

REPUBLIC SHATTERED

Sins of Before

By Michael J. Brooks

**Wars of the New Humanity
Book Three**



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About this Book

A Message for New Readers

This book includes a recap of the previous two, titled “The Story Thus Far,” making it easy for new readers to catch up and dive into the story. Additionally, you can refer to the glossary at the back for explanations of important terms and phrases.

Content Warning

Republic Shattered: Sins of Before is an action-filled science fiction book that contains violence, strong language, and detailed scenes of lovers making love.

Content Meter



If you are a new reader, welcome, and if you are a returning reader, welcome back.

Praise for Republic Shattered

“With succinct prose, Brooks weaves a layered and intriguing plot, treating me to intergalactic politics, futuristic technology, warfare, love affairs, action, adventure, thrills, and a dynamic and fascinating cast. The plot twists and tone of the storyline had me on the edge of my seat. The elaborate depictions that often created a vivid sense of movement and atmosphere made the novel cinematic. Brooks uses refreshing and well-paced dialogue, alongside a depth to the storyline that brings out the emotions and complex traits of the cast. This allowed me to connect with them and understand their conflicts in a morally complex universe. This is an incredible third installment.”

—**Keith Mbuya for *Readers' Favorite***

“This book, *Republic Shattered: Sins of Before*, has what great books entail: action, adventure, surprises, and love. This is an amazing and interesting science fiction novel, beautifully and intricately crafted, and is indeed worth the read, I must say.”

—***LitPick***

“Michael J. Brooks creates a thought-provoking story that hosts a wide range of characters; each with their own special abilities and interests. His insertion of ethical and political reflections will especially appeal to readers seeking more than just military-style battle encounters, while his ability to build just the right amount of tension, then juxtapose it with psychological growth and new directions, keeps the plot vivid and unexpectedly fluid.”

—**D. Donovan, Sr. Reviewer, *Midwest Book Review***

The Story Thus Far

Eden, the utopian motherworld of humanity's intergalactic republic, the Commonwealth, was a beacon of luxury and prosperity. In stark contrast, Satellite One, its less fortunate counterpart, offered only mediocrity to its inhabitants, despite the Commonwealth Government's assurances of equality. Tensions between the two worlds grew, and colonies One, Four, and Six of Satellite One declared independence. The Commonwealth Defense Force (CDF), equipped with mechanized combat suits known as Shells, was then deployed to Satellite One to quell the rebellion.

Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn

In *Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn*, Randal Scott was Linked (cerebrally connected via a nanoimplant) with his mother, Kathleen Scott, when she was killed in a devastating explosion. Traumatized and seeking vengeance, he joined the CDF to bring justice to the man responsible for both her death and his emotional scars—his father, Arson Scott, a decorated former CDF captain. Arson mysteriously defected to the insurgency threatening to collapse humanity's intergalactic republic, the Coalition of Rebel Factions, and took part in his wife's murder.

Randy, his girlfriend Stacie Spencer, and his best friend Jarius Ford were deployed as newly initiated CDF Guardians to Colony Four, where Arson led his insurgent faction. While on deployment, Randy began to see a darker side of the CDF, as colony citizens were treated cruelly by the very force he served.

Randy encountered Kesley Whittaker, a colony citizen and, unknown to him, a Coalition rebel. She opened his eyes to the

harsh realities that drove colonies One, Four, and Six to revolt, making Randy question whether the rebellion was, in fact, justified.

Randy was captured by Arson during an assault on his hideout. While aboard Arson's escape ship, Randy learned more about the legitimacy of the rebellion and was shown damning evidence of the Commonwealth Government's corruption. Arson disclosed the Coalition's plan to infiltrate the Parliament Building and use its broadcast center to transmit the evidence across the net. The operation was code-named Hammer Fall. Randy wrestled with the decision but ultimately sided with the Coalition, believing that overthrowing the corrupt government and freeing the oppressed colonies was the right choice. Jarius, who had been captured too, joined him in this cause.

Randy began to forgive Arson, accepting that his mother's death had been a tragic accident and that Arson had joined the Coalition out of a sense of duty to his people, him being a former colony citizen.

Randy's unit launched a rescue mission to recover him and Jarius, attacking Arson's second hideout. Both Randy and Jarius decided against returning to the unit, instead remaining with the Coalition. During the firefight between the CDF and Arson's faction, Randy encountered Stacie and provided her files that confirmed her parents, members of a powerful group of entrepreneurs called the Eight Elite, were involved in government corruption.

After reading the files, Stacie confronted her parents at a place called Babylon Island, on Eden, and they disowned her for opposing their crooked ways.

During the Coalition's Operation Hammer Fall, Randy and Stacie found themselves face-to-face on the battlefield of the

Parliament Building's lawn, the two of them now on opposite sides—Randy on the Coalition's and Stacie on the CDF's. Through their Link, Stacie uncovered Randy's accidental affair with Kesley, a moment of weakness that Randy regretted. Pissed, Stacie fought Randy at full force, but he defeated her and then ensured her safety within the Parliament Building, which the Coalition successfully took control of.

The Coalition leader, Arman Reza, had been expected to expose the government corruption and then pursue peace. Instead of doing so, he killed Chief Executive Cornelius Gould and proclaimed himself the new leader of the Commonwealth. While Cornelius was a power-hungry megalomaniac who had secured the Chief Executiveship by assassinating the previous Chief, Jared Kerner, killing him was still wrong.

Outraged by Reza's betrayal, Arson and Randy teamed up to eliminate him. With Reza dead, Parliament Chairwoman Oviereya Amaechi, a close friend and maternal figure to Stacie, became the new Chief Executive, by the government's rules of succession. As an immigrant—a former colonist permitted Eden citizenship through the lottery—she pledged to fight for equality, end corruption, and reform the CDF.

Scarred by the war, the loss of Stacie's love, and the burden of killing both rebels and Guardians, Randy took a temporary break from military life. As for Stacie, she inherited her family's fortune and organization, Spencer Enterprises, due to their deaths by Arman Reza's kill squads. She planned to assemble a team to bring down the new heads of the Elite, the men and women who had taken control of their parents' criminal empires, as a result of their parents being killed just like Stacie's.

Republic Under Siege: Threat from within

In *Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within*, the Commonwealth's civil war was over, but peace remained elusive.

Randy returned to the CDF and transferred to the Expedition Task Forces, specialized teams responsible for hunting down human and intergalactic criminals. Among the Guardians of the team he was assigned to, Vanguard Alpha, he became close to colony immigrant Akane Sugimori. She, along with two other Guardians of Vanguard Alpha, secretly belonged to a clandestine social-justice organization called RISE. While RISE's mission of advocating for colony and immigrant equality was noble, their methods were far from legal, making them vigilantes. Akane admired Randy for his role in emancipating the colonies as a former Coalition fighter and sought to recruit him into RISE. She slowly introduced him to the organization but concealed their illegal activities for the time being.

Randy learned from Akane about a growing threat within the Commonwealth—Purists, violent ultraextremists determined to preserve the classist society that oppressed colonists and immigrants. At the same time, Stacie, who had formed her own combat team, targeted the criminal empire of Damien Sykes, a member of the Elite now running for Chief Executive. Registered as a bounty-hunting entity, Stacie's team was able to legally obtain weapons for their war against the Elite. The bounty-hunter registration was just a smokescreen for Stacie's true objective.

Oviereya Amaechi, Stacie's friend and the Commonwealth's new Chief, informed her that Defense Force Intelligence (DFI) was investigating Damien Sykes. She requested that Oviereya allow her to go undercover for DFI, leveraging Damien's lasting attraction to her to infiltrate his network and gather evidence to dismantle his

trafficking operation. While undercover, Stacie discovered that Damien was also the leader of the largest Purist organization, the Brotherhood for Humanity's Salvation.

As Randy became more involved with RISE, he realized their actions—though rooted in a desire for equality—crossed legal and moral lines, including election interference. He faced a difficult choice: expose RISE's headquarters to DFI or continue protecting them. Despite his feelings for Akane, Randy decided to report RISE but kept Akane's association with them a secret. When he confessed to Akane what he had done, their budding romantic relationship dissolved.

The Brotherhood attacked RISE HQ before the CDF could make their move, killing Akane's Eden-family, which left her emotionally devastated. Akane and one of the last surviving RISE members, Jamie (Jay) Lister, vowed revenge on Damien Sykes.

Randy and Stacie teamed up to stop Akane and Jay from assassinating Damien during one of his rallies for Chief Executive. Despite Damien's crimes as a human trafficker and Purist, keeping him alive was essential for DFI to destroy his criminal empire and save countless lives. After Randy and Stacie defeated Akane and Jay, Randy chose to shield Akane from the consequences of her vigilante actions, opting not to turn her in to authorities. He urged her to take a sabbatical and visit her parents on Satellite One.

