

# The Argonauts

Dedicated to Paul “Captain” Windisch

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# PROLOGUE

## *The Solar System*

The red orb of Mars filled the bridge window of *Raptor One*, casting a blood-like glow on her white hull. The year was 5045AD. The *Raptor* was an A-class destroyer with a sleek, arrow-shaped body, two turbine engines, and a light engine that had closed the distance between the Solar System and the distant Kepler system in twenty-three hours. Her captain was Finnigan Arikainen.

As the ship neared the red planet, Finnigan instructed his navigator to disengage the thrusters, allowing the ship to float in the margins of the planet's atmosphere. They surveyed the destruction to Mars from a distance. Red plains and mountains were mottled with burns from the scorching heat of the Sun. The *Raptor's* shields would protect them for an hour, no more. By then, the next of the hourly solar flares that scorched the planet would arrive from the Sun. The thermometer on the bridge read 3,500 degrees Fahrenheit. The exterior of the ship was crafted from hafnium carbide, which had a melting point of approximately 4,000 degrees. The crew was pushing the envelope, but their mission was critical.

On the bridge, Finnigan turned to his second. "How is the internal regulation system faring?" he asked.

His second flicked her way through the holograms of the ship's mainframe. "Holding up, Sir," she said.

"Good," Finnigan said. He folded his hands behind his back and watched the ship break

the shell. Heat writhed over the ship's exterior as they did so, but the thermal protection system did its job.

*Raptor One's* mission was scientific in nature. Her crew was to ascertain the state of the planet's surface and install a new thermal monitoring system. It was crucial to the subsistence of the Solar System that Man keep an eye on the dead planets.

Three thousand years ago, the outer bounds of the Sun had struck outwards, consuming the planetary bodies of Mercury, Venus, and Earth. Humanity's birthplace had withered and died, its oceans drying up and magma bursting from the surface to transform the verdant planet into an inhospitable wasteland. Of course, Man had long since moved off-planet, colonizing Mars first, then the moons of Jupiter and Saturn a few centuries later. By the time 3000AD came around, Man was setting foot on the farthest reaches of the Solar System — taking up residence on the moons of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Allied together, they called themselves the United Planets.

Then, 500 years later, there was the discovery of the Kepler System a few thousand lightyears away, composed of four planets orbiting three dwarf stars. Hector and Tele were each habitable planets half the size of Earth, while Mentos and Paris were gas giants with habitable moons. Slowly, people migrated across the galaxy. New governments and economies took shape. Before long, the Deep Space Alliance (DSA) formed between the Kepler Planets, opposing the United Planets (UP). Tensions erupted shortly in Galaxy War I, a three year war that breathed animosity into both sides. The Federation was the product of the war.

A feeble pact between the planets to create peace, the Federation did nothing to stop Galaxy War II a few decades later. The physical distance between the planets drove a wedge into

the crux of humanity. The DSA wanted its independence from the UP. They wanted to leave the first system behind, create their own system of doing things devoid of Earth's influence.

Then an errant solar flare licked the side of Mars, incinerating a million lives. Shortly after, the Sun entered the next phase of its death march as the Zone of Habitability moved outwards. It was time for the Martians to evacuate. Luckily, the animosity between the systems was not enough to ignore Mars' cry for help. Both systems offered up their best soldiers, physicians, engineers, and scientists to form the Armada. A thousand years later, the Armada was still around — but it wasn't the united force it once was.

The Armada was supposed to serve both systems, but it spent most of its time in the Kepler System. Missions like this one were, however, important. Understanding the death of the Sun in the Solar System would tell them a lot about the future of the Kepler System. The Sun had not done what it was supposed to, after all.

Like every star, the Sun has a lifespan limited by its supply of hydrogen and helium. It was supposed to take billions of years for the Sun to deplete that supply, but in the year 2033, a massive clump of dark matter entered the Sun. It had been drifting through the Milky Way undetected for a millennium, inching its way towards the massive gravitational pull of the Sun, until eventually it was sucked inside. It upset the Sun's life cycle, causing it to gain a hundred degrees every century.

Finnigan held the back of his chair as the *Raptor* approached the surface of Mars. They were flying over the capital of Garth. Once the biggest city with over seven million people, Garth had been spared from the initial solar flare but was still in shambles. A field of atmosphere generators lay abandoned, squares upon squares of machinery that had once pumped nitrogen

and oxygen into the biodomes now flaking away into the hot wind.

The red dunes undulated until flattening beneath the first biodomes in the suburbs. Terraforming had been a novel concept on Mars. Here were relics of the past, of Man's first effort to live beyond Earth. These biodomes had gone through many upgrades in their time, but they were nothing like the modern domes, which stretched over hundreds and hundreds of miles and had atmosphere generators dispersed throughout them.

The skyscrapers were crudely formed, but Finnigan admired the ancient architecture. He had an appreciation for history and art. He tapped his communicator on his wrist, activating the implant in his brain. With a blink of his eye, he captured the image. Later, he would send it to Helena.

His wife was a Classics professor. She had an appreciation for the early days of Man that was unique in the 24th century — especially in the Kepler system. There, the Past was a relic of time, and an almost *failed* time at that. To survive, Man would have to keep moving, keep looking to the Future; this was the belief of the Kepler people. Had some individuals not looked ahead and considered the finite life of the Sun, humanity itself might not have survived.

One of his wife's favorite texts (aside from every work of Greek and Roman mythology) was the *Empyrean*. When temperatures on Earth began to rise in the 22nd century, a new religious sect arose that worshipped the Sun, praising its dual nature. Their beliefs were espoused in the 500 page *Empyrean*, a chaotic collection of lore, psalms, and prayers. "They chose to stay behind and burn," Helena had said the first time she showed Finnigan her copy, tracing a gold illustration of two figures prostrate beneath the vibrant rays of the Sun with her finger.

"Why?" Finnigan had wondered.

Helena had looked at him. “They needed a reason not to let go,” she had said. “The infrastructure outside Earth wasn’t well formed yet. Some people don’t like to take risks. So they turned to a supposed higher power to find reassurance for what they’d already decided.”

It was rumored there were still Empyreanists on some of the Solar planets. Whether or not they were true, the rumors were fueled by the general opinion that the citizens of the Solar System were backward thinking and by their own resistance to certain technologies. Most Solar people refused the Digital Integration System, the small probe that was implanted in the occipital lobe shortly after birth. When it was paired with a comm. watch, an individual could navigate a digital system completely invisible to the naked eye. He could navigate the Link, capture photos, and send quotes without lifting a finger.

Finnigan shifted through his camera’s storage, moving from the image he had just taken to the image before it. He had taken it at the airport on Tele before departing for the Armada Base on Visigoth. In the image, his son Belen was racing towards him to give him one last hug. He’d broken away from Helena, who was standing with his four daughters. Ralen, his eldest, was eight now and pretending to look strong as she held the hands of her twin sisters. It was Selen and Belen that were taking his departure the hardest. While Selen stifled her tears against her mother’s blouse, Belen had twisted out of Helena’s grip.

Finnigan had savored that last hug.

Belen had been a surprise. Just when Finnigan had contented himself with fathering four little girls, Helena told him she was pregnant again. Finnigan had held Belen to his chest when he was born, moving aside the collar of his shirt so his son could rest his head against his bare skin. Finnigan had laid a kiss on his infant son’s head, grateful that he had gotten leave from the



Armada to be present at his birth.

By the time he was a toddler, Belen was overly sensitive, emotional. He cried more than any of the girls had. At night, he slept in the same bed as Helena, afraid of the darkness in his own room. As Finnigan watched him grow, he felt, for the first time in his life, regret for joining the Armada. The same loyalty he felt to his fellow man that urged him to serve was pulling him to his family. Still, he had made a vow, and now, here he was, hundreds of lightyears away from the ones he loved most.

Finnigan watched the *Raptor* rise over the twisted shape of one of Garth's famous arches. The Silver Gateways had welcomed the first galactic colonists into the capitol. Now the mangled iron structures were collapsing, their great berth buckling beneath the scorching Sun. A skeleton of metal and decomposing concrete was all that was left. Gone were the parks with carefully maintained trees and bushes and flowers, the verandas with sparkling blue pools.

In the center of Garth was a building that towered above all the others. The navigator on the bridge guided the *Raptor* towards the landing pad on the top, releasing her ground gear.

Finnigan pulled the intercom to his mouth. "Prepare for landing," he announced to the hundred or so men and women aboard.

The *Raptor* hovered above the pad for a moment before descending vertically. The thrusters reversed, slowly bringing the ship down. A vibration moved beneath them when the gear touched. Then the body of the ship sank lower with a loud hiss.

lack-haired woman raised her hooded eyes to him. "The ship is ready," she said, anticipating his question.

"Let's get moving, then," he said. He zipped his regult up to his chin and grasped his

helmet from where it hung on the wall of the bridge.

Captain Nadeen followed him down the halls of the ship. The inside of the *Raptor* was a maze of silver tubes through which ran blue veins of wire. Those veins carried the data of the ship like neurons carried chemical information through the body. At the nearest dock, they boarded a small reconnaissance glider.

Outfitted with a thermal protection system, the glider was adapted to the harsher environment outside. The *Raptor's* Director of Research, Mitch Davenport, joined them, carrying in his hands a small case with a plant inside. Monitoring the plant's vitals once they placed it in the external environment would tell them more about the planet's current conditions.

The airlock mechanism initiated when the three of them took their seats, Finnigan at the helm. His fingers itched to touch the thrusters, but he waited until Nadeen and Davenport had strapped in to guide the glider beyond the confines of the docking port.

They soared out into a haze of red dust kicked into the air by the *Raptor's* descent. Their assignment was to install a new satellite system. The old one was now a mangled crisp somewhere in the midst of the city. To get the new one to work, they had to set up a triangulation system. One of the three modems was onboard the glider, a small mass of wires and circuits inside of a metal cube built to withstand over 5,000 degrees. The modems each had to be set up a mile outside the city, while the central satellite would be placed on the building the *Raptor* had landed on.

A blinking red light on the navigation dash showed them their target location. They twisted around tall buildings for a few minutes. Davenport pointed out the old capitol building. It was modeled after the Roman Pantheon. The red marble columns were still standing, but the

roof had collapsed some time ago.

“They reinforced the inside with steel,” Davenport said. “What a shame.”

Outside the downtown area, they passed over row after row of suburban housing. Their target was nestled among them. Finnigan brought the ship down in a cul de sac. The homes were all half-domes, early attempts at ergonomic, sustainable housing.

“Target acquired,” the ship’s interface system announced.

Once, these buildings had been homes. Families had congregated in them to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries and holidays. The grass had been green, manicured, cut to a perfect length once a week. Now the domes were only hollow shells and the grass was dirt.

Finnigan set the timer on his watch. “Fifteen minutes,” he said. “Then we head back.”

They suited up well. Finnigan had worn his suit in a chamber simulating the temperatures here. He trusted it to hold up, but he knew that even within the suit, it would feel like a boiling hot summer day. Each of them attached an oxygen tube to the back of their suit. It would funnel cool air from the ship into their suits. Dressed and ready, Finnigan grasped one side of the modem; Davenport held the other. Nadeen hefted the plant into her arms.

“Begin deboarding procedure,” Finnigan said.

The airlock spun open and a ramp unfurled, allowing Finnigan and his small crew to take their first steps on Mars. It was more like a leap. Gravity on Mars was weak, and the gravity generators had long been destroyed by centuries of overheating. They took baby steps, adjusting to the change. The heat outside touched the suit, a reflective combination of hafnium carbide and diamond threads that made the suit a bulky mess. The tube attached to his back pumped in cool air. Every other breath was hot, stagnant air. It only took a second before sweat was pouring

down his face. He took modulated, shallow breaths like he'd practiced in training, conserving his oxygen.

"In and out," Finnigan said. "I don't want to be here a second later than we need to."

He pressed the start button on his timer.

"We should set the modem up between those two walls," Davenport said, pointing up ahead. "Then it will be protected from the wind, at least on two sides."

Nadeen agreed.

They hurried towards the wall in question. Red sand particles swirled at their feet. The only sounds were that of the wind and their footfalls. No sooner was the modem on the ground than Davenport went to work. He opened a panel on the side of the contraption and began configuring the settings.

"Put that there," he said, pausing to tell Nadeem where to put the plant. He tossed her a wire. "Use this to attach it to that port there."

Finnigan helped unravel a number of cables, then he stood there watching Davenport's fingers dance over a puzzling array of buttons. His eyes drifted upwards, following the curve of the domed home nearby. Looking into the window near the top, he started.

"What was that?" he said.

"What?" Nadeen wondered. She was kneeling on the ground beside Davenport. She glanced between Davenport and the dome behind her, frowning.

"Help him finish," Finnigan said. "I'm going to look."

