

CHAPTER ONE

“John!” Martok bellows as he bursts through the door. “I have news, my friend—wondrous, wondrous news! You’ll not believe what fell to me in the markets today!”

John turns away from the window, the only one in the bare boardinghouse room he and Martok have shared for the past two months, where he’d been passing the afternoon watching the machinations of a murder of crows as they attempted to scavenge the carcass of a dead rat from beneath the wheels of the passing trundlecars in the street below, to see his patron hanging his formal sash on the hook by the door. Martok’s three-fingered hands are trembling with excitement, so much that it takes him two tries to get the sash to stay, and the crest that runs down the center of his broad bald scalp is flushed a happy pink.

“John!” Martok says again, then crouches so that his head is nearly level with John’s and spreads his arms wide. “Come to me, my friend! This has been a truly wondrous day!”

John hesitates a bare moment, then sighs, crosses the tiny room in three strides, and steps into the gray’s crushing embrace. Martok lifts him, thick hands pressing John against the

hairless, wrinkled skin of his chest, spins him half-around, and sets him down again with his back to the door.

“Ask, John! You must ask!”

John takes a deep breath in and lets it out slowly, mostly to make sure Martok hasn’t cracked his ribs in his exuberance, then says, “Please tell me, Martok. What wondrous thing did you find in the markets today?”

He’s expecting to hear something about a new sash, or a refurbished handheld, or perhaps a particularly ripe piece of fruit. Consequently, he has no idea how to react when Martok says, “A home, John! I have found us a home!”

THE INTRICACIES OF the grays’ economic system have never been remotely clear to John. What education he received in the crèche was mostly structured around learning ways to serve a future patron in practical ways. He was taught to cook, to clean, and to shoot (small-caliber weapons only, sufficient for hunting native game, but not remotely suited for penetrating the leathery, three-centimeter-thick hide of a gray). He knows there are some humans at work in the markets. He’s seen them there from time to time, has even seen Martok forced to barter with one of them on a few occasions. Whatever arcane knowledge of debit and credit that those humans have gained, however, did not come from the crèche, and Martok has never shown the slightest interest in passing along to John any small understanding of economics that he might have.

John has seen enough, though, to know one thing for certain: He and Martok are poor. If he’s being honest with himself, that much was clear to him even on the day Martok took him away from the crèche. John was not one of the children who lined up eagerly to show off their skills for the grays who came by

shopping for a bond. He was small for his age, with a high, piping voice and a slight stammer that came and went, with timing seemingly designed to maximize his embarrassment. Awkward with his peers and mostly terrified of the grays, John hung back as far as the nursemaids would let him when visitors came to the crèche—and as a consequence, he was passed over, time after time after time.

He still remembers the moment when he realized that he was dooming himself. He was twelve, and a girl named Tila had just aged out without a bond and had been unceremoniously put down in the alley behind the crèche. As one nursemaid heaved her body into the refuse bin and two others herded the children back into the building, it struck him suddenly, with the force of a physical blow: *That'll be me someday.*

By the time Martok came by, John was, strictly speaking, already past the age where he should have been declared permanently un-bonded. The only reason he was still there, the only reason that the nursemaids kept shoving him out in front of every gray who came by, was that he was still small enough to pass, and the nursemaids in his crèche, despite their general indifference and occasional cruelty, didn't actually enjoy putting humans down. Martok has never said exactly how the two of them wound up walking out of that place together, but John strongly suspects that when the nursemaids realized that Martok was just window-shopping, that he didn't have enough credit for the processing fee, let alone for the purchase of a bond, they offered up John for precisely what he was worth—which is to say, for nothing at all.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND," John says. "A home? Isn't this our home?"

"This? A home?" Martok crosses over to the pantry in two

short strides, reaches inside to pull out a protein brick, and tears off a bite half the size of John's head. "This squalid hovel?" He gestures broadly with the hand holding the brick, spraying crumbs from both his hand and his thick, wrinkled lips in an arc half the size of the room. "This cramped, wretched hole? No, John. This is no home. This is a place of bare subsistence, sufficient only to keep our heads dry and our bodies warm as we wait for the gods of fate to hand us the opportunity that we have been awaiting." He takes another bite, chews, and swallows. "And now, my friend? Now they have."

Martok drops onto the big bed that takes up a quarter of the room's floor space, pops the remainder of the protein brick into his mouth, and then flops backward with his hands folded behind his head. "We leave this place tomorrow. I shall settle accounts with our twice-cursed landlord once we've had our breakfasts—it wouldn't do to tell him before he's fed us one last time, of course—and we shall be on our way. I have already secured a trundlecar to take us as far as the central terminal. From there, I've booked passage to the terminus at Lake Town."

John waits a beat for him to go on, then says, "Lake Town? That's where we're going?" John has never seen Lake Town. He's never seen much of anywhere, honestly, other than the bits and pieces of Farhome, the city that still houses nearly eighty percent of the grays on the planet, that Martok has seen fit to show him. He's heard of Lake Town, though. It's the farthest western extension of the grays' footprint on this world, a barely populated outpost on the southern shore of a mostly frozen freshwater sea. He's not sure what sort of home Martok might have found there, but he's hard-pressed to imagine that it could be any better than this place.