During their mission to stop Akane and Jay, Randy and Stacie had Linked, allowing Stacie to comprehend just how much Randy still loved her. Therefore, she decided to give a relationship with him another chance, finally forgiving him for his past entanglement with Kesley Whittaker. Now, the story continues.

Epigraph

“So the CDF is a bunch of contract mercenaries, is that it? Just fucking guns for hire?”

—**Ahmed Hawsawi** (*Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn*)

“We’re (Guardians) human beings for goodness’ sake. Does the CDF want us to be cold-blooded or something?”

—**Randal Scott** (*Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn*)

“Seems like the CDF adopted a culture of brutality.”

—**Randal Scott** (*Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn*)

“It’s not like the CDF has been the universe’s do-gooders all the time.”

—**Akane Sugimori** (*Republic Under Siege: Threat from Within*)

“I’m pretty sure Lars was gonna blow me away just because I wondered if there was some legitimacy behind the protesters’ actions, on our first mission. I was gonna get blown away by my superior. Apparently, being a freethinker is a career killer in the CDF, literally.”

—**Jarius Ford** (*Republic Falling: Advent of a New Dawn*)

PROLOGUE

THREE YEARS AGO

Planet Mabbeon
Nation of Khanoria

Zataldra's heart wouldn't stop palpitating. Anxiety gripped her as she watched her father, Jud'Zarr Gor'Ronn, a Grand Elder, don his ornate robe of vibrant hues. Defiant in the face of tyranny, he had paid no heed to the warnings and looming death threats. Zataldra couldn't help but curse his fearlessness and dedication—qualities she had always revered, just like her dearly departed mother had. Yet now, those qualities were endangering his life.

Father, you're too noble for your own good, she thought. I pray an early grave isn't your future. Already robbed of her mother, could fate be cruel enough to steal her father, too?

Of all the Grand Elders, Jud'Zarr was the most vocal critic of the High Sorin's oppressive reign. He was driven by righteousness to decry injustice and defend the mistreated. Even now, he only thought of others' welfare as he prepared to uplift the flagging spirits of the locals corralled outside his and Zataldra's earthstone

abode. These men and women were relying on him to allay their fears, give them hope, and show them a path forward. He would not let them down, nor all of Khanoria.

Despite the Sorin's warnings, death threats, and intimidation tactics, his resolve remained inextinguishable. Feeble souls caved under pressure; the strong remained sturdy in their conviction and would rather die than renounce their obligations, even in the face of life-threatening repercussions.

The Khanoria he and everyone knew was being ripped from the seams by the Sorin. Seduced by power, the Sorin no longer consulted the Council of Elders for guidance, a practice honored by his predecessors throughout history. Instead, the Sorin chose the path of absolute power, and his offenses to Khanorian society were vast. Long-practiced religions were now prohibited. Hallowed lands were being exploited for profitable resources, uprooting aborigines from their homelands. Those who taught or spoke the Ancient Languages faced hefty fines. And anyone who dared challenge the Sorin's authority faced severe consequences, from imprisonment to execution by firing squad. Jud'Zarr knew the self-proclaimed supremacy of the Sorin had to be brought to an end.

The rise of the Khanorian Revolution was a sign that brighter days were on the horizon. The revolution had ignited a tide of spirited dissidence, clandestine rebellions launched in secrecy behind closed doors. Denizens across provinces were rallying against the authoritarian regime, some taking up arms.

Jud'Zarr placed a pendant around his neck that bore the signet of the Grand Elders, who the public respected as magnates of wisdom and leadership.

Looking into the mirror in front of him, he gazed at Zataldra's reflection. She stood behind him in a dress of flamboyant colors, her chin lowered in concern. He was proud of her. Zataldra had

earned admission into the esteemed Khanorian science guild the Shaho’Gkodii, which was at the forefront of Khanorian society’s scientific advancement. Her mother would’ve been proud too.

Noting the unsettling look on her face, Jud’Zarr turned from the mirror and beckoned her to speak her thoughts. “Daughter, what is it that ails your heart?”

Zataldra’s voice quavered. “Your criticisms of the Sorin incur his wrath. He may sic his new allies on you, this . . . Commonwealth Defense Force. I’ve heard about these humans’ indisputable atrocities. These beings are savage.” Her eyes flicked toward the window. The storm clouds shrouding the sky felt like an ill omen, a presage for something terrible. “I beg of you, Father, cancel your oration.”

“I am a Grand Elder, Zataldra. That means I am duty-bound to the people, obligated to denounce the defilement of our society.” Jud’Zarr’s tone was stern and unfaltering. “The Sorin has dismantled the fundamental principles that form the bedrock of Khanorian civilization. He even has the gall to enslave beings from other worlds to labor for him. Despicable. No Sorin has ever stooped to such depravity.”

Zataldra fidgeted with the embroidered cuff of one of her sheer sleeves. “Yes, but . . .”

Jud’Zarr silently raised a hand, ending any further remonstrations from Zataldra. “Enough, Daughter, I have no time to argue with you.”

The panic wrenching Zataldra’s heart remained incurable. Exhaling an acquiescent sigh, she looped an arm around her father’s to escort him outside. “Allow me to be by your side onstage.”

Jud’Zarr okayed her request with a nod.

When they emerged from their home, the boisterous voices of

the hundreds of locals who had congregated hushed. Within the crowd, Zataldra spotted her closest friends, Navexira and Gezman. They had also come to listen to Grand Elder Gor'Ronn speak.

Zataldra said, "Father, I will join you shortly. I want to speak to Gezman and Navexira."

"Of course, my child." Jud'Zarr proceeded up the wooden stairs to the stage.

Zataldra strode to her friends and hugged them. They held a special place in her heart. Since the three of them met five years ago, when Zataldra was twenty years old, they had shared memorable times together, supported each other's aspirations, and lifted each other up through difficult times. Besides her sister and father, no one else meant more to Zataldra.

Gezman registered the despair etched across Zataldra's face. "Are you alright?" he asked, resting a hand on her shoulder. "You look stressed."

Zataldra's nerves were fraying by the minute. "It's just that . . . I fear for Father. The Sorin has cautioned him against continuing his objections, and now Father does this: holds *another* assembly. I have a bad feeling. This might be the final provocation the Sorin will tolerate from Father."

Navexira knew that since Zataldra had already lost her mother to terminal illness, losing her father today would butcher her heart. To offer some comfort, she told Zataldra, "I will keep him in my prayers."

"I appreciate that." Hearing her father begin, Zataldra rushed off to the stage.

Jud'Zarr's gift of oration captivated his audience. "The regime in power does not respect our time-honored traditions, the order that has guided us since the dawn of our civilization. They refuse to consult us Elders. They restrict religious diversity. Their affronts

to our society have grown numberless—grown intolerable. Intolerable to where . . . conventional means of removal are . . . feckless.”

In his prime, Jud’Zarr had been a warman in the National Protection Force, but he had long since adopted a life of nonviolence. Nevertheless, he’d wield arms again to overthrow the Sorin if need arose, allowing the dormant warrior inside him to resurface.

The audience applauded Jud’Zarr with fulsome cheers, but the distant rumble and sputter of approaching vehicles caused their standing ovation to fall silent.

One attendee shouted, “It’s them, the Sorin’s new allies—the humans, the footmen of the Commonwealth Defense Force!”

Fearing an overthrow, the Sorin sought to enlist the aid of humanity’s military forces, which had earned a reputation as hired guns. After negotiating a lucrative compensation package with the Sorin, unscrupulous politicians within the Commonwealth Government greenlit the deployment of the CDF. The deployed Guardians bolstered the numbers of the Sorin’s undermanned National Protection Force to help him curtail the widespread civil unrest.

BUSs, the CDF’s all-terrain soldier carriers, were closing in on the crowd fast.

Near-crippling fear knotted Zataldra’s stomach, yet Jud’Zarr stood unperturbed in the face of the CDF’s arrival. Being the calm within the storm was a skill he had perfected through countless trials.

The BUSs chuffed to a halt among the earthstone dwellings. Guardians in M-X01 Shells disembarked, deadly weapons clattering. They fanned out, encircling the gathering area—setting up a dragnet for Jud’Zarr.

A Guardian raised his coarse voice above the Khanorians' overlapping murmurs of panic, hollering into his helmet-mic, "I'm Sergeant Cochran! I'm in charge of this force!" His introduction was funneled through his helmet's audio feed and translated into the Khanorian language.

Bodies shuddered at the menacing alien soldiers. Heart rates went way up. Panic paled faces and shaved a year or two off lifespans.

Cochran narrowed an intimidating glare on Jud'Zarr. "You must be the troublemaker we're looking for. You're Grand Elder Gor'Ronn, correct?"

"I am," Jud'Zarr responded bravely.

