



New World (Project Gliese 581g #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: She was trained to be invisible. He was born to be untouchable.

Mei Li Hú was raised to be a weapon—sharp, silent, and deadly. Her mission aboard the Gliese was clear... until it shattered along with the ship. Awakening on an alien freighter in a world she doesn't recognize, Mei must rely on every brutal lesson Earth taught her to survive—and reunite with her found family.

Dorane LeGauth is the wealthiest man in the galaxy, a force wrapped in charm, secrets, and danger. But even legends have enemies. When an assassin comes for him, it's a ghost in the dark who saves his life—one he's determined to find.

With killers closing in and the Legion threatening everything they love, Mei and Dorane must risk everything to trust each other. Because in this war-torn galaxy, love may be the only thing left worth fighting for.

Explosive chemistry. Shattering secrets. A love forged in shadow and war.

Total Pages (Source): 25

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

A ethereal

The twin suns blazed high in the crimson sky, their light casting a deep glow over the endless stretches of dark red soil. The landscape was a rugged masterpiece of towering cliffs, jagged rock formations cut into the colorful sandstone, and boulders so massive they seemed to have been carved by giants. The dry wind carried the scent of sunbaked earth and the faint whisper of distant storms.

Dorane ran barefoot across the dusty ground, his laughter echoing through the canyon. He dodged between the boulders, chasing Shep and the others, their voices a symphony of youthful exuberance.

“Try to catch me, Dorane!” Shep taunted, his wiry frame darting through a narrow crevice between two massive stones.

“Just wait!” Dorane grinned, scrambling after him.

Six of them played among the rocky outcroppings—Shep, Kalna, Orren, Tiev, Miris, and little Ryl. They leaped from stone to stone, kicking up fine clouds of red dust, their feet calloused and tough from years of running over the harsh terrain. The village sprawled below them, a collection of dome-shaped huts built from sand-hardened clay, their rounded forms blending into the arid landscape.

Dorane skidded to a stop, raising a hand to shield his eyes when a shadow passed over them. The others slowed, their laughter fading as they turned their faces skyward. The silhouette of a dark gray ship cut against the bright sky, the hum of its engines a distant growl growing steadily louder.

“A ship!” Miris whispered.

“It’s a Legion ship,” Tiev added, his voice tinged with awe.

Dorane narrowed his eyes, watching the dark, angular shape descend toward the village. It was a troop transport, sleek and menacing, its underbelly splitting open as landing struts extended.

“Why is the Legion here?” Kalna asked, her excitement dimming to unease.

“They never come here,” Shep muttered, crouching low behind a ridge of rock. The others followed suit, instinctively pressing themselves into the shadows, their game forgotten.

The transport settled onto the outskirts of the village, a plume of dust rising in its wake. The hiss of hydraulics signaled the ramp lowering, and then they emerged—Legion soldiers in matching dark gray uniforms, their visors gleaming in the sunlight.

Dorane’s stomach twisted. The Legion only came to the Outer Settlements for one reason.

“Something’s wrong,” he murmured.

The children fell silent as a figure strode out onto the ramp. He was tall, his uniform crisp, adorned with the insignia of power. Even at nine years old, Dorane understood rank, and this man held it like a blade.

General Coleridge Landais.

Dorane had never seen him in person, only heard his name in hushed conversations

between his parents and the village elders. He was said to be ruthless, a conqueror who saw the Outer Settlements as nothing more than pieces on a board.

Why is he here?

Dorane's gaze followed the general as he stepped onto the packed soil of their village. The village leader, an older man named Ralvek, approached him with cautious deference. Their voices were too far away to hear, but then Ralvek pointed—at Dorane's house.

Dorane's stomach clenched.

His mother stood outside their home, a woven basket of cloth draped over her arms. She stood watching the scene unfold. Her head was held high. Dorane smiled, pride swelling in his chest. His mother never bowed to anyone. A second later, his father stepped out of their home.

Dorane didn't understand what happened next. One second the Legion General was walking toward his parents, and the next, he lifted a blaster and fired. He never even spoke. The Legion General just... fired on his father.

His father crumpled to the ground.

Dorane's world snapped apart.

The moment stretched, surreal, endless. His breath caught in his throat as his mother lunged forward, her cry barely escaping before another shot fired. Her body folded, collapsing beside his father in the dirt.

Dorane's ears rang with the sound of the shots, his vision tunneling as the world around him fragmented. The voices of his friends blurred into meaningless noise. His

limbs locked, his breath stalled, and for the first time in his life, he understood what true terror was.

The village erupted. Screams burst from the residents as blaster fire rang out. The Legion soldiers surged forward, storming into homes and cutting down... everyone. The scent of scorched flesh filled his nose. Dorane's legs trembled beneath him.

"No," Shep whispered.

Kalna bolted, sprinting down the hill.

"No! Stop!" Dorane hissed, but it was too late. Two more children followed, rushing toward their families.

They didn't make it.

Blaster fire cut through the air, bright streaks against the backdrop of rising smoke. Kalna jerked mid-step, her body hitting the ground in a heap. The others fell a second later.

Dorane's heart pounded in his chest. He grabbed Shep's arm and pulled on him.

"Run," he rasped.

Shep didn't move. His face was ashen, frozen in shock. Dorane wrenched at him, dragging him back, but a new sound filled the air—a screeching roar as fighter skids swept over the landscape, their engines flaring as they turned toward the hill.

"They see us," Tiev breathed.

Dorane shoved Shep, his voice raw. "Run! Now!"

The others scrambled away, vanishing into the rocky outcroppings. But Shep wouldn't move.

Dorane had no choice.

He let go.

Shep lay on the ground, out in the open, unmoving. He just stared blankly down at the devastation below. Dorane didn't look back. He ran—down the opposite side of the hill, away from the carnage, away from the screams, away from everything he had known.

Weaving between the rocks, he dove beneath a boulder wedged between two cliffs and pressed his shaking body into the tight, dark space. His hands scrabbled at the loose rocks, pulling them in front of him, covering himself as best he could.

The ground trembled as the skids screamed overhead. Dust rained down around him, stinging his eyes, choking his throat. The sounds of more blasters screeched through the air. He covered his ears with his dirty hands and closed his eyes.

He curled into himself.

And he waited.

Two days later, the silence was worse than the noise. Dorane crawled out from beneath the boulder, blinking against the harsh sunlight. His body ached, his throat burned, his stomach twisted with hunger—but he barely noticed.

His feet carried him over the ridge, back toward the village. Shep lay in the same place that Dorane had left him. His friend looked almost as if he had fallen asleep there—if it hadn't been for the stain of blood and the scorch mark across his back.

Dorane wanted to turn his eyes away as he stumbled past, but he couldn't.

The wind howled through the corridor lined with huts, stirring ashes where homes once stood. The dome huts were crumbling, some reduced to skeletal remains of what they had been. Scorch marks blackened the ground.

Bodies lay where they had fallen.

Dorane walked forward in a daze, his eyes hollow, his mind blank. His parents' bodies remained in the dirt where they had been left, their hands inches apart, almost touching.

He staggered past them, toward his home. Inside, the air was thick, stale. He stepped over the threshold and froze.

His younger sister and brother lay on the floor, their small forms still and lifeless.

A sound tore from his throat—raw, broken. He dropped to his knees, his arms wrapping around his thin legs as his body shook. The light faded outside as he sat there, shivering, locked in grief and shock, before fatigue finally pulled him into a fitful sleep.

A low buzzing sound woke Dorane. Rolling to his feet, he released a low, feral growl when he saw the flies around his little sister. Scrambling over to the couch on his knees, he ripped the cover his mother had made off of it and rose on shaky feet to cover Saffin's petite body.

Grief tore through him, but he was too dehydrated for any tears to fall. Instead, he murmured a low prayer to give him strength. Stumbling through the doorway, he looked at the devastation surrounding him. He would not leave his people to rot out in the open. They would not become food for the scavengers who lived among the

rocks. They deserved better than that.

Dorane rounded the house to the small shed that contained his father's tools. The Legion soldiers had ransacked it, just like they had ransacked the inside of his house.

He pulled a shovel from under the discarded debris. Over the course of the day, he dug two graves in the center of their garden where the dirt had been tilled. Dorane ignored the blisters that formed and the blood that dripped from his fingers. He continued until the graves were deep enough to hold his parents and his little brother and sister.

One by one, he dragged them, wrapped in bedsheets, to the shallow graves. He placed his father and little brother in one and his mother and little sister in the other. Then he covered them. First with dirt, then with colorful sandstones.

He didn't stop.

When he was finished with his family, he climbed the hill. He spent the next five days picking up rocks and covering the bodies of his friends and their families. He wasn't strong enough to dig their graves. By the time he finished, his body was nothing but exhaustion and emptiness.

Trembling with fatigue, Dorane collapsed inside his home and slept.

The sun rose and set three times before he finally stirred, driven by hunger and thirst to wake up. He crawled into the kitchen, too weak to stand, and picked through the items scattered across the floor. The juice of the fruit soothed his parched throat while the sweet flesh and meat filled his stomach.

There's nothing left. There's no one left.

Dorane bowed his head, his thin shoulders shaking. Sniffing, he wiped his nose with the back of his hand as his mother's gentle voice floated through his mind.

"You are the son of a Knight of the Gallant Order."

"What does that mean?"

Dorane sniffed again and tilted his head back. He could almost feel his mother's gentle caress as she brushed his hair back and tweaked his nose.

"You are blessed, Dorane. Both your father and I are Gallant Knights. The Staffs you play with are powerful weapons, and one day, one of them will be yours. We are the protectors of the people—all people."

"But... why are you and Papa here if you are warriors?"

"Because now we must protect you and your brother and sister."

"What if the Legion comes? I've heard you and Papa say they are not good."

"Let us hope they do not. If they do, we will do what we have to. One day, you will understand. Now, let us practice."

Dorane's gaze turned to the wall where his parents hid the powerful weapons of the Gallant Knights. His father said it was to protect them. That only a true Knight of the Gallant could use them.

He stood and walked over to the metal vent. He pushed aside the end table that had been broken and pulled it out. Inside were two plain wooden boxes. He pulled one out and opened it. His father's Gallant Staff lay on a bed of velvet.

He lifted it in his hand, running his fingers over the inscriptions. His gaze moved to his mother's. With a deep sigh, he replaced the vent cover. No one would come here. The village would always be left as it is—a reminder and a place where restless spirits were trapped.

Packing what little he had, he stood in the doorway, looking at the only home he had ever known.

And then—he shut the door.

One day, he would return.

One day, the Legion would pay.

Earth:

Outside Beijing, China – The Zhang Estate

The courtyard was silent except for the rhythmic whisper of fabric slicing through the air. Twelve-year-old Mei Li Hú stood in the center of the polished stone training grounds, her petite frame poised with unnatural precision. Around her, the shadows of her father's elite guards lingered, their watchful gazes sharp and assessing.

She moved.

Each step was precise, calculated. The controlled turn of her wrist, the sharp pivot of her foot—each motion executed with the quiet grace of a dancer, but the deadly intent of a warrior.

Her bare feet skimmed the cold stone as she transitioned into Lán Zhō— a sweeping arc meant to redirect an opponent's energy. The movement was flawless. Too

flawless.

Mei did not hesitate. A perfect student. A perfect weapon.

A slow clap shattered the stillness.

Her father, Liu Zhang, stepped forward from the shaded terrace. His dark eyes glinted with something unreadable as he studied her. The guards immediately straightened.

Mei did not.

She kept her posture firm, her breathing steady, waiting. Waiting for his judgment.

He walked toward her with deliberate slowness, the soft click of his polished shoes against the stone stretching the silence taut. When he stopped before her, he said nothing, letting the weight of his presence settle over her like an invisible chain.

Then, quietly? —

“Again,” he instructed.

Mei’s fingers twitched at her sides. She bowed her head. There would be no praise. There never was.

She reset her stance and moved into the sequence again, the fabric whispering around her like ghosts.

Her father circled her as she moved, his expression unreadable. Then, with the barest flick of his fingers—a silent command.

The guard closest to her lunged.

Mei felt the shift in the air before she saw it. Instinct took over. She twisted, narrowly avoiding the strike aimed at her fragile ribs. She countered—a small palm snapping against the young guard’s wrist, redirecting his balance.

He recovered quickly, but she was faster.

Her foot hooked behind his knee, her body spinning as she used his own momentum against him . He staggered.

A second’s hesitation—and Mei sent the man sprawling against the stones, relieved him of his weapon, and stood over him with the QSZ-92 semi-automatic pistol pointed at his temple.

Then—she pulled the trigger.

The click resonated through the enclosed courtyard. Mei stared into the guard’s terrified eyes. For a fraction of a second, so quick it could have been imagined, a flicker of something twisted in her chest. Then it was gone. She watched dispassionately as the guard’s head fell back against the smooth stone, sweat beading on his forehead, and he swallowed noticeably as he stared back at her.

She had passed her father’s test.

Her father lifted a hand. The guard shakily climbed to his feet, bowed, and stepped away. Mei straightened, released the clip, and checked it and the chamber to make sure they were empty before she turned to face her father. Her breath came steady despite the sharp pulse in her veins. Her father’s gaze was sharp as he took a step closer, his voice a quiet decree.

“Exceptional.”

She had done well. The word curled in Mei's stomach like an icy knot. It should have felt like praise. It didn't.

It felt like ownership.

He turned to the assembled guards, his voice smooth as silk, yet edged with steel.

"She will begin the next phase of her training immediately. No limitations."

The guards bowed.

Mei stood still, absorbing the meaning of those words. There was no joy in them. No pride.

Only a deeper confirmation of what she already knew.

Her father was not looking at her like a daughter.

He was looking at her like a weapon.

And she had just sealed her fate.

From the Terrace, Behind the Silk Screen

Ming Li Hú watched from the shadows, her slender fingers tightening around the embroidered sleeve of her robe. Her heart clenched as she witnessed what she had long feared—the moment the man who controlled her life now claimed Mei as his tool, rather than his child.

They were not married. Her family's standing was not high enough for such a status. She was a tool, just as her daughter would be.

A searing pain, a deep regret, and a fierce determination battled within her. For years, she'd felt the approaching weight of this day, a sense of dread mixed with anticipation. While her parents had remained oblivious to the life they were sentencing her to when they accepted Lui's offer of financial support in exchange for their daughter, Ming had been diligently preparing Mei for a different life, her actions quiet but purposeful.

She had seen it in Liu Zhang's eyes since the day Mei first displayed her talent. A child prodigy. A perfect creation. His ambition had taken root then, and today, it had borne fruit.

Ming's dark eyes softened as she studied her daughter—small but strong, delicate but unyielding. So much like her.

The way Mei's jaw tightened in the face of her father's cold praise, the way she held herself still, controlled, when every child should have been basking in the warmth of their parent's approval. Mei understood, even at such a fragile, impressionable age.

Liu Zhang had never looked at Mei the way a father should.

And that was why she had quietly taught Mei what he never would.

Not through rebellion. No—Mei could not afford open defiance. The world Mei lived in, the world Ming had long endured, was not kind to women who fought too openly.

She had taught Mei the art of quiet resistance.

She showed her daughter how to survive in a world of powerful men, without them even realizing she was slipping from their control.

Ming released a slow breath, smoothing her sleeve as she stepped back into the

shadows.

The time would come for Mei to choose her own path.

And when it did, she would be ready.

Even if Ming was no longer there to guide her.

Beijing: Twelve years later

The city stretched out beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, a glittering sea of neon and steel. Mei stepped into the cavernous office of Liu Zhang, her father, barely glancing at the panoramic view of Beijing below. She had grown up surrounded by wealth and power, but neither had ever belonged to her.

Her father sat behind his sleek, black desk, his hands folded in front of him, his face unreadable. Standing beside him was a man in a crisply pressed suit. Mei quickly categorized him as the Chinese military. His posture was stiff, his expression neutral, but Mei didn't miss the way he studied her the moment she entered.

"Come in, Mei," her father said, his voice as smooth as polished stone.

She obeyed, stepping forward, her movements controlled, precise. Years of discipline had taught her that weakness was never tolerated in his presence.

"This is Major Xiao Cheng," her father gestured to the officer. "He is here on behalf of the government."

Mei gave the man a polite nod, her mind already piecing together what this meant. Her father rarely entertained guests unless they were useful to his ambitions.

Her father continued, his voice calm but edged with something sharp. “You have been accepted as a representative for a special exploratory mission to space.”

Mei blinked, momentarily surprised. Of all the things she had expected, this was not one of them.

“It is called Project Gliese 581g ,” her father explained. “Something has been found in space... something alien. The government wants information. You will be part of a carefully selected crew tasked with studying what has been discovered.”

She listened as her father summarized what had happened. An accident. A change in crew. A new opportunity. She knew immediately there had been no accident. There seldom was during a mission of this scope.

She didn’t miss the glance he exchanged with the major, nor the way the officer’s jaw tensed. This wasn’t just about discovery—it was about control. Intelligence gathering. Spying.

Xiao Cheng spoke then, his voice firm, clipped, confirming her suspicions. “Your mission is not simply exploration, Ms. Li Hú. You will be trained to gather intel on the technology being developed onboard and report any findings once contact is made.” His dark eyes measured her reaction. “You are to bring back anything of value.”

Mei felt a thrill of excitement coil in her chest, but she did not let it show. She simply inclined her head, her voice steady. “I understand.”

Her father studied her, his gaze piercing. “I called in many favors to ensure your assignment to this mission, Mei. It was not easy and came at a substantial cost. You must not fail.”

He didn't say it with concern, only expectation. Success was the only thing that mattered to him.

"I will not disappoint you," she said evenly.

The words came easily, practiced over years of training. But this time, for the first time, they held a different meaning to her.

She turned and walked out of the office, careful not to let her stride betray the anticipation humming beneath her skin. This was it—her chance. A way off this planet. A way out from under his control.

The rhythmic clicking of her heels down the corridor was abruptly interrupted by the heavier sound of following footsteps. She maintained her pace, recognizing her companion before he could speak, as he hastened to join her.

"Ms. Li Hú, a moment, please."

Mei glanced sideways, meeting Major Cheng's assessing gaze. He wasn't just studying her—he was fascinated.

"You are... different from what I expected," he said.

She kept her expression neutral. "Oh? How so?"

"I have read about you," he said casually. "Your father was very... thorough in sharing your accomplishments."

Of course, he would be, she thought with disdain.

Mei had spent years ensuring that the world saw only what she wanted them to see. If

this man thought he knew her, he was mistaken.

“Then you must know everything there is to know about me,” she said, her voice smooth, careful.

His lips quirked slightly. “Not everything, I suspect, but I would like to remedy that. Perhaps at dinner tonight?”

They reached the entrance of the building. A sleek black car pulled up, its tinted windows gleaming under the city lights. The driver stepped out, opening the door for the major.

“I’m afraid I have to decline, Major Cheng,” she replied with an edge of coolness to her voice. “I already have a previous engagement.”

“Regrettable. Perhaps we will have another chance in the future.” Xiao paused on the sidewalk and turned to face her. His dark gaze flickered with something unreadable. “You remind me of a lioness.”

Mei arched a brow. “How so?”

“There is a stillness in you,” he said. “Most people would not see it, but I do.” He hesitated, then added, “It is the lionesses who hunt. And if necessary, they will bring down a male who threatens them.”

Mei smiled slightly, tilting her head. “Interesting.”

Xiao held her gaze for a moment longer before he slid into the car. As it pulled away, his eyes remained on her, watching. Mei suppressed the urge to frown. There was something in his expression—not admiration. Something sharper. Calculating.

Mei chuckled under her breath, her mind already focused on her next move. Neither her father nor her government had any idea how deadly she had become.

And soon, she would be beyond their reach.

Six months into the voyage aboard the Gliese

Mei knelt in front of the open panel, her fingers deftly running along the smooth wiring as she ran her final diagnostic. It was a routine check, one she had done countless times before. The hum of the ship was steady, a comforting rhythm she had grown used to over the last six months.

She reached inside to adjust the connector when—an ugly, distorted face lunged at her from the dark recesses of the panel and skidded across the floor.

Mei let out a startled scream, her instincts kicking in as she rolled onto her back, heart pounding. Her first thought was intruder . Her second thought was kill . But before she could react, a familiar sound reached her ears—deep, throaty laughter.

Her breath steadied.

Sergi.

Mei tilted her head back, still sprawled on the floor, and glared at the doorway. There, with a smug grin on his face, stood Sergi Lazaroff, doing what could only be described as an awkward victory jig.

The papier-maché monstrosity dangled in his hand, its exaggerated features hideous in the bright light.

Mei exhaled sharply, shaking her head. “You’re a dead man, Lazaroff.”

Sergi's laughter deepened. "Worth it."

He saw the moment she shifted onto her feet, the movement fluid and full of unspoken promise. His grin widened—then he bolted.

Mei took off after him, her voice sharp with mock fury. "You are an absolute menace! I swear I'm going to eject you with the waste!"

Sergi's laughter echoed through the corridors of the Gliese as he sprinted ahead, dodging low-hanging pipes and swinging around corners with practiced ease. Mei was right on his heels, her irritation only growing as she heard Julia's chuckle from the comms station.

"Ten credits says she catches him in under two minutes," Julia called.

"Five says she'll draw it out just to make him suffer," Ash countered, already pushing off from his seat.

Josh sighed, setting down his tablet. "What now?"

Ash clapped him on the back. "Come on, it's about to get interesting."

By the time Sergi skidded into the galley, he was wheezing with laughter. He turned, arms raised in surrender, but his grin never wavered. Mei lunged, ready to tackle him?—

Only for his hands to settle on her shoulders, gently guiding her around.

Mei's breath caught as she saw the table.

A small, slightly misshapen cake sat in the center, a single papier-maché candle

standing upright on top. Julia, Ash, and Josh stood nearby, their grins bright as they began singing Happy Birthday in off-key harmony.

Mei froze.

The threats she had been preparing died on her lips.

Sergi leaned in, his breath warm against her ear. “Gotcha, pandochka .” His voice was soft, teasing, but beneath it, there was something deeper.

Mei blinked hard, willing the sudden moisture in her eyes to disappear. She wasn’t the type to cry. Tears were a waste of energy.

But as she looked at the surrounding faces—their laughter, their joy for her—something inside her softened. They weren’t just crewmates.

They were her people.

Her family.

Mei exhaled and leaned back against Sergi for the briefest moment before he let her go, giving her space. She turned, locking eyes with him. He knew. He understood. And in his gaze, she saw acceptance—no expectations, no demands. Just someone who saw her.

A small smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

Julia held out a neatly wrapped package. “It’s not much, but?—”

Mei took it with steady hands. “It’s perfect.”

Ash eyed the cake. “So, uh... we can have more than one piece, right?”

Josh chuckled. “That’s up to the birthday girl.”

Mei gave them all a slow, assessing look. Then she picked up a knife, cut the barest sliver, and handed it to Sergi with a cheeky grin, laughing at his disgruntled expression before she added more.

“I knew you loved me,” he said with a pleased expression at the chunk of cake now on his plate.

She snorted out a rare, inelegant laugh and shook her head. “Don’t get too comfortable, Lazaroff. There will be payback. I promise. There will be some serious payback.”

His laughter was warm, real. “I’d expect nothing less, pandochka .”

Mei breathed out as a rare emotion threatened to choke her, and glanced at the others. Their faces were filled with laughter and light. For the first time in a long time, she didn’t feel alone.

It truly is a happy birthday, m?ma.

1

Jeslean, Neri – Legion Headquarters

The capital city of Jeslean stretched beneath Andri, its skyline a labyrinth of towering spires and sweeping bridges that gleamed under the planet's pale sun. From the highest floor of the Legion Headquarters, Andri Andronikos observed his empire through the massive transparisteel windows of his office. The city pulsed with controlled order—precisely as he had designed it.

His control of the star systems was almost absolute. Only the Knights of the Gallant Order and a few council members continued to defy him, and there were only a handful of them left. Andri and his brother had made sure of that.

He turned and walked over to his desk. His office was an extension of that control. A vast chamber brightly lit by crimson recessed lights in the walls, the black marble floors polished to a mirror sheen. The furniture was sparse—elegant but severe. A single desk carved from obsidian, its surface immaculate. A long, vertical holoscreen flickered beside the desk, casting shifting shadows across the walls. Every detail of the room was calculated, measured, perfect—a stark contrast to the turmoil churning beneath the surface of his mind.

Andri sat down, motionless, fingers steepled beneath his chin as he listened to the voice on the transmission. The captain of the Varrien, one of his most efficient warships, reported from the debris field they had discovered.

“We picked up an anomaly, Director Andronikos. It was brief, a fraction of a second,

but the disturbance in subspace was significant. We couldn't pinpoint an exact location before it disappeared."

Andri's jaw tensed. Another anomaly. Another disruption without explanation. This was the third such report in the past cycle.

"We have begun recovery operations," the captain continued, his voice tinged with something unspoken—unease. "The wreckage is... unusual. The material composition doesn't match any known ship in our records. And there's more, sir—our instruments detected five unique energy signatures moving in different directions before they vanished. We lost track of them almost immediately."

Five.

Andri's eyes flicked to the other report that lay before him. The one he had received just hours earlier. His stomach twisted with a cold weight of certainty as he exhaled slowly.

"Retrieve everything. I want every fragment analyzed at the Jeslean laboratories. Nothing is to be left behind." His voice remained smooth, clipped, but his fingers tightened over the edge of his desk. "And Captain?"

"Sir?"

"If any trace of those five energy signatures reappear anywhere in the system, I want to know immediately."

"Understood, Director Andronikos. We'll update you the moment we have further information."

The transmission ended, the holoscreen flickering back to idle status. Silence draped

over the room like a suffocating shroud.

Andri inhaled deeply, the sound loud in the quiet space. His fingers traced the edges of the report before him—the one from his historian, detailing what remained of the Gallant Order.

For two decades, Andri and his brother had hunted them, eliminating them one by one. He had thought they were finished. The Gallant was a relic of a bygone era, shattered and scattered, their so-called warriors little more than dying embers of a forgotten fire.

But the fire was returning.

His eyes dropped to the faded parchment nestled among the official reports. A copy of an ancient prophecy, a fragment of text that had always haunted him. He had dismissed it as a myth for years. A precautionary tale woven by fools who refused to let go of the past.

But now...

Now the universe itself seemed to be conspiring to make it true.

Andri's lips parted slightly as he read the lines again, his fingers tracing the delicate etchings of ink:

“When the stars fracture and the darkness rises, five will return from beyond the veil. Five warriors, bound by fate, shall rally the lost, forge the broken, and stand against the tide. The Ancient Knights of the Gallant will rise once more, and in their wake, empires shall fall.”

His throat tightened. His heart pounded once, hard, against his ribs.

His gaze shifted to the image—a centuries-old carving discovered in the caverns of Aetherial. It depicted five warriors standing in three interconnected circles, the Gallant Staffs in their hands raised, their faces unreadable. Three men. Two women.

Five.

Andri sat back in his chair, his breathing slow and measured. The office felt... smaller than it had minutes before. The shadows pressed in at the edges, the hum of the city outside suddenly distant, almost unreal.

The Ancient Knights of the Gallant had not simply been legends. They had been real. Their power had once united entire star systems. And now, if these signals were correct...

They have returned.

Andri exhaled sharply, his pulse accelerating in his throat. This wasn't a coincidence. It wasn't random chance. This was a pattern, a movement, a force that had been set in motion long before he had ever taken his first breath.

This cannot happen.

His control was absolute. His rule was undisputed. He had spent years bending the will of planets, ensuring the Legion remained unmatched, unchallenged. If the Ancient Knights returned...

Everything he had built—everything he had taken—would crumble.

He couldn't allow it.

With deliberate precision, Andri reached forward and keyed in a secure transmission.

The holoscreen flickered, shifting into the sharp, rigid features of his brother.

Coleridge Landais answered. “Andri. What is it?”

Andri stared at him for a long, tense moment. Then, quietly, he spoke the words he had long dreaded:

“The prophecy is true.”

Coleridge’s brow lifted slightly. “What prophecy?”

Andri’s hands curled into fists against the desk, his knuckles white. His breath was slow, controlled—but beneath it, something burned. Something sharp and raw.

“The Ancient Knights of the Gallant have arrived. They must be stopped, Coleridge. You must find them and stop them.”

For the first time, a shadow of emotion flickered across Coleridge’s face.

Andri felt it then, deep in his bones—the inevitability of what was coming. A war unlike anything the Legion had faced before.

The fire had been reignited.

And he would do whatever it took to extinguish it before it could consume everything.

Present Day:

Deep space, unknown galaxy

Mei's body bowed sharply as she sucked in a breath, her nerves reacting before her mind fully caught up. The pod shuddered as its lid clicked open, allowing frigid, stale air to sweep over her. Somewhere in the fog of her mind, a voice murmured. Familiar. Urgent.

"Mei... wake up. You have to wake up."

The voice was distant but steady. A soft, insistent whisper against the abyss pulling her under. She recognized it—Li Wang, the MIT student she had been working with back on Earth.

"Computer readings indicate the air is suitable for humans. Gravity is within the range of normal human function. Caution is needed. You have been in stasis for ten days, eight hours, forty-three minutes."

"Computer, l-location," she requested, her throat dry.

"Location unknown," Li replied.

"Computer, location of the Gliese," she asked, reaching out and gripping the edge of the escape pod to pull herself up into a sitting position.

"Location unknown," Li answered.

Mei breathed in deeply, testing the oxygen while her eyes scanned the room. The smell of rust, decay, oil, and several unidentifiable, foreign things overwhelmed her after nearly two years of purified oxygen. The scent felt lived-in. The air was thick, almost clogging her lungs with the taste of corrosion.

After nothing came to investigate, her fingers twitched as she slowly pushed the heavy lid of the pod upward to open it further. It moved stiffly. She winced at the

sound of metal against metal when the resistance suddenly disappeared and the lid crashed against the backside of the pod. Her eyes flew around the room.

It seemed empty of anyone—or any thing—who would react to the noise, but the room was massive, cavernous, and the only light came from above the dirty, dented double doors, a sickly green glow that cast more shadows than light. Damaged and neglected machines, twisted beams, shattered hull plating, old cryo-chambers, broken satellites, and more were all stacked in uneven mounds, covered in layers of grime, rust, and unidentifiable filth.

Mei lifted a hand to her head. The dull, aching weight in her skull pulsed, radiating down her spine, spreading through her limbs like the aftershock of trauma.

She was weak, and for a moment, she remained motionless, gathering her thoughts. Something had gone terribly wrong. The last thing she remembered?—

The explosion. The Gliese breaking apart. The cold emptiness of space swallowing everything before the sedative in the pod kicked in, reducing her heart rate.

She unzipped her jacket and ran her fingers under the edge of her shirt, along her collarbone, to the nutrition patch she had placed there before she lost consciousness, but the thought of its potential usefulness and the unknown duration of her survival in the unfamiliar place made her pause before pulling it free. A shuddering breath hitched in her throat, her heart pounding a rapid rhythm against her chest as the full horror of her situation dawned on her.

She caught herself before panic could take root. Emotions would not save her. Survival was all that mattered.

Slowly, she pushed herself upright. The escape pod's interior was small and cramped, its curved walls lined with survival compartments.

She inhaled slowly and waited until she could sit up straight without holding onto the pod. Her eyes scanned the dingy, cluttered room. The doors would slide open instead of swinging in or out on hinges. She would have to remember that.

Peering through the window that ran along the top of the pod, she noticed a small, grime-covered viewport. Unfortunately, it offered little but shadows and metal, a confirmation that she was still in space. Someone—or some thing —had collected her. She needed to find out who .

A low hum vibrated beneath the escape pod, telling her that the ship was functioning in some capacity beyond the basics necessary for life. Mei inhaled deeply, centering herself. Her training demanded she assess, adapt, and act.

She was not safe here.

Her body protested as she half-rolled, half-stepped over the edge, gripping it when her knees gave out. She leaned forward, muscles stiff, weak from the time she had been unconscious. That weakness wouldn't last. She wouldn't allow it.

Her mind slowly cleared, helped by the chill in the air. Muscle memory from years of training took hold; every action precise, efficient, focused solely on survival. Each second felt like an eternity as she listened for any sound that would signal someone's approach. From the extensiveness of the disarray around her and the space dust covering the items, she concluded the items were not likely to be attended closely. Still, she needed to make sure she had removed everything she needed before anyone appeared.

She reached back into the pod and pulled out the standard survival gear that had been packed by the Project Gliese's team before she pulled a Ka-Bar USMC combat knife from a slot in the wall. Running the tip along the liner, she slit the silky material, revealing a cache of additional gear not on the scientists' lists. It had been tricky

getting the added weight onboard the Gliese. She wouldn't have been able to if not for the extra mission into space during the building process that her father had arranged.

Mei ran her fingers along the hilt of her katana, the familiar weight grounding her. It was one of many weapons she had trained with—one of many she would use if necessary.

She glanced toward the viewport on the far side of the storage bay. Through the grime-smeared glass, the vast emptiness of deep space stretched beyond the freighter's battered hull.

A sharp exhale left her lips. She might be lost, but she wasn't dead. And yet, she was alone. That was what hit the hardest.

Mei pushed away the flash of grief at the thought of losing Sergi, Julia, Ash, and Josh. She stepped out of her weighted boots and stripped out of the standard-issued uniform worn by the crew of the Gliese, keeping on her black cotton t-shirt and matching black boy-shorts. She tossed the uniform and boots into the pod, then pulled on her replacement gear: a pair of black thick socks, black cargo pants, black soft leather combat boots, a black form-fitting jacket with hidden pockets, a black knitted cap to hide the shine of her hair, and black gloves to hide the sheen of her skin. Flexing her fingers, she felt confident that she could disappear into the shadows. Especially if the rest of the alien vessel was as dark as this room.

Minutes later, she was warm and armed, and she placed everything she needed in a black duffle bag which she stowed in a secure spot near the door.

She spent the next hour exploring the room. The ship clearly dealt in junk, and from the looks of the writing on the assorted pieces, the ship had interplanetary space travel capabilities.

It was tricky climbing over the heap of debris to the viewport, but she wanted a better look outside the spacecraft. She pulled a cloth out of the pocket of her jacket and cleaned a section of the interior pane. Her heart caught in her throat when she noticed the ship was near a planet.

Dark gray clouds and flashes illuminated below her. It looked like there was one hell of a storm covering most of the celestial body. In the distance, she counted three small moons in a line.

Her gaze moved back down to the planet. She didn't know if it was habitable. It could be a gas giant, with no actual landmass. Pain flashed through her at the thought that she—or one of the others—could have landed on such a world.

The thought settled like cold steel in her chest, building as another sank in. There was no home to return to—not without another gateway and a spaceship that could take them. Even if they had one, there was no guarantee a new gateway would spit them into their galaxy.

“What would I have to go back to anyway? The cage my father kept me locked in?” she murmured, her voice raw with emotion.

Closing her eyes as a swift shaft of pain ran through her, she released a silent prayer to the universe.

Please... let the others be safe.

Three weeks later, Mei had become a ghost aboard the alien freighter, slipping into their stores of food and water, memorizing the ship's layout, and watching the crew from the darkness. She moved silent as a breath, and used the maze of rusted passageways and flickering lights to her advantage.

The ship was old, patched together with scraps of salvaged tech. The air always carried a scent of ozone and burned metal, and the hull creaked like an ancient beast groaning under its own weight.

Sitting on a beam high above the massive storage bay where they sorted what they had collected, she pulled a small notebook and pencil out of a pocket of her cargo pants and leaned back in the shadows, observing the two men below.

She opened the notebook and turned to a new page. Her eyes flicked between the scene below and the drawing she was making to capture it. This was her tether. Her quiet anchor in a world she did not belong to. Some wrote journals to process their thoughts—Mei let them bleed into lines and shading. Each sketch was proof she existed. That she was still here.

She had captured each of the five crew members onboard the freighter. As far as she could tell based on their physical characteristics, they all came from different worlds. This meant that wherever she had awoken, there were multiple planets that could sustain life.

She paused in her drawing when the tall, reptilian man with dark, shimmery green patches of luminescent gold skin that pulsed when he spoke entered through a narrow doorway. She knew that the doorway led to the level where the galley and the crew cabins were located. He paused on the platform and called out to the two men. His name was Xyphos, among a few other things which she might not precisely understand but knew the gist of based on the derisive tone with which they were said. He had four eyes that blinked independently, a sour disposition, and from the way the men reacted to him, she was positive he was the captain of the freighter.

“Rak’tol varun nezhak-toh kry’tulakh ves’tan Cryon-II!” Xyphos commanded.

Grak shrugged while Tiv snapped to attention. Even without understanding the

words, Mei recognized submission when she saw it. Tiv moved faster, his mandibles clicking, while Grak—slower, lazier—barely acknowledged the command, tossing debris over his shoulder with deliberate indifference.

“Tzarak Urvalek. Vash’kal nerai Frell’shak vok’ta Cryon-II turak vor’zhak,” Xyphos grumbled to himself in a voice pointedly loud enough to be overheard, his glance singling out Grak.

Mei’s lips twitched. Even without knowing the words, she could tell he wasn’t wishing Grak good health. Her gaze flickered down to the quick sketch she had drawn of Xyphos, the lines of his angry expression dark and emphatic.

Lorik stepped through the doorway to stand beside Xyphos, and Mei watched with amusement as the captain started for the stairs, intending to grouchily ignore the newcomer on the scene before Lorik placed his hand on Xyphos’s arm, shook his head, and spoke in that hypnotic voice of his. A moment later, Xyphos grumbled something she couldn’t hear, nodded, and disappeared back the way he came.

Lorik was the most human-like of the five. He had dark obsidian skin with silver veins that pulsed faintly, but it was his voice that Mei found the most intriguing. It was smooth, spellbinding. He used it most with the three other crew members, but like today, she had seen him use it a few times on the captain when the man had become tired of the bickering among the crew or with Grak’s insubordination.

Grak, Frell, and Tiv were the grunts. From the disconnection between them and the captain and first officer, she suspected they had been a rash hire—one that both men regretted.

Mei casually sketched Grak. He was a massive hulking brute, with thick skin covered in spiked ridges down his arms. He was slow, but strong. His voice was a deep, guttural growl.

She had noticed over the last few weeks that he had a bad habit of drinking too much. He was not a functioning alcoholic. His ineptness had led to a near fatal accident yesterday when he hit the wrong button on the lift controls and dropped a pile of space debris on Frell.

That was probably why Frell wasn't there today. Frell, the smallest of the crew members, had been fortunate that he was wiry and fast. He had four arms and piercing red eyes that never stayed still. Yesterday, he had come close to killing Grak. The argument had escalated to the point that Mei had been surprised that Lorik hadn't confined Grak to keep him from being murdered.

Her eyes softened when she studied Tiv. He was the only one she found herself... liking. Which was strange—he wasn't human, wasn't even close. But unlike the others, he never barked orders, never wasted words on cruelty.

His mandibles clicked when he was nervous, and sometimes, she imagined she understood what he meant by the small, weary tilt of his head. Maybe that was why she watched him more than the others. Maybe that was also why she hoped—just a little—that when she finally made her move, he wouldn't be in the way.

He was the only one of the crew worth keeping in her opinion. Tiv worked tirelessly, never complained—that she had witnessed—and kept to himself. When he was working with Grak and Frell, he tried to keep the peace between the two.

Out of the five, Mei enjoyed watching Tiv the most. There was something about the way his eyes moved and how he would just shake his head at Grak and Frell that amused her and reminded her of Julia, Ash, and Josh when she and Sergi were teasing each other.

Well, not quite the same way. We picked on each other for fun.

The memories caught her off guard. For a short time, she'd had a family—one made of laughter and teasing and bad birthday surprises. One where she wasn't a tool, a weapon, or a mission. She hoped—desperately—that she still did have a family. Somewhere. Anywhere in this strange new universe.

With a shake of her head, she returned to her observations. The aliens' languages were a chaotic mix of guttural clicks, rolling consonants, and deep rumbles. She could pick up fragments, but nothing cohesive. There was one word that stood out, though. Turbinta .

They had said it often over the last few days. When they did, their voices lowered. Their gazes darkened. It was a name, a place, or a warning.

Interesting. Very interesting.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

2

Later that evening, the soft hum of the ship vibrated beneath the metal cargo container as Mei sat cross-legged by the viewport, staring out at the endless black. The ship, which had been stationary the past week, was back underway. She wasn't sure what had been wrong, but Xyphos' curses and Lorik's greasy clothing led her to guess that it was a mechanical issue.

She released a sigh, leaned back against a piece of metal behind her, and pulled her notebook from her pocket. Her fingers traced the well-worn cover before she flipped it open. The pages inside were smudged with charcoal and pencil, filled with stolen moments, captured in quiet lines and soft shading.

A low chuckle slipped from her, and she looked out of the viewpoint again. She had used her escape pod as a storage unit to hide some of her most personal items during the Gliese's voyage. She hadn't wanted anyone, especially Sergi, to see her most inner thoughts. Her drawings were a glimpse of her soul, a peek inside her heart and mind.

Her hand caressed the soft cover of the notebook she was holding. She had been afraid to open this notebook at first. She was afraid of what the memories inside might do to her. But now, as she turned the pages, she realized they didn't hurt.

They brought her peace.

She exhaled softly, studying the first drawing. She had captured Julia while she was unaware of anything else but what she was focused on. The page was filled with

delicate, intricate details—Julia’s slender hands cupping a sprouting seedling, her glasses slightly askew as she studied a computer screen, a lock of blondish-brown hair falling over her cheek as she bent over a microscope.

Mei traced the drawing with her fingertip, the soft edges of the graphite bringing back the memory.

“You always draw people’s hands first,” Julia had once said, watching her from across the lab. “Why?”

Mei had smiled, shading in the curve of Julia’s fingers.

“Because hands tell the truth,” she’d replied. “A person can lie with their face, but never with their hands.”

Julia had laughed, the sound light and unguarded.

“That’s poetic. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Dr. Marksdales.”

“You might be surprised,” Julia had teased. “One day, you’ll have to show me your drawings. I can’t tell you how frustrating it is to wonder and never see.”

“Perhaps one day,” she had vaguely replied.

Mei’s breath hitched at the memory. “It might not be too late. She could have survived. I did.”

The thought soothed her. She turned to the next page and shook her head. The image wasn’t refined like Julia’s had been. This one was a collage of moments with Josh.

The drawing was pure chaos.

Her face lit up as she remembered drawing this one. There were schematics layered over each other, half-written notes scrawled in the margins, and a tiny, grinning stick-figure version of Josh giving a thumbs-up beside a horribly drawn spaceship labeled Definitely Not Rigged .

Mei chuckled. Josh had loved the ship. Every inch of the Gliese had been his playground, his puzzle to solve.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to fly a spaceship that wasn’t government-approved,” he’d said one night, sprawled out on the floor of the engine room, tools scattered around them as they worked to untangle what the engineers back on Earth had done.

“My dad used to say Earth looked the most beautiful from space. I wonder if he ever imagined this—being out here, where no one’s been before.”

“What do you think he’d say?” Mei remembered asking, watching him tinker with the system controls.

Josh had grinned, wiping grease from his hands.

“That I’m a goddamn genius.”

Mei snorted, shaking her head.

“More like a menace. If only the engineers could see what you are doing at the moment.”

“Please. I’m an innovator. Tell me you’re not impressed.”

She'd rolled her eyes but hadn't argued. She'd been more than impressed. The next page was a drawing of him deep in thought as he lay under the console. She realized now that it had been one of those rare moments when she and Josh had been alone. As she studied his face, she realized that the mask of professionalism that she associated with him was gone. It was as if she were seeing layers of him that only a few people—like Ash—ever saw.

“You’ve given me a gift that I will always cherish,” she murmured, touching the corner of the drawing before she turned to the next page.

Warmth filled her when she saw Ash's face. The drawing had captured Ash alive with movement, freezing him forever in mid-spin. His arms were outstretched, his head tilted back in laughter. The background was blurred, giving the illusion of floating in zero gravity, the faintest hint of music notes sketched in the air beside him.