"Oh no," Martok says, his chest rumbling with laughter. "Lake Town is a terribly depressing place, John—a refuge for

miscreants and ne'er-do-wells who have been driven from the more polite society of Farhome, mostly for perfectly good reasons. I spent two thoroughly unpleasant years there when I first made landfall on this world, and I have no interest in ever returning. Lake Town is not our destination. It is simply the farthest extent of the transport network. I intend to stay there for the shortest time that we can possibly manage."

"Oh," John says, then reaches up to scratch the back of his head. "I'm confused."

Martok sits up again, and his lips fold back from his thick, square teeth and two stubby upturned tusks in a parody of a grin. "As well you might be. You would not know this from our time together, John, but I was not always the soft city dweller that you see now. Years ago, I was considered quite the adventurer, and I expect that experience will serve us well now. Upon reaching Lake Town, we shall strike out southward, away from the lakeshore. Our destination is some fifty kilometers along, over hill and bramble, across rill and stream, and through trackless wilderness."

He leans back, and the bed groans as his weight settles onto his elbows. "As I have already implied, I had a most fortuitous meeting in the markets today. In particular, I met a worthless scion of the Greatfoots, a distant descendant of the Chief Administrator himself—Daro Lia née Greatfoot by name. It seems this wretch had acquired a great deal of property beyond the reach of polite society, south and west of Lake Town in what was once an agricultural region of sorts. He purchased this property not because he had the slightest idea what to do with it, of course, but merely as a speculative investment. Such follies are common among the more useless members of the wealthier clans, you know. They have abundant credit, but they lack the wit to imagine how to invest it usefully. It seems he had some

idea that Lake Town was due to expand greatly, and that when it did, he would be in a position to profit massively.”

With that, Martok gets to his feet again and begins pacing—a singularly unsatisfying thing to do in such a tiny space, but John knows by now that when Martok is excited about something, he has a great deal of trouble holding still.

“This ignorant Greatfoot has such an impoverished imagination that he could see no use for land such as this beyond the construction of more of what we already see around us. When it became clear, as it should have been from the outset, that no expansion in the direction of Lake Town was in the offing, he had no ability to see other possible avenues of progress.”

He stops pacing then and turns to face John, arms spread wide. After a moment’s hesitation, John hazards, “But . . . you did see some such opportunity?”

“Yes!” Martok says, and starts pacing again. “Of course! I am no failed third nephew of a wealthy clan, John. All my life, I have had to earn my way by my wits, and as this dullard poured out his tale of woe over a half-full tankard, I could already see what he could not. I let him ramble on for an hour or more, and then, my voice dripping with sympathy and fellow-feeling, I offered, strictly as a favor to both him and his noble clan, to relieve him of the burden of his misbegotten investment.”

Martok seems about to burst with self-satisfaction. John, though, is beginning to feel a familiar, gnawing unease. This isn’t the first time that Martok has had a brilliant idea, one sure to bring him the wealth and acclaim that he clearly deserves.

A quick glance around their squalid room tells the tale of how those other opportunities ended.

“So . . .” John says. “This Greatfoot, he just . . . *gave* you the title to this property?”

That stops Martok’s pacing again, and when he turns to face

John, his face has lost some of its smugness. The gnawing in John's belly turns abruptly into a sharp, stabbing pain.

"Well, no. Of course not. Even a decadent Greatfoot dandy would not be foolish enough to simply hand over an opportunity like this to one he'd just met, would he?"

John closes his eyes and breathes in, then out slowly. When he opens them again, Martok's gaze has dropped to the floor between them. "Martok?" John says. "What did you give him?"

"Well," Martok says. "Nothing, really. A pledge, only. He was in such desperation to be rid of the property that he lent me the credit to take it from him. I had only to pledge him collateral."

Collateral? John's eyes sweep the room. Everything Martok owns is here. What could he have . . .

Oh gods.

"Martok?" John says, slowly, evenly. "Did you . . . no, you couldn't have. Please tell me you didn't pledge him my bond?"

Martok turns away, flops back onto the bed, and covers his face with his arms. "What does it matter what I pledged? I tell you truly, John. At the rate he offered me, this property will pay for itself a thousand times over."

John drops back into his seat by the window and buries his face in his hands. His heart seems to be trying to pound its way out of his chest, and when he speaks again, his voice is trembling.

"When is the first repayment due to him, Martok?"

"Sixty days," Martok says. "An eternity, really."

John knows the answer to his next question, but he asks anyway. "And do you have it? Do you have enough credit even to cover the first payment?"

Martok doesn't answer. Outside the window, the crows have given up on what remains of the carcass in the road and have fallen to fighting among themselves over a hunk of protein brick

that's been dropped by a passing gray. John closes his eyes again and breathes in, breathes out.