A two-way translator, the audio system in Cochran's helmet relayed Jud'Zarr's response to Cochran in English.

Peril looming in the air, a trembling sensation started in Zataldra's legs. "We should leave now," she whispered to her father in a pleading voice, ensnaring his sleeve in a viselike grip.

Zataldra understood Jud'Zarr's aversion to fleeing. As a former warman, he wasn't accustomed to showing weakness or backing down—to anyone. But being aware of the CDF's uncompromising nature, Zataldra knew that attempting diplomacy with these Guardians was out of the question. Fleeing was the only sensible option.

Cochran advanced, his Shell's servo-mechanisms whirring with each step of his mechboot. "The Sorin has ordered us to take you into custody, Grand Elder, so you're coming with us."

Jud'Zarr frowned. "And what offense have I committed to warrant arrest?" He shrugged off Zataldra's grip. "I do nothing but enlighten my people about our traditions, culture, and moral doctrine. Does that truly warrant reprimand by the Sorin?"

"You're being taken into custody for inciting violence and civil

insurrection,” Cochran said.

“I have not . . .”

Cochran cut Jud’Zarr off before another word could leave his mouth. “Shut your trap and come with us! This isn’t up for discussion, oldtimer!” With a foreboding edge to his tone, he added, “And any resistance might be fatal to your supporters here, get me?” He issued an order with a hand gesture. In response, the Guardians lifted their rifles, and articulated instruments of death sprouted from their armored chassis’ built-in weapons system.

Jud’Zarr’s countenance twisted into a scowl. “You would turn your arsenal on defenseless Khanorians who pose no threat?” His tone dripped with disdain. The warrior within him came alive. He wished he had a battalion of Khanorian warmen with him to stand by his side and confront these arrogant alien brutes.

Not one to be trifled with and intolerant of defiance, Cochran’s nostrils flared. “Are you fucking hard of hearing or something?”

Jud’Zarr let out a resigned sigh. Not complying would put the safety of the gatherers and his daughter at risk. “Alright, I will go with you.”

Zatadra snatched his arm, holding him back. “Father, please don’t.” Her voice was brittle, about to crack.

Jud’Zarr eased an arm around her back and drew her into a gentle side hug. “Everything will be fine. I will be okay. Guard your sister well until I return.”

Impatient, Cochran made a displeased sound in the back of his throat. He was about to blow a gasket. “Don’t keep me waiting, Elder!”

Jud’Zarr descended the stage’s stairs.

Zatadra wondered what fate awaited him. A lengthy prison term? Execution?

Witnessing their beloved Grand Elder hand himself over to the

aliens, the crowd's anger simmered. They refused to be intimidated. They refused to allow Jud'Zarr to be detained in some holding cell. As their emotions rose, they hurled stones, bottles, and other projectiles at the Guardians, while yelling things like "Leave our nation" and "Go away."

Cochran shouted above the clamorous grousing, to his men, "Enough of this bullshit!" A bottle shattered against his Shell, splintering into however many fragments. "Threat level elevated! Open fire on these malcontents!"

A young male private dared to question Cochran. "But, Sergeant, isn't that level of force . . . overkill?"

Cochran got in the private's face. "Are you disobeying my orders, Private Weissman?"

"Uh, no, Sergeant," Weissman stammered.

"Then be a good little grunt and do what I fucking tell you!" Cochran clapped a palm against Weissman's chest, propelling him back a step.

Weissman swallowed hard. "Yes, Sergeant," he said flatly, hesitantly bringing up his rifle.

A homicidal, trigger-happy grin hitched the corners of Cochran's lips at the click of his rifle's trigger being pulled.

All Guardians' weapons flashed and crackled.

Khanorians dispersed in multiple directions, shrieking and stumbling. Bullets whizzed through the air, shattering the earthenware and tchotchkes showcased atop market stalls. Mortally wounded bodies crumpled into haphazard heaps.

Zataldra recoiled in horror. "Father!" she screamed from the stage, voice drowned by booming gunshots. Her worried eyes roved the ensuing chaos for Jud'Zarr.

A scholar of the science field, she was a far cry from anything resembling a warrior. This was her first encounter with live

gunfire. The harrowing screams, wild sprays of blood, and ceaseless thundering of killing devices overwhelmed her.

Fight or flight kicking in, her mind went haywire. Should she run away? Seek cover? Where was her father? She raced down the stage's stairs and into the swarm of Khanorians—some fleeing, some banding together in solidarity to stand their ground—and got swept up in the melee.

Bodies crushed against her, jostling her aside.

A man slammed into her by accident. She stumbled but recovered her balance, avoiding a fall onto her face.

An unending stream of bullets pierced flesh indiscriminately—men, women, children.

Ears ringing, Zataldra's searching eyes snapped left and right. *Father, where are you?* Her brows rose and jaw hung when she spotted Jud'Zarr lying prone, a purplish puddle of blood seeping into the earth underneath him.

A sick feeling swelled through her, and she forced herself not to retch.

In a slow and painful crawl, Jud'Zarr inched toward his firstborn daughter, fingers raking grooves into the earth, blood trailing with the drag of his body. "Z-Zataldra . . ." he said, his breaths raspy. He was just barely clinging to his last vestige of life.

The world came to a five-second standstill for Zataldra as dread accumulated in her chest and ground into her heart.

A bullet narrowly missed grazing her temple, instead colliding with a nearby shopfront's window.

Her body reacted with a convulsive shudder at the crash of glass.

Shedding the paralyzing grip of fear, she darted through the dispersing mass of Khanorians to get to Jud'Zarr, arms swinging with the beat of her feet. Nothing was going to stop her.

Possessed by emotion, she plunged into a state of tunnel vision and zeroed in on reaching her father at all costs—shoes kicking up dirt. The gunfire now appeared trivial, as if she had just become bulletproof. Without apology, she shoved anyone in her way onto the ground. Her arms were now battering rams clearing her path. She'd have to reckon with guilt later; right now, all that mattered was her objective.

Pulse racing, chest thudding without respite, and silver whorls of long hair swirling around her mauve face, she made it to Jud'Zarr and slowed to a full stop.

A whirlpool of cherished memories churned in her mind. *No*, she thought. The ache was small at first. Within a blink, it multiplied tenfold. It jabbed at her rheumy eyes, and tears flooded over her lids, pattering the ground in droplets.

The weight of sorrow dropped her onto her knees. A broken woman, she wept. Her father had transitioned.

Cochran ordered his men, "Cease fire!" Weapons hissed, cooling down. The life-scan readings streaming across his HUD confirmed Jud'Zarr's demise. "Dead or alive was our orders. Looks like the mission has been accomplished," he declared smugly. After taking snapshots of Jud'Zarr on his HUD for proof of elimination, he marched over to Zataldra.

Heart lodged in her throat, she cradled her father's lifeless body in her arms. She was one of the most brilliant scientists of the Shaho'Gkodii, but she couldn't help but feel that her genius-level mind was powerless in preventing massacres like this.

Cochran's faceplate slid up with a metallic zing and clink, unveiling cold, unrepentant eyes and the ear-to-ear smile of a remorseless soul. "Let everyone know that all who defy your nation's Sorin will be punished by the Commonwealth Defense Force. Got that?" he said to Zataldra.

Receiving nothing but silence from her, he nudged her rib cage with his mechboot, prompting a response.

Zataldra gnashed her teeth. Her goldish eyes were searing with fury. The death of her father had smashed her world into countless pieces. She was on the razor's edge of losing it. "*Leave—me—alone, you butcherer!*" Sobs and sniffles disjointed her words.

If she had the power to, she'd disembowel every one of these foreign bastards and relish in the joy of dancing over their mutilated corpses. And she'd gladly serve Cochran's rifle to him, shoving it down his gullet and pumping the trigger.

Cochran snorted and spat in her face. "Stupid Khanorian bitch."

Zataldra growled, brows twitching.

Cochran signaled his Guardians to load up and head to the next stop. He felt no sympathy, regret, or remorse. He had completed the mission, proving that crossing both the Sorin and the CDF could be fatal. Basic Combat Training ingrained in Guardians the importance of being ruthless, regardless of who the Commonwealth Government ordered them to point their weapons at. Instructors hammered into Guardians that showing mercy to the enemy was unacceptable and might get them killed, so when deployed, Guardians were to establish dominance right away. Their goal was to instill fear in *whoever* their enemy was, which included civilians like the Khanorians that Cochran and his team had just terrorized and murdered.

The Guardians left in their BUSs.

With the violence over, the area fell into an unsettling stillness. No one could hear even the faintest rustle of a breeze or the distant sound of wildlife.

Everyone who had ensconced themselves behind locked doors tentatively ventured back outside. Bereft, they dropped to their

knees on ground lathered in blood, bawling over dead loved ones.