His blaster was at his hip. He stepped around Nadeen and Davenport and removed it from its holster. His right eye ticked. He moved quickly towards the door of the dome. The timer read

2:50.

He tried the handle. The door was unlocked. He turned off the safety on his blaster and opened the door.

“Armada,” he called out. “Show yourself!”

There was no response. 2:30 his clock read. The house had been stripped of its furniture. The glossy blue floors were covered in a layer of dust and sand. The wallpaper was peeling to reveal the gray concrete beneath. Finnigan paused in front of a mirror whose dusty surface had been scrubbed clean in the center.

2:00.

Finnigan looked at the staircase. With his blaster trained in front of him, he began to climb. His steps echoed within the dome. In the walls there were still nails left behind from when the pictures had been taken down. Finnigan paused on the steps, hearing the floorboards creak on the next landing.

“Armada,” he said again. “Show yourself!”

1:30. No response.

Finnigan ascended the rest of the way. At the top of the steps, there was no one, but one of the bedroom doors was open. Finnigan stepped inside, his blaster leading the way. There was a curtain whipping back and forth in front of the window. The glass had blown out from the heat, leaving an empty square. That explained everything — including the sand and dust downstairs. Finnigan returned his blaster to its holster and crossed the room as the timer hit 1:00, exhaling a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

At the window, he looked out and down at Davenport and Nadeen, who had finished

installing the modem.

“Anything, Sir?” Nadeen wondered.

“Just the curtain!” Finnigan replied, shaking the black material in emphasis. “Go ahead and head back to the ship. I’ll meet you there.”

0:40.

He stepped back and drew the curtain over the window to keep out the dust and sand. Then, chuckling to himself, he pulled it aside again. What did it matter, keeping the dust out when no one lived there? He turned — and was hit with a stun ray so powerful it thrust him straight through the window and down onto the dirt below.

As he laid there unconscious, his timer beeped once, twice, three times.

0:00

Above, the sky was brightening as a solar flare barreled towards them. Davenport and Nadeen lay unconscious a few feet away. They had been struck, too.

“Captain!” his radio crackled, as the minutes ticked by. “Captain Arikainen, do you copy?”

But the only answer was the wind moving up and over their fallen forms, already beginning the process of burying them in red sand.

15 Years Later...

# CHAPTER ONE

*The Solar System, 5060 ad*

VENETH

The night was hot and balmy but the wind was coming off the edge of the Sky Basin in a cool breeze that whisked over the fields. It was perfect for a game of spaceball. After all, night only fell at the end of every fifth day on Triton, Neptune's largest moon. The days stretched long and bright over the tropical biosphere. Most days Veneth slept there, she closed her blinds a few hours before she went to bed, simulating nighttime even as the Sun burned hot in the sky.

"Don't forget the rackets, Ven," Tom'kar said, as they stood in the mudroom of their family's chalet in the mountains. Her father was practically inside his locker in the narrow room, his belongings spilling out from the overcrowded shelves and pooling at his feet.

"I know, Dad," Veneth said but she double checked to make sure they were there. "You sure you don't want to come this time?" Veneth asked her mother. She tucked her blonde hair underneath a ball cap.

Her mother stood in the kitchen doorway, watching them as the sky grew darker and darker outside. She shook her head. She was a doctor and the prospect of all the broken bones they could get made her cringe. Besides, she knew that this was their time with their father. The Vice Chancellorship of Neptune was no easy job.

Veneth knew she was just waiting to break out a glass of cloudberry and read one of her mystery novels. "You all go ahead," she said.



Her Dad continued to anxiously skim through the equipment. “I have the knee pads and the elbow pads and the helmets and —”

“You have everything!” Veneth said, rolling her eyes. “Let’s go! They’re probably waiting for us!”

Her brother Luc stood by the door, waiting for them to join him. He hefted a net of balls onto his shoulder and looked at them impatiently. “The sun is going to be up by the time we get there,” he said.

“Okay, okay,” Tom’kar said, closing his locker. He was outfitted from head to toe in protective gear. Veneth raised her eyebrows.

“What?” her father said, looking down.

She shook her head.

They piled into the glider outside, Veneth at the helm. Their chalet was nestled in the knees of the blue-tinged mountains that surrounded the port city of Paeion, the main port on Triton. All around them, the hoarfrost was setting in, encasing everything in a thin sheet of white. The lush, green fronds of the trees bent and withered into their dormant states. Catscaades shrank into their dens beneath the bushes, scuttling out into the narrow pathway between the winding tree trunks before darting away when the glider passed over them.

When the engine hummed to life, Veneth felt her skin vibrate with excitement. She had been eager to get outside all day. Earlier in the morning, she had returned from her trip to Antai, the metropolitan capital of the planet Tele. She had slept until the early afternoon and then spent the better part of the day bent over the mangled spine of a book, studying the insides and outsides of a new line of transceptor ships Neptune wanted to acquire. Even as she closed

her eyes, the lines and axis of ship plans filled her vision. No one in a planetary radius could possibly know as much about transceptor ships as she now did, but as Neptune's Apprentice Trade Ambassador, it was her job to know these things.

Right now, though, she could forget about all that for a second.

Clutching her jacket closer to her body, she squeezed the thrusters, urging the ship to go faster. Her jacket was thin. In the warm mudroom of the chalet, she had thought momentarily about slipping on her parka but had opted for her thin, wool overcoat. She figured she would warm up when she got moving. That was before the temperature dropped and the hoarfrost set in, a cold front chasing away the balmy summer air. It didn't help that the hood of her glider was busted. She pushed the dead button again but there was no response.

"Piece of crap," she muttered.

"You should have brought it into the shop. Hennis would have fixed it," Luc said, always the know-it-all.

"I can fix it myself," Veneth said.

"No, you can't," Luc said.

*"Can."*

*"Can't."*

"Guys," her father said. "Let it go."

Veneth stuck her tongue out at her brother. She was twenty-five and Luc twenty, but they always devolved into their old ways when they were around each other. This weekend Veneth was taking a few days' respite after a month abroad, traveling between the planets on various diplomatic assignments. Luc was home from the academy, where he was studying to become a

doctor like their mother. It had been a few months since they'd all been home as a family. Veneth missed these nights. Her life as an apprentice Trade Ambassador often felt like being everywhere but nowhere all at once. She spent much of her days in transience, living in hotel rooms filled with synthetic perfumes, nestled in the seat of a ship staring into the endless black abyss of space. Diplomacy was a barrage of pleasantries, faces, and places that made her head spin.

She was glad to escape that tonight. Tonight, with the smell of the white-petaled xenith flowers blooming around her filling her nose and the humid air leaving dew drops on her skin, she felt rooted. For once, she wasn't drifting.

The winding mountain path fed into the foothills. When the brambles were too thick, Veneth activated the vertical lift on the glider and arched her trajectory over the trees. A foreigner would easily get lost if he relied on the path he had forged in these parts, but they didn't get many foreigners here on Triton. In fact, they didn't see much of anyone who wasn't a shipper or member of the Neptunian Guard.

On the other side of the relentless brambles, the blue and gray surface of the Sky Basin gleamed. The water tonight was calm, lapping gently at the rocky coastline. In its aqueous face was reflected the evening sky. A few sparse clouds dotted the lower atmosphere.

They passed over the surface of the Sky Basin, the thrusters kicking up a spray of water behind them. Beneath the clear surface was a myriad of stars, yet it wasn't a reflection of above but rather a window into what was below. It was a marvel of Paeion, the Basin was. A few million years into the Sun's slow death, a piece of the burning body of Venus had been flung into space, hurtling outwards until colliding with Triton. A chunk of the moon had fragmented into

pieces held precariously in the moon's center of gravity. Ships could enter through either side of the Basin, the lake suspended in the atmosphere.

The fields were on the other shore of the Basin. "There's Wal'terr," Tom'kar said, pointing to a figure waving in the distance.

Veneth slowed the glider and parked it beside a leaning gingin tree whose arms, dangling with purple fruit, reached out towards the sky. She put on her wrist guards when she stepped out and tightened the laces on her shoes.

"Ready to lose again?" Wal'terr asked.

Tom'kar shook his head. "We've been practicing," he said. "I wouldn't be so confident."

Wal'terr wound his arm up. He pointed to his bicep. "See that? Uh-huh. I've been working out every day for the last week."

"Must be in your dreams," Tom'kar said. "I've been with you all week, and I haven't seen you exercise once. Yesterday you asked Heta to unscrew the top of your canteen for you."

Veneth laughed, shaking her head. Wal'terr was the Chancellor of Neptune. Tom'kar was Vice Chancellor. And here they were arguing like it was thirty years ago and they were still novice cadets at the academy.

Wal'terr's kids Pele and Deren approached them. Deren had a full, black beard like his father now. He shook Luc's hand. "What's going on?" he said.

Pele walked up and said Veneth's hat was nice. She was thin and pale and had her arms crossed in front of her chest, but Veneth knew better than to underestimate her.

"Thanks, I got in on Tele," she said.

"Shall we begin?" Wal'terr said as the daylight faded and the stadium lights around the

field blinked on. "Team Zaid for the win," he said to his kids, who rolled their eyes.

Everyone stepped into the field. Anticipation bounced between them. Tom'kar was the one to turn on the anti-gravity machine. A transparent force dome appeared above the field, visible in long sparks that moved over their heads like lightning. Veneth shifted from foot to foot, feeling a subtle rise in her step as she tested out her new weightlessness. The rules were simple. Two goals. Two goalies. Four defenders. The goal nets were suspended ten feet off the ground, meaning you had to jump to intercept the ball. If the ball bounced more than once or hit the ground, it was out.

Veneth got to serve first. She hit the ball towards the dome. When the ball cracked against her racket, it flew forward with a super-charged force and quickly came ricocheting back. Luc jumped up and whacked the ball at the side of the dome. Veneth leapt towards it, lifting off the ground several feet to hit it towards the opposite wall. Whenever she took her first leap she always felt like she was flying.

A smile broke out on her face. "Here it comes!" she said, smacking it back.

It hit the dome at an impossible speed and the dome returned the force, crackling around the spot that the ball had touched and throwing it back with equivalent kinetic energy. BAM! It went racing across the arena, whizzing past her head. Deren raced towards them, trying to put himself between the ball and Luc, but Luc was too quick. He pushed off the opposite wall and went careening over Deren's head, smacking the ball in a somersault and landing on the ground with an "oomph!".

The game was on.

Wal'terr and Tom'kar were ambitious goalies who teased each other incessantly. Pele

played her usual fast and quick game, darting out faster and further than any of the rest of them. Veneth took a hit to the face, courtesy of Luc. She could always count on her brother to give her a black eye. As they rounded out half-time, she and Luc were poised to score their third goal.

“Get up there!” Luc shouted out to her, sweat pouring down his face.

Veneth dodged Pele, who had come out of nowhere. She nudged the edge of the dome and flung herself towards midfield.

Wal'terr looked at her, shaking his head. “Don't even think about it,” he said, giving her a mocking look beneath the brim of his cap.

Luc sent the ball spiraling towards her. It whipped past her shoulder and sprang off the wall. She wound up and backhanded it as it came flying towards her head. The angle was right. It shot towards the goal, missing Wal'terr's hand by an inch. Her father cheered at the other end of the arena.

As it hit the net, a siren went off.

It was deafening. Veneth slammed her hands over her ears. It was a low sound like a trumpet that hummed over the fields. It meant one thing: a ship was coming into port, and it had been under attack. Tom'kar deactivated the dome. Wal'terr took his cap off and smoothed his hair down as he immediately began striding towards the Basin. He wasn't Wal'terr Zaid, her father's best friend anymore. This was the Chancellor of Neptune in front of her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” Wal'terr said. He turned to his children. “Deren. Pele. Go home and get me a change of clothes.” They nodded and left.

Wal'terr started jogging. Veneth followed suit. Her father and Luc caught up with them. Tom'kar's face was anxious, his free spirited mood gone and replaced with all of the stress that came with being a politician in a galaxy fraught with tension. Adrenaline was shooting through Veneth's system. Though many would claim nepotism, she had won her seat as apprentice Trade Ambassador through her own merit. She had been on the fringes of the galaxy's politics for a while now and was hoping for a higher position.

Up ahead, the surface of the Basin boiled and then a ship broke through with enough force to send a wave crashing over the rocky coastline. It was a sleek, black Pegasus-class destroyer. The gold tridents on the wingtips indicated that it was a Neptunian ship. The basin had put out the fire consuming its body, but the scorch marks were visible. No sooner did it alight beside the dock than the deboarding plank was lowered and the men began unloading the injured.

From the guard station, medics came barreling out with stretchers. Luc began walking towards them. Tom'kar stopped him. "I can help," Luc insisted.

"Get your mother," Tom'kar said.

Luc looked chagrined, but he knew his father was right. As a cadet, he only had novice training. His mother would be much better suited. He raced off towards the speeder instead.