The chill of movement against her cheek caused her to lift her hand to brush it away. Her hand froze in midair and she stared at the tips of her fingers when she realized that she had brushed away a tear. Her gaze flickered between the dampness and the page. A wistful smile curved her lips, and for a moment, she almost felt like she could close her eyes and travel in time back to that day.

“Come on, Mei,” Ash had coaxed, grabbing her wrist and tugging her toward him. “You can fight like a demon with Sergi, but you can’t dance? What kid never learned to dance?”

“The kid who didn’t want to embarrass herself,” she had laughed.

Ash had snorted, spinning effortlessly.

“Nonsense. Dancing is just another form of exercise. Think of it as getting in shape to catch Sergi next time. Consider me your new exercise coach.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m ‘vested. Josh, Julia, and I have placed bets, and I hate to lose.”

He had tried to teach her, guiding her movements, his warm laughter filling the air whenever she got a move wrong. And she had. Many times. On purpose, just so the lessons wouldn’t end.

She traced the edges of the sketch, remembering the way he had grinned at her triumphantly when she had followed his steps without tripping over herself.

“See?” he had said, beaming. “Told you I was the best dancer on the ship.”

“You are the only one who dances,” she dryly pointed out.

“Semantics, my dear pupil. Now, I have five marshmallows riding on you catching Sergi the next time.”

She chuckled and brushed another tear as she remembered Ash wiggling his eyebrows at her and leaning in. Shaking her head, she drew in a deep breath, gathering her emotions before she fingered the blue tab. Everything beyond it was focused on Sergi Lazaroff.

She knew Sergi’s history—just as he would have known hers. Cheng had given her a dossier on every member of the crew. Sergi’s had been thin, but the limited information had been enough to warn her that she was dealing with a man who wasn’t to be toyed with. Her lips quirked at the thought.

“Oh, Sergi. You’d better have survived,” she murmured, flipping over the pages.

She felt her throat tighten as a flood of emotions threatened to crush the icy wall she

imagined protected her heart.

Sergi's sketches differed from the others. The lines were heavier, bolder, capturing the smirk tugging at his lips, the mischief in his eyes, the cocky tilt of his head.

Each drawing made her chest ache.

Beneath the first, she had drawn a self-portrait of her with Sergi. He had his hand resting on her shoulder, their arms pressed together in a way that spoke of effortless camaraderie, of shared secrets, of unspoken trust.

"You know, you're not as terrifying as you think you are."

"Says the man who hid in a ventilation shaft for two hours after stealing my dessert."

"I regret nothing and admit even less."

"You should. That was my last piece of chocolate."

"You don't even like chocolate."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"That you're a thief and I will have my revenge."

Sergi had laughed so hard, he had nearly fallen off the table.

"I like you, pandochka," he had said, using the nickname he had given her. Little panda. "You remind me of home."

“You don’t,” she had whispered, turning away from him.

He had gently cupped her chin, turning her back to face him. His eyes were serious, somber. She held her breath as they looked at each other.

“I don’t what?”

“You don’t remind me of home.”

“What do I remind you of then, pandochka?”

She remembered throwing her arms around his neck and hugging him. He had held her close, his warmth sinking into her.

“Safe. You make me feel... safe. My home was never that, but here, with you and the others, it is,” she had confessed, pressing her face against his neck.

“Oh, pandochka. That is what a real home feels like. It is your fortress, your castle, against the world.”

Mei released a shuddering breath and closed the notebook slowly, her hands tightening around it.

They had been her family. They had shown her what a home felt like. And, for a brief, impossible moment, what it meant to be truly free.

Mei breathed in deeply, steadying herself. She tucked the notebook back into her pocket. Perhaps she hadn’t been as ready for the memories as she’d thought. She brushed another tear from her cheek and was wiping her hands on her trousers when she heard a noise outside in the corridor.

She stiffened, every nerve in her body going on high alert. Rolling silently off the crate, she grabbed her katana from where it had been lying beside her, and retreated to a shadowy spot behind a line of crates stacked by the door. Her fingers tightened around the katana when she recognized the staggering shuffle of heavy boots. The door hissed open, and the greenish tint of a large man with thick arms covered in spikes stood out against the ghastly, dim glow.

Grak.

Mei stilled, sinking deeper into the shadows behind the crates as the door closed behind Grak. The smell of alcohol hit her before she saw him. Acrid. Sharp. Fermented. It clung to the surrounding air, mixing with the already thick scent of ozone, rust, and burnt metal.

She had learned his stumbling, heavy gait over the last three weeks—a lumbering beast of a man who moved like gravity was his to command, a mantle of it cascading over his shoulders and thundering from his feet.

Tonight, he appeared drunker than usual.

His boots scraped against the floor as he staggered forward, muttering under his breath. Then, with fumbling fingers, he yanked a small communicator from his belt and activated it.

A sharp buzz of static filled the storage bay before a low, mechanical voice answered in his native tongue.

Grak's words slurred, thick and guttural, his voice dropping into a conspiratorial whisper.

“Raash'ten vek Tor'Rag—vash ka'Lek turiss nash'tak vah.”

The voice on the other end responded, garbled but questioning.

Grak grinned, a wet, drunken chuckle rattling his chest.

“Zash’Tor ka’vak draal—ten vash’mek!” he crowed.

His words blurred together, voice thick with greed and liquor. He swung an arm wildly, nearly toppling a pile of discarded metal casings before bracing himself against the wall.

The voice crackled again, urgent.

Grak snorted, waving a hand at the air as if swatting away concerns.

“Tirash ka’nor ur’vak Cryon II. Draal tur’resh ka vash.”

He chuckled, tapping the communicator against his thick, ridged forehead before shoving it into his pocket.

Then he turned and his heavy-lidded eyes scanned the room, barely able to focus as he swayed on his feet.

Mei watched through a gap between the crates, her breath measured, controlled. Grak’s gaze landed on the escape pod. Mei’s pulse steadied.

Grak moved toward the pod, his massive hands running along its curved exterior, fumbling for a latch. His fingers slid over small dents, the scratches left behind from its emergency ejection. A flicker of frustration crossed his dull, glazed expression, but then his movements sharpened and he was wrenching the lid upward with a creaking groan of metal.

She stiffened when he paused. In the dim light, she could see his body tense. She didn't need to see his face to know what he was looking at.

The ripped-out lining. The empty compartment where the survival gear had been. The evidence that someone had already been here.

A low, guttural chuckle slipped from Grak's chapped lips, rolling into something darker. He turned, his body half-shrouded in the dim glow of the emergency lights—and spoke in English.

"I know you're here."

Mei's fingers curled around the hilt of her katana.

"Come on, ancient one," Grak coaxed, his eyes scanning the darkness. "The Legion is looking for the Ancients of the Gallant. They'd pay a damn fortune for you."

Mei's breath slowed.

Ancients of the Gallant.

The Legion.

Her mind filed away the information, but her focus remained on the immediate threat.

She watched as Grak's thick fingers twitched, hovering near the weapon strapped to his belt.

Mei made her decision. She couldn't risk him telling anyone else about the pod or her. Her mother's soft words came back to her in haunting clarity.

“Let your enemy see what they wish to see. Someone who is weak, vulnerable, easily controlled. Then, strike with deadly precision. Do not give them a chance to understand what they are up against. And then become a shadow once more, because there will be others waiting. Those that are larger, more powerful than you, will always think they can control you, defeat you... but you are the viper. Small. Fast. Deadly.”

Her lips curved as her mother’s words flowed through her. She was small, fast, and deadly. She was the Green Tree Viper.

Grak’s eyes widened slightly when she stepped out of the shadows. Her mind calmed when a grin split his wide lips.

“Well, well,” he rumbled, his voice dripping with greed. “No one else on board knows about you or your pod. I would say this is my lucky day.” He rubbed his hands together, like a gambler with a winning hand. “And that, ancient one, makes you mine.”

Mei’s lips curved into a cool smile.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

And then—she moved.

Mei struck first. She stepped into his space, katana flashing upward with deadly precision. Grak barely had time to react—his body too sluggish, too slow—before her katana sliced through the air with a whisper of steel, parting fabric and skin in one seamless motion. The scent of blood—sharp, metallic—curled into her nostrils as Grak let out a guttural snarl, stumbling backward, his hand pressing against the thin, red line blooming across his chest.

Cursing, he fumbled for his weapon. Mei didn't give him the chance. She sidestepped his wild swing, ducked beneath his reach, and drove her knee into his ribs.

A grunt of pain, but his thick hide and bone-structure made any physical contact with him pointless. Grak swung again, this time with more force.

Mei twisted, his fist grazing past her shoulder as she countered with a sharp elbow to his throat. He stumbled, gasping. She noted the weak spot.

He was bigger. Stronger. But she was faster.

Grak lunged, trying to grab her.

Mei pivoted, using his own momentum to flip him onto his back with a bone-rattling crash. He hit the floor hard, the air rushing out of his lungs. Before he could recover, Mei brought her katana up, poised to strike.

Grak froze. His bloodshot eyes darted to the blade hovering a breath from his throat. His chest heaved.

Mei stared down at him, unmoving for a split second before her hand moved with the grace of a dancer. The surgeon's sharpness of her blade slid across the soft, vulnerable flesh.

She had been trained for this. Conditioned for it. And yet, the weight of the moment pressed against her ribs, as sharp as her blade. Not guilt. Not regret. Just the undeniable certainty that she had survived. Again.

3

Mei stood over Grak's body, watching dispassionately as green blood slowly pooled under him, and silently cursed. Her plan to remain undetected would be difficult to maintain with a missing crew member. There would be a search. Once the captain and first officer realized that Grak had been murdered, they were bound to notify someone. She needed to find a place to hide his body and hope they didn't find it, or her, until they docked somewhere she could escape.

She was still contemplating what to do next when the door behind her softly hissed open and the warmer light of the corridor illuminated several feet into the storage unit. Her body tensed and she twisted to face the opening, poised to strike like the viper her mother had taught her to be. A low gasp of dismay slipped from her lips as she instantly recognized the shadowy figure in the doorway.

Tiv.

The insectoid alien stood in the doorway, his multi-jointed limbs motionless, his dark eyes wide with curiosity. Mei's grip on her sword tightened.

Tiv's mandibles clicked, slow and deliberate, as if he was trying to tell her something. Then—he lifted his hands and extended them slightly toward her. Not in fear. Not in defense. Reassurance.

Tiv stepped forward, crossing the threshold, and the doors slid shut behind him. Mei kept her stance firm as she watched Tiv step closer.

The insectoid's multi-jointed limbs moved carefully, his sleek chitinous exoskeleton glinting under the dim emergency lights. His mandibles clicked softly, a rhythmic sound, as if he were choosing his words carefully.

Mei's muscles coiled, ready to strike if needed. Tiv stopped a few feet away, lifted his uppermost set of hands, and spoke.

“Zhis'ska torin ka'resh vash'ti?”

The language was sharp, almost musical, filled with layered clicks and subtle vibrations that Mei's ears weren't trained to pick up. She gave a brief shake of her head. Her gaze warily followed the movement when Tiv's lower set of hands reached up to a small metallic device around his neck. He adjusted it with delicate precision, twisting a dial.

A second later, a voice, smooth and rich, filled the air.

“Do you understand me?”

Mei's eyes widened slightly, the unexpected sound catching her off guard. A translator. The voice was human-like, hesitant but clear—and feminine.

Mei nodded once. Tiv's mandibles parted in what Mei now recognized as the alien species' version of a smile.

“Good,” Tiv said, her voice softening. “I had hoped so.”

Mei lowered her blade slightly, but remained cautious. Her eyes narrowed as a realization dawned on her.

“You knew I was here.” It wasn't a question.

Tiv tilted her head, her strange, luminous eyes narrowing in amusement. She lifted one of her hands, gesturing toward Mei's face.

"My species... sees things that others cannot."

Mei frowned. "What do you mean?"

Tiv tapped the side of her head, where the ridges along her skull pulsed faintly with shifting color.

"We see heat signatures. Energy trails. Movement in the dark. You are not as hidden as you believe, ancient one."

Mei stilled. That meant Tiv had been aware of her for a long time. She would have to remember that in the future.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Tiv's smile faded slightly and she shrugged her uppermost shoulders.

"Because I have no desire to make enemies where I don't need them. And..." she glanced down at Grak's crumpled form and let out a soft chattering laugh, "because I rather like the idea of him gone."

Mei's lips twitched, but she didn't let the amusement fully surface.

"And your captain? Your first officer?"

Tiv shook her head, stepping closer, lowering her voice.

"I only took this job to escape being enslaved on a mining asteroid. I plan to meet up

with my brother on Cryon II. I have no desire to cause trouble or bring trouble to myself.”

Mei’s gaze sharpened.

“Then why are you here?”

Tiv’s mandibles clicked together softly, her posture shifting.

“I came to check on the pod.”

Tiv motioned toward the escape capsule, her expression unreadable. Mei stilled.

“The Legion has placed a bounty on these pods,” she explained, voice lowering slightly. “They believe they carry the Ancient Knights of the Gallant.”

Mei’s stomach tightened. Her gaze flickered to Grak. He had said the same thing... and had also called her ‘ancient one’. She looked back at Tiv with a frown.

Tiv tilted her head, as if sensing her confusion. “I was on duty when we picked up yours. I hid it here, knowing it would be the last unit emptied.” She paused. “But when I came to check, I realized whoever was inside had already woken up and disappeared.”

Mei’s mind raced, accepting the debt owed, but needing more information.

“You didn’t turn me in,” Mei said carefully.

Tiv shrugged. “I had no reason to. Besides, we’re not so different.”

Mei narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

Tiv's mandibles clicked softly.

"The Legion destroyed the moon base where my parents worked, killing them to test their new weapon. I barely escaped," Tiv continued, voice softening. "I snuck onto a supply ship. I was not as good at hiding as you. The pilot found me and demanded that I pay for my passage. I didn't have the credits the pilot wanted, so he planned to sell me." Her mandibles twitched with distress. "I escaped and ended up here. I disguised myself as a male to get the job. It was easy, given my species."

Mei's lips curved into a compassionate smile as she understood Tiv's cautious movements now, her nervous glances and her silence. Mei exhaled, her shoulders relaxing slightly.

"That's why I was drawn to you," she murmured.

Tiv gave her another sharp, knowing smile. Mei's lips twitched when Tiv clapped her lower hands in excitement. It was hard not to like the unusual alien.

"Now that you know about me," Mei asked, "what do you plan to do?"

Tiv tilted her head toward Grak's body, mandibles twitching.

"Help you."

Mei lifted an eyebrow. Trust was dangerous. She had spent her life avoiding it. But Tiv had seen her. And she had said nothing. That meant something. Tiv continued, voice lowering conspiratorially. She motioned toward Grak.

"There's talk of other Ancient Knights appearing. If you want, I can help you find out more once we reach Cryon II."

Mei studied Tiv, looking for sincerity in her alien features. She found it.

Finally, Mei said, “I accept your offer of assistance.” She meant more than those words conveyed, but they were the only words she had.

“We must dispose of Grak’s body. It will smell very bad in a few hours,” Tiv said with a shudder.

“Help me seal his body in the pod. We need to get the pod off the freighter somehow,” she murmured, grabbing and hefting Grak’s bulk.

“I can do this,” Tiv said as she lended her aid without hesitation. “I will send it far away.”

Within minutes, they secured the lid of the pod, locking the corpse within. Mei wiped her hands on her trousers, eyeing the sealed pod.

“What exactly are you going to do with it?”

Tiv’s mandibles twitched with mischievous humor.

“Take it to an ejection tube, add a directional thruster, and program it to crash on Turbinta.”

Mei’s stomach tightened. Here was her chance to learn why the crew spoke of Turbinta in hushed tones, as if it were a curse. Even the brutish Grak had stiffened at its mention.

“Turbinta? What is that? I’ve heard the other crew members say the name. It sounded like they were afraid.”

Tiv nodded.

“No one, not even the Legion, would be stupid enough to search for the pod there.” She let out a laugh. “If they were smart. Which, let’s be honest... they aren’t.”

Mei’s stomach twisted.

“What is Turbinta?” she asked again.

Tiv paused, considering. She scratched at her mandible with her lower arm, then finally lifted her hands and waved them as she spoke.

“Turbinta is a planet filled with assassins. They kill for profit. And for fun. They are made up of species from all over the galaxy, but they have one thing in common—they will not stop until their target is dead.”

Mei stiffened. A strange chill crept through her. She thought of her father. Of her training. Of the way she had been forged into something lethal, unyielding, unstoppable.

If she had been born in this part of the universe... there was absolutely no doubt in her mind:

I would have been one of them.

4

Cryon II

The feeling of being watched had lingered for some time as Dorane LeGaugh traversed the interior levels of the spaceport that was still under construction and probably would be long after he had turned to dust. He'd ignored the sensation at first. He was accustomed to drawing attention. Wealth, power, and influence made people watch you for different reasons. But this was different. The eyes tracking him now weren't the calculating stares of rival entrepreneurs or the greedy glances of those who wanted a piece of his empire.

This was the gaze of a predator.

And he didn't like being hunted.

A soothing blue glowed from the metal structures lining the streets. The lighting on the artificial moon replicated the full spectrum of light found on most inhabited planets within the galaxy, including blue light to regulate circadian rhythms and red light that supported mitochondrial function and cellular health. The artificial moon was a vast sprawl of steel and neon, a refuge for criminals, exiles, and people who were both ambitious and didn't mind getting their hands dirty.

Cryon II had its own gravity and atmosphere thanks to the translucent shield surrounding it. The shield was a marvel of technology by itself. Every corridor, every alley, every docking bay held stories of betrayal, deals gone wrong, and the unspoken rule of survival—kill or be killed—but they also told stories of success, which drew

those hoping for a better life.

Dorane had thrived in this environment. If anyone knew the harsher realities of life amongst those considered outcasts, it was him. Hunger and the desire to not be one of the dead had been a driving force of his success—along with a huge amount of luck and preparation.

Which was why the fool tailing him had no idea just how badly he had miscalculated his target.

With a slow, unhurried stride, Dorane veered left, stepping away from the main thoroughfare. The streets here were narrower, the overhead lights dimmer, casting deep shadows across the rusted metal walls. Steam hissed from the grates lining the alley. The scent of purified air tinged with exotic food and spices from the nearby restaurants hung thick in the air.

He didn't break his pace. The footsteps behind him hesitated for a fraction of a second before continuing. It was the sound of indecision.

Too obvious. And too greedy for whatever bounty they hope to get, he mused.

Dorane smirked, adjusting the cuffs of his coat as he passed a row of old cargo containers. This part of the station was quieter, used primarily for storage and docking overflow. Fewer witnesses and less chance of an innocent pedestrian wandering into the fray.

His gaze swept the area, his mind categorizing every scenario of the fight that would invariably occur. He slowed his steps when he came to the spot where he would have the best advantage. A light overhead, beaming a warm white, would shine on his opponent while he remained in the shadows.

Perfect.

He turned sharply to the left and stood in the shadows beside a stack of metal crates, slowing his breathing, waiting.

It took less than five seconds.

The assassin moved into view—a silhouette against the neon reflections in the alley's puddles. Dorane studied his opponent when he paused just out of the light. Tall, lean, dressed in a dark fitted bodysuit with reinforced armor plating. Disappointment filled him.

A bounty hunter.

There wouldn't be much of a fight. The man would be more used to bringing in his prey alive than killing them. He would hesitate when it mattered. Whoever had put a price on Dorane's head must have made it enough to entice the idiots who were too stupid to live.

In a blur of movement, Dorane struck.

The assassin barely had time to react before Dorane's blow brutally connected with the man's ribs, sending him stumbling sideways into a sharp, pointed edge of an open crate. The scent of blood, the man's grunt of pain, and the clatter of the man's weapon against the ground made Dorane smile. He almost felt sorry for the bounty hunter—almost.

The man twisted, his fingers fumbling for another weapon, but Dorane was already ahead of him. The weapon in his hand glowed briefly as it sliced through clothing, flesh, and bone. The assassin's mouth opened in a silent scream, shock pouring through the man as he grabbed what was left of his arm and fell to his knees.

The fight was over.

Dorane stepped forward, holding his weapon against the assassin's throat. He couldn't see the man's face. It was obscured by the helmet he was wearing. The assassin's breathing was heavy and uneven, the sound of it mixing with anguished moans. The smell of urine filled the alley.

"You really shouldn't have taken this assignment," Dorane tsked. "This is far above your pay skill."

Dorane's reflection stared back at him in the faint glow of the man's visor. He pressed the glowing tip of his weapon just below the man's neck.

"Who sent you?"

Silence.

Dorane sighed. He shifted his grip, sending a short but powerful charge into the man. A thin line of dark blood welled against the edge.

"Let's try this again. I can be very patient," he murmured. "But you look like you don't have that kind of time."

The assassin exhaled sharply. "There's a price on your head—a good one."

Dorane raised a brow. "How about telling me something I don't know, like who placed it?"

"A powerful man."

Dorane chuckled. "A wealthy one, yes. A powerful one, maybe. A smart one would

have known better.” His smile turned sharp. “Give me a name?”

The assassin remained silent.

Dorane sighed and tilted his head. He hated when his opponents thought he would show mercy. They would die. It was just up to them how fast it happened. Impatient, he reached down and pulled the man’s helmet off. He already knew what he looked like. He didn’t need to stare into his reflection. What he wanted to know was who the idiot was who thought they could kill him.

Beneath the visor, Dorane recognized the Melskarian that was a frequent visitor to the moon. The normally deep violet skin, marked with faint bioluminescent patterns that pulsed in time with his breathing, was now a pale, translucent violet. His jet-black eyes were glazed with pain and defiance.

“I thought you were smarter than this, Bro’qi,” he noted. “You don’t take jobs lightly. Which means someone really wanted me dead or you were really desperate.”

Bro’qi clenched his jaw but said nothing. Dorane sighed theatrically, tightening his grip.

“Come now, at least tell me who is stupid enough to?—”

“The Legion.”

The words were barely above a whisper. Dorane’s amusement faded. He had expected it to happen one day. He had known that his power, wealth, influence, and personal army would eventually be considered a threat by Coleridge and Andri Andronikos, but hearing it confirmed sent a pulse of cold fury through his veins.

There were only two people in the Legion who had the power—and the

arrogance—to put a price on his head.

“Which one?” Dorane pressed before he shook his head in sardonic amusement that didn’t reach his eyes. “Or was it both?”

Bro’qi hesitated. Dorane could see the light beginning to fade along with the bounty hunter’s coloring. He had lost a lot of blood.

“There’s no stopping them now. I heard Coleridge killed his son. It’s only a matter of time before they get you. There’s no one to stop it now.”

Dorane stilled.

Roan.

The former Legion general. The man who had dared betray the most ruthless organization in the known galaxy. A silent curse slipped from his lips. Dorane had tried to warn him.

His grip tightened fractionally. He had expected Roan to suffer consequences, but if the Legion had already executed him, then things were escalating faster than he had expected. He exhaled through his nose.

“Well, that simplifies things.”

Bro’qi dropped his good arm down to his side. Dorane cursed when he saw a faint glow through the fabric of the Melskarian’s trousers. Rising quickly to his feet, Dorane sprinted for the cargo containers he had stepped behind minutes earlier. He barely made it to safety before a brilliant flash of white light followed by a shockwave strong enough to shift the heavy containers lit up the alley.

Dorane cursed when a stream of retardant gases released. Covering his nose and mouth, he slid into the gap between the containers and the wall behind him, rolling away from the gruesome scene. Once he was safe from the noxious gases and smell of burnt flesh, he dropped his arm to his side and strode down the alley.

The encounter hadn't been a complete waste.

He slid his weapon into his pocket when he heard footsteps approaching from behind. He didn't bother turning around. The faint hint of a smile curved his lips at the unmistakable heavy tread. These were footsteps he would recognize anywhere.

"How did it go, Jammer?" he asked.

Jammer's massive form loomed beside him, arms swinging wide as he fell into step with Dorane. "Good. How'd it go with Bro'qi?"

"You could say explosive," he replied with a chuckle.

"For fuck's sake, Dorane. You know, normal people don't go looking for assassination attempts," Asta snapped, not bothering to hide her displeasure with him.

Dorane shot a wink at his second-in-command when she fell into step on his other side. Unlike Jammer, she was much lighter on her feet and more difficult to hear coming.

Dorane laughed. "Where's the fun in that? Besides, I needed information and he was stupid enough to accept the bounty."

Asta's tail flicked in exasperation. "You're insufferable."

Jammer snorted. "So, how close were we to guessing it right?"

Dorane brushed past them, rolling his shoulders. “Spot on, like always.”

“Fantastic. You know you’re going to have to give me a raise if you want me to keep you alive,” Asta called out behind him as he pulled ahead of them.

Jammer chuckled. “A raise sounds good.”

“You know you guys love the challenge,” Dorane replied, lifting his hand.

“Why does this feel like it is going to be even worse than usual?” Asta groaned, picking up speed to catch up with her wayward boss.

5

The lift ascended in near silence, the hum of the artificial moon the only sound against the backdrop of Dorane's thoughts. His gaze was fixed on the metallic walls, but his mind was somewhere else—on someone else.

Roan Landais was dead.

At least, that's what the Legion wanted everyone to believe.

Dorane wasn't convinced. He wouldn't be. Not without proof. Roan wasn't the kind of man who died easily, certainly not at the hands of his father and uncle. If anyone could cheat death, it was Roan.

And me.

His lips quirked slightly at his thoughts. How many times had they cheated death together?

The lift doors slid open with a soft whoosh, opening to the uppermost levels of the moon base where his personal headquarters overlooked Cryon II's sprawling, ever-expanding construction. Through the reinforced glass windows, he could see the neon-lit streets stretching far below, a labyrinth of steel, light, and shadows. The distant glow of welding torches flickered like fireflies in the night. Drones, construction machinery, and supply shuttles hovered in intricate formations as they assembled yet another sector of Cryon II's artificial world.

It was a place of ambition and ruthlessness, much like himself. His mind wasn't here, though. It was on a different world, in a different time.

Plateau – Eighteen years before

“Where's that scrawny sewer rat disappeared to now?”

Hor Dicer's voice carried over the clang of cargo being unloaded, sharp and grating, thick with frustration.

Dorane didn't look back. He never looked back. That was the first rule of survival. Instead, he slipped through the narrow gap between two crates, his body twisting with the ease of someone who had learned to navigate tight spaces out of necessity. He crouched low, waiting, listening.

The heavy footfalls stomped past, a string of curses trailing behind them. He let out a slow breath, pressing his fingers against the fresh bruise on his ribs. The dull ache was a reminder—Dicer had hit him last night, hard. It wasn't the first time. But it would be the last.

If he stayed, he swore he'd kill the bastard.

The thought sent a dark thrill through him, but he forced it away. He had no time for revenge. Not yet. Right now, he had to get as far from that freighter as possible. His escape had led him here—wherever here was. He didn't even know what planet they'd landed on.

He scanned the area before he stepped out of the shadows of the freighter. A hiss of disbelief slipped from him and his breath caught in his throat. Across a woven bridge, a market sprawled before him in a dizzying riot of color and sound. It was unlike anything he had ever seen.

The air was thick with the scent of spices, sizzling meats, and something sweet and floral carried on the humid breeze. Stalls lined the cobblestone paths, their owners calling out in languages Dorane only half understood. Above, winding bridges connected the floating islands, their jagged cliffs draped in thick vines and bioluminescent flora that pulsed faintly in the morning light.

And the sky—gods, the sky.

He turned in a tight circle, staring up at it in wonder. It wasn't the dull gray haze of smog-choked atmospheres that he was used to. It was vast and open, swirling with golden light that reflected off the massive moth-like creatures gliding effortlessly between the islands. Their translucent wings caught the sun, scattering light like fractured gemstones.

Dorane had never smelled air this clean. Never seen a place that wasn't falling apart at the seams. It was beautiful.

He hated it.

Places like this were for people who belonged. People who had someone who cared about what happened to them. Places like this were not for gutter rats like him.

His fingers curled into fists as the words echoed through his mind. He didn't belong, but that had never stopped him before.

A shadow passed overhead, breaking his trance. A Legion transport. He turned just in time to see a group of soldiers striding toward a towering structure of onyx-black stone. Their rigid postures and pristine uniforms were unmistakable—Legion.

Dorane's stomach turned.

He had seen what the Legion did to planets. He had watched their soldiers tear through the slums, hunting down those who resisted, those who fought back. His parents had been among them. He could still hear his mother's scream, still see his father's blood painting the alley walls.

He spat on the ground, his eyes narrowing with anger as his lips curled into a sneer. That was when Dorane saw him. A boy his own age, walking a few paces behind the soldiers, head held high, expression unreadable. His uniform was too clean, too stiff, his boots polished to a shine that had never known dirt. His dark hair was neatly combed, his features sharp and proud—but there was something about his eyes. Something that didn't match the rest.

Dorane knew how to read people. It was what kept him alive. And this boy— this boy didn't fit. Dorane's lips curled into a smirk. Was the boy some rich kid playing soldier?

Curious, Dorane decided to follow him. The boy fell behind the others, his eyes darting from the line to the market. Dorane's lips twitched when he saw the boy's shoulders relax as the last of the progression of soldiers crossed the bridge. He followed the soldier boy into the market. The boy stopped at a vendor's stall, scanning the wares with a careful, almost too-neutral expression. The stall owner, a short, stocky man with deep red skin and tusk-like protrusions from his lower jaw, grinned widely.

"Something for the young officer?" the merchant asked, voice oily with practiced charm.

Dorane leaned casually against the next stall over, just within earshot. He could already tell—this kid wasn't used to being talked to like that. He was used to commands, not conversations.

The soldier hesitated.

Dorane smirked and waved his hand at the food. “I didn’t think Legion brats ate food from places like this,” he said, loud enough to be heard. “Don’t they just inject nutrition slop straight into your veins?”

The boy’s sharp brown eyes flicked to Dorane’s, unreadable. He didn’t react right away, which made Dorane like him slightly more. Most kids in his position would have bristled, barked something back.

Instead, the boy turned back to the stall, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a few credits. “I’ll take two,” he said, his voice quiet but firm.

The merchant nodded and handed him a pair of wrapped pastries. The boy held one out to Dorane, who blinked at him in shock.

“Are you buying me off, Legion ?” he drawled.

“No,” the boy said simply. “I just don’t want to eat alone.”

Dorane snorted, taking the pastry from his hand. “That the official training manual response, or do you actually think that works?”

The boy tilted his head slightly. “It worked, didn’t it?”

Dorane’s smirk faltered. Alright, maybe this kid wasn’t as soft as he looked. Dorane took a defiant bite. “Fine,” he muttered around the mouthful. “But if it’s poisoned, I’ll haunt you.”

The boy didn’t smile, but something in his expression shifted. “Noted.” Dorane watched as the boy turned to the vendor who was watching their exchange with

amusement and asked, “Is this poisoned?”

“No. It would be very bad for business if I killed all my customers,” the merchant chuckled.

“Thank you,” the boy responded before turning back to Dorane.

“Point taken,” Dorane reluctantly admitted.

“My name is Roan, by the way. I—Do you want to go somewhere—to talk?” Roan asked as they walked through the marketplace.

Dorane didn’t miss how Roan’s eyes kept scanning the crowd. He noticed that every time a Legion soldier came into view, the boy changed directions. Dorane had been in plenty of tight spots before, but sneaking away from a bunch of Legion guards with a high-ranking officer’s kid was a first.

“Sure. I’m Dorane LeGaugh,” he introduced.

“Follow me,” Roan murmured, changing directions again when a group of three soldiers came into sight.

Dorane caught on fast: this boy, Roan, was practiced at slipping away. He had no wasted movements, no hesitation as he wove them through the winding paths of the market. Dorane had to admit, he was impressed.

They crossed a narrow bridge, the wind tugging at their clothes as they stepped onto another floating island. This one was smaller, quieter. Trees with long, drooping leaves lined the edge, their roots twisting around jagged rock formations.

Roan followed a long, winding path as if he knew where he was going, and they

emerged at an overlook where several low walls allowed visitors to sit and gaze out across the vast landscape. Dorane gulped when he saw the sea of floating islands. It was magical. Roan walked over and sat on the edge, looking out at the sky. Dorane hesitated, then plopped down beside him.

They sat in silence for several minutes, watching the massive moth-flyers glide between the cliffs. The creatures moved with lazy grace, their glowing wings illuminating the darkening sky.

Roan spoke first. “You don’t like the Legion.”

Dorane huffed a laugh. “Understatement of the year.”

Roan was quiet for a moment. “Why?”

Dorane turned to him, incredulous. “Are you serious? Your Legion took my planet, killed my parents, and threw me to the streets like garbage. You’re really asking me why I don’t like the Legion?”

Roan’s hands curled into fists, a torrent of words behind his eyes and every line of his body, but the only words he gave were: “It wasn’t my choice.”

Dorane studied him, hearing what could have been a statement of defensiveness but instead was a startling glimpse of rage and helplessness. An invisible cage pressing down on the soldier boy’s shoulders. Dorane exhaled, shaking his head. “No. But you keep going back to them.”

Roan’s jaw tightened. “You think it’s that simple?”

Dorane shrugged. “I think you’re too good at avoiding Legion soldiers for a kid who’s supposed to be following orders. You choose to go back. Why?”

Roan didn't answer. Instead, he watched the moth-flyers, his gaze distant.

Dorane leaned back on his elbows. "I can think of lots of reasons... but if you don't wanna share, that's fine. At least I got a shot at being free. What about you?"

Roan's expression darkened.

"I don't know," Roan admitted, voice barely above a whisper.

Dorane was silent before he playfully nudged Roan.

"Well, that's a shitty way to live. You don't have to if you don't want to. You can always escape. If you decide you want to live the free life, let me know. I'll show you all the ropes."

For the first time, Roan smiled.

And in that moment, a friendship was forged in the brilliant light of Plateau, between the orphan and the soldier—the boy who refused to be caged and the boy who didn't know if he'd ever be free.

It wasn't until after they had parted ways that Dorane discovered the boy was none other than Roan Landais—son and nephew of two of the meanest, most ruthless men in the galaxy.

And it hadn't changed a thing.

"Boss."

Asta's voice cut through his thoughts. Dorane turned from the windows in the sparsely furnished office on the upper level. Cold metal walls, minimalist furniture,

and an expansive view of the moon base's sprawling structure below were a long way away from that day eighteen years ago.

Asta stood near the central console, her yellow-green slit-pupiled eyes scanning the holographic screens flashing reports in rapid succession. The flickering glow reflected against her dark, dusky skin, accentuating the sharp angles of her face. She looked tense. Focused.

Jammer was at her side, arms crossed, his massive armored frame dwarfing the control panel as he scowled at the data scrolling across the displays.

Dorane's gaze flickered between them. "Tell me."

Asta didn't hesitate. "There's definitely been an attack on the Legion."

That caught his attention.

Dorane stepped closer, watching the screens as Asta pulled up live surveillance footage from Tesla Terra's airspace. A graveyard of destruction filled the display.

Legion Battle Cruisers—obliterated.

Debris—scattered across the void, tumbling lifelessly in Tesla Terra's orbit. His salvagers were going to have a field day cleaning it up. That much debris would provide a lot of building material.

"Get the salvagers there," he ordered.

Jammer chuckled. "Yeah, no sense in letting all of that just burn up in re-entry."

Asta whistled under her breath and shook her head. "Would you get a look at that?"

Now there's a sight for my poor eyes."

Dorane exhaled slowly, his hazel eyes narrowing. The entire Legion fleet was retreating, battered and broken, but something... was off. This didn't have the feel of a major Gallant/Legion attack. If it had been, the wreckage would have been a mixture of Gallant fighters and warships, not just the Legion.

His fingers danced over the holographic interface, enhancing the playback. He wasn't sure what he was looking for until?—

There.

A flicker. A flash of movement in the chaos.

Dorane slowed the feed, adjusting the contrast, isolating the anomaly.

And then he saw it.

Amid the swirling wreckage, where fire and twisted metal rained like falling stars against a black canvas, a faint outline emerged. The telltale ripple of shields flashing against debris impact.

A ship. A shuttle.

One that shouldn't have been there.

Dorane felt his pulse steady and his lips curved. He only knew of one person who could pull off this level of destruction and escape right under the Legion's nose. The person would have to know what was on the ship and how to get on and off, and that would require intimate knowledge—very intimate knowledge—of the Legion's military tactics and warships.

A slow laugh rumbled from his chest. He shook his head, pure admiration laced with amusement.

“Way to go, my friend,” he murmured, eyes locked on the phantom ship as it vanished into the void.

Asta’s ears twitched. “What?”

Dorane grinned, stepped back, and rolled his shoulders. Roan was alive.

Of course he was.

He shot Asta a knowing look.

“Just an old friend who is too mean to kill and too stubborn to die.”

6

Shadows of Cryon II:

The hum of Cryon II's artificial atmosphere and gravity was constant, an ever-present static that vibrated through the metal walls and narrow service corridors. Zoak moved through the less traveled passages, his steps silent, his breath measured. He had been on this moon base for days now, learning its arteries, tracing its pathways, and memorizing the movements of its most influential occupant—Dorane LeGaugh.

The man was an enigma, a self-made power in a galaxy dominated by old blood and military rule. A shadow king ruling a metal kingdom. Many underestimated him—like the bumbling Melskarian bounty hunter who had tried to kill Dorane this evening. Zoak did not.

He crouched low against a grated walkway, his four-fingered hands flexing with anticipation as he peered down into one of the many observation lounges scattered throughout Cryon II's core district. Below him, the glow of holoscreens illuminated Dorane's angular face, his hazel eyes flickering as he absorbed the intelligence reports his second-in-command, Asta Ma'Tran, was feeding him.

Zoak watched, waiting.

A lesser assassin would have made their move by now. A quick shot. A clean kill. A moment of satisfaction and then nothingness. But Zoak did not kill for simple contracts. He killed to be remembered.

He wanted a story worth telling.

And what greater story than the dismantling of the Ancient Knights and the men who would see them rise again?

His communicator buzzed softly against his wrist. A secure line. No traceable link. Zoak sighed inwardly, irritation flickering through him as he flicked it on. The moment he saw Coleridge Landais's face, his mood darkened.

“Andri is your new target, Zoak,” Coleridge's voice rasped, his tone clipped. “Kill him and you'll have a fortune greater than your wildest dreams. The credits are being transferred as I speak. You now have the funds to be the assassin you've always wanted to be. In addition to the Director, I have included funds and resources for the termination of General Roan Landais and The Ancient Knights of the Gallant. My brother has already funded Dorane LeGauth. They're yours. Every last one of them. Make it count, Turbinta, and your name will never be forgotten.”

Zoak barely contained his smirk. A fortune? A name to be remembered? The very things he had always craved.

And yet, as he watched Dorane now—pacing, restless, unknowingly playing a part in Zoak's masterpiece—he felt something close to satisfaction. Not yet. He wasn't ready to kill him just yet.

Zoak's gaze flicked to the holoscreens where Asta and Jammer were more than likely discussing the Legion's failed attack. The fallout of Tesla Terra had sent ripples across the stars, the story relayed and retold across the galaxy.

Zoak leaned in, eyes narrowing on Dorane's face through the scope he was looking through. The man had been staring at the screen before he threw his head back and started laughing. It wasn't hard to put two and two together. Dorane's amusement

could only mean one thing.

Roan Landais had survived.

A slow exhale left Zoak's lips. Asta and Jammer did not seem to realize what that meant. He did... and so did Dorane. They had seen men cheat death before. They had both done it. It took a certain madness, a specific will.

It took a legend.

My name will echo through the galaxy when this is done.

Zoak settled further into the shadows, his fingers drumming absently against the casing of his rifle. Soon. Not tonight, not while Dorane was still maneuvering, still fighting shadows he didn't even know were circling him. No—he wanted Dorane to know he was being hunted. It would make the kill more satisfying. He wanted Dorane to feel the weight of inevitability pressing down before the blade slid between his ribs.

He had a list now. Dorane. Roan. The Ancient Knights. And finally, Andri.

All pieces in the final act.

Zoak stepped back into the shadows, a satisfied hum vibrating low in his throat. There was no hurry. If Roan Landais was indeed alive as he suspected, he would come to see Dorane. If Zoak was lucky, Roan would bring the female Ancient with him.

“Perhaps I will rearrange my list to accommodate her first. So many choices. So many trophies,” he chuckled in a rare moment of enjoyment.

Whichever order he decided, when he was finished, the galaxy would never forget his name.

Three days later, the soft hum of the freighter surrounded Mei, a constant drone that had become oddly familiar over the past weeks. She sat on the small cot in the cabin Tiv had claimed for her, fingering the fabric she was sitting on. The room carried the faint hint of stale air and dust, but beneath her was the crisp scent of clean fabric—a small luxury she hadn't had in far too long.

The cabin was a forgotten space, tucked away in the upper level of the freighter, used only when a paying passenger booked passage, which was rare, given the ship's battered state. The room had been filled with crates of things the captain didn't know what to do with but didn't want to toss—half-functional equipment, odd trinkets from past hauls, and bits of tech too outdated to sell but too valuable to discard.

It had given her a place to be, to exist without constantly looking over her shoulder.

Tiv had helped her, bringing her food during the late-night rotation when no one was around. During those quiet moments, Mei had learned more about the war brewing across the stars.

The fight between the Legion and the Gallant was escalating. There had been battles—entire fleets torn apart in the vacuum of space, planets shifting alliances, outposts vanishing without a trace. And then, the rumor.

A new Ancient Knight had been discovered.

A woman.

One who had stood up to General Landais.

Mei's fingers had curled into the fabric of the sheets as she processed those words. Landais—the Legion General. The one everyone had feared? Dead? An unknown woman.

Her breath had hitched, the realization striking her like a live wire. They had survived. All of them. Sergi. Julia. Ash. Josh.

The crew of the Gliese wasn't just alive. They were fighting.

A shuddering breath had left her lips as she sat there, staring at Tiv in disbelief, struggling to breathe past the storm of emotions rising inside her.

Relief. Grief. Hope.

For the first time since she awoke, she understood the purpose of her survival. She needed to find them... and stand beside them in the war they had been drawn into. Her gaze was drawn to the image filling the viewport.

Outside, Cryon II loomed—a colossal, moon-like structure, vast and sprawling, an artificial world suspended in the void. It wasn't natural, wasn't a planet formed by time and the cosmos. It was built, piece by piece, a testament to the raw ambition of those who ruled this corner of the galaxy.

Metallic plates formed a patchwork over its surface, interlaced with glowing seams of energy conduits. Docking stations jutted out like skeletal arms cradling incoming ships, each one vanishing into the labyrinthine corridors of the station's interior.

It was staggering.

She had seen cities before, but this? This was something else.

An entire world, floating in space.

The realization of the difference from Earth was mind blowing. She had always been a survivor, but she had survived in what she had known—a realm bound to Earth, with its rules, its limits. This place had no limits.

For the first time since waking up, she felt small.

Not weak, but small—a single thread in a galaxy-wide tapestry.

The thought was terrifying.

And yet... exhilarating.

Her grip on the edge of the cot tightened. She was about to step into a place she didn't understand, among people who didn't know her.

But... the others have found their destiny. I will too.

A shuddering breath slipped from her. Josh, Ash, Sergi... even Julia, sweet, compassionate, nerdy Julia, had fought to stand against the Legion. Mei had thought she was alone, but she wasn't.

The door hissed softly as it slid open an hour later. Mei emerged out of the bathroom where she had taken refuge when she heard footsteps approaching. Tiv stepped inside, her sleek exoskeleton reflecting the dim light. Her mandibles clicked together lightly, and her multi-jointed hands rested on her hips.

"We're almost there," she said, her voice carrying that familiar calm amusement. "Less than an hour."

Mei nodded, exhaling.

“You ready?” Tiv tilted her head.

Mei’s lips twitched. “Are you?”

Tiv chittered in laughter before stepping further inside. “I’ve arranged everything. You’ll be hidden inside a container, standard cargo, nothing suspicious. Once we dock, they’ll move it to the loading bay. That’s where you’ll slip out.”

