



Z
AND
THE SEA

CONNOR BEST



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A story by Connor Best

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Z and the sea



PART I

CHAPTER ONE

The Sentinels of Z

NOVARIO

'In life there is space... Space between people, planets, and all things one can see.'

The air flowed throughout the room with the gentlest of breezes, and was warmed by the touch of golden light. Novario looked out past the pearl-colored walls, and beyond the marble balcony into the glare of the sun. He had thought long and hard about which story to tell to his little girl this evening, and knew it could not be just any story. Each day more, was another day less that he could stir her imagination. Soon enough the pages of her life would turn to older years, and she would be immovable in the mind. He knew this was the nature of life, and she wouldn't be his little girl much longer. So, while her imagination could still roam; Novario knew he had to tell one that counted. He needed a real story that stirred, and of course he had promised such a story not one night ago. Ever since though, it had puzzled him all throughout the morning and into noon. He had searched his thoughts relentlessly that day until finally... He remembered one that just might do.

This though, was an *old* story... One that his own father had told him. The tale was truth, and yet also the gentlest of lies. This was the story of *Z and the sea*.

Far away, the light of the setting sun scattered the horizon, and the glittering towers of the city sparkled. He looked down to the prying emerald eyes eagerly awaiting the bedtime story that was promised. Her dark cheeks hid the outline of a smile now halfway concealed behind the light fabric blanket. *Carana* was all tucked in for the night, and he wouldn't make that little face wait

any longer. He cleared his throat, and strummed his fingers together before beginning in a mysterious tone...

'There once was a man who lived on an island alone out in the sea, and this man... Well, his name was Z.

Poor Z never knew where he belonged, and he was always alone, except for the company of the stars far above his home. Truly, all that poor Z knew of this world- was the terribleness of the sea.

The sea would crash into his island from time to time, and it scared him oh so much... Poor Z would cry each night until sleep. His eyes would wake the next morning, and his home would be broken and crushed; taken from him time and time again.

Luckily enough though Z was a tinkerer, and my dear there was never one better. He would rebuild his home after every storm. The sea despised his creations... Of that, he was sure. And many times, Z waded- and would try and sail off into the deep dark blue. But he knew this place he called home was very, very far gone. He would sail until the trees grew small, but he never lost sight, never at all....

Then, one day Z grew tired. He, himself was being crushed- being all alone on that island. So, Z made a wish... It was the only wish he ever made.'

'Can you guess what that wish was Carana?' Her brow furrowed. 'Di-did he wish for a friend?' He nodded approvingly, and continued.

'A great time passed after such a wish, and it would have been easy to lose all hope....' Novario leaned into a whispers distance with her, allowing his tone to hush to nothing more than a murmur. *'But- in fact, someone did find him- out there in the sea. One day, a whisper reached his ear. He looked around confused... Until up above his head it became near.*

A voice had spoken to Z. One from the stars far above him; it was such a long way away indeed. It was a voice that met him as a friend... But how quiet it was! Z could hardly hear it, and yet the more he listened- the more things became clear. The voice in the distance told him an answer, and it was one that he could believe.

It was an answer to the dreadful sea.

The voice above told him how, and he began to work at a creation that one could never believe. He began to build, and construct that which could eventually tame the sea. He followed the faraway words: instructions from high, high, above. Z crafted and toiled; weaving and binding, welding and fusing, and all things that one could believe...He fought with all his might to build this key. He toiled and labored for 10,000 nights, until finally he had it!

Small as a spec, yet large as the sky- oh my dear what a thing that it be. The voice had told him to build a net, a net which would capture all but he.

It was a net which he could walk on and keep safe, and stay above all the chaos beneath. It would give him control of the tide, and crush every terrible thing. It was all Z ever dreamt of; it was all he would ever need. So, on day ten-thousand and one... Z let loose his net to the deep.

It swarmed and surrounded! Quickly quelling all but he, his island, and his trees. For many nights Z hid in fear while the sea fought with a strength that quaked the world itself. It hated this thing he had founded. It raged at the net but couldn't best it! For Z's skill was no match. So strong was the net that neither the great creatures of the deep- nor even the flees; could escape this unnatural net.'

The look on the girl's eyes turned to awe.

'Then, one day the sea grew still- as it lost all its fight and its will. Underneath, the sea slumped, and realized that a silent fret... That was still better than the sting of the net. So, Z returned to the shore, and he found it did not fight or even scare him... It had lost its might! So, Z stepped foot out above the waves, and he danced above a net which kept him safe.

And yes, he did his best to enjoy the peace made from this stillness for the remainder of his days.'

Novario reached down to take a sip from the crystal glass beside him, subtly noticing his daughter had emerged with a frown on her face. A long sip followed, and he looked down onto her. 'What is on your mind?'

'But Daddy, I like the sea. This is a terrible story; what about the fishes and- and-'

He couldn't help himself, and a chuckle emerged as he set down the cup. 'I like the fishes too my dear, and I suppose that they were very scared under that great big net...' He stroked his chin and thought to himself. 'But that's not all Z did I suppose.... No, Z decided he wanted to look down

deeper into the blue-’ Her eyes lit up, and she pulled the blanket back up over her smile as she realized the story wasn’t finished yet.

‘Well Z tried to talk with the voice from the stars after that- but it had gone quiet. Z was now alone and sad once more, and he found that the silence of crashless waves... That was far worse than his fear from the times before. He simply had to see what had become of below, and he found his courage.

With bravery in his heart, he let himself dive down through the net. He ventured deep, deep, down.... But what he saw made him upset.

The sparkling fish of the blue, and the spotted ones too... They were being crushed by his very own net. It pressed them in and condensing their wings, and Z knew they didn’t want to be in the painful, awful, net. As he saw this; it made Z filled with regret. So, he ventured back up to the surface knowing he had to stop it!

However, when Z found the crest- that voice from above... That voice, which before was his friend, it echoed in laughter over the trapped waters. Loud and terrible for all to hear- Z listened as everything was finally made clear. The voice from above revealed it was an enemy of the sea, and it hated its loud existence... The voice- it wanted all to be still; same as he.

The voice stood for all that was lifeless and cold, while the sea fought against this insistence of old.

Z realized then what he had done and was filled with such shame... He had been tricked, and because of it the sea would never, never, be the same. The sea was never a monster- and yet he himself had fallen prey to one all the same. Z tried to return to his island, but there was hope for it no more. He was trapped in the net he built, and could no longer touch his own shore.

But just when Z was losing all hope, seven strangers emerged from beneath the tide. Floating alone in that dark place beneath the blue, their glow rose up from below. Never before had Z seen such a sight, and their light brought life from darkness; same as you. Z was scared, but little did he know that those strangers were scared too. It was not until he heard of their lives; those strangers- that he felt soothed. Mysterious, timeless, and lost too. For years and years, they had lived on the seas. They had found other islands and ventured of course; nothing was free-er than

the sea. Next, they told Z what he sadly already knew; how they were dependent on the sea itself, lest they too suffer and die. Z let loose a sigh beneath his evil net, and with a heavy heart told the Seven what he had done, and who he had met.

Z told the truth; how he was scared that all of the sea could die... He was scared that he could be the reason why.

So, the Seven thought long and hard of this, and now that they knew- they told Z that if he could build a net; then surely he could build a solution too! So, the Seven offered to help Z, and gave him a way to breath down in the deepest of depths. He ventured with them to a sunken workshop both dark and quiet; and very hidden from their foe. He worked and he worked as hard as he could! In a race to beat the voice of cold. Z toiled and toiled until he couldn't no more.... Then finally he found a way.

Z had made a ripple.

It was a special ripple; one which could control the net. This was a ripple that the voice would not soon forget! The Seven and he- well they raced up to the tide and began to beat back his terrible net.

When the great voice from above saw what he had created, the voice began to bellow and sneer. But all was only echoes, and it retreated to the far reaches of the cold dark... back away from all things.

They were trapped by the faraway voice no more!

Next, they started by spreading the net out wider; ... Even more! So that it would not crush their friends too close to the shore. Then, using the great spread of the net to help all the fishermen above- they helped to grow the fish and strengthen the sea. Of this, the sea was thankful... As thankful as could be. Their job was done, and so these few who tamed, and saved what be now had found their way to a golden shore.

But to their surprise; Z chose to stay back below on the deep and cold ocean floor. The Seven were as confused as you and I, but Z was neither confused nor doubtful. He had found after all of this- that his heart was one with the sea, and THAT was truly wonderful. No more did the tinkerer feel lost or alone- but loved and dear. Z had found his real home.

He told the Seven happily that it was time for him to go; he had seen enough, done enough, and lived enough that he could not lose. It simply couldn't be so. For the first time, he knew where he was meant to be. Z smiled a glorious smile, and said these words- as he sank beneath the waves of the sea:

In life there is space; space between foes, and space between friends. One day in time we shall see each other once more... and once again.'

Novario smiled, and the story concluded. Just below him, Cara had allowed her eyes to flutter to a close as she was fast-approaching the embrace of sleep. 'Dad... why would Z want to leave his friends?' Novario brushed a strand of hair from his princess's forehead, and she was close enough to sleep that he could have let her just fall into her dreams in silence.

'I think that Z knew his friends would be okay without him darling.'

'And- what about his great big net?' He stood, and gently planted a kiss on the crown of her head while a grin rose across his face. 'I think *that* is something you have to decide for yourself my dear. Some things are just stories, and others are just as curious as the swells of the sea.'

Novario accessed his Net, and instantaneously his billions of nanites answered the call.

They began to take form, and he felt the ever-normal transformation as they extended outwards from within his own eye-socket. Creeping over like a mold; his blue eye was seamlessly encased within a mere cycle of time, and the purple hue once again illuminated his vision. Vast multitudes of possibilities, and the endless information of the universe returned to him. The purple dome now concealed his cornea, and the whites of his eye wholly. He reached up his hand to touch his right eye, it now felt like a smooth layer of glass to his fingers. By thought, Novario indicated for the lights within the room to dim, and he was about to turn to leave when a final question emerged.

