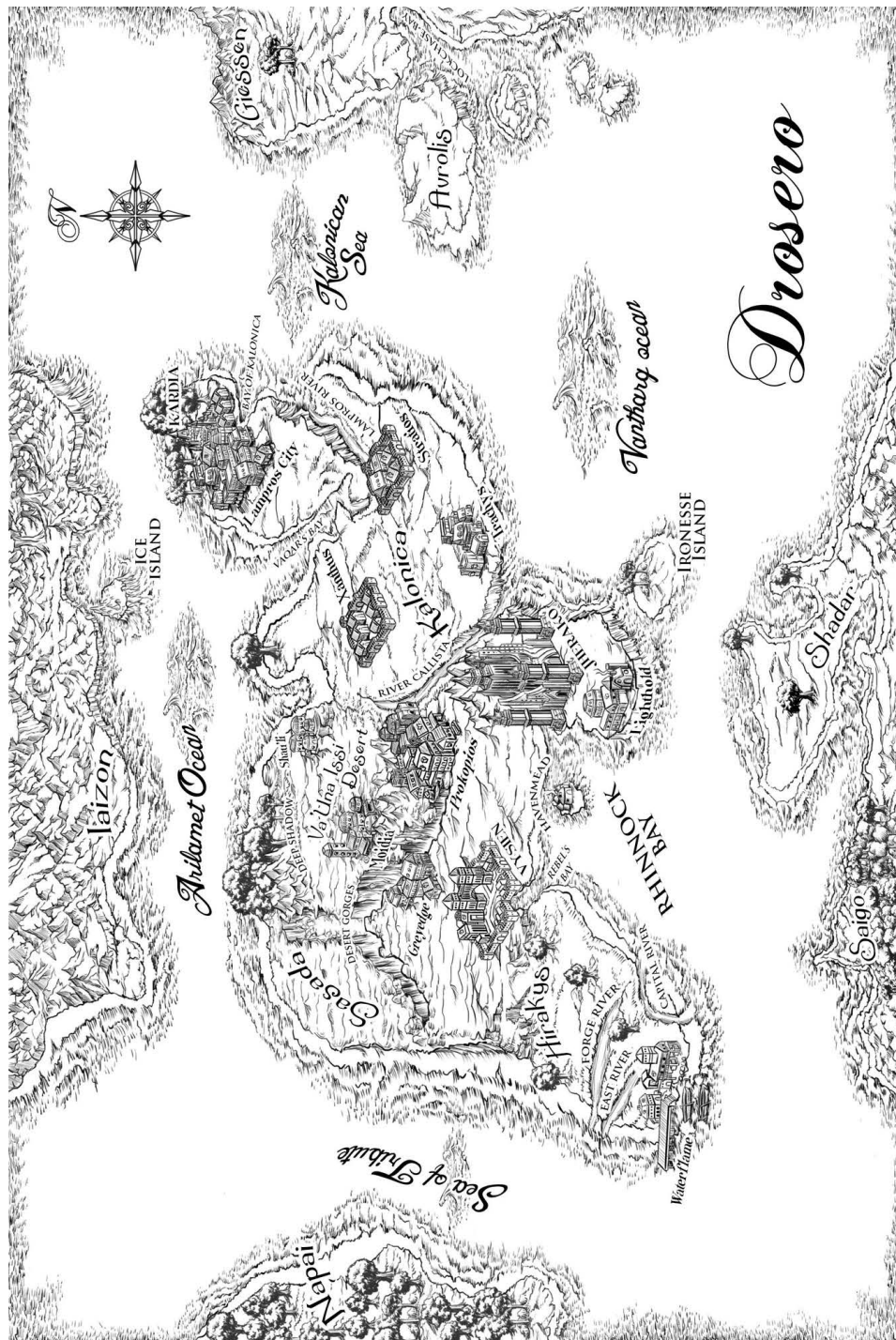


# BRAND OF LIGHT

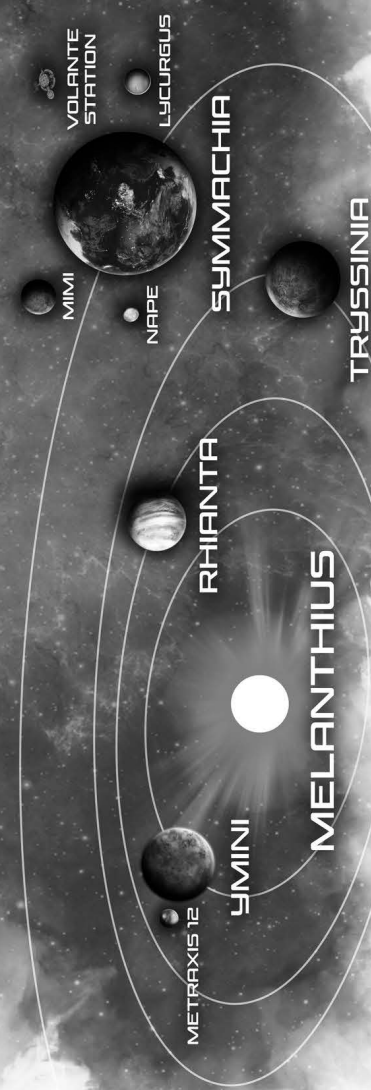
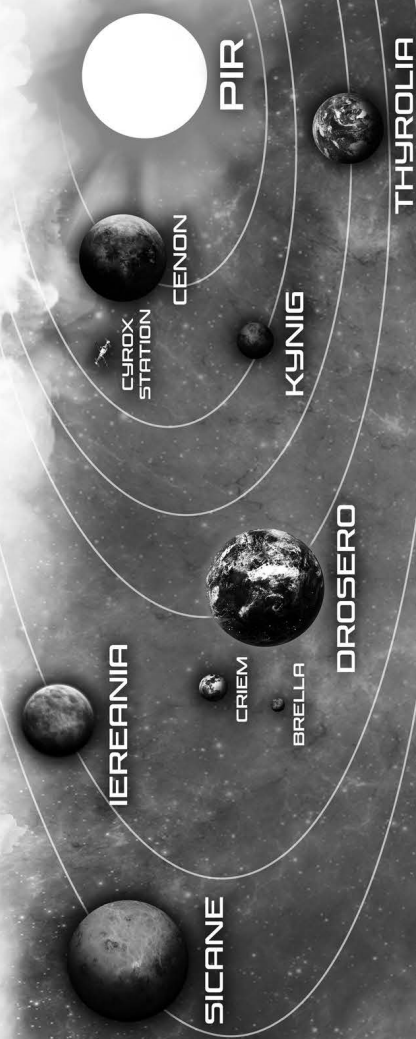
THE DROSERAN SAGA  
BOOK 1

RONIE KENDIG





# HERAKLES QUADRANT



# KEDALION QUADRANT



# PROLOGUE

KALONICA, DRO SERO

The *tap, tap, tap* of rain drilled into Achilles's brain, holding him captive against sleep. He flopped over yet again, kicking the confining coverlet, and stared into the darkness. Would this reek-cursed night never end?

A strange light fell from the sky and glided over the rain-pebbled window. Blinking, suddenly aware of a deep thrum that had run under the rain for the last several minutes, Achilles threw off the coverlet and scrambled across the mattress. He landed with a thump on the thick rug and scurried to the large window that towered over him. Rain sprinted down the beveled glass, blurring his view. He squinted after the ominous blue light that now fled the palace, as if on orders from his father. But it was not the light itself—unnatural and clearly not born of any torch—that held him rapt, but the way it moved.

*Flying.*

Like an aetos from Mount Kalonica, which stood guard over Lampros City. Chills wormed through his bare feet as he watched the fading illumination. Fear played havoc on his stomach. What had it been? Why was it here in Lampros City? Was it dangerous? And it stunk! He held an arm over his nose, hating himself for being afraid and it for irritating his senses.

*Blood and boil!* Must the reek be so rotten?

"Riders!" came a shout from the watchtower. "Riders from the cliffs!"

Achilus stilled, breath trapped in his throat. The cliffs—that was the direction of the light! But people out in the rage of the Kalonican storm? The matter must be urgent. Pulling his unwilling gaze from the now-black night sky, he craned his neck to see the portcullis. Pushed onto his tiptoes. If he were just a little taller, a little older, he could see who disturbed his father's sleep at such a late hour.

"Open the gate!"

Cursing his age and height, Achilles wished himself older. Father promised when he was ten Achilles would be present during receptions. Which meant he could stand by the great fire pit in the solar as the intruders presented themselves. Surely their news must be terrible for them to tempt the peril of

the hour and storm.