Mei arched a brow. “Just like that?”

Tiv’s mandibles twitched with mischief. “It is a very busy place. No one will notice.”

“Anyone still looking for Grak?”

Tiv let out a soft chitter. “After the initial search, they decided he accidentally ejected himself out of the trash tube. He was very drunk.”

Mei blinked, then snorted. “Are you serious?”

Tiv’s eyes twinkled. “I may have... manipulated some of the vidcom and data logs.”

Mei laughed. “You rewrote the records?”

Tiv shrugged with all four of her shoulders. “Since no one smelled anything, they accepted it. Lorik swore us all to secrecy.”

Mei shook her head and raised her eyebrow. “And the captain?”

“He scrubbed all records of Grak from the system.” Tiv’s eyes gleamed. “Paperwork

is annoying.”

Mei chuckled. “They would’ve made good politicians back on my world.”

Tiv’s mandibles flicked, her version of a grin. “Perhaps. But there is no paperwork in space. I must go. There is much work before we dock.”

Mei exhaled, shaking her head. This galaxy was ridiculous. Sergi must love it here.

After Tiv left, the weight of what came next settled onto Mei’s shoulders. She had no plan. No contacts. No idea how she would find the others.

Mei had to remind herself that she had survived an impossible journey. She had woken up in an unknown galaxy through an alien gateway that shouldn’t have existed.

And yet, here she was.

Plus, she wasn’t alone anymore. Tiv had offered to help, and her brother might as well.

Mei drew in a deep, calming breath. She would find her friends, her... family. She let her eyes drift shut, recalling the whispered assurances of her mother.

“You hold the power to make your own destiny, Mei Li. Even when the odds are against you.”

The words wrapped around her like armor, strengthening her resolve. She opened her eyes, rose, and gathered her survival bag and katana. Her eyes were drawn back to the viewport. She lifted her chin as Cryon II filled the circular window.

This was it. She would make her own destiny. She would find the others. And she wouldn't just survive, she would thrive.

A short time later, she emerged in the loading bay where she and Tiv had agreed to meet. The area was a chaos of metal and movement, the hum of machinery interwoven with the shouts of workers as cargo and space junk was shuffled between transports. The heavy scent of heated metal, fuel, and lubricant filled the air, mixing with the ozone tang from the power grids overhead.

Mei crouched low behind a towering stack of discarded parts, her pulse steady, though she was hyper-aware of her surroundings. Tiv had told her exactly where to go. Now she just had to wait for the moment.

Across the busy floor, Tiv worked easily among the crew, blending in as she unloaded carts of scrap metal with practiced efficiency. Mei watched as the insectoid woman maneuvered a heavy-laden cart near the crates where Mei was hidden, Tiv's movement casual, unhurried, but purposeful.

Then, as if adjusting the load, Tiv lifted a sheet of dull metal, exposing a small, shadowed gap in the cart beneath. There was a nondescript metal crate tucked under the layers of junk. Tiv didn't look around, didn't make eye contact, but her mandibles twitched—her way of signaling.

Now.

Mei didn't hesitate. She slid forward, her movements a whisper of motion, folding herself into the cramped space between the stacked metal. The darkness swallowed her, her breath slow and measured.

Tiv bent as if retrieving something, murmuring under her breath, "Yi is waiting to unload this. He will hide you in his transport. You'll stay there until his shift ends,

then he'll take you to our home."

Mei gave a silent nod, gripping the translator collar Tiv had given her, ensuring it was ready if she needed to listen in.

With a last glance around, Tiv draped the metal back into place, sealing Mei inside just as the sound of clanking machinery and hydraulics roared to life. The entire cart lurched forward, the vibration humming through the metal beneath her.

Everything was going according to plan.

At least, until the shouting began nearly ten minutes into her journey. Mei tensed when the cart jerked to a sudden stop, nearly knocking her into the side of the crate. Her grip tightened on her sword as she stilled, listening.

Muffled voices. Angry. Disputing.

Mei quickly adjusted the translator collar, twisting the frequency until—

"This shipment isn't scheduled for the lower dock. It's been reassigned."

Yi's voice, firm but tense. "I don't have any such orders. This is my shipment."

"It's been reassigned," the other voice insisted. "Orders came down this morning."

A pause. Mei could almost feel Yi's frustration. He was nervous—she could hear it in his voice.

"I was told to take it to the recycle field. Check your damn logs again."

A sharp huff. "I don't need to. I know what I saw. You're taking this to the Legion's

holding bay.”

Mei’s gut twisted. The Legion?

She could feel the weight of the metal above her shift—a deep, mechanical groan. She braced her hand against her side and her feet against the wall when high-powered magnets almost ripped her sword out of her hand. Behind her, she could feel the tug on her duffle bag as the metal inside it was pulled upward.

Her mind calculated the distance to the floor. If the magnet engaged, the entire crate could be pulled upward, leaving her vulnerable. She needed to move.

Carefully, she eased toward a crack in the crate’s wall, peering through the narrow slit. The bay stretched before her, a massive space filled with stacked cargo, machinery, and pathways carved between towering crates.

There. A pile of crates behind the cart. Small enough that she could slip behind them without being seen. Now all she needed was a distraction. Yi was still arguing with the men. He was insisting they show him the change of orders.

Her chance came when the harsh metallic clang of the magnet stopped. Mei felt the cart shudder, almost as if it were relieved to no longer have the pressure pulling at it. A second later, there was the sound of a crate crashing nearby, followed by angry shouts as metal tumbled across the floor.

Mei moved. She slipped out and rolled behind the stacked crates. She pressed her back against them, her breath even, but her muscles tensed.

From her vantage point, she saw Yi still arguing with the workers who had stopped him. The hairs around his face stood on end and were flushed with frustration.

The two men stepped toward Yi. Her eyes narrowed when one man grabbed Yi's lower arm and twisted it around his back. Yi snapped his mandibles in pain. The clicking of his voice rose with fear when the second man drew a glowing blade and stepped forward. Mei's fingers twitched toward her weapon. She had no choice but to reveal herself. She couldn't let those men hurt Tiv's brother, especially after everything else her new friend had been through. She moved to step out when an unknown voice cut through the chaos.

"That's enough!"

Everything stopped—including her. Mei warily watched as the two men immediately froze. They took one look at the man striding towards them and they bolted.

Mei slid back into her hiding spot and focused on the tall, dark-skinned man who suddenly came into her field of view. Her breath caught as her gaze swept over him, cataloging every detail. She noted the rich coloring of his mocha skin, his thick, black curls, cut short on the sides, but thick on top, and his firm jaw. He was a cross between Ash and Sergi. He had Ash's lean physique and Sergi's broad shoulders. He also moved like Sergi, with a confidence that wasn't forced, it was absolute.

His hazel eyes scanned after the retreating workers. Her lips twitched when she noticed that his ears weren't rounded, but had a slight point to them, almost like an elf. They weren't like the cute images she had seen of Santa's elves, more like those of an elven warrior from the animes that she had occasionally watched.

His eyes were framed by thick black lashes. They were sharp, intelligent, and held more than a touch of danger.

"Are you alright?" The man's voice was smooth, unshaken.

Yi stammered slightly before regaining himself. "Yes. Yes, sir."

The man's gaze flicked to the cart. "Where did this shipment come from?"

Yi pointed toward the freighter.

The man turned, his eyes narrowing into a thoughtful expression. Mei watched as the man studied the ship before he turned when a woman's voice rang out. Mei had been so focused on him that she had missed two more individuals. She silently cursed her distraction.

You will not survive long in this world if you can't keep your mind on what is happening around you, she silently admonished.

She returned her focus to the scene, studying the new arrivals. The two were obviously with the man. The first was a slender woman with calculating eyes, while the second was a thickly built man who radiated silent intimidation.

"Jammer, check the logs. Asta, I need you to follow those two men and find out where they are going and who they are reporting to," he ordered.

"You know we are supposed to be protecting you, not running around doing?—"

The woman's disgruntled reply ended abruptly when the man with the hazel eyes stared back at her in silence. She pursed her lips and muttered a long string of curse words in at least four different languages, but took off in the direction the two workers had disappeared. Mei blinked when she noticed the woman had a long tail, similar to a cat, when she turned.

"I'll be at the docking bay office. Don't leave without one of us. I hope you know Asta is going to be twitchy tonight," the man named Jammer replied.

"She'll get over it if you scratch her belly," the man with the hazel eyes retorted.

“Smart-ass,” Jammer muttered before he turned and strode back the way they came.

Mei was surprised by the big man’s deep voice. It was surprisingly smooth and filled with wry humor. The man with the hazel eyes turned back toward the freighter. Mei watched him, drawn to the way he moved—effortless, precise. A man used to being obeyed.

When he paused near her hiding place, she stopped breathing and melted back into the shadows. His hazel eyes flickered across the crates, his sharp gaze searching.

Could he sense her watching him?

For a tense moment, he lingered—then, with a subtle shake of his head, he turned and continued forward.

Mei exhaled silently, a mix of disappointment and curiosity curling in her stomach as she moved along the back of the crates, tracking his movements.

Who was he?

There was a sensation of command around him—of power and reverence. He could either be an opponent she would need to be wary of, or an ally who could stand beside her. The question was—which one?

She would have to wait for Tiv to get off, which wouldn’t be for several more hours. Until then, she had a question to answer. Who was the man who had come to Yi’s aid? If she wanted to find out, she needed to move undetected among the residents of this alien world.

Her focus moved briefly to the man who was climbing the platform. Her lips curved in a slight, predatory smile when she realized that her next move had just become far

more interesting.

As the artificial lights of Cryon II faded, the sprawling moon base was cloaked in twilight, the cold metallic surfaces gleaming faintly under the distant stars, a stark, haughty beauty. Mei's footsteps were silent on the worn factory floor as she slipped into the flow of weary workers. As they left their shifts, the smell of filtered air couldn't quite mask the strong odor of sweat clinging to their clothes.

She adjusted her pilfered cloak's hood, ensuring the shadows hid her features. She had matched the cloak with a pair of goggles she had found, a black neck gaiter, and a thick, protective pair of black work gloves from her bag. This outfit blended in perfectly with the unusual lunar residents.

Mei followed several paces behind Tiv. The other woman had covered her surprise when Mei bumped into her a few minutes before. She had shot Mei a confused, worried frown before she was pushed forward by the crowd of workers in a hurry to exit the area.

Mei noticed Yi hurrying toward his sister. Even with his insectoid features, she could tell he was frantic with worry as he spoke in a rapid clicking. When Tiv replied with her own gestures and clicks, Yi's head jerked around and he stared at the crowd with a surprised expression before Tiv slid an arm through his and they continued walking toward the exit.

"Ancestors, Tiv!" he gasped, his voice hushed but urgent. "Your friend nearly gave me a heart attack! I opened that crate and she was gone! I thought?—"

Tiv held up a hand, a slight amused smile playing on her lips. “I told you she could take care of herself.”

“I apologize for worrying you. The situation became too dangerous. I’m glad that man came to your aid,” Mei murmured, drawing up next to Yi.

Yi exhaled sharply, shaking his head. It was as if his nerves were still raw from earlier. His mandibles twitched in agitation, but his eyes sparkled with something else—excitement.

“What man?” Tiv asked.

“Tiv, you won’t believe what happened,” he exclaimed, his voice dropping in awe. “Dorane LeGaugh stepped in and saved me.”

Mei tilted her head, the name unfamiliar. “Who is Dorane LeGaugh?”

Yi looked at her as if she’d asked who the sun was. “Dorane LeGaugh! You know, the wealthiest man in the galaxy—except for maybe Lord Andri Andronikos.” He waved a hand toward the towering skyline. “He owns this moon, the freighters, the markets, and he even has his own personal army. The guy is practically untouchable!”

Mei’s brow furrowed slightly and she listened as Tiv demanded her brother tell her everything that happened. Wealth and power were nothing new—back on Earth, there had been young men just like this Dorane. Of course, they hadn’t owned a moon or a fleet of space freighters, but they had still wielded influence, status, control—and a man like that also had something she needed right now: information.

Information was the most valuable currency in the galaxy right now as far as she was concerned.

Three days later, Mei continued exploring the city with one focus—finding more information about Dorane LeGaugh. The upper beams of Cryon II were her highways, a personal labyrinth of catwalks and scaffolding that let her move unseen.

Yi's schematics of the lower levels had proven useful. The underbelly of the moon was a different world—darker, harsher. The place where secrets thrived.

It was here that she spotted him again. Dorane LeGaugh.

He walked with purpose, flanked by the two figures she had marked as his bodyguards—the slender, feline-featured woman with golden, slit-pupiled eyes, and the massive, armored Zurkaan brute.

Mei followed them from the beams, shrouded in shadows, watching as they disappeared into a drinking establishment.

Interesting.

With her hood drawn low and a scarf covering her lower face, Mei descended, blending into the ebb and flow of customers filtering inside.

The establishment was dim, its lights casting a faint reddish glow against metal walls. The air was thick with smoke, spiced liquor, and the low hum of conversation.

At the far end of the room, Dorane took a seat in a booth, across from a woman who was more machine than flesh—her face half-replaced with sleek cybernetics, her limbs humming with hidden enhancements. Mei sensed this wasn't a social meeting.

Mei didn't pause, didn't hesitate; she was weaving between patrons, her focus razor-sharp. On a nearby table, a half-finished drink sat abandoned. She snatched it up, the movement seamless, natural. A ruse. A cover.

A drunken man stumbled past, swaying into her path.

Mei used the moment, pretending to lose her balance, and when the drunken man toppled, her free hand darted forward and slipped a small tracking device into the lining of Dorane's jacket.

She caught herself with a slight stumble, turning just as the cyborg woman's head snapped toward her.

Mei kept her eyes down, ducking her head, acting like just another clumsy customer. A low, mechanical mutter came from the woman's metal-plated lips. Mei didn't react, didn't acknowledge the mild threat.

Instead, she twisted away and stumbled to the bar where she slid onto a stool, her back to them, her ears tuned in. She could see their reflection in a gap between a stack of glasses. The mirrored surface of the walls distorted their features, but it was enough that while she couldn't hear the conversation, their body language told her everything.

Dorane was not happy.

His jaw clenched, his fingers drumming on the table, his body language sharp, coiled like a blade ready to strike.

The cyborg woman was speaking in low, measured tones, but Mei recognized the arrogance that came when someone thought they were more skilled than their opponent. This wasn't business. This was something deeper, darker, more ominous.

Mei didn't watch Dorane. Instead, she watched the woman.

Everything about the cyborg felt wrong. It wasn't just the cybernetics. Mei had seen

plenty of enhanced beings over the last few days. It was the way the woman moved—too still, too precise. Someone waiting to strike. Someone like Mei.

Mei lifted the drink, pretending to take a sip when the bartender looked her way. Her plan had been to locate Dorane, slip the tracking device Tiv had given her somewhere on him, and follow him.

She had accomplished that mission and should have left, but she didn't. Shit was about to blow up, and her gut was telling her that Dorane and his two friends were going to need all the help they could get.

For now, she would watch and be ready. But she had the feeling that whatever was about to happen—it wasn't just Dorane's problem anymore.

Minutes before:

The soft chime of the lift was almost drowned out by the irritated muttering of Dorane's companion as she paced inside. Dorane fought against grinning when Asta's tail flicked in sharp agitation. Jammer wasn't as successful at smothering his amusement, drawing an irate glare from Asta. Dorane half-listened, hands resting in his coat pockets as he stared at the slow flicker of floor indicators on the control panel.

"I swear to every damn god in this galaxy, I am not paid enough to deal with this level of stupidity," Asta growled, glaring at him. "You know this is a trap, right? You're walking into a bar to meet a Turbinta assassin like you're catching up with an old lover over drinks."

Jammer shuddered at the thought. "Please tell me that you never slept with Cee," he murmured.

Dorane shot his friends a disgusted look. “You assume all my lovers are the violent sort... and to answer your question, Jammer; no, I never slept with Cee. I do have a little self-respect.”

“More like a sense of self-preservation,” Jammer muttered.

“I know all your lovers are violent. I’m usually the one who has to deal with them when they try to kill you,” Asta shot back.

Behind her, Jammer rumbled with laughter, leaning against the lift railing with his massive arms folded across his chest. “Can’t argue with that.”

Dorane ignored them. Despite his nonchalant outward appearance, his thoughts were all strategy, as was necessary when dealing with Cee 585. Cee was a Turbinta assassin, highly skilled, dangerous, and—above all else—currently sitting in Deek’s, waiting for him.

She hadn’t slipped onto Cryon II undetected. Not exactly. One of his security guards had helped her in. The poor bastard was probably no longer breathing thanks to a very sudden case of explosive decompression if he knew his two companions. They would not show mercy to anyone who betrayed him.

They probably tossed him out of Level 32’s airlock, he mused. The pressure seals were old, and that meant cleanup would have been minimal. Asta was efficient like that.

“Do you want to know what’s really pissing me off?” Asta asked.

“No,” he replied.

Asta continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “It’s that you’re not even worried. You knew

she was here —didn't you?"

Dorane gave her an affable grin. "Of course I knew."

Asta cursed under her breath and smacked the lift's control panel so hard, it beeped in protest.

"You enjoy making my life difficult," she accused.

"Constantly. If you were bored, you'd quit, and I can't have that. Do you have any idea how difficult it would be to train someone new?" he asked as if outraged at the thought.

"Sometimes I really hate you, Dorane," Asta hissed.

"For all of two seconds before you realize I'm right," he retorted.

"Can't argue with that, Asta," Jammer said.

"Shut up, Jammer," Asta muttered.

The lift doors hissed open. Level 12. Dorane stepped out first, pausing as a group of pedestrians moved past. The station's artificial lighting flickered in strips along the ceiling, casting a pale, electric glow over the metal streets.

"Jammer, make a note to have mechanical take a look at the lighting again. Their new programming leaves a lot to be desired," Dorane requested.

"I already spoke to them," Jammer replied.

Dorane continued forward at a leisurely pace. Once again, the sensation of being

watched curled around him. The awareness had been following him for weeks now.

It wasn't paranoia. He knew what that felt like. No—this was deliberate. Someone was playing a long game, watching him from the periphery, waiting.

He hated being toyed with. He really hated it.

His gaze flicked upward toward the crisscrossing metal beams and dim observation platforms overhead. Nothing. But that didn't mean no one was there.

Asta exhaled sharply. "That look on your face is making my trigger finger itch."

Dorane rolled his shoulders, his smirk returning. "Relax, we have an assassin to greet. You'll probably get to scratch it before the evening is over if I know Cee."

She muttered something foul under her breath. Jammer chuckled. With a sigh, Dorane strode forward.

Minutes later, Dorane entered the arched doorway leading into Deek's. The bar was barely marked, the name half-flickering on an ancient neon sign mounted over the steel-framed doors. It was a low-lit, smoky dive, filled with the scent of cheap liquor, burnt circuits, and poor decisions.

The walls were reinforced metal, patched in places with whatever scrap had been lying around, and the ceilings were strung with dim hanging lamps that flickered whenever the power grid hiccupped—which was often in this section. He made a mental note to speak to mechanical if it wasn't fixed soon.

Perhaps shooting a few more people into space will make Asta feel better, he mused.

Deek ran a no-nonsense establishment, catering to the clientele who didn't ask

questions and didn't start fights inside—mostly because Deek himself would break their legs if they did.

The Kerlian was older than the moon base and redder and meaner than the mines he had emerged from. Hell, he had been old when Dorane met him ten years before on Balstin Prime.

Dorane stepped inside, the muffled hum of conversation hitting him first. Patrons hunched over tables, some playing games of holo-dice or battle bots while others watched the holoscreens displaying the latest news of the Legion's defeat.

Deek is living dangerously, broadcasting the illegal channels.

Not that much was illegal on Cryon II. Still, the few who were loyal to the Legion wouldn't be happy if they knew their defeat was set on a loop for everyone to see.

Dorane scanned the interior. The bar stretched along the right wall, and behind it stood Deek himself—a thick-set, four-armed Kerlian with red-tinted cybernetic optics. Deek had lost his four arms in a mining explosion. The corporate owners, upset at losing a crew, had 'gifted' the cybernetic arms to Deek after he was dragged out almost dead. Deek had used their gift to escape the horrors of the mine and the brutal corporation that had owned it.

The mine was one of the first places Dorane had purchased after hearing what Deek had been through. Now, the corporate owners, those who were still alive, were doing the digging. Dorane lifted a hand in greeting when Deek paused and nodded to him before glancing at a table across from the bar.

Asta and Jammer fell in step behind him.

"Sit at the bar," Dorane instructed.

Asta grumbled, tail flicking. “One of these days, I’m letting you get shot.”

Jammer chuckled, striding toward the counter with a booming greeting.

“Deek, you magnificent bastard, you still serving that battery acid you call Torrian Viper Piss?”

Deek didn’t even glance up as he slid a glass to another patron. “Yeah, and it’s still too strong for your oversized ass, Jammer.”

Jammer just laughed.

Dorane didn’t stop at the bar. He strode toward the back booth, where Cee 585 was waiting.

Cee sat at the far end of the booth, leaning back with casual ease, her cybernetic fingers idly tapping the table in an impatient rhythm. There was a wall behind her, as well as a corridor that led to the bathrooms and an exit.

Her right eye gleamed an unnatural electric blue, the left one dark and calculating. The side of her face was more machine than flesh, sleek plating running from her temple down to her jaw.

The last time Dorane had seen her, she’d been less metal and more normal-looking... if you could call the patchwork of red, blue, and green molted spots and leathery skin normal.

Asta really must think I have terrible taste if she believes I would ever sleep with someone like Cee, he thought with distaste.

He walked along the narrow path between the bar and tables and slid into the seat

across from her, eyeing the robotic server as it placed a glass of amber liquid in front of him.

He lifted it in a toast and shot Cee a deceptive smile of greeting that didn't reach his eyes. "At the rate you're going, Cee, you could get a job serving drinks here."

Cee didn't smile. "I see you are entertaining as always, Dorane."

Dorane took a slow sip, then motioned toward her. "That's a lot of shiny new parts. Did you have another accident, or are you just trying out a new look?"

Cee's fingers tightened slightly on the table.

Dorane grinned. Good. She still had a temper.

Cee leaned forward. "Do you know why I'm here, Dorane?"

He laughed and nodded. "You're a Turbinta assassin, Cee. I have a bounty on my head. That's like asking if I know the sky is black and if stars shine."

Cee tilted her head slightly, watching him. "The Legion wants you dead."

Dorane shrugged. "Hardly news."

"It is a sizable amount," she added, her voice unreadable.

Dorane's smile didn't fade, but his gaze sharpened slightly. "I'm sure it is. Let me guess, the Director of the Legion is feeling threatened."

Cee gave a small, mocking bow of her head. "It would appear the dead general wanted to leave a parting gift for you as well. What did you do to upset them so

badly?”

Dorane exhaled, dragging his fingers through his curls. “It might be easier to list what I haven’t done to piss them off.”

Cee smirked. “That, I can believe.”

She paused, her gaze flashing to the screens playing above the bar. “You know about the battle?”

Dorane leaned back, swirling his drink. “Of course. It’s a little hard to miss.”

“Rumor has it that Roan Landais defected and he is alive. His father... not so much,” Cee said bluntly.

Dorane didn’t react outwardly. She was fishing for information. She wanted to know where Roan was and if he had contacted him. She would have to keep wondering. What he didn’t expect was her next question.

“Where are the Ancient Knights?”

Dorane arched a brow, lips twitching. “How should I know?”

Cee pursed her lips together. “You know everything.”

Dorane was about to reply when a large, male patron crashed into their table. Dorane’s hand instinctively went to his weapon, but when his gaze snapped up, it landed, not on the drunken man, but the cloaked figure that the man had knocked against.

A startling awareness coiled through him. It was instant—and sharp. The figure was

almost child size, but there was a grace in the alien's movement, in the way the liquid in their glass barely moved, that captured his attention. His eyes flickered when the alien's hand moved—slender fingers covered by black gloves.

A shadow moving through the light.

The thought flashed through his mind as the customer straightened, turned away, and staggered to the bar stool across from the table.

Dorane's eyes narrowed, unease curling in his gut. The stagger had been graceful, almost like a dance step instead of a stumble. He vaguely heard Cee growling, "Watch yourself or you'll be next!"

The drunkard turned to say something but paled and hurried away. Dorane dragged his gaze away from the small stranger sitting hunched at the bar. He exhaled slowly and shook his head at Cee, registering what she'd said.

"For the sake of our friendship —and all those lovely new upgrades—I really hope you're not here to cash in on my bounty."

Cee's lips curled into a smile that wasn't really a smile.

"Dorane," she said softly, lifting the pistol in her hand, her mechanical fingers curling easily around the grip.

"It's not personal, just business. I'm sure you understand."

8

The moment Cee lifted her weapon, Mei reacted.

She didn't think. She moved.

Sliding off her stool in a single fluid motion, she hooked it with her foot, caught the top, and shoved the four legs into Cee's arm with enough force to jolt the assassin's aim off-course. Dorane twisted to the side, his reflexes matching the disruption.

The blast of laser fire shot wildly across the room, ricocheting off the metal walls and shattering a pitcher of dark liquor behind Deek's head. The thick scent of alcohol filled the air as the shattered glass rained down onto the bar top. A chorus of curses and chaos erupted as the patrons dove for cover.

Cee's metal fingers clenched around the stool leg as her head snapped toward Mei. Her cybernetic eye flickered, locking onto the unexpected fighter on Dorane's side. With a furious growl, Cee swung the stool like a hammer, launching it straight at Dorane who had already started moving—after Mei.

"Son of a—" Asta's voice cut off as she rolled onto the bar, dodging the flying stool as Dorane caught it in midair and redirected it out of his way.

Jammer moved to intercept Cee when she launched herself after Dorane. His massive frame blocked Cee's path for only a fraction of a second—she was faster than she looked. With one hand, Cee grabbed Jammer by the front of his coat and hurled him into a nearby table. The furniture collapsed under his weight, sending chairs skidding

across the floor.

While Deek pulled out a double-barrel laser rifle and shot in the wake of the moving cyborg, shattering the sign above the door, Mei exited the bar, trying to lose herself in the swarm of patrons scrambling to get away. She ducked under the falling pieces and slipped outside with Dorane in hot pursuit.

Damn it!

Mei silently cursed as she darted away from the bar. She hadn't planned on interfering, but the moment she had seen Cee pull her weapon, she knew Dorane would die. She had learned enough about the Turbinta assassins over the last few days from Tiv and Yi to know they didn't play around.

If she had been the one sitting across from him, she wouldn't have waited for the banter—she would have killed him instantly. Her breath came fast as she slipped into a thick crowd of pedestrians, her pace slowing.

She wove in and out between bodies, keeping her head down, her movements controlled, scanning for an exit. She knew Dorane was following her. Their eyes had briefly met before she'd turned and bolted. She hoped his backup could handle the cyborg.

Her gaze swept through the crowd. She had seconds to find a place to vanish if she didn't want to come face-to-face with Dorane LeGaugh in a crowded market. She could just see the headlines flashing over the monitors in the bar tomorrow if that happened: Last Ancient Knight discovered in seedy bar on Cryon II. Come and get her!

There!

Mei sighed with relief when she found what she was looking for. To her right was a merchant's stall covered in a thick, dark cloth. The perfect place to disappear.

Without hesitation, Mei stooped low and rolled under the table, pressing her back against the cool metal floor, her breathing even despite the rush of adrenaline. The sound of running footsteps grew louder, then slowed.

From her hiding spot, Mei watched Dorane skid to a stop just beyond the table, his chest rising and falling as he scanned the streets. His jaw tightened, a curse slipping from his lips, before he turned and took off down a long, narrow alleyway.

Mei was about to roll out and move in the opposite direction when a glint of metal and the faint whir of cybernetic servos warned her to stay where she was. She stared up through a rip in the fabric at the cyborg assassin. Cee paused, still as death before she released a malicious chuckle.

Cee's cybernetic fingers flexed before she muttered, "A rare, fatal mistake, Dorane. One that I will use to my advantage."

Mei twisted onto her stomach and watched as the Turbinta assassin strode toward the entrance of the alley where Dorane had disappeared. Bitterness rose in her throat. How many times had she heard her father speak in that same tone before he did something unimaginably cruel? It was the certainty of a hunter who knew their prey had just walked into a trap.

Shit.

Driven by her desire to stop what she knew would happen, she rolled out the opposite side, startling the merchant.

"Apologies," she whispered, brushing past before the man could react.

Her eyes flicked toward the bar just in time to see Asta and Jammer emerge—going in the opposite direction. They hadn't seen which direction Dorane had gone. They didn't realize he had just trapped himself.

Walking away wasn't an option. She couldn't leave Dorane defenseless. Never again would she look the opposite way when she had the power and skills to stop someone who enjoyed inflicting pain. While she didn't know Dorane LeGauth personally, he had stopped the two men from harming Yi. If nothing else, he deserved to have someone cover his back.

Damn it, Dorane, Mei thought as she took off after him.

She moved fast, because if she was right about Cee, Dorane wouldn't be walking out of that alley alive unless he had a little help.

Dorane groaned, dragging a hand down his face as he slowed to a stop and glanced around the alley. He had made a mistake. A rare, stupid, potentially fatal mistake.

The cold metal walls loomed on either side before ending in a solid wall. The only exit was the way he came. He stood at the midpoint, which meant—yep.

A dead end. I just hope it will be a figurative one.

He exhaled slowly, shaking his head. "Damn it."

It wasn't even the trap that pissed him off. No, what really bothered him was that he had walked into it . On his own. Willingly.

His lips twitched despite himself. This time, he was the dumbass. He had led plenty of people into traps before, watching with mild amusement as they realized their fate too late. It was almost refreshing to be on the other side of it.

Almost.

A dry, mocking laugh echoed through the alleyway, slicing through the silence like a well-placed blade. Dorane turned, already knowing who he would see.

Cee 585 stood at the entrance, her cybernetic fingers flexing, her lips curled into an amused sneer. The dim alley lighting reflected off her metallic faceplate, the edges of her cybernetic enhancements catching the glow in eerie, jagged streaks. His lips quirked in wry amusement. He lifted his hands, palms up.

“What can I say? At least you’ll have more room to kill me here.” He tilted his head, feigning disappointment. “Though, I gotta admit, I’m a little let down, Cee. A laser pistol? Really? I expected something a little more creative from you.”

Cee’s cybernetic eye flickered. “Oh, don’t worry. I can be creative.”

Dorane cursed himself. He should’ve finished her in the bar. Hell , he should have finished her two years ago when he cut off her arm. Would have, too—if she hadn’t plummeted into that damn ravine.

She should have stayed dead.

But, like him, Cee didn’t seem to know how to die properly.

He rolled his shoulders, muscles coiling in anticipation as she holstered the pistol and reached behind her back. A moment later, the unmistakable crackle of energy filled the air as she drew her weapon.

Dorane grimaced at the dark purple glow of the laser sword, the edges flickering with an unnatural shimmer. He felt the heat radiating off it even from where he stood.

“Centarian poison?” he dryly observed, shaking his head. “Painful, but I hate to tell you this, it’s not deadly to me.”

Cee grinned at his expression. “What’s wrong? Don’t like the extra kick?” She twirled the blade effortlessly. “You should be honored, Dorane. Few get to experience a death this excruciating .”

Dorane sighed dramatically. “And here I was hoping for something quick .”

He reached into his coat, gripping his own weapon. Cee’s eyes widened slightly when he pulled it free—then narrowed dangerously.

The sleek, segmented metal gleamed in the dim light, the gold trim catching against the darkness of the alley. It extended with a quiet hum, locking into place with practiced ease.

Cee’s sneer deepened. “A Gallant Staff ? You?” She let out a sharp, mocking laugh. “How did a lowborn piece of gutter trash like you get your hands on one of those?”

Dorane smiled at her baiting, rolling the Staff between his fingers. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She didn’t reply. She attacked .

The alley erupted into chaos.

Cee moved like a specter, her blade slashing through the air with deadly precision. Dorane blocked with fluid efficiency, his Gallant Staff deflecting the searing edges of her strikes. Sparks flew as metal met energy, lighting up the alley with each impact.

Cee was fast. But so was he.

They moved like two forces of nature—her attacks ruthless and relentless, his movements sharp and calculated. Each strike, each counter, each pivot was a deadly dance they had performed before.

Then—pain.

A sharp, searing burn sliced across his upper arm. Dorane gritted his teeth as agony flared through his veins, the Centarian poison latching onto his nervous system like fire. His fingers trembled for a split second—just long enough for him to stumble back, dropping the Staff.

Cee's grin was pure malice.

“Finally,” she purred, advancing, her blade raised. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to?—”

Dorane frowned when Cee froze as if her damn cybernetics had locked. His face twisted with pain as he reached for his laser pistol with his good hand. Her fingers twitched. Then—her cybernetic hand jerked violently to her back, fumbling for something.

Dorane's breath hitched when she pulled her hand back around. The glow of a star-shaped weapon gleamed against her metal plating. She jerked again, then again, and again, the blows happening in rapid session.

Cee whirled, her furious gaze snapping away from Dorane, her face contorted in confusion and rage. Dorane followed her line of sight. Time seemed to slow and everything around him faded: the excruciating pain, the threat of death, even the perfect opportunity he had to kill Cee before she finished what she came to do.

His eyes were locked on the petite, cloaked figure from the bar. Even though he

couldn't see his guardian's face, her build and graceful movements signaled her gender. Her hood was drawn low, her stance poised, and her slender fingers lifted in a delicate, almost lazy motion that he could imagine running across his burning flesh.

Dorane's gaze flickered to the tips of her fingers when she held up a device. His stomach dropped and his eyes widened when he recognized what she was holding.

A detonator.

“Vas'ailora ti'shen!” Holy shit! Dorane muttered in his native language.

Cee recognized the device at the same time he did. Her furious gaze locked onto his. He watched in amusement as her lips parted on a single word before the rest of her sentence was cut off.

“Tzarak—!” Damn ? —

He barely had time to tuck his injured arm under him and roll under a nearby metal recycle container before the world erupted in a flash of blinding white. The explosion rocked the alley, heat and Cee's body parts splattering around him as he buried his face in his good arm.

Pressure in his ears pulsed violently before sound slowly returned, ringing and distorted. He slowly lifted his head, grimacing when he found himself staring into the burnt remains of Cee's cybernetic skull, her mechanical eye cracked and glazed from the intense hit. He reached for the Gallant Staff that had fallen nearby.

With a grunt of pain and a lot of cursing, he rolled out from under the container, vaguely hoping he didn't roll in any of Cee's remains. He grabbed the edge of the container and pulled himself up to his feet just as Asta and Jammer rushed into the alley.

Asta's eyes widened. "What the hell happened here? Is that Cee?"

Jammer let out a low whistle. "Damn. Wow, I'm glad you didn't do this to her in the bar. Deek would have really been pissed off at you."

"I didn't do it. Someone else did. And yeah, I'll be alright. Thanks for asking," he dryly replied, his focus elsewhere.

"You look like shit. Is that Centarian poison?" Asta asked, peering at the slowly healing wound along his arm.

"Yeah," he replied, his gaze scanning the alley, searching for the cloaked figure.

Gone.

Again.

His jaw clenched.

"Well, it's a good thing Cee didn't know you were immune to it," Jammer said, slapping his injured shoulder. "You are one lucky Aetherialan. I'm glad you're alright."

Dorane hissed and glared at Jammer, but it was hard to be angry with Jammer and Asta when he saw the genuine worry in their eyes.

"Let's get back to headquarters," he muttered.

He slid the Gallant Staff into his pocket. As he did, his fingers brushed a small device that hadn't been there earlier. A slow smile replaced his grimace of pain as he rolled the small disk between his fingers. Whoever his guardian was, she had saved his life.

Twice. And it looked like she wanted to keep tabs on him.

He didn't enjoy owing debts, especially to someone he didn't know. Perhaps she truly wanted to save his life—or perhaps she wanted to toy with him before she tried to kill him.

Two can play this game, lira'vaen eth'shari. His name for her was only going to be my little shadow temporarily, because soon, he would know her real name.

How disappointing, Zoak thought with amused exasperation as he watched Dorane LeGaugh walk straight into a trap.

He had been tailing Dorane for weeks, watching from the shadows as the self-made power broker eliminated the fools who thought they could collect the bounty on his head. Watching Dorane dismantle his would-be killers had been entertaining—a refined, brutal efficiency that spoke to the man's years of experience in surviving.

But Cee 585 was a different breed.

Zoak leaned forward slightly, his slit-pupiled eyes narrowing. Cee was a Turbinta assassin, and unlike the rest, she actually had a chance. Which was a complication. If it looked like she was going to be successful, he would have to intervene.

Dorane is mine.

He perched in the darkness high above the alley, his four-fingered hands resting lightly against the cold metal railing. The artificial lights of Cryon II flickered inconsistently below, casting elongated shadows through the narrow passageway. From his vantage point, he had an unobstructed view of the unfolding spectacle.

His fingers flexed against the metal railing, the weight of his blade familiar and

comforting at his side. Below, Cee activated her blade, the dark purple glow of the energy weapon crackling in the alley's dim light. Zoak's nostrils flared slightly as he caught the faint, acrid scent of Centarian poison.

A slow and agonizing way to die.

Dorane, to his credit, looked unimpressed.

Zoak smirked, watching the two circle each other, waiting for the first strike.

The fight erupted in a blur of motion—faster than most beings would have been able to track. Blades clashed, sparks flew, and Zoak's smirk deepened as he observed the violent, ruthless exchange.

Dorane fought well, but Cee was relentless, pressing her advantage. And then...

A mistake.

Zoak saw the moment it happened—the flicker of pain in Dorane's expression as Cee's blade sliced across his upper arm. The telltale shimmer of poison burning into his bloodstream.

Dorane stumbled. The Gallant Staff slipped from his grip and rolled under the container to his left. Zoak tensed and pulled his laser rifle up from where he had rested it against the wall of the building he was standing on.

I think not, Cee.

He sighted the angle he'd need to take her down before she could land the last strike, and his fingers twitched on the trigger. He would enjoy watching the surprise on her face as she realized her life had been claimed instead.

A pinpoint of red light flashed through the air—small, fast. Cee stiffened in surprise and raised her hand to her back, and then her body jerked several more times.

Zoak froze, his predatory instincts flaring, before his eyes flashed to the entrance of the alley. Zoak blinked in surprise at the cyborg's choice to turn her back on her target, as she did the same. Zoak shifted silently, and finally caught sight of a cloaked figure at the alley's mouth, standing unnaturally still. The shadows clung to the figure like a second skin. He couldn't make out the intruder's features.

Then Cee's body exploded.

The blast rocked the alleyway, sending a shockwave through the surrounding structures. Zoak gripped the edge of the wall and remained perfectly still, barely shifting with the force of the explosion. His slitted pupils narrowed to thin slivers as he watched the aftermath unfold.

From the smoke and debris, Dorane slowly emerged, brushing his uninjured hand over his long coat with the nonchalance of a man who should have been dead. Asta and Jammer appeared seconds later, their expressions a mix of disbelief and irritation.

Zoak's tongue flicked against the roof of his mouth. They are not responsible for Cee's death. That much is clear.

His gaze flickered back toward the alley's entrance, but the cloaked figure was gone. A slow, dangerous grin spread across Zoak's face.

Interesting.

He had assumed this hunt was between himself and Dorane, but perhaps... perhaps there was another player on the board.

His curiosity stirred, simmering beneath his usual cold amusement. Who are you?

His fingers drummed absently against the railing, his keen gaze lingering on the empty space where the figure had stood.

Then—he felt it.

A ripple of awareness.

His body went completely still.

For the first time in years , a sensation crawled down the back of his neck like a whisper against his skin.

He was being watched.

Slowly, he turned his head, scanning the surrounding rooftops, the darkened windows of the abandoned structures lining the alley. His gaze moved methodically, calculating, searching.

Nothing.

But that didn't mean no one was there.

A slow, predatory smile curved his lips as his internal desire for survival kicked in and he melted back into the shadows... slipping away. And yet, the whisper against his skin remained.

This had just become far more entertaining.

The metallic hum of Cryon II's artificial atmosphere and gravity was almost soothing, if one ignored the fact that it was currently vibrating through the floor at a slightly irregular pitch—a sign of yet another power fluctuation in the lower levels. Dorane noted it absently as he leaned back in his chair, listening to Asta rant.

“Another one. I swear to every damn god in this galaxy, if one more moron tries to kill you, we’re going to be knee-deep in bodies. We don’t have the storage for this, Dorane!” Asta threw her hands up in exasperation, her tail lashing behind her.

“You can’t count Cee. There wasn’t much of her to store,” Dorane replied with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Very funny. You know that Andri’s jacked up the price on your head again. Unless we ban everyone from Cryon II, this is going to turn into a goddamn charnel house,” she continued.

Dorane pursed his lips and absently rolled the small tracking disk between his fingers—the one his mysterious shadow had left him. “Sounds like you’ve got your work cut out for you, Asta. Maybe we should start charging an entrance fee for bounty hunters. Call it an ‘assassin’s toll’.”

Asta’s glare could have melted steel. “Or, we could just stop letting every trigger-happy idiot with a vendetta walk in here!”

“Then why don’t you? You are in charge of security,” he pointed out lazily.

Asta bared her fangs. “Don’t tempt me to take a vacation, Dorane.”

The office door slid open before Dorane could deliver his undoubtedly witty response. Jammer stepped inside, his usual relaxed demeanor tempered with something cautious.

“You’ve got visitors,” he announced.

Dorane arched a brow. “Do I?”

Jammer grimaced. “Yeah. A Turbinta assassin.”

Asta let out a string of very colorful curses. “Now they’re showing up and making an appointment to try to kill you! You have really outdone yourself this time, Dorane.”

“But,” Jammer continued, “she’s not alone. She’s with an Ancient Knight of the Gallant.”

Dorane leaned forward, suddenly intrigued. That announcement even shut Asta up. Dorane’s lips curved into a wry smile. So, the rumors were true. There was a Turbinta assassin with an Ancient Knight.

“Now that is interesting.” He flicked his fingers toward the door. “Please, escort them in.”

Jammer nodded and stepped back out. Asta muttered under her breath, folding her arms. “I swear, if we’re hosting a damn assassin convention now, I’m out.”

“You’ll stay, because you love me,” Dorane teased.

Asta growled, “I love paychecks.”

“Same thing,” he mused.

Moments later, Jammer returned, and with him came a pair that made Dorane’s interest sharpen.

The Turbinta woman—tall, sharp-featured, with piercing violet eyes—was assessing the room as if it was a battlefield: exits, structural weaknesses, and probably the fastest way to kill every person here. And yet, despite the danger the assassin presented, it was the man beside her that caught Dorane’s attention and held it.

The man’s entrance was bold, a purposeful stride that filled the room, but it was devoid of the expected swagger, leaving Dorane disarmed by his surprising modesty. Curiosity was etched on his face, but Dorane would bet his most prized starship that the man had much in common with his companion, the subtle shift in his eyes betraying a similar assessment.

His movements were effortless, fluid, confident—like a man used to both fighting wars and laughing at them. His relaxed smile didn’t have a hint of deception in it. And, more notably, his arm was casually resting around the Turbinta’s waist in a slightly possessive way that spoke volumes.

Dorane’s eyes flicked between them, entertained and fascinated. He had seen assassins with lovers before—fleeting, shallow things meant for distraction, leverage, or convenience. But this one looked at this man differently. With ... deep emotion.

Well, well, Dorane thought. That’s unexpected.

Ash shot him a pleasant smile and held out his hand. “Ashton Haze, but everyone calls me Ash. You’re Dorane LeGaugh, I presume? Gotta say, you’ve got a pretty impressive setup here.”

Dorane rose, shook Ash's hand, and waved to the two seats across from him. "Thank you. Now, forgive me for my impatience, but what brings a Turbinta and a Gallant to my doorstep? Normally when a Turbinta comes this close, they are trying to kill me."