'This story... Is it about Lord Zelos making the Net? It sounds like how he and the Sentinels took over the universe before the *Three Sovereignties*, Daddy.'

Novario retracted his Net somewhat dazed, and knelt down next to her as his voice quivered in shock at what he had just heard. 'Who told you that, baby?' She stretched carelessly, and did not

know the seriousness of what she had just uttered. ‘Mr. Revaxon had told me a couple weeks ago. He’s nice. He just asked me to keep it secret, but I don’t keep secrets from you, Daddy.’

A ringing was forming in his ears. He could see she was close to sleep as she yawned, and realized then that this was a terrible choice for a story. He had been too careless to tell her this, and now opened the wrong door for her imagination. From this day on, she would know of the darkness that existed all around her, and of the horrors that still burned in memory. She would see her Net as the chains that they were, and would know until her last waking day of the shadow that would forever loom. All that he could hope for was that she would fall into dream- and think of this story as nothing more than that. He closed his eyes, and forced a calm on himself as he kissed her forehead.

‘Only a story, Cara... I love you, and sweet dreams.’

Revaxon had told his child of the terrible former masters of this universe. He had told her of reality’s worst nightmare. A fury boiled within him that he would keep hidden from his little girl as she descended into sleep. Novario did not want to scare her. As for Revaxon though...

There would be nowhere that he could hide from him now.

REVAXON

His feet felt every step nowadays.

His nightmares seemed like dreams compared to reality, and now, a nervous sweat slickened Revaxon's palms. His gaze stayed on the flickering fire in front of him, and traced its random movements as his lone solace. The cave they sat in was a dry and dust covered recess upon the cliffside, and across the flames just in front of him was his older brother; Nilus.

Nilus was no longer a kind man, and was seemingly much too impatient these days to sit in a cave like this with nothing but silence. No, this was unlike him and exceedingly strange. Indeed, they were not like the thousands that littered the field outside this cave... The two of them now were far beyond the laws of nature in their impossible ages. *Could he be having doubt? Why would he lead him here and risk the dangers of the wild?* Their bodies could change like any interchangeable tool of an engineer, but this was uncharacteristic. He expected Nilus to be the one who complained of the inconveniences and minimized his risks. Revaxon knew this to be true.... Yet it was *his* feet which felt every step this day, and not a sound from him...

He wondered *why*.

'Do you think we could talk freely?'

Shifting his gaze upwards, the dim illumination of the fire showed the cold blue eyes of his older brother staring into him. His soulless windows tore through the openings of his wild white hair. Dark eyes: unflinching, unwavering, and preying with a cold consumption of all things that may be construed as weakness. Nilus was a calculating presence, and where curiosity lacked- he knew an insatiable hunger for power prowled inside. His elder brother no longer just intimidated him; he scared him. Time had a way of tearing down those bonds which made them each other's shields against the cosmos. Time had replaced their familiarity with a contest of conviction, and now Revaxon feared above all that this path they had begun on an eternity ago was nearing to a tipping point. Across the flames, Nilus averted his gaze outwards to the entrance of the cave, and Revaxon knew that his attention was farther absorbed in what smoked below this cliff.

Outside this cave lay a smoking battlefield. A battlefield harboring thousands of impact craters from the inferno that they had unleashed. The colony which locals had referred to as *Belozante*, and a place which refused the choice his brother had offered to them. There would be no more locals left... Surely none survived what had just been unleashed. Revaxon had researched this planet down to its every fiber, and he *knew* they were of no threat to them. They could not have hidden away any critical weapons, and no overlapping history with the long-gone species of the Sentinels; the *Ilmari*. They only wished to be left in peace, but his brother had not been content with this answer. Nilus had consumed himself in believing that they had hidden the technology of the predecessors here. He had created a false reality which showed these innocents as a threat to the three sovereignties of the modern age. He had warped truth to show the *Council* that any of these warring systems could become as dangerous as the Sentinels themselves if left to their own devices. He did this, just as he had to the colony before them, and the ones before that. Revaxon squeezed his hands into fists... He could no longer avoid the truth: his brother had become a monster.

‘Nilus.’

Clenching his jaw, his brother lifted his hair up off of his forehead. ‘I told you to never say that name-’

But that was his name...

He pointed his finger coldly at Revaxon, and breathed in through his nostrils heavily. ‘*Nilus* was the name I was given as a child, and is a name which will now only allow leverage for others. You have become a fool if you think you can still use your real name without consequences! You drag me down with your persisting stupidity and recklessness. I am now *only* the Patria-’

He needed to stop his momentum before he got going, and uncharacteristically interjected. ‘Nilus please.... I need you to listen to me that we *need* to stop this! You are Nilus. That is your name and you are not a bad person. Those people were not a threat, and you and I both know it! For the sake of our mother please listen to what I am telling you-’

Nilus lurched to his feet with frightening agility. ‘Our mother is dead!’

‘I can no longer stand your whining ignorance to the fact that we are all that is left. You need to remove yourself from the equation and see the broader truth brother. That truth is that you are either with me or against me- because your scheming and secrets are at their end.’

Revaxon’s heart had begun to beat at a frantic drum. ‘Those people-’ His finger pointed outwards to the cave entrance, ‘Those people were not a threat to us, they did not even have any presence of the *Net* here! We butchered them!’

Nilus held stark in his stance over the glowing light of the whipping fire. ‘What worries me the most brother... is that you do not *want* to see the power the Sentinels still have over us.’

‘What power!? The Sentinels killed themselves off almost Three Hundred years ago! *The War of the Flares* decimated the last of the Ilmari people: The Sentinels killed themselves! We were there Nilus, and you and I saw them fall into extinction! What power do they have left?’

‘The power of memory, you fool! Have you forgotten the millions upon millions of *Automatons* which vanished in the end? Have you forgotten so easily the *Manta ships* screaming over smoking skies as existence burned? The power of the Sentinels lay in the hands of the Helios who wielded the Net, and we are forever chained to this prison!’ He pointed to the side of his head in an almost manic gesture. ‘You and I remember an Onari galaxy controlled by them, but you do not see this as enslavement. I push us on because if we do not extinguish their fire to the last ember, then that very same power will be our undoing. The Ilmari created a weapon in our damn minds, and if you can’t see it as exactly that... Then you have already surrendered to this prison of the mind.’

‘Do you hear yourself, Nilus? They created the greatest technology in history, and you want to destroy this tool? That is all it is, and it’s not worth what we are doing.’

‘This conversation is over!’

Nilus gripped his hand into a fist and brought it up to his forehead. ‘I am done with your delusions, and this conversation is over... I expect when we return to Burax for you to resign from your position. You are clearly-’

‘*NO!*’

His brother's eyes shot back at him enraged. Revaxon needed him to hear this- he *had* to get through to him. 'I said this conversation is over.' He couldn't back down. If he did, then the genocide they had just committed would not end. He needed Nilus to acknowledge that he was no longer in the right. 'Nilus, you are acting like a madman! If we continue on this path, you are leaving me no choice but to-'

'Make a choice, then.'

His dry words caught in the back of his throat. Nilus had spoken with a frost in his tone which he had rarely heard throughout his life. In that moment, he came to realize the intensification of the rain outside. The gentle pattering had morphed into a downpour. It roared into the cave and whipped mist through the cracks in the rock, and at his feet, the small fire was being beaten inwards helplessly as the harsh gales swept in from the cliffside. His brother's eyes had darkened, and an almost menacing feeling began creeping into Revaxon's thoughts.

Calmly, Nilus streaked his fingers through his quicksilver hair. 'Have you heard that rain is supposed to mean a new beginning? I suppose it is to signify the act of washing clean the past. Like a wound...'

Revaxon furrowed his eyebrows. 'Nilus, ... I- I can't let you do this. It's not right.'

'You are not listening.'

He was trying to comprehend his distant words, 'Do you even hear yourself-'

But strangely, his air left him in that moment. Revaxon felt a sudden confusion grip at his thoughts like he couldn't form a word. Nilus had flashed a movement towards his belt, and before he could even react- something had changed in him. Revaxon found his wide eyes staring adrift... Aimlessly, he looked back at his brother. His breath was becoming frantically erratic, and it felt as though time was beginning to slow. 'Rev-' His brother had spoken softly, but a ringing had formed rapidly in his ears. His eyes lowered, down past the fire at his feet and to his own hands. They shook just in front of him. He was trembling frantically, but did not understand why. *Why did he suddenly feel so strange?*

It was at this question, that the smell of burning skin began to materialize in his nostrils.

What is this...? On his chest, a smoking hole had become visible through his dense-fiber tunic. *He hadn't even heard the shot.* Gravity took hold as dizziness collided with his coordination. Rapidly, his legs lost their strength, and he collapsed violently to the dirt. He needed the warmth of the fire, and reached outwards towards the licking flames. His eyes turned upwards; pleading to the ceiling as a cold numbness was seizing control over his body. He uttered the only thing he could.

'He-help me, Nilus...'

Revaxon craned his neck and stared in shock through horrified shivers. His brother slowly walked around the fire, and stood there motionless above him. *Why- why was this happening?* Tears were beginning to form in his own darting eyes, and he gasped out for anything to make sense of what was going on. Nilus' words emerged soft through the deafening ring in his ears. 'I am... setting you free.' He squatted down and placed a heavy hand onto his shoulder- a light pat that could hardly be felt as it broke through the numbness. 'Don't be scared... fall asleep Rev. Just- close your eyes.' His brother stood up and stepped over his crumpled self, moving towards the cave entrance. Revaxon felt himself slipping, it was all going to black.

No.

With all the strength he had left in him, Revaxon turned himself over onto his stomach. He looked after his brother's exit, and mustered up a deep breath of air.

'We... We-re brothers!'

His words came out like a hoarse whisper, but it caused Nilus to stop in his tracks. Just outside the cave entrance, the rain came down in torrents upon him. Lowering his head, he turned and Revaxon watched as the droplets washed over his emotionless face. There was no sadness or love left in him, and only calculating consideration.

