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## Chapter 1

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**R**ushkah's dog tags chinked together inside her shirt as she leaned forward to lay three more cards on top of the crate. Like her commander had said, sometimes she just didn't know when to quit.

"Lieutenant."

The voice came from off to her left, breaking her focus on bad decisions. "Yeah."

"You want some of this nasty shit?" Ptero held up one of the slim packets the Rhyolusian fleet kept trying to convince them was food, the metal ghost of a defunct water turbine hulking behind him.

"Yeah, make me some."

Her eyes went back to Vrachys, who was scowling at the cards in his hand, flicking the little fan with an antsy finger. The sound echoed in the cavernous, empty space. She grinned.

"Come on, Ensign. What's it gonna be?"

"Fuck you, Lieutenant."

"Oohh!" Dendri chortled at his gall from somewhere near Ptero, though the surrounding darkness kept most of the woman's body hidden.

They were only operating by the weak light from a pair of frictolamps, for now. No need to broadcast human presence.

Aurlo had been the goal. The furthest of the Imbrian moons and covered in water. Get in, stake out one of the remotely manned turbine farms, look for weaknesses in their system. Find a way to disrupt power on Imbria itself. Take out that final shield layer.

Too bad those pale bastards had abandoned the place decades ago.

Interstellar communication had its drawbacks: intel could change faster than it arrived. Now Rushkah's unit had to sit around and wait to hear from the higher-ups in the chain of command. Get out of there? Change objectives? They didn't know yet.

She shifted her boot and the sole made a gritty noise on the hapticrete floor. Dendri was clacking pieces of her heat cannon back together. Ptero shifted his bulk around a foldout cooker, poking some semblance of food into a sizzle. Vrachys chewed at his lip, nothing to say for once.

Hurry up and wait. Her favorite thing.

"Come on, man," she said. "Just admit you're about to lo—"

*Clank.*

Vrachys looked up from his cards.

*Clank. Clank.*

"The fuck?" Dendri's head snapped to the sound.

*Clank. SsssZZZZZZZZ.*

*Oh, shit.*

"Down!" Rushkah dove for the ground, yelling to her unit.

She heard profanities from the others, even as clouds of gas began to catch the dim lamplight from several directions.

It was falling like a mist. She coughed, crawling for her pack. None of them had been geared up.

*Just sitting here! Ancestors, fucking take me!*

The others were hacking, unseen now in the cloud. Her eyes burned. The edges of her vision started to blur. The floor spun.

Between her and the floor, the metal of her dog tags scraped along, and the last coherent thought she had came blaring out of her throat.

"*Tags! Now!*"

Rushkah clawed at the beaded chain and yanked, the little ball links breaking away as designed, chucking the evidence of her name and rank as far as her weakening arm would let her.

The last sound she heard was them tinkling through a metal grate, somewhere far enough, she hoped, the enemy wouldn't find them.

As the black sear rolled into her lungs and she lost her grip on reality, Lieutenant Ekhayl hoped the rest of her unit had managed to do the same.

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QILLIAN WEHR STARED past the shoulder of Viceregent Idosius to the strata of clouds outside the fifty-second-floor window. Their stalemate was a waste of his time.

"And just how much longer do you expect it to take, Qillian?" said the viceregent. The man leaned on the defense minister's desk, weight on a palm as if Qillian were interrupting. As if they hadn't summoned him here. Again.

A pair of gulls winged by. He could be in his study right now.

"I have no idea, *Xeno*," he replied, jabbing the older man with the familiar use of his given name. "It's more of an art than a science."

The defense minister's mouth came into a line, and Qillian was sure there was no way this meeting had been her doing—Ulma Durehn had little faith in the whole translation project. She shifted a holomap out of the way, the edges at odd angles to the lines of her desk. Qillian's jaw tightened. The projection

blinked out and Idosius stood straight, making a dismissive gesture.

"Bah," he said. "You're the all-fired minister of records. You don't have a team on this? People crawling all over it like Lerasday crabs?"

"Translation work is a nightmare," Qillian said. "You'd know that if, say, it were *your* area of expertise." Minister Durehn snorted at this. "Regardless, I'm the only one who can pick out ancient Tephra worth a damn. You'll just have to keep your robes on."

The viceregent's chest rose as he took in a breath. Sleet-grey eyes stayed locked on Qillian. "Relay to Minister Wehr what has happened today," he said to Durehn.

The woman at the desk sighed, and she laced her fingers. The blue stone in her service ring had rotated to one side, and Qillian rubbed at the back of his knuckles with the opposite thumb.