Ash waved that away with a chuckle. "If Kella wanted to kill you, she wouldn't have knocked."

Kella rolled her eyes at Ash's comment and looked at Dorane with a slightly apologetic expression and a slight shake of her head.

"He is the one who would knock, have a conversation with you and probably a meal and a drink before killing you. I am trying to teach him efficiency, but he is not a very good student," Kella retorted.

It took a second for Dorane to realize that Kella had made a joke. Asta's smothered snicker told him that she picked up on the subtle humor at the same time. Dorane's fascination grew.

There must be something to these Ancient Knights if they can make a Turbinta joke, he silently mused .

"I'll remember that," Dorane chuckled. "So, why are you here?"

Ash's demeanor shifted slightly—not losing its warmth, but solidifying. "To warn you that there's a Turbinta assassin named Zoak who's taken your contract. According to Kella, he's a badass with mental issues."

Dorane exhaled in mild amusement. "Thank you for the warning, but it's a little late. There have been several attempts on my life recently." He paused, considering. "Though... I hadn't heard that Zoak was in the mix. That is interesting."

Kella shook her head at his dismissive attitude. “Zoak is different. He is like Ash says... not right in the head.”

Dorane tilted his head, unimpressed. “He’s an assassin. He kills. That’s pretty much all I need to know.”

Kella’s lips thinned. “You don’t understand. He is not an assassin. He will take money, but he is not driven by credits. He will kill more than who he was hired for. He wants a legacy. He wants to be remembered for his cruelty.”

Dorane studied her, noting the way her posture stiffened, the flicker of something unreadable in her expression. “And you know this because...?”

Kella hesitated. He didn’t miss the way Ash’s arm tightened around Kella’s waist or the way Ash leaned into her and murmured encouragement in her ear. He wasn’t sure if it was to calm her fears or to keep her from telling him ‘Good luck facing Zoak’ and leaving. He suspected it was the latter.

Dorane leaned forward slightly, his voice smooth. “Come now, Kella. Don’t be shy. You seem awfully concerned for someone who normally wouldn’t care.”

Kella’s jaw tightened. “I knew him. When I was training. And I’ve heard stories.”

Kella’s eyes strayed to the glass of his office. It was as if she were staring at someone, almost daring them to take the shot. Dorane motioned with his hand to Asta, who nodded. Asta touched the communicator on her wrist and tapped in a command. Dorane waited, his eyes not leaving Kella’s face as it tightened and she moved until she was between Ash and the glass.

“A laser cannon could be fired at close range and not penetrate the glass,” he murmured.

She turned to look at him. A myriad of expressions crossed her face before it changed to relief. She sensed the same thing he had—that there was someone out there.

More than one, he thought, resisting the urge to get up and walk over to the window.

“Zoak likes to stalk his prey. He will start with those closest to you and kill them, simply to taunt you. That is not the Turbinta way. We are trained to kill a specific target—for credits. We kill only those that get in the way of our target. Any other is a waste of our energy and not conducive to the end mission. Zoak would kill every person on Cryon II if he knew it would cause you pain. He is driven by a desire to be known as the greatest ‘assassin’ of all time, fool that he is. He is a loose cannon who was shunned by the great Masters. I overheard Tal—my Master and Zoak’s former Master—speak of him once, many years ago. He had an obsession with killing all the Turbinta Masters and claiming their titles. Tallei recommended that Zoak be terminated, but instead, he was transferred to a new Master—who shared Zoak’s obsession. She believed that he would only betray her when she was the last Master left standing. He killed her first... and the rest of the villagers nearby, hanging them in their homes, before he disappeared.”

“Why didn’t the Turbinta Masters go after him?” he asked, sitting back.

“They believe themselves smarter and faster than Zoak, there was no profit in hunting him, it would be unprecedented to work together for a single target, and those who were affected were dead. He has been relatively quiet since. Plotting his next grand show,” Kella said. “He is here. I can feel it in my bones, watching even as we speak.”

Dorane weighed her words, then nodded. “I believe you.”

She nodded in return, and Dorane turned his gaze back to Ash. “And you? What’s your angle? Why do you care what happens here?”

Ash met his gaze without hesitation. “Because I know what happens when dictators are in power.”

Dorane raised a brow.

Ash continued, his tone serious but steady. “The Gallant needs your support. I grew up on a planet called Earth. They had their own mess of politics there... it doesn’t always look like war, but it is. Dictators suppress people through fear, through cruelty. They take power, not because they deserve it, but because they can. And they keep it because good people don’t stand up soon enough.” His jaw set. “I made an oath once—to defend against enemies, both foreign and domestic. Doesn’t matter that I’m in a different galaxy. That oath didn’t change.”

Dorane studied him for a long moment. There was a quiet resolve in Ash’s expression, a certainty that Dorane could appreciate. He leaned back in his chair.

“I like you, Ash.”

Asta groaned, dragging a hand down her face. “Oh, stars help us.”

Dorane waved her off, his lips curving at Asta’s comforting irritation. “Unfortunately, I’m going to have to put off any heroic declarations for the moment.” He glanced at the holoscreen flashing on his desk. “I have an important communication I need to take. We’ll have to finish this conversation later.”

Ash inclined his head. “We’ll get out of your hair. I appreciate you hearing us out.”

“Please, stay in one of our guest apartments,” Dorane offered.

Kella locked eyes with Dorane, a challenging smile forming on her lips. “We would be delighted,” she replied with wry amusement.

Dorane flicked his fingers toward Asta. “Asta, please escort Ash and Kella to the guest apartments. And try not to threaten them too much. I’d like to keep this assassin on my good side.”

Asta grumbled but obeyed, escorting them out.

The moment they were gone, Dorane turned back to his holoscreen and tapped the incoming call.

Roan Landais’s face appeared.

Dorane grinned. “Well, well. If it isn’t the man of the hour. It’s good to see you aren’t dead, unlike your father, from what I’ve heard.”

Roan sighed. “It was close... and yes, Coleridge is dead.”

Dorane leaned back, fingers steepling. “It’s about time someone put him out of his misery. I’m guessing this isn’t just a social call to let me know about his passing.”

Roan’s lips twitched. “No. I’ve been having so much fun blowing things up, I thought you might like to join in.”

Dorane threw his head back and laughed. “Damn, it’s good to know you are still alive. Tell me what happened.”

The moment Roan began speaking, Dorane’s expression darkened. He listened in silence as Roan described what had happened aboard the Legion Space Lab—the twisted experiments, the Legion’s plans to obliterate Tesla Terra, the sheer scale of destruction they were preparing to unleash.

By the time Roan had finished his vivid description and dire warnings, Dorane felt as

if he had been on the space lab with his friend. He exhaled slowly, fingers tapping against the desk. This night was proving to be more exciting than he had expected.

“We need your help, Dorane. My uncle is mad, and what happened will make him desperate. With the power at his disposal, I don’t have to tell you how dangerous that makes him,” Roan said.

“You know how to stir up a Torrian vipers’ nest, Roan,” he replied with a shake of his head.

“I have an Ancient Knight with me. Her name is Julia Marksdale,” Roan added.

“There is one here as well. He said his name is Ashton Haze,”

Roan nodded. “He came to warn you about an assassin?—”

“Named Zoak. Yeah, he told me. I guess Coleridge wasn’t happy with just dying. He and your uncle have put a high enough price on my head that every would-be assassin in the galaxy is after my blood,” he replied with a hefty sigh.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into this, Dorane,” Roan murmured.

“It was bound to happen. Men like your father and uncle are easily threatened by men like us. I’m assuming you’re heading to Cryon II. How soon before you arrive?” he asked.

“Two days,” Roan replied.

Dorane’s fingers traced slow circles against the desk as he mulled it over. “You might want to reconsider coming here.”

Roan's brows lifted slightly. "Why?"

"Because Cryon II is currently crawling with assassins," Dorane said dryly. "And unless you're planning on shooting your way through a very enthusiastic bounty pool, it might be better if I come to you."

There was a beat of silence.

Then Roan nodded. "Where?"

"Aetherial," Dorane said immediately.

Roan exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face. "We'll meet you there."

Dorane sat back in his chair, exhaling slowly as his gaze flickered to the ceiling. He processed everything that had happened in just the last hour. He had met his first Ancient Knight—and had been mildly surprised. The man was nothing like the rumors. In some ways, that made Ash even more remarkable. Rising to his feet, Dorane walked over to the glass, staring out across the darkened rooftops across from him where Kella had been staring. He folded his hands behind him. He felt no fear; Zoak's threat was just another noise in the violent symphony of the battle. The layered defenses, composed of reinforced transparent glass and additional shields, created an impenetrable barrier against any weapons.

His thoughts turned to the Legion and their plan to wipe out Tesla Terra. If what Roan told him was true, and he was sure it was, then the Legion had crossed the line. Tesla Terra was one of his most lucrative clients. It was more than that, though. Their attack was personal. He had friends there.

He absently rolled the small tracking device between his fingers—the one his shadow had left him. A rueful smile curved his lips. It was time to find out if his mysterious

guardian was a friend or an enemy.

He turned when Jammer and Asta strode into the office. Jammer groaned the moment he saw Dorane's expression. "I already hate whatever you're about to say."

Asta, ever the perceptive one, grinned. "Finally. Are we done pretending everything is normal around here?" She threw herself onto the couch across from his desk. "Because I swear if I had to listen to you complain about the rattling in the power grid and the lights flickering one more time, I was going to shoot you myself."

Dorane chuckled. "You still might."

She flicked her tail, amused. "Not yet, but I'm considering it. It helps keep the boredom at bay."

Dorane rolled the tracking device between his fingers, eyes glinting with something dangerous.

"Tell me..." he mused. "Are you two ready to pick a fight with the Legion?"

Jammer groaned louder and glanced between him and Asta. "Oh, come on. Please tell me you aren't serious? Is this because an Ancient Knight and a Turbinta have fallen in love? You think the galaxy should be all lovey dovey?"

Asta threw back her head and laughed. "It probably has more to do with Roan Landais. If you ask me, which you did, I think it's about damn time you got your head out of your ass and joined the fun."

"That's a ringing endorsement. Jammer?"

Jammer paused before he muttered a curse and sighed, then grinned. "When do we

leave?”

A flare of excitement swept through Dorane. “As soon as I’ve found what I’m looking for. Asta, can you inform our guests of our plans? I have a feeling they will want to join us. We'll leave for Aetherial soon.”

Asta sat up, her eyes shimmering with curiosity. “What are you looking for?”

Dorane’s eyes glittered with determination. “My shadow.”

And this time, she wouldn’t disappear.

10

The artificial night of Cryon II felt different tonight. Thicker. Heavier. Dorane walked the winding paths of the lower levels, fingering the tracking device. He had carried a thousand different currencies in his lifetime—credits, stolen gems, information worth more than gold—but this?

This felt like a gamble.

Would his shadow come out into the light?

His gut twisted in a way he didn't like to analyze. If she didn't, what then? He had no name, no face—only the memory of how she moved through chaos, a figure who had pulled him back from the edge of death more than once.

It wasn't just curiosity that burned inside him. It was something deeper. Something that coiled in his chest, a slow, smoldering tension that felt too much like waiting for something to break.

Jammer walked beside him, moving with that deceptively casual ease he always had. Dorane wasn't fooled, though. Jammer was always watching, always ready.

“So,” Jammer murmured as they rounded the last corner before the stretch leading to Deek's. “Are we really doing this?”

Dorane exhaled, fingers tightening around the Gallant Staff at his side. “There comes a time when even a sewer rat has to take a stand.”

Jammer let out a low grunt, rubbing the back of his head. “I was hoping you’d say no. I don’t know about sewer rats, but I have a great affection for being alive.”

Dorane huffed out a quiet laugh, but it faded quickly. His stomach was tight. His footsteps felt heavier the closer they got. It was ridiculous, really—the amount of weight he was placing on something as uncertain as a hope.

Would she be there? What would she look like? For a second, dread filled him at the thought that she could be a Mnezzar or other insectoid type species.

That would be very disappointing, he mused .

He shook off his misgivings and crossed the threshold into Deek’s. The scent of alcohol, sweat, and dim-lit regret greeted him like an old friend. The air vibrated with the hum of low conversation, the clatter of server bots, the occasional bark of laughter. He scanned the room instinctively, his gaze flicking toward the booth at the far end where he had sat less than a week ago.

Empty.

His stomach dipped.

He didn’t pause, didn’t let the disappointment settle too deep. Instead, he rolled his shoulders back, forcing himself to move along the bar. Deek, ever the unbothered bastard, barely looked up as Dorane motioned for a drink. The server bot hummed over, setting a glass down with precise efficiency before Dorane even reached the table.

Jammer settled a few stools down, easily chatting with Deek about the repairs he had made since their last visit. Other patrons moved about the bar, drinking, laughing, playing out their usual routines.

Dorane slid into the seat with his back to the wall this time. He picked up the crystal glass. A fine thread of spiraling steam rose from the amber liquor, but he didn't drink. His mind was elsewhere, scanning, waiting, bracing.

The world moved on, and for the first time in a long time, Dorane felt a flicker of something unsteady inside him. What if she didn't come? What if she was already gone? He didn't even know who she was—what she wanted, what she fought for. Only that she had killed for him. Twice that he knew of, maybe more.

That was enough to make him wonder—would he ever get the chance to ask why? He was so lost in his thoughts that he almost missed the shiver of awareness that ran down his spine. His fingers froze around his glass.

The world contracted, narrowing to a single point of awareness. She was here. He didn't turn. He didn't want to alert her, or worse, frighten her away.

He felt her the way a predator senses another in the dark—the whisper of fabric, the softest shift of footsteps, the presence of something just out of reach but watching. She moved with the grace of the moth-like creatures from Plateau, gliding out from the dim corridor behind him.

His fingers tightened around his glass as she slid into the seat across from him. Smooth. Effortless. As if they had done this a thousand times before.

He waited, allowing himself a moment to study her as if she were a piece of fine artwork.

A cloak. Goggles. A scarf covering the lower half of her face. All of it designed to conceal, to obscure, to blend in. But none of it could hide the stillness about her. The way she held herself—coiled, controlled, the same way he would in a room full of threats.

She didn't fidget. She didn't shift. She simply watched.

Dorane's chest tightened. He wanted to rip the mask away. He had a feeling that if he tried, he'd be dead before his hand made it across the table.

The tension between them settled, low and charged. Not hostile. Not challenging. But dangerous all the same. A mutual awareness that was razor thin and balanced on the edge of knowing.

His lips curled into a relaxed smile as he leaned back, his voice low and lazy in Urvanian.

"Zarath vi liera vesh'ta, ka'len tor vash." The last time a woman sat there, she tried to kill me, he commented, placing the tracking device on the table.

For the first time, she moved, a slow, deliberate shift of her weight. He had to remind himself to breathe as she tilted her head, the faintest shift—like the whisper of a blade sliding from its sheath, a sound almost too subtle to register but sharp enough to make his senses prickle. Then she spoke, and it felt as if Jammer had punched him in the stomach. Her voice was low, a husky whisper that felt warm and inviting. The sweet cadence flowed through him like the smooth, amber liquor in his glass, a slight burn warming his belly, a delicious feeling that left him wanting more.

"I'm sure it was an explosive encounter."

The words took a half-second to register. The pun in her statement spoke volumes about her wit, but it was the second realization that caused him to sit forward.

His mind snapped the pieces together instantly—too fast, too sharp, certainty slicing him while a slow, sinking weight paralyzed his chest. She had spoken in the language of the Ancients.

Dorane's expression was something dangerously close to wonder laced with wariness. His little shadow was no ordinary assassin.

She was one of them.

His pulse thumped heavily as she lifted her hands.

Slow. Unhurried. Deliberate.

The goggles slid up.

The scarf unraveled.

His breath caught.

And for the first time, he saw her.

She was young, but not fragile. Sharp, but not cold. Her face was a study in contrasts—delicate features carved from tempered steel, a softness in her mouth that warred with the cool intensity in her dark eyes.

Ancient eyes. An assassin's eyes.

Dorane realized then—he had never been in the kind of danger he was in now.

Not from death.

From something far worse.

From losing heart.

Almost as if she could read his mind, her lips twitched with amusement. With a slow, subtle bow of her head, a gesture of acknowledgment, she confirmed his suspicions.

“My name is Mei. I think some of your people believe I’m an Ancient Knight of the Gallant.”

A Half Hour Earlier:

The creature was gone.

Mei hissed under her breath, tightening her grip on the tracking device she had placed in Dorane’s pocket almost a week before. Her steps were swift and soundless across the latticework of metal beams. She had been watching it—him—for days now, observing the way the creature followed Dorane from the upper levels, a predator trailing its prey.

She should have anticipated this.

The moment Dorane had left his headquarters, the creature had vanished into the rooftops, slipping into the shadows as if the darkness itself had swallowed him.

It had taken Yi a couple of days to find out who the creature was after she described him. Since then, Yi had been a basket case of nerves. He had barely been able to click out the creature’s name.

Zoak.

The Turbinta assassin’s name rolled through her mind as she paused to scan the upper-level beams. Tiv had explained that Turbinta assassins were notoriously hard to track, but this one? He was a ghost in a city of ghosts.

Mei clenched her jaw, scanning the crisscrossing scaffolding above. She was fast—faster than most—but even she had limits. Losing him in the web of Cryon II's upper beams was frustrating, and frustration led to mistakes.

A flick of her wrist, and the tracker screen pulsed. Dorane's signal was still moving. Heading downward.

Her heart kicked harder when she recognized the path. She had a suspicion she knew where he was going—and why. Mei's mouth pressed into a thin line. It would be a serendipitous move on his part to see if he could lure her back to the place where they first met.

She stood frozen for a moment, staring down at the display as uncertainty twisted through her stomach.

She had a choice to make.

She could stay on the hunt for Zoak, attempt to retrace the assassin's steps through the maze of steel and neon, or she could finally do what she should have done days ago.

Confront Dorane LeGauth.

Mei exhaled through her nose, her fingers tightening around the device. It was reasonable to think that Zoak wouldn't be far from Dorane. She could kill an assassin and save an idiot with a death wish with one stone, literally, if Zoak decided to make his move. The fact that the Turbinta hadn't made his move yet still puzzled her.

Over the last few days, Mei had learned enough about Dorane to make a few educated guesses. Tiv and Yi had spoken of him with a quiet reverence that made Mei wonder if the guy was some supernatural being. Dorane had crawled from the

gutters of the galaxy to claim a kingdom built from smoke, shadows, and sheer audacity.

The merchants spoke of him with the same awe. Unfortunately, the man also appeared to have a healthy dose of enemies waiting in the shadows to kill him. Mei had watched him fight, leaving those she felt confident he would have no issues defeating to him. There had been three she had intervened with, not counting Zoak. She would have taken the Turbinta if she could get close enough. At the moment, they were at a stand-off, aware of each other's presence, but still analyzing.

Zoak's darkness was familiar, and yet it was all the more jarring for that, because somehow her new life had been lightened by good people.

Josh, Ash, Julia, Sergi, Tiv, and Yi.

And perhaps Dorane.

The time on the Gliese had shown her what the sunlight felt like on her face. Where she didn't have to pretend. Losing them had been like losing a piece of herself. She could still feel their presence, but without their support, she was once again being pulled into the darkness. She didn't know if she could go back to that now that she knew how it felt to have a real life.

She had to find them. They were alive.

And if anyone knew where they were, it would be Dorane.

Her heart beat a slow, deliberate rhythm. She already knew what her choice would be.

It was time she confronted Dorane. If he was truly the man Yi, Tiv, and the

merchants whispered about, then he would help her.

If not, I'll leave his sorry ass for the assassins, she thought with a peevish shrug.

Descending into the depths of the spaceport, Mei pulled open the ventilation hatch, which gave way with a soft hiss, revealing the dimly lit maintenance shafts that ran like hidden veins through Cryon II. She slipped inside, the metal cool against her fingertips as she navigated the cramped space.

She had mapped out these tunnels days ago—routes meant for engineers, smugglers, and ghosts like herself. The passage narrowed, forcing her to slide onto her stomach as she pulled herself through an opening barely large enough to accommodate her body.

A drop-off loomed ahead.

Mei adjusted her balance, bracing her feet against the sides of the shaft before twisting her body into a controlled descent. The shaft opened into a vertical tunnel, where a series of worn metal rungs were embedded along the walls.

She climbed down fast and silent, the hum of the station's inner workings vibrating through her bones.

Level 12 was below.

When she reached the last stretch, she released her hold and dropped soundlessly onto the top of a lift, rolling into a crouch as she landed. She braced her hand against the cold metal as the lift descended.

When it slid to a stop, she rose and stepped to the edge. She scanned the shadowed corridors below, listening for movement before slipping into a low hatch door that

opened into the back corridors.

She was here.

Now came the part she wasn't sure she was ready for.

The back entrance of Deek's was a heavy metal door that was slightly ajar. Through the gap, a dim glow streamed out into the alley, warm against the cold steel walls.

Mei paused in the shadows, invisible to the crowd within, her eyes locked onto the man she had come for.

Dorane LeGaugh had just entered.

He paused, scanning the room, but he couldn't see her from where she was standing. Mei recognized the tension in his shoulders, the subtle flicker of disappointment when his gaze skimmed over the empty booth where he had last sat.

He thought she hadn't come.

Seeing his dejection, she felt a sudden, constricting ache in her chest, a physical manifestation of empathy. She should leave, escape the suffocating fear closing in, but a strange paralysis held her in place.

She couldn't. There was something about him that called to her, much like a moth to a flame. She had seen so many men who thought they were untouchable: her father, his guards, the people who whispered in corridors. They all thought themselves above the inevitable. Even the Turbinta assassin, Zoak, felt he was beyond reach, but none of them were, not really.

Dorane wasn't like them.

He was sharp edges wrapped in careless ease, a man who played the game not just to survive, but to win.

He should have been like the others. But he wasn't.

And that was what scared her.

Mei had known fear before. The cold, calculating kind that came from battle, from missions, from facing the inevitable.

But this?

This was something else.

This was the unknown. Even her interactions with Josh, Ash, and Sergi hadn't prepared her for the tsunami of conflicting emotions threatening to crush her.

She clenched her jaw, pushing past her hesitation, pushing past her instinct screaming at her to run. She would not take the coward's way out. It was not her way.

She drew in a deep breath and silently stepped forward. The whisper of her cloak barely stirred the air as she slid through the back entrance, moving through the dimly lit corridor like a shadow returning home.

Dorane sat at the same booth as before, his back to her. His fingers loosely curled around a drink he wasn't drinking. His thumb absently rubbed along the condensation on the outside of the glass while he fingered something with his other hand. Jammer was at the bar casually talking to Deek, though Mei could tell he was watching everything.

She crossed the space between them with quiet steps, slipping into the seat across

from Dorane as if she had always belonged there.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Mei gave herself time to calm her wildly beating heart. Through the tinted goggles, she studied the intense myriad of expressions flickering through his hazel eyes. The intensity was so piercing, she was astonished she didn't go up in flames.

She returned his gaze without hesitation.

Then—his lips curved in a reluctant smile.

“Zarath vi liera vesh'ta, ka'len tor vash.” The last time a woman sat there, she tried to kill me.

His Urvanian was smooth, casual—but the tension beneath it was not lost on her. Mei tilted her head slightly, a flicker of amusement curving her lips.

“I'm sure it was an explosive encounter,” she replied in English, her voice slightly muffled by her scarf.

Surprise flickered across his face. His breath left him, sharp and startled—recognition.

Mei knew they had a common language—the language of the ancients was, surprisingly, English. The translator Tiv gave her allowed her to understand what others were saying, but it would take time for her to learn how to speak any others. Fortunately, this was a language they spoke as a universal one. That alone made her wonder if aliens from this world had once passed through the gateway and settled on Earth.

That answer will have to wait for another time, she thought as she slowly lifted her

hands.

She slid her goggles up first, revealing her dark brown, almond-shaped eyes.

Next, she pulled her scarf loose, allowing it to fall to one side. She was hyperaware of every movement he made. She recognized the moment everything changed.

She waited, caught in the snare of his scrutiny. She noted the way his body stilled, the way his lips parted, and the movement of his fingers as they tensed around his glass. Her breath caught when his carefully constructed nonchalance slipped—just for a second.

Mei knew the moment she saw it in his eyes. This wasn't a chance encounter. This wasn't a mistake. This was a collision course that began the moment she was chosen for the Project Gliese's mission. Whatever they were now, whatever they would become—it was already set in motion, and neither of them would escape unscathed.

11

Dorane LeGauth was rarely—if ever—tongue-tied. He had talked his way out of a thousand bad deals, a hundred life-or-death situations, and at least dozen ill-advised entanglements with women who had tried to kill him.

But this?

This was different.

His fingers curled reflexively as Mei's slender, gloved hand slid the tracking device back toward him. His gaze focused on the tiny silver disk and her slender fingers.

He should just take it, pocket the damn thing, flashed her one of his usual, lazy smirks, and go back to pretending he was in control of this situation.

Instead, he covered her hand, his skin pressing against the soft material of her glove, the warmth of her fingers barely muted beneath it. A tingling sensation ran up his arm—like a live wire had been pressed directly against his skin.

She didn't pull away.

Dorane swallowed when she turned her hand until her open palm pressed against his, the movement so effortless, so trusting, that it sent a sharp, unfamiliar ache curling in his chest.

His gaze flicked to their joined hands, his fingers still loosely wrapped around hers.

“You should keep this on you,” she murmured, her voice a husky whisper beneath the low hum of conversation and the clink of glasses around them. “For safety’s sake.”

Dorane resisted the almost overwhelming urge to pull her glove off. He wanted to see her fingers. He wanted to see all of her.

Instead, he looked up.

And was lost.

Her dark eyes were liquid pools, pulling him deeper, swallowing him whole. They were soft but sharp—holding a quiet, devastating intensity that sent a rush of heat through his veins. Black lashes framed them, thick and impossibly long. His gaze drifted lower, catching on the faint dusting of dots across the bridge of her nose.

Freckles.

He didn’t know why that detail made something inside him tighten, but it did.

Then there were her lips.

Curved in an amused smile—at his expense, no doubt. She was enjoying this.

She tugged lightly on her hand.

He reluctantly released it, feeling her fingers curl just enough to slide the tracking device back into his palm before she sat back. The absence of her warmth was immediate. He gave her a rueful, bemused smile when he noticed the quiet satisfaction in her eyes.

Dorane dragged in a breath, shaking his head as if to clear it before shifting his gaze

toward Jammer.

Jammer was gawking at him from across the bar, his drink halfway to his mouth, his brow furrowed like he had just watched Dorane spontaneously combust.

Jammer mouthed three words that summed up Dorane's current predicament perfectly:

What the fuck?

Dorane fought back a groan, raking a hand through his curls before pocketing the tracking device. He caught the subtle shift in Mei's expression—approval.

That damn glint in her eyes of approval sent a shaft of emotion coursing through him. It made something warm settle low in his stomach, something dangerously close to pride .

He let out a dry chuckle and shook his head. He was so screwed. He cleared his throat and sat back, hoping it would help him clear his head.

“Well,” he said, forcing himself back onto familiar ground—words, wit, charm, control. “Since we’re playing nice and handing out gifts, maybe you can answer a few questions for me.”

Mei lifted a delicate brow. “Only a few?”

He chuckled and found himself leaning forward again. Resting his arms against the table, it was like he couldn't resist closing the distance between them.

“I'll try to keep it to less than a hundred. How did you end up on Cryon II? Where are you staying? Where exactly did you come from?” He hesitated only a fraction before

adding, “Are you attached to anyone?”

Mei laughed softly, and the sound sent heat curling up his spine. The glow of the bar lights caught the faintest flush on her cheeks, subtle but unmistakable. He watched, utterly enthralled, as she tilted her head, considering him with open amusement.

“Which one would you like answered first?” she asked teasingly.

Without hesitation, he said, “The last one.”

Mei’s lips curved , but instead of answering, she reached over and claimed his drink, turning the glass in her fingers as if debating how much she wanted to tell him.

“I was smuggled onto Cryon II by a freighter that had picked up my escape pod,” she said, bypassing his last question entirely.

Damn.

Dorane’s brows lifted. “The pods the Legion has been scouring the galaxy for?”

She bowed her head in agreement. “My pod was mixed with other space debris and picked up as junk. Lucky for me, it worked out—for the most part.”

He frowned. “What happened?”

Dorane wondered if he was going to have to have someone killed. Asta said she was bored. She would probably do it for free if he asked her nicely.

“A few weeks into the journey, one of the crew members figured out that they had collected something of value,” she murmured before taking a small sip of his drink.

Dorane was entranced by the way she moved, the way she spoke—controlled but natural, guarded but open. He was also very aware that she had placed her lips directly over where he had taken a sip. The realization caused heat to flow from his head to his groin fast enough to disorient him.

I am definitely in deep, deep trouble, he mused.

“I haven’t heard anything about another pod being discovered, especially one on Cryon II.”

Mei gave him an innocent smile and ran her tongue along her bottom lip to catch a droplet of liquor. His eyes followed the movement.

“Let’s just say Grak and the pod decided to make an unplanned voyage to Turbinta. I’ve heard it is quite the vacation spot,” she said.

“Turbinta? Why would— Oh, a joke. You’re joking,” he said, once again flustered because his mind was on her tongue and lips and not on his question.

“Yes about it being a vacation spot, no about Grak and my escape pod heading there. I was told by a reliable source that the Legion would not care to search there,” she said.

“Yeah. It’s a shithole,” he agreed. “Where are you staying?”

Mei lifted a shoulder. “I have a safe place.”

That answer did not sit well with him. Her idea of safe might not be the same as his. Shields, reinforced structures, the highest level of tech... that was safe.

Dorane exhaled through his nose. “And where, exactly, is ‘a safe place’?”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. “Somewhere on Cryon II?”

Gods, she was dangerous.

“That narrows it down by about seventy-two levels,” he growled.

Mei smiled but didn’t respond. He wasn’t letting that go, but he let it slide—for now.

He tapped a finger against the table. “And what about fighting? I’ve seen you move, I’ve seen you kill. Who trained you?”

For the first time, Mei’s amusement dimmed. A shadow crossed her expression, something old, weary. Dorane immediately regretted the question, but she answered anyway.

“I was trained by the best teachers my planet had,” she said simply. “From the time I could walk. I think if I had been born here, you would consider me a Turbinta.”

There was no pride in her voice. No bravado. Just fact.

Dorane’s chest tightened. He had known too many people who carried that kind of weight. He had, too, until he learned to let it go.

He changed tactics.

“Where did you come from, then?”

Mei hesitated for a heartbeat before answering. “A world very far from here.”

“That’s vague.”

“It’s true.”

Dorane huffed a soft laugh. “Is everything about you going to be a mystery?”

Mei’s smile softened, her dark eyes gleaming with something unspoken.

“Would you be disappointed if it wasn’t?” she murmured, picking up his glass again and sipping it.

That damn tingle ran up his spine again as he watched the tip of her pink tongue swipe at a droplet on the rim of the glass before she locked her lips over the imprint of his lips. His body was instantly hard.

How could such a simple act be so arousing?

Dorane shook his head, more at himself than anything. “You know, for someone who’s spent the last week tracking me like a bounty, you’re awfully reluctant to share details about yourself.”

Mei’s soft laugh sent a flush to his ears. “Where’s the fun in giving you everything at once? Besides, it is not me that you have to worry about. It is the orange and black lizard man.”

“You know about Zoak?” he hissed, his eyes narrowing.

“Yes. He’s been following you and I’ve been following him,” she said, her expression as serene as if they were discussing the weather instead of a brutal assassin with an agenda to kill not only him—but the beautiful, fragile alien woman sitting across from him.

Shit a Torrian viper’s nest! Life is getting too fucking interesting now!

Mei was playing with fire and she knew it. She just didn't care.

From a distance, she'd thought her attraction to Dorane was manageable—a curiosity, a quiet pull, nothing more. But up close? This was different. This was consuming.

She hadn't planned on flirting with him. Hell, she had never flirted in her life. She wasn't the type. It had never appealed to her. If she wanted a man, she told him. Simple. Direct. Efficient. No need for coy glances, subtle touches, or veiled innuendos.

Yet now?—

Her gaze flickered to the rim of his glass, at the faint trace of his lips still imprinted against the crystal. The moment she'd noticed it, something inside her had tightened. The desire to take a sip had been overwhelming.

She hadn't calculated the move. Hadn't planned it. She had simply reached for the glass, turned it, and drank from the same spot. The moment she did, her world shifted.

Dorane's pupils dilated. A slow, dark hunger swept through his eyes, and his expression became intense. He had noticed. The power of seduction swept through her—not as a weapon, not as a tactic, but as something raw, unbidden, and deliciously dangerous.

A thrill shivered through her, curling deep in her stomach. The realization that she had such an effect on the man sitting across from her was heady. She forced her eyes to lower to the glass, her fingers curling around it. She couldn't afford to be distracted.

The flirting, if that's what it was, had been a mistake. She had unconsciously tried to

steer him away from his questions, but she wasn't naïve enough to lie to herself. The truth was she didn't want him to know everything just yet. Until she knew whether he would help her or not, the less he knew, the better.

That was why she had mentioned Zoak.

It had been a way to redirect him, to pull them both back to the real danger waiting in the shadows. She could feel it—lurking, watching. She had seen what happened when people let their guard down. Her father had taught her that lesson in the most brutal way possible.

She wouldn't make that mistake.

Dorane's sharp gaze narrowed as he leaned forward, the easy charm from moments ago shifting into something far deadlier.

"How long have you known about Zoak?"

Mei lifted the glass, running her fingertip along the rim before answering. "Since the first attack with your cyborg friend a week ago."

Dorane's jaw tightened, but he didn't interrupt.

"I noticed him watching you," she continued, keeping her voice steady. "At first, I thought he was another hired gun. Just one of the many eager to collect the bounty. But he was... different."

"How?" Dorane asked, his tone deceptively calm.

Mei met his gaze. "He's patient."

Dorane's lips pressed into a thin line. Patient killers are the most dangerous kind.

Mei set the glass down and folded her hands. "I started tracking him, but it wasn't easy. He's good. Very good. He moves through this moon base like he built it. I suspect he has been here a while, scoping things out. He's been watching you in your office, following you whenever you leave your headquarters. The last few attacks? They weren't just random bounty hunters." She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. "He was behind at least two of them."

Dorane cursed under his breath, his fingers flexing against the table, and then he glanced over his shoulder at the bar and gave a silent signal to Jammer.

"He's been studying you, Dorane." Mei's voice dropped lower. "He's learning the way you fight. He's learning your defenses, your movements. He's waiting. You aren't the only one he's following either."

A muscle ticked in Dorane's jaw, but his voice was even when he spoke. "Who else?"

Mei hesitated. "The man sitting at the bar and the cat-lady."

That was the breaking point. She saw it—the sharp flicker of rage that flared behind his controlled expression. Dorane was too seasoned to react carelessly. Instead, he inhaled slowly and exhaled through his nose, pressing his fingers into the table as if grounding himself.

Mei continued. "I stopped at least one attempt on each of them."

His gaze snapped back to hers.

"One on Asta. One on Jammer," she clarified.

Dorane's expression darkened, but his voice remained quiet. "Where?"

"The first time was in the upper levels, near the refueling stations. The next was near mechanical."

Dorane cursed again, this time in Urvanian. "Son of a ? —"

Mei lowered her voice, leaning in slightly. "I think he's testing your security. I lost him in the lower levels beneath us. I don't know if he's waiting to make his move or if he's just enjoying the hunt."

Dorane drummed his fingers once against the tabletop before going completely still. His hazel eyes broadcasted his thoughts.

He was pissed. Not at her, but at the implications. At the violation of his space, of his people.

Mei held her breath as he slowly shifted, lifting his hand. A second later, a shadow loomed over the table.

Jammer.

The massive Zurkaan slid into the seat beside Dorane. Mei lifted a slender hand and pulled the hood of her cloak lower before casually lifting the side of her scarf up to conceal her lower face. Jammer's eyes were sharp as they flicked toward her. Though his face was relaxed, she could tell he was assessing her.

"What's up?" Jammer asked, his tone deceptively light.

Dorane slowly related what Mei had just told him—including the attempts on his and Asta's lives. Jammer exhaled through his nose, then turned to Mei. For a long

moment, he simply studied her. She felt his gaze sweep over the small details—the hood, the scarf, the only part of her face visible: her eyes.

Then his lips curved into a small, wry grin.

“You remind me of someone,” he murmured. “There’s a guy up at headquarters. Same color eyes almost. Same look.”

Mei stilled. Jammer continued, oblivious to the way her pulse had just shot into her throat.

“He calls himself Ashton Haze. He has darker skin,” he said casually. “You know him?”

Mei’s heart stopped. She stiffened, hope cascading through her as she whipped her gaze to Dorane. The noise of the bar, the tension of the conversation, the assassin lurking in the shadows—it all disappeared. The air in her lungs froze as she waited for his confirmation.

Ash? Ash was here?

Dorane, sensing her sudden shift, bowed his head. A crooked, apologetic smile curved his lips.

“I should have mentioned that when I realized who you were, I guess. He and his Turbinta girlfriend, Kella, are guests at my headquarters.”

“You guess ?” she murmured, shaking her head at him in disbelief.

Mei’s mind raced. How had she missed him? She had been watching, tracking movements, listening for names whispered in the shadows. She exhaled shakily,

barely aware of her fingers loosening their grip on her scarf. The fabric slipped away as if on its own, baring the lower half of her face as she sat back.

Relief flashed through her with an intensity that was almost a physical pain. Ash—her friend, her family , one of the few people she had trusted in the darkness—had been within reach, and she hadn't even known.

Both men tensed at the same time. Dorane's lazy crooked smile faded into something more complex as he studied her stunned expression and the flare of hope in her eyes that caused them to shine a touch too bright in the dim lighting. Jammer's expression turned from casual to shocked as he caught his first look at her unshielded face.

She locked gazes with Dorane, her voice quiet but steady.

“And the others? What about them?”

Silence stretched between them. She swallowed against the tightness in her throat, her next words barely audible.

“What about... Sergi?”

“Holy Mother of Mayhem! Mei! I can’t believe it! I can’t wait to tell the others.”

Mei threw herself in Ash’s arms when he opened them. She didn’t care that this was completely out of the ordinary for her, that it was undignified. Ash was alive, a familiar face, and she’d missed the hell out of him.

A half-laugh, half-shaky breath escaped her as she buried her face into his shoulder, gripping the fabric of his jacket as if to make sure he was real. He crushed her against his chest, burying his face against her hair like he would never let her go. Unfamiliar tears burned her eyes at his huge bear hug.

“I thought you were dead,” he murmured, pulling back slightly to cup the sides of her face. He searched her eyes, scanning her like he wasn’t sure if she was real.

She gave a wry, unsteady smile. “That makes two of us. I’m so glad I was wrong.”

“Come in. I want you to meet Kella. Don’t let her intimidate you. She’s really a sweetheart under all the knives and blasters,” he said without a trace of irony, stepping aside to allow her to enter the apartment.

Mei breathed out a shaky laugh. She wasn’t sure if Ash knew her background. Julia had, but her gut told her that Julia had kept the information to herself as a ‘need to know’ if things went south on their return to Earth.

Mei stepped into the foyer and glanced around. She could appreciate the safeguards

Dorane had incorporated into the structure. His headquarters wasn't just a fortress; it was a testament to his empire—a kingdom carved from the bones of a spaceport, refined into a palace of wealth and calculated luxury. The living quarters she entered was no exception.

The main apartment stretched across an entire level, seamlessly blending sleek industrial architecture with opulent comfort. Glass-paneled walls overlooked the jagged skyline of Cryon II, neon reflections dancing across the surface in the distance. The floor was obsidian stone, polished until it gleamed like dark water, broken by strategically placed rugs—thick, woven creations from artisans on a multitude of planets within the star system. Their deep crimson and gold patterns whispered of old royalty, of power reclaimed and repurposed.

The central sitting area was a contrast to the cold efficiency of the rest of the headquarters. A massive, low-slung sectional sprawled in a loose semicircle, its dark leather cushions looked impossibly soft and were meant to swallow anyone who dared to sit too long. A holographic fire burned in a sleek, suspended hearth—the holo-ambiance looked and felt real. The scent of it, mixed with the lingering spice of imported liquor from the stocked bar, gave the room a warmth Mei hadn't expected.

Mei paused at the top step leading down to the sunken living room. A woman with dark green skin stood poised near the couch. Mei knew immediately the woman was assessing whether she was a threat. Lean and athletic with piercing, almond-shaped, dark brown eyes not unlike her own. Her eyes—and her movements—were the only similarities between them. Mei was facing a warrior. She gave Kella a slight bow of respect. A flash of uncertainty swept across Kella's face before she bowed her head in return, her short, choppy brown hair falling forward to brush against her cheeks.

"I see you've settled in," Dorane dryly commented, looking at the security feed for the building on the large holoscreen.

“Kella was bored,” Ash said with a wink.

“I’m sure she was. I’ll have to have a talk with Asta,” Dorane dryly replied.

Kella smiled. “She is the one who helped me. She said, ‘if Dorane is inviting assassins to stay, why does he need security?’ ”

Dorane groaned and shook his head. “It’s going to be a long talk with Asta.”

Mei laughed. Dorane and Asta reminded her a lot of her and Sergi. She descended the steps and sat down on the couch next to Ash. Kella sat down on the other side of him, and Mei’s lips twitched when Ash absently reached for both of their hands as he turned to face Mei.

Dorane reclined in a leather chair, one leg crossed lazily over the other, but Mei wasn’t fooled. He was studying them. Thinking. Calculating.

“Tell me where you woke and how you ended up here,” Ash quietly requested.

Mei tilted her head as a chill ran down her spine, and she casually pulled her hand free and rose, walking toward the windows. Dorane murmured a command and the windows changed, allowing her to see out while no one could see in, or so Dorane informed her.

“Safety,” he gruffly murmured, their eyes locking for a brief moment before he looked away.

“Thank you,” she replied, turning to stare out the window. Her gut instinct warned her that Zoak was out there. Watching. Waiting in the shadows.

I can almost feel him.

She turned and wound her arms under the cloak she was still wearing.

“I woke over a month ago, ten days after the Gliese broke apart,” she began.

When she finished with the first part of her story, Ash furrowed his brow and asked, “That’s how your pod end up with a dead alien on Turbinta? Sergi damn near had a heart attack when he found your escape pod!”

Mei started with surprise. A low mutter that sounded suspiciously like ‘Good for Sergi’ caused her to look under her eyelashes at Dorane. He had a disgruntled expression on his face. He had been unusually quiet since they left Deek’s.

“Sergi found it?”

“Oh yeah ,” Ash said emphatically, eyes glinting with amusement. “And he nearly died trying to get to it.”

Mei’s stomach dropped. “What happened?”

Ash leaned back, one arm draped over the couch as he smirked. “La’Rue was looking for the pod to help pay off a debt, but it turned out that she wasn’t the only one. Sergi’s pod had landed on Turbinta too. They had a little disagreement, but they worked things out. Anyway, I guess your pod landed on the Leaning Tower of Turbinta in a badass ravine. Long story short, there was grappling hook, flood, and a massive storm involved. Sergi pushed off the rock that had fallen on the lid, opened it up, and found a big-ass, very dead alien inside instead of you. They got out of there in the nick of time, and then they met up with me and Kella. We were there trying to kill her old Turbinta Master. She was a very nasty piece of work,” he added with a wink.

“We left her in Sergi’s pod,” Kella added with a sniff.

“Sergi was relieved,” Ash continued, “to find the dead alien you left in your pod, you know? Those pods do seem to be handy places to stash bodies?”

Mei stared. “He was relieved to find my dead alien?”

Ash snorted. “Hell yeah. He was like, ‘ If Mei was in there, she’d be dead.’ He found a video of you kicking some ass. You forgot to remove the onboard video chip.”

“Yes, I did. I’m glad it was Sergi who found it,” she softly replied.

“So, how did you get off the freighter?”