The commander of the squadron, Anton Kess, emerged in the midst of the sea of men, shouting orders. His cap was gone, his hair disheveled. His right eye was swollen shut and bleeding. Wal'terr approached him.

"What's going on, Kess?" he asked.

"They fucking shot at us," he said.

"Who?"

“Fuckin’ pirates!” the commander said. He took a piece of cloth someone offered him and slammed it against his eye.

“The hell are they doing out here?” Tom’kar said.

“No idea,” Kess said. “But when I tried to find out, they shot at me!” A medic rushed up to the red-haired commander’s side with a stretcher, urging him to sit. He batted the man away, telling him to attend to someone else first.

Instead, he gestured for the three of them to follow him. He led them to an office inside of the station as a flock of droids arrived to hose off the ship, which still smoldered with embers. The trauma wing would be full, but the worst would just be bad burns, Kess assured them.

“It was a warning shot,” he explained, dabbing blood away from his eye.

“A warning shot?” Wal’terr repeated. “What do you mean?”

“They snuck up on us. Came under our radar with cloaking and everything. Our shields were down because we were about to break the shell.”

Break the shell was another way to say “break the atmosphere.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it. One minute they weren’t there. Next thing they were right next to us. Luckily, I had my best navigator on board and she picked up on their presence. We hailed them, but they fired that shot and got off like someone lit a fire under their ass.” Kess paused to adjust the ice on his eye. “Point is, we never even saw what they looked like. If they had wanted to take us out, they could have.”

Wal’terr and her father were perplexed.

Veneth shook her head. “I’ve reviewed every ship in the galaxy over the last month. There’s not one ship with that sort of cloaking ability on the market.”



“Forget the galaxy,” Kess said. “There’s only one place you need to look and that’s Saturn.”

“Saturn?” Wal’terr said, puzzled. “Why?”

“Because Calkan is a fucking lunatic,” Kess hissed. He combed his fingers through his beard. “Why do you think we came back a week early? The damn planet is about to be on fire.”

“What do you mean ‘on fire?’” Tom’kar asked.

“In the month we’ve been stationed there the temperature has gone up a consistent three degrees per day. The solar flare there is terrible. He’s convinced them that it’s a seasonal change, an unusually hot summer.”

“By ‘he’ you mean Calkan, yes?” Wal’terr clarified.

“Yes, that slimy bastard,” Kess said. “I had my lab run tests. The Solar System is overheating already. It’s going to implode.”

“Fuck,” Tom’kar cursed.

“It’s happening again, just like Jupiter,” Veneth said.

Wal’terr put his hands on the table in front of him and hung his head.

Seven years ago, Jupiter had gone up in flames. It was the fifth addition to the graveyard of no longer hospitable planets that now made up over half the Solar System. The Sun’s death march was supposed to be slow, but the last century had told them differently. It had told them that the death of the planets would happen much faster than they’d thought. They thought they had learned from Jupiter and made a better projection with Saturn, but it was clear that they were wrong again.

“How long?” Wal’terr asked, picking up his head.

“A month, I think,” Kess said. “I wanted to stay longer and confirm our readings with his

labs, but he figured us out.”

“So he knows what’s happening, then?” Veneth said.

“Oh, he knows,” Kess said. “How do you think he’s kept it a secret for so long? No media there kicking up a storm yet? No calls to the Federation to express concern?”

Wal’terr moved to the window. Outside, Veneth could see Luc return with their mother, who had her scrubs on. She was telling Luc something as he nodded and drew a mask over his face, ready to assist her. The soldiers would be in good hands. Her father sat in a seat beside the door, the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

Frederic Calkan was the Chancellor of Saturn. Veneth had met him on more than one occasion, ever since she had taken up the apprenticeship of Trade Ambassador a year ago. There was nothing in particular that struck her about him. He was usually quiet when the Solar System Council convened, offering only mild suggestions every now and then. When he spoke, though, it was with a certain command of the room.

What he lacked in disposition he made up for in reputation. When Jupiter was burning and the galaxy struggled to respond, he took in refugees, opening Saturn to more than twenty million people. The rest he worked with the Kepler planets to accommodate. Of course, the evacuation had still been too slow. Over 10 million people had still been lost when an errant solar flare raised temperatures beyond anything life could handle. Even so, without Calkan’s help, the situation would have been far worse.

So why Calkan would choose now to hide the critical state of his own planet was a mystery.

“It makes no sense,” Veneth said. “Did you confront him?”

Kess nodded. “I showed him the reports. He said he had it under control. I disagreed.”

“And then?” Veneth wondered.

“He told me to leave. So I did. He dismissed the Armada, too, although I can’t say if they know yet. And that’s when the ship attacked us.”

“And you believe what? That the ship is one of Calkan’s?”

“Would seem so,” Kess said. His blue eyes narrowed. “The thing attacked us while we were en route here. There hasn’t been a pirate cruiser in this system for over a decade. One suddenly appears out of the black?” He shook his head.

Wal’terr looked at Kess. He thanked him. “Get some rest. We’ll speak in the morning.”

Veneth and Tom’kar followed him outside. The smoldering outside of the ship had been extinguished. Deren returned with clothes. He gave one pile to Wal’terr and another to Tom’kar. Wal’terr assured him everything was alright for the time being.

“Tell your mother she can relax,” Wal’terr said. “I’m sure she’s worrying.”

Deren parted from them. They stood outside, watching the stars pass overhead. Of course, none of them were looking at the stars but at what was beyond them. Two star systems. Two worlds. One old and one young. United in their shared birthplace but divided in so many other ways.

“I have to notify the Federation,” Wal’terr said at last.

“If the attack was really Calkan, you know what that will mean,” Tom’kar said.

Wal’terr nodded. He knew. They all did. “We’ll meet with him,” he said. “We’ll attempt peace talks. We’ll do everything we can. But in the end, we have to do what’s best for those people.”

Veneth nodded. Tom’kar did, too. Wal’terr said he was going inside, to check on the

wounded, ensure everyone was alright. She and her father stood outside. The frost had sealed everything in an eerie silence. The careless, jovial nature of only an hour before was gone. Instead, there was a sense of dread in the air.

“That was a good game,” her father said wistfully. He squeezed her shoulder. “I’m going to go check on your mother.” They shared a glance and in it passed a million more words than they would ever say to one another. They had always been alike in that way. In their eyes alone was betrayed the truth.

“Okay, Dad,” Veneth said.

His footsteps retreated. She was alone. In front of her, the Sky Basin still gleamed peacefully, unchanged by what had occurred. Their world was fragile, and that single shot would ripple infinitely outwards. It had the potential to start something that had been brewing for years in the galaxy. It had the potential to start a war.

## CHAPTER TWO

*The Kepler System*

NILOS

The nebulous abyss in front of him warped when Nilos activated the ship's light engine. With a hiss, the panther shifted through a spray of white stars. He sat at the monitor, watching his sleek ship cover several hundred leagues in the course of an hour. When his destination neared on the navigator, he pulled the thruster and guided the ship into a slower glide. The black orb of Hector's moon Visigoth appeared in front of him.

Ragen had summoned him. She said it was urgent. He touched the screen and the panels on the edge of the bridge opened to give him a wider view of the space around him. He relished it for the last few minutes he had. If he had a choice, he would never touch down. He would drift endlessly through space. For the last few days, he'd been filling star charts. It was menial work that a cadet could have done, but he'd offered to do it instead of taking his allotted week's leave. There was a freedom out here that not many understood.

"Crimera," Ragen's voice said, filtering through the speakers. "Don't be taking your time up there. I know you like stargazing, but we have a real issue here."

"Understood," Nilos responded.

He pushed the thruster to quicken the ship's descent. As the atmosphere enveloped them, the panther shuddered. Clouds enshrouded her black form. Seconds ticked by. Beneath the

clouds, her wings folded to allow a vertical descent.

Nilos looked at the black sand and felt a weight settle in his chest that hadn't been there before. The barracks, stacks of identical cubes, rose over the dunes. The command buildings were across from them, half-circles with open mouths waiting to swallow any soldier willing to risk his life. Eight years ago, Nilos had walked into that gaping mouth and sworn only to follow the code of the Armada. He gave up his allegiance to his home planet, Neptune. He swore only to obey the word of his commanding officer.

The panther alighted on her landing pad. Nilos flipped the switch to power her down. The luminescent blue dash went dark.

Outside the ship, no one received him. Rank didn't ascertain any sort of luxuries in the Armada. Only the general demanded any real respect. Ragen had said she was in the command center. He entered the covered walkway off the landing pad and followed the tube to an intersection. A line of men and women passed in front of him. Their blue uniforms announced their status as cadets.

This wasn't the officer's academy on Mentos. It wasn't a glamorous assortment of buildings that rich politicians paid for their children to attend. This was the ensign training center where everyday citizens learned what it meant to put a blast ray in a man's face, where they became human weapons honed to kill.

The Armada was an elite, independent military guard. It did not serve any one nation but rather served the Federation as a whole. All eight planets of the Federation had their own private guard, but the Armada supplied auxiliary forces for what it called "peacemaking." It monitored disputed borders, interfered in hostile rebellions, and deployed troops to assist with general

civilian safety. In a way, the Armada was like a separate military nation. It answered to the High Council of the Federation but the General did have the last say in carrying out those orders.

The open mouth of the command center rose in front of him. Nilos touched his index finger to a scanner beside the doors. They swept open, revealing the high Roman columns that supported the domed roof. As soon as he stepped inside, there were sly looks everywhere.

“Ragen’s dog,” a red-haired captain sneered to the woman beside him.

Nilos ignored the remark. He kept walking, his footsteps echoing on the marble floors. He folded his hands behind his back and kept his gaze ahead.

As a citizen of the Solar System, Nilos was unique in his decision to join the Armada. He was ostracized by his fellow airmen because of his Neptunian citizenship, and disliked by other Solar citizens because he had joined the Armada. While the Armada invited every citizen of both the Solar and Kepler systems to apply, it was an unspoken rule that citizens of the Solar System did *not* join the Armada. Most of the ensigns were citizens of the Kepler System. In fact, less than 3% of the force was from the Solar System.

The Armada claimed that it was an independent military force acting for the collective wellbeing of the Federation. It seemed impossible to have a shared army serving every planet — and it was. Those who grew up in the Solar System understood that the Armada served the Kepler System. It was only in the last two hundred years that the Kepler planets had begun to train their own private armies, responding to the threat that they felt the private armies of the Solar System posed. Before that, the Kepler planets had relied solely on the forces supplied to them by the Armada.

These days, recruitment was down 50% of what it had been only twenty years ago. Their

numbers were small and shrinking every year. As tensions in the galaxy increased, the idea of a universal army was one of disillusion. No one knew when the next call to arms would be and who in his right mind would fight against his own people if the order came to be? Even within their ranks, the divide between the systems was evident.

The first night he spent in the barracks, his fellow cadets had buried his belongings in the sand. Everything he had brought from home had disappeared in the ever changing dunes here. It was still there, buried beneath meters of black sand.

He pushed open the door to the command center. Ragen stood with the other commanders. She had a sharp nose and small, dark eyes. Her accent was thick. "Lieutenant Crimera," she said.

She waved her hand and the other commanders dispersed. Nilos stayed still as they waded around him, trying to act like he wasn't as surprised as they were that she wished to speak with him alone.

"Saturn is going to blow," she said, when the room was clear. She never wasted any time with pleasantries. He appreciated that. She pulled up a map of the planet and activated the thermal imaging. "Surface temperature is too hot. We're about to have a full scale evacuation of a million people on our hands."

Nilos raised an eyebrow in surprise. "I thought they were projecting another decade."

"There was another wave of activity from the Sun. It's expanded an additional thousand miles. That brings the average surface temperature to a hundred-fifty degrees."

"How much time do they have?"

"Months," Ragen said.



“So we begin evacuating now,” Nilos surmised. He was still wondering why exactly she had summoned him.

“It won’t be that simple. Zaid is going to negotiate with Calkan but I have reason to believe Calkan won’t be cooperative.” She took a pause. “Our troops on Saturn intercepted a shipment of arms the other day. A thousand pounds of ammunition. Three hundred thousand firearms.”

“From where?” Nilos asked.

“We don’t know. Someone is supplying them.”

“And you haven’t notified the Federation,” Nilos concluded. “Because you think someone is colluding with Calkan.”

“That’s why I like you, Crimera. I don’t have to explain myself.” She held up a finger. “I need you to come with me to Neptune when the time comes for the United Planets to convene. You can give the Armada a front of impartiality. Besides, I don’t deal with the Solar planets directly very often. You know these people, don’t you?”

Nilos hesitated. He nodded. Knew them he did, like them he did not.

“Good. It won’t be long,” Ragen said. “Those fucking idiots on Neptune will screw this thing up like they do everything.” She looked at him. “Well, go on. You need a private dismissal? I’ll let you know when the time comes.”