'We're at a point in our lives where it is about more than just the two of us, and the future of all the Onari galaxy is at stake. It is for the best your journey ends here. You always were too weak to do what needed to be done.'

Wheezing, and fighting through the tears streaming down his cheeks, Revaxon's arms pulled at the loose rock and raged for each excruciating centimeter towards his brother's feet. Nilus'

emotionless face continued to look down on him as streaks of water fell into his thick beard from the damp clumps over his forehead. Revaxon wouldn't stop, and he couldn't quit.

'I am proud of you, Rev.'

He fumed with all that he had left inside himself, and pulled further away from the fire. He resisted the darkness creeping onto him- and pushed into the mists of water spraying onto his face from the descending storm outside. His eyes stayed ahead; terrified- as Nilus inhaled deeply.

'But... it is time.' He furrowed his brow. 'I am Rainfall.'

Revaxon's eyes panned upwards with heavy weight, and watched Nilus' dripping arm lift itself toward the roof of the cave entrance. The plasma sidearm came into view, and before he could realize what was happening... It discharged with a deafening boom. Light erupted, and Revaxon heaved with all the sound he could muster in his lungs.

'We're brothe-'

But his words were cut from him as the ceiling caved down, and dust-shrouded darkness engulfed him.

CHAPTER TWO

A rhyme in a new time

BEAU

“The voice had told him to build the Net, a net which would capture all but he.”

In his dream, Beau had been floating. He was adrift through space, and blanketed in complete darkness. That cold darkness was like a shadow, and it had to cling to him there... like a frigid wind wrapping around his heart. Now, he looked down upon the sea-sprayed cliffside, and watched as the light of the moon peaked through the clouds. A moonlight hue pierced through the cold tears of the heavens, and in its illumination he gazed. Soaked in his high perch, his blue eyes stayed transfixed on the crashing waves below. Untamed brown hair slipped over brow, and had been soaked to black as the droplets trickled over his forehead. The icy water cascaded down his cheeks, and he knew he should be under cover... but he was hopelessly stubborn- even with himself. He massaged his chest, and slowed his breathing in an effort to relax.

“An answer, to the dreadful sea.”

He stood there in the rain for absolutely no reason at all... and that was the beauty in it. His mind wandered, and he was able to be briefly free- between these crashing waves below, and the shining lights beyond. This little world called Antionus was so beautiful... but he was sick of life. *Life*, which nowadays had grown so loud and confusing that he doubted whether anything truly wild lived among those stars anymore. He lived in a time of crisis of course... as it naturally is. *Where do crisis even begin?* Ironically, hopeful doctrines of peace and plenty were never in short supply from the Galactic Union, Golden Empire, and Onari Republic of Unified Systems (ORUS). So much so that it was easy to feel drowned in all the positivity... but they

were just words attempting to strangle the truth. Trillions across countless worlds were scavenging for resources. There wasn't peace, and it was because everyone wants more. His dream adrift through the darkness was an almost welcomed escape. Life was nothing like the bedtime stories his mom would tell him, there were no voices high above, just silence. So quite inexplicably, Beau felt heard in that moment alone on the cliffside. It was a soothing and ignorant thing which he dreamed- that there was someone, or something listening in the clouds.

“Staying hydrated?”

Logan's chime broke the silence, and caused Beau to jump from his own contemplations. His friend had a mastery of sneaking up on people despite his large frame. A big, green head emerged from the brush at his back, characteristic of the *Sorctif species*. Logan had a gruff look to himself; black hair, and a braided beard which made him appear as though he were an ex-convict with a love for knives, vehicle theft, and unholy women. Reality couldn't be farther from the truth though, as he was in fact the shy man behind the console. An absolute genius... and socially challenged as most engineers are. “No, definitely not.” Beau replied with a grin, “Just swimming in my thoughts, *philosophizing*, I guess. Actually, it could probably do wonders for you big fella.” He directed the subtle dig back at Logan with a smirk, and chuckling followed as he sensed the sarcasm. “Don't think that I have forgotten about your escapades there- *Philosopher*... you still blaming the service droid from that last Union Day celebration and all... when the sad truth is you just can't keep up with ole Logan.”

Beau shook his head with amused disbelief, knowing all too well that the events of this night were only survived by the security footage on their cruiser, and a faceprint on the porthole of the boss's quarters. They had known each other a long time, and it was difficult for Beau to even imagine life without Logan. Heck- he would've been killed his first days in the slums of *Burax* if this green giant hadn't decided to take him to *Minvette*. Getting taken into the Minvette gang was no small feat, but surviving was a whole other beast entirely. In the gang, every other day it seemed as though you were either in a firefight or on the run, and it didn't help that their ship captain; Sonan Tez, was certifiably insane. The 'cyborg' always seemed hungry to pull off maneuvers and jobs that would most likely mean suicide, but Beau had grown to respect the ambition (or madness) behind it. However, their assault tomorrow was nothing short of the most deadly, idiotic, and downright lucrative of them all. Beau shifted his weight- trying to divert his

attention to escape the dark thoughts. “I’ll, ... I would take nights like this over the roar of Burax any day of my life.” He heard Logan’s steps as he joined him at the cliffs edge, “You nervous about tomorrow?”

“Nothing to be nervous about- we’re only stealing about five lifetime-sentences worth of lokani, who could possibly be nervous in a time like this?”

“Just another day in the life.”

Lokani crystals: the only known thing in existence which was able to open a *flashgate*. The first advanced civilizations known as the *Ilmari* had discovered the lokani drive’s technology; the crystals would centrifuge gravitational chutes... and take you anywhere in the cosmos. Sonan wouldn’t give up the details for how he found out about this place, but the cache they were after tomorrow was supposedly massive. As the rain had soaked Beau to his core; he was freezing, but he would not part from this view just yet. “Yeah, tomorrow will be interesting... not every day you raid a *Union satellite station*.” His eyes panned upwards, where a break in the clouds saw the flashing dot orbiting around them... He indicated for his Net to enhance his vision. The light tickle wrapped around his eye, and he watched as his eyesight zoomed like a telescope. That station blinked now in his full view, before more clouds passed... but he already knew what awaited him. He retracted the Net, and blinked his focus back to the waves.

“Run me through it one more time, will ya?” Logan urged him, clearly trying to reassure him it was a viable plan. “In and out in 30 rotations. I’m with Sonan and the others hitting the orbiting structure at daybreak: we are ejecting out of the planet’s rings, and drop on top of the facility. Enter through the secondary main hangar. The tower down here will keep their defense drone’s attention on the surface. We grab the lokani from the R&D level, and meet at the hacked transport within 25. After that- we’re running. We’ll get back to you just inside the rings; you pick us up, we ditch the Union transport, then, multi-gate it until we’re back in Titus City. Obviously, this can’t go wrong anywhere...” Logan peered over him, “Come on brotha, we’ve got this- I checked the specs and they match 100%, our intel is gold. Even my old uncle would’ve given the thumbs up.” Beau exhaled, coping with the stress as best as he could. “What do you think our odds are- really?”

“Oh, we’re definitely gonna die.”

He didn't miss a beat, and Beau couldn't help but break out laughing. *How long did people really live nowadays anyways? Was it nine fractures... yes that was it.* He had pushed his luck quite a bit in his now 2 fractures of existence- about one fracture every 84 months: 4452 days... *tomorrow would be day 10,085.* Beau lowered his head to look down below them, and felt that strange phenomenon of wanting to take the leap creep into his thoughts. A part of himself drew away, while a smaller part stayed. The gales whipped through his hair, and he leaned into the breath of the sea. Happiness would be taking a boat through those swells, out into the vastness of that deep blue. Inhaling deeply, he savored the salty air washing over the cliffside. He felt a hand find his wet shoulder, seemingly in an effort to bring him back to reality. He nodded to Logan, and they turned their backs to the cliffside, before beginning their trudge back through the jungle.

Stepping over the curling vines on the path back to the ship, and after a while they could hear Sonan's roar off in the distance. He would guess he was in a rage over the pulse tower's slow setup. "At least we won't have to be down here when it fires, those drones are going to tear this place apart." Logan's chime struck him ironically. The pulse tower was basically a makeshift radio. Simple enough, except it sent a concentrated frequency towards the facility in orbit, and as soon as that bad boy fired- a whole lot of Union drones were coming for it. Beau shook his head at this. "We won't have as bad of a day as these poor fellas." Sonan had told the ground team that they were to book it out of there in the *G09* the moment the radio fired, but Logan and Beau knew better. Military drones would not come for prisoners, and those bots were much faster than any ship the ground team would have to break out of the atmosphere. Two of their crew down... and they didn't even know it yet. Beau reached the entrance to the cruiser and trudged up the ramp, absolutely soaked, and yearning for sleep.

"I'm going to take a quick powernap." He managed through a yawn to Logan, and the bearded brainiac couldn't help but yawn himself. "I'll get you up when it's time... and hey, and we've got this man." Reassuring Beau, he clapping his hand with a valiant attempt at enthusiasm. He nodded with an amused smile before turning to walk down the hall towards his pod, he needed to let his mind go blank for a few hours. He needed to forget about Minvette, about life... about everything- at least for a little while. As his head hit the meridian pod and he closed his eyes, he sank into the quiet knowing he would return to his endless drift through the dark. That singular, and strangely beautiful thought followed him into sleep.

CARA

Fire reigned down from above her, and stray embers would briefly illuminate the smoke enshrouded landscape below the ash-bed. The singed trees stood as ghosts of their once towering selves in the wake of the battlefield. Cara ducked next to a fallen tree, knowing the rest of her squadron had moved forward to the checkpoint, but she progressed patiently- suspicious of the subterranean threats around her. All ORUS soldiers were well aware of the threat the Omniza possess concerning their tunneling in the face of a warped landscape. ORUS *Legionnaires* are some of the most well-trained militants in the galaxy, but her squadron had progressed ahead through the foreign landscape with an arrogant attitude. Cara rolled underneath a bark-encrusted corpse and swiftly slid into the low tunnel just ahead. Creeping through the black embrace of the subterranean world, she indicated to her Net to activate her low-light iris shell. A lens crept from inside her skull, and wrapped around her eyes; suddenly allowing her to witness the black tunnels in a bright yellow light. Down into the underworld she continued, deeper and deeper... until a chill emerged in the air.

