes and spires sparkled in the sun of a perfect, cloudless sky. Upon seeing it my heart leapt, as it hadn't in all the thousand years of my exile.

So close! Almost home!

But then—*pain*.

Ragged claws raked through my tattered cloak and across my back as I surged toward the gates. Dark energies besieged me every step of the way.

My heart about to burst, I poured the last of my strength into this mad dash.

Furious, my adversary lashed out at me with all his might. Tendrils of fire ensnared me and surged over my chest and arms, then flowed toward my legs, seeking to bring me down.

My sweat flowed in rivulets along my face and neck as I swept the flames aside and ran for the gates. Disoriented himself for a moment, the Dark Man fell a few steps behind me. I didn't bother to look back; I lunged for those cold, gold surfaces and laid my hands, and my fondest wishes, upon them. The fire again swirled around me, singeing my hair, but I gritted my teeth and heaved against them with all my strength and all my force of will.

The great gilded doors resisted, and I was not surprised: many of the gods had wanted me gone from the City, and they had laid their own wishes in that regard upon the gates.

An eternity that in reality could not have lasted more than two seconds passed. The gates felt the force of my personality, and knew me, and had no recourse but to yield. I slipped through the narrow opening, the Dark Man mere inches behind me now. His black robes flared around him as he lunged after me, talons slashing.

I delivered the strongest punch I could muster to that featureless face, staggering him. As he stumbled back, I raised my stinging hand and made one last satisfying and defiant gesture before shoving the gates closed and slumping against them, gasping.

The gates would not know him. They would not open for him. I was safe.

Safe in the heart of my true enemy's stronghold, I realized with a groan. *One issue at a time, Lucian.*

Allowing myself a few breaths and some measure of self-congratulation for having gotten this far, I stood and gazed at the vista laid out before me. In its spectacle and its grandeur, it represented everything I had missed for the thousand years of my exile. No matter who controlled it at the moment, it was and always would be my city. The city of my dreams.

My eyes drank in the glorious sights that never failed to stir me, no matter how cynical and jaded I grew: a city wrought all in gold and silver and jewels beyond counting. A realm that reflected in its appearance the

esteem its inhabitants held for it.

Know simply that the City is the center of the gods' existence and the focus of our hearts' desires. At its center flows the Fountain that pushes the not-quite-metaphorical current through the circuits of our bodies and our lives. Once, it had been my home. It remained my dream and my utter ambition. I believed with complete conviction that, upon reclaiming it, I would not willingly surrender it again.

That was when it hit me. No, not the massive, golden-armored fist. That came a few seconds later. What hit me first was the shocking realization that the inhabitants were nowhere to be seen. I was alone in the main thoroughfare of the City. Alone, in an immortal city usually teeming with gods and goddesses, their retainers and favorites, and a multitude of assorted other hangers-on.

Amend that thought. Not totally alone, as the voice that boomed and echoed throughout the city revealed.

"What supreme arrogance!"

Inside, I felt my stomach sink, along with my slender hopes of being warmly welcomed back into the fold.

"You dare to come here? To show your face at the site of your unforgivable, unimaginable crimes?"

"Surely it was not as bad as all that," I called back. "And don't you suppose I've more than served my time?"

Golden lights flared about me then. I knew them all too well. Collectively known as the Hosts of Baranak, they were half-sentient, ephemeral servants and heralds of our own great god of battle. Ghost-like, they flitted about me, their sparkling majesty filling my vision momentarily. When they withdrew, I blinked and beheld a sight I'd hoped to avoid: the golden god himself, grand and awful and full of wrath, standing before me in all his polished glory and muscular power. Intense blue eyes glared at me from above a blunted nose and thick blond beard. Golden armor covered him from neck to toe. A huge, golden-hilted sword hung at his side, and I remembered that it was strong and swift and terrible.

"Baranak," I said, brushing my long, dark hair back out of my eyes and greeting him with the closest thing to a smile I could manage.

"Lucian." His voice was deep and rumbling, his face cold and expressionless. "I cannot imagine your plan, or what you hoped to gain by all of this. But you should have remained in hiding." His fists knotted. "For now you must be punished. And with the Fountain flowing once more, you can be punished."

This was surely the most I'd ever heard him utter at one time, and I

frowned, trying to make sense of his words.

“My plan? But the insurrection was so long ago—”

“So many of us dead!” he bellowed. His fist swung out in a golden flash, sending me sprawling. “*So many!*”

Ages had passed since I’d last met that fist, and I would have been quite pleased never to encounter its like again. As I pulled myself up, shaking my head to clear it, he advanced, his face still somewhat calm but his eyes burning brighter with controlled fury. The massive fists lashed out again.

“Dead?”