At the clanging of chains raising the gate, he pressed his nose to the window. His breath bloomed on the leaded glass, fogging his view. With a grunt, he swiped it with his sleeve, looking past the raindrops sparkling like crystals. Torchlight scampered across the bailey. Shadows shifted but he could discern nothing save the drenching rain.

Noises in the hall yanked him around. Achilus threw himself at the door, catching the knob. With a light press against the brass, he eased it open. In the hall, Father's broad shoulders faded as he descended the stairs. The sadness and anger trailing him drew Achilus into the open. Straining to discern what prickled the hairs on his neck, he stared into the recesses of his brothers' rooms, darkened by the night. What had he—

A shadow moved toward him.

Cold dread chilled Achilus. Braced, he pulled in a breath and watched the shape glide across the black floors.

"Achilus?"

Air whooshed from his lungs as his younger brother shuffled closer. "You should be in bed, Silvanus."

Rubbing an eye, his brother grunted. "The banging woke me."

"Go back to the nursery. Check on Darius."

He swatted at the air. "Aw, all that baby does is sleep. I don't know why we needed another."

"Go back. Now!" Jaw jutted, Achilus waited until his brother started for the nursery. Voices from the grand foyer turned him. He tiptoed to the balustrade and glanced over the rail. Two golden aetos twisted in battle glared up at him, their tangled shapes set into the marble floor.

He descended, the smooth rail guiding him down the twenty-four steps. In the great hall, that chatter rose to a dull roar. Heart racing, Achilus stopped on the last step. Many voices. Many ... *smells*.

Fear choked him. "I am in my own home—the castle, for boil's sake! There is nothing to fear." Jaw tight, he left the safety of the stairs and inched toward the great hall, breath harnessed.

Swirls of cool air slammed him, freezing Achilus just across the threshold, while his gaze swept the room. A whirl of black erupted—a man. Large. Eyes black and fierce. Shoulders larger than the great pit! Achilus gaped. By the Ancient, he looked as big as a Zeev! Long black cloak matched his pants, belted tunic, and hair slicked into a queue down his back. A faint blue glow came from his hip—no, his wrist. Something he wore gave off dim light.

The man leaned toward him.

Though everything in him screamed to run, Achilles stood rooted. Balled his fists. Lifted his chin. Fury or friend, he'd fight.

The stranger chuckled. "Good, boy. Good." With a twist, he snapped off a small piece of the glowing thing on his arm.

Achilus tried not to flinch when the stranger pressed the thing to his throat, but it was cold and ached with an odd vibration. Then it trilled and white flashed.

"So high?" The man's voice and smell betrayed surprise.

"You and your technology, Roman!" Ma'ma rushed to Achilles, and her purple overcoat wrapped around him, as if to protect him. "I did not want this for my son."

"*Want* is irrelevant, Athina. Despite Droseran hatred of technology, the device is never wrong. He *is* gifted. It cannot be argued. Life here for him will only be strained. Give him over to what he is called."

"Athina," Father said quietly. "You're frightening him."

"I'm not afraid, Father."

Shuddering through a breath, Ma'ma held him at arm's length, her face screwed tight and crying. Watching her, smelling her sadness—he might as well walk the rope bridge over Kardia Falls during a windstorm.

"No more." Gold cords swung across the stranger's chest.

Achilus stepped back with a choked breath. Widened his eyes. He knew—*knew* what that meant. *A master hunter!* A Kynigos. But what was *he* doing in Kardia? May and true, they had authority everywhere, but here? In the castle?

Clicking the device back onto the wrist strap, the stranger stalked to Achilles. Clamped a hand on Achilles's shoulder and bent, staring through a terse brow. "You are brave, yes?" Dark eyes seemed to stab at the fear within Achilles.

Mutely, he nodded.

"Then you will ride strong and fearless."

"Ride? In this storm?" Achilles looked to Father. "Where are we going?" He recalled Father and Uncle speaking of sending him away for protection should war come. "Is there war?"

Ma'ma pushed away, stifling a sob with the back of her hand. "Mercy ..."

A bitter burst of sadness erupted from behind. Achilles glanced over his shoulder. The stairs. Silvanus came flying into their mother's arms. The two embraced as if their lives would end. It was not comforting or helpful.