Nilos inclined his head and left, leaving Ragen to stew over diagrams of Saturn. He understood immediately the severity of the situation. Saturn was now a ticking time bomb. A time bomb with over a billion people on it that would need to be evacuated as soon as possible. Like everything, that evacuation would be embroiled in politics, and possibly, as Ragen was hinting, an armed disagreement between both sides.

What he was thinking of, though, was not that but rather Ragen's request that he go to Triton with her. He had not set foot on Triton since he'd left to join the Armada. At eighteen, he had left and never looked back.

He left the command center and took one of the tubes to the exterior of the snaking campus. Pushing open a door, he stepped outside. The wind lashed out, throwing sand at his face. His eyes narrowed into slits, he threw up a hand to shield his face from the siege.

He felt trapped in his own body as memories came flooding back. He wobbled forward through the sand. The black dunes rose and fell around his feet. His free hand went to his throat, unbuttoning the tight collar of his uniform, freeing his skin, giving him air that he desperately needed, desperately wanted.

He didn't stop walking until the base was far behind him. Then he let his body slink to the ground, his back against the sand, his feet buried in it. The dunes went on and on in every direction, endless. He scrubbed a hand over his features, willing it all away. It was times like these that he knew he had never moved on. He had only distracted himself.

At his feet lapped water.

His family home in Paeion, Triton had overlooked the mountains. In the mornings, his mother cooked warm, speckled bread that they spread jam on from the fruit trees in their backyard. His mother worked in the tavern in Paeion, serving the soldiers that traveled in and out of the port city. His father serviced ships at the Armada station. Every day he came home with grease on his hands and on his face. He scrubbed it every night but it never went away. It left permanent splotches on his skin.

He had two younger siblings: a sister, Jaka, and a brother, Sol. Sol painted the room with his laughter. He was kind and gentle. Jaka had a wild spirit that always got her into trouble.

Twice a month, Nilos and his siblings accompanied their father to the main moon to buy new ship parts. Anablus was one of Triton's most metropolitan cities. His father knew the sprawling mass well. He had grown up in one of its most poverty stricken quadrants. Indeed, he was so comfortable with its bedraggled outskirts that when he went inside the gray warehouses to conduct business, he left his children outside, exposed to every wandering eye.

His father wasn't meant to be a father. His own parents had shown him little warmth and care when he was growing up. In his youth, he had lived the life of a drifter, finding work on the merchant ships that moved through the city. When he found out the Armada paid better, he found his way on board the next ship. He'd met Nilos's mother Cala in a pub at one of the Armada stations interspersed throughout the galaxy.

They were mostly strangers, Vilas and Cala. Vilas knew the smell of her sweat better than the sound of her voice when she brought his grease-stained hand to the swell of her stomach and told him she was pregnant. He could have run, then, let the solar winds carry him into the life of a vagabond, but when he looked at the black imprint of his hand on her skin, he put his hand over hers and vowed to stay.

Now, Nilos wondered why. Why had his father chosen to stay? He and Cala were married for the sake of finances. Their house in Paeion was a benefit of Vilas working for the Armada. In the confines of their home with its honey-colored wood floors and soft, white walls, Vilas was clearly uncomfortable. He slept in the armchair or on the sofa in the living room every night, his boots a few steps away. Sometimes Nilos would catch him outside in the middle of the night, his

face upturned looking at the stars.

“Go back inside,” he would say. His voice was always an afterthought. It was the wind that followed on the heels of a great storm.

Perhaps he had wanted to settle down. Perhaps he was tired of never having a home, of all the aimless wandering. He tried to love them. He brought Cala flowers and played with Nilos and his siblings. But when he thought they weren't looking, a distant, sad look would fill his eyes. He felt like a fraud amongst them.

On one of their visits to Anablus, he left them outside like usual. They were in an offshoot of leaning homes outside of the main city center. The living apartments were stacked on top of each other, one after the other after the other. They had already bought the ship parts. Now, their father told them he had personal business to conduct. At thirteen, Nilos was old enough to understand what that meant but too young to know the circumstances in which his parents had met. The soft cries of the woman inside made his features knot together in disgust, appalled that his father would cheat on his mother. His mother knew about these women. She had her own fair share of lovers — but Nilos didn't know that.

He looked at Jaka and Sol kicking a ball around in the street, then at the apartment building behind them. “Let's go,” he said, not wanting them to hear.

He took their hands and led them away as if he knew where he was going.

“Can we get ice cream?” Jaka asked, as they walked. She swung his hand back and forth, oblivious to what was going on.

“Oooh, I want ice cream,” Sol said, a smile brightening his features.

“Maybe later,” Nilos said.

They passed into a street where darkness closed in on all sides. He felt a shiver run down his spine, but he pushed his fear away. Anger gave him false courage. There was a sliver of sunshine on the stoop of an abandoned shop nearby. Nilos sat there and looked up at the biodome as Jaka and Sol resumed their game, their cries of happiness echoing in the narrow street. They weren't alone anymore, though. There were faces in windows, figures slinking between trash piles at the other end of the street. The smell of sulphur and metal lingered in the air.

Jaka crawled onto the stoop. "I don't like this place," she whispered to him. "I want to go back to daddy."

"He told us to wait here," Nilos lied.

"He did?" Jaka wondered.

Nilos nodded.

Jaka rubbed her bare shoulders, obviously uncomfortable. Sol kicked the ball towards her, and she turned back to their game, trusting Nilos.

With the sun warming his face, he began to fall asleep. He had stayed up all night playing Starship Racers and fatigue was catching up to him. His eyes opened and shut. When he opened them again, it was to the sound of Jaka's scream. A man had seized a hold of her. Jaka's flailing movements pulled the hood from his head, revealing a shock of red hair and a face tattoo that crawled along the side of his left eye. Nilos jumped to his feet as Sol rushed toward them, crying. The forgotten soccer ball rolled past them, mottled in filth.

"Let her go!" Nilos said. He was fast enough to grab Sol, hold him at his side as he screamed and clawed at Nilos, trying to get to his sister.

Silver streaked through the air. There was a knife at Jaka's throat. Words cut through the air in a language Nilos didn't understand. But he understood when he took a step forward and the knife bit into Jaka's throat and a trickle of blood slithered down her throat.

"Ok!" Nilos said, backing off.

"Give her back," Sol sobbed. "Give her back."

Nilos could do nothing except tremble and shake with fear as the man pulled his sister away from them. Her gray eyes were wide with fear. The man's hand crept up her thigh. Nilos threw Sol behind him and ran towards him as the man laughed and sprinted away. His heart raced in his chest. Like tunnel vision, all he could see was the back of the man in front of him, racing away. He missed the other man lurking in the shadows, only seeing him when a blunt force hit his chest and his body whipped backwards.

His head hit the cement with a loud whack. He saw the clouds of the biodome and then blackness.

He woke up alone. Minutes ago, his father had passed him by, blindly searching the city after speaking to a distressed Sol. In that moment, Nilos felt a hollowness creep inside him as he realized what had happened. His sister was gone. And it was his fault. When his father returned with Sol, he said nothing. He pulled Nilos to his feet by the collar of his shirt and hit him, hard.

With his jaw throbbing in pain, he had described his sister's kidnapper to a disinterested Anablus officer. Kidnappings were a well-known issue in this part of the city, as was the sex trade.

"We'll let you know if we find anything," the officer said. There was no emotion, not even an attempt to convey any sort of empathy.

They returned home without Jaka. When his mother found out what happened, she was inconsolable. She went to Anablus herself and searched for her daughter. She returned a week later with a voice hoarse from screaming her daughter's name. She looked different, more unraveled, unstable. Nilos didn't know it, but this was the woman she had been before his birth. In the wake of Jaka's appearance, his parents' imitation game fell apart. His father was seldom home. He slept in the back of the shop. His mother came home drunk late at night and would stumble into Jaka's room.

After the first time Sol cried, hungry, his mother having failed to make dinner the third night in a row, Nilos took up the cooking. Soon he was cleaning and going to the market, shouldering the responsibility of his mother and father, who weren't mother and father anymore, just Vilas and Cala. On the days his mother was sober, she would take them to the lake to swim. She would lay in the sand while Nilos and Sol immersed themselves in the cool water.

It didn't take much time for Nilos to notice them. The stares. Some of them were aimed at his mother, at her thin, pale form and her dark sunglasses concealing her bloodshot eyes. But most of them were looking at him. *They know*, he thought. *They know it was my fault.*

At school, people avoided him. He'd never been very good at making friends in the first place but things only got worse. At lunch, he sat alone amongst the buzz of hundreds of other conversations. The verdant scenery of Paeion — its lakes and mountains and green fields — became a mockery. In such an enchanting place, he should have been happy, but he wasn't.

Years trickled by. After a bout of cirrhosis, his mother abandoned the bottle. She found a job in the Kepler System and decided to take Sol with her. The day she left, Nilos cried, begging her to take him with her. Sol cried, too, reaching for Nilos as his mother tugged him away.

“You stay here with your father,” she said, coldly. “This is where the two of you belong.”

Nilos understood then that she blamed him, too. His father had left them alone, but it had been Nilos that led them away to that awful place.

She and Sol boarded the next transport ship to the Kepler System. He never saw them again. Left with only his father, Nilos was alone. His interactions with his father were limited. Vilas hardly spoke. Every week or so, he slipped a bank note under the front door.

At eighteen, Nilos left for the Armada. Everything he had heard told him it was a soulless institution where men went to become robots. But Nilos did not care about that. All he wanted was one thing. To never feel too weak or too slow again. And if he forgot who he was along the way, then so be it. He hated himself anyway.

When he told his father, Vilas only nodded.

The next day, he was gone, drifting again.

Nilos turned off the lights and locked the door behind him. There was no one there waving to him goodbye. No one telling him to call home. He hefted his pack and walked away and never looked back.



## CHAPTER THREE

*The Solar System*

JANE

Jane stood at her window on Titan, blowing hot air onto the glass as a fire licked at her insides. Her breath formed water droplets on the glass that trickled down to the casing. She took another sip of wine and touched the pad of her finger to the glass, swiping the water away. Her hand was shaking. She put the glass down, afraid she would break it.

*Stay calm*, she told herself. *Stay calm*. She practiced counting to ten like her therapist had told her. She never got farther than three.

In her mind were flames and death and the screams of her people, things she had never witnessed but that she imagined over and over again. It was her own self-inflicted pain, retribution for her failure.

She went to pick up the glass but her finger spasmed and it went sliding over the edge. A dark stain bloomed on her carpet. She stooped to pick the glass up.

“Don’t worry about it,” a voice said from behind her.

She started. Turning around, she willed her anxiety away. “Eric,” she said. “I thought you were with Michael.” He had an uncanny ability to walk in like that, completely silent. It unnerved her, but it was only one of many things that the man did that made her uncomfortable.

“I *was* with Michael,” he said. “But I thought I’d pay you a visit. You seemed...*off* today.” He

stopped to lean against the couch in her living room. Tall and lean, Frederic Calkan was not handsome. His nose was too big. His eyes were too far apart. The turtleneck sweater he wore only emphasized the awkward length of his neck. Nevertheless, the air of authority and knowledge that he carried himself with had gotten him far. Too far.

When Jane first met him ten years ago — she, a young ambassador, he, a Vice Chancellor to his predecessor — she had cast him off as a misguided, weak man. Misguided he was, but weak, no.

Jane cleared her throat. “I’m worried, Eric.”

“There’s no reason to be worried.”

“Well I am,” she said. “This — ” She motioned to the blistering heat outside her window. “This is Jupiter all over again.”

“We have things under control.”

“It’s happening faster this time. I spoke to your labs today. They said the Sun is volatile,” Jane said, a trace of her old authority slipping into her tone. “I won’t put my people through this again. What are we waiting for?”

“A better bargain,” Eric said.

“A bargain?” Jane walked towards him. “What the fuck do you want?” she asked. She took pleasure when he winced at the expletive. He hated cursing. “They’re offering our people homes, safety, food,” she continued. “They’re offering them a chance to *live*.”

“In prison!” Eric finished, exasperated. He stood, rising to his full height. Jane had always been a tall woman, but Eric still had a few inches on her. She didn’t back down.

“This was going to happen at some point. We all knew it. We have to be willing to make

concessions,” she said. Her anxiety had withered away, replaced with the anger that flushed her cheeks. “We are all human.”

“We’re not the same,” Eric said. “You of all people should know that, Jane.”

Her jaw clenched. She knew what he was going to say next.

“You were once chancellor of your own planet. Now? That planet doesn’t exist.”

“It’s uninhabitable,” Jane said dryly.

She could see the impression of the Jovian moons in her mind. Io. Callisto. Ganymede. Europa. Once flourishing with numerous settlements that produced a quarter of the galaxies’ produce and a third of its ice, the moons were now shells of hard rock. Io’s volcanoes spewed lava that decimated millions of homes. Ganymede’s atmosphere evaporated. Jane had grown up on Callisto. She’d been married there. Satellite images showed her home immersed in a boiling ocean.