Mei looked at Dorane when he asked the question. His eyes were a dark greenish color. She vaguely wondered if they changed colors with his moods—and if they did, what color would they be when he was locked in passion.

A delicate flush rose to her cheeks as the image of them together, mixed with twisted sheets, flashed through her mind. The slight curve of his lips told her that he could see what she was thinking—and it had nothing to do with escape pods and freighters.

“Tiv hid me in a crate under some scrap metal. Two men who worked for the Legion wanted Yi to deliver the metal to their docking bay. I slipped out while Yi argued with them. You saved him,” she said, turning to Dorane. “They were about to hurt him when you came along,” she quietly explained.

Dorane’s eyes widened. “I remember that day. Word had just come in on the escape pods the Legion was searching for. I spoke to the captain, but he said they hadn’t seen anything. I had each ship and all the scrap that came in checked.”

Mei nodded. “After we loaded Grak’s body in the pod, Tiv placed a directional thruster on it and aimed the pod for Turbinta. She figured if the Legion was stupid

enough to go to the planet, they would get what they deserved. How funny that it was Sergi who found it.”

“Ah yes, Sergi again. And who is this Sergi to you?” Dorane asked.

Ash snorted. Mei shot him a glare when he raised an eyebrow, pointed a finger between her and Dorane, and mouthed ‘Couple?’

Kella was not so subtle. She frowned and sat forward, then said, “You sound jealous. Sergi is not with Mei. He is with La’Rue. You do not need to be jealous. You can have Mei,” Kella stated with a wave of her hand.

Ash didn’t bother trying to hide his amusement when Mei looked at Dorane with a startled expression while Dorane had a very pleased expression on his face.

Distraction. That was what she needed. Good ol’ redirection of the conversation.

“Kella... do you know anything about a Turbinta named Zoak?”

Kella’s expression sharpened. “Yes.”

The energy in the room shifted, just as she’d hoped. She could handle dealing with danger—as long as it wasn’t the kind that included her heart.

Dorane straightened slightly, his gaze flicking toward Kella as she exhaled through her nose.

“I have explained to Dorane that Zoak kills for legacy, not credits.”

Mei nodded slowly, her mind clicking the pieces together. “That fits. He’s been watching Dorane, but he’s also targeting his people. I think he’s testing your

security.”

Ash frowned. “What do you mean ‘his people’?”

Mei met his gaze. “Asta, Jammer, and I imagine he knows that Ash and Kella are here. If he seeks legacy, he will want to kill someone he considers his equal, and an Ancient Knight would qualify. The Legion has announced that we are a valuable target of great interest.”

The room fell silent.

Then Ash, ever the optimist, grinned and stretched. “You got this, don’t you, honey?”

“Of course I have this,” Kella replied, shaking her head.

“And Asta thinks I’m bad?” Dorane scoffed with a shake of his head.

Mei’s lips twitched with amusement before she turned to look out the window again. The smile faded as she stared out across the moon base’s landscape. For once, she sent a small thanks to her father. If he had not done what he had, she would not be who she was.

“Our life paths may not always be clear, Mei, but the universe will give us the tools we need to protect us. Your father teaches you to fight with your body. I teach you to fight with your mind and spirit. There will be no threat you cannot overcome.”

You’re right, m?ma. I will need all three to protect those that I have come to love.

In the reflection of the glass, her gaze turned to Dorane as the last word flashed through her mind. Their eyes connected, and once again, she felt as if the universe tilted around her before realigning.

Deep in Legion Territory

The ice planet Crysta loomed in the distance, a frozen wasteland trapped in the perpetual twilight of its distant sun. A smooth expanse of white with dark red bands stretched across the planet's surface, its unforgiving storms swirling like ghosts of forgotten worlds.

Cold. Barren. Unyielding.

It had been the perfect place to create the lab that would develop the iROS, a parasite that could wipe out entire worlds.

And it suited Andri's mood now.

From the bridge of his Battle Cruiser, Andri Andronikos stood in silence, his hands clasped behind his back, his fingers curled so tightly that his nails dug into his palms.

His reflection in the viewport stared back at him—a face he barely recognized anymore. His once-sharp features had grown thinner, harder, his jaw clenched with a tension that never eased. The weight of command pressed on him, a constant, suffocating presence. It had worsened since Coleridge's death. His brother's final message whispered through his mind like a toxin, seeding doubt, curling through his thoughts, twisting reality.

“Who can you trust, Andri?”

“They will betray you, just as they betrayed me.”

“Zoak is coming for you. I made sure of that, brother.”

His fingers twitched toward the weapon at his waist. He carried it always now. He

trusted no one. Even now, guards stood outside his door, their presence both necessary and suffocating.

Can I even trust them?

With a slow, measured breath, Andri walked over to his desk and keyed in the secure transmission.

A moment later, the holoscreen flickered to life, revealing the sharp, gaunt features of General Stronauss. The man's face was lined with age, his hair thinning, but his posture remained rigid with military discipline.

"Director Andronikos," Stronauss greeted with a bow of his head. "We are prepared for your arrival."

Andri's voice was cold, clipped. "I expect a full report upon my descent. Ensure the lead scientist is waiting for me."

"He will be, sir."

The transmission ended, the screen going dark. Andri grabbed his cloak, pulling it around him as he turned away from the viewport and strode toward the exit. The guards fell into step as he moved through the pristine halls of his Battle Cruiser, their footsteps echoing in perfect rhythm.

The shuttle ride to the planet's surface was silent. Outside, jagged glaciers towered over barren wastelands, their crystalline formations catching the dim sunlight like fractured glass. The Legion's top-secret laboratory was a stark contrast—a fortress of steel and ice, its sharp angles and reinforced walls built to withstand the relentless storms that battered the planet.

As his shuttle descended onto the landing platform inside the sealed hanger, Andri stepped out into the biting cold, his breath misting in the air. General Stronauss and Lead Scientist Quar stood at attention, flanked by guards and a contingent of researchers in dark uniforms.

“Director,” Stronauss said, his expression unreadable.

Andri barely acknowledged him. His gaze flicked to Quar, a thin, anxious man with nervous eyes and hands that twitched at his sides.

“You,” Andri said, his voice cutting through the howling wind echoing from outside the hanger. “With me.”

Quar swallowed hard and nodded, falling into step beside Andri as he brushed past Stronauss without another word. The general stiffened but said nothing, watching as Andri disappeared into the depths of the lab.

Inside, the air was sterile and cold, the walls lined with terminals and containment units. Scientists moved like ghosts, their gazes darting toward him before quickly averting.

Fear. Good. Let them fear.

Andri stopped in the center of the lab. His eyes swept over the massive room—over the rows of empty cryo tanks lining the walls, their glass interiors dark, hollow. A cold rage coiled in his chest.

“Where is it?” he demanded.

Quar’s hands trembled as he gestured to the empty tanks. “Director... all viable iROS specimens were taken aboard the Legion Space Lab before its departure. Dr. Mella

oversaw the final phase of the project personally.”

Andri’s gaze snapped to him. “And why haven’t you replicated his success?”

A bead of sweat trickled down Quar’s temple. “We... we have tried, Director. But large portions of Dr. Mella’s research data are missing. We suspect he deliberately withheld crucial details—possibly to prevent unauthorized use.”

Andri’s fingers flexed at his sides. “Then why are you not using the data you do have?”

Quar hesitated, glancing at the other scientists. “Without Dr. Mella, we cannot fully reconstruct the process. We are working tirelessly, but?—”

“Enough,” Andri cut him off. He turned, his cloak swirling behind him as he stared at the empty cylinders, their presence a stark reminder of failure.

Of Coleridge’s failure. Not mine. Never mine. Coleridge promised he would not fail, but he did. He is responsible.

Andri breathed in a deep breath, his words careful, measured. “You mean to tell me, that in all your brilliance, all your resources, none of you have been able to make progress?”

Quar stammered. “We—w-we were solely focused on iROS. There was nothing else— It’s just that Dr. Mella—Dr. Mella insisted that none of us know exactly what he was doing. He—he regularly rotated us so we couldn’t learn his process.”

Andri’s breath came slow and deep. He bowed his head for a moment, the silence stretching unbearably. Then, without another word, he turned on his heel and walked out.

Stronauss was waiting for him in the outside corridor. “Director, I?—”

Andri didn’t stop. He brushed past the general as if he were nothing more than an insect, his pace unwavering as he stepped onto his shuttle.

By the time he returned to the Battle Cruiser, his decision was made.

He strode onto the bridge, his expression blank, his voice devoid of emotion.

“Destroy it.”

The bridge officers froze.

One of them swallowed. “Sir?”

Andri’s eyes burned like dying embers. “Obliterate the facility. Nothing is to remain.”

A silent, horrified pause. Then the order was relayed.

Andri watched.

From the viewport, he observed the planet below, the faint glimmer of the lab barely visible against the ice. Then?—

A surge of blinding energy erupted from the cannons of the Battle Cruiser, streaking down toward the surface like the fist of an angry god, cutting through the intense winds and heating the freezing air.

The lab stood no chance. Explosions rippled across the facility, metal crumpling like paper, entire sections disintegrating as fire and plasma consumed it whole. The

shockwave spread outward, shattering ice and rock, sending massive clouds of debris spiraling into the atmosphere.

Inside Andri's mind, the voices rose.

"They will betray you, just as they betrayed me."

"Zoak is coming for you."

"They whisper in the shadows, questioning your strength."

His hands curled into fists, his nails cutting into his palms as Coleridge's mocking voice echoed through his mind. His vision blurred as rage and paranoia churned inside him, an ever-growing storm with no outlet. He was in control. He was in control. No one would take that away. The Legion belonged to him.

"You are wrong brother. I am the stronger one," he breathed out.

A faint chuckle ghosted through his mind, like Coleridge was right there beside him, whispering in his ear. Andri ruthlessly pushed his brother's mocking laughter from his mind. He would not let his brother's lies trick him. He would destroy everything that defied him. Everything that failed him.

His mind sharpened. His breathing steadied. The destruction below was only the beginning.

He turned, his voice quiet but deadly.

"Set course for Cryon II."

If the Ancient Knights had returned, they would need help, and who better to help

them than Dorane LeGauth, with his vast empire and powerful personal army?

Dorane only thought he was powerful.

When Andri was finished, there would be no other empire but the Legion standing—Ancient Knights be damned.

He would burn every star in the sky before he allowed them to rise again.

13

The next morning, the docking bay hummed with controlled chaos. Mechanics moved like clockwork around Dorane's star cruiser, making final checks when his crew secured cargo and running diagnostics before departure. The scent of heated metal and fuel mixed with the crisp bite of Cryon II's air circulation system. Above, steel beams stretched into the shadows of the towering bay, illuminated only by flood lights and the occasional spark from a welder's torch.

Dorane stood near the base of the ramp, arms crossed, his sharp gaze following the organized flurry of activity. His attention, however, wasn't on the preparations—it was on Asta.

She was pacing.

Her tail flicked in agitation, her golden eyes flashing as she turned back toward him, fists clenched at her sides. "I don't like this, Dorane."

He sighed. He knew this would be a fight. "I know."

She stopped pacing and jabbed a finger toward his chest. "Then take me and Jammer with you."

"No."

Asta let out a sharp hiss of frustration. "You need us. We need to be there. Watching your back?—"

“I need you here,” Dorane interrupted, his voice firm but calm. “Someone has to keep an eye on things while I’m gone.”

Asta scoffed. “And who’s going to keep an eye on you?”

Dorane lifted an eyebrow. “I’ve got two Ancient Knights, a Master Turbinta assassin, a squadron of cutthroat crew members with enough experience to handle just about any attack, and myself. You really think I’m under-prepared?”

She scowled. “You and I both know that’s not the point.” Her voice dropped, rough with unspoken concern. “Zoak is out there. And you’re walking right into whatever trap he’s planning.”

That was exactly why he wanted her and Jammer to stay on Cryon II. Asta’s presence filled his world with a warmth he couldn’t bear to lose. Through thick and thin, Asta and Jammer had stood by him, their loyalty unwavering and their support steadfast.

They were the closest thing he had to family, something he would never admit to them because it would put them in even more danger. The potential of Zoak using them as leverage was too great a risk; he wasn’t about to allow it.

He exhaled, glancing at the ship before turning back to her. “I’ve got this, Asta. Believe it or not, I did think about things like assassins and danger. I need you and Jammer to keep an eye on Cryon II and any Legion movements. If Zoak has compromised anything here, we need to know before anyone gets hurt. No one knows every bolt and crevice in this place better than you two.”

Asta narrowed her eyes, her tail flicking again. “Do you think he has done something? Do you know something that I don’t?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him; and no, I haven’t heard anything. It’s just a gut feeling. I

really need you to get a crew and go level by level, starting at the core and moving up. I need you to do what you do best: protect our people.”

He watched as indecision swept across her face before it became resignation. “Are you ready for me to let Crock know what’s going on?”

“Something tells me he is already in the loop, but yes, I’d like for you to tell him it is time. He’ll understand,” Dorane said without hesitation. “Coordinate with him. I want his freighters prepped for immediate response.”

Crock was more than just a freighter captain—he commanded a network of heavily modified ships that could function as either blockade runners or war vessels. If something happened to Cryon II in Dorane’s absence, Crock was one of the few who could respond fast enough.

Asta exhaled sharply, rolling her shoulders. “Fine. But if you end up in a med bay when you get back, I’m personally going to rub it in for the rest of your miserable life that you should have taken me and Jammer with you.”

Dorane chuckled. “I would be utterly heartbroken if you didn’t.”

She gave him a long look before finally stepping back. Her voice softened, just slightly. “Be careful.”

“I’m always careful.”

Asta snorted before she muttered a curse and turned. Seconds later, she was barking orders at a passing technician as she strode toward the control station.

Dorane watched her stride away, his expression unreadable.

Then—he felt it. A subtle shift in the air. A crooked smile curved his lips as he slowly rotated until his eyes locked on the source.

Mei.

Her name whispered through his mind. Since he had met her, she had been a constant shadow there, filling both his waking and sleeping moments. She walked towards him, and then pulled back her hood, her face fully revealed.

His stomach tightened in alarm. He swept his gaze around the docking bay, searching for threats. “Mei?—”

She smiled, tilting her head slightly. “He’s watching.”

Dorane tensed. “Who?”

Mei stopped beside him, turning her head slightly. “Zoak. Crane tower, halfway up. Near the support beam. When the crane moves, you’ll see a slight reflection from the view glass he is using.”

His eyes flicked toward the structure, scanning the dark scaffolding. He couldn’t see him—not yet—but that didn’t mean she was wrong.

Dorane’s pulse quickened as Mei—calm, composed, completely unshaken—lifted her chin and stared directly at the spot where Zoak was hiding. Then she smiled, a slow, knowing smile that sent something sharp curling in his gut—and she tilted her head in acknowledgment, in... challenge.

Dorane reacted instantly, gripping her arm and pulling her back toward him. “Vas’thelan kai’tor!” Damn it! he hissed in Aetherial. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Mei turned, meeting his gaze with unwavering confidence, and then, before he could say another word, her fingers slid up the side of his neck and she pulled his head down to meet her kiss.

Dorane felt an electric shock flare through him when their lips met. The world vanished around him, his entire body locked, his breath stalling for a fraction of a second, and he released a deep, guttural groan.

His lips moved seductively over the warmth of hers. The press of her body, the sharp inhale of breath that wasn't his aroused him to new heights. A wave of crushing need, one that had been building since she'd pulled off her goggles and lowered her scarf in Deek's bar, blanked everything else out, and instinct took over. His hands found her waist, dragging her against him, his mouth pressing hard against hers, devouring, claiming. The kiss was deep, intoxicating, pulling him under like a tide he had no interest in resisting.

Everything else—the docking bay, the crew, the damn assassin watching them—ceased to exist.

Then, slowly, she pulled back.

His breath was unsteady. He searched her face, still half-lost in whatever spell she had just cast over him.

She gazed up at him, her dark eyes unreadable, her lips parted slightly as she whispered, "I'm sealing Zoak's fate."

Dorane blinked, the meaning of her words cutting through the haze of desire. The words hit him harder than any blow Jammer could have struck. His mind caught up with what she was saying. What she was doing.

A slow, burning anger erupted inside him and he glared down at her.

The hood down. The direct stare. The kiss.

She was marking herself.

She was using herself as bait.

His blood ran cold.

“ Vas’thelan kai’tor! Are you crazy?” he snapped, his voice lower, rougher, as panic started to build inside him.

Mei simply tilted her head. Dorane released another low curse.

The moment Zoak saw her, truly saw her—her face, her connection to him—it was over. Zoak was already obsessed with his hunt. Now? He wouldn’t be able to resist. Mei had just made herself the ultimate prize.

The perfect challenge.

And suddenly, Dorane was filled with a desire to hunt Zoak that was beyond anything he had ever felt in his life. Not because Zoak hunting him...

Because he was hunting her.

Zoak crouched on the narrow beam, his body perfectly still as he watched the controlled chaos of the docking bay below. The cavernous expanse of Cryon II’s launch sector pulsed with activity, the sound of hydraulics hissing and boots echoing against steel platforms as final preparations for departure were made. His focus was not on the mass of workers beneath him. They were of no interest to him. He lifted

his view-spotter, the enhanced lenses sharpening the figures below into razor-edged clarity.

Dorane LeGauth.

The name sat on Zoak's tongue like bitter ash. The man stood near the base of his star cruiser, arms crossed, speaking with his second-in-command—a feline-featured woman who was radiating anger through every fiber of her being. The way her tail lashed, the sharp tilt of her head, the way she jabbed her finger into Dorane's chest—oh yes, she was pissed .

Zoak's lips curled in satisfaction.

Let her be angry. Let her fight him. It won't matter soon.

Dorane had no idea what was coming. None of them did. The carefully placed charges in the lower sections of Cryon II, near the artificial moon's core, would detonate in seventy-two hours. The explosion would send a cascading collapse through the structural integrity of the entire base. It would crumple like a dried husk under its own weight. Thousands would die.

And he would be long gone.

Originally, he had planned to eliminate Dorane here, taking his time savoring the moment before the base was reduced to scrap floating in the vacuum of space. But this? This was better. So much better. Dorane was leaving. That meant Zoak could follow. He would hunt his prey in the vast reaches of space, far away from distractions. And when Zoak killed him, it would be against the backdrop of Dorane's greatest failure—his home, his empire, his friends—obliterated in one perfect stroke.

Zoak's fingers tightened around the view-spotter, his heart thrumming in anticipation.

Then—a shadow moved into his view.

His instincts flared before his mind caught up. Movement near Dorane. Someone was approaching.

He adjusted the focus, narrowing in on the figure striding toward his target. The dark gray, almost black, cloak. Zoak's smug satisfaction twisted into irritation. He knew that cloak. It belonged to the person who had been trailing him.

The one who had dismantled his traps.

The one who had evaded him.

For the past two weeks, this ghost had stalked him through Cryon II's underbelly, unraveling his carefully laid plans, forcing him to adapt, move, change course. The two times he had thought he finally had the assassin cornered— they had vanished . No one had ever done that before. No one. It had taken every ounce of his patience to not lash out in frustration. To not kill indiscriminately. He couldn't, because a legend must have control, remembered for his choices , not his reactions.

His irritation soured into something sharper as he focused in. Arrogant. To walk so boldly in the open now—right up to Dorane, in front of all these witnesses—it was almost like?—

Zoak's breath locked in his throat as his own personal predator slowly reached up and lowered the hood of his cloak. Shock coursed through Zoak as he sucked in a sharp breath. The view-spotter trembled ever so slightly in his grip.

A female! A female has been tracking me?

The realization struck him with the force of a laser blast to his stomach. And her

features... they made no sense. No Turbinta assassin in the star systems had ever matched him, let alone toyed with him the way this one had. And yet, as her face was revealed, as her dark eyes lifted, a jolt of something strange slid through his body.

Uncertainty.

His fingers clenched around the metal railing, his sharp claws digging into the surface.

She was... no one.

He had never seen her before, not in any records, not in any Legion databases, not among the names of those he had deemed worthy enough to know. He was positive. She was an anomaly. A problem he hadn't accounted for.

Who is she?

His mind scrambled to fill in the blanks. He was trying to discern what species she was, where she came from, when she turned. She tilted her head, a slight, knowing smile curved her lips.

Zoak stiffened, the hair on the back of his neck rising. He frowned when he realized that she wasn't looking around the docking bay. She was looking at him.

Dead. Straight. At. Him.

The breath he had been holding expelled in a sharp hiss. A tingle of unease snaked down his spine, rolling through him like a phantom touch. It was as if she had reached into the shadows and yanked him into the light.

Impossible! She cannot possibly see me.

And yet, even as his eyes narrowed on her face, she stared, her lips curved ever so slightly, a tilt of the head—mocking him.

Just like the others. Only... different. Worse.

The realization caused him to stumble back from the railing and deeper into the shadows. His entire body tensed, his pulse hammering against his ribs in a way it never had before. His mind shouted warnings, but his limbs locked in place, unable to move. His pride—his very identity —howled in outrage.

How did she know?

How did she see?

Did she hold some kind of mythical power? Was it an Ancient Gallant trick? Did she possess some cursed ability he had no way of countering?

A sliver of fear slid into his consciousness as the questions raced through his mind. He feared nothing, no one! He was the hunter. Even his old Master had fallen to his blades. He was destined to be a legend.

Yet now—Zoak shivered as a multitude of unfamiliar feelings ran through him. There was a shift in the hunt. The moment when the predator realizes—too late—that it is being stalked.

His mouth dried and his chest heaved as his mind raced, trying to reassert control, to analyze, to strategize. Gripping the view-spotter between his hands, he forced his body to move closer to the railing.

She had turned back to Dorane and was kissing the man as if she hadn't a care in the world. A visceral growl rumbled in his throat as fury slashed through his brief lapse

of fear. He clenched his jaw and dropped one hand to the railing where his claws left gouges in the railing as his body shook.

It was a message.

A clear, undeniable message.

The woman—this Ancient Knight —wasn't just looking down on him. She was challenging him. Openly. Publicly.

She had marked herself as the true master assassin.

She had taken his hunt away from him.

She wants to deny me my status!

The knowledge hit him like a gut punch, sending a nauseating wave of rage through his system. Sweat beaded on his brow at what she had accomplished with a mere look. His fingers flexed toward the rifle leaning against the steel beam before he pulled his hand back.

She had done something no one had ever done before. She had made him feel weak.

His breath came in ragged bursts, his limbs taut with the desire to lash out. To kill something. To prove that he was the dominant force in this game.

Zoak's lips peeled back, exposing sharp, predatory teeth as his pupils shrank to slits. He had planned to draw this out. To let Dorane squirm. To savor his victory.

But this? This changes everything.

He would not kill this one from a distance. He would look her in the eyes. Anything less would be an insult to his skills.

He would find her.

He would break her.

And when she lay dying beneath his blade, her final moments would not be filled with courage or defiance.

No. Her last thought will be one of acknowledgement, that she is not the best.

His eyes narrowed as the images of her lying broken, bleeding, defenseless, and unable to protect the man she cared about sent a thrill through him. He would show her what happened to those who dared to mock him!

Yes, he would need to time it right. She needed to live long enough to watch Dorane die in front of her.

The hunt is mine, Ancient Knight. I will not fail.

14

A board the Aetherial Arrow

En route to Aetherial

The corridors of the Aetherial Arrow pulsed with activity and the ship's core pulsed through the metal walls, a smooth, rhythmic vibration Mei had grown accustomed to since her time on the Gliese . The soft glow of recessed lighting cast elongated shadows as she stood outside Dorane's personal quarters, hands folded together, staring at the smooth panel of the door as if willing it to give her the answers she needed.

Dorane had been avoiding her. She knew it; he knew it. Ash was driving her crazy with knowing it, and he wasn't even on the same ship! He and Kella were following her starship.

Ever since they had left Cryon II almost twenty-four hours ago, Dorane had made himself scarce, keeping to the bridge or locking himself away in his cabin under the pretense of 'important preparations'. She wasn't buying it. Not for a second.

The silence had become unbearable as she replayed their passionate kiss over and over in her head. She had never been one to shy away from a challenge, but Dorane was making it extremely difficult.

After spending an hour tossing and turning in the bed in her cabin, she had finally given up, dressed, and cursed her way across the hall to his door.

I swear he put me this close to help drive me crazy!

Now here she was, loitering outside his room, like some kind of nervous, lovesick fool, trying to decide if knocking was the best course of action—or if she should simply return to her cabin for another restless night's sleep and pretend she hadn't been debating this for the past hour.

You should knock. You felt his response. He likes you.

Her fingers twitched at her side. She raised her arm, curling her fingers to knock on the door, before she dropped her arm back to her side in indecision again.

What if he doesn't? How can I know that he doesn't respond to every woman who kisses him like that? Okay, if he responds like that to other women, I'll just have to kill his ass, she savagely thought as a wave of jealousy flashed through her.

No, you won't.

Well, maybe I'll just ? —

A soft groan slipped from her and she bowed her head. What was she doing? I should turn around and go back to my cabin. Dorane will get over it... eventually. This was good. You've probably driven him so far away he won't ever want to talk to you again. You don't need this kind of distraction.

But I do want it. That's the problem. I want it very, very badly, she moaned in self-disgust.

Then maybe I shouldn't have used him to piss Zoak off.

She exhaled sharply as she thought about what she had done. She had made a

calculated decision back on Cryon II. Well, a partially calculated decision. The kiss hadn't been a part of her original plan.

She hadn't expected Dorane to react so strongly—to both her kiss and to her comment about Zoak. She didn't regret what she had done. If given the chance, she'd do it again.

But did I have to kiss him like that?

She closed her eyes, groaning softly.

Yes. Yes, I did. It was a damn good, curling-toes kind of kiss.

Her pulse quickened at the memory. The taste of him, the way his hands had locked around her waist, the way his breath had shuddered against her lips before he pulled her deeper, devouring her like a man starved.

A shiver ran down her spine.

Alright, fine. Maybe she had enjoyed it a little more than she should have considering the location and the fact that a Turbinta assassin, along with about another hundred people, were getting an eyeful. She had never been one to display her emotions, much less do it in public.

Just... knock on the damn door.

She could almost see Sergi's incredulous expression at her indecision. He would be thoroughly enjoying this moment at her expense and would tease her to no end.

Mei took a deep breath, channeled her inner determination, curled her fingers again into a loose fist and lifted her hand to knock.

Bad idea. Bad, bad idea.

“Just talk to him,” she muttered under her breath. “Apologize. Explain that you weren’t using him?—”

Before she could second-guess herself again, the door slid open. Mei startled with a squeak, her mouth parting as Dorane’s broad form filled the threshold. He leaned against the frame, arms crossed over his chest, hazel eyes unreadable as he studied her.

Mei stared back at him, unaware of the longing and uncertainty reflected in her eyes. She swallowed as the silence between them grew. His presence was commanding, his posture deceptively relaxed, but there was something simmering beneath the surface.

Something intense.

Something hungry.

The scent of him—a mix of worn leather, spice, and something uniquely Dorane—hit her senses all at once. She was momentarily speechless, her carefully thought-out words vanishing into thin air.

Dorane raised a single brow. “Are you planning to talk, or should I leave you to argue with yourself a little longer?”

Mei scowled. “I wasn’t arguing with myself.”

His lips twitched. She scowled when he flicked a finger upward. She followed the motion, realizing that he had been watching her the entire time.

“Smartass. You probably enjoyed that,” she muttered.

He didn't say anything, just turned and walked back into his quarters, leaving the door open in silent invitation. She hesitated only for a fraction of a second before following him inside. The door hissed shut behind her.

Dorane's personal cabin was a perfect reflection of him—structured but not sterile, refined but lived-in. It was a far cry from the tethered bunks on the Gliese, her makeshift bed on the freighter, or the narrow cot that she slept on in Yi's compact apartment.

The walls were lined with dark, textured steel, softened by deep, warm lighting that cast long, golden hues over the room's furnishings. The main living space was dominated by a low, sleek table surrounded by two leather chairs, positioned in front of a massive viewport showcasing the vast expanse of space.

Decorating the walls was a collection of rare artifacts and weapons, some haphazardly acquired— through theft, undoubtedly—others carefully chosen. A Gallant Staff rested in a secure glass case near the entrance, a quiet testament to his heritage.

And then there was the bed.

Large. Built for comfort. Its black sheets slightly rumpled, as if he had been tossing and turning before she arrived.

Mei's stomach tightened.

Dorane moved to the sideboard, reaching for a decanter of dark amber liquid. "Drink?"

Her mouth opened—then closed. Her gaze flickered to the bed, then back to him. Her heartbeat thundered in her chest.

What came out next was completely unfiltered.

“I want more than a drink.”

Dorane stilled.

The air between them shifted.

Slowly, he lowered the decanter, his fingers curling around the glass as he turned to face her fully. His hazel eyes darkened, the flicker of heat undeniable.

“What do you want?”

Mei swallowed hard.

Dorane’s expression was dangerous. A mixture of desire and warning. She should tread carefully, she was entering unfamiliar territory after all—but she didn’t.

Instead, she reached for the clasp of her cloak and let it drop to the floor. Dorane inhaled sharply. His gaze followed her fingers as she began removing the knives from her belt—three at her waist, one strapped to her thigh. Then came the blaster tucked behind her back and the reinforced, pointed sticks that had been holding her hair in place. Each were set onto the table with a decisive clatter. Her silky, straight, waist-length black hair cascaded down her back.

Dorane’s breath caught.

Mei continued, determined to see how far he would let her get—and hoping like hell he didn’t tell her to stop. She slowly began unbuttoning her blouse, her fingers lingering over the next clasp. Dorane let out a low, rough sound deep in his chest.

“Let me,” he murmured.

She breathed a sigh of relief, embracing the shiver of desire that was spreading warmth along her nerve endings. She dropped her hands to her sides as he closed the distance in three strides. Her lips parted when his fingers brushed against her skin as he worked the clasps free, his hands unwavering, his touch searing.

By the time she was nearly bare from the waist up, he wasn't looking at her; his eyes were locked on the table with a puzzled frown. More specifically on the arsenal he had just pulled from her trousers and the thin wisp of lace cupping her petite breasts.

Dorane's laughter rumbled low and appreciative as he cocked his head. “Is that all of them?”

Mei's lips curved, dark amusement in her gaze. “You'll have to do a thorough search to find out.”

Dorane's pupils dilated. His nostrils flared.

The fuse between them ignited when he pulled her into his arms and crushed his lips against hers. The raw need that had been building over the last couple of weeks as they had danced around each other exploded.

Their bodies collided, fire and friction, teeth and tongues, the heat between them searing through every touch. Her hands roamed and explored as she pressed against him, unmaking him with every brush of her fingers.

By the time he stripped off his own clothes, everything else had burned away. All that was left was the blazing, consuming hunger between them. Mei reveled in each stroke of his fingers, allowing herself to shed the restrictive binds on her emotions as she poured every ounce of who she was, every emotion that she was feeling, into this

moment.

She tilted her head back, looking up at Dorane as they tumbled onto the bed. He rose up, staring down at her with eyes that burned with desire—and something deeper.

“I think you are the deadliest woman I have ever met,” he murmured, intensely serious and heartfelt.

Mei tangled her fingers in his hair and pulled his lips closer to hers.

“You have no idea how true that is,” she whispered before capturing his lips in a kiss that told him she wasn’t the only one who was dangerous—so was he.

To my heart.

The soft glow of ambient lighting bathed the cabin in golden hues. Outside the wide viewport, space stretched endlessly—a sea of stars flickering against the abyss. Inside, wrapped in the quiet hum of the ship, Dorane’s mind was focused on his conflicting emotions for the woman he held in his arms.

Mei lay against his chest, her breath slow and steady, her fingers idly tracing patterns across his skin. The sheets were tangled around them, the cool fabric a stark contrast to the heat that still pulsed between them, lingering embers of the fire they had just stoked to an inferno.

He exhaled a long breath. Contentment settled in his bones like a drug he’d never known he needed. He ran his fingers through Mei’s dark hair, letting the silky strands slide between his fingertips. She was beautiful like this—unguarded, her sharp edges softened by the aftermath of their passion. He had always been drawn to strength, to resilience, but it was the rare glimpses of vulnerability in her that made his chest tighten in a way he didn’t quite understand.

She shifted slightly, her voice a whisper against his skin. “When I was a child, people thought my life was perfect,” she murmured, her words almost lost in the hush of the cabin.

Dorane stilled, sensing the weight behind her words. He continued to caress her. Tender, gentle strokes. The slight tremble in her voice told him that what she was about to share did not come easy for her.

“I was the daughter of Liu Zhang, a man respected, feared. My life was gilded in wealth, in power. But it wasn’t a life.” She paused, her slender fingers stilling over his chest. “It was a cage. And I was the bird of prey my father wielded against anyone who dared oppose him.”

Dorane tightened his arm around her, waiting. Mei’s voice was steady, but there was something underneath it, something raw that pulled at his heart. He wanted to erase the pain, the dark memories, but he knew from his own experience that it was impossible. Those memories were what made them who they were today.

“Training wasn’t just training. It wasn’t about learning to defend myself—it was about becoming a weapon. Every lesson was a test. If I failed, there were consequences.” She exhaled shakily. “There were days I wanted to collapse, to sleep, to just... stop. But I couldn’t. I wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.”

Dorane closed his eyes briefly, imagining a younger Mei—small, fierce, pushing herself beyond her limits just to prove she wouldn’t break. He could see it now, the steel in her spine, the fire in her eyes.

Her voice softened, and something in it made his throat tighten.

“My mother was the only light I had.” Mei’s fingers resumed their slow caresses against his chest. “She couldn’t protect me outright, but she found other ways. She

taught me... subtlety. She made sure I had books, music. She would sneak sweets into my room at night when my father wasn't looking." Mei let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh. "She used to tell me stories about the stars, about places beyond our reach. Places where not even my father could touch me. She wanted me to believe there was something more. She also taught me that winning a fight was not always about defeating your enemy physically. You could do it mentally and they might not even know, not right then."

Dorane swallowed hard, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "I think my mother would have liked yours."

Mei tilted her head up, curiosity flickering in her dark eyes. His heart clenched as he realized something. For the first time since he was a child, the memory of his parents didn't hurt. Instead, it warmed him, like an ember glowing in the dark.

"My parents would have loved your mother." He exhaled slowly, pressing a kiss to the top of Mei's head. "They probably would have killed your father, though. They detested men like him."

Mei let out a quiet chuckle. "They wouldn't have been alone."

Dorane smiled, his fingers tracing slow, lazy circles against her back. His smile faded, replaced by haunting memories, and his fingers stilled. The past clawed at him, the ghosts of his mother's voice, his father's laughter, the screams?—

He had never shared his past. Not to anyone. But he wanted to... with Mei.

"I was nine when my parents and younger brother and sister were murdered by the Legion—by Coleridge Landais," he began, his voice low.

Mei shifted beside him, sliding up until she could look into his eyes. She didn't

He spoke, just watched him, waiting. He covered her hand where it rested against his chest, grounding himself.

“It happened a long time ago,” he murmured before he began speaking in a low, even tone.

The minutes ticked by as he recounted very horror in brutal detail. Once he’d conveyed the whole memory, silence stretched between them, heavy and unbreakable. Finally, he rolled away, sitting up at the edge of the bed, dragging a hand through his hair. Mei sat up behind him, her warm fingers ghosting down his spine. The gentle touch nearly unraveled him.

He let out a ragged breath before he stood and walked toward the cleansing unit. He could feel Mei’s eyes on him. He didn’t know why he had told her all of that. No one—not Asta, not Jammer, not a single soul—knew where he had come from. To the galaxy, Dorane LeGauth had simply appeared.

He stepped into the cleansing unit, pressing the controls as warm water cascaded over his skin. He exhaled, letting the steam wash away the ghosts of his past. Bowing his head, he felt his body shake as silent tears coursed down his face, washing away the pain he had kept locked away for so long. He lifted his hand, brushing it across his cheek when he sensed Mei.

He released a shuddering breath and turned as she stepped in behind him, her dark eyes locking onto his. Dorane’s breath stalled. He saw everything in her gaze—understanding, acceptance, fire... love. She didn’t pity him. She simply saw him.

She ran her fingers through the damp strands of his hair before trailing them down his jaw, his neck, his chest. Her touch was soft but certain.

And Dorane knew.

She had chased away the shadows in his heart and replaced them with light.

He cupped her face, his thumb tracing her cheek. She leaned into him, her breath warm against his skin.

He kissed her.

Slow, deep, reverent.

For the first time in decades, the memory of his family didn't feel like a blade in his chest. The pain was still there, but it was different—softer, like a scar instead of an open wound.

15

Torrian Underground Rebel Base

The underground base was alive with movement. Even this deep beneath the scorched surface of Torrian, the air vibrated with the urgency of war. Josh Manson strode through the wide corridors, his boots striking against the compacted stone floor as he and Cassa de Rola made their way toward the war room.

The cavernous tunnels, carved from the red stone of the planet's core, were reinforced with metal support beams and thick blast doors designed to withstand both orbital bombardments and surface attacks. Torches and glowing bioluminescent crystals embedded in the walls cast flickering light across engineers, technicians, and fighters hurrying through the network of connected bases.

This was the largest base—the one the rebellion had worked tirelessly to complete. The strategic heart of the movement. Supplies from the frozen moon base were still being transported through the narrow underground tunnels, moving from storage chambers to armories, medical bays, and ship hangars hidden beneath the surface.

Josh's sharp blue eyes flicked over the fighters posted along the halls—Torrians, Tesla Terrans, five humans, and a host of other alien species united under one cause. Rebel fighters nodded in respect as he passed. Josh acknowledged them with a bow of his head, but his focus was on the meeting ahead.

Beside him, Cassa walked with measured precision. She was battle-worn but steady, her dark hair pulled back, her sharp expression unreadable. She was more than a

skilled operative; she was a leader, one of the few people Josh trusted implicitly and loved completely.

As they reached the entrance to the war room, the massive doors slid open with a hiss, revealing a large, circular chamber carved into the stone. A long table sat at the center, surrounded by holo-projectors, tactical displays, and communication terminals.

Inside, General Hutu Gomerant, the towering leader of the Torrian rebellion, stood at the head of the table, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His red skin gleamed under the dim lights, the intricate tribal tattoos across his arms and neck shifting as he moved. His presence commanded respect.

To his right sat Kubo Gomerant, his blind, elderly father—a former Gallant Knight, now a legend among the rebellion. Though his milky-white eyes stared unseeing ahead, Josh had no doubt he perceived more than most in the room. He wore the ceremonial robes of the Gallant Knights, his silver Staff resting at his side.

General Natta Gomerant, Hutu's younger sister, stood beside Kubo, her lean, muscular frame tense. The tribal tattoos adorning her red skin mirrored her brother's, though hers were newer, still dark against her skin. She was young, fiery, and still eager to prove herself, which she had when she and her squadron engaged the Legion forces long enough to allow Josh, Cassa, Roan, and the others to escape after they blew up the space lab that would have destroyed Tesla Terra.

Josh and Cassa took their places as Hutu gestured toward the central holomap. The glowing blue projection of the sector flickered to life, showing Cryon II, its orbits marked with commercial trade movements.

The comm terminal to the left of the room crackled, and a deep, Russian-accented voice cut through the chamber.

“Josh. It looks like we have another problem.”

Josh exchanged a glance with Cassa before leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. “Go ahead, Sergi.”

The holo-image flickered, and Sergi Lazaroff’s face appeared, his features grim. La’Rue stood slightly behind him, arms crossed, her usually cool expression tight with concern.

“Legion Battle Cruisers. A lot of them,” Sergi said. “Crock and the other freighter captains picked them up moving toward Cryon II. Guess who’s leading them?”

Josh’s fingers curled into fists against the table. “Andri Andronikos.”

Sergi nodded. “Da. And he’s not just bringing a few ships—he’s bringing nearly the entire Legion armada.”

The room fell silent for half a heartbeat. Josh inhaled deeply, his eyes flicking toward the fleet trajectory on the map. He already knew what this meant.

La’Rue confirmed his worst fear. “Andri’s not just going after Dorane.” Her voice was cool, controlled. “He’s going after Ash, Julia, and Roan.”

Josh’s chest tightened and he curled his fingers to keep from hitting the table in frustration. He relaxed when Cassa casually reached over and laid her hand over his. She gave him a small, knowing smile before she pulled her hand back and focused on the screen.

Josh breathed out a calming breath. They needed to warn Ash and Roan, but they weren’t the only ones. “Mei’s there, too.”

Sergi ran a hand down his face, muttered a low curse in Russian, and closed his eyes briefly as Josh's quiet words sunk in, relief flooding his face and the tension visibly leaving his shoulders. He released a harsh chuckle and shook his head.

"Perhaps it is the Legion we should warn. She is well, yes?" Sergi breathed out as he bowed his head and gave Josh a small smile of thanks for the good news.

Josh had sensed the deep bond formed between them during their time on the Gliese, a connection forged in shared experiences and quiet understanding. He sensed no romantic spark between them; their interactions felt more like a playful rivalry, a competitive dance between siblings. He knew Sergi felt fiercely protective of Mei and his constant teasing had worked to break through Mei's reserve.

"She's good. According to Ash, she is fitting right in. Mei was on Cryon II when he arrived, though neither of them realized it." He exhaled sharply. "Things could get very interesting. We have Dorane, three Ancient Knights, a Turbinta assassin intent on killing them, and a Legion armada arriving in the same place at the same time."

Sergi snorted with a laugh and ran his hand down over his face. "Da. What could go wrong?"

Josh forced himself to think, to push down the immediate fear tightening his ribs. He wouldn't lose his crew—his friends—now, after everything they had been through. He looked over at Hutu when the Torrian exhaled through his nose, his deep voice resonating through the chamber.

"This isn't just an attack. This is a kill order. That's all Andri knows."

Cassa crossed her arms. "If Andri succeeds, he'll wipe out LeGaugh's forces, kill three Ancient Knights, and cripple trade across the sector." She glanced toward the Torrians, her voice quieter. "And if Zoak really is there too, Andri would want him

dead as well if the rumors are true and Coleridge put a bounty on his own brother.”

Kubo, who had remained silent, finally spoke. Josh felt the shift in the room as it quieted whenever the old Torrian spoke. He could understand why Ash spoke of the man with a slightly reverent tone. Kubo’s presence projected power and wisdom.

“This will create a power vacuum.” His voice was smooth, unshaken. “If Dorane falls, the rebellion loses one of its most vital armies. If the Ancient Knights fall, the hope they have begun to inspire will shatter.”

Josh’s throat tightened.

Sergi’s voice cut in again. “Crock and the other freighter captains are moving to intercept, but they’re outnumbered and outpowered. We sent a warning to LeGauth’s people, but even with their defenses, Cryon II is in danger. If it had been what we faced before, a few Legion Battle Cruisers and fighters, it would be different, but it is almost like Andronikos is doing ‘a Holy Mary’?”

“Hail Mary,” Josh corrected.

La’Rue’s expression was hard. “Sergi and I are heading to Cryon II.”

Josh exhaled sharply. “This is an opportunity that we may not get again. Andronikos is making a critical tactical error.”

All eyes turned to him. He glanced at Kobo, who nodded slightly, sensing his thoughts before he spoke them. Josh turned back to the map.

“Andri’s moving in with overwhelming force, expecting a quick and decisive victory. If we hit them hard enough, with a massive strategic strike using both our ships and the freighters, we can turn this into something else entirely.”

Cassa leaned forward. “You’re talking about cutting off the head of the snake.”

Josh met her gaze. “Exactly.”

Hutu considered for a long moment before frowning. “But are we not doing the same thing as Andronikos? If we arrive en mass, he could wipe out the Gallant forces, leaving us just as vulnerable as the Legion.”

“We would need to strike quickly. Andronikos must not be allowed to retreat, but we do it with a twist. We use a tactic popular in the American Revolution.”

A grin curved Sergi’s lips. “You wish to use Guerrilla warfare?”

Josh chuckled. “La’Rue, can you share the recipe for that paint you developed that makes your ship practically invisible?”

