Charlotte saw her chance and jumped in front of Steele, her hands on her hips and her face set in a scowl. “All right, slicknick! You’d better start apologizing!” she said, trying to keep her voice from rising to a screech.

 Steele looked surprised for a moment, then gazed dismissively past her, a slight twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes. “I beg your pardon?”

 “You know very well what I’m talking about! The crimtonium? You tricked us, you filthy liar!”

 Steele stepped around her and continued walking at a brisk pace. “It’s called business, sweetheart. Sometimes you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do, even if it involves twisting the truth.”

 “That’s no excuse! You’re a manipulator!” Charlotte was seething with rage while she jogged to keep up with him.

 “I prefer to think of myself as an outcome engineer,” Steele said calmly.

 “What is your problem? Do you want us to lose this war?”

 “This war is none of my concern. I refuse to get involved in it.”

 Charlotte sprinted ahead of him, then planted herself directly in his path. “Hear me out, Steele. I’m going to get that crimtonium, even if it’s the last thing I do!”

 “I have no doubt that you will,” he said rather patronizingly. Then, doffing his cap, said, “Good day, Miss Dragon.” Then he disappeared around a corner and into the busy street.

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