

## Chapter 04

### *The Sixteenth of Shumond* *Fort Granic*

Unlike his previous journey from Kit'abana to Chancel, O'mas' departure for Port Hadley was far less dramatic. For that, he was relieved. The events of the previous day had been a whirlwind that had him rushing from one room to another.

Lynwell had not been wrong: once O'mas arrived at the LIO's office, he was handed a packet of documentation and immediately escorted to a string of offices throughout the building. Concerned politicians brought him in and held short, private meetings in which they overstated their involvement and undersold the challenges of such a mission. Late that evening, worn out from the frenzy, he crashed at an inn in the nearby Hotta Ward.

After tending to some personal business in town the next morning, he eventually chartered a carriage bound for the southeastern port. For the average citizen, transit between cities was inconvenient; those not in the Gendarmery or affluent enough to have their own motorcraft were dependent on the network of stagecoaches that traversed the main trade routes.

As expected, the trip by horse-drawn carriage from Chancel to Port Hadley was a three-day affair, with planned stops in Terenton and Burghal. O'mas paid little attention to his fellow passengers as the faces changed at each stop. He was far more

focused on the dense stack of paperwork. Only when the steel-framed coach rattled over a bad stretch of road was he distracted from his research.

On arrival, he found the port city largely unchanged since his last visit. Founded on the coast, much of the Port Hadley's architecture showed clear evidence of different eras as the municipality expanded over the decades. Many of the white brick and wood structures in the oldest parts of town were of square or rectangular design with curved-metal stair railings and symmetrical facades and hipped roofs. Dotted throughout the township were a number of small parks, many of which contained limestone or marble statues honoring the city's historically-important residents.

Though his path did not take him deeper into the city, O'mas was briefly curious as to how much destruction had been sustained from the recent attack by the Moa'rehnzan navy. Most of the nearby structures looked unmarred. He spotted a few trickles of black smoke in the distance. Considering that months had passed since the battle, he doubted it was from the smoldering ruins of a damaged building.

To the north along the coast, Fort Granic's main rampart was visible. The five-story tall fortification loomed over the rock-and-sand coastline. A mirror image of Fort Marligate in the far west, the stronghold was a major feature of the city. Age and weather had long ago tinted the once-white stone exterior to a yellowish grey. Notched along the battlement was a string of evenly-spaced embrasures, in which a series of recently-used cannons were stationed. At each end of the rampart was a pair of watchtowers that were currently in use; the staff remained on vigilant watch for another attack. Even from a distance, O'mas could see the blackened scorch marks and the occasional fissure along the seaside wall.

O'mas was tempted to remain in town for the day. He had

personal contacts within Port Hadley whom he could visit. Reaching out to old friends under the auspices of information gathering could be excused, even if he was expected by senior staff. After mulling over the pros and cons of such a diversion, he chose discretion and began the trek to the north.

Though it was a longer walk than he recalled, O'mas eventually reached Fort Granic. Leading up to the front gate was a winding lane bordered by moss-covered deciduous trees. From prior visits, O'mas knew that once they came into bloom with white-petaled flowers, the path would become a far more enticing hike for visitors.

After clearing the security checkpoint, he headed for the nearby administration building. Once through the double doors that led into the foyer, he announced his arrival to the staff at the front desk. When a cursory check of his credentials was completed, O'mas was quickly ushered through the main fort. A young staff member led him to an expansive field at the north, where a temporary encampment stood. He quickly picked out the freestanding hangar on his right where the Gendarmery docked its lone airship. From the looks of things, the *VAF Navemaris* was away, perhaps on patrol in other parts of the continent.

On a clear day, if not for the dense acres of temporary settlements and training grounds, O'mas might have been able to spot Sodebrest Airfield beyond the tree-line to the north. As it was, the distant hangar and administration office was lost to view in the sea of olive canvas. The aging installation had been around for decades and at one point was where the Gendarmery housed its growing fleet of hovercraft. With the recent development of the much larger airships, including another two of which were still being constructed in Trone Stenan factories, this location was being phased out. Rumor had it that, due to the looming war, the plan to erect another pair of matching steel-frame hangars outside of Fort Granic was put on hold.

