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PART ONE



PROLOGUE

HELENA WONDERED SOMETIMES IF SHE STILL HAD eyes. The darkness surrounding her never ended. She thought at first if she waited long enough, some glimmer of light would appear, or someone would come. Yet no matter how long she waited, there was nothing.

Just endless dark.

She had a body; she could feel it wrapped around her like a cage, but no amount of effort or determination could make it move. It floated inert and unresponsive except when jerking violently as the surges hit—jolts of electricity tearing through her, beginning at the base of her neck and making every muscle in her body seize violently. As suddenly as they came, they'd be gone. They were her only sense of time.

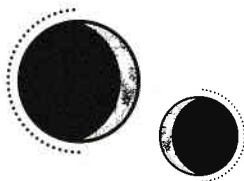
They were done to ensure her muscles couldn't deteriorate altogether while she was in stasis. Helena remembered that detail. Remembered that she'd been placed there as a prisoner, kept preserved, but someday, someone would come for her.

At first, she'd counted the time in between surges to calculate their frequency. Second by second. Ten thousand, eight hundred. Every three hours without fail. Always the same. Then she'd counted the surges, but as the number grew and grew, she stopped, afraid to know.

She forced herself to focus on other things, not the wait. Not the endlessness. Not the dark. She had to wait, so she gave herself a routine to keep her mind fresh. Imagined walks. Cliffs and sky. Visited all the places she'd ever wandered. All the books she'd read.

She had to endure. To stay alert. That way she would be ready. She *had* to stay ready.

She would not let herself fade away.



CHAPTER 1

W

HEN LIGHT CAME, IT NEARLY SPLIT HELENA'S brain open.

There was screaming.

"Fuck! How's this one awake?" A voice broke through the sensory agony.

Light was stabbing her. A spike driven through her eyes, burrowing into her skull. Gods, her eyes.

She writhed. The brightness blurred, careening. The burn of fluid rushed down her throat. A roar in her ears.

Slick fingers dug into her arms, against bone, dragging her up. Air hit her lungs, sending them seizing as the fluid came back up.

"Fuck this stasis gel. Can't get a decent grip. Make her shut up! She's about to drown herself."

Her head slammed into something as she was dropped. Rough stone tore her hands. She scabbled blindly, trying to push herself up. Her eyes squeezed shut, but the light was still a knife in her skull. A hard object was ripped off the back of her neck, and something warm and wet ran across her skin.

"How the fuck is she awake? Someone must've fucked the dosage on this one. Don't let her crawl off."

Her arms were gripped again, and she was heaved up from the ground. She tore herself free, forcing her eyes open. All she could make out was blinding white. She lunged towards it.

“You fucking bitch, you cut me!”

Pain exploded across the back of her head.

THERE WAS STILL LIGHT WHEN she regained consciousness.

It came slowly, as though she were underwater, swimming towards a surface that rippled just beyond reach, consciousness seeping back in. Her eyes were closed; the light was just beyond them. She could feel the pain of it already.

She was lying on something hard. A cold table, its metal inert beneath her fingers.

She could dimly make out voices, muffled but close.

“Well?” A woman’s voice. “Any others?”

“No.” A man’s voice. That first voice from earlier. “We’ve pulled the rest out. It was just this one stored wrong.”

“And she was conscious when you opened the tank?”

“Sure was. Started screaming when we lifted the top and pulled her up. Gave me a heart attack, I can tell you. Willems was so startled, he nearly drowned her, and when we did get her out, she was fucking feral. Scratched the shit out of me until we got her knocked out. Had the intravenous and all, but the sedation was turned off. Someone must’ve bumped it.”

“That doesn’t explain the lack of records for this one,” said the woman. “Seems odd.”

“Probably done in a hurry. Couldn’t have been kept for long. Even the ones properly done are mostly dead. Lot of the tanks are just soup and bones.” The man laughed nervously.