I tried to ask him just what the hell he was talking about, in between blows, but to no avail. The brutality of the beating I absorbed was matched only by its thoroughness. As we are unable to create portals within the confines of the city, I could not make my own exit and flee. There was absolutely nothing I could do but take the beating.

What you have to understand is that Baranak is supposed to be able to kick my ass. That doesn’t mean I won’t do my best to resist, it simply means I will fail. I am not, after all, the god of battle. Unfortunately, he is.

As oblivion descended, his words echoed through my mind once more. The other gods—dead? Was that what he had meant? How could that be?

Any further consideration had to be deferred, as I was busy lapsing into unconsciousness.

In sleep’s cold embrace I dreamed, and in dreams I saw again the events that had started me on my journey back to the City.

On a day like so many before it, running back endlessly across the centuries, I awoke with the Mysentian dawn and climbed out of bed, gazing out of the broad palace windows overlooking my capital city, gingerly stretching my aged body, my withered muscles, my brittle bones.

Instantly I sensed it. Something felt different that morning, both within my flesh and in the very air surrounding me. Before I could pause to consider it, though, the serving girls entered, carrying trays of fruits and bread.

The resounding crash of their trays hitting the marble floor caused me to look up in surprise, only to witness the girls fleeing my bedchamber, shouts of alarm on their lips.

Startled, looking about for signs of intruders, I pulled my robe tighter about myself and rushed after them. Tyren, the captain of my guards,

met me at the door. Having served me for many years, he had earned my implicit trust, and I waited for him to explain this strange turn of events.

It was not to be. Gawking, eyes wide, he stumbled back a few steps, then called for his men. They rushed up behind him, resplendent in their white uniforms, weapons at the ready, even as I attempted to ask what was happening.

“Who are you?” Tyren demanded. “Where is my lord Markos?”

Frowning, utterly bewildered, I searched the faces of the guards, these men and women who had been in my employ for much of their lives. None of them exhibited the slightest signs of recognition. Shocked and rapidly growing fearful as well, I whirled about, casting my gaze across the furnishings of the room, seeking a mirror. I desired above all else at that moment to see what my guards were seeing. It was not to be, of course. I had banned all mirrors from my presence years earlier, when my aging had grown so pronounced that I could no longer bear to look upon myself.

At last I brought my hands up to my face, and then I began to understand. My shock, profound after so many decades of helpless wasting away, must have been obvious. My skin felt smooth, my hair thick and strong. Looking at my hands, I saw they belonged to a young man, not to the ancient figure I had become.

Staggering back, I slipped and fell to the cold floor, and fears immediately rushed through me. Had I broken a bone? No! I had hardly felt the impact. I was whole again. I was young!

Springing to my feet, I faced my guards and laughed maniacally, practically bouncing in the air. Confused, they hesitated in moving to apprehend what they surely took to be an intruder in the palace. One of them recognized something about my features then, minus the wrinkles and spots, and gasped in awe. Others quickly followed suit, and then the captain, Tyren, knelt on one knee, his mouth working soundlessly for a second.

“My lord Markos,” he whispered finally, using the name I had adopted on this world. Awe filled his voice. “How can this be?”

I could feel it then. In truth, I had felt it from the moment I had awakened, but its long absence had dulled my sensitivity to it. A low, soft buzzing, growing steadily stronger. Not a sound; a sensation, a feeling, as of a current, long absent, now flowing once more through the firmament, through the fabric of the universe itself.

A sense of awesome, nearly limitless power, once again at my disposal. The Power! After long decades, it had returned. During the night it

had swept over me, carrying away the effects of age and restoring my appearance and condition to that of a man of thirty. It had made me a god once more!

Scarcely acknowledging my guards and the advisors who had rushed up as word of an intruder had spread through the palace, I turned the entirety of my attention instead to a goal I had believed forever denied me.

What would become of Mysentia, this world upon which I had dwelt in exile for ten centuries, and over which I had reigned for much of that time? What of the war I had been fomenting subtly against the mighty Terran Alliance? To what fate was I abandoning the Mysentians, and the other inhabitants of the Outer Worlds?

At that moment, I did not know and scarcely cared at all. For me, a destiny far greater awaited. The Golden City, so long denied me, beckoned.

Thus did I take my leave of the mortal realm and set my foot upon the Road once more, the Road leading home.

My faceless acquaintance with the excessively somber sartorial preferences had been lurking along the way. Who was he? No way to know, and he had not seemed the talkative sort. Had he been lying in wait for me? Someone in my line of work cannot afford to believe in coincidences.

The dream images faded then, and I drifted in peaceful blackness for a time. It could not last, of course, though I clung to that great oblivion with all of my unconscious willpower for as long as I could. Some small part of me, you see, knew where I would find myself upon awakening, and wished to delay that bitter revelation for as long as possible. Soon enough, though, reality reasserted itself and my worst fears were dreadfully, depressingly confirmed.