Eric cocked his head. “You know what I mean. Just because the planet is gone doesn’t mean that Jupiter doesn’t exist. Her people are still alive. They should have given you another planet.”

His eyes betrayed a false warmth. Once she had believed that warmth and empathy was genuine, now she knew better.

“We haven’t discovered another habitable planet in the last three centuries,” Jane said.

“Not a new one. One of theirs.”

Jane backed away, refusing to engage with him. “We’ve had this discussion before.”

“It’s the Old World versus the New World,” Eric said, splaying his hands. “We can’t coexist. They think that they are *better* than us. They are not.”

Jane gave him a look and walked past him. He followed. He’d betrayed half of these

extreme leanings to the Neptunian chancellors earlier. Wal'terr and Tom'kar had been earnest. She could see that they wanted to help. Sometimes she'd wished she'd turned to them instead of Eric, but back then, when she'd made that decision, her head had been in a different place.

She had been ashamed. And shame and fear led people to do things that they regretted. Outwardly, of course, she had projected anger.

“My people deserve more!” she had yelled in press briefings.

What she really meant was “I deserve more!” She knew that once they all left Jupiter she would be nothing. Long before the average surface temperature reached 300 degrees and the cooling systems failed, it was already too late. The crops had died. The ice on Europa had melted. She had failed to save the two resources that kept Jupiter in the markets. At thirty years old, she was the youngest chancellor to date and there she was, up to her neck in shit, undermining her own achievements.

She reassured herself by saying that Jupiter's death was the first of its kind. The other planets had died a slow death lasting hundreds of years. She had inherited the planet when it was already in its final days. When she was a child, they didn't play outside without regulator suits like her grandparents did. The Sun was getting hotter at a faster pace than before. They couldn't follow old trends, couldn't rely on the figures from Earth and Mars to determine how much time they had left. She'd thought she'd be the middleman, transitioning Jupiter's economy into something heat sustainable. Instead, she was the gravedigger.

She stood in the hallway outside her apartment. The Needle, a sleek fifty-story tower, rose over the rest of Fife, the capital city of Saturn. Below was a crisscrossing skyway of gliders. Fife had a population of eight million. It was the biggest of all the cities on Titan, owing

especially to the fact that it had over half of the Jovian refugees in its suburbs. Jane traced the red and white threads of lights to the red sun setting in the distance. It was hard to believe that the same thing that had breathed warmth onto the lifeless, sub-zero surface of Titan was now going to render it inhospitable again.

“The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away,” her mother had always said, quoting the Bible.

Following passages of such an antiquated religion was something that Jane had never understood, but perhaps the Christians had a point. No matter how far humanity had come, they were still subject to the whims of Nature.

Walter and Tom’kar had offered asylum to the inhabitants of all Saturn’s moons. They would settle on Tele and Hector.

*“And be under whose government?” Eric had asked.*

*“The Federation,” Wal’terr had answered.*

*“The Federation,” Eric had sneered. “There is no federation. You’re all lying to yourself pretending that this thing is going to hold up. One wrong move and this facsimile government fractures apart. What you need to do is decide whose side you’re going to be on.”*

“What did you mean by that?” Jane wondered aloud. “One wrong move?”

Eric was watching her. His expression was unreadable. A civilian ship passed the window, drawing a shadow over his face. “It’s all a delicate balance,” he responded. “We have to be ready for that balance to be upset. That’s all.”

The shadow passed. He smiled. “I have an inclination for a cocktail. Care to join?”

Sometimes his smile made her sick. This was one of those times.

“I don’t think I will,” she said. *I’ve got someplace else to be*, she thought to herself.

Eric shrugged and left her.

Half an hour later, in shorts and a tank top, she zipped a regulator suit up to her neck and put her helmet on. She drove her glider outside the penthouse bay and it hovered there, a mile above the city. For thirty seconds, she felt the heat of the city bearing down on her. Two hundred fifty degrees that put sweat on her brow and made her face burn like it had been stung by a venomous insect. The heat was more intense up here than it was down there. She looked at all the glittering lights below her and imagined each of them winking out.

*I won’t let you down again*, she promised.

Revvng her engine, she pointed the nose of her glider at a downward angle and joined the skyway.

The boxing club she frequented was nestled in the narrow alleyways that shot off from the main skyway, between a buffet and a thrift shop. She parked her glider in the public bay a few doors down and followed the metal balcony that wound around the outside of the shared building. Outside the door she paused, listening to the neon boxing glove fizz on and off above her head and watching to make sure no one had followed her. A blistering gust snaked through the alleyway, putting sweat on the back of her neck. When she shifted, the toe of her sneaker sent a piece of scrap metal tumbling over the edge of the balcony and it went spiraling between the buildings to the ground level still fifty meters down.

She stepped inside as her comm. flashed 20:00. The bags were mostly open. There was only one man in the far corner, working on his uppercuts. She unzipped her regulator suit and

removed her helmet, tucking them into a locker with her gym bag.

She stretched for a minute. Her muscles worked beneath her skin. Her hand wraps were still moist from the last time she'd cleaned them. She put her gloves on and fell into her usual rhythm. It was a familiarity that never failed to keep her anxiety at bay.

Her grandmother had been a boxer. Sometimes when she closed her eyes, she was there behind the bag, encouraging her, telling her to give it all she had. The smell of rubber brought her back to her family's basement, where her grandmother had set up a makeshift ring. They hadn't had much growing up. It was the leftover funds from her grandmother's career that carried her through life. Her parents' meager salary from the convenience store they had wasn't enough to pay for her academy tuition.

A hand on her shoulder gave her pause. It was the owner, Ulu. "We're closed," he said.

She nodded, wiping sweat from her eyes, but instead of packing up her things, she followed him into the back.

Sitting between boxes of old gloves was a man her age. "How long have you been here?"

Michael answered without looking at her. "An hour. As soon as he left to see you."

Jane sat down beside him. Ulu closed the door to give them privacy. Michael's dark features were drawn into an expression of defeat. "He's gone," Michael said. "You were right."

Jane wasn't sure what to say. She wasn't very good with these sorts of things. Usually when people got sad it made her anxiety worse. She wrung her hands. "I'm sorry."

Michael wiped a tear from his eye. "I've seen it for a while," he admitted. "I just didn't want to believe it."

Jane let silence fill the air between them for a few beats. He and Eric had been partners for

the last three years. Michael had gotten closer to Eric than anyone had. When the two were together, Jane swore that Eric's usually expressionless features betrayed a certain tenderness. She had taken a risk, taking Michael into her confidence a month prior. But she'd begun to notice a heaviness in Michael's features and a distance between him and Eric that hadn't been there before. Was it cruel of her to take advantage of Michael's pain? To suddenly ingratiate herself with him when they'd exchanged little more than a "hello" and "goodbye" these past years? Probably. But after ten years in this game, it wouldn't be the first time she sacrificed someone's else's feelings to satisfy her own ambitions.

She bit her lip. "Do you know anything?" she asked gently.

Michael wiped tears from his eyes. He nodded. "He's not going to let anyone evacuate," he said. "He's willing to sacrifice many lives to get what he wants." Michael sniveled. "How did I get involved with someone like this?" he said to himself. "This isn't who I am."

Jane looked at him. "Sometimes it's hard to see people for who they really are when we're in love," she said, the wave of her thoughts curling back on her own past. "And besides, he deceived me, too," she added, in a rare moment of transparency.

Michael nodded. He rose. From his pocket, he produced a small chip: a tracking device that Jane had given to him. "I put it on his pin. He never takes that fucking thing off," Michael said. He put it in her open palm. "Don't let him win."

"I won't," Jane said.

Michael nodded. Zipping up his regulator suit and putting on his helmet, he slipped out the back door and into the night, leaving Jane alone with yet another promise she had yet to fulfill.



She sighed and dropped her head into her hands. She had a long night ahead of her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

*The Kepler System*

BELEN

The white of the snow was a vibration of feelings The snow was coming down hard. Belen shielded his hand in front of him and trudged faster across the white expanse. It was winter in Cerep, one of three outposts along the equator of Tele, the dwarf planet of the Kepler System. The heavy flakes shrouded Belen in a curtain of white, isolating him from everything. Somewhere at his back was his family homestead, a two-story cabin in the middle of the Ithacan mountains. It was only a matter of minutes before his mother and sisters figured out he was gone, but he wasn't turning back anytime soon. The bus left in an hour and it would be another week until the next one came.

He turned and walked backwards for a moment, taking one last look at his speeder. It poked out of the snow, its sleek body painted black and blue. It was his first speeder. He'd waited a long time to get it, but now he was leaving it behind.

*For something better,* he thought to himself.

He mustered his strength and took a step, beginning the long slog up the mountain. The peak rose above him menacingly. He'd have to surmount the left flank to reach the road.

He was going to join the Armada.

With tensions brewing in the Solar System, they were recruiting more than ever. His home planet, Tele, had a meager private army, but he had bigger aspirations. The Armada was an elite

force respected throughout the galaxy and the officer's academy was highly competitive.

His father had once been one of their best officers. Belen kept his medal of honor hidden in the bottom drawer of his dresser. His mother couldn't bear to look at it. Finnigan Arikainen and two of his crew members had disappeared in a routine mission to the Solar System when Belendir was only three. His mother had raised all five children herself after his disappearance. There was a time when she would sit by the window every evening after supper, periodically glancing at the sky, as if his father's ship would break through the clouds and he'd be there again. But one day, she drew the curtains over the window and banished his belongings to the dark undersides of beds and moldy recesses of closets, as if memories could be swept away as easily as dust. Still, the shadow of their father remained.

Belen had been off-planet only a handful of times, but he felt it was time for him to move permanently beyond their tiny outpost in the tundras of Tele. The youngest of five siblings and the only boy, Belen had never been equated with the word impressive. He was tired of the leering looks from his sisters when he came home with his marks from the university. His mother being a professor at Jeru University an hour away, he always felt the pressure to perform at his very best — even if he fell short time and time again. It didn't help that his sisters were all perfect students, following in the footsteps of his academically-inclined mother.

"Why are you so mediocre?" his sister Selen had remarked to him after reading his paper the other day.

"Mediocre" was a word that only one of his sisters would use.

There were four of them. Ralen, already a tenured professor, was the eldest. Then there were Enel and Anel, twins with their identical cropped brown hair and sharp blue eyes. Selen

was the youngest. There was only a year between her and Belen but they couldn't be more different. She was a flare in the dark, always burning, always ready to snap. He had a knack for making Selen and the twins angry. When they were after him, talons and teeth bared, he called them The Furies — coined from Greek mythology.

His mother was a Classics Professor. She delved into all realms of human mythology, from the Roman and Greek myths of old to the Deru texts of the last millennium. His sisters took after her. Their two-story home had a bookshelf in every corner, but there weren't enough shelves to accommodate ten different editions of every volume. The last time a book had been printed on real papyrus was centuries ago, but his mother and sisters hoarded those outdated texts like there was no tomorrow.

Between wicks of melted wax in their living room, he had once acted out the ancient myths alongside his sisters. Their shadows, thrown on the blank wall, were Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Demeter — any number of the gods. His sisters loved to cast him as Eros, crushing red berries in their hands and painting his chubby cheeks an impish pink. He whined to play the cunning Odysseus, his favorite, but it was always Selen who played him, braiding her long hair beneath her chin to mimic a beard.

In grade school, his peers had teased him about wearing girls' clothes, and it was true, some of his clothes were indeed hand-me-downs from his sisters. Even now, fully grown, he couldn't fit into his father's old clothes. Belen was short and stocky, with a rather oversized lower lip. His father had been tall and lean. On leave, his father would grow a thick, bushy beard. At most, Belen could sprout a few measly hairs on his cheeks.

When he first broached his desire to join the Armada at the dinner table, the conversation

had come to a screeching halt. His mother, lifting a serving spoon full of vert root curry, dropped it on Selen's lap in surprise. As his sister scrubbed hot curry off her favorite pair of pants, his mother pointed the spoon at him and told him if he ever brought that subject up again he could take his "ungrateful, star-hugging ego" elsewhere. He never discussed it with her again.

Still, he was tired of this life. His sisters were all en route to become professors like his mother, but Belen didn't want that. He didn't want to sit at a desk for the rest of his life correcting essays. He wanted to be like his father.

"Belen!"

He turned around. It was Selen. She had parked her orange speeder beside his and was running up after him. Her long legs propelled her through the snow with ease. "Where are you going?" she shouted.

"Not home!" Belen yelled back.

"Why?"

"Don't want to!"

"Belen, stop!" Selen shouted, sinking into a deep drift. She gave up holding her hood over her face and let the wind tip it over her shoulders, revealing her blonde hair. "What are you doing, idiot?"