“We’ll know more once I have her in Central,” the woman said. She sounded disinterested. “You were right to call this in. It’s anomalous. Let me know how many of the rest wake. Any corpses intact enough for reanimation go to the mines. The living stock goes to the Outpost.”

“Of course. And you’ll put in a good word for me, right? It would mean a lot if it comes from you.” The man sounded hopeful, and his chuckle was forced. “Not getting any younger, you know.”

“The High Necromancer has many petitions to consider. Your work will not be forgotten. Have a lorry made ready for transport.”

There were retreating footsteps followed by an irritated sigh.

“There’s no need to feign unconsciousness; I know you’re awake. Open your eyes,” the woman said. “I’ve altered your senses, so the light shouldn’t be too much.”

Helena peered cautiously through her lashes.

The world around her was greenish dusk, every form shadow-like. The vague shape of a person moved on her right side.

Her eyes followed sluggishly.

“Good. You’re following instructions *and* tracking motion.”

Helena tried to speak, but a low gasping emerged.

There was a click of a pen and papers shuffling.

“So, Prisoner 1273, or are you Prisoner 19819? You have two inmate numbers, and there’s no record of either in this facility. Do you happen to have a name?”

Helena said nothing. Now that the mere concept of light was not a terror, she could think a little. She was still a captive.

The woman gave an impatient huff. “Do you understand me?”

Helena gave no response.

“Well, I suppose I can’t expect much. We’ll know soon anyway. You, bring her.”

The shape blurred away, and new figures appeared. Cold skin pressed against her wrists. The stench of chemical preservatives and old meat burned in her nose. Necrothralls. She tried to make out the faces, but her eyes kept sliding off, refusing to focus.

The table began vibrating as it was rolled across a stone floor, radiating through her skull into her teeth.

Then it was so bright, it was like needles being driven into her retinas. She gave a muffled scream, squeezing her eyes shut again.

There was a nauseating lurch upwards, and everything grew darker again, a motor rumbling to life somewhere beneath her.

She needed to escape. She tried to shift and felt the clank of metal.

“Lie still.” The woman’s voice was suddenly back. Very close.

Helena jerked away, breath coming in rapid pants and her hands and feet twisting against the restraints. She had to run. She had to—

“Don’t make my day harder,” the woman said, her voice icy.

Fingers gripped the base of Helena’s skull, and a pulse of energy flooded through her brain.

Darkness again.

JOLTING AGONY AND SUDDEN TERROR ripped Helena back into consciousness.

She lurched upwards, eyes wide, just in time to see a syringe pulled away. There was a snap of chains, and she fell back, heart racing, every beat a throb of pain as though it’d been stabbed through.

“There now.” There was the clatter of the syringe being dropped onto a metal tray somewhere to her right. “That should get you lucid and talking.”

It was the woman from earlier.

Helena was no longer on the table or in a lorry. There was a hard mattress under her, and the strong sterile scent of antiseptic everywhere.

A dim grey ceiling loomed overhead.

Through the pain, energy was suddenly roaring through her veins, growing into a searing heat that burned in her hands as they flexed. She could feel her consciousness sharpening and everything growing brighter, clearer. She twisted, and metal bit into her wrist.

“None of that. You’ll break your bones before you break out of those shackles. Answer my questions and I might let you get up before that drug wears off. I understand it can be quite painful otherwise.”

Unable to move, Helena felt her mind begin to race instead. An injection, some kind of harsh stimulant. Trapped inside her, the energy poured into her brain, and her scattered, panicked thoughts were narrowing into crystalline focus.

“Helena Marino. You”—there was a sound of shuffled pages—

“should be dead according to your 1273 file. You were marked for culling, due to unspecified ‘extensive injuries.’ But the 19819 designation means you were selected for stasis.” More pages were shuffled. “However, there’s no record that you ever arrived there or underwent processing.” The woman sucked her teeth. “You have not existed anywhere in our file system since Augustus of last year. Fourteen months. And now we find you in the very stasis warehouse you never arrived at. How is that?”