I awoke to a cold floor beneath my prone body and a throbbing in my skull. My muscles ached, my spirits flagged, and depression overwhelmed me, to the point that I scarcely felt any desire to move. Though there was scarcely a reason to do so, I opened my eyes, and was greeted with the sights I had expected. Black marble tile beneath me stretched endlessly into darkness in every direction; immense stone columns soared into nothingness above. No visible walls. No furnishings whatsoever. All just as I remembered it from my last stay here, a thousand years ago. Any remaining hopes I might have entertained evaporated.

At that moment the sound of hushed words from nearby reached my ears, and I became aware that I was not alone. My eyes, peering through the gloom, focused on three individuals who sat huddled against a nearby column. They were clad in what appeared to be military flight suits, dark

blue with gold insignias. The look seemed somehow familiar to me. Alliance? That could scarcely be possible here. Yet, as their faces resolved to me, I knew they were no gods. Humans? Apparently. But—here? How?

“—told you already,” one of them was saying, “there was no malfunction. All the systems showed green. It just powered down. I don’t know what we could have done differently.” The voice was male, high-pitched and filled with anxiety. “Everything checked out right up until the end.”

“If that’s so,” came a deeper, rougher voice, “then you must have screwed things up even worse than I thought.”

“That’s enough,” a third voice stated firmly. “Whatever happened, we’re here now, and our only priority is to get back home. And we will.” This one was female, firm, and confident. The leader?

“We don’t even know where ‘here’ is,” the first voice complained.

“Then we have to find out.”

A pause, then the second, rougher voice growled, “Maybe our friend over there knows. Maybe we should try to wake him up again.”

“Leave him alone,” the woman said. “He looks to be in worse shape than we are.”

One of the figures was staring at me.

“No, I think he’s already awake.” It was the first guy, the nervous one.

I sighed softly, wanting to roll over and go back to sleep. But some small degree of curiosity about these people, I had to admit, tugged at my mind. Reluctantly, and with some effort, I pulled myself up to a seated position and faced the others, waiting.

They all stood then and made their way over to stand in front of me in a semicircle.

“Hello,” the woman said. “Can you understand me?”

Their uniforms were definitely Terran Alliance issue, I could see now. Could they actually be Alliance officers? Or was this some joke of Baranak’s?

Not meeting their eyes, I nodded once.

“Good,” she said. “Are you all right?” A pause, then, “Can you tell us where we are?”

This woman surprised me. Her voice was strong and even, lacking the fear and desperation I would have expected from any mortal confined in this place—the fear already detectable in at least one of the others. Perhaps she simply knew too little to fully appreciate her plight, I thought to myself. Drowning in self-pity and horrified at the thought of revealing that fact to mere humans, I resolved to ignore them.

“Can you tell us where we are?” she said again. “Can you help us?”

I emitted one sharp laugh before rolling onto my side, my back to

them.

“Hey!” shouted the rougher voice. “What’s that all about? You can understand us—why don’t you answer the captain’s questions?”

Seconds ticked by. I was in no hurry. Where else would any of us go? But they were all standing there, waiting, hoping I could tell them something that would explain their bizarre predicament. At last, I turned back to them.

“Who,” I asked, “are you?”

They all seemed shocked that I had actually spoken.

Regaining her composure quickly, the woman said, “I’m Captain Evelyn Colicos. Terran Alliance Navy.”

The Terran Alliance. So it was true. Only a day earlier, still powerless and trapped in exile, I had believed the Alliance represented my mortal enemy—mortal in every sense of the word. Now, a god again and removed entirely from that existence, I cared nothing for that government or its people, save a lingering sense of resentment and animosity.

The woman gestured at the two men, gruff one first.

“Lieutenants Frank Cassidy and Tony Kim. And we...” Her voice lowered, and she all but whispered, “...We would appreciate your help.”

I took a deep breath, pursed my lips, and looked them over carefully, taking the opportunity to appraise them. All three were what one would expect of naval officers. They were fit to the point of being athletic. The captain had short but full blonde hair and piercing blue eyes so vivid they struck me as belonging more on one of my kind than hers. Behind her, the rough-sounding guy, Cassidy, was tall, though not so much as me, and an imposing specimen, blunt of nose and ruddy of cheeks. He kept his head shaved and his muscles filled out his flight suit. The other man, Kim, possessed hair even darker than mine, worn in a crew cut, and was the shortest of the three, though wiry.

Perhaps realizing after a few moments that I was in no hurry to speak, the captain addressed me again.

“We—” She hesitated, frowning, then, “I’m sorry if this doesn’t make sense to you, but it doesn’t to me, either. We were aboard a long-range spacecraft, and something happened—”

“The *Copernicus*,” I said. I remembered hearing about its disappearance on the news, days ago, just before I’d taken my leave of Mysentia and started for home.