La’Rue released a low groan and shook her head. “I don’t want to give it out to just anyone,” she muttered, thrusting her hands into her pockets. “What’s the use of having a secret weapon if everyone knows about it?”

“Ah, moya malen’kaya díkaya voítýelnitsa , Josh and Hutu will keep your secrets,” Sergi murmured.

“I agree with La’Rue. This type of knowledge should be kept secret,” Hutu sighed.

“What about if it could be replicated using the sensors? This way, there can be a way to override it and only those in this room and one other would know about it,” Cassa suggested.

“What do you mean?” Josh asked.

Cassa smiled. “Let me talk to Bantu first. I have an idea and he will know if it is possible,” she said.

Kubo folded his hands. “The Gallant forces are prepared; they can intercept before the Legion reaches Cryon II.”

Natta finally spoke, her voice firm. “We can’t just defend. We will need to destroy them. If we are unsuccessful, think of the devastation they would inflict. We cannot leave the planets defenseless.”

Josh glanced at the fleet trajectory on the holomap, his mind racing. He wouldn’t leave any planet without defenses, but they had to strike first. Andri Andronikos was making a mistake. He was putting himself in the open, bringing the full weight of his forces to one location.

Josh’s gaze swept across the gathered leaders. They weren’t just talking about an ambush. This was the moment everything had led to. Hutu’s warriors. The Gallant forces. The freighter captains. Every fighter willing to bleed for this cause.

“We’re going to end him.”

They weren’t just going to fight Andri Andronikos, they were going to destroy him. There would be no turning back this time. Andronikos had shown he would stop at nothing, regardless of the costs, when he had deployed that space lab to destroy an entire planet and its population. This time, it wouldn’t end until Andri Andronikos was dead.

The Aetherial Arrow’s engines vibrated through the floor as Dorane strode down the main corridor, the familiar weight of his holstered weapons grounding him. The ship was a masterpiece of Aetherial engineering—sleek, powerful, built for speed and survival. Many thought the Aetherialans were a primitive species because they

enjoyed living in sparsely populated villages.

In reality, they were a learned people who continuously sought knowledge in all areas, including technology, research, and military. Dorane's parents had both been soldiers for the Knights of the Gallant Order before he and his siblings were born. They sought a more peaceful life after the conflicts had settled, choosing to raise their children on Aetherial.

Yet, even their great skills could not save them, or my brother and sister.

He could feel Mei's presence beside him, the soft whisper of her cloak brushing against her legs as she matched his pace. They moved in perfect sync, a silent bond between them. It was something he had never experienced before—this awareness of another, a connection so deep that he could anticipate her movements, sense the subtle shifts in her energy.

As they neared the bridge, the chime of an incoming message pinged in his earpiece, pulling him from his thoughts. He touched the comm embedded in his wrist bracer.

“Go.”

Asta's voice was crisp through the secure line, sharp and urgent. “We've got a problem.”

Dorane exchanged a quick glance at Mei, and without a word, they altered their course, moving toward the nearest tactical planning room. The doors to the strategic command center slid open with a quiet hiss. The moment they entered the room, Dorane called out the access code to the ship's internal systems, pulling up the encrypted connection on the display terminal.

The room was lined with high-resolution holo-displays, star charts glowing in soft

blues and golds, and tactical readouts running streams of data. The central command table, shaped like an elongated hexagon, displayed a live scan of Cryon II, its orbiting defenses and fleet positioning rendered in intricate detail.

Dorane moved to the center of the room, pulling out a chair for Mei before pulling the one next to her and sitting down. A moment later, Asta's sharp golden eyes filled the screen, her tail flicking in agitation.

"Talk to me," Dorane calmly commanded.

Asta exhaled through her nose, her gaze flicking briefly to Mei before settling on Dorane. "Crock just sent word. It looks like the entire Legion fleet is heading straight for Cryon II."

Dorane's jaw tightened, his fingers curling against the edge of the table. Damn it. He had suspected Andronikos would make a move, but bringing this many Battle Cruisers... it wasn't just an attack.

It truly was an extermination.

Despite Mei's silence, her presence beside him was palpable, a steady, unwavering comfort. She watched intently, her eyes darting between the speakers, absorbing every nuance of their conversation: a subtle shift in tone, a barely perceptible change in expression. She placed her hand on his knee, and he gently covered it with his own, the pressure a soft comfort against the fabric of his trousers.

Asta continued, "One of the Ancient Knights—a man called Sergi—along with a Tesla Terran freighter pilot named La'Rue, met with Crock. La'Rue was there to convince him and the other captains to fight."

Dorane arched a brow. "Crock agreed?"

Asta smirked, a dangerous glint in her eyes. “You know how he is. Stubborn as hell. But he’s listening. And if he’s in, the others will follow. If you talk to him, you know he will be.”

Dorane nodded slowly, his mind working through the implications. He and Crock had fed the rumors over the years of Crock and the others being a part of Dorane’s vast personal army. In reality, they did have a vast army—as long as they worked together. It worked well for both men to build the illusion. It helped lessen the threat against each of their established business endeavors.

Crock had influence. If he was willing to fight, that meant dozens—if not hundreds—of freighters could be mobilized. The Legion might have overwhelming firepower, but an ambush of fast-moving, heavily modified freighters could turn the tide. Modifications Dorane had financed and Crock had overseen on Cryon I, the original base built before Cryon II.

He felt Mei’s fingers brush against his arm.

“Sergi?” she murmured.

Dorane’s pulse kicked up, irrational and sharp. He had no idea who this man was—only that he had once been part of Mei’s crew, part of her world. And this was the second time he had felt that unexpected stab of jealousy.

“Where are Sergi and La’Rue? Are they still with Crock?” he asked, pushing away the stab of emotion and refocusing on Asta again.

“According to Crock, they are on their way here. I guess hearing there was an Ancient Knight or two on Cryon II put a fire under this Sergi’s ass,” Asta said.

Dorane frowned. “How much time before Andronikos arrives?”

Asta's expression darkened. "Three, maybe four, days. Lucky for us, that many ships don't move as fast as one, and word has it, they were deep in Legion controlled regions before they made the decision to head this way. We've begun mobilizing the defensive systems. Jammer and our security teams found Zoak's explosives near the core. They're working to neutralize them. We need to make sure they found all of them before all hell breaks loose. The last thing we need is Cryon II exploding from within while the Legion is blasting us from outside."

Dorane inhaled slowly. At least that was one threat handled. Zoak might still be pursuing them, but Cryon II wouldn't be destroyed from within.

Jammer's gruff voice cut through the transmission in the background, growling in frustration. "That bastard got deeper into mechanical than anyone should've been able to. We're going to have to tear this place apart and rebuild the security systems from the ground up."

Dorane exhaled sharply. Zoak was too damn good. And if Jammer hadn't found those explosives when he did—none of this would have mattered.

Asta crossed her arms. "We'll do what we can to hold off the Legion, but we're going to need more firepower."

Dorane didn't hesitate.

"I'll contact Crock." His tone was absolute. "Deploy the full defense grid and move all non-combatants into fortified sectors. We don't run—we hold. Make sure every single ship is armed and ready."

Asta's sharp-toothed grin spread. "It's a shame that you are going to miss all the fun."

Dorane's lips quirked in amusement. "Who says I'll miss the fun? We'll be there

before the fireworks start.”

Asta’s golden eyes gleamed. “Just take care of that Turbinta for me. I’m really pissed that he screwed up Jammer’s security system.” Her tail flicked behind her.

Dorane ended the transmission, the holographic screen flickering back to the tactical display.

Silence settled.

Dorane sighed and turned to look at Mei. Without thinking, he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers. In the forefront of his mind was a sharp, aching memory—the screams coming from his village, the shake of the ground from the explosions, and the stench of burning flesh. The horror of being powerless as he watched his family die.

His fingers curled gently around the back of Mei’s neck, his breath uneven, his heart hammering. He swallowed past the lump in his throat, his voice low, rough with emotion.

“I will never let that happen again.”

Mei’s dark eyes softened, her fingers brushing against his cheek. She said nothing at first—just studied him, as if memorizing every line of his face. Then, finally, she murmured, “You are no longer a defenseless boy, Dorane. You are a fierce and powerful warrior.” Her voice was soft but unshaken. “And most of all—you are not alone.”

Dorane exhaled, the tension in his chest easing as he held onto her words.

Not alone.

He had fought for years, carving his own path, shouldering the burdens of his past alone. But now... he wasn't just fighting for vengeance. He was fighting for his people. For his found family.

For Mei.

Dorane pulled back slightly, his eyes locking onto hers. Resolve settled into his bones, deep and unshakable.

Andri Andronikos had made a grave mistake. The Legion director was coming to eradicate them.

But Dorane had no intention of dying.

16

A board the Legion Warship Tyrannis

Three Days from Cryon II

The bridge of the Tyrannis pulsed with quiet tension. Andri Andronikos paced back and forth, each step measured, controlled—yet seething with the storm beneath his surface. The crew stationed at their consoles stole covert glances in his direction, wary, their movements precise, as if afraid to draw his attention. He could feel their unease, their silent fear. It was a tangible thing, slithering through the air like a living entity.

The only one who seemed unaffected was Commander Ri Manta.

Manta stood near the command console, his posture relaxed yet poised, like a predator surveying its domain. Andri had promoted him after executing the previous captain for incompetence. The memory was still fresh—the look of stunned horror in the man's eyes before Andri fired his blaster at point-blank range, the spray of blood staining the cold metal deck. The four officers removing the body had worked quickly, efficiently. Andri had watched dispassionately as the lifeless husk was dragged out of sight, never to be spoken of again.

Ri Manta, on the other hand, had not flinched.

Instead, he had merely turned away from the sight, addressing the bridge officers as if nothing had occurred.

“Status report,” Manta ordered now, his voice level.

The navigations officer straightened immediately. “The fleet is maintaining formation. We are three days from our target.”

Manta nodded. “Hold course. Keep the formation tight.”

Andri paused, tilting his head as he watched his new captain at work. Yes... Manta was different. Calculated. He took command effortlessly, without hesitation, without the constant, self-serving fear that plagued so many officers. He reminded Andri of them .

Coleridge. Roan.

A slow, seething rage burned through Andri’s veins. They had betrayed him. They had turned against their purpose, against their destiny. His own brother, his blood, had defied him, questioned him, as if Andri was the one who had lost sight of their goal.

And Roan... Roan had been Andri’s greatest disappointment. His nephew —his heir—who had every advantage, every opportunity to rise above the rabble, only to abandon everything for a pathetic cause .

No.

This one, Ri Manta , would be different. This one would be loyal.

Andri’s lips curled. “Captain Manta,” he said smoothly, gesturing toward the doors. “Walk with me.”

Manta nodded once before turning to his second-in-command. “The bridge is yours.”

Without another word, he followed Andri into the command room adjacent to the bridge. The moment the doors slid shut, Andri crossed the room to the sleek bar built into the far wall. He poured himself a glass of dark amber liquid and swirled it idly, watching the way the light caught the surface. He turned to Ri, who stood silently, waiting.

“Drink?” Andri asked.

Ri Manta shook his head. “Never while on duty.”

Andri smirked, impressed. “Good.” He took a slow sip before setting the glass down, then folded his arms, studying the man before him. “Tell me about yourself, Captain.”

Ri Manta remained utterly composed. “I was recruited into the Legion at thirteen. Attended advanced training immediately after my seventeenth birthday. My studies were focused on military history and strategy. I served under several commanders, including General Roan Landais.”

At the mention of Roan, Andri’s fingers twitched. He inhaled sharply. “And what do you think of my nephew?”

Manta’s answer was immediate. “He was brilliant in battle. His strategies often followed classic military doctrine, but he knew how to adapt. He had an instinct for it. It’s why he won as often as he did.”

Andri let out a slow exhale, his jaw tightening. “ Won ? He lost to an Ancient Knight. A species from another world.”

Manta nodded. “True. The Ancient Knight outmaneuvered him—but there were mitigating circumstances. General Landais adapted, learned from it. That was his

strength. He changed direction in real-time without hesitation. That's what made him dangerous."

Andri studied Manta for a long moment. "Made..." He studied Manta's face. "Do you believe you can defeat Roan?"

Manta inclined his head slightly. "Yes." His voice was unwavering. "General Landais is at a disadvantage now. He no longer commands elite Legion soldiers. He has patchwork rebel fighters—many of whom distrust him. He must constantly prove himself to them. That hesitation alone gives us the advantage."

Andri's lips curved into a slow, approving smile. Yes... this one understands . "Good." He turned to the star chart projected in the center of the room. The blue holographic outlines of the Legion fleet stretched across the void, converging toward Cryon II.

"Stay the course. Destroy any freighters or rebel ships you encounter. And when we reach Cryon II..." He looked back at Manta, his eyes gleaming. "We raze it until there is nothing but debris floating in space. I want no survivors. Everything must be destroyed. Dorane LeGaugh and his empire will burn. Do I make myself clear?"

Manta saluted, sharp and precise. "It will be done." He turned and strode from the room without hesitation.

Andri watched him go, his smirk widening. Yes... this one will serve me well.

Silence settled over the command room as Andri turned back to the viewport. The fleet moved in perfect formation outside. Close to a hundred massive warships cut through the void like a sea of unstoppable destruction.

My fleet. My power. My legacy.

His fingers flexed around his glass as the knowledge and might of everything he built surrounded him. He lifted the glass again and sipped the fiery liquid, embracing the burn as it slid down his throat and hit his empty stomach.

Then—he heard it.

A dry chuckle.

Andri froze.

The sound was faint, like a whisper in the recesses of his mind. He turned sharply, eyes scanning the empty room. Nothing.

Then it came again.

Soft, knowing, filled with amusement .

Coleridge's voice.

“So confident, big brother.”

Andri's breath stilled in his throat. His grip tightened around the glass.

“Still convinced you're the only one who sees the future.”

The voice was inside him—woven into the very fabric of his mind. A ghost of the past.

Andri's pulse pounded in his skull.

“ You were weak, Coleridge!” he whispered aloud, his voice shaking. “ You and that

brat that you and Nia had. He should have been mine! Nia should have been mine! ”
His words sounded hollow.

The laughter in his head grew.

“And yet, here you are... desperate. Doubting.”

“ No! ” Andri’s glass shattered as he threw it against the wall.

The room spun. The holomap flickered, as if the very ship had exhaled under his fury. His breath came in ragged bursts, his vision swimming as he turned back to the viewport.

For a moment—just a moment—he swore he saw a reflection standing behind him.

Coleridge.

Tall. Strong. Giving that damn smirk he always had when he was right.

Andri lunged .

His fists struck empty air. He stumbled forward, gripping the edge of the table, his body trembling.

His mind roared against the phantom. You’re not here. You’re DEAD.

“And so are you, Andri,” the voice whispered. “You just don’t know it yet.”

Andri gasped and stumbled back until his back hit the wall. He slowly slid down to the cold floor and clutched his head, his fingers digging into his skull as he rocked forward.

“You were never meant to win.”

Andri clenched his teeth, shaking. “I will win...”

But the silence that followed told him the truth.

Kryla Settlement – Aetherial

The night air was crisp, carrying the scent of warm spices and the faint metallic tang of starship fuel. Above, the sky stretched into infinity, a canvas of endless stars, brilliant and unfamiliar. Mei exhaled slowly, her breath disappearing into the cool night as she pulled her hood up, blending into the shadows that stretched across the settlement of Kryla.

The Aetherial Arrow had landed in one of the designated docking zones—an enclosed circular bay reinforced with thick metal walls to shield against the violent sandstorms that could descend upon the settlement without warning. The landing pads were arranged in a semi-circle, large bay doors allowing the transfer of cargo and supplies. Even now, the sounds of hydraulic lifts and the chatter of workers echoed against the high walls.

Mei’s gaze flicked toward Dorane.

He stood near a group of traders—broad-shouldered, confident, the golden light from the ground fixtures casting sharp shadows along the angular planes of his face. His hazel eyes gleamed with amusement as he exchanged stories with a rugged-looking Tesla Terran merchant and a reptilian S’vakarian with iridescent blue scales. His laugh was deep, warm, unguarded in a way that made something tighten in Mei’s chest.

Dorane looked up.

Their eyes met across the landing bay, and a shiver ran through Mei at the heat in his gaze. He didn't need to say anything. The memories of their time together—the taste of his kiss, the heat of his hands, the whispered words between them—were already burning between them.

Mei smirked under her hood and tilted her chin in silent farewell. Dorane arched an eyebrow in question.

She turned toward the settlement, glancing back once.

He mouthed, Be careful .

Mei wrinkled her nose at him and stuck out her tongue playfully before vanishing into the night.

The main street of Kryla was alive with movement, a bustling artery of trade and commerce nestled in the heart of the Aetherial wastelands. Narrow side streets branched off into darkened alleys and staircases leading to multilevel walkways and flat-roofed structures.

Unlike the artificial brightness of the Legion-controlled cities, Kryla's lighting was soft, warm, and intimate—angled downward or close to the ground, creating an otherworldly ambiance. Bioluminescent lanterns hung from metal poles, casting soft gold and green light onto the stone-paved walkways.

The marketplace was in full swing, despite the late hour. Merchants hawked their wares in a dozen languages, some human, others deep-throated or insectile. Exotic fabrics hung from wooden stalls, shimmering like liquid under the lights. The scent of grilled meats and sweet pastries drifted through the air, mingling with the smoky spice of incense from an apothecary's corner stand.

Mei weaved through the crowd with practiced ease, her senses attuned to every detail. The soft clink of credits exchanged. The low murmur of negotiations. The sound of children laughing as they darted between adults, playing a game of chase.

She paused near a rising staircase, her fingers brushing the worn stone railing before leaping onto the roof of a low building. The settlement's architecture was compact, built for efficiency against the sandstorms. The rooftops connected in sections, forming a natural pathway for anyone skilled enough to navigate them.

From this vantage point, Kryla stretched before her like an ancient maze, bathed in the golden hues of its ground-lit streets and the stark white glow of its landing pads. The stars above shimmered in breathtaking clarity, unpolluted by city lights.

Mei leaned against a metal cooling vent, tilting her head back to stare at the cosmic expanse overhead.

An alien world... in a galaxy far from Earth.

Sometimes it still didn't feel real.

She had grown up beneath artificial lighting, surrounded by reinforced steel walls, training for battles that had nothing to do with the universe beyond them. But this—this was different. Out here, in the vast unknown, she was free.

Her thoughts drifted to Dorane.

His quiet confidence. His teasing. The way he pushed her buttons just enough to make her want to shove him... or kiss him.

I enjoy being with him.

The realization hit her harder than she'd expected. She wasn't just attracted to him—she trusted him. She liked him. She felt safe in his presence in a way she never had with anyone but the crew of the Gliese.

Was she ready to promise him something more than this moment?

Would he be?

Mei exhaled, shaking her head. It wasn't the time to get lost in what ifs. Not when there was still a threat looming over them.

The settlement was unfamiliar. She needed to know its escape routes, its blind spots, its weaknesses. Zoak was still out there.

She couldn't afford to be careless.

As she scanned the crowd, a ship descended toward the docks, its engines humming as it lowered onto one of the outer landing pads. New arrivals. Potential threats.

Mei was about to move when a familiar shape caught her eye.

A tall, hooded figure wove through the crowd with effortless grace, his movements fluid, precise. Mei's body went still, instincts kicking in.

Zoak.

Her lips pressed into a thin line.

The Turbinta assassin was here.

She tracked his movement, her muscles coiling in anticipation. He didn't seem to be

in a hurry, but there was purpose in the way he moved—cutting through the shifting masses with predatory ease.

Mei followed from the rooftops as far as she could, leaping silently across the narrow gaps between buildings. When the structures grew too distant, she descended into the street, seamlessly merging into the crowd.

Zoak slowed.

As if... sensing her.

Mei ducked behind a merchant's cart, pretending to inspect a rack of dark red fabric. The moment Zoak turned forward again, she resumed her pursuit, closing the distance.

He knows someone's watching.

But he doesn't know who.

She watched as he slipped into a bar, its entrance hidden beneath a canopy of thick vines and twisted metal lanterns.

Mei hesitated, considering her options.

She had been in his head for weeks now, forcing him to question his own dominance. She had rattled him, made him second-guess himself.

Now?

Now it was time to turn that whisper of doubt into a roar.

Adjusting her cloak, she strode forward.

And entered the bar.

The skidder hummed beneath Zoak as he approached Kryla's west gate, the small hovercraft kicking up wisps of dust as it glided over the cracked, sunbaked ground. He preferred it this way—quiet, unnoticed, slipping into the settlement like a shadow instead of drawing attention with a direct ship landing.

The desert winds howled in the distance, stirring the tall metal containment walls that loomed over Kryla's perimeter, shielding it from the violent sandstorms that could rip across the region in an instant. The west gate was manned by two guards, but they barely glanced up as the skidder drifted past, the automated scanning system briefly flaring before allowing him entry.

He concealed his skidder behind a low wall, securing it, before he stepped out and adjusted his hood, tugging the fabric lower over his face. The streets of Kryla were alive with activity—traders, merchants, and travelers weaving through the market, the ground lights casting a dim, golden hue over the stone-paved walkways. It was a perfect hunting ground.

But not yet.

Not until Dorane LeGaugh arrived.

Zoak moved without hurry, his keen eyes sweeping the alleyways, balconies, rooftops—cataloging potential escape routes, ambush points, places to stage a kill. He memorized the settlement's layout, mentally marking its choke points, shadowed corridors, and blind spots.

His plan was simple.

He would wait until Dorane and the female left the ship. Then he would destroy the vessel, using the explosion as cover. During the confusion, he would strike—knocking Dorane out, removing him from the equation before the female even knew what was happening.

Then, he would take Dorane somewhere private.

Somewhere he could make an example of him.

And when she came for him—because she would—she would walk straight into the trap.

He relished the thought of her face contorted in helplessness, forced to watch Dorane die first before he turned his attention to her.

The female would suffer last.

The thought sent a slow, dark pleasure curling through his chest as he moved through the crowded settlement.

He was halfway to the landing pads when it hit him.

A shift in the air.

The familiar, slow prickle down his spine.

Someone was watching him.

Zoak stilled, his gait subtly shifting into a predatory glide as he scanned the street.

The marketplace was alive with bodies—Torrians, Tesla Terrans, Aetherialans, and other species haggling, arguing, laughing—but nothing seemed out of place.

Yet the feeling didn't leave.

If anything, it grew stronger.

His upper lip curled slightly, exposing sharp teeth, but he didn't react. Didn't let on that he had noticed. Instead, he shifted course and moved toward the nearest bar, a low-lit den tucked into the side of a curved stone structure. Its entrance was half-hidden, the doorway framed with sheets of tight cloth and old metal lanterns that flickered dimly.

Perfect.

Without hesitation, he stepped inside.

The air inside was thick with the scent of spice, alcohol, and the musk of too many bodies in close quarters. A mix of traders, smugglers, and locals were scattered across the room, clustered at the long metal bar or hunched over wooden tables, their voices a low murmur beneath the hum of alien music.

Zoak claimed a table in the farthest corner, his back to the wall.

From here, he could see everything.

A server approached—a lanky Tesla Terran male with cybernetic implants running down his arm. Zoak barely looked at him.

“Drink?” the server asked, voice bored.

Zoak lifted two fingers. “Something strong.”

The server nodded and left, but Zoak barely noticed.

His attention had locked onto a conversation to his right, voices carrying over the ambient noise.

“The Legion’s mobilized.”

Zoak’s jaw twitched.

“They’re heading straight for Cryon II.”

A low growl started deep in his chest. He had been hired to kill Dorane, but if Andronikos destroyed Cryon II first, it would steal his victory.

His hand flexed against the table, claws itching to tear something apart.

He was about to snarl a comment at the fools discussing his prey when the chair across from him scraped against the floor. Zoak’s eyes snapped up. Someone had sat down across from him.

Uninvited.

His fingers twitched toward his concealed blade, but the moment he met the female’s eyes, the movement stilled.

She was smiling.

Dark. Amused. Unafraid.

Zoak's entire body went still.

Mei studied Zoak as she settled into the chair she had pulled out.

Up close, he was larger than she'd expected, his scaled hide a dark, mottled hue of red, black, and tan that blended into the dim lighting of the bar. His cloak draped heavily over his broad shoulders, but Mei's sharp eyes picked out the subtle bulges of concealed weapons. A throwing knife on his right thigh, a blade strapped beneath his forearm, something heavy at his back—likely a plasma pistol.

She wasn't concerned.

Her own weapons were just as well-hidden.

She waved off the server with a flick of her fingers, keeping her gaze locked on Zoak as she leaned back in her chair. She wanted to see how long he would tolerate her silence.

It didn't take long.

Zoak's jaw twitched, the muscles beneath his scaled skin flexing with irritation. She could feel his anger simmering, barely held in check, like a beast ready to lunge. He expected her to speak first.

She didn't.

Instead, she listened.

Around them, the low murmur of conversation continued. She tuned in to the threads of information drifting through the smoky air—Legion forces moving, freighters being paid to smuggle goods out of the sector, a small dispute between two traders

over stolen merchandise.

The only useful information was about the Legion. The rest was insignificant. Out of her peripheral vision, she noticed the bartender watching them with a wary eye. He was smart.

Mei had positioned herself at an awkward angle to the assassin, making it difficult for him to attack her without giving away his intention. Her back angled toward the wall, not the crowd, and she was completely relaxed—something that seemed to anger him.

Her lips quirked when he finally spoke.

“You’re either the bravest fool I’ve ever met...” His voice was low, rough, laced with the promise of violence. “...or the dumbest.”

Mei tilted her head slightly, unimpressed. She had heard worse insults. Zoak leaned forward, his sharp teeth flashing in the dim light.

“Do you know what I am?”

Mei was silent, studying his face with a raised eyebrow as if she were truly contemplating his question. Her gaze swept over his face, noting the scales, the way they changed colors as his anger grew, his slanted eyes and pupils with the film of a lid that slid over them, and the tapping of his pointed claws on the table that he probably wasn’t aware he was doing.

“The ugly version of the Geico talking lizard?” she finally answered.

Confusion flashed through his eyes before they narrowed at her nonchalant insult.

“Do you know what I’m going to do to you?”

Ah. Here we go, she thought with amusement .

“Please, enlighten me,” she requested with a graceful wave of her hand.

Zoak leaned forward, his forked tongue flicking out between his sharp teeth, his slitted pupils narrowing as he studied her face with unhurried deliberation. Mei could tell he wanted to savor this part—the build-up, the anticipation, the slow unraveling of hope in his prey’s eyes.

“First,” he murmured, his voice low, velvety, and dripping with promise, “I will find your family and friends.”

His claws tapped against the wooden tabletop, a slow, deliberate rhythm.

“I will slaughter your family, taking my time. I will take them off-planet and release them one at a time into space after I’ve killed you. I want you to know that they are my captives and what their fate will be before your death comes. I believe the first of them that I’ll take is the dark-skinned one I saw on Cryon II.” He smirked as if he were telling her a great secret. “Yes, you care for him. He seems... durable. I will make sure he feels every slice of my blade.” His smirk widened, revealing rows of sharp teeth. “I imagine he will scream in that sharp, guttural language you speak as I strip the flesh from his bones, bit by bit, until there is nothing left but raw, glistening sinew.”

Mei kept her expression neutral, watching his movements as he spoke. Learning more about him and his thought processes. So far, what she was seeing and hearing made her feel like she needed a shower. She fingered the hilt of the knife strapped below her knee as he continued, his voice almost caressing the words.

“The woman—the Turbinta Master who thinks she is my equal—will be next. Kella.” His smile grew colder as he rolled Kella’s name across his lips. “Oh, I think I will

break her mind first. She cares for the dark-skinned Ancient Knight. It will be a sweet pleasure when she sees what I have done to him.” He exhaled through his teeth. “She has forgotten what it truly means to be a Turbinta assassin. I will remind her and take her status as a Master away from her, just as she took it from Tallei.”

His eyes darkened as he tilted his head. “And your other Ancient Knights? I will string them up like the relics they are, shattered and unrecognizable, a warning to anyone foolish enough to hope.”

“Then,” he whispered, his breath warm with the scent of fire and decay, “there is Dorane.”

Mei’s gaze dipped to the table when Zoak’s claws flexed against the wood, sinking in, splintering it slightly. Well, at least the bartender can add a tourist draw of the idiot Turbinta assassin who clawed up his table.

“I will let him fight.” He chuckled, dark and cruel. “Oh yes, I will give him hope. I will let him believe that maybe—just maybe—he can stop what’s coming. He will want revenge once I tell him that it was I who destroyed Cryon II, not the Legion.” Zoak’s slitted pupils flared with delight. “Then, I will snap his bones, one by one. I will cut into his back, peel the skin away inch by inch, carving through muscle until he can no longer stand.”

Zoak sighed in mock sorrow. “And just when his pain reaches its peak, when he realizes there is no saving himself, no saving you...” He gave her a slow, predatory smile, his fangs gleaming in the dim light.

“... I will slice open his chest and take his heart.” He rolled his shoulders as if savoring the thought. “I want you to see it in my hands, still beating, still warm, the last piece of him... before it stops.”

His voice dropped even lower.

“Then... it will be just you left.”

Zoak leaned back in his chair, a pleased expression on his face. Mei followed his movement. She briefly pondered if he was even aware that she or anyone else were still there. He was so lost in his vision of gore, in his own delight of what he was revealing, that she seriously doubted it.

“I will start with your hands,” he said, his voice almost affectionate now. “You are too fast, too precise. I cannot have that. The tendons—yes, those will go first.” He mimed slicing across her wrist, his claws tracing the air. “The fingers will curl inward... useless. You will feel every snap, every fiber shredding beneath your skin.”

His voice took on a feverish edge, his words flowing like poetry.

“Then your legs. I could simply break them, but that would be too kind.” His forked tongue flicked out. “No, I will carve away the flesh first, slowly, methodically, until all that remains is raw bone.” His breath hitched. “I wonder, will you crawl to him? Even with nothing left?”

He let the silence stretch, basking in the image of her broken body reaching for the lifeless shell of Dorane.

Zoak smiled wider.

“And then—ah, your face.” His eyes gleamed as he tilted his head in the other direction. “It is almost a shame, but I find that people look so much more honest when their skin is peeled away.” His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “I will make sure you see it, every inch, before I take your eyes last.”

His fingers drummed against the table, a slow, expectant rhythm. Mei stared back at him, her lips twitching, her expression mocking and bored. She exhaled through her nose, slow, even. Then she tilted her head slightly, as if... thinking.

A beat passed and Zoak's smile faltered.

Mei waved a dismissive hand, her lips pursed in mild irritation as she gave a slight shake of her head.

“You should really work on your delivery. It is very long-winded and boring.”

Zoak blinked at her response. A frown darkened his face. Mei decided seeing emotions on a lizard was more fascinating than his droning about the demise of herself and her friends.

Tiv and Yi are insectoid creatures and they are very expressive once you get to know them, she reminded herself. Still, they are insectoids, not lizards.

Mei shook her head again as she pulled back from her musing. Now was not the time to debate alien emotional responses. She let out a long, exaggerated sigh, shifting slightly in her seat.

“I understand what you were going for. The whole ‘I will tear you apart’ speech.” She gestured vaguely. “It was very dramatic. Very... drawn out. Somewhat creatively detailed, though a little repetitive and would be very time-consuming, not to mention messy.”

Zoak's jaw twitched. She needed to know what would shake him to the point he would lose control. She needed to see how he fought. If given a chance, she would prefer not to do it in a crowded bar where innocent bystanders could be hurt. Hopefully, if he wanted to fight, they could take it outside.

Sitting back in her chair, she pressed what she hoped would be a button that would trigger the response she wanted—his loss of control.

Let's see how an insult to his ego works.

“If you're going to monologue, at least try to make it short and interesting. You're just not that original and are trying way too hard,” she murmured, her eyes glinting with amusement.

Almost there, she thought when his nostrils flared.

“Do you always talk this much? Or are you just lonely? You should just get to the point,” she recommended. “It would save us both time.”

The corner of Zoak's eye twitched. Mei was ready when he moved. She had reached his breaking point.

The flash of steel was fast—a knife flying straight for her chest.

Mei tilted back in her chair, the blade whistling past her, impaling into the wooden support beam behind her.

Zoak snarled and went for another.

Mei twisted the chair, shifting her weight with a smooth pivot, and he slammed his second knife into the leg of her chair instead of her body. Before he could react, she angled the chair, spinning the embedded blade out of his grip.

A hush fell over the bar.

Zoak's sudden burst of violence had drawn unwanted attention. A few of the patrons

began subtly shifting toward the exits.

Zoak's lip curled. Mei could see that he wanted to kill her now. His gaze swept over the crowd. He didn't understand why she was so confident. If this could be a trap.

Instead, he flipped the table.

Mei moved. She flowed like water; her cloak swirling as she twisted in an elegant dancer's move, avoiding the crashing wood with ease. It was obvious Zoak was infuriated beyond rational thought by now. The colors of his skin were changing in a hue of reds and darker tans. He lunged, but she was faster.

She snapped her cloak outward and the flick of the material hit his face, forcing him to recoil just enough for her to slide out of reach.

The moment he reoriented, he changed tactics—going after a merchant who was too slow to get out of the way.

Mei closed the distance in two steps, her body moving in a blur.

Zoak's right claw swung toward her ribs—she deflected it with an inside parry, redirecting his momentum downward. He swiveled and came around with his left blade up—she turned her hip, twisting her body just enough to avoid the lethal arc, then slammed her forearm against his wrist to knock it aside.

He tried to catch her with his tail—she anticipated it, dropping into a low stance, sweeping her leg under his, and forcing him off-balance.

As he stumbled, she used his momentum against him—pivoting and striking his knee joint with precision, making him stagger back.

Zoak hissed in frustration and pain. His movements were disconnected—dangerous, fast, but lacking a seamless flow. He relied on brute strength, overwhelming his opponents with relentless attacks, but he wasn't efficient in close combat.

Mei had just learned everything she needed to know.

The shrill sound of whistles cut through the night, signaling settlement security forces approaching.

Zoak snarled, his eyes flashing. "This isn't over."

Mei watched as he turned and fled, vanishing into the back exit of the bar.

Mei exhaled slowly, collecting her cloak off the back of a chair and adjusting it to cover her body. She wasn't worried about Zoak's threat. She had what she came for.

She pulled her hood up, stepping aside and offering the bartender a quiet bow of apology before slipping through the shifting bodies.

Her gaze swept the area as she exited.

Zoak would retreat—at least for now. He would reassess, lick his wounds, and come back stronger. His ego had been wounded tonight, and his rage would only fuel his recklessness. If he was smart, he would try to eliminate them from a distance, but he wouldn't. The fight tonight made the need for close contact imperative to his identity.

It also made him as dangerous as Andri Andronikos, because he would be unpredictable.

Mei let the thought settle as she faded into the shadows of the night.

Her path was clear. Now, she needed to share what she had learned and warn the others.

The air was thick with the scent of warm metal, starship fuel, and the faint spice of Kryla's market drifting from the settlement beyond the towering walls. The landing bay was illuminated by soft, ground-level lights, their dim golden glow casting elongated shadows against the stone pathways and the sleek hulls of docked ships.

The settlement's containment wall loomed high, its reinforced metal plating reflecting the soft glow of the stars. A large circular blast gate was set into the far end, partially open, allowing a stream of workers to pass in and out as they transferred cargo from the ships to the storage bays and merchant stalls. The night was alive with the rhythmic hum of machinery, the distant murmur of conversations, and the occasional hiss of hydraulics as loading ramps extended or retracted.

Mei stepped lightly along the stone-paved landing platform, her senses still sharp, her mind still turning over every movement of her fight with Zoak. The echoes of their clash were etched into her muscles, her body still humming from the precision of each counter, each strike. The fight had been instructive, but it had also been a warning. Zoak would be back. And next time, he wouldn't run.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her, but she wasn't cold. No, she was still in battle mode, her awareness of her surroundings heightened. She moved to the side, letting a crew of dockworkers pass, their arms laden with crates of supplies they had brought for the settlement.

She waited, watching as they disappeared into the streets beyond, before she turned back toward the ship and froze. Her breath caught.

Dorane was standing near the edge of the landing pad, speaking with Ash, Kella, and another man that looked vaguely familiar. The tall, dark-haired man, his posture calm, his expression unreadable—but it wasn't the stranger who held her attention.

It was the poised woman beside him.

Julia.

The sound that left Mei's throat was involuntary, a sharp, disbelieving cry of delight and relief. Julia's head snapped up at the same time, her face lighting up like a sunburst, her eyes widening.

Mei surged forward, and Julia did the same, their movements colliding as they threw their arms around each other, Mei pressing her face against Julia's shoulder, feeling the solid, undeniable presence of her friend.

For a moment, the universe felt still.

"I'm so glad you are alive," Mei breathed against Julia's hair.

Julia let out a soft chuckle, the sound warm and full of amusement, her arms tightening around Mei. "You aren't the only one who is difficult to kill."

Mei pulled back just enough to tilt her head up. Julia, several inches taller, was smiling mischievously, her hands resting lightly on Mei's back, as she asked, "Are you always this heavily armed? Or are we expecting an ambush?"

Mei blinked, then realized what Julia was feeling beneath her cloak—the subtle but unmistakable outline of her weapons.

Mei shook her head playfully. "I see you've already forgotten all the defensive

training I gave you onboard the Gliese.”

Julia’s eyes gleamed. “Oh, trust me. I haven’t. The kick to the groin? Very effective; thank you for that little lesson.”

Mei laughed, pulling back fully, her gaze flicking to the dark-haired man standing beside Julia. He had an imposing presence, though he radiated a calm, steady intensity rather than raw aggression.

Mei’s brows lifted. “Did you...?”

Julia giggled and shook her head. “No, I didn’t use it on Roan.”

Mei’s eyes widened slightly as realization fully set in. Roan Landais. The son of Coleridge Landais.

In person, he was different from what she’d expected—but there was no mistaking the resemblance to the infamous Legion General.

Julia casually threaded her arm through Mei’s, as if this were any normal reunion, as if they weren’t on an alien planet in the middle of a war. Mei held onto her for a second longer, grounding herself in the miracle that they were here, together, against all odds.

“It’s unbelievable,” Julia murmured, as if reading her thoughts. “The fact that we both survived the Gliese breaking apart, ending up in the same system?” She gave a small shake of her head. “Nothing short of impossible.”

Mei inhaled deeply, still struggling to process it all, then asked the question that had been burning in her mind for months. “Do you know how far we are from Earth?”

Julia's smile faded slightly. "Not yet."

Mei hesitated. "Do you want to know?"

Julia's sharp eyes flicked to her, searching her face. "Do you ?"

Mei's gaze drifted to Dorane, whose eyes held a quiet intensity that made her heart flutter. He held out his hand to her. She didn't hesitate as she took it and shook her head in response to Julia's quiet, searching question.

With a gentle smile playing on his lips, Dorane's other arm encircled her waist, his touch light yet reassuring. Mei felt the warmth of his body, the unspoken promise in the way his fingers curled against her side—but before he could say anything, another voice called out.

A teasing, familiar voice.

"Pandochka ."

Mei stiffened. Her lips parted. She turned toward the ramp of Dorane's ship?—

"Sergi!" Mei breathed, her heart pounding as she stared up into Sergi's grinning face.

Sergi stood at the top of the ramp, looking exactly the same—tall, lean, sharp-eyed—with a smirk that could melt glaciers. But he wasn't alone. A young woman stood beside him, watching with quiet amusement.

Mei couldn't move. Couldn't think. For a moment, the entire galaxy felt like it had shrunk down to just him.

Sergi opened his arms, the familiar crooked grin on his lips and affectionate warmth

dancing in his eyes. With a sharp intake of breath, Mei launched forward, sprinting toward him.

She didn't slow down. She didn't care that they weren't alone. All of her father's training about discipline vanished as she hit him at full force, wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist as she buried her face against his shoulder.

"I hate you," she muttered against his skin, her voice shaking, her fingers digging into his shirt.

Sergi's low laughter rumbled through him, and he tightened his grip on her, supporting her easily as he turned in a tight circle.

"I missed you too, Little Panda."

Mei sniffed hard, blinking rapidly as her chest constricted with emotion too big to name. She pressed her forehead against the curve of his neck, inhaling his scent, his presence, the very essence of home.

"You're an idiot," she whispered, her voice thick. "You don't even want to know all the ways I'm going to make you pay for making me worry."

"I can't wait," Sergi chuckled, rubbing slow circles against her back as she released her legs around his waist and slid down to the ground.

Mei stayed pressed against his body, too overwhelmed by her emotions to face him yet.

"I love you, Sergi," she softly confessed, finally looking up at him. "You... you are my family."

She clenched her eyes shut. His arms curled around her, holding her like the brother he had always been.

“I love you too, pandochka. You scared me as well,” he grudgingly admitted in a voice that wasn’t quite steady.

“Hi, Mei. I’m La’Rue,” the woman next to Sergi greeted.

Mei pulled back and gave the woman who was about her age a wavering smile before she raised an eyebrow at Sergi. “Are you robbing the cradle now, old man?”

Sergi released a long groan and ran his hand over his face. “Old man? I’m not that old!” he grumbled while Ash and Julia snorted out a laugh.

Mei winked at La’Rue and looked up at Sergi before glancing at Ash and Julia. A sigh of contentment flowed through her. All they were missing was Josh, and he wasn’t far—in terms of space travel.

They had already done the impossible once. And no matter how many threats Zoak or the Legion hurled at them, they would do it again. Together.

We’ve become living legends! she mused, looking back up when Sergi laughed at something Ash said.

The dim glow of the room’s ambient lighting bathed the cabin in warm, muted golds. The air was thick with the lingering warmth of their bodies, the scent of skin and sweat, of shared whispers and tangled limbs. Dorane lay on his back, one arm curled around Mei, the other draped lazily over his stomach. His mind, however, was far from at rest.

Mei’s fingers trailed absently across his skin, tracing lazy patterns along his

abdomen. He loved the way she touched him—not just with heat, but with purpose. As if every brush of her fingertips was a reassurance, a quiet claim. A part of him wanted to lose himself in that feeling, to let go of everything but this moment.

But the night weighed heavy on him.

He was still processing what Mei had told him earlier. Her encounter with Zoak. And the fury that had stoked within. At the risk she had taken. The danger she had walked into. His gut reaction had been to demand why she had done it, but he had swallowed the words. Mei was no reckless fool. She was calculating, tactical. She had baited Zoak for a reason.

That knowledge didn't lessen the fire in his veins.

Or the jealousy that had crept up like a slow, insidious burn when he saw her reunite with Sergi.

Dorane exhaled sharply, his mind flashing back to earlier, when he had stepped out of the ship and into the cool night air of Kryla, needing space, needing to breathe.

Earlier:

The night air had cooled from the oppressive heat of the day. The faint scent of dust and distant spice from the market beyond the walls carried on the breeze. The hum of the settlement was softer now, the workers fewer, their murmurs drifting into the desert winds.

Yet, beneath the ordinary sounds of Kryla, Dorane felt something else. A pressure. A presence. Zoak was watching. Somewhere, in the dark, unseen. Waiting.

Dorane clenched his fists. It wasn't just Zoak that made his stomach tighten—it was

the way Mei had melted into another man's arms, her body unquestioningly at home in Sergi's embrace. He breathed deeply, trying to understand the conflicting emotions coursing through him as he stood at the top of the loading bay ramp, arms crossed, staring out over the sealed entrance to the landing pad.

He was still angry.

He was still jealous.

And he hated himself for both.

He couldn't forget the way Mei's face lit up at the sight of Sergi. The way she launched herself into the other man's arms without hesitation. The way she clung to the stranger with blue eyes, her relief so raw, so unguarded, that it sent something dark curling through Dorane's chest.

It was jealousy, yes. But more than that—it was the unfamiliar, suffocating fear that he was too late. His jaw ached from clenching it too hard. His fingers curled into fists at his sides before he forced them to relax. A slow breath. In. Out. But it didn't stop the tightness in his chest. The fear that whatever bond they had formed wasn't strong enough to compete with what she had lost.