"We captured a group of Rhyolusians," she said.

Qillian shrugged. "And?"

"They were military. We found them bunkered inside Turbine Center 46-N." She met his eyes. "On Aurlo."

Now, his eyebrows twitched up.

"Do you see, Wehr?" The viceregent's tone patronized. "They're growing bold. You need to find something. Deliver. Because if you don't—"

"If I don't, *what?*" Qillian felt the Push crackling, crooning for its use. His nails bit into his palms. "You need *me*, old man. If you didn't, that bodyguard wouldn't be standing out in the hallway. I wouldn't be stuck on this planet like a museum piece, under lock and key."

Idosius scoffed. "No one's keeping you locked up."

"The fuck, they aren't."

He had to get out of there. These people were using him. As always.

Durehn made a move to intercede. "Wehr—"

"It doesn't matter," he said, turning on a heel. "I'll know more when I know more."

"Get it done, Qillian," said Idosius to his back.

The Push twitched in readiness as he waved the door back open and stepped out into the corridor. Qillian let it pop in pleasant release and the floor-to-ceiling glass window behind the viceregent disintegrated into glittering sand.

Idosius swore as the door slid closed behind the records minister, who smiled to imagine the holomaps now blowing all over the room.

*It's what all that hierarchy needs. Just a dabble of chaos. Keeps them on their toes.*

Stoic outside the door stood one Haphro Rangal, Qillian's bodyguard for the last seven years. The tower of a man stepped in behind his charge, who moved off toward the elevators.

"Sounded like it went well," Haphro said in his usual rumble.

"Xeno's getting nervous. And Ulma's sick of his *katta*," said Qillian, referring to Minister Durehn by her first name. "There's nothing she can really do about it, though. Strati's up his ass."

They reached the elevator doors and Haphro grunted. "Archregent'll be up everyone's ass if half the Rhyo fleet shows up in our system."

Qillian nodded at this as the car reached their floor. The pair stepped inside, and the doors swished shut behind them.

"Basement," he said, prompting their descent.

The soft, repetitive clacking of the car passing each level had him closing his eyes, taking deep, slow breaths.

"You all right, Wehr?"

"They could make this thing quieter."

"Ah." That was all Haphro needed. He knew Qillian's quirks.

They rode the rest of the way in silence.

*Well, almost silence, for Unity's sake.*

Qillian was ready for the rest of Imbria to leave him alone.

RUSHKAH SQUINTED at the older Imbrian woman who was fitting needles on the ends of vials. This was not how they treated enemy prisoners on Rhyolus. These people were being far too delicate.

Not that all threats were absent. Far from it.

As she sat in the sterile white room, her left wrist and elbow strapped to the stainless-steel arm of a chair, a capable-looking soldier in Imbrian blue-and-grey stood at the ready behind the woman she assumed was a medic. A weapon hung from his belt, silver and sleek. If Rushkah were to guess, she'd say it was some sort of cryo gun. Dendri would know for sure, but Dendri wasn't here.

None of the others were there. She'd awakened from the gas long enough to see Imbrian soldiers carting the rest of her unit off down a hallway before the snakes had thrust her into a cell. They'd probably done the same with her team.

Rushkah flexed her fingers into a fist, trying to work circulation past the grip of the straps. No violence yet. No interrogation. But also, no escape. Not that she could see.

Not yet.

"What is this?" she said to the woman who was tying off a flexible band above her elbow.

The medic's grey brows rose. No doubt, she hadn't expected the prisoner to speak Imbrian. Rushkah knew her accent was terrible, but she could make herself understood.

*Know your enemy.*

"Routine tests."

If she'd flapped the woman any further, the medic shut her reactions right down. Her face was impassive again when she found the vein, pushed the needle past skin.

Rushkah looked over the woman's shoulder, through a window in the hapcrete wall that opened into another small

room. The window was too high to show her more than light fixtures on the other room's ceiling and most of a blank wall beyond that. It was as good a focus as any; she refused to watch these pieces of shit take her blood for Ancestors-knew-what purpose.

After counting her breaths to ten, three times over, there were small clattering sounds on the stainless. She dared a look down, and the medic was packing her supplies, no further eye contact or conversation.

The woman picked up her small bag, stood and headed for the door. She'd left Rushkah's arm strapped to the table.

"Hey! I'm still attached, you f—"

The door swung shut, a heavy lock clunking into place in the medic's wake.