Cara entered into a large chamber; a hive. Dozens of holes on countless levels extending far, *far*, below her position into a massive chasm. Moving to her left in silence, she edged along the external rows, listening, and watching for any potential threats lurking in the dark. Grappling the rock wall, she climbed down another three levels and felt strangely blanketed in complete silence. Her thermo-indicator was picking up a subtle heat trace spread throughout the rock flooring... but it was very faint. Scanning the dirt floor as she moved around the circular ledge... and she tensed. The lightest, most indistinguishable crushing of material had emerged... but that quiet crunch nearby had motivated her to activate the plasma rod on her right shoulder. There was definitely something here with her. She raised her fists, and the *scythe-burners* hugging her knuckles began to hum. She peaked down outside the entrance to a tunnel, where her eyes caught disturbed dirt lingering on the far side. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes to focus- to listen. *Nothing, ... Nothing... Crunch.* Her eyes shot open, and she launched around the turn without hesitation.

SMACK!

In an instant she was dropped by something heavy. She hit the ground hard, and raised the burners fully primed- but the shadowy figure advanced with predatory aggression. Before she could even tighten her fingers, it pounced on her and caused the two to tumble off the ledge violently. Cara impacted on her back with a hard thud, but vaulted up in an instant, charging after the shadowed opposition. *Lightning fast*- her own momentum was harshly redirected, flinging her like a bag against the side of the wall. The surprise maneuver caused her to buckle, and without pause it had her pinned in an instant. Her arms clamped to the wall with enormous pressure bearing down. Her left elbow felt moments away from dislocating at the overwhelming strength. “Cara, you disappoint me...”

This is bad... The man pressed his knee into her chest, and she could clearly feel the armor of his leg-guard expanding in size to force the air from her lungs. He was going to make her pass out with just the nano-extension, *the disrespect was immeasurable*. She took a final breath. “Speak for yourself... you-” Her vision was being impaired with black spots and had sensed her head now becoming worryingly- and dizzyingly light. *Enough of this*. The plasma rod on her shoulder abruptly whirred to life, filling the cavern with a bright flash of green light, and sending the man spiraling through the air. She watched exasperated, as he smacked against the adjacent wall and dropped to the ground. He was motionless in the dirt, laying still for a moment before finally lifting his head with a large amount of effort. “Not... cool.” Cara couldn’t help but let a smile break free as she rolled onto her feet with a devilish giggle. She stuck her tongue out victoriously and pressed the console on her wrist.

SIMULATION COMPLETE

Instantly, light engulfed the room. The renderance of the dirt crypt rapidly retracted to reveal the walls smoothing, and like a giant mold, their setting was reverting to a light blue coloring as those walls retreated further and further. She could now see Dorvax; his black skin and bald head shone with the new light; he was a muscular individual, and she did her best to hold back a laugh as he was still struggling to get up. Looking down below her position on the ledge, the once seemingly endless pit began to ascend up from nothing, melding to a level, and singular flooring as though inflated air was surging beneath to reshape this once warped balloon. Cara and Dorvax stood there, feeling the material under them continue to rise until the entire arena was but a large and empty space in a massive indoor dome. On the far side, she could see the three other

squadron members standing in the distance, undoubtedly pissed that they had cut the simulation short. Bright blonde hair emerged as Nina separated from the other trainees and retracted her helmet on her way to the pair of them. “You kidding me, she already got you? Did she pull out the nanite swarm?” Nina shouted when in range of the two.

Dorvax grinned down at the ground, “She did cheat, I thought we were gonna have a fair matchup... and next thing I know I have a plasma rod teaching me to fly.” Cara’s bewilderment bore down onto the First Lieutenant, “Hey! You and I both know that was fair play!” Dorvax shrugged, apparently rejecting her argument, “I’ll keep that in mind when we do this again, and you may want to have some extra padding. You know... for when I drop a detonator at your feet.” They pushed each other playfully and began walking to the nearest wall of the renderance arena. Nina and Cara split up from their squad leader at the exit, separating with an informal salute, and walking down the hallway into the open patio of the Legion Academy. Light pierced into the tunnel, and revealed the 63rd floor of the superstructure, a perfect place to look out on the sprawling city of Eunos; the epicenter of the ORUS governance in the galaxy. They took their time breathing in the fresh air, and observed the vast capital. Giant towers extended from hundreds and hundreds of levels below, on upwards. Not a thing in the universe could stop this city.

One could peer down through the spacing of towers, and see trenches of subterranean sophistication stretching fathoms deep. Elevated highways for magnetic chutes snaking through the air, and far below; underwater commuters dove through the lime-green depths. Zooming ships came and went into the atmosphere as the accelerator towers zipped them through the clouds. This was the bustling hub of planet Emina. Almost 5 billion people lived here, and it was all hers; an inheritance of imperium. She was royalty of course, but she knew most every corner and hidden secret of this metropolis. Cara loved all of it; she loved the Shipwreck Casino down in the sunken ghetto, the Starlight Sky Bar on the 300th, the Purple Sun Tower... The successor to the throne of ORUS and the commander of the Legion held claim on Eunos- and to her... that would be dad. “Why is it that you of all people aren’t a Squadron Leader yet?” Nina blurted out, “I mean for *Zelos*’ sake Cara, one day the entire planet will be bowing down to you, and you are still second in command to Dorvax; the guy who will one day inherit the grand total of a singular hat... maybe.” Cara rolled her eyes, “That’s not what it’s about. I’m no better than anyone else.”

Sensing Nina was unconvinced, she continued; “Besides, I haven’t even reached my second fracture yet, I still don’t have half the experience of Dorvax, or any other squad leaders. But come on... we are *Marauders* we don’t answer to many others anyways!”

“I’m just saying... also I hope you know tonight we are making absurdly poor choices; you’re finally catching up to the rest of us on fracture count.” Her friend shot a look that reeked of mischief, but Cara just shook her head with disbelief. “You have a drinking problem you know that?” They reached the elevator, and quickly descended down to the locker rooms to change out of their combat suits.

Cara looked into the mirror occupying the far wall of the locker room. She sized herself up. Having always thought Nina was prettier than her... she *always* criticized her own complexion. Cara inherited the Noxar family melanin content, giving her skin a graphite grey color; with matching lips and blue hair, but her eyes were a light green. She was slightly taller than Nina, and had a little less fat on her body, but Nina was considerably stronger. She had always wished for the simplistic beauty of her blonde hair and fair skin; it was such a natural beauty. She had a face that people didn’t stare at out of shock. The signature give-away of Emina royalty was this graphite skin, and all of the highborn bloodlines were intertwined with the peculiar pigment mutation which yielded it. The blue hair and green eyes however, that was entirely her mother’s doing- as the High Queen Bellona Noxar was originally from the jungle planet of Baneen.

Cara finished changing into her loose-fitting shirt and shorts that were *far* more comfortable than the skin-tight uniform. Before the close of the hour, she found herself zooming down the highways back to the Royal Keep. The simulations always drained her of energy, even more so than full-go missions it seemed. But then again, she realized that made complete sense, as *Marauders* are always going to be more of a challenge than the next ten contestants combined. She looked over to ask Nina what her choice of dress would be, only to find her in a self-induced coma most definitely aided by the very expensive seat she occupied. She cracked a grin, and let her own eyes rest as they raced faster than sound towards *Nomelle*. She would need to prepare for the gala upon arrival... but her dress would be for the guests invading her house, and definitely not for her. She was positive that these politicians would be far more dangerous than any soldier... and dammit was she dreading the oncoming horde.

CHAPTER THREE

Transference

BEAU

He felt like he was going to be sick.

Sweat poured down Beau's face- stinging into the corners of his eyes as the bright green glow filled the inside of the drop pod. They were veiled in the rings of the planet up to this point, but approaching visibility fast. The ejection countdown flashed on the screen in front of him. These pods could have been a little more comfortable, yes... but *sweet Seven* did he wish he would have taken a piss before getting in this thing. His current regrets were tallying. There were five of the crew, and Sonan waiting in the other drop pods. Seven silos lining the underbelly of the cruiser: seven mech suits. They had picked these up a couple months back by way of a multitrillion *credum* mining corporation called *Vusix*. It was risky messing with them, and positively suicidal doing what they were now within a moment of attempting. He knew well enough that not even a mech suit would save him from the heavy artillery onboard the orbital facility- it would tear them in half. The suit's intended purpose was for asteroid mining, not this.... magnetic grips, oxygen supply, carbon scrubbers, nanotech clotting- the works, but by no means combat ready. Not even the few modifications Minvette made would really help, no...he felt like he was about to take on a leviathan- with nothing but knives.

And why did they have to take out the waste systems?

A deep rumble saw the interior lights shift to deep red, and Sonan's voice coughed inside his helmet. "*Eck- rhmm, alrighty you smooth heads- Blue just fired the tower. You know the drill: drones enter the atmosphere, and we're flying. T- 30 cycles... and er- we'll pour one out for Blue and, the other guy when this is done. Clenching time!*"

Beau's heart drummed: roaring in his ears as his eyes darted over the holographic display. He tried to calm his breath while analyzing the asteroids, and they were fast-approaching a dense field ranging from the size of his fist to larger than the drop pod itself. These 'space-coffins' would route them through the rings, and through the dust and ice... nothing big enough to cause damage. *No, surely not.* Logan patched through as if on cue. *"Be there at the 30th Rotation no matter what- Ok?"* Beau knew what he meant. Anyone who wasn't in the hangar when it was time- wasn't leaving. He nodded and closed his eyes.

"Eject!"

Weightlessness. His breathing intensified, and his eyes were squeezed so tight together that his face felt frozen in wrinkles, and he counted down in his head. Popping began to cascade against the metal. 5, 4, He reached into his thoughts and felt his Net begin to materialize around his closed eyes. 3, 2, ... His eyes shot open, and the suit launched into space. His blood roared through his body like a fire and engulfed his heart in an inferno of adrenaline. He was flying towards the looming shadow at zooming speeds when Sonan's unpleasant growl rang into his ear. *"We're coming in hot boys! Don't flinch!"* The sharp inhale before impact caused him to reflect, just in time to form a singular thought.