"I love her." The words had felt so easy to say in the quiet of their cabin. But now, in the open air, surrounded by everyone else who already had a place in her heart, he wondered if they were enough.

He pulled in a deep breath when he heard the soft shuffle of boots on metal behind him. He squared his shoulders, expecting a challenge, but instead, the other man shot him a crooked, knowing smile.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?"

Dorane shrugged and looked back out at the night. Sergi stopped beside him and leaned casually against the frame of the bay doors. Dorane glanced sideways when Sergi shoved his hands into his pockets, noticing that the other man had a thoughtful expression on his face.

Dorane barely restrained a sigh. He wasn't in the mood for conversation, much less one with the man who had so effortlessly pulled Mei into his arms earlier. He started to turn away, ready to brush Sergi off, when the other man spoke again.

"She loves you, you know."

Dorane let out a slow breath. "You can read her mind now, can you?"

"It's quite fun seeing your jealousy. I am enjoying it immensely, thank you."

Dorane blinked. He hadn't really expected the man to be so honest. He waited, turning back as Sergi paused.

Sergi continued, quieter—serious. "She wouldn't have confronted Zoak if she didn't."

Dorane's chest tightened. He had spent so much time doubting, questioning... Maybe it was time to stop.

"You know," Sergi said, his voice quiet, "when I first met Mei, I was supposed to kill her."

That stopped Dorane cold. He turned his head to stare at Sergi, his brows furrowing, but the other man wasn't looking at him. He was looking at the night sky, his expression unreadable.

“I was sent to the Gliese 581g mission by my country, Russia. It’s the largest country on Earth, further north than where Mei was born, and our countries, they squabble, da ? They compete. My orders were clear: infiltrate the mission, document everything about the alien object, especially if there were advanced weapons... and if necessary, eliminate the crew.”

The words settled over Dorane like a slow-moving avalanche. He turned his head slightly, his expression carefully blank, but his pulse had kicked up a notch. Exhaling slowly through his nose, he fought the sudden, irrational urge to knock Sergi off his feet. Instead, he clenched his jaw and remained silent.

“The plan was simple,” Sergi continued. “If the alien tech was too valuable, I was to take control of an escape pod, destroy the Gliese, and return to Earth with the data.”

Dorane unclenched his jaw enough to speak. “You didn’t follow your orders.”

“No.” Sergi let out a soft chuckle. “I made the decision long before things went sideways that I wasn’t going to. Julia changed that first, but all of them did. I started to see the mission differently—bigger than my government or thirst for power. In space, there was no nonsense from the selfish leaders back on Earth, there was just... us. Humans. Trying to survive. Together.”

His voice grew quieter.

“Julia knew who I was, what I was sent to do, and yet... she never judged me. She never betrayed me. She gave me her trust, even when she had every reason not to.”

Sergi exhaled, shaking his head. “That trust changed me. But it was Mei who gave me something that had been taken from me a long time ago.” He turned then, meeting Dorane’s gaze with something deeper, something weighted. “She gave me back my humanity. She taught me how to love.”

Dorane's throat tightened.

Sergi smirked suddenly, waving a hand toward the settlement. "She is a shadow and a bright star. She can blend in anywhere, move unseen, yet light up a world with her smile." His voice turned wry. "She is also dangerous. Far more than even I expected before I met her. It was difficult to find any information on her at all, and I suspect half of what I found was inaccurate, or at least misleading."

Dorane's lips twitched. That, he had no trouble believing. "And when you finally met her?"

Sergi chuckled. "I tested her. Teasing her, provoking her, breaking things so she would have to fix them."

Dorane arched a brow. "And?"

Sergi's grin widened. "I failed. No matter what I did, she continued to intrigue me, make me laugh, challenge me, and... I fell in love with her."

Sergi lifted his hand when Dorane exhaled sharply, shaking his head. But the jealousy that had burned in his gut earlier and had started to ebb flared again.

"Not as a man loves a woman, but as a brother would love his younger sister. Don't get me wrong, I wondered at first what it would be like... but—" Sergi shook his head and chuckled. "She's good, but you already know that. She is brilliant in everything she does. That's why you need to trust her."

Dorane's jaw clenched. "Zoak will strike."

"Yes," Sergi agreed, "but Mei would never have confronted him if she didn't think she could win. She was doing what she was trained to do—seek information, analyze

the situation, plan.”

Dorane was silent for a long moment. “I love her.”

Sergi nodded as if he had already known. “Then trust her.”

Dorane hesitated. “I’m afraid.”

Sergi’s smirk returned, but it was softer this time. “Then ask her what her plan is.”

Dorane narrowed his eyes. “And if she doesn’t tell me?”

Sergi’s expression was knowing. “Then you’ll have your answer.”

Dorane frowned. “What do you mean?”

Sergi’s eyes gleamed. “People like us—like you, like me, like Kella, like Mei—we don’t trust easily. We never, ever trust someone we don’t love.”

Dorane blinked, pulled back into the present when Mei shifted against him, rolling onto her side to face him. Her dark eyes searched his face, her expression soft, curious.

“What’s wrong?” she murmured.

Dorane inhaled slowly, then exhaled. “I was angry about your confrontation with Zoak.”

Mei’s brow lifted slightly, but before she could speak, he continued.

“And jealous.”

Her expression flickered with something unreadable. She started to pull away, but he caught her face between his hands, guiding her gaze back to his.

His thumb brushed lightly over her cheekbone as he studied her, as if committing every line of her face to memory. “You amaze me,” he admitted, his voice rough. “I’ve fal— I...” He cleared his throat and looked away quickly, blushing furiously. “I mean, I...” He drew a deep breath and locked eyes with her. “I adore you, Mei.”

Mei’s lips parted slightly, her breath hitching.

“My anger, my jealousy—it all comes from fear,” Dorane continued, his voice quieter now. “Fear of losing you.”

Mei’s expression softened. Slowly, she leaned down and kissed him, long and lingering, her fingers threading into his hair as she poured every unspoken word into the press of her lips.

When she finally pulled back, he let out a breath, searching her face.

Quietly, he asked, “What’s your plan?”

Mei studied him carefully as she gave him a small, crooked, secretive smile, her dark eyes shining with an inner light that was warm and deep. Then, slowly, teasingly, she trailed one finger down his bare chest, her touch light but deliberate. Dorane inhaled sharply, his muscles tensing under her fingertips. She leaned in just enough that her breath warmed his lips, her voice low and filled with dark promise as she said, “I thought you’d never ask.”

The warmth of Aetherial's twin suns had begun to seep into the late morning air as Dorane stepped out onto the landing platform. The scent of warm sand, metallic starship fuel, and Kryla's spiced market air filled his lungs. The light was golden, soft yet bright, casting elongated shadows across the stone walkways and the smooth hulls of docked ships.

His eyes found Mei instantly.

She stood with the others—Ash, Sergi, Kella, La'Rue, Julia, and Roan—her dark head tilted slightly, listening intently to something Ash was saying. Even in this group, amidst warriors and strategists, she stood out. A presence both fluid and sharp, quiet but commanding.

As if sensing him, she turned.

A small smile played at the corner of her lips, and then, in a gesture both simple and deeply meaningful, she bowed her head.

Dorane felt something shift in his chest.

He crossed the distance between them, his boots echoing softly against the stone. Mei met him in the middle, the others parting slightly as if instinctively understanding that this moment belonged to them. Together, they turned toward the wide, open doors that led out into the settlement.

He let his fingers brush against the small of her back as they walked. “Everything ready?”

Mei lifted her gaze, amusement flickering in her dark eyes. “Would I be here if it wasn’t?”

Dorane chuckled, the sound deep in his chest. “Point taken.”

They reached the outer landing where the skidders were parked beneath a curved overhang, shielding them from the worst of the rising heat. The sleek airbike was matte black, its surface dusted with fine, golden sand. It was built for speed and endurance, its double-seater frame designed for long journeys across the unforgiving desert terrain.

Dorane slid his rifle blaster off his shoulder, securing it in its sheath on the side of the skidder before glancing toward the high wall of the settlement. He could sense menacing eyes watching them.

Zoak.

The Turbinta assassin was out there, hidden in the shadows, waiting. Mei felt it too; he could see it in the way her fingers flexed at her sides, the way her weight shifted slightly as if preparing for an attack that wouldn’t come—not yet.

Good. Let him watch. Let him stew, Dorane savagely thought.

He swung a leg over the skidder, gripping the handlebars before offering his hand to Mei. She slid her hand into his and climbed on behind him with practiced ease, settling onto the smooth leather. She sat back against the padded seat, within easy reach of a second rifle blaster. She would provide coverage should they need it along their trip.

In minutes, they were past the settlement walls, the desert swallowing them whole.

The air was dry, but not unbearable, the desert stretching endlessly before them in golden waves of shifting sand. The skidder sliced through the open terrain, kicking up a fine trail of dust as they navigated the winding road.

They were dressed for the journey—sand-colored garments made from a special material designed to repel heat and protect their skin from the abrasive winds. Their headgear shielded their faces from the fierce rays of the suns, while their goggles cut through the glare. Their breathing masks filtered out fine particles and helped regulate body temperature.

Dorane pushed the skidder to its limits, weaving through jagged rock formations and open dunes, the landscape a breathtaking display of nature's artistry.

"The canyon up ahead is beautiful," Dorane murmured through the commlink that connected them. "The rock contains a natural element only found on Aetherial. The walls were carved over thousands of years by sand and wind, shaping the stone into waves. The minerals within create the colors."

Mei leaned slightly to the side, observing as they passed through towering canyon walls streaked with rich shades of red, violet, gold, and deep indigo. Light filtered through the narrow gaps, casting brilliant shafts of color across the ground.

"It looks like the stone is glowing," she murmured, her voice filled with wonder.

Dorane smiled. "It is. The minerals refract the sunlight, changing as the suns move across the sky. My mother used to bring me here when I was a child. She said the canyon was alive, always shifting, always speaking—if you knew how to listen."

Mei was silent for a moment. Then, softly, she said, "She was right."

Dorane's grip tightened on the controls.

"I wish you could have met her," he murmured, his heart filled with a wistful sorrow.

"So do I."

A half hour into the journey, they pulled into a shaded alcove at the base of a cliff, the overhang offering protection from the harshest rays. Dorane cut the engine, the silence of the desert settling around them like a living thing.

Mei slid off the skidder first, stretching her arms before unsealing a storage compartment and pulling out a canteen. Dorane did the same, taking a long drink before sitting on a rock ledge.

"We've given Zoak enough time to reach the village," Mei noted, pulling down her mask.

Dorane wiped the sweat from his brow, nodding. "He'll be expecting us. His focus is entirely on us now."

"On me," Mei corrected, lifting the canteen to her lips.

Dorane studied her for a long moment. Then, without a word, he reached into the second storage compartment and pulled out the Gallant Staff.

Mei's eyes widened slightly when she saw what he was holding. The Staff was crafted from a rare, dark alloy, inlaid with fine silver filigree. It was smooth and balanced, yet deceptively sturdy. Symbols of the Gallant Order ran along its length, etched in a language far older than the stars themselves.

Dorane ran his fingers along the engravings before offering it to her. The cool metal

hummed faintly under his touch, the symbols alive with history.

For a moment, he could almost hear his mother's voice.

“The Staff is not just a weapon, Dorane—it is a promise. A burden, if you let it be, but also a guide. It will teach you, if you are willing to listen.”

He had been a boy then, barely able to lift it, watching in awe as she wielded it with impossible grace. He had tried to mimic her movements, had fallen more times than he cared to admit. She had only laughed, ruffling his hair. “One day, my son.”

Now, he was passing it on—not to his brother or sister, but to an Ancient Knight of the Gallant; to the woman he loved more than life itself.

His throat tightened. His mother would have loved Mei.

Mei's fingers tightened around the Staff, and he saw it then—that quiet flicker of understanding.

“This belonged to my mother,” he said, his voice quieter now. “She carried it as a Knight of the Gallant Order before she left the war behind. It was a part of her. It was the same for my father.”

Mei took it reverently, her fingers tracing the metal. “Dorane...”

His eyes searched hers as he wrapped his fingers around hers when she started to hold it out. Their reaction to each other, their connection, was an almost palpable thread binding them.

“I would be honored if you carried it now.”

Something flickered in Mei's gaze—something deep, something anchored.

“Are you sure?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Dorane exhaled. “More sure than I've ever been about anything.”

He activated the Staff's biometric security. The engravings flared softly, adjusting to Mei's touch, the technology within recognizing her as its new master.

“The Staff will respond only to you now,” he murmured. “It will not allow another to wield it.”

Mei turned it over in her hands, adjusting her grip experimentally. Dorane watched as she shifted into a stance, testing the weight.

“You've used a staff before,” he noted.

She glanced up, amusement in her eyes. “It was one of my favorite weapons to train with.”

Dorane smiled. “Then let's see what you can do.”

He withdrew his father's Staff from the sheath at his waist. Extending it, he twirled it once before he lowered into a ready stance. Mei mirrored him, and for the next thirty minutes, they moved together. Strike. Parry. Counter. Their bodies flowed in sync, the Staffs humming as they connected.

Dorane's breath caught as he watched her.

The way she moved—it reminded him of his mother.

She was grace and precision, power and control.

A deep emotion unraveled inside him when he disarmed her with a well-placed maneuver, only for her to flip backward and reclaim the Staff in one fluid motion.

He stepped forward, his breath slightly uneven.

Mei's studied him with a calm that belied the hammering pulse at the base of her throat. Her eyes were bright with exhilaration when he cupped her face and kissed her.

Deep. Slow. Reverent.

He pulled back just enough to whisper, "No matter what happens, I need you to know—I love you."

Mei's breath hitched. Emotion flickered across her face, raw and unguarded.

Then, in one swift movement, she tugged him down and kissed him back, fierce and unyielding, as if she could carve the words into his very soul.

When they finally parted, she pressed her forehead to his.

Her voice was hushed but firm. "Then don't die before this fight is over."

Dorane let out a rough chuckle, his hands tightening around her waist.

"I wouldn't dare."

Zoak moved like a specter across the desert, his skidder carving a silent path over the wind-swept dunes. The twin suns had begun their slow descent, stretching his shadow

long across the sand, but the heat remained relentless, pressing against him like a living thing. He barely noticed.

The rhythmic hum of the skidder beneath him was a constant, steady vibration—a pulse against his skin, a heartbeat of the hunt. His muscles were loose, his mind razor-sharp, honed into singular focus. This was what he lived for. The moment before the kill.

As the canyons rose in the distance, carved by the winds of a thousand storms, Zoak allowed himself a small, satisfied smirk. Dorane had made this easy for him.

He knew exactly where the man would go.

Back to the beginning.

Dorane wanted to take the woman to the ruins of his old village—to the bones of his past, to the ghosts that whispered in the sand. Zoak could almost taste the bitter irony. The fool sought closure, perhaps.

I will give him that, Zoak thought darkly. His past, his present, and his future—ending where it all began.

The skidder wove through the narrow canyon passes, the air shifting cooler in the shadowed ravines before opening back into the scalding heat of the sunlit dunes. Zoak's slitted pupils adjusted to the glare instantly, his body moving fluidly with each shift of the skidder. He had traveled these types of landscapes before.

For others, the Aetherial desert was a death trap—unforgiving, ruthless. To him, it was a hunting ground.

The canyon where the village was located appeared on the horizon, concealed by the

high, rough walls formed by a river that dried up long ago. The rounded structures, once home to families and laughter, were now hollow ruins, their dome roofs cracked, walls scorched and half-buried in sand blown in by storms.

Remnants of fire and destruction still marred the ground, deep gouges in the earth where explosions had turned homes into unmarked graves. The village was a corpse, and soon, it would welcome two more bodies into its graveyard.

Zoak pulled the skidder off the main path, guiding it behind a jagged outcropping of rock where the canyon sloped down toward the valley. The vehicle would be hidden here, out of sight from the high road leading into the village.

He dismounted with the fluid grace of a predator, his boots sinking slightly into the sand as he moved toward the edge of the slope, lifting his view-spotter to scan the ruins below.

The village was silent. The wind moved sluggishly through the open streets, shifting dust in lazy curls and kicking up miniature dust devils that danced across the ground before dissolving.

There was no other movement. No sound. Just the hush of abandonment. He had arrived headed of Dorane and his woman.

Zoak's gaze swept the area methodically. His mind worked in calculations—distances, lines of sight, elevation advantages. He noted the remnants of old buildings, the hollowed-out husk of what had once been a communal gathering space, the dried-out well in the center of the square.

Then his attention flicked toward the graves.

The small mounds along the slope above the village were unremarkable at first. He

dismissed them as nothing but old bones—Dorane’s childhood friends, likely. Meaningless.

But as his scope tracked lower, he stilled.

Two mounds. Different from the rest. They were set apart, carefully tended. Real burials.

Zoak adjusted the focus on his view-spotter. The markers were newer, the material smooth and polished. Thick, etched crystal—not the crude, hand-carved stones the other graves bore. Even in the light of the suns, the crystalline structures gave off a faint glow.

He sneered. How poetic. Of course Dorane would visit these graves. That was where Zoak would strike.

He pulled the scope back, adjusting for a better angle. The open area would make it difficult to launch a surprise attack up close—there was too much light, too much space. The woman would sense him. She was too sharp, too attuned to danger. He could not allow her that advantage.

No, this fight would begin from a distance.

His plan shifted. He would strike Dorane first, wound him—not enough to kill, but enough to cripple, to slow him down. The woman would stay close—she would not leave Dorane defenseless. That would give him the opportunity he needed.

Then, he could take his time.

He would drive them into a corner, force them into a position where they had no escape. He would disable the woman, leave her alive but helpless. Then, he would

hang them both—like trophies—like messages left for the ghosts of this place.

Let Dorane hear the echoes of the past. Let the woman watch him suffer.

Only when Dorane had breathed his last would Zoak turn his full attention to her .

One slice at a time.

Pleased with his plan, Zoak moved with the silence of a shadow, descending from the ridge with practiced ease, slipping between the half-buried structures like a wraith. He ignored the faded remnants of a past that wasn't his—broken pottery, a child's rusted trinket, the blackened remnants of a doorway.

His destination was already chosen.

Across from the graves, stood the shell of an old hut, its roof partially collapsed, its walls blackened with soot from whatever fire had consumed it long ago. The interior was hollowed out, but it provided the perfect vantage point—deep enough to conceal him in shadow, open enough to give him a clear line of fire.

From here, he would wait.

He settled against the farthest wall, pulling his rifle from its holster and laying it across his lap. The sight was calibrated within seconds, the crosshairs settling over the distant graves. He adjusted his angle, testing the view, imagining Dorane kneeling there, head bowed, vulnerable.

He imagined the moment his first shot struck.

A slow, satisfied exhale escaped him.

Yes. This will be perfect.

He would let them feel safe. Let them grieve. Let them lower their guard. His fingers slid absently over the serrated edge of his blade, feeling the ridges catch against his calloused skin. He imagined the edge sinking into flesh, the slow resistance before it gave way, spilling warmth onto the sand. He inhaled, picturing the scent of copper mingling with the dry desert air.

He turned the knife over and carved a slow, deliberate line into the soot-covered floor, tracing a shape from memory—a symbol once burned into his wrist by his old Masters. A mark of shame, they had told him. A reminder of his weakness.

“You want it too much, Zoak. A true Turbinta does not savor the kill—they execute and move on.”

He could still see the old Masters’ sneers, hear their warnings, the threats of dismissal. They had called him undisciplined. Weak.

Fools.

He had proven them wrong.

Yet...

His grip tightened on his rifle as a flicker of unease stirred in his gut.

The woman had mocked him. Had laughed at him. Had waved his threats aside as if they were nothing more than an irritation.

Even now, the memory of her smirk set his blood boiling.

No. He would not let her get inside his head. This time, she would not be the one in control.

But the rage coiled in his chest, hot, unchecked.

He would take his time with them. And when the village was once again filled with the scent of death, he would carve that same mark into the Ancient Knight's flesh—deep, final, unforgiving.

He closed his eyes, listening to the hush of the wind through the shattered walls, his body still as a coiled viper.

Not yet. Let them feel safe. Let them grieve. Then...

His grip tightened on the blade, the faint scrape of metal against stone the only sound in the dying light.

Then, he would strike.

He could already hear it. Not their screams—no, those would come later. But the moment before. That last heartbeat of silence. The way a body knows before the blade strikes, before the bullet shreds through flesh.

That silence was his favorite part.

He let out a slow breath and settled deeper into the shadows.

And waited.

Let history repeat itself.

Only this time, it would be his name, not the Legion's, that echoed in the screams.

20

The holographic map of Cryon II flickered with blue light, the shifting orbits of ships and the moon port's defenses marked with glowing trajectories. Josh, Cassa, and Hutu stood around the central war table, their expressions grim, their minds sharp with the weight of what was coming.

The air in the war room was heavy—a mixture of anticipation, strategy, and the unspoken knowledge that they were running out of time. Andronikos was coming. And he was bringing hell with him.

The ship vibrated beneath their feet as the engines adjusted their position, drifting into the optimal intercept zone ahead of the Legion fleet. Outside, the deep void of space stretched endlessly, but within, the storm was about to break.

Hutu's voice was measured, his deep resonant tone carrying over the quiet hum of the tactical consoles.

“Andronikos should have been here by now. His fleet is moving slower than expected.”

Josh exhaled sharply. “Because he's paranoid. Our informant onboard just confirmed it.”

Cassa's fingers flew over the controls, pulling up the latest transmission from their informant aboard Andronikos's Battle Cruiser. The message scrolled across the holoscreen in tight, coded script, but the meaning was clear.

Andronikos is unraveling. The closer we get to Cryon II, the more erratic he becomes.

Paranoia is gripping his officers. He believes the trade routes have gone silent as a trap—he is convinced he is being led into an ambush.

Tensions are rising among the Legion captains. Some question his leadership, but the loyalists—his inner circle—keep them in line through fear.

Andronikos has locked down the bridge. No one is allowed inside except his most trusted guards.

Four Battle Cruisers are captained by loyalists. However, many of the crew are there under threat to their families—they fight not out of loyalty, but fear.

If Andronikos's ship falls, the Legion will collapse. If the chain of command is broken, those fighting under duress will have a chance to surrender.

A Battle Cruiser has been dispatched to Aetherial. Orders: eliminate Dorane, Zoak, and the Ancient Knights. Once Cryon II is destroyed, the fleet will turn its weapons on Aetherial, razing the planet's settlements before continuing throughout the star system.

A heavy silence followed as the message ended. The muted sounds of the ship and crew filtered through the door of the war room, but no one spoke.

Cassa finally exhaled through her nose, shaking her head. "If Andronikos is this paranoid now, he'll be even more dangerous once the battle starts. He'll push his fleet to destroy Cryon II, no matter the cost. He won't care how many of his own ships he loses in the process."

Josh's jaw clenched. "Then we need to take him out before he gives the order."

A soft click sounded as the war room doors slid open. Josh and Hutu stood as Asta entered the room. Her feline-shaped eyes narrowed with sharp intelligence, the subtle gleam of her retractable claws reflecting off the tactical lights. She moved with a silent grace, yet her presence commanded attention.

Josh gave a small nod. "Asta. Thank you for coming."

Asta dipped her head in greeting, but her gaze was all business. "I do not like leaving Cryon II at a time like this. But since you insist on your reckless plans, I figured I should at least give you some pertinent warnings."

Josh bowed his head in acknowledgment of Asta's irritation. She turned toward Hutu and Cassa, her voice cool and unwavering. "If your Gallant forces value their lives, they will stay out of Cryon II's defensive range."

Hutu's eyes sharpened. "Are you saying your people will fire on us?"

Asta's ears flicked back, her expression neutral. "I am saying that Cryon II's defense system is not selective. Once the moon port enters full lockdown, no ship—Legion or otherwise—will be allowed in or out without triggering its automated defenses."

Josh and Hutu exchanged a glance.

Cassa folded her arms. "So what you're saying is, once you lock Cryon II down, we'd better hope we're not still in the kill zone."

Asta bared her teeth in something not quite a smile. "Precisely."

She flicked her claws over the holo-display, adjusting the map to highlight key

defense systems positioned across the moon port. “Zoak planted multiple explosives within our infrastructure. We dismantled them. The new system Dorane, Jammer, and I have developed is meant to optimize Cryon II’s defenses and keep the moon port safe. You focus on taking down Andronikos’s fleet. My focus is keeping my people alive.”

Josh nodded, studying the systems Asta was pointing out. “That’s a remarkable defense system.”

Cassa’s voice was steady. “We have no choice but to disable the Legion fleet without destroying it outright. If we strand their ships in space, we can buy time to separate the loyalists from the unwilling.”

Asta’s tail flicked in irritation. “This is war. You don’t get to pick and choose who dies.”

Josh met her gaze. “It may be that the majority of the people on the Legion ships don’t want to be there. This is the smart play to reduce our enemy’s numbers, but more importantly, we are not the Legion. If it is possible to save lives, Asta, we will try to do that.”

Asta let out a slow exhale, but she gave a sharp nod of understanding. Hutu leaned forward, his massive arms crossed over his chest.

“What about the Battle Cruiser heading toward Aetherial?” His voice darkened. “If that ship gets through, we could lose Dorane, Zoak, and the Ancient Knights.”

Josh’s fists curled at his sides. The weight of the decision pressed like a vice around his chest.

Hutu turned to him. “Josh, I recommend you and Cassa go to Aetherial and intercept

the Legion cruiser.”

Josh looked up sharply. “What? What about the fleet... and Cryon II?”

Hutu’s expression was unwavering. “We have the Gallant fleet and Cryon II’s defenses. We can’t afford to send any more to Aetherial. Between a smaller, more agile Gallant warship, La’Rue, Kella, and Roan’s ships, you can stop the Battle Cruiser. It isn’t just Dorane and the others; it’s also the people of Aetherial. Go. Warn them. Use the new defense weapon Cassa and Bantu developed. If that Legion Cruiser makes it to Aetherial, we both know what will happen.”

Josh hesitated, his gut warring with responsibility and instinct.

Asta nodded. “Andronikos’s forces will be in for a surprise when they reach Cryon II. There’s a reason the freight lines are quiet. The Gallant forces aren’t going to be alone.”

Cassa placed a hand on Josh’s arm. “She’s right. We need to go.”

Josh exhaled sharply, his decision solidifying.

Hutu’s golden eyes met his. “We’ll hold the line here.”

Josh nodded. He hated leaving Hutu and the Gallant forces to face Andronikos’s fleet alone, but deep down, he knew the truth. If the Ancient Knights were eliminated, then even victory here would be meaningless.

They had to stop that ship.

Josh met Asta’s gaze. “Good luck.”

She bared her teeth, her tail flicking once. “We make our own luck, Ancient Knight.”

Hutu reached out, gripping Josh’s forearm in a warrior’s clasp. “Go. Make sure they live.”

Josh returned the grip firmly. Then, with a final nod, he turned toward Cassa.

The war was coming.

And it was about to explode on two fronts.

The desert stretched before them, the muted golds and deep ochres of the canyon walls standing in stark contrast to the bright, unforgiving sky. Mei kept her gaze moving, scanning the terrain, but she didn’t need to see Zoak to know he was already here. She could feel him.

The shift in Dorane was just as palpable. His shoulders had tensed, his grip on the skidder’s controls firm, almost mechanical. The closer they got, the quieter he became, his gaze fixed on the winding path leading into the ghost of his childhood home.

Mei’s chest tightened as she looked at him. This had been her suggestion—to use this place to trap Zoak—but now, seeing the subtle tension in Dorane’s posture, the memories heavy on his shoulders, she knew it had been insensitive.

She exhaled softly, her voice quieter than the wind that stirred the dust at their feet. “I’m sorry.”

Dorane didn’t answer at first, as if the words hadn’t quite reached him through the storm of his thoughts. Then, slowly, he looked at her.

Mei held his gaze, letting him see the regret in her eyes. Understanding flickered across his face. He nodded once before turning back toward the village.

“No,” he murmured. “You were right. It’s the perfect place.” A sharp exhale. “And it’ll play into Zoak’s mind frame.”

Relief mixed with the ache in Mei’s heart, but there was no time to dwell on it. They had a fight to finish. She pulled out the map Dorane had drawn, spreading it between them as they stood on the compacted dirt just outside the ruins of the first huts.

“There are three main ways he could’ve entered,” she said, pointing at the different entry points. “Through the main road, the west via the desert, or a wide arc from the north.”

Dorane traced a finger along the main road, shaking his head. “He wouldn’t have come this way. Too exposed.”

Mei nodded. “Then that leaves the desert.”

Dorane’s jaw tightened. “We practiced with the Staff for almost too long. If we were any later, Zoak would be suspicious.”

Mei agreed, scanning the canyon walls as they moved forward. The silence was unnatural. No birds. No shifting of desert creatures. It was the hush before the kill.

Zoak was here. Watching. Waiting.

Her eyes swept the ground, searching for fresh tracks. Her fingers tightened on the Staff Dorane had given her.

They passed the first huts, and the air grew heavy with the weight of devastation long

past but never forgotten. Mei's steps slowed as she saw the mounds of rocks—scattered between huts, along the road, markers of the dead.

Her throat burned. She clenched the Staff so tightly that the etched metal dug into her palm, grounding her in something tangible, something real. Rage and sorrow twined together inside her, knotting into something fierce, something unbreakable. This place had once been filled with life. Dorane's life. And Zoak would dare to twist it into his battleground? No. No more. Never again.

Dorane's voice was quiet, distant. "I was the one who buried them."

She turned toward him sharply.

"When I came back," he continued, his voice raw, "they were all gone. The Legion didn't leave survivors."

He was staring at the graves, his hands at his sides, fingers curling slightly, as if they could still feel the weight of stone in a child's grip.

"I carried the stones to cover them," he murmured, his gaze flickering to a low wall, half-collapsed from missing stones. "I didn't want the wind to take them. Or the animals."

Her heart cracked at the thought of Dorane as a child, carrying rock after rock, alone in a world that had erased everyone he loved. Mei clenched her jaw, channeling the pain into resolve.

Zoak wanted to drag Dorane into his grief. To break him, wound him, strip him down to a lost boy among the ruins.

A dry wind stirred the dust at her feet. It should have been empty, silent, just the

weight of a long-forgotten tragedy pressing down on them. But something was off. The silence wasn't natural—it was waiting. Watching. Her fingers flexed around the Staff. Her skin prickled, as if unseen eyes were brushing against her, their gaze crawling along her spine. Not yet. But soon.

She barely brushed her fingers against Dorane's hand as they neared the far end of the village. A slight imprint in the dirt caught her attention.

Dorane saw it too.

His voice was a low murmur. "Tracks."

They exchanged a look before stepping toward the nearest hut. Inside, the air was stale, heavy with the weight of time. Sand had crept through the broken doorway, covering the faded carpet, the fractured stone floors. Furniture lay in ruin, skeletal remnants of a life once lived here.

The walls were scarred with absence—the nails where pictures had once hung stood bare, tiny ghosts of what was.

Several small, alien birds burst from the alcoves, startled by their entrance.

Mei didn't touch anything.

This was a sacred place.

She paused in the living room, her breath catching when she saw them. Twin stains of dark red, forever etched into the faded carpet, the crevices of stone.

Dorane's voice was tight, distant. "Saffin and Jaytin."

His younger siblings.

Mei pressed her lips together, her heart aching as Dorane moved deeper into the house. She followed, her fingers caressing the carvings on the Staff.

The first room belonged to his parents. The ghost of a blue dress shifted where it had been caught on a broken window.

The second room was smaller. Colorful drawings decorated the crumbling walls—a child’s vision of beauty, still clinging despite the ruin.

“Saffin’s artwork,” Dorane murmured before turning away from the doorway.

The last room held two beds. One mattress was missing. The other had been torn apart by rodents, the stuffing a shredded, desperate attempt at warmth.

Dorane’s voice was flat. “I used the blankets to cover them. I burned my mattress to stay warm.”

Something inside Mei shattered. She moved before she even thought about it, stepping into his arms, wrapping herself around him. She couldn’t erase his past, couldn’t go back and undo his suffering, but she could be here now.

He tensed for a moment. Then he let her in. His arms slid around her, strong, steady, holding her as she held him.

For a long moment, they stood in the wreckage of his childhood, surrounded by ghosts and echoes, and claimed something real.

Mei’s voice was barely a whisper. “I only lost one person who I truly loved. My mother. I was twelve.” She swallowed. “I can’t imagine what you went through.”

Dorane exhaled sharply, his lips against her hair. “Pain is pain.” He locked eyes with her. “We’re not alone now, you and I.”

The words swelled inside her, crashing over her with the intense emotion behind them. She didn’t let him speak again. She kissed him, fierce, desperate to show him what he meant to her.

Dorane returned it with the same fire, his fingers tangling in her hair, pulling her closer, deeper. When they finally pulled apart, her breath mingled with his, her forehead pressed against his.

“Don’t leave me, Mei. Sergi warned me you might try to go off alone.”

Mei’s eyes widened before she huffed a rueful laugh. “Of course he did.”

Dorane brushed a kiss against her palm, his eyes filled with something softer than amusement. “Trust in our plan.”

Mei stared at him, feeling how fundamentally something had shifted in her core. She had not even considered leaving him. This wasn’t just her fight. It never was. And he was her partner.

Her fingers tightened in his. “I do. We’ll do this together.”

They shared an intimate smile and turned together, stepping toward the back exit, toward the garden beyond the shattered home.

Mei’s pulse slowed, her breath even.

Zoak was waiting.

They were ready.

21

The moment they stepped into the garden, Zoak felt the sharp thrill of triumph coil in his chest. Everything had fallen into place. Dorane. The woman. The graves.

Dorane had led himself and the Ancient Knight into the jaws of death, just as Zoak had known he would.

He had waited in the crumbling remains of the hut for hours, resisting the urge to shift, to drink, to stretch his aching muscles. Sweat dripped down his forehead, sliding hot and slow along his spine, but he ignored it. Discomfort was part of the hunt. His patience would be rewarded in the trophies he claimed.

Through the scope, he watched Dorane turn just enough for a clean shot to the chest. Zoak's lips curled.

Now.

He squeezed the trigger. A sharp crack echoed across the ruined village. Dorane's body jerked, a red stain blooming across his chest as he crumpled near the graves.

A scream—raw, desperate—ripped through the air. The woman dropped to her knees, her hands hovering over Dorane's unmoving form, her distress filling the abandoned village.

Zoak smirked, savoring the moment before he rose from the shell of the hut, his weapon still raised, moving slowly as he basked in the kill. He kept his eyes focused

on the woman. The shot he had taken at Dorane wouldn't kill the man—immediately. Dorane's lung would fill with liquid, making it difficult for him to breathe. He would slowly begin choking on his own blood, making his death agonizing as he slowly suffocated.

His gaze flicked to Dorane lying in the dirt, then back to the woman's face. Confusion swept through him when he noticed her expression.

Not a sneer. Not a grief-stricken grimace. She had a serene, knowing smile.

Zoak felt his gut twist. His steps slowed as his instincts started to scream a warning at him that all was not as it appeared. His gaze flicked downward again, past where the woman stood with a relaxed, easy posture. He swallowed when he saw Dorane rising to his feet, casually brushing the dirt from his clothing.

Zoak's vision blurred with rage and he bared his teeth a snarl. They had played him for a fool! Baited him, set him up, let him sweat?—

“You think you have won, but you haven't,” he growled.

“Oh, I think we have,” Dorane dryly commented, grimacing when he looked at the dirt on his hand before he pulled the Gallant Staff at his side.

The woman just smiled and shook her head at him. Rage poured through him and he took a step toward her, only to halt when she flicked her wrist and the Gallant Staff she was holding extended, the end glowing with a brilliant red light. His clawed fingers curled around the rifle in his hand even as his other hand slid down to the knife at his waist.

“I wouldn't,” a deep voice warned.

His head snapped to his left as Roan Landais and a tall, blonde woman stepped out from the shadows of a ruined hut. Roan held his Gallant Staff pointed in his direction.

Zoak's pulse slammed against his ribs. He stiffened, every muscle locking tight, his breath hissing between clenched teeth.

No. This isn't possible!

He had accounted for every factor, every variable. He had watched them—he had seen the grief rip through them. It had been real. His grip on the rifle convulsed. The betrayal of his own senses sent a slow, seething rage through his veins.

They had tricked him. They had outplayed him. His blood roared as he stepped forward, weapon still raised, willing—needing—to regain control. But then... he heard the laugh.

He twisted and froze when he saw another Ancient Knight holding a Gallant Staff standing behind him.

“Hi, Sergi,” Mei greeted.

“Hi, Mei,” Sergi replied with an answering grin.

Sergi let out a low whistle, twirling his Gallant Staff in his hand as he walked forward. “I gotta say, Dorane, that was some top-tier dying back there. Really sold it. Ever considered a career in theater?”

Dorane rolled his eyes, brushing a spot of dust from his chest. “No, but if you'd like me to shoot you and see how well you sell it, just let me know.”

Sergi grinned. “Tempting, but I think I'll pass. La'Rue gets upset when I get hurt.”

“I can imagine. You know, it’s been a while since I’ve been shot. What do you suggest I add?” Dorane asked.

Pain exploded through Zoak.

“Maybe an example of what death sounds like would help,” a wry, feminine voice suggested from behind him.

Zoak’s breath hitched and his rifle slipped from his grasp as a blade sank through his back, piercing his body and protruding from his stomach. He staggered, his mind scrambling to catch up with the cold bite of steel cutting deep.

His eyes dropped to his stomach, disbelieving, and he wrenched forward, the sharp Turbinta blade slicing up with deadly precision as he pulled away. His clawed hands opened as numbness spread through him and his weapon clattered to the ground. He turned sharply, his vision swimming, his gaze locking onto the face of his executioner.

Kella.

She stood behind him, her expression stone-cold, her eyes unreadable. Beside her, a dark-skinned man stood with a second weapon raised, ready to strike.

Zoak tried to speak, to snarl, to curse her?—

“First rule of a Turbinta assassin, never turn your back on one,” Kella murmured before her blade swept out in a perfect arc.

Zoak twisted, his hands going to his throat as the fine blade sliced a path along it. The world tilted and he folded. He rolled onto his back, his mind feverishly in denial of what was happening to his body.

His vision blurred. His breath was shallow, each pull of air weaker than the last, but when a shadow fell over him, he managed to lift his gaze. The mocking woman crouched beside him, her dark eyes steady, filled not with hate, but something worse. Pity. She exhaled softly, tilting her head.

She should be the one dying. Instead, her dark eyes bore into him, unreadable, calm. He strained, wanting to know.

“How?” his voice was raspy, the word almost indistinguishable.

She leaned in, her voice soft, almost gentle. “You never understood. Evil is loud,” she murmured. “But good? Good is relentless. It’s the quiet force that keeps pushing forward, even when it’s hard. It’s the force that connects people, and there are more of us than there are of you.”

Zoak wanted to claw at the woman’s eyes. He wanted to erase the compassion in them, the serene smile on her lips. She simply shook her head at him, mocking his helpless rage.

“And because of that... you could never win.”

Her soft words washed over him, chilling him to the bone. Assassins were not supposed to die looking at compassion and smiles. He wanted to kill her, but even as the desire pulsed through him, the edges of his vision darkened. His breaths slowed, and he knew that he would be the one haunting this place, an isolated, massacred village so much like the one he had destroyed all those years ago in his first big move to be a legend... and no one would remember him.

Mei smiled when Sergi let out a low whistle, stepping over Zoak’s lifeless body with a dramatic shake of his head.

“Kella, you are one terrifying woman. I can totally see why Ash loves you.”

Kella wiped her blade off with a practiced flick, unimpressed. Ash, standing beside her, grinned.

“You know, it’s actually really hot being in love with an assassin who doesn’t play with their kills.”

Sergi and Julia both groaned at the same time.

“You might need counseling, Ash,” Mei muttered as she rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, Ash?” Julia laughed and shook her head.

Roan chuckled. “I have to agree with him. Seeing Julia in action is pretty arousing.”

Julia blushed and glared. “If you keep talking, I may have to show you a move or two that Mei taught me.”

Roan grinned. “As long as it isn’t the kick to the groin that you used on my father.”

Sergi laughed. “I’m glad I fell in love with the blood-thirsty freighter pilot instead of the killer.”

“That’s because you are the assassin in your couple,” Julia dryly retorted.

“Speaking of a certain blood-thirsty freighter pilot, do you think La’Rue is ready to pick us up?” Dorane asked, pulling Mei against his side.

Mei laughed when everyone started talking at once about what had just happened. It wasn’t until they heard La’Rue shout down from the top of the cliff that they went

quiet and looked up. Mei shielded her eyes with her hand. Her lips parted when she saw the familiar man standing next to her.

“Josh!” Mei breathed, a strangled laugh slipping from her.

“Hey, guys. We’ve got a Legion Battle Cruiser heading our way! Are you done playing with the Turbinta assassin yet?” La’Rue hollered.

The battle wasn’t over yet.

Cryon II airspace

The Legion fleet surged toward Cryon II, an ominous wall of warships and firepower, its presence a herald of destruction. The bridge of the Tyrannis , Andronikos’s flagship, thrummed with tension.

Commander Ri Manta stood at his station, his expression unreadable, his hands folded behind his back as the final moments before war ticked down. The bridge was filled with Legion loyalists, their eyes locked onto the incoming battlefield. None of them suspected the silent rebellion already in motion in the bowels of the fleet’s ships, including this one.

Andronikos stood at the center of the bridge, his presence a coiled storm of delusion and unchecked fury. His paranoia had reached its peak. He hadn’t let anyone enter his private command room for over two days, only issuing orders through his guards. Now, his voice was sharp, clipped, as he issued his next command.

Andronikos’s command swept through the bridge like a blade, his eyes burning with obsessive purpose. “Deploy a Battle Cruiser to Aetherial. I want six of my elite soldiers on board. You—I want a meeting in the command room now.”

He turned sharply, his glare locking onto Ri. “Prepare a transfer shuttle and inform the captain of the Charger to expect my men.”

Ri gave a curt nod, his calm exterior. “Yes, sir. Ensign, contact Captain Ramos and tell him to expect a shuttle transfer within the next few minutes.”

Ri watched as Andronikos turned his attention to his security team. Ri’s sharp gaze didn’t miss the tremble in Andronikos hands or the way the Director’s head twitched, almost as if he had a neurological disorder. Six of Andronikos’ personal guards saluted, their boots echoing against the polished floor as they filed into the planning room to receive their orders. Less than ten minutes later, the group filed out, moving in formation as they exited the bridge.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ri noticed the rest of Andri’s guards taking up position once again outside of the doors to the private command room before the doors slid close. The Director had sealed himself back into the command room.

At least there will be six fewer soldiers to deal with, he wryly thought as he refocused on the viewport.

He watched dispassionately as the shuttle’s lights cut through the artificial lights of the fleet before disappearing into the adjacent Battle Cruiser. Moments later, the Battle Cruiser veered away, breaking formation before disappearing in a flash of light.

A minuscule smile curved Ri’s lips before he looked down when a silent pulse from his wrist communicator alerted him. He breathed in and out before returning his attention the room. He sat down in the captain’s chair, his hand sliding to the button that controlled the doors to the bridge, and he pressed the override. He fingered the button on the side of his wrist communicator.

“Secure the bridge on arrival.”

The moment the Legion fleet dropped out of hyperspace into Cryon II’s airspace, Ri felt the shift in the room. Legion officers stiffened, eyes darting to the viewscreens as the battlefield took shape. The Gallant fleet was waiting.

Ships—too many to count—moved like a tidal wave, led by Hutu’s warships, flanked by hundreds of freighters, their gunports unveiling hidden firepower. Gallant fighters swarmed into formation. The pulse of battle was imminent.

The First Officer, a man not of his choosing, released a snarl. “They were waiting for us. Good. Let’s end this.”

He turned toward Ri, expecting agreement. Ri rose from the captain’s chair, lifted his laser pistol, and fired.