A forever-wounded soul, Zataldra couldn't stem the flow of tears.

She cradled her father's corpse, with her features set in a mask of revulsion. *Humans are nothing but sowers of death and ruination.* Her eyes promised retribution for their sins. *They will answer for what they've done here, I swear.* Animosity hardened her gentle heart.

A voice called her name. It was Gezman, and Navexira was with him. They had survived, finding a safe place to hide during the massacre.

I am sorry for your loss, Gezman thought, watching Zataldra let out gut-wrenching wails.

Though Zataldra was relieved that her friends were alive, she simply cast a tearful glance their way before tightening her embrace on her father.

Gezman was about to go console her, but Navexira grabbed his arm, restraining him. "She needs space."

Understanding that Navexira was right, Gezman stayed put, giving Zataldra the space she needed to grieve.

Amid the mewls of the Khanorians around her, Zataldra laid her father down and stared at her bloodstained palms. The emotions choking her were a battle cry for vengeance. She hoped her thoughts would reach the ear of the divine. *If it is your will, allow me to be your wrath, your blade, your avenger.*

Thunder crashed, and forks of lightning scarred the murky sky. It was as if the heavens itself was furious.



CHAPTER ONE

PRESENT DAY

Planet Dilaxus

Randal Scott's muscles tensed, and pressure mounted inside his chest as he and his Vanguard Alpha teammates, in their Shells, ventured into a canyon. Ahead of them lay the carcasses of fallen comrades, some decayed beyond recognition. The deceased's Shells bore evidence of a fierce fight—blast punctures and other structural damages. The whole scene reeked of an ambush.

Randy's visor scanned the busted-up Shells. He'd be devastated if his best friend and former battle-buddy, Jarius Ford, were among the dead. *Please, Jarius, be alive*, he silently implored. The drumming in his chest worsened.

Jarius had elected to commission into the Ambassador Corps of the CDF, the branch dedicated to diplomacy and intergalactic relations, with some convincing from Randy. He and two other ambassadors had deployed to negotiate the release of several Guardians detained by the Commonwealth's new mysterious enemy, the Collective. While they were returning to Eden from a

Mission World, a Collective boarding party attacked and infiltrated the Guardians' vessel. Randy suspected the Collective had no intention of negotiating with the ambassador delegation. Consenting to a meeting with them had been a setup from the start.

A wave of relief evaporated Randy's worries when he confirmed that none of the bodies belonged to Jarius. The other two lieutenant ambassadors weren't among the dead either. It was likely the Collective took the three of them captive, but that didn't guarantee they were still breathing.

Lieutenant Carl Breckenridge contacted the other task forces deployed to locate the ambassador delegation and their team of bodyguards, bodyguards which now lay dead. "This is Lieutenant Breckenridge to all task forces. We found them," he reported over audio comms. "The ambassadors aren't here, though."

Randy contemplated the Collective's intentions. *What in the universe could the Collective possibly be after? What the hell's their objective? It appears their sole mission is to . . . eliminate Guardians and disrupt the Commonwealth's trade network.*

The emergence of the Collective was a sudden and enigmatic development. They had attacked Commonwealth vessels, bombed Commonwealth embassies within protectorates, and targeted Guardians engaged in planetary-impact missions. Their actions seemed driven by a relentless desire to undermine the Commonwealth at every conceivable turn, ruling out any notion that they were mere intergalactic pirates.

"Attention, everyone," Carl said in a commanding voice. "Plug into these Shells and check out their video logs. Let's take a look at what went down here."

"Yes, Sir," the team of five replied in unison—Specialist Randal Scott, Sergeant Jenny Pines, and newcomers Specialist Arturo de León, Private Brayden Warnock, and Sergeant Royce

Thatcher.

Vanguard Alpha fanned out, dry earth crunching beneath their mechboots.

Randy knelt beside one of the fallen Guardians, whose faceplate had been shattered during the battle. The gross sight of flesh-eating parasites nibbling on the decaying remains tightened his features into a wince. Jerking his head away, he shook off the disgust and regained his bearing. Then he glanced down at the Guardian's name tag: HARLOW.

He inserted an interface cable into the port at the back of Harlow's helmet. His Shell's CPU synced with Harlow's, granting him access to its memory bank. And that memory bank contained footage of the battle, because a Shell's visuals were always being recorded and archived by its CPU.

Through Harlow's perspective, Randy observed:

Brilliant flashes from Harlow's energy gun danced across his Shell's visor.

One of the Collective soldiers, encased in his own mechanized armor, crumbled to the ground after taking too many shots from Guardians' weapons.

Harlow shouted, "Dammit, they've got us outnumbered!" Enemy gunfire pummeled his Shell with reverberating impacts that tore into its metal rind, vibrating Randy's eardrums as he watched on.

Harlow retaliated, pivoting his gun's muzzle from one direction to another while pumping the trigger.

Hostile fire rained from above, battering the earth.

Harlow tilted his visual perspective upward and zoomed in on the cliffs, sighting more hostiles standing atop ledges. "Shit, there are more of them, up there!" He elevated his aim. The errant

plasma blasts discharged from his gun struck the cliffsides, sending debris cascading down.

A Guardian screamed in the distance after the strident boom of an explosion.

Harlow shouted, “Fuck, Talbert’s down!” Blasts pelted him from all sides: left, right, front, and back. Shell breached by the storm of gunfire, he crashed to the ground with a thud. Exposed hardware and circuits, within the cracks and lacerations of his Shell’s exterior, disgorged smoke and crackling sparks.

All that filled Randy’s visor was the sky as Harlow lay on his back, struggling to oxygenate his lungs.

Life ebbing away slowly but surely, Harlow knew he was only seconds away from death, so he paid no mind to the damage reports blinking on his HUD.

The cacophony of roaring weapons faded, giving way to the enemy’s voices mingling with Harlow’s labored breaths.

One of the Collective soldiers said, “Zataldra, we have secured the envoys.” The CPU in Harlow’s helmet translated the language being spoken.

“Good. Take them to the ship,” Zataldra replied.

Randy pondered, *Could this Zataldra be the Collective’s leader, or at least an authority figure within their ranks?*

Vital-sign overlays scrolled across Harlow’s HUD. Numerical indicators pulsed, plummeting from three digits to two to one—and then zero. Harlow’s body was slowly surrendering to death. Any second now, he’d be gone.

Feeling for his fellow Guardian, Randy’s throat constricted. Then his heart rate ticked up a notch when he heard Jarius demanding, “What do you people want? Why are you doing this?”

Zataldra responded to Jarius in a frigid tone, “What we seek is retribution, retribution for *all* beings who have suffered because of

you humans.” The device she wore around her neck translated her words.

Harlow wheezed his final breath, and his vitals flatlined. Next came the commotion of a scuffle between the three ambassadors and their captors. At that point, Randy closed the video log, his blood running cold.

Randy unplugged the interface cable and rose to his feet. Harlow’s last heartbeat and the ambassadors’ clamors of resistance stuck with him. He initiated an analysis of the language spoken by the Collective attackers. His CPU identified it as Khanorian. Randy’s memory stirred, recalling something from the Academy’s archives about a Khanorian Campaign that took place years ago.

Specialist Arturo de León approached Randy. “Hey, chin up, war hero. I know you’re stressed out about your buddy, but the fact that he isn’t on the KIA list is a positive sign, right?”

“Well, it’s certainly better than the alternative,” Randy replied dully. “I’ll manage.”

“Alright, but if you need to talk, you know I’m here.”

“Thanks.”

It seemed Randy couldn’t catch a break. His best friend was missing, possibly enduring torture or worse. Moreover, being sent on missions to combat human and alien criminal forces often kept him galaxies away from Stacie for weeks at a time, while they were in the midst of rebuilding their relationship. And future missions might even wrest him away from Stacie for two or three months at a stretch. He didn’t want to be an absentee boyfriend. But he understood that his career as a Task Force Guardian would inevitably test his and Stacie’s relationship.

The ships of the other task forces sent to the planet, to search for the missing delegation, descended from the sky and touched

down.

Carl lifted a fallen Guardian into his arms. “Let’s help get our comrades-in-arms back home.”

Vanguard Alpha rallied around Carl, helping to transport the Guardians to the waiting ships.

Randy worked alongside his teammates, thinking about Jarius. *If you’re still alive, the CDF will find you, buddy.*



Lieutenant Ambassador Jarius Ford was an outgoing man of infectious charisma. Big personality, smooth talker, confident swagger, charming smile. He was a prime candidate for a lieutenancy in the Ambassador Corps of the CDF. His collegemate, battle-buddy, and best friend, Randal Scott, was the culprit who motivated him to apply to Officer Candidate School (OCS) and commission into the Ambassador Corps. The transition was the right move beyond a shadow of a doubt. The Ambassador Corps seemed to fit him more so than his prior service branch, the Land Combatant Corps. Leave it to Randy to steer his career in the right direction.