“Yes! Yes, that’s right.”

Emboldened perhaps that she had gotten a word or two out of me, she pressed on.

“We had just jumped, and something must have gone wrong. When we emerged into what should have been subspace, the engines shut down...”

"Yours was an experimental ship," I said.

"How did you know that?" the smaller man, Kim, demanded. It seemed to me he hovered perpetually on the verge of hysteria.

"I think I know," Cassidy said. "I think he's from the Outer Worlds."

"A spy, maybe?" Kim asked, looking from Cassidy back to me.

"He does look familiar, now that I think about it."

The captain silenced them both with a look, then turned back to me, her brow furrowed.

"What else do you know about our situation?"

"You sought to improve jump technology. You jumped farther than you know." I grinned. "Much farther."

"The stars disappeared," Kim said quietly, his voice shaking.

Ignoring him, the captain continued.

"The next thing we knew, we were attacked by these bright lights."

"The Hosts of Baranak."

"I—all right, sure. And they nearly tore our ship apart before bringing us here. Wherever here is. And a man—a huge man, in gold armor—threw us into this—" she looked around at the infinite-seeming depths of blackness around us, "—this *place*, whatever it is."

"We didn't do anything to him," Cassidy interjected angrily.

"You scarcely could have," I replied, a slight smile playing about the corner of my mouth. "And he was no 'man.'"

The captain looked back at the others. Each of them shared a confused expression. Shaking her head as if to clear it, as if this could all make sense to her somehow if she could just sort out the pieces, she turned back to me.

"We're lost," she said flatly. "We're out of our depths. Anything you could tell us would be welcome."

I met her eyes. "Are you so sure of that?"

She shrugged. When she spoke again, her voice was softer.

"At least tell us *something*..."

I considered her request for a long moment.

"My advice to you: Abandon all hope," I said, and turned my back once more.

Silence for perhaps two seconds, and then, "Son of a bitch! Who do you think you are?" Cassidy grabbed my shoulder roughly. "You'll answer our questions, or—"

His voice trailed off as my dark eyes met his. He felt something of the Power then, and faltered, staggering back a step. My wrath aroused at last, I made as if to rise, but stopped myself as the woman interposed herself between us.

"Frank, that isn't helping," the woman said. "Step back."

Somewhat reluctantly, Cassidy moved away, smoothing out his flight suit as he went, his face still revealing his anger.

“We don’t even know this person,” the captain said. “Maybe we should start over.” She bent down over me, extending a hand. “My name is Evelyn. What’s yours?”

She startled me with her composure, and though my anger dissipated almost instantly, I determined to shake her up. Considering the truth I was about to reveal, I couldn’t help but laugh. I took her hand and shook it.

“Pleased to meet you. I am Lucian, considered in these parts to be the devil himself. And as to where we are,” I gestured broadly with both hands, “welcome to the dungeon of Heaven.”

Their faces registered no expression. Unfortunate—I’d hoped at least for shock or fear or something to indicate they appreciated the seriousness of their situation. But they truly had no clue.

“Now if you will excuse me,” I said in as friendly a manner as I could muster, “I have to be thinking of a way out of this most inescapable of prisons, before Baranak surely returns to execute us all.” I turned away, and this time they respected my wishes.

Perhaps, during my time among their kind, I would have been more patient with them, more willing to help. But those days were now over. And thus I found I had little interest in their plight. And I had not, I reminded myself, not precisely been among their kind—the Alliance—but among their enemies, the Outer Worlds. I had fought their kind for centuries. Help them now? Hardly, I thought. Let them rot.

Whether they believed me insane or simply decided to abide by my request, the humans left me alone after that exchange, and didn’t speak to me again for some time. They retreated a few feet away, huddled together, and spoke in hushed but intense whispers. Try as I might, though, I found myself quite unable to ignore them.

The captain, Evelyn Colicos—I surprised myself with how easily that name came back to me—carried herself as a leader should, despite being well out of her depths. She kept her cool, for the most part, and directed their discussion, as they walked through the series of events that had led them here.

After a time, the debate grew heated along some finer point Cassidy was pressing. Kim took issue and their voices raised. Just as they seemed ready to come to blows, the captain stepped between them.

At that moment, I found my mind spinning backwards through the centuries, to the days prior to my failed revolt. Memories long suppressed

flooded forth, sweeping me along helpless in their path.

My Halaini. My lady of poise and strength and grace. My goddess, my muse, my inspiration, and my conscience. She who had encouraged me to strive beyond the limitations of my Aspect, then consoled me when I'd invariably failed. She who had argued so strongly against my secret plans to overthrow Baranak's ruling circle and install myself as ruler of the City. She who had watched in sorrow as my plans were exposed and an army of gods marched out to meet my followers and me before we were fully ready to strike.