Father moved between him and the master hunter, then led Achilles to the foyer. "Remember the night you were able to ferret out the servant boy who

had stolen your bow?" His grip tightened, the pressure almost painful. "No one could find him, but you did—said you could smell his fear."

"I'm not sure I could really *smell*..." An unfamiliar rush pelted his courage like iced-rain in winter. Suddenly, he understood why the master hunter had come. It seemed appropriate that he would arrive on a night like this. Tales spun over feasts and large fires colored them as haunting. But ... how? How could this be? He shifted his gaze back to him. "You've come for me."

"I have."

The doors swung open with a bang, jerking him around. Black night poured in, rain splattering the floors. Destriers stamped in the inner bailey as the storm raged. Guards worked to steady the war horses, who seemed impatient to be on their way rather than stand still. Achilus could relate to their restlessness.

"Achilus." His father knelt before him. "The Ancient has blessed you with gifts that will help bring justice to the lands. Ride with Roman."

Going with the Kynigos meant one thing: those who went never returned. Achilus bit his trembling lip and tightened his fists. He would be strong. Yet never again seeing Ma'ma ...? His gaze wandered to her and Silvanus. "Is the journey long, Father?"

Hands squeezed his shoulders. "A lifetime, my son."

Swallowing hard, refusing to be weak, Achilus lifted his chin and followed Father and the master hunter into the bailey. The hunter mounted and Father lifted Achilus easily onto the horse. "Be strong, Achilus."

A tear defied his will and dashed to his cheek. "*Vanko Kalonica*, Father."

The beard twitched, rain dancing on it. "*Vanko*, Achilus." Forever.

They rode out of Kardia, his family disappearing in the inky, rainy night. The hunter's arm held him tight as they raced through Lampros City and out toward the raging sea. There, beneath the cliffs, hummed a large metal ship. It was bigger than the royal carriage and horses. Waves crashed behind it and swelled over the sleek hull as if to swallow it.

The master hunter reined in the horses. "Have you ever been in a ship before?"

He tried to shake his head but a shudder ran through him instead.

"You will find there is much to fear in our system." The hunter dismounted and reached to Achilus. "But not technology as your parents believe."

Eyes locked on the ship, where another hunter opened a panel, shooting more light across the stormy night, Achilus felt a sting of excitement. Tried to remember what he'd promised his father. Tried to believe the hunter's words, but he had sharp awareness that many terrors awaited him.



“You are sure of this, my lady? It’s Myles.” Weighted eyes drove home the point. “Our fiercest.”

“It was a fair draw.”

“Aye, but—”

“Let it not be said that I, the lone female in the training yard, whinged.” Not when she had pleaded so hard for training. As it was, she was thankful Uncle Rufio had left express word before he left for the middle lands that she should be allowed to continue her levels.

Jamming her fingers into thick hide gloves, Kersei Dragoumis stalked toward her destrier. She smoothed a hand over Bastien’s broad skull, then pressed her forehead to his and closed her eyes, stroking his powerful neck. “May I serve you well, friend.” She swung up into the saddle, ignoring the heat and dust that clung to her. Thank the Ancient women in Kalonica wore split pants to accommodate arduous tasks. At least in this she conformed to tradition.

Squinting against the strength of the full rise, she stared down the training yard at her opponent. Courage curdled inside her.

*Seek strength where it may be found.*

Approaching on her left, Minos lifted a javrod. “Myles will not take into consideration that you’re a female, nor that you’re a second-year. He is ruthless.”

“Then I must be at my best, aye?”

Minos thrust the javrod into her grip. “You have the iron of the machitis in your blood, Lady Kersei.” His sun-leathered face grimaced. “Ancient help us all.”

She laughed, more because of her nerves than out of amusement. “Now you sound like Darius.”

Had he been here, he would have forbidden her to spar against Myles, one of Father’s favorites. Myles had gained the rank of aerios faster than most—faster, even, than Darius—though only by a month. Yet her father



would threaten his position on the elite guard of the realm if anything were to happen to her today. She'd never taken on a warrior of his caliber. Still, she knew Minos was right: Myles would give no quarter, while everyone else *had* taken into account that she was a female and that her father was Xylander, Elder of Stratios, one of the Five, and Chief Counsel to Medora Zarek.

Minos secured the strap around her arm. "Prince Darius will have my hide and your father my shield if harm comes to you."