After graduating from OCS as a second lieutenant, he met up with Randy for a night of celebration, and to his surprise, Stacie Spencer was with him. Jarius was genuinely happy for Randy, glad that he and Stacie had decided to make an effort to mend their broken relationship, one step at a time, of course. And, from an outside observer’s perspective, their renewed relationship seemed to be progressing well. Three days later, Jarius crossed paths with the woman of his dreams, Jazzlyn Rochelle de’ Medici. Black and Italian. Good-looking. Saucy attitude. Ambitious. Lieutenant in the Reserves of the CDF’s Air & Space Corps.

He, Jazzlyn, Randy, and Stacie double-dated and created

timeless memories. Jarius and Jazzlyn even established a Link, consummating their relationship through the intimacy of mental communion. And within just two months of meeting her, Jarius proposed. To many people, tying the knot at this stage might seem impulsive, but to Jarius, it felt entirely right. Why play the field when he had scored a remarkable woman like Jazzlyn? With her at his side, he was on the biggest high of his life.

Now he lay on the dingy floor of a grungy, unventilated detainment cell as a prisoner of war—arms and ankles bound, nostrils inhaling the fetid reek of his unbathed flesh, uniform begrimed, and wounds from recent beatings throbbing. How many days had it been now: four, maybe five? In BCT, cadets were told they'd have to embrace the suck when out in the field; this was beyond *suck*.

Why he and the other two ambassadors were being kept alive by the Collective remained a mystery to Jarius. No amount of further interrogation could unsheathe any valuable insights from him or his fellow ambassadors. What they had divulged was already common knowledge to the Collective. The truly sensitive data relative to the Commonwealth's defense capabilities and innovative weaponry in development was in the hands of people way above his pay grade.

Jarius' cell door creaked open. He squinted to blunt the shaft of light stabbing his eyes as it pierced the darkness. In the doorway stood a Khanorian woman, a member of the Collective: Zataldra. She was clad in a purplish outfit accentuated by an armored corset-like garment hugging her midsection. Completing the ensemble were bicep-length gloves and thigh-high boots. On her face was a decorative nose chain, a hallmark of traditional Khanorian women's attire.

The outfit exuded an air of boldness, signifying a notable shift

in Zataldra's demeanor. The gentleness her eyes once held had been supplanted by a fierceness that was totally uncharacteristic of her former self. The woman who had once felt powerless witnessing her father's demise had undergone a transformation. She had shed the fear she'd previously harbored toward the alien soldiers who took his life, the CDF's Guardians. In its place was an aura of strength, fearlessness, and authority. Never again would she be the victim, but always the victor.

She gave Jarius a nasty look—a look he interpreted as unbridled hatred. His people's military had supported the Sorin's tyrannical regime in squashing the first wave of uprisings that had threatened to unseat him, through a mass-scale civil enforcement operation known as the Khanorian Campaign. Zataldra and the Collective had deemed that the time of reckoning for the human race was now. If it weren't for the CDF, that first wave of uprisings would've forced the Sorin to abdicate the seat of leadership.

Zataldra tapped the interspecies translator collared around her neck, enabling her words to be conveyed in the human prisoner's language. "What is the purpose of this?" she demanded, holding aloft a nanochip nipped between her thumb and forefinger. She had extracted it from the brain of one of the Guardians that the delegation had been sent to rescue. "I've been conducting numerous experiments on this micro device, and though knowing its exact function isn't pertinent to the success of my experiments, I'm curious as to what it is and how it actually benefits your people."

Jarius shifted upright, bracing his back against the stone-block wall. His arm and leg shackles chinked and rattled. Features cringing with scorn, he said, "Maybe you should've asked my colleague, who you *ripped* that cerebral implant from the brain of,

murdering him.” He had allowed anger to decide his words, a grave folly for an ambassador. He needed to stay cool and somehow negotiate his release from captivity.

Emotional wounds from the past resurfaced within Zataldra once more. Who was this human to speak with such disdain? Her face contorted into a scowl. “And, just like all of your *foul* species, he deserved nothing more than death.”

Fighting back the flush of anger triggered by Zataldra’s ruthless assertion, Jarius unwrinkled his brow and schooled his face into an amicable expression. He had to have receptive ears. He had to be understanding of her pain—like an Ambassador Corps liaison should be—and not bow to heated emotions. Allowing reckless, insensitive words to compromise this opportunity to reason with Zataldra would be foolhardy. Though reasoning with her would most likely be a hapless endeavor, he had to give it a shot. Smoothing out his voice, he said, “I get why you hate us, but we . . .”

Zataldra steamrolled over the rest of his words. “Silence your mouth, ingrate!” The condemnation in her tone nearly nailed Jarius to the wall. “Tell me, what is the purpose of this . . . cerebral implant?” She took an aggressive step forward into the dark, confining enclosure. Jarius could feel fury radiating from her. She glared inquisitively at the small invention of alien neuroscience in her hand. “Is this micro contraption some sort of . . . wetware enhancement mechanism?”

“It allows us to establish a mental Link,” Jarius responded calmly.

Zataldra’s features pinched. Then puzzlement sowed its way across her face. “What?”

Jarius explained, “Linking allows humans to send and receive thought. It’s a cerebral bond shared by two consenting individuals.

Linking was created to foster empathy, understanding, and compassion among humans to bring them closer together.”

Zataldra regarded him for a moment. *Empathy? Understanding? Compassion?* she thought. Was this human being earnest? She laughed, hand clapping the wall in utter amusement. “A . . . most noble pursuit for such a barbaric species, *if true*. But I don’t believe candor is a trait your race possesses.”

“Look, I’m aware Khanorians have suffered because of the Commonwealth Defense Force. We were wrong for supporting your people’s oppressors. So, yeah, we’re guilty as charged. And we’ve done some terrible shit to citizens of other worlds too. But the Commonwealth Government is ‘under new management.’ Our current leader would *never* compromise the Commonwealth’s integrity just for . . . incentives.” Jarius and all the Commonwealth knew Chief Oviereya Amaechi was incorruptible. “We’re trying to redeem ourselves and redress our wrongs. We want to . . .”

“Redress your wrongs?” Zataldra spat angrily, interrupting Jarius mid-sentence. Her lips twitched. Countless nights she had cried herself to sleep over her father’s death. “Can you revive the dead? Can you reverse the annals of history and undo your atrocities? Can you restore what you took from me?”

Jarius redoubled his efforts to make peace with Zataldra and said, convincingly—wholeheartedly, “We’re not asking for absolution, but we wanna rectify the damage we’ve done. Please, you’ve gotta believe me.”

His passionate entreatment was answered with a harsh laugh from Zataldra. She refused to lend credence to the notion that the human race was anything more than a malevolent species. To her, evil was baked into their DNA. “Like I would actually believe a word you say,” she sneered. “You humans destroy lives at no cost to your conscience. That, I have observed firsthand.” The emotive

memory of innocent Khanorians and her father being slaughtered dragged her back in time, the sharp cracks of gunfire meshing with agonizing screams. “In support of the High Sorin’s tyranny, soldiers of your Defense Force deliberately reined terror across this nation, quashing mass protests and resistance with unwarranted violence. Women became . . . trophies to them.”

Jarius bit his lower lip, remorse burgeoning and thoughts cursing the bad actors within the Defense Force. They had defaced its reputation for all Guardians. And those bad actors included high-ranking officers right down to the lowest of enlisted.

Zataldra’s narrative continued. “After witnessing so much death, I forsook my scientific endeavors to stand alongside the rebels fighting to overthrow the Sorin. We gave our best effort against your Defense Force, but they eventually beat us into submission. As soon as your Defense Force fulfilled their contract, every single Guardian departed Khanoria.

“The year following their withdrawal, the flame of resistance reignited. The voices of dissent grew louder than before. Without your Defense Force’s manpower, the Sorin was overthrown during the second wave of the Khanorian Revolution.

“If it weren’t for your Defense Force, the Sorin’s defeat would’ve come much sooner, and countless lives wouldn’t have been lost. Women wouldn’t have been . . . stripped of their dignity. So why should I believe anything you, a human, says? Why should your people not face punishment for their crimes?”

Zataldra pivoted to leave through the open door, the footfalls of her flat-heeled boots clicking.

Jarius wasn’t going to be an apologist for the CDF’s wrongs, but he wasn’t going to demonize the entire CDF either. They were more than the sum of their sins. He said, “Not all Guardians are a buncha amoral dicks. And you can’t hold every single human

being accountable for . . .”

“Zer’Katro, Bingrew,” Zataldra addressed two men in the corridor, disregarding Jarius, “bring the prisoner, just in case I require another test subject for the demonstration.”

“What the hell? What demonstration?” Jarius demanded.