Rushkah growled in her throat. She twisted her arm from side to side under the straps as best she could, hoping to get enough room for blood flow again. The soldier on the opposite wall turned his eyes in her direction but said nothing. Looked at her like she was some fascinating animal, but one he didn't want to try petting.

"They're just going to leave me here like this?" she asked.

He put his gaze back on the wall behind her, and Rushkah rolled her eyes.

*Fucking Imbrians.*

The table was solid. Even if she could have lifted it, what then? The one body she needed to take out before worrying about the door was armed. And she wasn't. And there'd be more in the hall. And they probably weren't on Aurlo anymore.

And, and, and.

By the time the door opened again, Rushkah had lost feeling in her fingers.

A man entered. His uniform was immaculate pale grey, the blue lines embroidered on his collar indicating some higher rank. If memory served her right, she'd say 'admiral', but that

seemed like ridiculous overkill for the capture of a unit the size of hers.

The soldier saluted, four fingers flat and pointed at the ceiling, thumb tucked in, Imbrian style, first knuckle of the right-hand sweeping across the brow. The officer nodded and stepped to the swiveling stool the medic had vacated. He sat, laced his fingers together, elbows on spread knees and assessed Rushkah.

She'd never heard of an Imbrian with black hair, but here was one. Pale green eyes searched her face as though all the answers were written there. He cocked his head just to the side, and the captured lieutenant decided she hated him more than the normal amount she reserved for their self-righteous kind.

"Name and rank," he said, at last.

Rushkah curled half a grin. "Not Talking the Third, Lord High Bishop of Go Fuck Yourself."

The smile he returned showed teeth. His foot shot forward and shoved the left front leg of her chair. The seat rotated out from under her ass and Rushkah tumbled to the floor, her shoulder yanking against the socket where her arm remained attached to the table.

She grunted and glared at the man, digging her metaphorical heels in for what was to come. He did nothing to stop her from pulling the chair back into place and seating herself again. If it was under her, that was one step between either him or the soldier picking it up and beating her with it. This was the sort of small ground Rushkah was working on holding now.

A light came on in the room beyond the window. She flicked her eyes to it and saw a man enter. He was not in uniform. He began moving around the room, head down and puttering with something below her line of sight. If the officer noticed her divided attention, he ignored it.

"Name and rank, little one."

Rushkah sneered but said nothing this time.

*'Little one'. Fuck him and his frail race.*



This asshole might be one of the larger snakes she'd seen, but the Rhyolusians as a whole were a bulkier and stronger people than the Imbrians. And this man wasn't even old enough to be doling out diminutives like that. He was ten years older than she was, tops. Probably less than that—Imbria had a longer orbital period than Rhyolus.

"Do you know," he said, "where the rest of your unit is right now?"

She held eye contact and silence. Whatever tactics he thought he'd be using today, the man was about to watch none of them work. Her entire unit had trained on the salt flats of Dragspar. He'd get blood out of a stone before he got useful intel out of any of them.

"Do you know where *you* are right now?"

Rushkah blinked at him.

"Cirrivus is a long way from home, *Rhyo*." The slur for 'Rhyolusian' dripped off his tongue like venom. "Would you like to see it again?"

She snorted out loud at this. As though the Imbrian military would be allowing them to leave at any point. And her government was well known throughout this sector not to meet demands for release of prisoners. She'd die. They'd all die here, and these pricks wouldn't get a single thing.

The officer smiled at her in a way that told Rushkah to brace. This was a part of his job the man enjoyed too much.

"Soldier," he said to the man behind him without looking away from his captive.

"Admiral."

*Right about the rank. Buckle up, Lieutenant.*

"I think this Rhyo is carrying too much weight," he said. "Come lighten her load. Maybe she'll find the energy to talk without having to carry such a burden."

Rushkah narrowed her eyes at him, even as the soldier

stepped away from the wall. If there was one thing she hated, it was people trying to be clever.

The silver weapon was in the other man's grip. He passed the opposite palm over the wide barrel, making a series of blue lights course up its length as he moved alongside the table.

"The lowest setting," said the officer as his subordinate pressed the muzzle into her numb, open palm. "We're not in a rush."

Rushkah inhaled and exhaled at a deep, slow pace.

*Be ready.*

A second person entered the room on the other side of the window—the medic from before. She hovered over the shoulder of the man in that room, and they began to speak, though no sound came through the glass.

The soldier thumbed over a red light and Rushkah began to feel it, even through the pins and needles of restricted circulation. Another count on which she'd been right: cold began to seep into the muscles of her hand. It *was* a cryo gun.