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Ultimately, with the aid of the young assistant, O'mas tracked down Captain Ordin Roman, who was observing a group of militiamen and new recruits in the midst of small arms tactical training. To his right was a trio of instructors, only one of whom appeared to be a ranked soldier; by the patches on his sleeve, it was clear that he was a Drill Sergeant. The other two toted clipboards as they took copious amounts of notes. After giving the young man his thanks, O'mas approached the commanding officer.

"Sir," O'mas spoke up as offered the proper salute.

With a sideways glance, Roman nodded silently. Years spent in the Gendarmery had carved harsh lines that rimmed Roman's eyes and mouth. Thin black hair slicked back beneath his service cap had begun to show signs of gray. His thick chin jutted forward as his jaw clenched tightly. O'mas quickly picked out the signs in Roman's face; he was stewing over something. O'mas hoped that it had to do with the raw recruits before them and not his arrival.

After what felt like an interminable length of time, Roman cleared his throat and spoke to the instructor on his immediate right.

"That asshole, there," he pointed to one man in particular. "If he waves the barrel of his rifle above waist height around another soldier again, have his ass run laps between here and the harbor until dawn."

"Yes, sir." For a few tense seconds, the instructors seemed locked in place, waiting for someone to take the first step.

When no one moved, Roman's voice dropped to a deep growl. "That means you go out there and tell him to stop that shit, *right now!* Not after a man's got a hole blown in his face."

At this, the sergeant charged as he blew a whistle that he hastily drew from his breast pocket.

Roman clenched his jaw and let out a long, exasperated breath before turning to O'mas. After a quick once over, he began to walk away from the training ground.

"Lieutenant O'mas," Roman spoke up as he offered a dismissive wave to the administrative staff around him. The clipboard-carrying assistants returned to their observations of the nearby exercise. Both slumped in relief as Roman strode off. "Walk with me. I've been kept abreast of your recent... *un-resignation* and orders. There are matters I would discuss with you on this subject. Privately."

"Yes, sir," O'mas said with a snap. He quickly strode up beside Roman as the senior officer marched away from the mass of troops. It wasn't until they were around the corner of a makeshift depot that Roman's tense posture shifted.

He paused by the back of the canvas tarp and cast a wary glance to both sides. O'mas moved in close.

"What is on your mind, sir?"

"Drop the sir, Marianus," Roman stated. "It's enough to hear it from young men and women. You've known me long enough to not need formality in private conversation. I'm of the notion that you'd be of equal rank if you'd not so rudely gone into the private sector."

Though the senior officer's humor was brittle, his comment still elicited a small laugh from O'mas. "And if I had not shown proper respect, you would be quick to admonish me."

Roman mustered a single bark of laughter. "True enough. I find myself curious... who exactly did you piss off to have you reinstated so easily? One might consider this a punishment, even with your rank restored. If I recall correctly, your resignation was pretty comprehensive. And a bit scathing. That was a bridge I thought firmly burned."

"Less a punishment and more a matter of necessity."

The evasiveness caused Roman to scowl ever so slightly. “So no one in particular?”

“It would be easier to say that I convened with a number of high-ranking individuals in Chancel.” O’mas chuckled. “The names began to run together after the second or third meeting. A few were even charismatic enough to convince me that they had the best of interests at heart, as it was. The virtues of the greater good were extolled for hours at length. I think that the idea of minimizing loss-of-life was a far more pressing argument than some of the other justifications presented. One can understand not wanting to get into a protracted conflict where potentially thousands of your constituents are burying their husbands, fathers and sons.”

Roman grunted.

“Surprisingly, the discussion I had with Commander Lynwell earlier that day was not as contentious as one might expect.”

“Lynwell welcomed you with open arms?” Roman asked sardonically.

“I get the distinct impression he was not given much in the way of choice. More resignation than acceptance. He welcomed my skill-set and familiarity with the network. My own involvement is an inconvenient side-effect. I gather that no one in the Gendarmery has yet been able to competently fill my post as head spymaster.”