She had stood there, in the main square of the City, her hands raised between both armies, appealing for peace and restraint. She had faced even mighty Baranak down with the sheer force of her will and the purity of her intent. She had been determined to stop my war before it got going, and she had said—

“There's nothing to be gained from this, can't you see?”

My mind snapped instantly back to the present.

Those words. Had Evelyn actually spoken them, just then? Or had they merely floated up to me, from out of the depths of time, echoes and memories of my long-lost love? I wasn't sure.

I looked at the humans again and saw that their captain had indeed spoken them. She had stopped the fight with those words.

Thus did the mortal woman Evelyn Colicos, with her poise and her strength and her grace, inscribe the first cracks in the wall surrounding my black heart, and summon ghosts from ten centuries in the past to torment me. That was the moment when all my plans and dreams came to naught, though I scarcely suspected the truth until much, much later.

At about that time the door opened, shattering my reverie.

The “door” was in actuality a portal, a breach in the fabric of reality that could only be opened from the outside. It shimmered into existence a few feet from us, blindingly bright golden lights flooding through. I raised a hand to shade my eyes, and saw the humans behind me cringing.

“Could you turn it down a bit, perhaps?” I called into the light, my voice tinged with sarcasm. “I don't think the humans are equipped to tolerate your glorious radiance.”

The two of Baranak's Host who had entered flared in indignation before settling into a more torch-like blaze. They moved to each side of the portal as their lord and master—and our captor—stepped through. Behind him came two others, whom I did not recognize at first.

“The dark god himself. So. This one is the cause of all our pain and woe,” said the figure to Baranak's right. I knew him then: Vorthan, the self-styled god of the forge. Our engineer and builder. His mottled bald scalp reflected the Host's golden light; above his black goatee, two red-tinged

eyes seemed to bore through me. His muscular arms were crossed over his chest, and contempt dripped from his every word. “My compliments, Baranak, on his swift capture.”

“Indeed, you acted swiftly,” came a female voice to Baranak’s left, “but are you certain you acted properly?”

Alaria, of course. Tall she was, and curvy, fitted within a tight, black dress that shone of intricate patterns in the flickering light, iridescent and shifting and almost snakeskin-like. Her eyes, rimmed in black, sparkled with many colors; her thick, pouty lips shone with the color of wine. Her narrow face, pale to nearly white, lay within a sea of hair so deeply red as to appear almost black, shot through with shades of burgundy and magenta where the light struck it. Two long braids trailed down her left shoulder and over her breast. In all, her Aspect caused me to ponder anew the concepts of beauty and love and desire. What else would you expect? As with all of us, she lived up to the part she desired to play.

“Is this then the guilty party?” she asked, gazing at me where I sat.

“Who else?” Baranak growled.

“And there is no doubt?” she continued.

The big, blond god seemed momentarily troubled by her question, but swept it aside.

“Can there be any?” he said by way of answer.

“None of the other few who remain has a motive,” Vorthan added.

Baranak nodded.

“And Lucian’s past deeds are well known,” he said. “He conspired to overthrow this realm once before, and was exiled. From there, he doubtless plotted any number of schemes to bring us to ruin. And he has nearly succeeded.”

“Is there even any point to me saying that I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

Sullenly I stared back at them, growing more resigned to my fate by the moment.

“You feign both innocence and ignorance,” stated Baranak. “Very well. We shall convene a trial to prove your guilt. And then you will be executed.”

“You will be consigned to the Fountain,” Vorthan added, “where your form and energies will disperse...” He smiled. “And you will cease... to be.”

Nothing unexpected there. I nodded impatiently.

“Right, right—but what exactly am I accused of? Can you at least tell me that much?”

Baranak glared at me, full of righteous fury.

“Mass murder,” he hissed.

“Excuse me?”

“You are charged with the murder of seventy-two gods,” he said coldly. “Nearly three quarters of our number are gone forever. And for that...” His eyes burned into mine. “... You will pay.”

I absorbed this news with a degree of shock. So many of our kind—dead? It was no easy trick to kill just one of us, but *seventy-two*? My stomach twisted and my heart quaked at the mere thought. Then I remembered that the Fountain had not flowed for years, and had started up again only recently. The Power had been denied us for so long. Of course, I had thought only of my own loss during that time—what else would you expect? But during that period, we had all been vulnerable...

Baranak whirled and stalked toward the portal even as I fought to regain my wits.

“You do realize,” I called after him, “that at least one homicidal figure in black is patrolling the main path to Earth’s plane, right? You do not suppose he might have anything to do with this?”

“This one will stop at nothing,” Vorthan muttered. “The master of lies, indeed.”

Wordlessly, Baranak stomped back through the portal. Vorthan followed without so much as a backward glance, but Alaria remained another moment, her eyes meeting my own, her expression unreadable.