This is gonna hurt.

Beau slammed into the side of the structure like a scorching comet. Oxygen seemed swooped from his lungs, and in a blinding instant of igniting lights and confusion- he reached outwards with all he had... His magnetics missed, and he was jolted into a battlefield confusion.

CRUNCH!

His side scorched in pain as he was struck- sending vibrations of heat over his ribs.

Uncontrollably: he spun. His body spiraled along the exterior of the orbiting fortress in perpetual cartwheel, and through the hyperventilations refilling his empty lungs- the rotations of these cartwheels now had him on course for the planet. Moving his arms around, he still had full mobility- only by miracle was the mech suit intact. His hands flailed as he helplessly worked to get ahold of himself. Breaths pumped in and out as blurred vision was inducing panic, and he hurtled towards Antionus' atmosphere. He closed his eyes to focus his thoughts into a command, and his Net responded.

LOWER THRUSTERS: FIRING

His body lurched forward a split-cycle; eyes shooting open maddeningly as he tried to mark a point he could catch ahold of. The railing was fast-approaching from the spinning blur's confusion. Beau torqued his knees up- aiming to propel within arm's reach, and just barely close enough to grasp on. His breath cut- and his magnetics screeched painfully within the suit. Desperately, his effort to catch failed, and he was sent skipping along the side a couple dozen meters. Finally- with his last great effort, he shot out his arm... and the Net responded.

LEFT MAGNETIC: ENGAGED

He locked; and even with the metal exoskeleton, his arm felt on the edge of being ripped from its socket. The momentum swung his body into the dense exterior brutally, and as he collided- he scrambled to grip onto whatever he could. Bouncing once, but pulled himself inward, and dangled there on the side of the speeding satellite. *He had caught on.* Peeking his head sheepishly downwards, he inhaled as though he hadn't known oxygen in eons, and allowed himself to slump against the exterior of the fortress in utterly exhausted relief. *He wasn't about to enter the atmosphere in a sturdy, human-sized can.* After a few moments, he became aware to the background noises blasting in his ear while the other members of the crew screamed. They were fighting head-on against the overwhelming opposition of the exterior defenses. He peeked down once more, and judging from his view of the planet, he must have ricocheted far enough to be on the underside of the facility. This, then answered the next question... as to why he didn't have a rail-shot tearing him in half at this very moment. Scanning his surroundings... he was indeed alone, and directly below him, a vacant drone port sat open in the drone's absence. *There.* Swinging his torso around, he scaled down into the port.

Once inside, he maneuvered himself to face the ceiling, and deactivated the plasma grid with a swift punch to the underside of the circuitry. Inside, he located the squishy, gelatin-textured balls that each housed a matrix of nanites... Beau activated the light on his right glove, and directed it inward to overwhelm the system's brain. He jerked his hand back as the cover slammed shut, and a whirring sent him tumbling into the dim, oxygenated interior. He popped up quickly to grab the rifle off of his back and spun around, but within a few cycles realized he was alone in the silence. Hyper-neurotic eyes searched the drone garage quietly, and watched for any potential threats in

the humming stillness- until finally, he retracted the helmet. Stretching out his neck, Beau activated the comm with the rest of the crew.

“This is Beau, I’m inside the Drone Garage, what is the status of-”

“SMACK MY CHEEKS AND CALL ME SAMANTHA! I was positive you was burnin’ up about now! Meet us in the hangar- we takin’ fire.”

“Got it.” He shook his head, as Sonan’s leadership never ceased to amaze him. Beau gripped his rifle, and jogged down the hallway to his left as the hangar turrets unleashing on the Minvette over the comm. *“We isn’t waiting Bo-Bo! We movin’ to the payload now- transport is flyin’ with or without you. GET!”*

The flashing red corridors hypnotized as Beau peaked around each corner and intersect, moving ever-cautiously... but time and time again- no one, and nothing. He maneuvered through the superstructure, keeping to the inside corridors and away from the exterior windows as lingering worries began to creep into the back of his head in the silence. He was becoming suspicious- *was he moving into a trap?* The emptiness of this structure cautioned him; he had never seen a place as utterly lifeless as this. *No- it is too easy.... they had to have picked him up by now.*

Instantly, he cursed himself for even thinking the words as a sound had emerged ahead: *A laugh.*

Hysterics echoed through the dim space, and put him on edge with its piercing cackles. At a snail’s pace, he rounded the corner to find his only route to the hangar... and an open doorway ahead glowing as if occupied. The white light protruding into the darkness was no doubt the source... and his heart began to race again. From within- hysterical shrieks, *whispers, whistles;* and haunting noises escaped through this open door. It seemed almost inhuman, and he clung to the rifle in a silent approach. Every step was taken tentatively- he needed to move past the opening, and there was no time to go backwards. He reached the edge of the door, and painfully slowly; peaked his head into the light. Inside, a lab lay strewn throughout in complete chaos. Screens shattered on paneled walls, desks scattered and toppled, all while the floor shimmered with broken shards of glass.

There, with his back to him- stood a towering figure.

The man was shirtless, with skin the color of a poisoned yellow and bone emerging beneath the thinly skin. He was humming a tune that sounded neither rhythmic, nor relaxing as he stared onto the glow of Antionus. The man was completely motionless, and somehow the vastness of space felt like a far more welcoming sight than this thing between them. The man twitched- and let loose shrieking harmonics of madness as the sounds escaped from his lips. “Mmmh - hhhmmmmeghhmm”

Get out of here now. The silent skeleton drew him close to a shiver, and the longer he looked, the more he realized this room felt drawn toward him. But this feeling was alien- it was more than what he could simply see. Something was very wrong here. His posture was too rigid, his hands... his hands lay flared open at his sides, gnarled outwards like they wished to separate themselves from his own arms, and flee from this nightmare. That was no man, it was a *creature*.

Without need for more encouragement: Beau moved like a cat, and darted across the doorway as quiet as possible: not making a sound despite the added weight of the mech suit. He peered back from the shadows to ensure he was undetected... and moved away from that foulness. Beau peeked down the corridor once more to ensure there was nothing, but it seemed he was home-free. In front of him now, was a straight shot to the hangar, and as he neared the location of the others, he contained his excitement. It was quiet; they must be working on locating the lokani...

Beau leaned forward- but strangely...he did not find the ability to move.

Beau had tried to take a step, but his body had lakened- it had refused to listen. *Why couldn't he move?* His breathing sharpened instantly, and fear began to grip. *Why couldn't he move?* Neither his head, nor any part of himself found the strength... only his eyes moved in the paralysis now. Then from his back, he heard it; the crunching of glass... and it moved closer. It was uneven; a sharp cracking; then squishing muffled by meat. Without need for eyes on the back of his head at that moment, Beau knew. One of the man's feet was walking bare- *stepping over the shards of glass...* Then, silence again. All he could hear was the alarm in some far-off corner, but his own pulse was drowning all else.

Suddenly, he spun around rapidly without control, and found himself face to face with the slender creature from inside. Dark eyes, and breath ranking of acid. Beau looked on in horror as

his black eyes peered soullessly into him. His voice rang out inside Beau's mind high-pitched, and he could only try and control his panic as the man's smile menaced at his faltering sanity.

Such a surprise... one final patient! Oh- how worried I was that the fun was over....

The man held his stare into Beau's soul unblinking, solidifying the rampant fear in his gut. He felt the taunting fingers dance their way over his armor, before harshly grabbing the rifle from his unresisting hold and flinging it behind him without care. Beau hadn't averted his eyes- he didn't know what was wrong with him, why he couldn't move, or why this man seemed without soul. He was petrified; whatever was happening... all he could do was look back into those cruel, black pits. The creature twitchingly licked his lips, then reared his head back as if to clear his own throat with an animalistic screech. Horrifyingly close, he chuckled into Beau's ear with his disgusting hot breath. "I will be- mhmhmm your doctor today...Teflon Vonn, DOCTOR!" His words stammered through hysterical chuckles, with the tones of his words changing from highly pitched to deep... as though he was searching for his own voice.

Abruptly, the man shot back his right foot behind himself, and to Beau's horror his left leg responded with a matching step. This man was controlling his *body*. A puppeteer that maneuvered this perverse waltz... and he followed unwilling into the room. Right leg, then left once again. *Beau- you stare this bastard down, don't let him know-*

"You know those... BRAIN robots, those NANITES boy??? I learned to SPEAK with them.... Yes, yes, I did!"

The maniac boasted to himself, and finally broke his stare. He leapt, dancing across the shards on his bare foot as Beau walked further into the room mindlessly. His eyes caught sight of his right foot, with flayed skin stretched outwards like he had been walking for hours on this shard-covered flooring. Beau realized what was going on, although he knew it to be impossible.

This man could control the nanites in his brain. The Net... *But how?* The doctor shrieked in response:

"How!!! HOW you wonder? You really think such T-Tu-TECHNOLOGY is without consequence?!? You really believe that someone wouldn't want to see INSIDE OF YOU!? You

think you can even control some things like your eyes, or even your breath- but really what are you without a brain???"

On que, Beau stopped breathing, and the ringing in his ears became deafening. "You really think you have any power over such chains? What kind of reality do you see here in my LABORATORY.... Bartholomeus Maracusa?" Beau's eyes rolled back into his head at the will of the psychopath. All he could hear was the continued ranting of the man... but it was becoming muffled. He had shut Beau out. The doctor was in his head, and would see everything there was in him- his thoughts, and his every secret, or desire... Everything was dark, and this man was going to kill him.

Is this how it ends?

BEAU

Then, the strangest of things happened, and Beau found himself back at the cliffside.