He didn't answer. Huffing, she ran to catch up with him. He was attempting to surmount an icy boulder to little avail. Her hand closed around his ankle, pulling him back.

**"Blast off!" he shouted.**

She held on. A second later, he lost his grip and they both went tumbling down the

mountainside. Belen blinked powder out of his eyes, holding his knee that had banged against a rock during their impromptu descent. When he looked up, there they all were. His real mother pointed a finger at him. Her goggles magnified her eyes into huge, bulbous orbs.

“What in the galaxy are you doing?” she asked.

Belen tsked and stood. “I’m leaving, mother,” he said. “I’m *out* of here.”

“What makes you think you can just leave?” his mother wondered.

“I’m eighteen, mother!”

“And three months from graduating! Why don’t you finish school and then you can do whatever nonsense you like.”

“It’s not nonsense,” Belen said.

“Your father joined their ranks and he never came back. It *is* nonsense.”

“Yeah, well, no wonder. Why would he come back to all of you?”

They all looked hurt. All five of them. Belen felt his heart clench in regret, but it was too late to take back what he’d said.

“You’re an ass,” Selen said, shaking her head.

Belen struggled to his feet. He stood there, puffing hot air into the cold. The snow swirled down around them. “I’m leaving,” he said. “I’m not coming back.”

His mother gave him a sad look. “I always feared this day would come.” She turned and passed between Enel and Anel, the twins, who were giving him mirrored expressions of disapproval. They lingered for a moment before following his mother. A second later, Selen followed her, too. Only Ralen stayed behind.

“I was hoping I could change your mind before they got here, but Selen realized you were

gone first,” she said. She dropped the pack around her shoulders to her feet. “I also know that trying to change your mind is like trying to tell a bird it can’t fly.”

“What’s that?” Belen wondered.

Ralen gave it to him. “Just some stuff. We all put some things in there.”

Belen frowned. “How long have you — ”

“You left your browser open.” She tilted her head. “And a recruiting officer called. You gave him my number instead of mother’s?”

Belen blushed. He didn’t think they’d actually call.

Ralen pushed his shoulder. “Don’t worry, space brain. I put in a good word for you. None of us agree with what you’re doing, but you’re not our baby brother anymore. We can’t stop you.”

Belen looked at her. Suddenly, he dropped the pack and threw his arms around her. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Ralen hugged him back. “Remember to call home every now and then.”

“I will,” he said. He broke away. Pulling the bag over his shoulder, he passed one last look over his eldest sister, standing in the middle of a blizzard with him in her bright orange snow pants. He turned his back and started marching.

“And Belen!” she shouted. “You could’ve left when it wasn’t snowing!”

Belen gave her a mock salute. He stumbled on. When he looked back, the snow had swallowed her back up. He was alone.

He stumbled on, the cold seeping inside his jacket. He activated the thermal liner as his legs worked to propel him up the incline. At the top, he was disappointed. He had hoped to see something, but the snow had reduced all visibility. He touched his communicator and opened

the navigation. It projected an arrow towards the bus stop.

He took a look at the slope. It would be too hard to descend on foot with all the snow that had fallen in the last 24 hours. From his pack, he took out his skis. A button on the base expanded them to their full length, and he dropped them in front of himself, stepping onto the deck and clicking his boots into the bindings. He slipped his goggles over his eyes and pulled his face scarf over his nose and lips.

He tipped his wedge downhill, and then — he was flying. He carved a zigzagging line in the powder, dodging thick patches of ice and deep drifts. As he neared the base, he activated the jets, doubling his momentum.

“Whoa!” he cried, leaning forward to keep his balance.

The foot of the mountain transitioned into rolling hills. Belen swept his feet back and forth interchangeably, skating across the fresh snow. In the distance, a blue light appeared. It thinned out into lines as he approached, the outline of the bus station forming. There was only an older gentleman there when he arrived, probably hailing from one of the handful of buildings that made up Cerep.

He removed his skis as they waited. The man puffed on a pipe of something sweet-smelling and the scent went drifting over Belen. It made him think of his mother’s giginberry tartlets that she’d made sometime last night, his favorite. He’d smelled them as soon as he’d woken up in the morning and he’d cried into his pillow like a pathetic piece of crap knowing that he was going to leave. He could imagine her staying up late to make them so she could surprise him with them in the morning.

A honk drew his attention upwards.



The red lights of the 160 bus glowed through the snowfall as it descended from the sky. The letters panning across the front in green read NONSTOP TO PEISISTRATUS STATION. It glided to a stop with a puff of powder that floated over their feet. The door whisked open.

“Tickets,” the driver grunted.

Belen activated his ticket on his comm. watch and presented it to the driver on the other side of the glass as he walked on. The man bobbed his head. Belen took a seat on the second tier, in the back. The bus floated forward and then up and up until they were above the clouds.

The dwarf suns broke over the crags of the Ithacan range as they surmounted the clouds. They threw their rays over the sea of cumulus wisps, painting them in oranges and pinks. He leaned his head against the glass and felt the coolness seep into his skin. His adrenaline subsiding, he realized that he was hungry.

He reached for his pack, unzipping it. The first thing he saw was the bag Ranel had given him, which he'd stuffed haphazardly inside. He took it out and reached inside. The first thing that he withdrew was a giginberry tartlet wrapped carefully in parchment.

A few minutes later, as he sat munching on a tartlet that was salted with an occasional tear dripping down his cheek, his mother sent him a quote.

Did you find the tartlets?

Yes, he wrote back.

Let us know when you get there.

Ok.

She was mad but not *that* mad, he surmised. He sat back and savored the tartlet, knowing it was the last one he would have for a long time.

The central terminal of Peisistratus Station was crowded when the bus pulled in just after nightfall. Belen hefted his pack onto his back and deboarded. He stepped onto the ground and looked around. The emerald ribs of the ceiling vaulted high over his head. Orbs of warm light hovered in the air, bobbing slowly in place and illuminating the travelers bustling over the marble causeways. A train hissed into the station with sand on its body. Drones spun into action as the passengers deboarded, rinsing the sand off and scrubbing the windows.

All sorts of people passed beside him. There were foreign dignitaries in pressed suits of the latest fashion. These days the turtleneck was popular, along with coats with embroidered lapels and long coattails. A woman walked by with the latest Sadida shoes that had Belen wincing at his shoddy blue snowshoes. He rubbed at a stain on his jacket and pants, distinctly aware of the loud sound his waterproof snow pants made every time he took a step. He scrubbed a hand over his head and patted his hair down in hopes he appeared halfway decent.

In the center of the terminal, Belen checked the departure board. ONTOR 21:00 it read. He had another thirty minutes or so. Adjusting his pack so it sat more comfortably on his shoulder, he went to get something to eat. There was a Narfean meatball place in the food court that looked great. He bought two skewers and a bottle of Jada juice and went to find his terminal. It was down a vein off the main terminal. As he walked, his comm. watch buzzed. He was balancing his coin card and his bag of food in his hands. He shifted his stuff around, trying to see what the quote said, but in his distraction he bumped into a rather large stranger.

His meatball skewers went soaring in their bag at the same time that a mess of meat went

flying onto his chest, sauce and all.

“Oh, blast it, sorry man!” the guy said. He was huge, a blonde behemoth with a thick knot of hair at the nape of his neck.

The sauce was a gelatinous pink. Belen swiped it off with a napkin that the other handed to him. “What is this?”

“That?” He licked his fingers. “Why that’s Corbin pig sauce, haven’t you ever had it before? My wife made it just this morning.”

“I haven’t,” Belen said, trying and failing to get the sticky substance off his shirt. “I haven’t, actually.”

He shuffled towards the gate that his plane would take off from, stranger in tail. “You headed to Ontor?” he asked.

Belen nodded. “I am.”

“So am I. Name’s Selig.”

He offered Belen his hand. Dropping his things onto a seat, Belen took it. He had a strong grip that Belen tried to mimic to no avail. Selig dropped himself into the next chair over.

“Boy that was a long ride.”

Belen hesitated, then, politely, he asked, “Where are you from?”

“Xestin,” Selig said. “On the outskirts of Barrinkton. Where the river dries up and it’s all desert.”

Xestin was far away in the province of Tarth, many leagues from where Belen lived. “I’ve never been,” he said.

Selig shrugged, unbothered. “Most people have never even heard of it.”

“I’m from Cots. Not many people go there either.”

“Cold there, right?”

“Freezing,” Belen said.

They lapsed into silence. On the telecast was a news channel broadcasting a segment about Saturn. They’d been hearing more and more about it in the last months. Belen had been twelve when Jupiter was evacuated. It stirred the galaxy, brought up age-old tensions. There were rallies in every major city. The Darwinist Party formed at that time, an extreme hand of the Evolution Party. The Darwinists believed that it was time to leave the Solar System behind. Those that still chose to remain there, knowing that the System’s lifespan was limited, deserved to perish in their minds. The United Party rallied against that idea. They believed in respecting the star system of humanity’s birthplace, Earth.

“We don’t have room for them!” a Darwinist man shouted on the telecaster. “There are millions of people on that planet! Where are they all going to go?”

His United counterpart shook her head. “There is no they,” she said. “They are us.”

“We have to do what’s best for our families and people. We can’t just take on millions of freeloaders over the course of a month!”

The discussion devolved from there.

Selig shook his head. “Don’t see what there is to debate,” he said. “Those people need help. We can’t just up and leave ‘em to die.”

“But we have to handle the evacuation carefully. Saturn’s refugees have already strained the economy,” he said.

“Economics and politics don’t concern me,” Selig said, shrugging. “I’m a nurse.”

Belen was surprised to hear that. Selig didn't strike him as the sort to have the gentle, careful hands of a nurse. He would have pegged him for infantry.

"What sector are you looking to join?"

Belen blushed. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, actually, I'm looking to become a command officer."

"Really?" Selig said, his eyes widening. "Well, good luck. You must be brave."

Belen opened his mouth and closed it. *He thought Belen was brave?* At the gate, a sergeant began calling out their names. There were only five of them. Selig and Belen made two. There was one other guy, a muscular guy that could've been the poster child of the Armada. Then there were two girls. One had short hair cropped close to her head. The other had a puff of dark hair and big, round eyes.

He and Selig sat together on the bottom level of the capsule. The seats formed a circle on the inside of the ship. The sergeant ascended the ladder to the bridge, where his second and the pilot sat waiting. Belen strapped himself in tight. He wasn't afraid of flying but he knew that capsules had more gravitational force equivalent than civilian ships. When the engine revved to life and they shot away from Pistratus station, he knew it was true.

"Holy fuck," Belen said through grit teeth. He felt his jowls stiffen and strain against his bones. He closed his eyes and willed himself not to pass out as a great weight settled on his chest.

Beside him, Selig had his eyes wide open. "Man isn't this crazy?" he said to Belen, who only nodded.

The weight was more manageable when they shifted from EVTOL to a normal cruise

speed. Belen relaxed and looked out the window at the myriad of stars. As the adrenaline coursed from his body, he felt the weight of the day peel from his body. He blinked blearily, trying to stay awake, but the hum of the ship lulled him to sleep.

Next thing he knew, Selig was shaking him awake. "Hurry up," he said.

Belen threw his straps off and grabbed his pack from beneath his chair. He followed the rest of the prospects outside of the ship.

The wind was the first thing he felt. It was hot. Instantly, the back of his neck was sweating. He shielded his eyes from the sun that broke over the shifting black dunes that spread out in front of the transport capsule. Grains of sand carried in the invisible hand of the wind whipped against his cheeks. He brushed them away from his eyes. The different buildings were connected by covered walkways. The sergeant guided them into the walkway off the landing pad and had them form a line. Behind them, the dome of the landing pad sealed the ship inside and the wind halted, sealed behind a wall of fiberglass. It was quiet.

The sergeant cleared his throat. "You have all signed up to report to various grades of the Armada. You have indicated your preferences on your applications. Only one of you has indicated a desire to join the command arm of the officer's academy. Belen Arikainen, step forward."

Belen did as he was told. The sergeant's eyes shifted between Belen and Selig.

"Your name?" the Sergeant asked. Belen was going to respond, but he realized that the sergeant was speaking to Selig.

"Selig Dest," he said.

"Nurse," the sergeant read. His eyebrows piqued. "Prospective medical officer."

“That’s right, sir,” Selig said.

“You sure you’re not looking to join the command?”

“No, sir, I know my place,” Selig said.

The sergeant looked at him and Belen. “Come with me. The rest of you will follow Private Hastings to the ensign tent.”

Belen and Selig followed the sergeant. The walkways were made of transparent fiberglass. The wind snaked over their heads, drawing the sand over the structure. Belen had heard of the black sands of Ontor, the Armada’s base on the dark side of Hector’s moon Visigoth. Up close, it was like a dark ocean, undulating and moving constantly in the incessant winds.

At an intersection of walkways, the sergeant pointed Selig in a different direction. “Good luck, Belen!” he said.