Roman shook his head as if he had no answer to give.

“I suspect that in the end, my decades of experience were enough résumé to place me at the top of their list. From the temperature in the building, I was left with the distinct feeling that anxiety was running rampant. I am only here because they were desperate for a man of my capabilities to perform a specific covert task that would be, for all intents and purposes, off the books.”

Roman held up an open hand. “Have you been given your orders, yet? The paperwork, I mean. I know Lynwell likely gave you more of a briefing than you wanted.”

“I’ve been provided a pretty comprehensive file. Not light reading by any stretch of the imagination. I’ve scoured it at length three times before my arrival. That they would put it to paper means enough interested individuals in Congress have considered their options and still chose this course of action. In my time on the road, I thought long and hard about how such a decision occurred. Lynwell might be a man of coarse means, but this kind of mission is not one he would order without approval.”

“True. Conrad was always of a singular mindset, and politically-driven campaigns were not his strong point. That he has to work day-in, day-out in the Congressional Hall must feel like a prison sentence. I take it that you’ve come to see me *about...*” He trailed off.

“I’m here to gather resources.”

“Resources? Really? We have a requisition office that can—”

“People.”

“Those, we have in spades.” He motioned back to the training exercise. From the random bursts of gunfire, it seemed that the drill had continued.

“No, Roman. You have bodies that can hold pistols and rifles. Human fodder that will occupy territory once you begin to capture their cities. I need talented people. People with skills. *Gifts*, even.”

Roman let out his breath in a long, slow exhale. “What *exactly* are you getting at? I’m not entirely sure a squad can be assembled for you based on such vagaries.”

“You won’t have to. I will know them when I see them.” It was a lie of convenience, a topic on which O’mas knew Roman

would have no means, or desire, to contest.

Roman snorted and despite himself, asked a follow-up question. “I’ll likely regret this, but explain yourself. Skip the finer details. I have no interest in being bogged down by your latest obsession.”

“I gather you’ve heard tale of people born with unique talents. Abnormal agility, strength... abilities considered magic, as the rubes might label it. Those who recognize their gifts might make a living in such a way. Working a carnival as soothsayers, strongmen, knife-throwers—”

“Perhaps you should be recruiting circus entertainers rather than soldiers.”

“You would be surprised how many go undiagnosed. Maybe a half-dozen walk the grounds right now.”

“Is this *truly* what you invested your time on since your resignation?” Roman said with a roll of his eyes.

O’mas nodded. “I visited the Library at Kit’abana many a time. Investigated a number of topics. Spent days in the private collection poring over tomes ages old. There was a specific story passed down through the ages that Sēmināre Aes was not one but two Byrael. Twins that descended at the same time.”

“And there’s a point to this tangent?”

“*Sem va Sēmināre Aes ve raenied epon tah’lan gehbe mahn tah’geft oph povier.*” O’mas recited the line from the creation dogma in the ancient tongue. This only served to make Roman frown. “*Fourth was Sēmināre Aes, who rained upon the land, giving man the gift of power.* This *gift* was theorized to be two-fold. First was imbued ores: aeustes, apech, iolide, and even the rarer ores. Alongside that was the seed embedded in the genetic sequences of man that allowed him to exhibit unique skills, ones that set him apart from his fellow kin.”

“And?”



“I followed this line of research to its logical conclusion: your everyday citizens who exhibit unique skills. At one point, I considered about how these people might be employed by the Gendarmery as a crack unit for just such an occasion. With proper training, each might be worth six, ten, maybe even twenty regular soldiers. Truthfully, it was an idea I never thought would see need. With an operation where there is no possibility for extraction or readily-available reinforcements, one might want to stack the deck as much as possible. A man who can tear a door off its hinges is valuable when you can't carry explosives into a warzone.”

Roman blew out an exasperated breath. “Well, I see your time away has not lessened your strange bent. You were always known for being a—”

“Non-traditional thinker?” O'mas said with a laugh. “That's not the kind of insult others might think it is.”