“Alaria!” came the booming voice.

Casting her eyes down, her black dress flaring at the bottom as she turned about, she followed the other two out of the dungeon. The Hosts closed the portal behind them and darkness descended once more.

I stared at the point where the opening had been, my eyes readjusting to the lighting, and contemplated what I had been told. I was being framed, obviously. And who better to frame?

Anger and depression settled over my spirit, and I sat in solitude for a while, considering my situation. The humans must have been impressed by the visit of our captors, for they kept to themselves during that time and I all but forgot them.

After the passing of perhaps an hour, they must have worked up their courage once more, for I heard one of them approaching. It was the captain, Evelyn. She knelt beside me, and I saw that her expression was pained.

“If you’re suffering from delusions,” she said, “clearly you’re not the only one.”

I shrugged, my mind still occupied with Baranak’s words.

“I am innocent, of course,” I said.

She nodded earnestly.

“Innocent. Yes. The devil himself. Of course.”

Despite my frustration, I couldn’t resist a laugh, and she joined me. I

found my depression lifting somewhat, much to my surprise.

“I apologize for our presumptions earlier,” she said after a pause. “We had no right to assume you’d wish to help us—especially if you do have some connection to the rebellious worlds.”

“I...” Words failed me. Indeed, I found myself quite unsure of how to respond.

“I disagree with their positions, of course,” she continued, apparently oblivious to my discomfort, “but certainly you wouldn’t feel any compunction to aid those whom you might view as the enemy.”

“I...” I did not know what to say. Speechless? Ridiculous! My thrashing at Baranak’s hands must have caused some sort of brain damage.

“You do view us that way, right? As your enemies?” She frowned. “I can tell.”

Was the woman sincere? I felt adrift, uncertain of my actions and my feelings—not a sensation I to which I was accustomed. Was she intentionally shaming me? Or could she possibly be as open, as sincere, as she seemed? I could not get a read on her, and it galled me.

Leaning forward, she rested a hand on my shoulder, and met my eyes.

“We won’t make any further demands of you,” she said. “If you should find some way to assist us, and feel willing to do so, we’d be grateful.”

I may have nodded once, my throat dry.

At that moment I had one of those out-of-body experiences, where you see yourself from high above. And I saw myself conversing with this mortal woman, as if she were one of us. And I was amazed. Certainly, in the thousand years of my recently ended exile on her plane of existence, I’d been forced to deal with humans, to interact with them. But always I had occupied the highest reaches of power, where I was removed from contact with all but the elites. I’d slain dukes and princes in my day, as well as generals and admirals and enlisted men by the bushels. By the end I had built my own power base among the Outer Worlds and had them on the brink of a war of liberation from the old Terrans. In all that time, though, only a very few mortal women had known my attentions, and none of them for long, even as the mortals measured time. My regard for most of them had been slight, indeed. None compared to what I had known in the eternal realm, to goddesses such as Halaini or Alaria. A thousand years had not been enough to make me forget what I had been forced to leave behind, nor to make me accept what I had deemed sub-standard replacements.

Yet here I sat, an inexplicable and undeniable interest in this mortal woman growing within me. Once I realized it, it struck me as quite ludicrous; no mortal woman—no mortal at all—could evoke such a

reaction from in me in so short a time. No, this had to be something unrelated to any specific woman. Something that had been building within me for quite a while. I could see it now. This woman, Evelyn Colicos, was the catalyst of the moment, but the root cause was ten centuries spent in exile among their kind. It had softened me. That simply could not be.

While my own mind had been in turmoil, the captain apparently had been doing some thinking of her own. Standing, she walked a few steps away, then turned back, gazing down at me.

"I do have one question, though," she said.

I sighed. I had known it was too good to be true. Her mind was always active, always thinking. Good traits in a captain, but not in a cellmate.

I looked up at her, waiting.

"So you're a god." She shrugged. "Okay. We'll take that as a given, for now."

One of the others snorted; we both ignored him.

"But, if so," she continued, "why can't you simply walk out of here?"

Grinding the balls of my hands into my tired eyes, I replied, "A portal into here has to be opened from outside. Our powers are negated within the dungeon. It is actually a walled-off pocket universe, a step below the City, and the Power scarcely trickles into this space."

Lieutenant Kim had been approaching, and he scoffed at my words.

"I'm not buying any of this," he said.

I shrugged.

"Lieutenant," Evelyn said to him, softly but tersely, "I was just apologizing..."

Kim ignored her.

"That big guy seemed awfully sure you were guilty of something," he said.

"Occupational hazard of being the 'dark god,'" I replied. "Of course, I am indeed guilty of... much."

He looked down at me, shaking his head in wonder.

"I'm supposed to believe there's really some kind of 'dark lord?' And he's you?"