Zataldra’s two acolytes rushed into the cell, grabbing Jarius beneath his armpits and hauling him off the floor to his feet. They were both robust men, strong and built.

Jarius writhed against their hold in a bout of fierce resistance. “Let me go, man!” he shouted through clenched teeth.

While Zer’Katro kept Jarius restrained, Bingrew discharged a chemical aerosol into Jarius’ face from a handheld dispenser of some sort. Then Zer’Katro released him from his grasp.

Dammit, Jarius thought. His eyesight blurred and swayed. In an act of desperation, he swung a fist at the two men, but with the shackles restricting his reach, air was the only thing he struck.

As his neohuman immune system struggled to overpower the foreign agent coursing through his bloodstream, his lungs burned and vertigo unbalanced his feet. Losing the battle to remain standing, he sank to one knee.

Brown complexion turning ashen and motor functions faltering, he succumbed to unconsciousness, slumping to the floor.



Jarius awoke, thoughts muddled. His arms were secured above his head, fastened to a wall by manacles. The feverish sweat induced by the aerosol wet the dark scruff on his unshaven jaw.

A pair of blurry figures to his right, manacled to the wall as well, came into focus. They were the two lieutenant ambassadors he’d went to Dilaxus with, seeking to secure the freedom of the Guardians being held prisoner by the Collective.

“Arlo. Cruz,” Jarius murmured, the fog clearing from his mind. He saw they were in an unfurnished, featureless stark-white room.

“You look like you’ve been through the wringer, but good to see you’re still alive and kickin’,” Cruz remarked. Depending on what Zataldra had planned, Jarius wasn’t sure how much longer that would be the case.

The doors leading into the room slid open, and in walked Zataldra, Bingrew, and Zer’Katro.

Apparently, Jarius and his fellow ambassadors were being given a front-row seat to Zataldra’s “demonstration”—whatever it entailed.

After Zataldra ordered the room’s virtual aide to translate their language into the humans’ and vice versa, a computer-generated voice acknowledged her command. Now, the loudspeakers in the room would echo everyone’s words in their respective languages.

The wall screen flashed to life at the designated hour, revealing the rugged bluish-gray visage of a man with high-composed features and a sharp underbite. He watched eagerly, awaiting Zataldra’s demonstration.

Jarius’ brow furrowed with contempt. He recognized the face of the man from the Academy’s archives. It belonged to Dafulton, a dictator the CDF had toppled during one of their respectable planetary-impact missions. Jarius wondered if he was the Collective’s leader.

Zataldra said, “Dafulton, we will now proceed with the demonstration.”

Dafulton nodded silently.

Zataldra tapped her wristlet. A faint blue light on the device blinked. Instantly, an agonizing pressure coalesced in Cruz and Arlo’s skulls.

Cruz’s teeth clicked together. “The pain . . . It’s too much . . .”

Hair-raising screams from both Arlo and Cruz echoed throughout the room.

Watching them suffer, Jarius tugged at his manacles as if they'd even budge. "What are you doing to them?" His voice was strained with emotion.

Once the two ambassadors stopped screaming, they began grunting and thrashing against their restraints like feral beasts.

"Now, release them," Zataldra instructed Bingrew.

He pressed a button on the remote he held, setting Arlo and Cruz free.

Zataldra inputted a sequence of commands on her wristlet, and the ambassadors locked eyes. Primal rage glazed over their unblinking gazes. They looked like they were itching to kill each other. In an eruption of violence, they collided, fists pounding into flesh.

Horror wrenched Jarius' heart. *What the fuck is going on?* Arlo and Cruz no longer recognized each other. They had been transformed into bloodthirsty savages. "Guys, cut it out!" Jarius yelled. There was no acknowledgment of his plea in their deadpan eyes. They weren't in their right minds.

Cruz rammed his forehead into Arlo's nose, producing a sickening crunch. Arlo staggered backward, blood streaming from his nostrils, before falling onto his back. Cruz then straddled Arlo's torso and rained down punches with a ferocity that reduced Arlo's face to an unrecognizable mess of blood, broken bones, and bruised flesh. Gripping Arlo's head in both hands, Cruz slammed it twice into the floor, killing him with blunt force trauma.

An epiphany dawned on Jarius: Zataldra had devised a way to hack a cerebral implant—the gateway into the human mind. Subverting human beings' will to turn them against their friends, family, and loved ones—making them obliterate each other—was

possibly one of the most horrid weapons Jarius had ever encountered during his time in the CDF thus far.

Cruz rose to his full height, knuckles drenched in red liquid. Arlo's blows had left noticeable injuries on his face.

Searching for another person to clobber, his crazed eyes panned the room.

Zataldra's wristlet lit up with a trill after she entered a new command, and Cruz froze in place. He stood motionless. Not one muscle in his face moved, yet sorrow, agony, and remorse flickered in his eyes. He was aware of his actions in ending Arlo's life.

"Now, on to part two of the demonstration," Zataldra announced as Dafulton continued observing. "Release the third prisoner," she told Bingrew.

Bingrew pressed a button on his remote control, and the manacles holding Jarius' arms aloft clicked open.

In a split-second reaction, Jarius lunged toward his captors. He figured he'd at least go down fighting.

Zataldra keyed a command on her wristlet, and the signal transmitting from it rooted Jarius' feet to the floor, stopping him in his tracks.

Jarius ground his teeth, an ache pulsating at the back of his eyes and setting his brain on fire. Questions mobbed his thoughts. Was Zataldra subjecting him to the same manipulation that she had subjected Cruz and Arlo to?

Zataldra removed her energy gun from her thigh holster and extended it to Jarius. "Take the weapon."

Against his will, Jarius' hand accepted the gun. He was conscious of everything happening but unable to fight Zataldra's influence over his mind. He was literally a prisoner within his own body. All he could do was watch helplessly as his limbs carried out

directives that weren't his.

"Now aim the weapon at your comrade and pull the trigger," Zataldra said.

Jarius wanted to scream and protest, but his mouth remained sealed shut. He was about to be a spectator to a murder being performed by his own body.

Jarius rested the gun against Cruz's temple. There was an expression on Cruz's swollen, puffy face that begged "*please don't.*" Firing at point-blank range, a backwash of blood splattered over Jarius as Cruz's head disintegrated—the floor now a grisly canvas for brain matter, skull fragments, and scraps of flesh.

"Return the weapon to me," Zataldra ordered. Jarius handed her the gun, and she stowed it back in her holster. Turning to Dafulton, who appeared pleased, she said, "Part two of demonstration complete." Her voice was beaming with pride. "As you have witnessed, my progress has been significant. We can even transmit the mind-control signal via unmanned aerial systems."

"Excellent," Dafulton said, wearing a wicked grin.

Tears drizzled down Jarius' cheeks although his face was emotionless. He stood there as an unwilling accessory to murder.

Zataldra said to Dafulton, "Geznan and Navexira are already on the humans' primary homeworld, preparing to conduct the weapon's most extensive test yet." There was no one she trusted more than Geznan and Navexira to accomplish this mission. They had fought with her against the CDF, during the first wave of the Khanorian Revolution. They had stood beside her even in her darkest moments, like after her father's death. They knew how much the extermination of humanity meant to her, which might hinge on this weapon.

Still paralyzed by the mind-control signal, Jarius flinched

internally at what he had heard. The Collective had two operatives on Eden, who were about to execute a large-scale demonstration of the weapon's capabilities.

Dafulton's eyes were alight with malicious glee. "I would like three of your control devices delivered to my ship to conduct some tests of my own," he said to Zataldra.

"Consider it done."

"Good. If you require any more test subjects, there are plenty aboard my ship. Enough to meet your needs." Dafulton was referring to the Guardians the ambassador delegation had been sent to rescue.

He signed off, and the wall screen cleared.

Zataldra released Jarius from her hold, lights on her wristlet winking as she punched buttons.

Now back in control of his body, Jarius dropped to his hands and knees, wheezing. He felt like he was about to vomit up his innards, and his muscles were taut with tension.

Zataldra crouched next to him. "How does it feel to watch helplessly as someone you care about dies, as I did?" she asked, her voice icelike. Jarius reined in the unsavory words coming to mind. "Nothing? Not surprising."

The continuous mental replay of him killing Cruz watered Jarius' eyes, tears peppering the floor. Being used as a test subject in someone's scheme to destroy humanity was a horror he wished on no one. Maybe Defense Force Intelligence would intercept the Collective operatives on Eden and thwart their agenda before it could harm any unsuspecting civilians. But he worried that was wishful thinking.

Zataldra drew herself up, her hard-hearted disposition unsoftened by Jarius' distress. "Take him back to his cell," she instructed Bingrew and Zer'Katro, "but make sure he gets cleaned

up. I tire of his stench.”