“Well, I hope you don't intend on wasting your time hunting a needle in a haystack. At the very least go speak to Aullus in personnel and get a listing of the more seasoned soldiers. You know, just in case you don't find your magicians and carnival acts.”

O'mas laughed softly. He knew not to press the matter. Roman was not one think too far outside the box. That he had endured the conversation this long would have to be enough. He relented as he shifted gears.

“How goes the manufacture of the Gendarmery's airship fleet? What with the recent hostilities, one would think that future development might run into a funding deficit.”

Roman offered a brief dismissive laugh. “Quite the contrary. Congress has been emptying their coffers to ensure that any and every military development project on the books is funded. With the phantom of potential future attacks on Verenigen soil, they want the airships up and about, acting as

a patrolling force for unincorporated areas of the continent. You'll see more hovercrafts in service and more bases established throughout. From what I hear, the contracts with the Grymore Foundation have them working on post-war stock of vehicles exclusively for military use."

"Yes, 'post-war.' "

Roman shot him a look. "Not to fret, my good man. We have plenty of supplies and vehicles ready for the ground campaign in Moa'rehnza. Cargo vessels outfitted with freight cranes. LIO has already worked out the finer details to get transports, including armored personnel carriers, on the ground, though I'm not certain we'll *want* to fight a protracted ground war."

"Yes, it would be best if we didn't get tied down to a long campaign. Capture a few ports, cut off supply routes, both by sea and land. Force them into negotiations." He punctuated the last sentence with accented syllables that did not go unnoticed by Roman. After a short pause, O'mas changed the subject. "And how goes your commission? The *Navemaris* was it? Jewel of the Verenigen Aeronautical Fleet as I hear it."

"How would—"

"It was in the papers years ago. You *gave* an interview. Of course I was going to know about it. The first of its kind and whatnot. A pinnacle of modern engineering. Some senator's boondoggle. You pick the terminology. Even in the backwater townships, word spreads. Especially once it began to patrol the skies."

"It goes as well as can be expected. Temporarily placed under the command of Hawthorn while I am here in Port Hadley, tending to the war efforts. She's to receive the next commission, so her temporary command is considered a dry run."

O'mas had a faint memory of the name.

“Perhaps when this is all over, I’ll give you a tour. The view is rather breathtaking at times,” Roman offered in an offhanded manner. O’mas only nodded in response.

“Will you be departing for Mercarton once it’s eventually secured? Joining the ground forces there?”

“No. I’m to remain in Verenigen. To oversee the defense of the homeland. Command of the war front is in the hands of Major Dohmarrin.”

Dohmarrin was familiar to him. He was a former militiaman from Gold Flats who parlayed his experience into a life of military service. He had joined the Gendarmery in his twenties and worked through the ranks, only to outlast most of his contemporaries. Dohmarrin seemed to be a competent, level-headed man. That he had a publicized history with the militias likely worked in his favor. As such, the Gendarmery’s relationships with the volunteer groups would hopefully be easier to manage as the conflict stretched on.

“Oh, one last question. The available pool of soldiers? Gendarmery? Militia? Are there any restrictions on whom I am allowed to recruit? I’ve not taken a temperature of the mood, so I don’t know who or what is deemed off-limits. Wouldn’t want to endanger any tenuous arrangements.”

“Whoever you can find that’ll work for you. Personally, I don’t care how they arrived at the Moa’rehnzan front as long as they can aid you in your mission.”

“So the militia leaders won’t raise any complaints with us appropriating their men for our own needs?”

“Not publically, at least. There was a sizeable confab at the outset, just as the first of the militias were arriving in Port Hadley. Gendarmery leadership wanted to reach a concord that allows for a freedom of command. Any volunteer militia to offer aid will be temporary contracted as a part of the standing military. Temporary rank, benefits, pay. The whole shebang.”

“That’s... convenient for them.”

“For both sides, I would say. It’s a compromise that allows our officers a degree of assurance that their orders will be followed in the field.”

“And this is without caveat? No addendums as a part of the contract to favor the Gendarmery? Seems a bit favorable to me.”