"You can believe what you like," I replied sharply. "I seek no followers among your kind. Not any longer."

"Our kind?"

"Humans. The Terran Alliance."

"Who would ever follow you?" Kim growled.

I shrugged. "I had supporters aplenty among the Outer Worlds. Soon enough, we would have been standing triumphant on your Earth, your old order swept away."

And then I cursed soundlessly. I had given in to anger, and given away something I had wished to keep hidden. Who was the god here? How could I have allowed these mortals to push me so, and cause me to slip?

The third human, Cassidy, approached then, eyes wide.

"I do know this guy!" he said. "I recognize him now!"

The captain and Kim turned, regarding him with questioning expressions.

"We've believed for years," he began, "that a family out among the Outer Worlds was building a coalition against us, either through intimidation or outright conquest of their neighbors. They've always kept a low profile, working through intermediaries and puppet rulers, so not much has been said about them publicly within the Alliance. Their current head is supposedly called Markos, probably named after the original one, years ago—who probably didn't even exist, anyway."

My dark eyes studied Cassidy carefully, but I said nothing.

He snorted a laugh.

"We've only been able to acquire a few pictures of him or the other leaders, over the years, and a bunch of us in the Directorate had begun to think maybe it was all a myth—something the Outies cooked up to scare our security forces out along the frontier. But—I've seen what few pictures we do have, and this guy has to be a part of that family. Maybe a son or a nephew—though he looks just like the guy from a generation ago." Cassidy paused and nodded slowly, his eyes drilling back into mine. "The secret leader of the Outer Worlds. I'm sure of it."

"Well, well," I breathed. "An intelligence man." Something from my dim, distant past reacted to that thought, but I quickly, reflexively suppressed it before it could fully register.

"Though not a particularly discreet one," Evelyn noted. She looked at me, waiting.

"Guilty as charged," I said then.

Cassidy nodded again, his jaw setting, his mouth curling into a self-satisfied smile. "You're the son?"

"I am Markos. The only Markos there has ever been."

Cassidy frowned. "That's impossible. You'd have to be..."

"Immortal?" I laughed. "What part of 'god' don't you understand?"

Cassidy grew visibly angry again, but held his tongue.

"I *was* Markos, rather," I said finally. "But no longer. All of that has turned out to be only a momentary diversion. A sideshow."

"Why?" Evelyn asked.

How much to tell them? I inhaled deeply, considered for a few seconds, then decided that recounting a bit of the story might actually do me some good.

Sitting back, I spread my hands before me and began. "A thousand years ago... well, let us say that I objected—strenuously—to the prevailing power structure in this City. For my troubles I was exiled to your mortal realm."

"They kicked you out," Cassidy said.

I ignored him and continued. "After a brief time of casting about for something to occupy me there, I seized control of the planet Mysentia in the Outer Worlds. It was not difficult for one with my knowledge, my abilities. And there, under the name Markos, I ruled, subduing your fellow humans to my will." I smiled. "For a time, life was at least tolerable. Security and safety I possessed there in full measure, along with control over the destinies of millions. Leading a world in rebellion against your Alliance was nothing to me—a entertaining diversion, at best."

Even as I said those last words, though, I knew them to be false.

Evelyn frowned.

"Why 'Markos?'" she asked, after a moment.

"I—because..." A veil of fog descended over my mind as I pondered that simple question. "It seemed..."

She stared at me, waiting.

I felt that an answer—a good answer—hovered out there, somewhere just beyond my reach. The fog...

"This is all preposterous," Cassidy growled.

I was grateful for the interruption. My mind cleared at once, as I set Evelyn's question aside and faced Cassidy.

"Look around you," I said. "How did you come to be here? Are you so sure your understanding of the universe is the only possible one?"

Cassidy looked away, unsettled.

"This is just ridiculous," Kim said. "Bad enough he's an Outie rabble-rouser, but one with delusions of godhood, to boot."

I glared back at him.

"Delusions? You fool. You insect. You have no idea." Despite my determination to ignore these creatures, they had succeeded in raising my ire—a fact that further angered me and spurred me to react.

Kim shoved past Cassidy, fists raised.

And again Evelyn was there, between us, voice gentle but firm and eyes unwavering as they met my own.

"Enough!" she said. "We're all equals now in our imprisonment, and the rebellion is very far away from all of us at the moment."

Calming myself, I executed a small bow to her and reseated myself on the cold floor, drawing my long coat about me again, turning away from the others.

Evelyn would not be deterred. After a few moments, she spoke again.

“Please—let’s put the accusations and innuendo aside. I genuinely want to understand,” she said. “I want to know who you really are... and where we are. But I don’t know how we’re supposed to believe you, especially when you actually claim to be... *evil*.”