Admiral Asshole watched her face with the barely-restrained delight of a man about to see a woman's shirt come off. Rushkah held steady, the loss of feeling in her extremity holding the first whispers of discomfort at bay. There would only be so much time.

Her toes curled in her boots.

*Breathe.*

Now it was like holding a chunk of ice. Her jaw went tight.

The medic glanced at her through the glass; whatever she was saying to the man becoming more animated.

Nerves that had stung from lack of sensation now began to sting from cold. Rushkah stuffed her free hand under her thigh to avoid making a fist. She shifted on the chair as the soldier watched his superior for instruction. The Imbrian officer only watched her with a vicious interest.

The first grunt of pain came when it felt like the skin on her fingers was about to burst.

*Sounds are good. Sounds are meaningless. They are not information. If you're screaming, you can't make words.*

It was odd how, at a certain point, the feeling of ice somehow became fire. Rushkah's arm pulled against the straps and the scald of tears welled.

*Ancestors, shield me. Pain is of the body, and I am not the body.*

The admiral gave a small nod, and the soldier tapped the red light again. The intensity doubled down.

*So much for going slow! Holy fuck!*

She cried out, a guttural sound, and the cold lanced up her wrist. Her feet braced apart on the floor.

*I am not the body. I am not the body. Ancestors.*

Her panting was hoarse in the small room. The officer looked like he might start jacking off, if it wouldn't be a breach in protocol. Much longer and Rushkah wasn't going to have a hand left.

She bit at the inside of her lip and drew blood. Her entire world was the hand. The hand, and oh, by the Many, she was going to piss herself. Cold like space was consuming the limb. Digits were going ashy purple. The black-haired man was grinning like a brine shark.

"Name and rank, precious."

A sharp trio of percussive noises made all three heads snap to the glass.

The medic was tapping with a knuckle, gesturing for the officer to join her on the other side. He shook his head and turned back to Rushkah, but she rapped again, this time sharper. Louder.

Her mouth was in a grim line when the men looked again, and she made a negating move with her hand. Said some single, decisive word in Imbrian—Rushkah could manage speaking, but reading lips was well beyond her, still—and cut a fierce eye to the soldier with the gun.

The officer made a sour face and stood.

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QILLIAN EXHALED through his nose and smoothed his brows outward with thumb and forefinger. Daylight filtered in through the skylight above the desk in his study, where he leaned over a duricopy of the original *Fishermen's Letters to Balta*. He'd been staring at this same passage since he'd come up here yesterday.

Ancient Tephran characters blurred before his eyes, and Qillian sat back in the chair. Gripped one wrist in the other on top of his head. Blinked out the wall of windows to bring the rest of the world back into focus.

The day was almost cloudless now—blue sky, the familiar array of tops of buildings. If he stepped to the glass, he'd be able to look down and see bridges below, zipping air traffic corridors, rooftops of single dwellings granular from this height, the water surrounding it all.

He puffed out air through his cheeks and bent back to the translation. If there was one advantage to having his apartments on the top floor of the Wayfinder Tower, it was quiet. No vehicles droning past, no chatter from mouths.

For a man who valued silence as much as Qillian Wehr, it was the closest thing to an escape a minister's salary could bu—

*Clack.*

"Qillian."

He made a face and laid his palms flat on the desktop so he wouldn't fuss. His brother rounded the corner.

"Spectacular job guarding the door, Haph," Qillian called to his bodyguard out in the hall.

"Here to keep you from bodily harm, not irritation, Minister," the man volleyed back. "Time to take on an assistant."

Qillian ignored him. They'd had the same argument for years. It was all just rote banter at this point.

"Tavid," he said to his brother. "Is there even the slightest chance this is something I want to hear?"

"Greetings and salutations to you, too, *brother*," said Tavid, climbing the single step to the raised area where Qillian's desk was. The Records Minister thinned his lips when the younger man in military greys put his palms on the opposite edge of the desk and leaned.

"I'm working," Qillian said, turning over a palm to fan his fingers at the documents arrayed in front of him.

"They found a match."

Qillian narrowed his eyes and gave the tiniest shake of his head. "Who is 'they'? And to what?"

His brother leaned in further, blue eyes glinting like their father's. "A *match*, Qillian."

For a moment, his eyes widened. Decades of plans began to hum to life. Then, just as fast, they fell back to their torpor. He pulled the *Letters* close again, sinking toward his work after a semi-false alarm.

"Perfect," he said. "I'm sure she'll be *thrilled* when she comes of age and a fifty-something year old man climbs on top of her."