Helena blinked slowly, trying to process the information. Fourteen months?

“Obviously no one can survive in stasis that long. Even at six months with perfect conditions it’s nearly impossible, and you weren’t even stored properly. So where did you come from? And who put you there?”

Helena turned her head away, refusing to answer.

The woman hummed, stepping closer. “You’re not in any trouble. Tell me the truth and this will all be over. Where were you before you were placed in stasis?”

The question was enunciated slowly.

Helena said nothing, although her jaw was burning to move. Her body started to tremble as her heartbeat drove the drug deeper into her veins.

There wasn’t anyone left to protect, but she refused to cooperate with her captors. To make anything easy for them, even their filing system.

Besides, she hadn’t been anywhere else.

“Where. Were. You. Before stasis?” The woman was speaking loudly.

Helena’s throat tightened, trying not to even think about the answer, because it tore her apart to remember.

Before the warehouse, she’d been captured along with everyone else, crammed into cages outside the Alchemy Tower, where all the prisoners had been brought so they could witness the “celebrations” of the war’s end.

She could still smell the smoke and blood in the summer heat, hear the raucous cheers as Resistance leaders died, their screams fading. Watching them die, and knowing it was still not over, even then.

Some necromancer in the crowd would hurry forward, eager to show

off, and in a matter of seconds that dead body would get up again. Someone Helena had trusted or served under, brought back with reanimation. A necrothrall, an empty automaton corpse. They'd be slit open, their skin in ribbons, organs excised, eyes blank, face slack, and they would be used to kill the next "traitor" in an even more brutal way.

The executions had not stopped until the air was red with a mist of blood.

General Titus Bayard's dead body was used to kill his wife. Slowly. Making him eat the strips of her as he cut them off.

Each death had carved out a piece of Helena until there was a cavern of grief inside her chest. When there wasn't anyone left worth publicly killing, they'd put her in that stasis tank.

The other prisoners had been unconscious as they were paralysed, needles inserted in their veins, tubes shoved down their noses, breathing masks adhered to their faces. Not Helena.

She had been kept awake, aware of the claustrophobic horror of all that was happening to her, as she was locked inside her body and left in the dark. Waiting for someone to come for her.

No one ever did.

Fingers snapped in front of Helena's face, jolting her from her memories. The woman was glaring at her.

"I'm not having a filing error damaging my reputation. If you won't answer, I'll stop doing this the *easy* way."

Helena flinched.

"See? You do understand me."

Her stomach shrivelled, but she locked her jaw.

The woman stepped closer. Helena's eyes strained to make her out. A squarish face with impatiently pursed lips. A medical uniform.

"Perhaps an example is in order." The woman's hand pressed against Helena's neck. Helena gave a sharp gasp as burning-cold energy surged through her, towards her spine.

It wasn't an electric jolt like in the tank; it burrowed from the woman's hand and into Helena like a needle. The channel of energy sang through her like a tuning fork, until both resonated along the same wavelength.

The woman clenched her fingers. Pain burst through every nerve in Helena's body. She gave a gasping, garbled scream, body seizing, hands wrenching at the cuffs.

"Be still."

A flick and Helena went limp. She couldn't feel anything below her chest. As if her spine were severed. Her blood roared in panic.

A wave of the woman's hand, and the void of numbness vanished.

Soap-roughened fingers trailed dangerously along Helena's arm.

"Understand now?"

The woman's resonance was still running through her like a current, a visceral warning. Helena managed to nod shakily. She should have realised: The woman was a vivimancer. Necromancy's inverse twin, wielded on the living rather than the dead.

"I knew you'd catch on. Let's try again."

Helena's throat grew thick, her eyes burning. Every nerve twinged, her blood roaring in her ears. What was the harm in answering?

"Where did you come from?"

"Wsss—th—w—housss—" Helena fought to make her tongue cooperate.

"None of that foreign nonsense. Speak Paladian," the woman said sharply.