“Not exactly, but the fine print won’t, or rather shouldn’t, cause too much problem. I would suggest that you consider any militiamen conscripted to be no more reliable than mercenaries. They are free to end their service contract at any time and any punishment administered would have to be handled through the civilian courts.”

O’mas grunted. “I imagine walking away might be harder once they’re two days’ into the Regenwald.”

“Which is probably why you might provide a comprehensive briefing and opportunity to decline before you get too far down the road.”

“Oh, certainly.”

After a few minutes of idle chatter, the two men parted ways. Roman pointed out the wood-paneled building in which O’mas could find the Personnel Office before he returned to the training grounds. O’mas watched him briefly before heading on himself.



The hastily-erected Personnel Office was nothing more than a painted wood shack that passed as office space for the staff of three. The workplace was furnished with a pair of desks and a miss-matched set of hand-me-down equipment that barely seemed functional enough. Beyond this was a larger chamber furnished with row upon row of filing cabinets. Many were rusted, with aged paint that flaked off along the edges.

In the far end sat a table that appeared to have seen heavy use. The wood was weathered and the supports creaked under the burden of even the smallest weight.

O'mas discovered that the records would eventually be moved to a more permanent storage solution within Fort Granic, and was then left on his lonesome to scour the files. By the end of the first evening, his eyes were tired and he felt no further along in his task than when he had arrived.

On his way out, he paused as he heard a discussion between two of the staff. The topics themselves held no real interest to O'mas, but the fervor with which they were discussed brought a tired smile to his lips. Before departing, he caught the name of their source: a corporal by the name of Wheedle who worked over in Food Services.

O'mas thought that he might want to meet with the gossiping corporal. It wouldn't hurt to make contact with an informant, even if the reliability of his content was dubious. Any rumors concerning recruits of note could prove invaluable. Greasing the man's pocket with a little coin would provide O'mas an additional ear.

Before his return the next morning, he reconsidered how to best assess the potential squad members. He had to take into consideration whatever metrics were provided within the dossiers: firing range accuracy, speed, strength and stamina statistics when completing the training courses, and recorded combat specialties. Except for the occasional recommendation by senior officers, there was little indication of whom O'mas should approach.

This strategy ultimately proved successful. By the time he found himself hungry enough to break for lunch, a short list was already scratched on a dog-eared pad of paper. A few were seasoned Gendarmery who were waiting for assignment before being shipped across the Calorso Sea.

The demographics of those militiamen who showed promise were unsurprising. While many were hunters or even local constables by profession, there was the occasional mercenary that stood out. In Verenigen, one could become a recognized gun-for-hire by applying for legal papers with the appropriate offices in Chancel. Though O'mas was not intimately familiar with the profession, he understood it was a profitable, yet dangerous, path for people with the skills and stomach to handle it. Often, one would be expected to perform as body-guard or bounty hunter. On rare occasion, the work required a more hands-on approach.

O'mas uncovered few candidates who indicated special affinities on paper. He was not disappointed by this. He knew that the Gendarmery wouldn't know to document such information.

Among the documentation, O'mas discovered a curious note from one of the marksmen trainers which offered personal observations on skill levels. As expected, many of the top-scorers were Gendarmery, a trio of whom was already penned on his short-list of potential squad members. Topping the memo was a name he'd not seen before: a young woman from Siracosta who arrived with the Azzotian militia the month before. Though she professed little prior training, she excelled with the bolt-action rifle and all manner of pistols. Her thrown-weapon accuracy exceeded anyone around her. One handwritten note caught O'mas' attention.

*If I wasn't dead certain that she's still a teenager, I'd swear she has at least a decade of small-arms experience. I haven't seen someone toss a knife like that since the carnival visited town in '52. If I had the time, I'd set up an advanced skills test to see what all she can do. Recommendation: Her skill-set makes her a vital asset. Place her with a patient and flexible commander who is going to get the best out of her.*

After a short conversation with the office staff, O'mas was directed to a wooden structure on the far side of the encampment. When he saw "Detainment Center" painted on the front in white block letters, he grew curious. It struck him as odd that someone so talented was posted there. He wondered if her age or the need for adaptable leadership landed her with such an undesirable job.