"OH COME NOW," Martok says as John climbs up onto the high stool that the master of the house has set out for him at the common table. "How much longer do you intend to continue this miserable sulking? This is a great day for us, my friend. I should have thought you would greet it with a bit more enthusiasm."

John stares across the heavy wooden table at Martok for a bit too long, then takes a hard roll from the platter sitting between them, bites into it, and chews. It's early enough that they're still alone in the dimly lit, wood-paneled dining room, other than the bondsman servers who come and go, laying out food and drink for the other boarders who will presumably be along shortly. The thing that he would like to say—that, while Martok has done foolish, impulsive things many times in their years together, this is the first time that he's led John to believe that he does not, in fact, care a whit whether John lives or dies—is not a thing that he can say.

John has spoken with the bonded employees of other grays. He's heard stories. He knows that the way Martok interacts with him, the way he speaks to John as if he were another living, sentient being—as if he were, in fact, actually a friend, and not just a cheap, meaty automaton—is far more the exception than the rule in these relationships. Because of this, he knows better than to push. He knows that there's a line that he might cross that would change their relationship irrevocably, and he knows that change would not be for the better.

That doesn't mean he has to be cheerful about the prospect of being sold off to some Greatfoot degenerate, though. He finishes his roll in silence, pours himself a glass of water, using two

hands to manage the gray-sized pitcher, and drinks that down in silence as well. Martok watches him this entire time, chewing absently on a hunk of dried meat, his crest slowly darkening.

Just as Martok's expression is beginning to shade over from annoyance to actual anger, John says, "The part of this that I don't understand—the part that, in fact, makes me question the accuracy of how you've presented this story to me—is this: What could this Greatfoot you met yesterday possibly want with me? He wants out of his investment? Sure, I get that. We all make bad bargains sometimes. He wants out badly enough to extend credit for the buyout to someone with no visible means of repayment? That's a bit more of a stretch, honestly, but I guess I'll go along with it. But the last bit? The idea that he's willing to accept the bond of a single non-famous, not-particularly-skilled human as collateral? You must see that's nonsense, Martok. Let's say you wind up defaulting on that payment in sixty days. How does taking on my bond serve as compensation? What possible use could this person have for me?"

"Ah," Martok says, and glances around the room. A pair of grays have taken seats at the opposite end of the table, but they're carrying on a conversation in rumble-speak and paying no attention whatsoever to John and Martok. "I see. Your confusion stems from your lack of understanding of the workings of business—hardly your fault given your station—but, apologies; I had not considered the depths of your ignorance when I explained our situation. You seem to be under the impression that your bond is intended to serve as *financial* collateral in this arrangement. As you say, this is nonsense. Even if you were a specialist—one of those insufferable bondsmen we occasionally encounter in the markets, say—your bond would not remotely serve in this capacity. When one offers financial collateral against a loan, the value of the thing offered must obviously be

commensurate to the value of the loan. How could *any* human's bond stand as collateral against the sum this Greatfoot has advanced me?"

John starts to mention that Martok has not, in fact, told him how much credit he's been offered up against. He quickly thinks better of it, though, as Martok continues.

"Obviously, such an idea does not bear discussion. It should be clear, moreover, that in this case, the property itself serves as financial collateral. If I fail to repay our foolish benefactor in a timely manner, the rights to the land will revert back to him immediately." He pauses to take a long pull at his breakfast ale, wipes his mouth with the back of one meaty arm, and lets loose a gut-rattling belch that brushes John's hair back from his forehead. "So, you might ask, why is any other collateral necessary? Why, to ensure that I am properly motivated to do what is necessary to make this investment pay appropriately, of course—which is to say, your role in this endeavor is that of *motivational* rather than *financial* collateral. Do you see?"

Unfortunately, John does see—or at least, he's beginning to. The pain in his stomach has returned with a vengeance.

"So what you're saying is that this Greatfoot isn't actually interested in taking me into his service if you default?"

A shrug ripples through Martok's massive shoulders, and his ears flip in negation. "It seems unlikely, does it not? One of his station could have his choice of bonds directly from the crèche. To break in a new bondsman, one who is already of your relatively advanced age, would likely be more trouble than it was worth."

"So . . ."

Martok throws back the last of his ale and gestures to the server to stop his pointless poking at the fire and bring another. "As I said previously, in order to reel this fish into the boat, it was

necessary for me to form a personal bond with him. We drank together for a long while before getting down to our business, and in that time I spoke glowingly of you. I went out of my way, in fact, to emphasize how highly I prize your service—and more than that, your companionship. I am clanless on this world, you know, and I led him to believe that I see you not as a servant at all, but rather as true family.” Martok sees John’s face change at that, and hurries to add, “This was not deceit, of course. You truly are all the family I have here. It is no exaggeration to say that I would be utterly devastated to lose you.”

“But if you default . . .”

Martok takes a fresh ale from the server, tips it back, and drains half of it in one go. “Yes, John. You see our situation correctly. This is why we must both now do our utmost to ensure that I do not default.”