In front of him now lay the soaring view, as the cooling of the wind fluttered through his hair. The stars shone above in all their brilliance while the feel of the cold stone massaged his damp feet. In that moment- he realized this was okay, if all things ended like this- he could let this world go. Looking out onto the vastness of the water- his eyes saw in the distance a faraway island... one which he had not noticed before. It rose out of a low fog, and seemed to gleam like an impression. He lowered his eyes, and looked down onto his toes which dangled over the edge. Past his feet was a far, far fall to the jagged rocks emerging from the swells below. *What would happen if he jumped? Let the tides carry him out there to the island.*

He was already gone, and content to leave this world. But at the edge of all things, his heart skipped a beat.

His eyes had caught a glimpse of a small boat just outside the jagged graveyard. Inside the boat, a woman kept her balance, and stood as the boat rocked above the choppy waves. A small figure... that he felt all too haunted by. She looked up at him from the shallows, and despite the distance- he knew it was her without any doubt. His mom was there- floating as real as anything just outside of the reef. In mere moments, the water beneath her boat receded, until it was but soft sand, and she stepped out onto the beach. He remembered her face... and a smile which had not escaped his lips in years began to find his cheeks again.

But just as quickly did this happiness emerge, did his joy turn to ash on that high cliffside.

Wails carried themselves up into the air on the winds, and found his ears. Anguish echoed over the rock. She was weeping there on the sand as though her heart had been ripped out while still beating, and uncontrollably- a cascade of emotions rained down upon him. He had caused this pain; this agony which was all his doing... and seeing its consequence now broke him. He dropped to his knees as memories bled into his thoughts like a hemorrhage, and resentment began drowning him. Beau grasped his mouth, and broke down into a sob as his sanity faded to hysteria. She stayed trembling where she was, while echoes continued to drift upwards like a death sentence. Her eyes averted downward, and something in her grasp began to take shape.

She brought the possession up to her face and held it to her lips, seemingly to kiss the envelope before throwing it outward to the gales. Rising rapidly with the wind, the small thing carrying itself up the high cliffside. It fought against the whipping torrents crashing in from the sea. Up and up, it climbed... and it grew closer and closer. Until finally, it hovered just outwards from his reach. The letter steadied in the suspended air, and he took it in his hands. Beau exhaled as he opened its contents, and his eyes found the first words.

Beneath the sea, descend into the abyss.

Death's shore lay beyond sun, heart, or foe.

Where nothing stands to be more, all is less.

Enter darkness, and wield sorrow.

Beau read back the lines to himself again, and again trying to make sense of the words in confused exasperation until they were engraved into his brain. He moved the paper away from his eyes, and it was only once the words were not so close... that he even noticed the color of his hands.

A sickly yellow.

Fear pounced over his heart as his fingers began their mangled work in tearing apart the letter in front of his very eyes. The parchment rapidly scattered to the wind, and his hands struck the true prey... him. He tried to suck in air as they clung to his throat without restraint. All oxygen cut from his lungs, and caused him to rear back in panic while he frantically attempted to escape. Silence descended as the wind turned silent like the very air inside him... and his eyes caught sight of her down on the sand. Blotches materialized over his vision, and he felt a wet tear slip over his cheek while gasping for air in the crushing grip. Beau tumbled onto his side, and saw for the last of his consciousness... that there was *no horizon*.

Past the reef and swells... the island was consumed. Its green trees were swept away by the rising sea as a world breaker roared towards the cliffside. Terror crippled his darkening

hallucinations, and overcame him at the sight of the tsunami approaching. It blitzed through the sea towards him... and towards his mom. A ringing deafened him, and he craned his head just enough to see her turn towards the rising swell about to wash away everything...

Then, light consumed his vision, and he collapsed back onto the floor of the laboratory. Gasping for air hysterically, now on his hands and knees.

“You now have it; you actually have it... I didn’t think-”

What just happened?

“I didn’t think I could ever be rid of it, but you have done it....”

Beau felt different- unbalanced. His limbs seemed like they had been unhinged, and could fall off of him at any moment. His head, ... he squeezed his eyes shut as his head split. He had never experienced this kind of throbbing intensity in a migraine in all his life. He worked in silencing the streaking pain slicing through his frontal lobe... and it took him a moment to realize he was detached from the maniac- he had control again. Without second thought, Beau struck. He lunged towards the doctor with everything he had... and tipped forward like a top-heavy infant.

A crunch, and Beau winced as he connected face-first onto the glass covered floor after not even managing to move his legs a centimeter. The shards stabbed into his left cheek, and he realized this was the worst death he could imagine as he slumped there like a limp fish.

“We need to get you out of here- you must not be here!”

Beau attempted to regain his movements as fear was rebounding into his gut. The creature hobbled towards him; hands grabbed his ribs and hoisted upwards- until the man leaned him over the table entirely from his own strength. *Please don’t strip me down- just kill me.* But the man had moved away hurriedly. “We are being pulled into the atmosphere as a redundancy... Also, wow- that is a very gross foot... But it seems as though my nerve-receptors are non-existent Bartholomeus, and that is tremendously fortunate for the pair of us!”

His mad tones had settled, and now he seemed different. “You will need to go to Burax- Burax City Bank of Tangibles in Facility Federative; vault number 02448-” Beau could feel sensation returning to his hands, and he closed his fingers into a fist. He could now begin to tighten his

core, move his toes, and turn his head.... Just one rotation more, and he'd have the strength he needed to overpower the creature.

His head craned ahead... and suddenly the room pitched.

Beau let loose a stifled shriek as he was sent tumbling over the table, and hit the ground with a thud before sliding across the floor. Shards crunched rapidly underneath the weight of his back plate, and he flinched before colliding with the far wall. He laid there immobile... and jarring pain left him thinking his head was held together by nothing but a singular twine. He seethed, and with tremendous effort, reached out blindly to grab ahold of what he only assumed to be a chair- trying with all he had to pull himself up.

“Bartholomeus!”

Across the chaos, he caught sight of the creature holding on for dear life to the control panel of the far wall while frantically inputting commands. Black spots were blanketing his vision, and Beau could feel himself beginning to hyperventilate while the alarms blared deafeningly all around. Claustrophobia was overcoming him, and lab equipment continued in burying him as it slid down the uneven flooring in his direction. *The wave was still coming*. He mustered all his strength to raise himself up onto his knee, then his other. *MOVE*. His failing muscles forced him to collapse again and again in the attempts at a crawl up the incline. He worked at a snail's pace, and was unable to fully support his own weight with every attempt. Weakly, he dug into the floor while torrents of glass cascaded down around him. The entire orbiting facility rocked cataclysmically.

“Are you alright!? Come on- you can do this!”

His fury was driving him more than his will to survive. Another few pulls up the incline, and he lunged for it. He was barely able to grab ahold of the desk base- pulling himself barely onto the topside... and his hands scrambled. He flopped over to the other side, and found where the gun had landed in the base of the table's leg. Yanking upwards, he freed it from the corner, and pulled it up to his chest. The creature saw the barrel aimed directly at him... and stopped everything he was doing.

“Get away from the console!”

“Hey- listen to me, ... I am helping you- if you shoot me, we both die here. I am ready to go out... but I need you to live...” Beau’s arms tired as the waning rifle subtly swayed over the thin man’s heart. He would just need to twist his grip ever-slightly... but with each passing cycle of time he was understanding the man’s words.

“Please put the gun down.”

“How were you in my head!?”

The creature looked worryingly at the console before completely turning away from him to continue working. “We don’t have time for this!” Beau’s head felt on the verge of collapse, and he had to be hallucinating as yellow bands were beginning to glow from within his suit. He dropped the rifle as his strength failed.

“I- I need to go.... to the hangar.”

The doctor dropped from the console, and shuffled down the incline in an uncoordinated struggle. Hastily, he threw Beau’s arm around his shoulder, and began to heave. The thin, tall, gold creature strained with extreme determination, and Beau felt himself lift up off the table. They stumbled- but were steadied by the long arms reaching out to support their crawl upwards. Fighting to keep his eyes open, all he could do was mumble. “I- I need to go....” Before even finishing his sentence, the creature’s hand rocketed out to a camera feed on the far wall and cut him off.

“No, you don’t.”

He strangely had to squint at the screen ... where the display revealed jet-black security droids surrounding what looked like corpses... corpses of the others. Losing his coordination, his eyes began to roll away. *Sonan was dead... all of them were dead. He was going to die-*

SLAP!

A stinging emerged on his left cheek, and jolted him back to the present as the creature bellowed into his ear- “BEAUTY!?! Listen to me! This will cause the very fabric of your life to change- I don’t know what chance brought you here onto this godforsaken place, but you’ll need to be a man for what comes next because you are in for the worst couple days of your whole life!”

“Huh?”

The creature offloaded Beau into a small bedding near the window that was similar to the interior of the drop pod. His head was spinning something fierce, and he fought to maintain focus while everything seemed sapped from him.

“Burax Capital City- Bank of Tangibles! Account number 02448. Go to my desk and open the box!!”

“What- what is this?” The man froze- and stared down at his arm as it glowed in bands of yellow light rippling from beneath the surface of the armor. “A miracle...” His gaze hardened: “And why the whole of the universe will descend upon you.” With a final effort, Beau glimpsed the creature staring at him with wide eyes as the sliding cover fell between the two of them. A whirring commenced, and he fought to keep his eyes open as the pod broke away from the window... and he drifted away into space. The orbiting facility began to catch fire as it was pulled into the atmosphere, and he watched the tall, yellow-skinned man fade into the distance as he stayed at the window... watching Beau’s escape.

His head slumped, and he fell into darkness.

CARA

Sitting there on her bed, Cara wanted nothing more than to go to sleep. She was sporting a dark blue dress assigned by her very entertaining stylist, who had said; *'Its gleam aligns with your hair my superstar.'* The makeup had followed, and been exquisitely done with the assurance that if she touched it or cried then there would be a royal assassination imminent. She couldn't help but laugh at the lack of fear Melody had, and all she could think every appointment was that the feisty artist would make for an extraordinary *Marauder*. Absolutely despising the lengths gone to for this occasion, her head throbbed, and each migraine prompted a renewed command to her Net to soothe the misbehaving neurons inside her skull. She would normally have turned to her usual stress-relievers, but this wasn't the sort of affair for excessive drinking... this was a *gala*. Political relations, and dry discussions that would ensure she was not allowed to enjoy her fracture-days' evening.