With Selig gone, Belen felt a rush of nerves. He was alone, a thousand miles from home on this desert moon. What was he doing, joining the officer’s academy? What was he thinking? By the time the sergeant brought him to the doors of the command center, he felt nauseous. The sergeant wished him the best. He sat on a bench, waiting for his escort to the officer’s academy.

As he waited, a man passed into the corridor. He had the wings of a lieutenant on his breast, but as he walked by, one of the cadet officers nearby whispered, “Ragen’s dog.”

By Ragen, Belen assumed the boy meant General Ragen, the head of the Armada. Belen observed the man. He was tall and dark. A shadow crawled over his features that made Belen swallow thickly. Without intending to, Belen caught his eye. His gaze was gray and sharp. It made Belen shrivel into himself. He looked away, at the ground, and didn’t look back until the lieutenant was long gone.

“Arikainen,” a voice said. It belonged to an older man that was leaning on a cane. He looked Belen up and down and didn’t seem to like what he saw.

“It’s only you,” the captain said when he didn’t move. “Don’t make me wait.”

Belen stood and followed him, throwing his pack over his shoulder. Despite having a cane, the captain walked fast. He led Belen into a walkway that snaked into the side of a huge, black dune. Lights flickered on overhead as the walkway dove down, away from the surface. They were underground.

“This is the ensign level officer’s training academy,” the captain said. “In a week, you will either still be here or you will be home crying to your mother and whoever else begged you not to come here, listening to them tell you they were right all along.”

Belen felt his mouth go dry.

“These men will never be your brothers in arms. This is not a movie. You are competing against one another for a position that only one in ten of you will get.”

They entered a hallway. The captain gestured to a room with rows of stacked beds. “You sleep here. You will be assigned a cot and a uniform. You will wear that uniform at all times. You will turn your personal belongings in. At the end of the week, if you fail, you will have them returned to you immediately. Otherwise, you will not see those objects until you have the rank to do so.”

Down another hallway, they entered the showers. Frosted plexiglass walls on either side obscured the bodies of naked men. “You will not be the biggest man here nor will you be the smallest,” the captain said. “It’s up to you to decide where you belong.”

They passed into the next hallway, where more barracks stood. The captain walked on. “The



first thing you have to do, of course, is complete the acuity test. That will determine if you get a cot assignment altogether.” He looked at Belen, who had gone pale. “You gonna throw up, son?”

Belen shook his head.

“Good, last kid did that and it stank to hell.”

He handed Belen off to a young private. The word “test” put Belen at ease. The first section of the acuity test was written, while the second part was physical. He took a deep breath in and out. He could handle this part. But when the private opened the door, what he saw was a massive training arena. Electric fences crackled in the distance, just on the other side of a mud pit and a climbing wall where Belen saw a total of *zero* handholds.

“The order of the tests has recently been reversed,” the private said. “We’ll be starting with the physical test today.”

*Just my fucking luck*, Belen thought.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*The Solar System*

KOGARASHI

Kogi swam through the water with ease, dragging his fingertips across the surface as his body released all the toxins it had gathered throughout the day. Steam rose above the pool in a gray haze, rising up to the vaulted ceiling and adding dew to the incandescent light bulbs. Outside the natatorium, the stars were setting.

On Pluto's moon Charon, the Sun itself was not strong enough to provide an ample amount of light and heat. They had engineered a secondary nuclear-powered star, Persephone, to generate another light source.

Persephone was not popular among the other planets of the Solar System. It had been risky, generating an artificial star. The nuclear fallout had anything gone wrong would have sent dangerous levels of radiation into Charon's atmosphere. Pluto was known for its bold engineering, however. They were the galaxy's main supplier of methane and atmosphere generators.

Two thousand years ago, the first colonists of Charon had begun harvesting the methane on its icy surface, turning it into usable gas that powered their cities. Once the methane was harvested from an area, it was terraformed into a liveable space. Atmosphere generators created the proper Earth balance of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and oxygen.

Kogi flipped at the end of the lane, bubbles dragging over his nose. He and his grandmother had reviewed the latest installment of generators earlier in the day. Through a field of generators they had passed, the Chief Engineer rambling to his grandmother about the details and the math Kogi had calculated many hours earlier.

Kogi looked down. The natatorium was a glass rectangle wedged into the side of the palace. A third of that rectangle extended beyond the walls. Beneath the bottom were the winding Palace gardens and beyond the walls was the skyline of Voto. The city lights glimmered in the waning evening light, and the crescent shape of Pluto hovered in the sky. Charon and Pluto orbited the same center of gravity. Evening hours on either planetary body were populated by the sight of the other among the stars.

At the other end of the pool, Kogi stopped, removing his goggles. A pleasant heat from his workout settled into his body. When he looked up, Gin was waiting for him, standing in the natatorium in a pressed suit, his cheeks flushed from the steam rising from the pool.

“Your highness,” Gin said.

Kogi groaned.

“Her majesty insists on your immediate appearance.”

“For what?” Kogi grumbled. “To pour her tea?”

Gin hid a smirk. “Can’t say for sure.”

Kogi lifted himself from the water. Gin handed him a towel that he wrapped around his shoulders. He slipped his sandals on and grabbed his equipment bag, tugging it along behind him. Gin followed him into the locker room, waiting outside the stall as Kogi exchanged his swimsuit for a pair of loose-fitting trousers and a snug black shirt. He ran a towel over his hair,

letting it hang damply over his ears.

“She’s in a bad mood?” Kogi asked.

“Wouldn’t say bad, necessarily,” Gin responded. “Wouldn’t say good either.”

“Screw off, Gin,” Kogi said, his formerly unpleasant mood returning. “Just tell me what happened.” He had come to the pool to calm down but his grandmother had a way of making his blood boil.

Gin laughed, getting a kick out of his anger as usual. “Your ex-girlfriend called.”

“Narcisse?” Kogi said, pushing the stall door open in surprise.

“She’s not going to buy.”

“Fuck,” Kogi swore. She had lied, then. Kogi knew he shouldn’t have trusted her. His grandmother had warned him not to do business with her. As both Kogi’s former consort and a Corporate Officer for the leading terraforming company on Paris, TerraX, Narcisse was not in his grandmother’s very limited favor. *Treacherous snake*—that’s what his grandmother had always called her.

In retrospect, it wasn’t particularly smart on his part to involve sake in their last meeting nor to book a reservation at what had been their favorite restaurant while they were dating. On a terrace in Louvre, Kogi had described the new generators at length. Narcisse had feigned interest while slicing tiny bites of a powdered eclair.

“They need those generators,” Kogi said through his teeth.

He stormed out of the locker room with Gin at his heels. The rest of the gym was mostly empty. There was a handful of other high-ranking patrons delicately raising weights or doing complex stretches. Two members of his personal guard wrestled on a dojo mat. They paused

their match to bow respectfully.

Kogi pulled his bag tighter around his shoulder. Gin hurried to keep up with his long strides. Kogi liked to see him struggle. Friends was a word Kogi would never use to describe his relationship with Gin, despite them knowing each other since childhood. Gin's father was the advisor to the Empress, and Gin, like Kogi, had been raised since the time he was a boy to perform his royal duties. The difference of course was that while Gin's duties involved choosing what cufflinks suited Kogi the best, Kogi's duties involved overseeing an entire country.

Leaving the gym, they entered the central hallway of the West Wing. The palace had some loose stylistic influences of the old imperial palaces of Japan. Many generations ago, his ancestors had sat on the throne of Japan on Earth. For thousands of years they existed as only a small territory on Mars, but they had reinstated their reign after the first Galaxy War.

"Prince Shōtoku," the courtiers murmured as he passed into the lobby, casting their eyes to the floor. They were ambling towards the dining rooms for the evening meal.

Gin gestured to a doorway where there was a side passage. "Improper for them to see you in such attire, oh 'Prince of Sacred Virtue'" he said.

Kogi snorted but let Gin open the door for him. Shōtoku was his name as Prince of Pluto, chosen by his grandmother. Kogi and his grandmother kept with the old tradition of using no surname. An emperor or empress was once regarded as a supreme, divine ruler, and while that element of the title had long since faded, omitting a surname was in his grandmother's view "a way to separate from the common people." Yoiwa was the name of his grandmother's imperial era. It meant "strong rock." When she died, she would be Empress Yoiwa, but until that day, she would be called by nothing less than "her royal highness." When Kogi ascended the throne, his

advisors would choose a name for the new era and the process would go on.

The hallway Gin had led them into was narrow. Accent gold panels with colorful depictions of rivers and mountains — their ancestral Earth lands — were offset by the black floors. Gin moved ahead of him this time, and Kogi was left staring at the back of his silver-dyed head.

“My room first,” Kogi said.

Gin looked over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow, knowing what he wanted there. At the end of the hallway was an elevator lobby. Gin pressed the buttons to hail the appropriate elevator car. The light above an elevator on the right side illuminated and a short tone accompanied the opening of the doors. Gin stood aside, allowing Kogi to enter first. Then he was standing beside the buttons, pressing the button for the 10th floor. He touched his finger to a small pad adjacent to the panel, scanning it to authenticate their entry in the security system.

They waited as the elevator ascended. Kogi looked at Gin lazily. There was a mark on his lip, a newly-acquired wound.

“Sparring again?” Kogi asked him.

“Something like that,” Gin responded coyly.

“The locker attendant?” Kogi wondered.

Gin perked an eyebrow but didn't respond. Kogi had never caught him with a lover but he suspected Gin had an assortment of male consorts throughout the palace.

The elevator doors shifted open as they reached the 10th floor. Kogi strode out. The whole floor was his. Higher up, the palace tapered into a more reasonable width, although the floors still provided an ample amount of living space. He dropped his bag in the foyer. Behind him, Gin gestured for the maids to pick it up.

His floor was done in the modern style. Concave walls curved around rounded corners. The doorways were soft arches with sliding doors that opened with a touch of a finger. There were gentle accent lights in the walls that brightened and dimmed to a silent rhythm.

Kogi entered his bedroom and rummaged in a drawer at his bedside. He withdrew a small rectangular device, small enough to fit between his thumb and middle finger. He touched it to his bicep and pressed a button on the side. The needle stung for a second before the rush of endorphins washed through his body. He needed the injections to keep the anger at bay.

“Kogarashi,” Gin said, his tone unreadable.

For a second, when Kogi glanced at him, he was frowning, the edges of his lips turned downwards as well. He knew what he was seeing. His pupils, pinpricks. His skin paling, the blue veins momentarily standing out. Kogi felt an unusual wave of shame curl over him but it was washed away by the effects of the drug.

“Not your place,” he said, warning Gin to keep his thoughts to himself. He ran a hand through his hair and exhaled slowly, collecting himself.

The concern vanished. Gin straightened. “We should be on our way,” he said. “The Empress waits for us.”

Kogi put the injector away. He nodded, allowing Gin to lead the way. They left the peaceful realm of his quarters and entered the elevator again. Only this time, the elevator shaft was a portal to Kogi’s own personal hell.

His grandmother’s quarters were at ground level. Kogi always told her she was a fool to have them there but she wouldn’t have any of it. She valued the ease of entering the palace gardens over her own safety. It was the only personal indulgence Kogi had ever known her to

take, but it was a particularly risky one.

She used the traditional style. Wood floors. Sliding panels. The walls were covered with ancient ink paintings on silk and paper preserved in glass. Kogi waited in the front room beside a huge porcelain vase filled with orchids as Gin's father entered from an adjoining room. He bowed.

"Prince Shotoku," he said. He and Gin bore little resemblance. Gin's face was slim and angular, while Shogo's face was round. "Her Majesty the Empress receives you."

Kogi followed him, Gin a respectful distance behind him. A curdle of smoke rose through the air as Kogi entered his grandmother's tea parlor. She sat on a red sofa with a green silk robe on, her gray hair pulled into a high knot with the help of an onyx and jade headpiece. In her fingers she clutched a long pipe, which she dragged between her thin lips.

"Tea," she said.

To give him credit, the senior Nagasaki *did* move to call the maid, but Kogi knew his grandmother wanted him to do it. He grit his teeth and grasped the handle of the pot, pouring the hot liquid into her cup.

She stifled her pipe in a dish and leaned forward, taking her cup. Her gaze flickered back to the portrait windows of the parlour that offered an unimpeded view of her gardens. A manicured row of bonsai marched beyond the glass, illuminated by the lamps flickering on as the waning light of dusk rapidly disappeared.

"You were foolish," she said, breaking the silence.

Kogi stilled. Here it was. Gin and his father disappeared from the room. Kogi lingered beside the teapot and tray, waiting for her to speak again. When she didn't, he steeled himself. "I



know Narcisse called,” he said.

She clicked her finger on the edge of the porcelain. “Then you know full well why I am displeased. I trusted you to handle our dealings with Paris.”