Tavid slapped a palm down between his brother's and jerked the documents away from him. Qillian's head snapped up, eyes piercing. "*No*," Tavid said, "A grown woman. They're bringing her now."

"What do you mean, 'they're bringing her now'?" Qillian shoved away from his desk, and the wheels of his chair clattered over the floor. "They can't just throw us together, like two *grenni* mice in a lab!" He looked his brother up and down as though the younger man had gone insane.

"You need to maintain," said Tavid, standing upright again. "It's not as expected. Everyone will need to adapt. Inc—"

"*Adapt?*"

"Qillian."

"Adapt to *what*? Where did they even *find* this woman?"

Qillian was up and pacing now. "Thirty-odd years, not even one female baby with the gene, now some adult woman shows up out of nowhere?"

*Breathe, Wehr.*

He did. Slowly. His steps took him to the windows, to clear skies and serenity.

This couldn't have come at a worse time.

"Not 'nowhere'," said Tavid. "Aurlo."

Qillian turned at the speed of denial. "What?"

"Aurlo." The air in the room tasted grim. "We caught a Rhyolusian unit bunkered—"

"—inside Turbine Center 46-N."

"Yes." Tavid let his eyelids fall closed as he confirmed, the tenuous grip on patience plain on his face.

"Tavid."

"One of the prisoners was a match. *Is* a match," said his brother. "Recessive."

Qillian huffed, incredulous. "I'm not going to do it."

"You absolutely are."

"I'm not going to force myself on some woman, Tavid."

His brother took a placating step in his direction and made a soothing gesture. "No one's telling you to 'force' anything, Qill—"

"Of course." He canted his head and squinted at Tavid. "Because a member of the Rhyolusian military—whose pending actions I'm supposed to be working to thwart, *this very minute...*" he flailed a hand at his desk "...is going to let the Imbrian Minister of Records move in right between her thighs and impregnate her! I'm sure she can't *wait*."

The buzz between his ears had him counting his breaths again. The Push was uncurling with his temper, the two feeding one another, dangerous.

*I need him to leave. I need quiet.*

"It has to be overcome," said Tavid. "We don't have other

options. What if we go another thirty years? Fifty? The bloodline is—"

"I don't *care*. About the bloodline." Fatigue settled on him like a lead blanket. "I have work. And nobody else is going to do it."

"And nobody else can do *this*." His brother's voice came up into his officer's authority. "The government doesn't care what you want. We need *presahra*. We *need* the Push. You're the all-fired *Scion*, Qillian. You have to do this."

Qillian met his eyes with a controlled calm. "I don't have to do anything. You want this woman pregnant so much, *you* fuck her."

Tavid sighed. His shoulders lost some of their hard angles. "Don't be obtuse, Qill. You know damn well I'm recessive. You're the only dominant left."

"And I want to bring a child into this existence?" He spread his arms to indicate the airy study. "More breeding in captivity for them? And their children?"

His brother leveled his chin at him. "It. Doesn't. Matter. The directive came down straight from the archregent. Strati's telling them to cut off access to your materials unless you comply."

Qillian blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You think the leash is short now? She'll have you tied to the bed with your cock *in* the girl, if she thinks that's what needs to happen to get a baby out of you."

The brothers faced off in crackling silence, claustrophobia closing in around Qillian, and determination keeping Tavid's spine erect.

He'd always been such a follower, Tavid. 'Commander Wehr', it was, now. He loved his rules. His protocol. There was a way things were supposed to be, and Qillian's brother knew his superiors would tell him what it was.

"This isn't a thing we should be doing," Qillian said at last. "If our father was here—"

"He's not."

The two words cut his entire line of thought in half, like a pair of shears.

"He's not here." Tavid went on, "And this is what we have to do. It's what *you* have to do. I thought you'd rather hear it from family."

Qillian could only stare at his brother. There was a tiny, dark spot on his collar, and the Records Minister wanted to pick it off.

"Admiral DiVerio is on his way with her now."

"Deep blue sea, they left her with *Jerrich*?" Qillian snorted. "She's probably pregnant already. Or covered in bruises. Missing a limb. Take your pick."

Tavid frowned and kept his opinions on his superior to himself. "The admiral was in the middle of...questioning the prisoner when they confirmed the match." His eyes shifted to the side. "He probably wanted to continue his inquiry through her transportation to your apartm—"

"Incoming, Minister," Haphro called from the outside the door.

Qillian scowled.

Tavid almost looked sorry.