A buzzer sounded, signaling the presence of someone outside the doors. They chirped open. In strode a teenage Khanorian girl. She wore a hip-length, short-sleeve overskirt paired with pants that puffed out slightly where they were tucked into her boots. Her facial features’ resemblance to Zataldra’s was undeniable. “Sister, what’s going on here?” the teen asked in a startled voice. Taken aback by the grotesque sight on the floor—the bludgeoned face of Arlo and the headless corpse of Cruz—her gut clenched. She covered her mouth, forcing down the bile rising in her throat. She wasn’t a noob to blood and gore; it was impossible for her to be. She had seen much of it during the Khanorian Revolution—too much. But such sights still made her insides twist.

Zataldra said, “Iya, what are you . . .” Then she remembered. “Oh, that’s right. So caught up in my work, I forgot about your visit today. My apologies.”

Confusion blanketed Iya’s face. She pointed at the two dead ambassadors and said, “Yes, but what in the name of the Gods is going on here?”

“Though I owe you no explanation, I will provide one later. For now . . .”

Iya’s eyes shifted to Jarius. One slow, sure step at a time, she started toward him. “You look to be in pain, human. Do you require medical attention?”

Jarius wondered why Iya was different, not fuming with rage at the sight of his kind.

Bingrew stepped into Iya’s periphery, stone-faced. He extended an arm to block her from further approaching Jarius. “Caution, young one, he is dangerous. Just like all of his race is.”

Iya stood akimbo, looking him in the eyes squarely. “I’m sixteen now, Bingrew. I know danger when I see it, and this human

appears to have been rendered harmless. Even if he's guilty of some misdeed, the Korahh'Havaell teaches us to respect all sentient beings, whether they are prisoners or . . .”

“Enough, Iya!” Zataldra said, her voice a whirlwind of fury. “This is neither the time nor the place for religious doctrine.” *It seems you're more like mother and I'm more like father*, she thought to herself. More like her father when he was a warman.

Jarius' mind conjured up theories. *Korahh'Havaell? Maybe that's a scriptural text of some sort.* Zataldra's sister definitely had a belief system that contrasted with hers, he clearly saw.

An insistent voice inside Iya urged her to act on her growing sympathy for Jarius. He was doing his damndest to fight off the nausea and headache working in tandem to keep him on his hands and knees. “That human appears to be quite unwell,” Iya remarked. “I will help him . . .”

“No, Iya, you will do nothing,” Zataldra said firmly. “This is my domain. I decide what happens here. While you may stay, as you are my sister, you must respect my authority.”

“Fine,” Iya conceded. “But do remember I'm sixteen now and that it's the Gods who guide my steps. And please, don't let your descent into apostasy overshadow the Korahh'Havaell's teachings, the teachings our mother lived by and used to instill morals, values, and compassion in us—even if we chose not to become devout followers, like you have.” She left, the doors shutting with a snick.

Zer'Katro and Bingrew assisted Jarius in getting to his feet.

A chirp turned Zataldra's attention to her wristlet. The message displayed on its small screen softened her irritable expression. It had been a while since she last spoke to Grand Elder Drosaide Varanz, her father's closest friend. He had always been there for her, Iya, and Jud'Zarr, especially after her mother's premature

passing.

Zataldra knew that a Khanorian did not disregard an invitation from a Grand Elder. So, though she was busy, she would meet with Varanz and hear him out.

Bingrew and Zer’Katro marched a resistless Jarius through the doors. He had no fight left in him, body fatigued by the aftereffects of mind control.

As he trudged along on shaky legs, his chin hung wearily. The outlook of his future seemed bleak, but he held onto the hope of being rescued, thoughts of his fiancée and best friend on his mind. *Jazzlyn. Randy.*

CHAPTER TWO

Commonwealth Planet Eden

On a morning run, Stacie Spencer and Jazzlyn de' Medici raced across a paved jogging trail winding through woods. The lattice of leafy tree branches overhead filtered the sun's rays, casting a patchwork of light and shadow over the two runners.

Both Jazzlyn and Stacie were in the zone, each striving to reach the end of the trail before the other.

Jazzlyn in the lead, Stacie kicked up her pace—the drumbeat of her heart accelerating, legs aching for reprieve, and air rushing from her lungs in ragged, uneven gasps. *Damn, Jazzlyn is a real speedster*, Stacie thought. *She wasn't kidding when she said she was a habitual runner*. Jazzlyn definitely had the build of a runner. However, no matter how fast Jazzlyn was, Stacie was determined to win the race.

Even in a friendly one-on-one competition like today's, Stacie's competitive spirit burned to the utmost degree. She *refused* to even entertain the idea of losing. And this drive didn't simply stem from ego, but from a history of underestimation and belittlement.

Stacie's parents, before their deaths, were members of the Eight Elite, the wealthiest of the upper echelon of humanity—Eden inhabitants. They provided her with anything she wanted. But over time, she became fed up with being labeled as just a privileged Elite “princess” by society. The notion of her being a silver-spoon heiress who had a leg up over everyone, because of family connections and assets, began to seriously grate on her nerves. Therefore, in her late teens, she had resolved to escape the gilded cage her parents had built for her. She wanted to prove to all her critics, and herself, that she could achieve success without relying on her privileges.

To make her point, she instilled in herself the ambition to be an overachiever at every endeavor she pursued, from athletic challenges to being a Guardian—a soldier—in the prestigious Commonwealth Defense Force. That ambition was fueling her drive to come out on top in today's race between her and Jazzlyn.

Right now, her body was begging her to slow down—to just let Jazzlyn win this one. But the hurtful remarks from her peers at Cadwell Institute of Higher Learning spurred her on:

“No way you got those stellar evaluations by your own merits. Your parents finagle them for you or something?”

“Probably got those high evals by sleeping around with your professors.”

“Spencer doesn't have to work nearly as hard as the rest of us. She knows her mommy and daddy can buy her graduation for her.”

She wasn't sure why past insults *still* niggled her. What was she trying to prove to herself? She was now the queen of Spencer Enterprises. She had taken over her parents' criminal empire and

purified it into an instrument for positive change. But her parents' organization was an inheritance, not a venture she had built from the ground up herself. Sure, she had served as a Guardian in the CDF and earned the mantle of Warrior Extraordinaire during BCT, but it was all thanks to the support of her significant other, Randal Scott.

Mind holed up in the past, another memory hijacked her thoughts as she trailed Jazzlyn, falling behind on the uphill stretch .

..

Stacie sat on the grass, nursing her injured knee after a rough fall during track practice. "Dammit," she muttered in frustration.

One of Stacie's teammates extended a hand to help her up. "Here, let me help you," she said. Just as Stacie reached out, her teammate withdrew the offer with a chuckle. "Try getting up on your own for once, princess."

Harnessing the voices of her detractors into adrenaline, Stacie willed her exhausted legs into a sprint—overriding the ache in her tendons, overriding the intrinsic voice yelling at her to not overexert herself. Momentum growing stronger and stronger, she overtook Jazzlyn like a lioness—long, silky blonde ponytail billowing behind her.

Maintaining her pace, she pushed her cardio to the limit. *Faster*, she told herself, diaphragm contracting rapidly, metatarsal bones pounding the earth. *Faster!* A fallen twig snapped under the drop of her foot.

She got her lungs into a steady rhythm: Breathe in, breathe out.

She could hear Jazzlyn's sneakers gaining traction and closing the distance.

Motivating herself, the words on repeat in Stacie's mind were, *Dominate. Be the fucking best. Win.* Her and Jazzlyn nearly neck and neck, she held on to her slight lead, and they followed the trail into the lush park beyond the woods. Winner: Stacie.

Totally spent, both women tiredly slumped onto a white bench, resting their now rubbery legs.

All around, people were enjoying meals at the bench-tables and taking strolls. Birds perched in green trees twittered. Amphibious creatures dwelling in limpid freshwater ponds bobbed.

"You're fast, Spencer," Jazzlyn huffed, pulse dropping to normal. Strands of sable hair clung to her clammy forehead. Like her running partner, her athletic wear was bathed in perspiration, and the afterburn of the run was stinging her quadriceps and calves. "I thought I had you."

Stacie sucked some air into her breathless lungs and smiled. "You *almost* did. Good run." She peeled her shirt from her midriff and wiped her face with it. Her solid, suntanned abs were soaked to the bone.

Jazzlyn returned the smile. "I'll beat you next time," she guaranteed. Her eyes glanced down at the engagement ring on her finger, and she sighed. The run proved to be a pleasant distraction for her, but the safety of her fiancée constantly pecked at her conscience.

Stacie said, "I know you're worried about him, but I'm sure he's alright."

Unlike Stacie, Jazzlyn had her doubts. "Jarius should've returned from his assignment *five days* ago." She tugged at her hair, twisting it around her fingers.