There was no such thing as a Paladian language; the woman was speaking in Northern dialect. Helena wanted to tell her that but didn't think it would help. She swallowed and tried again, but her tongue slurred everything together.

The woman sighed. "Why do you Resistance fighters always waste my time? Perhaps if we jolt your brain, you'll remember how to speak a proper language."

She gripped Helena's head this time. A wave of resonance surged through from both sides like cymbals slammed together.

Everything went red. The scream wrenched from Helena's throat was animal.

The hands were snatched back. "What on earth?"

Helena wasn't sure if the woman was running in circles overhead or if the room was spinning.

“What is this? Who did this to you?”

Helena stared dazedly up as the red faded from her vision. Her hands were twitching and spasming, convulsively jerking against the chains. She didn’t know what the questions meant.

“Something has been done to your mind,” the woman said, sounding bewildered but also strangely excited. “Some kind of transmutation. I have never encountered anything like it. I’m going to have to report this. I’ll need a specialist. You have—” The woman paused. “There’s no name for this! *I’ll* have to come up with a name . . .”

She seemed to be talking mostly to herself. “Transmutational barriers inside a brain. How is that possible? I have never—there are—patterns in it.”

She touched Helena again. Helena flinched, but the resonance was not for torture this time, just a frisson of energy through her brain that turned everything luridly red again.

“This is elaborate, beautiful, professional work. A vivimancer manually rewiring the human consciousness.”

Helena lay there, not understanding.

The woman’s face came close enough that Helena could make out blue eyes with deep creases between them and around the mouth. She stared at Helena with avid fascination.

“If Bennet were still here, he would marvel at the precision of this work.” Resonance ran through Helena’s mind as tangibly as if fingers were gliding inside her skull. The woman’s pale eyes lost focus as she worked. “The smallest mistake anywhere, and you’d be vegetative, but whoever did this kept you *almost* completely intact. This is genius.”

“Whaa—tt?” Helena finally managed a clear word.

“I wonder . . . What does it look like?” The woman walked away, then returned a minute later, carrying a sheet of glass.

Helena squinted and recognised the object. A resonance screen. They were frequently used for academic presentations and alchemical medical procedures. The gas used reactive particles to mirror the shape and pattern of a resonance channel.

The woman held the glass overhead, her other hand resting on Helena’s forehead, and ran resonance through Helena’s skull. Her vision

turned red again, but Helena squinted through and watched as the dim cloud between the panes morphed into the vague shape of the human brain and then into an incomprehensible spiderweb of lines that wound all over.

“I doubt you understand any of this, but imagine your mind is a— a city. Your thoughts run along various streets to reach their destinations. Those lines you see are your streets that have been rerouted. There are barriers, transmationally crafted, and so instead of following a natural pattern through the brain, someone has created alternative routes. Some areas are cut off entirely. I can’t even imagine how . . . The skill this would take . . .”

Her words trailed off. She set the screen aside and peered probingly at Helena.

“Who worked on you?” The question was loud, slow, and over-enunciated.

Helena just shook her head.

The woman’s expression hardened dangerously, but then she seemed to reconsider. “I suppose you wouldn’t know, given the state of your brain. You’re probably lucky to remember your own name. You were an alchemy student, I presume.” She idly tapped a metal cuff around Helena’s wrist.

Helena gave a wary nod.

“And foreign. Obviously.” She gave Helena a pointed once-over.

Helena swallowed. “Etras.”

“Ah, quite far from home then. Do you remember your resonance repertoire?”

“Div . . . erse.”

“Hmm.” The woman’s eyebrows furrowed, and she studied Helena more carefully. “Wait. I remember hearing about you. You’re that little savant the Holdfasts sponsored. That must have been more than a decade ago, so you must be what, twenty-something now?”

Helena’s eyes burned, and she gave a stilted nod.

The woman raised an eyebrow. “Do you remember what happened to your sponsor, Principate Apollo?”

“Killed.”