“Ga-La”

She didn't care for it. Cara knew that practically none of these people who would be here had ever lived outside their penthouses and palaces. Lucky for her, they would certainly come out of their holes for the Keep of Nomelle. Laying back onto the bed, she conceded to her fate and activated the Net around her eye. Mindlessly, her flipping through the endless entertainment options began. Normadu racing; no. Emina intelligence broadcasting; absolutely not. Binnoli fashion shows... nothing eye-catching whatsoever apart from maybe some *Vivanum brand* leather jackets. She continued to flip through, and the only real candidate for time wasting presented itself: *Nightloop*. If only she could be the fictional savior leading a revolution on *Yollaera* now... and a part of her wondered why she had even spent any time looking at other channels in the first place.

Literally right as she pressed play, her Net was alerted of a coming visitor to the door. *She would never be able to see Juen immortalizing his love for Cioni. Not while galas were a thing at least...* Cara retracted her Net, and the nanites crept back from over her eyes just in time to see her mother emerge through the sliding doorway. Bellona Thorn Noxar; a presence if ever there was one, and *amazing*... her hands were already placed on her hips in a judgmental fashion.

“You need to get out there soon my darling, the guests have begun arriving.” She tutted her subtle frustration while her eyes looked her up and down.

“Mom- can I just have...”

“Your father is out there already, and you have a responsibility.”

There went the kindness.

“You are the heir to the *Noxar* line- you are the example others follow.” Cara bit her lip- it was her fracture day... and even still, any argument she could make would be futile. “...And that includes being an example to those intolerable billionaires in the great hall now.” A smile slipped from her lips. She heaved; lifting herself off the microfiber covers to move towards the door. Her mom planted a kiss in her hair-line, and the pair of them entered into the hallway. The Great Hall of Nomelle was a sight that never dulled. She had grown up in this keep, but still felt partially in awe by the towering translucent ceiling every time she came back home. Above the amphitheater, thousands of hovering lights matching to the constellations above their heads. The enormous, although dimly-lit interior held dozens of floors extending upwards in the grandest of designs, and a sea of people spread out through all levels and spaces on the green-marble flooring. Her and her mom were escorted down from the residences, and eventually Cara entered onto the main floor to the sounds of thundering applause.

Immediately, she was overcome by the greetings and kisses of complete strangers as she navigated the political warzone. What followed next was a hurricane of congratulations, complements, and kissing upon the dark side of her dress which may have been unrivaled in the face of history. Those who didn't pursue the avenue of admiration attempted expertise; no doubt hoping one day she may remember the *intelligent* conversations they had. She found herself discussing the implications of the subterranean development in Eunost with a businessman whose name she hadn't even remembered. A rather impish red man asked her a few moments later if she thought the current trade tensions between ORUS and the Union would resolve. Next, was the future of the drone industry... Artificial Intelligence legalization after that, following with the potential for individual governance of robotics. All the while, she kept at smiling. Keeping her teeth shining for all the lurking media to see, and especially for all their eavesdropping drones hovering just above.

The highlight of affair though had to be when she about ran headfirst into none other than Juen; the star of *Nightloop*... finding him roaring drunk before the turn of the evening. He was a handsome blonde addition to the party, and although entertaining- was just a bit too determined to plan a trip down to *Braltoi* for a ‘foggy submarine’ excursion that certainly would destroy her family name. His affection for the wine did allow her a relieved break from the attention, and she was reassured by her agent later that his behavior would be the focus point for the millions watching live. *Thank Zelos for unstable celebrities*. Just to be sure, she sent a direct command to the event conductor that the wine must flow like water in his direction for the remainder of the evening. She assured him that endorphin levels would follow in the wake. Once confirmed, she managed to creep from the interior of the amphitheater, to off from the center stage at the conclusion of the 25th toast.

She saw her breakaway, and took it- moving in stealthy fashion for the galleries. Cara kept to the shadows of the lavender-scented halls, concealing her escape behind flowers, statues, and drunkards... very much aware that this particular hive was overrun- and she couldn’t be taking any chances. She found the north gallery service lift, and randomly selected the 77th as her destination. It was behind an unused bar, that her stress began to dissipate rotation by rotation, and ever-slowly her eyes closed in appreciation of the quiet. The echoes of conversations down in the Great Hall continued resonating upwards to still haunt her, but they seemed comfortably harmless now. Her anchor to sanity lay in this crystal glass halfway filled with a both very delicious, and very strong beverage. She sat there sipping, while a far-off gaze looked beyond this liquor cabinet in front of her. *How can these people do this all the time?* She pursed her lips at a long sip, and set down the empty glass onto the dark tile beside herself. Tilting her head back, she began to let her eyes rest. *What was the point...*

“Cara! You know... you cannot simply vanish when your father has yet to give his toast my dear.”

She nearly laid an egg at the interjection. It was as if tonight was a sour apple egregiously bitten into. She raised herself to her feet, and turned to face who she knew leaned over the bar behind her. Behind him stood two Atlon droids monitoring her every movement by his sides- and her Net instantly notified her of their scanning measures as she stood upright. His icy blue eyes loomed over her as the first thing she saw. His bald head was covered in tattoos of a *Noxar*

geometric pattern; now glowing white in the dim lighting. He held presence, and Cara looked down. Of all people, it was her dad here to confront her.

“I’m not mad, you know. This is your day, and you should be able to enjoy it... however, this is a part of the job.” Cara had to catch herself from mimicking his words, and could tell in his voice he was not enraged. Gradually his gaze was softening, and she nodded earnestly, as he strolled to the right, circling around the bar with relaxed composure and succeeding in heightening her paranoia. He walked behind the counter, and right up to her. Before she could even release words, he hastily wrapped her in a hug.

“I would have done the same thing though. Happy fracture day, dear.”

Her smile broke loose, and she breathed in the moment without speaking any words that could spoil it.

“I ALSO received a notification today from a renderance arena oversight office...” She felt her cheeks radiate to a deep purple faster than any ecchymosis previously recorded. “My darling girl... I could have sworn I read somewhere that plasma bolt usage within Eunost was illegal...” He pulled back with an annoyed, albeit amused grin. “It would seem that you and I are a lot alike- and it’s a bit spooky at times how much so.”

His head shifted sideways. “But of all the bars in this oversized dome-” Turning fully away from her, until he faced the back wall, he placed his hand on the mirror and sent it retracting sideways into the stone. The other side revealed a dark pathway that left her bewildered- having no idea it had been there. “...you managed to pick the one with my hidden cellar: *that* is beyond me.” He winked, and while chuckling- took a dramatic step towards the quiet opening. Cara couldn’t help but laugh, shaking off the momentary nervousness, and shifted her head to follow, before... she realized he had abruptly stopped in front of her. Within the next few cycles, her smile subsided.

“Dad?”

His posture had become rigid, and there was little indication of the familiarity that fled from them not a moment before. She moved slowly to his side, and saw what she suspected. His blue eyes had been encircled by the dark purple glow of the Net, and his face had lost all color save for the hue illuminating over his cheekbones. He stood there once again a stranger to her;

successfully completing the seamless transition, and wrapping himself up in a reality hidden behind the nanites which now entrapped his vision. She watched the Net around his eyes retract as he stared ahead into the dark corridor emotionlessly. Perhaps it was weariness that she detected, but in either case- there was more here than she could see. She held her breath.

Sighing, his head sunk, and a click sounded behind her from what she could only assume was the mirror closing over the cellar. “Carana...” His hand reached out, and took hold of hers. “I must ask you to come with me, my dear.” His head lifted, and she nodded without thought. He kept her hand held in his for a moment longer. “We have urgent business.” He pulled her close, then planted a kiss on her forehead and took a deep breath, before abruptly turning to walk out from behind the bar. Right at his heels, the Atlon droids followed, and she was just behind. Moving down the hall, they reached the lift without distraction before loading inside, and ascended up to the 150th. As they navigated through the quiet halls, she realized where their destination lay, and they turned a corner to face a familiar glass door. Cara knew exactly where they were. This was the diplomatic chambers, and whatever was going on was clearly of importance. He came to a stop, standing next to the railing as the faintest echoes of chatter ascended upwards towards them. He leaned his head over to peer down, exhaling and closing his eyes. “I’ll signal you when it is time; notify your squadron, and begin preparations to launch.”

“Understood.” The Rey nodded, and moved for the doors. *Her night was just beginning.*

NOVARIO

Briskly, he entered into the dimly-lit room, and was faced with the spanning silence of its' emptiness. The table stretching outwards, seemingly towards him- with its black top glistening subtly like obsidian. Its hollow center opened wide, leaving an open space that invited him to venture another step closer. This room was accompanied only by the twinkling of Eunos city shimmering through the panes, and the brief pause did just enough to steady the tremble that was running rampant throughout his chest.

BEGINNING SESSION

A familiar tickle formed behind his eyes, and his Net crept back to life over his iris. Near instantly, the nanites formed a lens which blanketed the emptiness, and in blinking- a table full of people manifested. Before him now sat the other eight, and their voices began to echo into his mind with the mounting of the intense discussion. He gripped his hands tightly behind his back in nervous anticipation, as he considered the circumstance which had cascaded down upon the evening.

'Doctor Tefflon Vonn's research station has been attacked in the Xiodeme system.'

This... this jeopardized everything. All the work done over the previous decade, their sacrifices, secrets: the very foundation of everything. *Who would be foolish enough....and how?* There was nowhere someone could hide- and no one who could oppose the power wielded by those sitting at this table. This table owned the media, the military, the economies and everything else in between. To challenge the Council... was suicide.

“Novario... now we are all present.”

The booming voice had rung out over the chatter, sending the room returning to silence. He locked eyes with the man, a cold black gaze that felt as if it looked through his very skin... but he was friend. The overshadowing presence of Rainfall caused all to fall in line; leathery skin, dark grey beard, and all accompanied by long streaking quicksilver hair that braided down his back. “Thank you, Patriarch.” He acknowledged the title, and moved towards the chair closest to the entrance to be seated with haste. Nodding, he continued.