Stacie settled a reassuring grip on Jazzlyn's shoulder. "That was an *estimated* end date, right? I'm sure that as a Commonwealth ambassador, brokering peace deals and

negotiating settlements can sometimes encounter unexpected hurdles. Mission completion dates are ‘subject to change,’ aren’t they?”

Stacie’s encouraging words weren’t quite enough to quell Jazzlyn’s unrest. An uneasy feeling lingered. She remained fearful that something terrible might have happened to Jarius. Thoughts of him stranded somewhere injured or being tortured by an enemy ran rampant through her mind. “Yeah, you could be right,” she ceded, lips quivering. “That’s got to be it.” Though there was now optimism in her voice, her troubled heart found no solace.

“Yeah, I’m sure he’ll be back on Eden any day now.”

A vendor golem was scouring the park for potential customers. When its optics landed on the two gassed, sweat-drenched young women, it rolled up to them. From the round lens at the center of its ovoid head, it projected a hologram of a plastic bottle with a green thunderbolt logo on it. The golem then launched into a sales pitch. “Velocity Water, by VoltLife, is enriched with minerals and electrolytes that will . . .”

“We’ll take two,” Stacie interrupted, cutting short the bot’s sales pitch.

The golem extracted two plastic bottles from the refrigerated storage compartment of its boxy midsection.

Stacie accessed the holotouch interface of her wrist PDA, opened a payment app, and tendered four credits.

The golem’s circular eyes blinked, confirming receipt of payment. Afterward, it rolled away, searching for VoltLife’s next customers.

Stacie and Jazzlyn twisted off the bottle caps and guzzled the water, wetting their parched throats and alleviating their thirst.

On the bottles’ label, the digital promo text VOLT LIFE scrolled from left to right.

Stacie lowered her bottle from her lips, admiring the intricate details of the tiny gold filigree of Jazzlyn's engagement ring. If the day ever came that she got married, she wanted a ring just as glamorous.

Jazzlyn noticed the impressed look in Stacie's eyes. "It's nice, isn't it?"

Stacie tipped her chin in agreement. "It's lovely."

"I gotta say, Jarius has good taste." Jazzlyn playfully nudged Stacie's shoulder with her elbow. "So, when are you and Mr. Scott gonna tie the knot?"

"Oh, um . . ." Stacie forced a wan smile onto her face, masquerading uncertainty. She grasped for words. "Well, we just got back together, and I've decided I . . . wanna take it slow. I . . . just wanna be sure, I guess."

"Sure of what?"

Stacie reflected on the past. First, there was Randy's infidelity—his accidental entanglement with Kesley Whittaker, which sparked their breakup . . .

*"Not only have you joined the enemy, but you sleep with them too! You betrayed your duty, but you also betrayed **me!** Me, Randy, the woman who dragged you out of your emotional withdrawal from society! The woman who broke you out of . . . being a loner! The woman who made you smile time after time since your mother's death by the very people you now ally yourself with!"*

And more recently, there were Randy's feelings for Akane Sugimori, the RISE member who was hellbent on killing Damien Sykes, even if it meant fouling DFI's investigation into his crimes—their painstaking effort to prosecute him . . .

“This woman means a lot to you, doesn’t she?” Stacie said to Randy.

“Yeah, she’s the first person to treat me like a comrade and a human being since coming back to the CDF from leave. She’s my friend.”

“Did you two Link?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, I know you. You’re not Linking with someone unless they’re pretty special to you. Did you . . . sleep with her?”

Randy’s forehead creased. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

*“I’m saying your judgment might be impaired by your **feelings** for this woman.”*

“Stacie?” Jazzlyn said, still waiting for an answer.

Stacie’s sculpted brows lifted in response, her mind no longer adrift in recollection. “Huh? Yeah?”

Jazzlyn took another swig of water. “What is it you want to be sure about?”

“Oh, well, it’s just . . .” Stacie dragged nervous fingers through her damp hair. Re-Linking with Randy, during their mission to prevent Akane and Jay from killing Damien Sykes, exposed her to the feelings he still had for her. Those feelings resurrected waves of nostalgic memories, from romantic outings to passionate nights in the bedroom. Yet, she couldn’t shake the doubt that had crept in. Had she been too hasty in jumping right back into a committed relationship with him? Caught up in the initial dopamine rush from once again bonding through mental communion, she now questioned the wisdom of her decision. The potency of a Link never ceased to astonish her, with its potential to influence one’s feelings and judgment.

The roar of atmospheric craft diverted Jazzlyn and Stacie's attention skyward, ending their conversation.

The craft's destination: outer space.

Side by side, Jazzlyn and Stacie watched the craft accelerate with a thunderous sonic boom, aft thrusters sketching contrails across the sky.

Jazzlyn and Stacie exchanged curious looks.

"That's like . . . the third launch today," Jazzlyn said. Whatever mission the Air & Space Corps was mobilizing for had to be significant, she thought, only a select few privy to it. As a lieutenant in the Reserves of the corps, she wondered if she'd be called up for duty. "Something big must be happening."

Stacie said, "Chief Amaechi announced that the Air & Space Corps would be conducting some orbital exercises for a few days. What else could it be?"

Jazzlyn continued staring at the sky pensively. Her intuition was warning her that more than just space drills were in progress. "I don't know, Stacie," she replied worriedly. "It's like . . . a defensive perimeter is being established in geostationary orbit."

Stacie downed some water and wiped her mouth. "A defensive perimeter?" That pulled a laugh out of her. "Who'd be stupid enough to even *consider* attacking the Commonwealth? We're a member of the Interplanetary Union, and you mess with us, you mess with the other Union Worlds."

I hope to God I'm wrong, Jazzlyn thought.

Stacie curled an arm around Jazzlyn. "Alright, let's shift gears and steer clear of any depressing thoughts. How about we make our way to my mansion for our private spa day?" She had planned to pamper Jazzlyn as much as possible today to ease her anxieties about Jarius' well-being. The in-home spa day was filled with appointments for manicures, massages, and beauty treatments.

Jazzlyn stiffly rose from the bench, her long, toned brown legs stretching to their full length. “Shall we?” she said with some cheer.

Stacie rose, standing a head shorter than Jazzlyn. She called for an air-cab with her PDA. “Are you watching the Executive debate tonight with friends?”

“I am.”

Good, Stacie thought. She believed it wouldn’t be wise for Jazzlyn to watch the debate alone, given everything she was dealing with.

“What about yourself?” Jazzlyn asked.

“Randy is due back from deployment today. We’ve got reservations at The Gourmet Oasis. Maybe we’ll catch some of the debate while we’re there.”

“That sounds lovely.”

Water bottles drained, they disposed of them in a nearby trash receptacle.

“I assume you’re voting for Amaechi,” Jazzlyn said confidently as they awaited their cab’s arrival.

Stacie’s face beamed. “*Abso-fuckin’-lutely*,” she exclaimed.

“So, how was it growing up with her as your caretaker?” Jazzlyn asked eagerly, a huge Amaechi supporter herself. “She’s such an *incredible* human being. When it comes to her values and what she believes in, she’s like a firmly rooted tree that can’t be toppled.”

“Yeah,” Stacie acknowledged. Her parents, like all members of the Elite, the aristocratic criminal conglomerate, held themselves in high regard. Yet, they treated Oviereya, a colony immigrant, with respect as their domestic servant. They even entrusted their daughter to her care in their absence. Growing close to Oviereya, Stacie adopted a mindset that diverged from her parents’ and the

majority of Eden's population. She believed colony inhabitants and immigrants were not inferior to the Omni-system's "chosen." They were equals and deserved a chance at prosperity. They could be more than resource harvesters as colony inhabitants or industrial workers or housemaids as immigrants.

Stacie reminisced about Oviereya sharing her wisdom in the estate's flower gardens, teachings Darlene Spencer wouldn't have condoned. Those teachings instilled in Stacie a profound respect for all the Commonwealth's people and taught her that the Commonwealth's classist society was a flawed one. Nevertheless, during the civil war between the dissenting colonies and the Commonwealth Government, she had viewed the insurrection as unjust, echoing the sentiments of most of Eden's population. And she had believed that so-called Independent Movement sympathizers were traitors. After all, according to the Commonwealth's constitution, a colony declaring sovereignty was treason—plain and simple. However, her perspective had since evolved.

Fond memories of her childhood with Oviereya brought a smile to Stacie's lips. "Growing up with Oviereya was . . . enlightening," she said to Jazzlyn.

"I can only imagine." Jazzlyn envisioned what it might have been like to have Oviereya as a caretaker during childhood.

A yellow auto-driven air-cab descended on their location. Once its landing skids touched down on the grass, the overhead glass canopy snapped open.

Jazzlyn and Stacie climbed aboard, bound for Stacie's home, where the personal spa day she had organized awaited them.