As O'mas understood it, the temporary jail was intended for the sudden influx of new recruits. With the rapid increase of volunteers on the grounds, Fort Granic's own brig was taxed. Rather than force those involved with every scuffle or drunken indiscretion into such a limited space, one of the temporary structures had been converted into a provisional lockup. O'mas assumed most of the inhabitants were sleeping off a hangover or cooling off flared tempers.

Once through the doorway, O'mas was saluted by a corporal at the front desk. Thin and fair-complected, the soldier straightened up as he tossed a book under the desktop.

"May I help you, sir?" he inquired.

"I'm looking for Zoe Agilis. I was advised that I would find her here. Unsure whether she's on duty at this hour or not. If not, any aid in locating her would be greatly appreciated."

The man turned to a handwritten schedule posted to his right. After a brief scan of the names, he shrugged. He grunted incoherently in what could only be disappointment. Before turning back to O'mas, he looked down and leafed through a nearby ledger, only stopping once his finger landed on an entry.

"Cell four, sir. Through the doors, down the hall and fourth door on your right. Would you like an armed escort?"

"I... I doubt that it would be necessary." O'mas gave him a wary glance. "Before I head on, can you tell me what landed her in detention?"

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“Assault. Says she broke another soldier’s hand in a fight. Not much more than that.”

O’mas passed through the nearby entry. On the other side was a single hallway, flanked on either side by barred doors. The sole guard, who was clearly armed with a rifle, took only a brief notice of O’mas before returning to his wards.

As he strode down the hall, the noise coming from one particular inmate was impossible to ignore. O’mas found himself cringing at vile commentary that filled the detention area.

“Heyyyyy, little girrrrrl...”

O’mas wondered if the speaker thought he was being alluring.

“You all quiet over there. I likes that. Silent and broody. It gets me going in a way that you don’t even know. It don’t matter to me. I can smell you from here. You’re sooooo sweet. The kinda sweet that makes a man all stiff down there. I can’t help but imagine the taste of you on my tongue. Sssssalty and warm.”

O’mas paused briefly as he walked past cell three, where the prisoner was standing on his bed with his face pressed against the wall. Scrawny with greasy hair and a thin dotting of fuzz along his jaw, the man’s beady eyes shot to O’mas only briefly before returning to the partition. The prisoner had one hand jammed down his pants.

As he shook his head, O’mas continued on to find the pervert’s neighbor seated quietly on the cot in her own cell. The woman on the other side of the bars couldn’t be more than eighteen years old. Though she was lean and muscular, some of the softness of youth remained in her features. Long black hair hung down across her face as she slumped in the bunk. When O’mas cleared his throat, she looked up.



She shifted her head, which caused her straight locks to fall back, and O'mas was able to confirm what he already suspected. Her olive skin, aquiline features and hazel eyes were all indicative of her heritage. *The lack of curly hair threw me off for a moment...* he thought to himself. *Azzotians came here as single militia representing the various villages along the bay. The worst that can happen to her is that she'll be discharged and sent back home. If she's aware of this, she may be less than cooperative. Less susceptible to the kind of pressure that would better sway her opinion. This would be easier if she was Gendarmery and facing a military court.*

"Yes?" she inquired. "I take it someone got around to deciding on my punishment."

O'mas quickly noticed the disdain in her voice. It took an effort not to smile. "They say that you broke a man's arm. Or, rather, his hand."

"I'm sure they do. Because it's what I did."

"And?"

"And what? I'm not going to apologize for it. The bastard groped me. Thought he was being funny, or cool, or whatever. I don't really give a shit what his reasons were. He was lucky all I did was break his hand and not his face." She rose from the cot. "Someone should take the time to teach your men that big, dumb and horny isn't a charming combination of personality traits."

O'mas stood quietly and watched as she stalked towards the door.

"And frankly, if this is the way the Gendarmery handles things, maybe it's best you send me home. You clearly don't have a handle on..." She trailed off as her features contorted. Her eyes scanned him as if looking for something in particular. Her gaze went to the various pockets of his jacket and then to his pack. "You're not here for that, are you? There's something

odd about you. Something I can't place."