“Primary Controllers of this Council, we shall begin.... The issue on Antionus. *Wundomar*, be of use and brief us on this incident.” The thin man laden with golden skin cleared his throat on Novario’s right shoulder, he stood peevishly; immediately beginning to fidget with his boney hands.

“Eghm- less than 3 hours ago; site 98217 was raided. The self-destruct sequence began when another lifeform entered into Doctor Tefflon Vonn’s laboratory- 98217 has now impacted with the planet, ... The doctor is confirmed deceased. His objective, as you all already know, was to assess the Sentinel frequency from the active site on Golniryn... he had made promising progress, but had lost significant test subjects.” He looked down in front of him, as though he was struggling to find the words to continue. “Our surveillance appears to show the doctor loading an undefined individual into the escape pod prior to impact. This individual is- eghm- believed to have survived. The survivor was not a test subject... but an intruder with the attack group.” The room was deathly silent, not one person here had any illusion what this could mean; the secret that could kill them all was now running around the galaxy.

“This- is him.”

A rotating figure flashed above the nine of them in the center of the table, it was a young man with dark scraggly hair. He had fair skin, and narrowed eyebrows- and was shown in a mech suit. *Where would that be registered?* He was about to interject when Reyna whispered into Rainfalls’ left ear, and began to stand. Placing her graphite-colored robotic arm on the table, she leaned forward; casting a shadow over her thin, and pale cheekbones. Her voice was shrill.

“This is Bartholomeus Maracusa, born: N-01322, in the Kiriae state on planet Tominus. Golden Empire records indicate he has been presumed dead for almost half a decade.” She looked up, and footage began to display of a group of individuals dropping onto the facility under heavy fire. “Our recordings show this party gaining entrance from the outer rings of the planet, those that survived the exterior entered through the main hangar...they were all eliminated. However, Bartholomeus entered from the underside.” He watched as the man seemingly ricocheted down the side of the facility before grasping on. *Lucky...*

“Where is he?”

A pin drop could have been heard. Rainfall had steel in his voice... *this was different*. Rainfall was focused: this was the objective, the only objective. "At this time, we do not know..." Novario's heart was drumming faster in his chest. This was here, and no single moment had ever dug itself so deep into his core as this. A panic that felt so close it seemed tied to his very spine. "The suits they were equipped with have been identified, and were manufactured under Vusix mining corporation's directive..." All eyes turned towards *Havan the Magnoy*, whose short stature gave the impression of an oversized child. His face was smeared with a thick and untamed black beard, and seemed strangely calm while seated next to *Alpha* on Novario's left shoulder. But whether his composure was genuine or not, Novario knew the room should all feel plagued with terror. He scratched at the large metal nose glimmering green over his rough red face, and strummed the table.

"Vusix is in line- they reported to me the theft this year, these here were reworked- all tracking equipment was disabled. Ye' should know though... our conclusions were pointing much'n towards the cartels. It was too messy for a coordinated operation..." His accent was thick with a Sorctith drawl. The accent from Titan's Peak could only really be likened to a snorting bull, with the way the words escaped his metallic nasal cavities. "I've called for a meet with the-"

"*You* will transfer all information to Reyna and Novario's intelligence agencies before the end of the hour." Harshly, Rainfall sliced through the Magnoy's words. "As far as I am concerned this catastrophe begins with you- and that missing equipment..." pointing upwards to the hologram of Bartholomeus; "That falls under your *failure* of a control sect. Do you understand me commissioner?" His eyes lowered, and the bearded Magnoy nodded in silence.

"Reyna if you please, ... I will not hear one more word from that *Ghureaim*..." Novario averted his gaze in an effort to conceal his expression, but Reyna continued on unphased. "The others infiltrating the facility: unidentified, and it is likely we will not be able to salvage DNA from the wreckage since the facility broke apart as it entered the atmosphere. We have diverted four teams to assess what is left from the remaining impact areas."

"Principle Commander-" Novario crossed his hands in front of him, trying with all his will to steady the quivers inside his chest. "Have we identified any family- or contacts of this Bartholomeus? Living, or even deceased?" She nodded emotionlessly, and averted her gaze upwards while tapping her fingers; two new figures emerged at his sides. "Biological registration

shows his mother and father as alive, and residing on Tominus. Logs show four filed applications for a missing dependent, but all were denied with the last being two years ago... it was his parents that filed each instance.”

Novario’s eyes flashed worryingly to Rainfall, and he picked up his concern. “Goxinus must be summoned on the Pharoah’s behalf- Wundomar, do this immediately. Track the parents down and get them into our hands but do not disclose information of the site.” Novario was continuing to watch the Patriarch... “We have no reason to assume the Empire is aware of the project... and so help the *Line of Heh* if we learn they are responsible for this.” Rainfall was on the edge of fury, and his hands had curled to fists. Reyna cleared her throat, and continued with her briefing.

“-Facility 98217 also picked up a partial trace of a flashgate in close proximity to the planet. Detection from inside the rings of Antionus showed gravitational residue likely for the *Mendu System*. We have surveillance on the planet of *Domivar* now, and are monitoring *Bonmor*, *Titus*, and *Squigol* cities.” She licked her lips and sat down, rigid in her chair. Once again, the room was in a state of soundless consideration. There was nearly a quarter of a trillion people on *Domivar*, so they would have their work cut out. But more than that, something deeply troubled Novario in the footage above their heads that he needed to have them address.

“What about the doctor... What about the *Sentinel frequency*?”

Wundomar returned to stand, fidgeting with his hands and shooting nervous glances around the room. “The assessing specialists and I... believe he had become corrupted by the frequency.”

“Corrupted?”

“He- appears like the test subjects before this attack. It is not verified... but he was not himself.” Novario clenched his hands, not satisfied with the information, and the thin man was starting to appear lightheaded at the persisting questions. “We were not made aware...” Novario snapped his fingers, indicating he needed no further explanation, and silenced Wundomar. Rainfall rose to his feet, and the rest quickly followed. “Council, I will not lie to you what worries me now...” Novario glanced over to see Havan lowering his chair to stand atop at the same height. “I have not forgotten what came before this Council. Before these days, a darkness lay suffocating over all life- and our old master’s brutality was unfathomable.” He paused as the words settled over them. “We have tried to forget... but it is very much real. The *Onari* galaxy was consumed once

by what lingered there on that very facility!” He slammed his hand down, silencing the room to void. “It is a WILDFIRE that can consume us all if given the chance, and it has sought to draw breath for centuries! This... this is the only danger that has ever existed. As far as I am concerned the *Sentinels* have not yet been extinguished from our stars. The whole point of the efforts at the facility was to give us a way to overcome what lies beneath Golniryn- now we have exposed ourselves.” It was as though a chill moved its way through his bones. He had never heard mention of the long gone Ilmari from Rainfall...

“The very fabric of our reality rests on the tides of a sea we do not now control, and control is the only reason we are here. We must hunt down Bartholomeus Maracusa, and stop at *nothing* to smother this ember.”

“Delta!”

Novario watched as the AI’s glowing green eyes blinked calculatingly, and she nodded without a word, placing her hands behind her back for instruction. “Track and isolate any trace of him should he be foolish enough to emerge in the Augment Dimension.” Delta nodded. “Same goes for the parents, and any other associates we uncover. This Bartholomeus is clearly not dead, and we need to know how and why. Alpha and Kileas, I want a terrorist narrative; put his face everywhere, and paint him as what he is: a radical, and a danger to society. Wundomar, you will receive instruction soon.”

Rainfall looked between Reyna and him, “Everyone but the *Guardians* leave us... and Havan...” Novario turned to see the uneasy shift of the Magnoy at his left. “I will not forget your failure here.” Rainfall closed the connections, and now only the three of them remained at the table. “Novario and Reyna, I ask you as Patriarch of this Council to combine your resources- *track him down*.” Novario looked across the table to the Union counterpart, and they both nodded. “If by some forsaken chance he is compatible with the frequency, then he is the most dangerous individual in this galaxy.” The Principle Commander brushed her dark hair from her cheek, “We have begun implementing the shield defense system for precaution against the frequency, but given the costs- only a handful of my *Lurkers* have the enhancements.”

“If the doctor was corrupted while having this, then I am less than optimistic of the enhancement. Novario, what of your Legion?”

“The Legion are in the early stages of this installment, but only a select few Marauders have it.” He paused, swallowing to clear his throat. “My daughters’ squadron is the first to be fully utilized, ... I will instruct them to depart for Domivar immediately.” Rainfall eyed him, seemingly seeing through the facade of commitment. “She will do us proud... beyond this, we need to look into who he is in league with, what the doctor knew, and be prepared for the worst. I will instruct Wundomar to prepare for an evaluation of our *Ocnion* on Lacands...”

“Patriarch.”

Novario interrupted him impulsively- but smoothly, “If I may lead this evaluation... the High Chief has been eager to receive me ever since the invasion of *Kaves*, and he will not hesitate my request for more forces on Golniryn.” He nodded, “Reyna, my gut tells me there are serious shadow economics at play- if there is a connection to the cartels here, I want something within a whisper of martial law. We must know if they are a threat to this Council, and if so then we must cleanse their filth.” His eyes were moving wildly, and Novario could not remember a time he had seen Rainfall acting this neurotic. “I have questions which linger... and I will find out all I can of Doctor Vonn and his treason. We must know how they discovered this facility- and most importantly... we must end this.”

He locked eyes with the Principle Commander, and Reyna moved from her chair while flashing him an unsettling look. “I’ll do what needs to be done.” She viciously scraped her metal fingers over the table, and vanished out of view. Now, it was just he and Rainfall left in the session, and he continued to stare at Novario for a moment. “Make sure our *Ocnion* are ready for a fight.” Novario nodded, and the connection cut off. He slumped down into the chair, and closed his eyes.

“Put him in the ground, Cara.”

Z and the sea

END OF SAMPLE

Ω