“Narcisse needed those generators,” Kogi replied. “They’re terraforming that luxury community on Versailles. She showed me the plans. There’s no other supplier in the galaxy that could meet their demands.”

“That woman is a *snake*. A liar that I told you not to trust,” his grandmother said, her eyes flashing. The onyx of her headpiece shimmered in the light as she stood.

“I’m telling you she can’t refuse us,” Kogi replied, standing his ground.

His grandmother stared him down. Her jaw tightened and released. Plucking her pipe from the tray, she gestured towards the garden, a wordless command to follow.

Outside, a cherry tree scattered its blossoms across the path. The crickets in the bushes chirped as darkness covered the garden. His grandmother shuffled down the path in her emerald green robe. Kogi followed, wondering what heinous things she would say next. Thus far the conversation had remained rather tame.

She took her time relighting her pipe and took a long drag before continuing. “We cannot afford mistakes, Kogarashi. The council already believes we should forfeit our private enterprises.”

“And I agree with them,” Kogi replied.

His grandmother flicked her pipe in irritation. She continued, “We must honor our ancestors by maintaining control of the company. Without it, we would not have the throne.”

“There are other ways to maintain power, grandmother.”

“Your mother had the same pompous view. You see where it got her.”

“Leave her out of this,” Kogi growled, his blood boiling at the mention of his mother. The drug swam through his veins, tempering his rage, but when the conversation circled back to this as it always inevitably did, he found he could never fully control his reaction.

His grandmother did not flinch. She took a seat beside a bowing willow tree and looked up at him. “Izumi was never fit to rule. You have done well in differentiating yourself from her. You are brave where she was cowardly, intelligent where she was foolish, strong where she was weak. But in *this* you are like her.”

He ignored the comments directed at his mother. “I only think that we are misdirecting our efforts. Our duty is to the people of Pluto. We should not be wasting our time elsewhere.”

“Your opinion was different during your affair with that snake,” his grandmother replied.

Kogi bit his tongue. “Narcisse had significant connections beyond that of the terraforming industry. I see no fault in my past relationship with her.”

His grandmother puckered her lips around her pipe. She took another long drag and blew the smoke out in his face. His nostrils flared at the acrid smell.

“Kogarashi,” she said. “You are my successor but if you cross me, I will not hesitate in removing you from your duties.”

She was always threatening him like this. He opened his mouth and flames curled around his words: “And who will you choose to succeed you? You have no other children. I have no siblings.”

Her eyes shone with fury. It was no secret that his grandmother had failed to conceive any other children after his mother’s birth. “I will wear this crown to my deathbed if I must,” she

said. “As for our business with that wench, you will go to Paris this instant and find out how and why TerraX has refused our offer. Ask me again to forfeit the company and you can join your fool mother in the country.” She rose. “Now begone from my sight. You are becoming just as much of a disappointment as your mother.”

Nostrils flaring, Kogi strode past her, walking deeper into the garden. He couldn't even stand to go back inside and walk through her ancient, stuck-in-the-mud quarters imbued in a tradition that had died long before Man left Earth. She was living in the past. All of her.

Up ahead, a low bridge ambled over a whispering brook. Bioluminescent insects fluttered over the water, collected in twirling clouds beneath the teardrop lanterns. At a fork in the path, he turned right and followed a winding maze of bamboo to a greenhouse. Gin was already inside, leaning on the trunk of a maple, Kogi's coat slung over his arm.

“I take it the conversation did not tread lightly,” Gin said.

“You've no fucking idea,” Kogi replied. He pulled his coat from Gin's shoulder and followed the spiral staircase behind the maple into a subterranean tunnel that ran beneath the gardens. Gin touched his hand to the panel by the entrance, opening the door that slid horizontally on the treads to permit them entry.

The tunnel was one of a handful designed as an escape from the palace should ever there be a need. Kogi used this one rather often — about as often as he spoke with his grandmother. As he walked, he pulled his coat on. Gin walked silently behind him.

“Your father?” Kogi asked, inviting him to speak.

“He advises us to travel to Paris unannounced,” Gin replied.

“He thinks Narcisse is dangerous?”

“Untrustworthy. Not necessarily dangerous.”

Kogi frowned. “I’ve known her for a few years now, but I can’t say I know what she’s up to.”

“You never did,” Gin said and Kogi could hear the controlled annoyance. He had never liked Narcisse either. She often rubbed people the wrong way; still, she had a way of getting what she wanted. She could open any door you needed her to, in both a literal and metaphorical sense.

The other end of the tunnel bowed upwards with the changing landscape. There was an exit at the top of the incline, but Kogi and Gin continued on to the transport bay ahead. There were two capsules in the narrow passageway. They boarded the closest one and sat down, tucking their knees in. No sooner was the hood down than Gin set their course and clicked the button to initiate the launch.

Kogi felt his jaw stiffen as the capsule shot forward with a whoosh of air. There was a circle of lights ahead, illuminating the way. Minutes later, the capsule slowed and locked into the receiving station.

They emerged from the subterranean tube into a field of atmosphere generators. It was mid-winter on the moon. The cold, dry air bit into Kogi’s skin, making him shiver. Beneath the hazy green glow of Charon’s true atmosphere, the biodome generators worked hard to generate the appropriate balance of gases. It was dark now. Gin threw a tiny drone light into the air that bobbed along beside them.

“There’s no *fucking* way she can get the generators anywhere else,” Kogi bit out, zipping up the front of his jacket.

Gin moved to stand beside him. Having exchanged his suit for casual wear and disrupting the carefully combed strands of his hair, he looked the part of a commoner. When they moved

into the city, they masqueraded as normal civilians. It helped them move covertly, especially when Kogi was fed up with all the formalities.

“Did she act abnormally during your meeting?” Gin wondered. He had been watching their dinner from a building across the way.

“No,” Kogi replied. “She was just as cryptic as ever.”

“And you?” Gin said.

“Me?”

“Did you betray the usual lack of control you exert around her?”

Kogi flicked Gin off.

There was a glimmer of a smirk on Gin’s lips as he replied, “I will understand your rude gesture as a ‘yes.’ In that case, I think my father is correct in his advice that we travel covertly to Paris.”

“I want to speak to Narcisse,” Kogi said.

“I don’t think that’s wise.”

A drone buzzed somewhere behind them. In the blink of an eye, Gin pushed Kogi down against a generator and hovered over him. The simple action betrayed Gin’s true function. Many people presumed Gin was only Kogi’s attendant, yet that was a vastly incorrect assumption. He was trained to kill anyone that posed a threat to Kogi. And while Kogi believed he was more than capable of defending himself, he appreciated the backup every now and then — unfortunately, this was not one of those times.

As Kogi glared at Gin, he couldn’t help but notice the sweet scent wafting off Gini’s skin. It was fendragon, a weed that many Plutonians enjoyed for an after-dinner smoke.

“Anxious?” Kogi asked.

Gin pushed a hand over his lips to hush him. The searchlight of the drone moved over the generator, lingered. There was a sound like the fizzing of electricity and Kogi spotted the scrambling device in Gin’s unoccupied hand. Kogi held his breath as the drone slowly moved away. Then he was ripping Gin’s hand from his mouth.

“Unnecessary,” he hissed.

Gin wiped his hand on his slacks and rose. “We should hurry. The night watch has started.”

There was a curfew on the planet ever since the protests began for Saturn. The people wanted Pluto to take a stance, but thus far they had remained neutral. Kogi wanted them to stand with Pluto. That’s what had been causing the tension between him and his grandmother for the last few days. She wanted them to uphold the dynastic tradition of neutrality. Yet Kogi saw the danger in neutrality, that often silence was an assent to wrongdoing.

If they were caught, his grandmother would be furious.

At the edge of the field, Kogi and Gin followed a footpath behind a row of houses that meandered over and beneath a series of bridges on an aqueduct. The footpath let out on a street with low lamplights. It was almost curfew. The noodle houses were shuttering up for the night. Gin was the first to ascend the staircase on the side of a ramen restaurant, knocking on the second-story window. He held his phaser as a drone moved through the street.

When the door opened, a pink-haired woman ushered them inside. It was a small apartment with a tiny kitchen and a sitting room that doubled as a bedroom. She led Kogi and Gin to a futon where they removed their shoes and sat, accepting her offer for tea.

“But no black tea,” Kogi said. “You know I don’t like that, Mom.”

His mother rolled her eyes. She removed her wig and deactivated the facial reconstruction device she was using, tearing the electrical webbing away and setting it on the counter. Her natural dark hair was closely cropped, an ergonomic hairstyle for someone that was always on the run.

“How about you, Gin?” she asked. “I know you’re not as particular as my son.”

“Anything will do, your highness.”

“Oh none of that,” his mother said, waving the title away. “How is your father?”

“Well. He sends his regards — and this.” Gin rose, producing a square of folded cloth. Kogi watched them with mild interest.

His mother unwound it to find a delicate pastry inside, its waxy exterior shaped into the form of a rose. “My favorite,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye. “You tell him I said ‘many thanks.’”

Gin bowed. He returned to the futon.

His mother walked over with three teacups balancing on a tray. Gin insisted on pouring the tea, and his mother assented, laughing. “You said you need to go to Paris?” she asked, when they were all reclining comfortably.

“Undetected,” Gin said.

Princess Izumi nodded. “I have an acquaintance there who would be willing to assist you. He was a friend in my time at the academy. You can trust him.”

“As long as he hates grandmother, we can trust him,” Kogi said.

His mother frowned. “I take it you haven’t been getting along.”

“She’s a bitch!” Kogi said.

“Kogi, that’s no way to speak of your grandmother.”

Kogi rolled his eyes. “The monarchy is shameful. Not taking a stance on the Saturn attack is going to make things worse.”

“It’s a delicate matter,” his mother said. “I understand her hesitation to take a stance. We risk losing the support of the Kepler nations.”

“*Fuck* the Kepler nations,” Kogi said.

Gin started, looking at the windows immediately as if there was someone there watching. His mother hushed him. “You can’t be heard saying that, Kogarashi.”

“We’ve been spineless for decades. It’s time we take a stand.”

His mother shook her head. “I am doing what I can with the powers I have. We are mobilizing support for the refugees. You must take things one step at a time. Your grandmother is old, but she will do the right thing. You both will.” She placed her hand on Kogi’s wrist, giving him a meaningful look.

Gin took the tray and stood, leaving them alone for a moment.

“I miss you,” she said.

“I know,” Kogi said, the words he really wanted to say sticking in his throat.

When Gin returned, she addressed them both, “Come in the morning. I will have a ship ready for you. And listen, you must trust each other. Things are not in balance. We must all be ready.”

Gin nodded his assent.

Kogi took his mother’s words to heart but he could see in her eyes that she was more afraid than she let on.



## CHAPTER SIX

The atmosphere generators worked with Charon's existing biosphere, creating biodomes that cycled through the seasons.

Kogi poured the tea carefully into the three cups. His grandmother accepted hers with a flourish of her hand, then gestured to the man seated across from her. She was Queen Nakamura, the Chancellor of

Kogi marched swiftly between the rows of atmosphere generators. His grandmother was walking fast beside the Chief Engineer, but whether she was motivated by the prospect of afternoon tea or her discussion with the man beside her, he didn't know yet. Her green robes swept the cement beneath her. Kogi touched the scarf around his neck, adjusting it. It was winter on Charon, Pluto's most inhabited moon. The atmosphere generators worked with Charon's existing biosphere, creating biodomes that cycled through the seasons.

Two thousand years ago, the first colonists of Charon had begun harvesting the methane on its icy surface, turning it into usable gas that powered their cities. Once the methane was harvested from an area, it was terraformed into a liveable space. Atmosphere generators created the proper Earth balance of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and oxygen.

Kogi's grandmother turned to him. "Are you listening, Kogarashi?" she asked. The jade headpiece pinning her hair up shone in the waning sunlight.

"Yes, grandmother," Kogi replied.

Kogi's grandmother was Queen Nakamura. The Chancellorship of Pluto was a monarchy, passed through Kogi's family for the last thousand years. Kogi was next in line. Of course, his

mother was the true heir, but she had abdicated her seat many years ago.

Kogi caught up to his grandmother in two long strides. The engineer was speaking emphatically. “With these new machines, we will be able to harvest methane at twice the speed we do now.”

“Yes, yes,” his grandmother said. “My grandson has done the math. What of our deal with Hector?”

Kogi could read the irritation in the engineer’s features. His grandmother adjusted the sleeves of her hakama, acting unaffected, but Kogi knew she was aware of the effect of her words. She referenced their forthcoming deal with the planet Hector. As land developers swarmed on the planet’s open land, they needed two things that Pluto had in abundance: atmosphere generators and methane.

His grandmother referenced the

“They are willing to make the investment,” he replied. “But they want to know that the generators work first.”

“They need our generators,” Kogi said. “That is not a bargain they can afford to make.”