“I agree. It is time to end this,” Ri replied.

He fired at the group of guards standing in front of the door leading to the command room. The bridge erupted into chaos as loyalist officers scrambled for their weapons. Behind him, the unsealed bridge doors opened and a group of elite officers poured in, quickly outnumbering the officers in the room.

“Take over communication and navigation,” he called out to two men. “Status report.”

“Engineering is secure.”

“Medical is secure.”

“Fighter bay and weapons are secure.”

“All top levels are secure, sir.”

The hidden Gallant operatives that had sprung into action—security officers, communications techs, ensigns—overpowered the Legion loyalists in brutal, efficient strikes. The takeover had been a long time coming and not without a cost. The careful planning had been tedious. When Roan had first approached Ri, he had been skeptical that an operation of this magnitude could be pulled off. It could only have happened if everyone was willing to die with this secret if they were captured. Ri honestly hadn't thought there were that many who would.

You were right, Roan.

Ri looked around the bridge. In under a minute, the bridge belonged to those who believed in freedom. Four men worked at clearing the bodies while the rest filled the vacant seats, taking command of the massive starship. Ri turned to the sealed door of the command room. He motioned for a tech to disable the door panel. Several security guards moved forward into position.

“Be careful. He is dangerous,” Ri cautioned.

“Ready when you are, sir,” the tech said.

Ri held his weapon at the ready. He gave a sharp nod to the tech who touched two wires together. The wires sparked before the doors slid open with a low whoosh. Four security officers burst through the door, low and wary. Ri followed, frowning when there was no answering response to the entry. He stepped into the command room, noting the broken displays, shattered glass, and smears of food and liquid across the glass of the viewport windows.

As he studied the room, he noted two things: any reflective surface had been defaced, as if Andronikos couldn't stand the sight of his own reflection, and the room was

empty.

Ri cursed as he studied the room, then his eyes narrowed. He strode back onto the bridge, staring at the spot where the Charger had been ahead of them. Andronikos had slipped out as one of the guards—and was heading to Aetherial.

"Damn it!" he hissed.

He strode over to the communication console. The communications officer rose and stepped to the side. Ri's fingers flew across the keyboard, activating a secure line to the Gallant Battle Cruiser.

"Tracer, this is Commander Ri Manta. Patch me through to General Hutu Gomerant immediately," he requested in a tense tone.

"Ri, you have control of the ship?" Hutu responded almost immediately.

"Yes, we have control of the command ship. Hutu, Andronikos has escaped. He's heading for Aetherial."

"We've sent a Battle Cruiser to intercept. I'll notify them that Andronikos is onboard," Hutu replied, his voice thick with anger. "We've ordered that the Legion ships be disabled when possible. We'll do our best to preserve as many lives as we can."

Ri looked up as the surrounding space lit up with small flashes. Gallant fighters were engaging with loyalist Legion squadrons, weaving through space in a deadly dance of blaster fire and evasive maneuvers. Freighters, armed to the teeth, ambushed smaller Legion battleships, unloading hidden artillery that turned ambushes into merciless takedowns. Cryon II's defenses activated, energy cannons pulsing with deadly precision, taking out entire Legion formations in seconds.

“Thank you. We’ll do our part to end this as soon as possible,” Ri promised, ending the transmission.

He turned and stepped back toward the captain’s chair. “Fire to disable only,” he ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the two weapons officers replied.

Ri sank down onto the plush chair. He flexed his fingers, his eyes locked on the viewport as the flagship of the Legion Battle Cruisers opened fire on its sister ships. The Legion was fracturing. “Loyalist” ships were abandoning the battle, their crews refusing to follow orders and die for Andronikos.

Andronikos’s house of cards was collapsing, but Ri knew this wasn’t over yet. It wouldn’t be until Andronikos fell once and for all.

Roan, I hope you are ready.

22

In orbit above Kryla Settlement: Aetherial

The stars gleamed against the void, distant and indifferent, but Andri saw them for what they truly were—witnesses to his ascension.

He stood at the viewport of the Charger , his hands clasped behind his back, his uniform pristine, gold epaulets gleaming in the dim tactical lighting. Aetherial stretched below him, a desolate, stubborn planet clinging to life. Its canyons twisted like veins through its surface, its twin suns beaming heat down mercilessly. And somewhere down there, in the dust and shadows, Roan, the Ancient Knights, and Zoak cowered like rats.

Andri exhaled slowly, adjusting his cuffs with practiced precision. His reflection stared back at him in the viewport, his own eyes gleaming with certainty. He was the Supreme Leader. The one destined to bring order to a fractured galaxy.

Not the Ancient Knights.

Not my brother.

Not Roan.

Me. Only me.

Behind him, Captain Ramos cleared his throat hesitantly. “Sir, your transport is

ready.”

Andri didn't turn. His gaze flickered to the reflection of his brother's face, superimposed over his own.

Coleridge.

Mocking.

Always mocking.

Andri's hands trembled as he straightened his collar, his lips curling in a sneer. “You always doubted me, didn't you?” he murmured under his breath. “You couldn't finish the job, so now I will.”

The reflection did not answer, but its eyes—Coleridge's eyes—burned with silent derision.

Andri's nostrils flared. He would not let that man haunt him a second longer. He would erase his legacy—wipe away the last remnants of his brother's failures—and when this was done, Coleridge's name would vanish from history.

Ramos shifted uneasily. “Sir?”

Andri blinked, realizing his words had not been entirely internal. He turned slowly, his gaze sweeping over Ramos like a blade. The Captain's brow furrowed, his gaze flicking to the viewport, as if expecting to see the shadow Andronikos had been speaking to.

A flicker of amusement coiled in Andri's chest. Ramos feared him.

Good.

Straightening, Andri strode past him without another word. The man scrambled to follow.

A short time later, the troop transport shuddered as it cut through the planet's upper atmosphere, turbulence rattling against the reinforced hull.

Andri barely noticed. He stood near the front, gripping the railing, watching as the surface of Aetherial came into sharper focus. The settlement—a cluster of simple dwellings and landing bays—was an insult to his grandeur. Soon, it would be reduced to ashes and whispers.

Ramos's voice crackled through the internal comm. "Sir, we have confirmation that General Roan Landais's starfighter and the ship belonging to the Turbinta assassin Kella Ta'Qui are in the docking bays. Kryla's arrival records also show a freighter belonging to La'Rue Gant, but visuals from our troops report the landing pads are empty."

"What of Zoak? Have your men found him yet?"

"No, sir, but the area has been secured. Not even that Turbinta could get through," Ramos replied.

Andri's eyes narrowed. He wouldn't take any chances. He looked at the five men he had brought with him.

"You two will find and eliminate the Turbinta assassin named Zoak once we land. Don't return until you have proof he is dead," he instructed.

"Yes, sir," the two men replied.

He returned his focus to the ground. He expected resistance, expected Roan and his ilk to make a stand. He had Roan and the Turbinta's ships. They could not escape. He doubted that they had abandoned the ships to travel in the old freighter.

Where are they? Hiding? Running? No. They wouldn't run. Not yet.

His hand brushed over his pistol, itching for the moment when he would face them—when he would take Roan's life with his own hands, erase the last of Coleridge's failures.

He exhaled slowly. "They are here," he murmured. "They think they can outmaneuver me."

His reflection flickered again in the glass of the troop bay's viewport—Coleridge's face, smirking, condescending.

No.

After today, Coleridge would be gone forever.

"Did you request something, sir?" the soldier standing next to him asked.

Andri snapped his head around, his expression darkening. "Deploy all ground troops. Secure the settlement. Round up the civilians. I want them all in the main square."

The soldier hesitated, looking at his commanding officer who was sitting behind him.

Andri's lips curled into a slow, deadly smile. "Do not make me repeat myself, Captain."

The soldier swallowed and nodded sharply. "I-I'm a private, sir. Yes, sir."

Andri swayed, tightening his grip on the handrail as the troop transport lurched. The pilot set down the transport in a wide section of the main street, its landing struts kicking up a storm of dust. Andri waited impatiently next to the hatch as it hissed open, tugging on his sleeves and the hem of his uniform to make sure they were perfect before he strode down the platform. The heat immediately pressed against his uniform, twin suns baking the world in merciless light. Sweat rolled down his spine and dampened the area under his armpits, but he ignored it.

A dozen of his finest guards followed him down the ramp. Another transport had arrived earlier. The soldiers had already swept the settlement, herding the settlers toward the square.

The streets were lined with scorched structures, their stone walls worn by time and sand. Tiny dust devils swirled across the compacted dirt roads. The air carried the acrid scent of fear—of sweat, of dust, of inevitability.

As Andri walked forward, the crowd parted before him like a wave splitting around an unmovable force. One side—his men, standing rigid, at attention. The other—the weak, the doomed, eyes filled with unspoken terror.

Andri smiled.

This place would be cleansed. The prophecy that started here would end here.

He let his fingers brush the gold insignia on his chest, a symbol of his divinity. The Gods had chosen him, not the Ancient Knights.

The Ancient Knights of the Gallant were a lie—a fabrication meant to keep order among the weak-minded. He had always known it, even as a boy, before Coleridge tried to steal everything from him.

Nia should have been his. She should have carried his son, not Coleridge's. She should have given him a Roan, but a Roan who was not weak like his brother.

The thought of Roan sent a wave of fury through him. He would have given him everything! Now, he would need to find another to raise as his heir. To give his throne to. To build his destiny.

He had thought Ri Manta would be his chosen one, but the man was too old and Andri had felt a whisper of warning, a hidden deceit lurking in the man's eyes. That was why Andri had escaped to the Charger. Let Ri and the others bring down Cryon II. Andri was destined to bring down those who thought to take his place—his nephew and those who believed they were the destined Gods returned to save the galaxy.

Rage thrummed beneath his skin, hot and intoxicating. He fed on it, let it sharpen him, shape him into the Supreme Leader he was always meant to be. He lifted his hand and motioned to a group of guards to push the people in front of them forward, lined up in front of him in rows so he could see each of their faces.

His eyes flicked over the prisoners—men, women, a few older boys. They stumbled forward on shaking legs beneath the searing sun. Some stood frozen, others trembled visibly.

Weak. Unworthy.

He had no use for the weak.

“Roan Landais. The Ancient Knights,” he commanded, his voice smooth, unwavering. “Where are they?”

A murmur of panic rippled through the crowd. He walked slowly in front of the

group, his eyes searching their faces as they bowed their heads, afraid to return his gaze. He paused in front of a woman, reached out a finger, and tilted her head. Her lips quivered and her breath became tiny pants. He waited, knowing what would happen—defiance.

A desert farmer standing next to her, old, worn, but proud, dared to lift his chin. “We don’t know.”

Andri sighed. They always resisted at first. He nodded to the nearest officer.

“Kill him.”

A single shot rang out.

The man’s body crumpled, blood pooling dark and viscous against the scorched dirt.

Screams erupted like a chorus of broken instruments, chaos rippling through the settlement.

Andri smiled as fear took hold. He continued walking along the line of trembling prisoners. His polished boots stirring the red dust, marking his path with quiet inevitability. His gaze locked onto a lanky boy, no longer a child but not an adult.

“Hold him.”

His guards seized the boy, who jumped and swung his eyes around wildly at the people behind him. The boy did not understand what was happening—not yet.

Andri calmly pulled a long, slender blade from the sheath attached to his belt. He flicked the end, and the blade hummed with a brilliant, intense blue. He looked over the boy’s head, his gaze flicking along the rows of villagers. Some of the women

wept silently. Men clenched their fists, torn between fear and desperation.

The breaking point was coming.

Andri lifted his hand toward the boy's throat... and let the silence stretch?—

“Wait!”

There it is.

The first crack.

The moment they always fold.

Andri barely contained his satisfaction as he turned, letting the moment hang, savoring the desperation in the man's desperate eyes. The eyes of a father who loved his son. A father who would betray anyone—everyone—to protect his child.

“They're were in the landing bay,” the man choked out. “They didn't leave. Their ships are still here. All except one. They-they went to-to the ghost village. The one-the one to the west, where Dorane LeGaugh came from.”

Andri smiled.

Victory was within his grasp.

Mei paused at the top of the cliff, turning to look down at the ruins of Dorane's childhood home. The canyon walls cast jagged shadows over the remains of stone dwellings long since ravaged by time and war. Mei's gaze traced the skeletal outlines of what had once been a thriving village, now buried beneath layers of dust and memory. The village stood in stark defiance of the horrors it had endured, a ghost of

what had been, yet still standing.

Sergi, Dorane, and Ash had moved Zoak's body, depositing it outside the entrance to the village. Dorane hadn't wanted the assassin's body left in the village, much less near his family. He had said the body would be gone within a few days once the predators in the area scented the decaying corpse.

She could feel Dorane's tension beside her as they approached La'Rue's freighter. Under the invisibility paint, Mei knew the ship was an imposing, sleek vessel. Currently, it was a predator cloaked in shadow, barely perceptible even as they neared it.

The moment Mei stepped inside the freighter's dimly lit interior, she felt a familiar presence—a presence that sent warmth surging through her chest.

“Josh.” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

She moved, crossing the distance in a heartbeat. Josh barely had time to open his arms before she hit him full force, wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him tightly to her. He laughed as he caught her, spinning her in a brief circle before setting her back down.

“Damn, Mei,” he muttered, his voice thick with emotion. “You don't know how good it is to see you.”

She pulled back, studying his face—more battle-worn, but still Josh. He was more than the commander of the Gliese, he was her friend. Josh's eyes gleamed with relief.

“I promise you, seeing you and the others—I can't tell you how much that means to me,” she said.

“You were safe?”

Mei nodded. “As much as I could be in an alien world. I was lucky. I found a good friend who helped me.”

Josh breathed a sigh of relief and nodded, looking over her shoulder. “Yeah, me too.”

Her gaze shifted as she noticed the woman standing behind her. The woman was poised, confident, and from the expression in her eyes as she gazed back at Josh, very much in love with the commanding officer of the Gliese.

“Hi,” Mei greeted with a smile.

Cassa inclined her head, her lips quirking in amusement. “The last of the Ancient Knights have been found. I’m Cassa de Rola. Josh has told me much about you.”

Mei stepped away from Josh. “I’m Mei. It is a pleasure to meet you. What kind of stuff?”

Josh chuckled. “Legendary, terrifying—take your pick.”

Cassa grinned. “He said you were brilliant and always outsmarting Sergi.”

“All true,” Mei replied with a wave her hand when Sergi snorted and gave Josh an offended glare.

“Oh, that is a challenge, pandochka . You should know better than that,” Sergi teased.

Mei stuck her tongue out at Sergi and turned to Dorane when he stiffened, lifting his hand to his ear. She watched as he glanced at the group.

“We’ll be ready. Secure the settlement,” Dorane ordered into his commlink before looking up at the rest of them. “We have two Legion troop transports incoming. Estimated time of arrival: thirty minutes. Andronikos is with them,” he stated.

The room fell into immediate focus. Josh’s easy demeanor vanished, replaced by the sharp precision of a warrior. Dorane stepped forward, his voice calm but edged with steel as he lifted a small disk. A holographic map appeared with two red moving dots.

“Sweet. How are you doing this? Is it real time?” Ash muttered, leaning in to peer at the map.

“Yes, it’s real-time. A couple of my crew placed trackers on the transports when they arrived,” Dorane explained.

“Finally, we’ll get to kill the bastard,” Sergi muttered.

Roan studied the map before he looked at Dorane. “He knows we are here?”

Dorane nodded. “Yes. He killed a farmer and was about to kill a boy.”

“It is his fate to die here,” Cassa murmured with certainty, looking at Dorane.

“Fate?” Kella asked with a frown.

Cassa nodded. “The legend of the Ancient Knights of the Gallant do not say where they came from, but some of the first recorded documentation of them came from Aetherial. Not far from here, actually.”

“A circle must close for it to be a circle,” Mei said, looking at Dorane. “The Legion’s presence here started this chain of events for you. It is here that it will end.”

Dorane swallowed, a peaceful calm settling in his eyes, and he nodded. “Yes, it is time for the circle to close.”

“More like a hangman’s noose if you ask me,” Ash retorted.

“We don’t have much time. I figure a transport can carry approximately twenty-five men and two flight crew,” Josh said.

“I can take at least one transport,” La’Rue said. “Does your shuttle have any weapons?”

Cassa nodded. “A small laser cannon with about a dozen shots.”

“The transports are faster and more agile. They are made for hostile territory,” Kella said with a shake of her head.

Roan looked at the moving dots. “If they can’t see you, you would have the element of surprise. Hell, even if you just knock one out, that’s twenty-five fewer bodies firing at us.”

Josh nodded. “The best move would be to take one out in the air and the other as it lands. The shuttle can’t maneuver well enough and the laser cannon is limited in range.”

“Cassa, you take the one landing. I’ll take the one in the air. This way I can help cover you if you need it,” La’Rue said.

“That leaves the rest of us to clean up any who make it to the ground,” Roan said.

“I hope it is more than one,” Sergi muttered.

“And you think I am blood-thirsty?” Kella asked.

“That still leaves the Legion Battle Cruiser in space. They can always send more troops,” Dorane said.

Cassa looked at Josh. “Our Battle Cruiser should already be aware of the Legion ship. It probably won’t engage until it knows we are safe. It’s cloaked and in stationary orbit. It can take out the Battle Cruiser. That will cut Andri off completely.”

“Good. Now, let’s talk about those ground troops who might survive the initial attack. What do you think, Josh?” Ash asked.

Josh glanced at Dorane. “Strategic points?”

Dorane tapped the holomap. “The canyon has three natural chokepoints. If we use the village ruins as cover, we can pick them off as they push through.”

Dorane pointed at a collapsed stone building and a small cave across from it in the cliff. “Sergi, Ash—up there. It’s the best sniper position. You’ll have clean shots at the main approach on each side.”

Sergi cracked his knuckles. “You hear that, Ash? He trusts us with the high ground.”

Ash grinned. “That’s because he knows we’re the best shots here.”

Kella arched a brow. “You’re adorable when you’re delusional.”

Ash brushed a soft kiss against Kella’s lips. “Don’t be jealous just because you have to fight on the ground.”

Kella gave a slow, predatory smile. “I always did love getting my hands dirty.”

Ash's eyes darkened and a wicked smile curved his lips. "Oh, I know. It makes me?—"

Sergi loudly cleared his throat and waggled his eyebrows at La'Rue, who shot him a glare that promised death if he said anything. Sergi opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again before he cursed softly in Russian and gave La'Rue an apologetic grin.

"You don't want me to brag that I know you love it when I'm locked and loaded? But, dorogoy ..." Sergi pouted with dancing eyes.

"You're a dead man, Sergi," La'Rue muttered, her cheeks heating.

"Are they always like this?" Cassa asked.

Julia sighed dramatically. "Oh, this is mild. Sometimes it's worse."

Josh pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine, fine—do your thing, everyone. Just don't get killed."

Mei rolled her eyes. "Have you seen the Legion fight? I could take on the lot with my eyes blindfolded."

"She could," Dorane and Julia said at the same time.

Mei gave Josh an apologetic smile when he looked at her with a confused frown. "There may have been a little piece of information missing from my resume," she confessed.

"A little piece?" Sergi snorted.

“You’ll have to enlighten me when this is all over,” Josh said dryly before he nodded. “Let’s get into position. I don’t want any mistakes. I want that bastard’s head on a stake.”

Mei slipped her hand into Dorane’s as they turned and exited the freighter. He squeezed her hand before moving down the slope. He knew exactly where he was going to take up his defensive position.

“Dorane,” Mei said as he started to turn toward his childhood home.

He paused. She walked over to him. Her eyes searched his, looking for any sign that he wasn’t ready to face his uncle—his past.

He brushed a strand of her hair back and gently caressed her cheek.

“I’ve got this. I’m ready,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her.

“I love you,” she said, before she pressed a hard kiss to his lips. “Don’t get hurt. I want you to make love to me tonight when this is all over.”

“TMI, Mei! TMI!” Ash called out.

Mei had a goofy grin on her lips as she headed for the spot she had picked out.

23

The transport rattled beneath Andri's feet, the vibration coursing through his boots like a heartbeat—his heartbeat. Steady. Unstoppable.

He stood at the viewport, his hands clasped behind his back, his military coat stained with red dust and sweat. The pilots murmured among themselves, reading out trajectory adjustments, but he barely listened.

Ahead of them, the ruins of a forgotten village appeared encased with the colorful canyon walls, a ghostly reminder of what had once been.

A fitting battleground.

A fitting place to erase the last of his enemies.

Andri turned his attention to the pilot when the man called out to him. The pilot pointed through the front glass.

“Sir, there's... a body.”

Andri's gaze snapped downward to where the twisted, discarded form of Zoak lay motionless in the dirt. The assassin's lifeless eyes stared skyward, his body crumpled like discarded waste.

Andri's throat went tight. His gaze swept the area, looking for additional bodies. Bodies that should have been left by Zoak, not the other way around.

He twisted, trying to catch a closer look at the transport that flew over. Zoak had been a force, a predator, a necessary monster. To see him like this—broken, abandoned, a corpse forgotten in the dust—it made something cold slither through Andri's chest.

He was thrilled the assassin was dead—but it shouldn't have been this easy. A whisper of doubt filled his head. He lifted his fingers to his sweaty temple and rubbed as the pressure built.

If they can defeat Zoak, can they defeat me?

His fingers curled into a fist and he pressed it against the side of his head. No. Zoak was reckless. He overestimated his prey.

Andri was smarter. Stronger.

The whisper vanished.

His hands stilled, his control returning. Zoak had been a weak tool of his brother's. Nothing more.

Andri turned away from the viewport.

"Prepare to land," he ordered.

The pilot acknowledged, adjusting their descent.

The momentary flicker of doubt was gone—obliterated by the iron will that had carried him this far.

Andri was chosen.

The stars had aligned for him.

Those thoughts had no sooner flitted through his brain when the transport shuddered violently, throwing him off-balance. He caught the handrail with one hand while a soldier grabbed his other arm to steady him. The transport rocked violently. Andri's free hand reached to grab the railing as his feet lifted off the floor. Alarms warned of engine damage and power loss as the ship jerked sideways.

“What the hell was that?!” Andri snapped, gripping the railing.

The pilot's frantic response came through the comms. “Direct hit! Starboard engine is failing?—!”

Andri lunged for the viewport, his vision narrowing on the sky.

Above them, a second ship moved, momentarily blocking the suns and casting a shadow. A Gallant shuttle—unseen, cloaked, deadly.

The rebels!

His rage boiled, roaring through his veins.

The Gallant rebels did this.

The ship tilted sharply, spiraling toward the ground. The wreckage of buildings rushed up to meet them.

“Brace for impact!” the pilot warned.

Andri twisted and fumbled to grab the railing. The soldier who had helped him before reached out, jerking him forward. Andri's hands wrapped around the metal bar just as

the transport slammed into the earth.

His grip loosened. He was thrown violently forward, his shoulder colliding with steel, pain exploding through him as the bar hit his collarbone. The world twisted sideways as the viewport cracked, dust and fire spilling into the shattered remains of the ship.

The transport spun, tossing the unprepared like rag dolls in a cyclone. Andri's head swam as the world tilted, spinning, filling with heat, smoke, and pain before finally coming to a stop, the side door partially crumpled and torn.

Then— blissful stillness.

Andri heard the moans and groans of pain. None of them came from him. He pulled himself up by the bent metal bar he was still holding, doing a mental assessment of his body. His shoulder hurt where he'd hit the bar, but other than that, he was fine.

He was alive.

He was alive... because he was meant to be.

He forced himself upright, blood trickling from a small cut on his temple, his uniform torn on the sleeve.

A handful of his soldiers—those who had survived the impact—were stumbling outside, their weapons drawn, waiting for his command.

Andri straightened his collar, ignoring the pain. Bending, he squeezed through the narrow opening before straightening. His gaze warily swept the sky before he looked behind him. He could see the burning remains of their other transport. There were no survivors.

He stepped forward, his voice cutting through the wreckage like a blade.

“Move into the village. Find them. Kill them.”

Andri pulled a laser rifle and a blaster from a dead soldier. He followed in slow, measured steps behind the soldiers who were spreading out into the ruins like vipers in the dust. They would flatten this place to the ground until nothing remained. No reminders that it had ever existed.

He moved cautiously forward, his eyes scanning the cliffs, rising to the top, sweeping the sky, before falling back to the dry dusty floor of the canyon. Sweat, mixed with blood from his cut, ran down the side of his face. He lifted his sleeve and wiped it away.

The deeper he stepped into the village, the greater the gnawing doubt grew.

It is too quiet. The canyon walls should be echoing with movement, with fear, with retreat.

Instead—there was nothing. The ruins felt alive, waiting, watching.

A trap. It is a trap.

Andri's hand slipped down to his side. He dropped the pistol and pulled the ornate cylinder-shaped weapon from his uniform coat. It had been a long time since he held this weapon.

“You are not worthy to carry such a weapon of honor. Neither of us were.” Coleridge's mocking voice whispered through his head.

“That is not true. I am the only one worthy of carrying it. I will not let you trick me,

brother. This is my destiny. Yours was to die!” he hissed.

“Sir?”

Andri impatiently waved on the soldier to his right who had turned when he spoke. He was about to order the man to move ahead when the soldier jerked to a sudden stop, surprise widening his eyes before he dropped dead.

“One!”

Andri’s head swiveled back and forth as the voice bounced off the canyon walls.

“Two!” a voice answered, as the soldier in front of Andri crumpled to the dirt.

Shouts of warning echoed from the soldiers in front of him. He ran for cover near the first house, reaching it just as a series of blasts opened up holes in the wall near his head. Three more of his men fell.

“Save some for us!” a feminine voice shouted, her voice ricocheting and repeating before it faded.

Andri’s heart hammered in his chest. The Ancient Knights were picking his men off one at a time. He slid around the curved remains of the building where he had taken refuge. His gaze bored into the cliff above him. He saw a flash from a darkened ledge.

He twisted when more holes opened up across the building in front of him. He lifted his Staff and extended it. Aiming at that ledge in the cliff across from him, he released a powerful charge.

The explosion of rock sent a cloud of dust and debris into the air, sending him

running for cover as large chunks of the ledge above came raining down around him.

“Son-of-a-bitch! They have a rocket-launcher.”

Andri cursed as he sought coverage along the wall of the canyon behind a line of fallen boulders. There was no way he could reach the man above him from the angle, but the man could also not reach him. Andri didn't know if he had killed the one across from him, but he hoped so.

As he moved between the massive boulders, the battle raged around him. His soldiers were falling one by one. He didn't care.

His focus honed in on one thing. He would find Roan. The death of his nephew was the only thing that would silence Coleridge's mocking laughter ringing through his head.

Andri threaded his way through, sometimes sliding on his belly under a boulder to avoid the firefight. He paused only long enough to look over the crumbled walls of burnt-out huts to see if anyone was hiding in them.

“They are everywhere, Andri. You can't defeat them. This village is filled with ghosts who help protect them.”

Lies! They are dead. They will bleed. I will show you how much they will bleed.

“The only one who will bleed is you, brother. Roan will see to that. He will be the only one of us to survive.”

Never!

Andri stumbled to the back entrance of the last hut. Splaying his hand against the

white wall near a window, he registered the two headstones nearby and the mounds they protected. He wiped the sweat from his burning eyes, staring at them. Once this was over, he would dig them up. He would show his brother there was not such things as ghosts.

A sound inside the hut pulled his attention. A slow smile of satisfaction rose inside him. Finally, he had found where one ghost was hiding.

He waited, using the cover of the battle to hide the sound of him pulling open the broken window. He slid his leg over, ignoring the way the red dust and chalky white paint stained his uniform. Twisting, he caught a faded blue dress, fingering the material before he dropped it to the floor.

He winced when his boots crunched over glass. The continuing sound of blasting told him that whoever was in the other room was unaware of his presence. Andri smiled, extended the Staff again, and stepped out of the bedroom toward the noise.

This is how you kill ghosts, brother.

Dorane stiffened when he heard the soft crunch of glass. He fired several shots of his blaster at two soldiers pinned down across from him. In the shadows, he could see Kella moving up behind them. He sheathed his depleted pistol and pulled his father's Gallant Staff from his waist, extending it as he moved along the cabinets to the corner where the kitchen opened up.

He lifted the Staff just in time, deflecting a blow that would have killed him. A large hole opened in the wall to his right just before he blocked the swing of a Gallant Staff. Dorane's eyes widened with surprise before they narrowed when he recognized Andri.

Andri smiled. "You should have died with the rest of them."

Dorane's grip tightened on his weapon, straining as Andri pushed back on him.

"I was the one who gave the order to raze this village," Andri continued, letting the words sink in, letting them dig deep. "I remember killing your family, your parents most of all. They were the first Knights of the Gallant I killed. The first is always so sweet, don't you think?"

Dorane's breath hitched.

Andri smirked. "They were an example. You were supposed to die too. But you were too afraid. You ran and hid, leaving your brother and sister to die on the floor alone."

"I'm going to enjoy killing you," Dorane growled.

Andri's sneer curled his lips. "With your father's Staff. A weapon that you know nothing about?"

"I don't need it to kill you."

Dorane pushed the vivid images of his brother and sister lying lifeless on the floor in the other room from his mind. He would not let Andri into his headspace. Instead, he struck out with the cold, deadly purpose of ending this battle once and for all.

Andri met him head-on, their Gallant Staffs clashing with a crack of energy.

"You didn't think your parents were the only Knights, did you? Coleridge and I were trained, too. That's how we knew exactly who to eliminate. I was a Gallant Knight before you were even born," Andri mocked, blocking Dorane's blows. "I was one of the elite Knights."

"That was a long time ago... old man," Dorane hissed.

Their weapons clashed in a violent dance, dust and debris swirling around them. Dorane fell back a step, blocking a series of powerful moves. He gritted his teeth as Andri kept countering him. He swung low, trying to slip under Andri's Staff when a powerful blow to his side sent him flying out the open front door.

His breath hissed out of him when he hit the hard ground. His father's Staff flew from his hand, landing several feet away. Dorane scooted back along the ground, his boot sliding against the compact, pebble and sand soil. His hand went to his side. Warm blood flowed between his fingers, and his side burned like hell.

He glared up at Andri's satisfied expression.

"One down," Andri declared.

Dorane lifted his chin, his eyes blazing with hatred as Andri lifted the Staff in his hands to fire a powerful bolt into his chest. His eyes widened when the Staff was knocked to the side and a small, deadly woman stood in front of Andri.

A bemused smile curved Dorane's lips when he saw how Andri froze. He rolled to the side, his fingers stretching for his father's Staff while his eyes remained locked on the dance in front of him.

He recognized the moment when Andri realized he was up against someone better than him. Mei struck, again and again. She had traded the Gallant Staff for a long, curved sword. Her movements were graceful, beautiful, as the blade sliced through the air.

"No," Andri snarled, slashing at her again, harder, more desperately.

But Mei was effortless. She parried, her movements precise, patient, her body fluid, her arms flowing in a language that Dorane wanted to learn, to know. She spoke then,

serenely, as she littered his body with tiny cuts.

“You are nothing but a failed tyrant. You think yourself chosen,” she murmured, countering him with unshakable calm. “But you are nothing but a man drowning in his own madness.”

Her blade cut deep.

Another wound.

Another failure.

Dorane scooted against the wall. His breath caught when he realized that Mei was slowly driving Andri away from him and out into the open. His eyes flashed across the open area. He breathed a sigh of relief when he counted each of the men and women he had come to know and respect emerging. They were watching Mei with the same awe and respect as he was.

Andri staggered, his limbs heavy, his strength fading. His rage was turning to panic. He was losing and he knew it.

“No,” Andri whispered.

Mei took a step closer.

“There is a saying that a man who dies by a thousand cuts feels the weight of sin upon his soul,” she said softly. “Each cut is a wound of your own making.”

Mei sliced another cut, this one across Andri’s face, the same place where Andri had cut his brother Coleridge. Andri screamed in rage, lifted his Gallant Staff, and twisted it.

“Mei—!” Roan shouted.

Dorane realized at the same time what Andri was doing: setting the Staff to overload. Roan lunged, yanking Mei a safe distance away.

And then—the world erupted in brilliant white fire.

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 4:18 am

“Ouch! That hurts,” Dorane hissed, peering up at Mei’s thunderous expression.

“You weren’t supposed to get hurt. I had plans for tonight,” she snapped.

Dorane ignored Sergi and Ash’s snickers. Instead, he tried to lie still and not wiggle out from under Mei’s torturous hands.

“Why don’t you let me and Cassa finish this, Mei?” Julia offered.

Mei looked up at Julia before she closed her eyes, pulled in a calming breath, and nodded. Dorane mouthed a silent thank you to Julia and Cassa. He reached out and gripped Mei’s hand, pulling her closer to the top of the medical bed so Julia could work on his wound.

His heart melted when he noticed the glint of tears in her beautiful brown eyes. Lifting her hand, he kissed her knuckles and gave her a crooked smile.

“Thanks for saving my ass again,” he murmured.

“Somebody has to. Asta and Jammer would be upset if I brought them back a corpse,” she sniffed.

“Mei, how many did you get back there?” Ash asked.

Mei frowned and looked over her shoulder. “How many what did I get?” she asked.

“Body count, pandochka . We have a bet going,” Sergi said.

Mei rolled her eyes. “That’s goes against my moral compass,” she said.

Ash snorted out a laugh. “And killing doesn’t?”

“Why should killing the bad guys go against a moral compass?” Kella asked, then frowned and added, “What is a moral compass, anyway? Does it help you find someone to kill?”

“Yes, it is definitely a compass to help you kill,” Sergi said, clearly enjoying his mischief.

“Then why haven’t you given me one yet?” Kella asked Ash. “I would like to have one.”

Julia smothered a giggle while Sergi threw his head back, laughed, and slapped Ash on the shoulder hard enough to make him wince.

“Now, to get out of this one,” Sergi said.

“Thanks a lot, pal. Come on, love. I’ll see if I can explain this without you trying to kill me to see if it works,” Ash muttered, sliding his arm around Kella’s shoulders and guiding her out of the room.

“I think La’Rue won the body count,” Mei said.

“ Net, net .” No, no. “The transport only counts as one,” Sergi argued.

“Definitely La’Rue,” Cassa and Julia said, grinning.

Sergi’s face fell and he gave them his best pout before he perked up. “But, because La’Rue and I are a couple, we get to add ours together! Hey, Ash!”

Dorane chuckled, his body relaxing as the healing agents kicked in and the pain in his side began to fade.

“I like him,” he murmured, looking up at Mei.

Her lips twitched. “He kind of grows on you once you get to know him,” she said in a beleaguered tone.

“Speaking of getting to know someone, how about you explain the way you fight?” Josh asked.

“Busted,” Julia murmured, pulling off her gloves and looking at Cassa. “Would you like to go grab a tea?”

Cassa chuckled and nodded, glancing back and forth between Josh and Mei. Dorane gripped Mei’s hand, and she looked down. His eyes were soft.

“I’ll be here when you’re finished,” he said, his eyelids heavy from the sedative Cassa had given him. “He should know.”

Mei sat next to Josh on the platform, staring out at the settlement. Life had returned to normal—if you could call this new world she had woken in normal.

“I am—was—a spy for the Chinese government. My mission was not quite the same as yours, not at first,” she said, staring straight ahead as she spoke.

“Oh. Well... bygones, huh? I thought I recognized a few of the moves you did; what level are you?” he asked.

Mei’s lips twitched. She knew he was asking what level of karate or jujitsu. She swallowed, looking down at the steaming tea Julia had given her as they passed the galley.

“10th dan by the K?d?kan,” she murmured.

“10 th !” Josh hissed.

“Only because they did not go higher,” she said, bowing her head before she took a sip of her tea and looked up at the night sky. “I don’t ever remember seeing this many stars when we were on Earth.”

Josh looked up. “I think humans have forgotten they are even there sometimes.”

“I’m glad that you made the decision to go through the gateway,” she said.

Josh was silent before he released a dry laugh. “If you had told me going through it would take us to a new world, filled with danger, intrigue, prophecies?—”

“And love?” she murmured.

Josh chuckled and nodded. “And love, I would have said you were crazy.”

Mei laughed softly. “I think you would have eagerly sent us through if you knew. You have always been the bold rule-breaker.”

“Yeah, maybe so,” Josh said ruefully with a smile. “Would you have wanted me to?”

“Yes,” Mei said without hesitation, her lips tilting in a secret smile. She drew her knees up to rest her chin on them. “So, what happens next?”

Josh stared out at the mixture of alien crew members and dock workers laughing, chatting, and going about their lives as if it wasn’t strange to be traveling to moon ports, secret bases, and worlds with floating islands. It was just another day.

“I don’t know, but for once, I’m excited to find out,” he said.

“Me too.”

Mei sighed with contentment as she thought of Dorane. She would go wherever he went. If it was on Cryon II, she would have new friends: Asta, Jammer, Tiv, Yi, and the crew of the Gliese and their mates. Her eyes followed the movement of a spaceship approaching. She still marveled at the beauty of watching the ships take off, land, and disappear. Her thoughts moved to Earth and she wondered what would happen now that the Gliese had disappeared. Would they give up? Would they try again?

Who cares what they do? I’m free, and that is all that matters.

Jeslean, Neri

Three months later

Mei gripped Dorane’s hand tightly as they climbed the steps to the Grand Hall of the Knights of the Gallant tower. Her gaze swept over the scorch marks left from the Legion’s attack on the city.

Representatives from all the inhabited planets in the galaxy, large and small, were here tonight to celebrate history in the making. Banners bearing the new sigil of the Gallant Order hung from the high vaulted ceilings, golden threads shimmering beneath the glow of elegant chandeliers. The air was charged, not with the tension of war, but with something far more profound—hope.

“It’s good to see the recovery,” Cassa murmured.

“I agree,” Roan replied, his voice laced with emotion.

Mei’s expression softened when she saw Julia pull Roan’s face around to kiss him. By the time Julia was finished, the look of regret and guilt had vanished from Roan’s

eyes, replaced with desire. She would have to remember to try that on Dorane.

“You are beautiful. Have I told you that tonight?” Dorane asked.

Mei’s lips twitched with amusement. “Maybe once or twice.”

“Dorane, I forgot to ask, is the bounty on your head canceled?” La’Rue asked.

Dorane gave La’Rue a wary look. “I don’t know. You aren’t going to try to collect on it, are you?” Dorane’s eyes flashed between La’Rue and Kella.

“No, we’re just wondering if we should keep an eye out for assassins,” La’Rue said.

“Yes, I have found my moral compass. If I cannot kill good people like you, then I can kill the bad ones who try to kill you,” Kella replied.

“I didn’t say you had to kill them, honey. Just if there’s no other way. Not all bad guys are actually bad,” Ash said.

Kella glared at Ash before she shook her head. “Sometimes you make no sense at all.”

Mei turned slightly when Sergi wrapped his arm around her waist and leaned closer. “Are you ready for all of this? Life could be boring now that there is no Legion.”

Mei snorted. “There will always be a wannabe Legion. You know that as well as I do. Besides, I think we’ve earned a little peace and quiet, don’t you?”

“Where’s the fun if everything is a piece of cake?”

“Pie, Sergi. A piece of pie,” Mei growled.

“I still like cake better,” he grumbled before La’Rue pulled him away and motioned for him to be quiet.

At the center of the hall, a great circular dais had been erected, where those who had fought, bled, and sacrificed now stood. The crowd—a mixture of warriors, freighter captains, former rebels, and the newly reformed Knights of the Gallant—waited in hushed reverence.

Roanna, Roan’s grandmother, stood regally at the forefront, her silver-lined black hair swept back, her Gallant Staff gleaming in the light. Beside her, Hutu, Kubo, and Natta, along with other Gallant generals, observed the gathering with solemn pride. And at their side stood Ri Manta—the man who now guided the reformed Legion.

"The universe is not won with war," Roanna began, her voice strong yet gentle, the kind that commanded wisdom and respect. "It is healed through those who never stopped believing in something greater than themselves."

She turned, her sharp eyes sweeping the gathered warriors. "And today, we honor those who gave us back our future."

Mei’s cheeks warmed when the crowd erupted into applause. She followed Josh, Ash, Sergi, and Julia as they stepped forward. Cassa, Kella, La’Rue, Roan, and Dorane stepped up behind them.

Mei wasn’t sure she’d ever get used to ceremonies, especially when they involved her. But as she stood beside Dorane, she suddenly felt no discomfort, no hesitation. Instead, she felt something stronger than she ever had before.

Belonging.

Roanna motioned for a large cloth-covered frame to be unveiled. A group of Gallant soldiers pulled the covering away to reveal an image—one so familiar, yet so

impossible that the entire room fell silent.

A patch from the Gliese was embedded at the base of the image, but what captured everyone's attention was the etched depiction of five figures standing together, their Gallant Staffs raised high.

A perfect, ancient replica of the very people standing before them.

Roan released a soft curse, eyes widening.

His grandmother bowed her head at him, a knowing smile curving her lips.

Sergi leaned in, grinning. "I don't know about you, but I find it a little unsettling when a prophecy gets it right."

Ash nodded solemnly. "Maybe we missed a time-travel subplot. Would that be weirder than an accurate psychic? I think it'd be weirder."

Julia rolled her eyes. "No one is getting into a time machine, Ash."

"I was just saying! Weirder could be good."

La'Rue elbowed Kella. "He's your problem now."

Kella grinned. "I know. Isn't it great?"

Dorane's hand tightened around Mei's, his warmth anchoring her.

"This was always meant to be," Roanna murmured, as if speaking to herself. She turned back to them, nodding deeply. "And now, the future belongs to you."

A thunderous applause rose in the hall, but Mei hardly heard it.

She looked at Dorane and he looked at her, a silent understanding passing between them.

They had won.

They were free.

And as Dorane pulled Mei into his arms and captured her lips, she knew with certainty that at long last, she was home.

Time seemed to fade as the universe stretched before them, endless and filled with wonder. Dorane's starship glided effortlessly through the void, heading back to Cryon II.

In the quiet sanctuary of their private cabin, Mei sat curled up against Dorane, a warm blanket draped over her shoulders and his arms wrapped around her waist. Their bodies were bare and tangled, skin warm from the lingering embers of their lovemaking, their breaths steady.

Through the viewport, stars pulsed softly, distant and unknowable, yet Mei had never felt so certain of where she belonged.

Dorane let out a contented sigh, shifting so he could look at her. "You're thinking too much."

Mei smirked. "I thought you liked my thinking."

"I do." His fingers traced lazy patterns on her bare shoulder. "But not when it pulls you away from me."

She tilted her head back, studying his face. The battle-worn edges were still there, the grief of the past still lingering, but it no longer consumed him.

"Do you ever miss it?" he asked suddenly.

"Miss what?"

"Your world. The one you left behind."

Mei leaned in, pressing her lips to his, slow and deep, pouring everything she felt into him.

When she finally pulled back, she held his gaze and her voice was steady when she said, "I am exactly where I was always meant to be."

Dorane let out a slow breath, his eyes dark with something she recognized all too well—love. Fierce, unwavering love.

He pulled her back into him, kissing her deeply, and this time, there were no words left to say.

There was only the stars, the silence, and the promise of forever.

Earth – Paris, France

Two years after the last contact with the Gliese 581g

A quietly lit chamber in Paris hummed with tension, the gathered officials speaking in hushed, deliberate tones.

At the center of the room, a projection screen flickered, showing a celestial object far beyond the solar system, an unnatural structure suspended in space. The classified image bore five distinct seals, each representing a different nation.

"How recent is this image?" a woman in a dark suit asked.

Markus Landborne's fingers tapped quickly as he pulled up the date of the image.

"The next interplanetary mission is approved," Liu Zhang declared. "The technology we've gained from the Project Gliese mission will be implemented in the new prototype."

Silence fell.

Then an older man at the head of the table leaned forward. His expression was grave but determined.

"The Gliese 581g mission was just the beginning. This time... we go prepared."

The room erupted into quiet discussions, but above it all, one thing was clear.

Earth was about to reach for the stars again.

And this time, they would not go alone.