I sighed, then looked up at her again. Her eyes sparkled in the dim light, betraying no deceptions. I found, unexpectedly, that I, too, wanted her to understand.

“Evil is my Aspect as a god, but not necessarily my nature,” I said, for perhaps the thousandth time in my long existence. I paused, considering the strange sense of sincerity I felt behind the phrase this time. “At least, perhaps not my nature any longer.”

I considered my own words, and then laughed humorlessly.

“Not that it matters,” I said. “Baranak has already made his decision, and found me guilty. His one-track mind will not entertain any other possibilities.”

I steepled my fingers in front of my chin, my mind sifting through the strange series of events that had brought me to this point.

“Understand one thing, though,” I told her. “I was a god long before I found myself involved in the affairs of your worlds.”

“And before that?”

“Before... that?”

I looked at her, then looked away and said nothing.

Cassidy and Kim, still lurking nearby, frowning, shook their heads and retreated some distance away. Soon enough, it sounded as though they had set the issue of my presence and identity aside for the moment and were resuming an earlier argument over engineering problems with their ship.

The captain, however, remained. She sat across from me, her eyes penetrating, never leaving mine.

“So,” she said finally, “you and your people are gods. But what does that mean, really?”

I tried to ignore her, but found I could not.

“We are who we are,” I finally said, by way of answer. “Our origins are lost in the mists of time.”

“Mm-hmm.”

She pursed her lips in a way I could not help but find most attractive.

“I can explain no better than that,” I finally said. “Why do you care?”

“Because, if we truly are in some other universe, and you’ve been to mine, I want to know how you got there, and how you got back again. It might help us to get home.”

I sighed.

“It is not that you are in an entirely different universe,” I said, “it is merely that you are... well... a level up from your own plane, so to speak.

Whereas subspace, which I imagine you were attempting to penetrate, is a level down.”

I smiled, sitting back.

“One might say that, in your nice, new, experimental ship, you simply lacked for a decent roadmap.”

Evelyn attempted to question me further, but, despite any personal feelings on my part, I studiously ignored her. After a brief while, she gave up and returned to the others.

An uneventful few hours followed, during which Kim cast occasional unsavory glances my way. Eventually the three humans slept, and I sat there in the near-darkness with my mood grown black as my prison and my soul.

I do not know how much time I spent in bleak introspection before being roused back into attentiveness by the flaring of a portal opening. This time I stood, determined to face Baranak down—but it was not our glorious golden god of battle who passed through. Alaria instead emerged from the flaming circle and stood before us, now wearing diaphanous robes, backlit and glowing, leaving her curvaceous silhouette an interplay of shadow and fire.

“Lucian,” she whispered, “whether you are guilty or innocent of these crimes, we both know you will receive no fair hearing from Baranak. He is convinced of your guilt and means to see you consumed by the Fountain immediately.”

“He made that abundantly clear, yes.”

“You deserve the opportunity to prove yourself.”

She gestured toward the blazing portal, and the freedom beyond.

I blinked.

“You mean...”

“Go!” She waved again at the glowing exit. “Find your evidence. Find the murderer. But do it quickly!”

I looked at the portal, then back at her. It didn’t quite add up. I hesitated.

At that moment the human captain pushed past me, the other two in tow.

“If you’re not going, we are,” she said.

I scoffed.

“Going where? You have no idea what horrors await you out there.”

“It can’t be any worse than staying here, at that guy’s mercy.”

“You don’t even know where ‘here’ is,” I replied.

The captain moved very close, gazing up at me. Her eyes sparkled, there in the dungeon of my City.

“You know the way back to Earth,” she whispered. “Or at least to the

Outer Worlds. Take us home.”

“I thought you were not going to make any further demands upon me.”

“I take it back,” she said quickly. “Just this one thing.”

I shook my head.

“That path is not safe for any of us.”

She looked past me at the glare of the open portal.

“Then at least show us the way.” Her voice was now louder, and very firm. “We’ll go by ourselves.”

I snorted.

“Indeed?”

Rising to my feet, I made my decision and started past her.

“Without a guide you would scarcely get a mile from the city,” I said.

“What do we have to lose?”

“You have no idea,” I repeated quietly.

“Lucian,” Alaria hissed, “you must come now!”

“We need your help,” Evelyn said. “Please.”

For a long while afterward I attempted to rationalize my decision in any number of ways, including the possibility that three humans might make excellent decoys. Certainly, in the case of Cassidy and Kim, I honestly believed this to be true, and felt no guilt over the thought. With the advantage of hindsight, however, I have to admit it was probably the look in Evelyn’s eyes that motivated me to do what I did.

For long seconds, as Alaria urged me to depart, I stared back at the human woman. Finally I told her, much to my own surprise, “Very well. I will do what I can. Come on.”

We rushed over the rainbow, then, the portal snapping shut behind us on that long, cold darkness.