O'mas was taken aback. His rucksack hung from one shoulder. Within was his pair of imbued ores, one of which still radiated a soft aura to which he had grown inured. That she took notice of it so easily piqued his interest.

"Lieutenant Marianus O'mas," he introduced himself. "I take it you are Zoe Agilis, from Siracosta. Unless, that is, I have the wrong cell." He reached out a hand.

For a second, she eyed it warily before extending her own through the bars. After a quick pump, she stepped back and looked him up and down.

"You don't look like the usual Gendarmery officer. Not enough contempt in your eyes."

"Yes, I imagine you've dealt with a number of high- to mid-ranking officials who are only welcoming the militia begrudgingly." He paused briefly. "I am actually with the Gendarmery's Intelligence Division. Well, I was with them, then I resigned, but now I've returned at special request of Commander Lynwell."

"Okay—and I mean no offense—but do you have a point you're gonna get to? What exactly is it that you're trying to pitch to me. Because, as we both can tell, I'm not really in a position of advantage here." O'mas found himself impressed by the way she carried herself. Despite her youth, her eyes were sharp. She paid attention to every little move, every shift in posture, every wrinkle in O'mas' features.

"You'll forgive me if I don't divulge the particulars just yet. Especially in light of the situation." He motioned to the bars.

"Top secret and all, right? That's what people who're spies say. That what they're working on is all hush-hush."

"Something to that effect. I've been tasked with a high-priority mission that will see us behind enemy lines, as the

parlance goes. As such, I need to field a small squad composed of as many highly-skilled people as I can recruit.”

“And an eighteen-year-old girl, sitting in a cell, is up for consideration?”

O’mas chuckled softly. “We can go back and forth over this, play coy, or we can skip to the part where we’re both aware you have a certain set of skills that men twice your age seem incapable of matching. A gift, one might say, having to do with your extraordinary proficiency with guns and knives. I have a fair idea of why. I think you do, too. If not, well, that’s a discussion for another day.”

Zoe let out an exaggerated breath as she looked away.

“And, you volunteered, did you not? I imagine that, by the way you carry yourself, no one tells you what to do. If so, then consider this an opportunity to be as much use as humanly possible. Rather than waste your talents by either sending you home or placing you in a squad to be assigned to the front lines, I would see you put to best use.”

At this, he paused and waited for her to respond. Her countenance eventually softened.

“Get me out of here and we’ll talk.”

He only responded with, “That will do.”

With a grin on his face, he stepped away and marched back to the front desk. As he walked past the adjacent cell, O’mas cast a sideways glance to its occupant. Having worn himself, he was now slumped on the cot with his back against the wall. His head was turned towards the door and a drooling grimace painted his face.

Once through the double doors, O’mas made a beeline for the corporal, who was at least pretending to be busy as he shuffled paperwork from one pile to another.

“Is there anything else I can help you with, sir?” he inquired

as he straightened.

O'mas dropped his pack to the ground and knelt. Within a few seconds of digging within, he removed a wrinkled sheet of paper and presented it. The young man quickly browsed the written order before nodding once that he understood.

"Agilis. She's to be released to my authority."

"Understood. Paperwork appears all in order." The attendant turned and snatched a set of keys off of the nearby desktop. The fresh-faced corporal paused as O'mas held up an open hand.

"Also... the man in cell three."

"Yes sir? Guilroy, sir. He's a bit of a handf—"

"He's to be remanded to the detention facility at Fort Granic. Solitary confinement."

"Sir? I'm not—"

"By the end of the month, someone is going to be rotting in solitary. I'll leave to you to decide who that might be." O'mas hesitated for a moment as he dug in his memory for a name. Seconds later, his eyes brightened. "Be certain that Corporal Wheedle is made aware of this situation."

"Wheedle, sir? But, but, he's not a part of Detention Services, sir."

"And? Make sure he knows that Guilroy is being sent to Fort Granic to serve a sentence for his crimes."

"But, sir? He's a bit of a chinwag."

"That's the point."