She cut him a glare. "Then I am glad neither is here."

With a sigh, Minos backstepped.

Kersei again studied her opponent. "He thrusts at the last second," she muttered.

"And at an angle. Give it room to bend." His eyes held the worry of a warrior facing his last battle. "Pull off if—"

"Blood and boil!" someone shouted. "Kersei has drawn Myles!"

"She can't be going through with it. She wouldn't be that—"

"Aye, she would." Another laughed.

Kersei blew out a breath as her periphery filled with the grubby green tunics of machitis lining the edge of the hay-strewn training field. She ignored their mocking murmurs and focused on Aerios Myles, who sat in quiet confidence on his mount, bored. Even though he wore a training jerkin and armor, it was *how* he wore it. Stretched taut against his chest and arms. Comfortable as a second skin. The destrier stamped impatiently. Myles had long been intent on proving she should not be here. Her mother liked him for that reason alone.

With gloved hands, Kersei slid down the face shield. Mentally patted armor that should protect her ribs and stomach. Wouldn't Ma'ma love her to come home the night of Adara's Delta Presentation with a black eye or broken limb?

*Then best not get injured.*

"Riders, ready!" Minos called over the chatter of the other machitis.

Both she and Myles hefted javrods to readiness and nudged their mounts into position on either side of the long dividing fence.

"Ho! Look to the ridge," a spectator called. "The Kalonican lion!"

Sucking a breath, Kersei flicked her attention to the rise overlooking the training field. Royal banners snapped in the breeze. A cluster of horses cantered ahead of the detachment coming down the hill. One rider broke ahead in a full gallop. And though she could not see faces at this distance, she knew that golden-brown hair.

“It’s Prince Darius!”

Now he returns? No no no. He had always said she should not spar or joust. If he saw—

Her gaze darted to Minos. He held a fist to his chest in recognition of his prince. “*Vanko Kalonica*” rang out from the warriors. *Blood and boil!* Darius would end this match.

“Ready,” she shouted, hunching into Bastien.

“Ready!” The shout from the other end of the field pulled her up straight.

*So, Myles is as anxious as I.* But which of them would stand proudly before their prince when this was over?

Kersei swallowed. Tucked the javrod into her shoulder, its length standing straight. Lighter than a lance, it was a formidable weapon even if she were dismounted.

Aerios Minos lifted an arm, then violently swung it down.

“Huah!” With a jab of her knees, Kersei committed.

Bastien reared, his raw power surging beneath her. He vaulted forward like the mighty war horse he was. She leaned into the charge. Breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth, she urged Bastien to eat up the distance.

As Myles stormed her, he grew. In size. Formidability. Ferocity.

Heart thundering with Bastien’s hooves, Kersei focused her advance. *Bend with it.* Darius’s instruction from their days of sparring nudged attention to her rigidity. Expecting failure, she loosened taut muscles. Lay upon the buffeting wind streaming between her and Bastien.

As she aimed her javrod, Myles did the same.

Shouts pushed past the wind to reach her ears.

Her javrod wobbled in her grip. It vibrated up her arm. Shook her. She stiffened, fearing she’d lose the rod before even engaging her opponent.

Bastien responded, tensing beneath her stress.

Kersei shed the fear. The expectation of failure. Guided Bastien to the rail and firmed her grip. Felt it nock perfectly into her gloved hand. Targeted down its length to Myles’s chest.

*Just forward more. Almost there ...*

As she thrust, she held her breath. She must do this. She was Kersei, daughter of Xylander, the fiercest machitis in Kalonica!

The thick, dulled tip of Myles’s javrod beamed right at her. Firm. Solid. No uncertainty. Pure experience. Ferocious determination. His scowl bled into focus behind the rod. Dark eyes. Forbidding. His rod swung down.

*Ah!* Just as expected. He'd miss. She would stand before Darius. She would—

*Thud!*



Horror struck Darius as the thick rod punched Kersei from her mount. She flew through the air like a limp doll. Black curls loosed. The terrible grate of armor rang out as she landed in the dirt with a heavy thud.

He drew up his mount on the training field. Vaulted off his horse. Sprinted across the sandy yard to her unmoving form. "Kersei!" He snapped a glower to Minos. He would hang the man over the cliffs for this. "Get the pharmakeia! Iason!"

Darius visually traced her limbs for obvious breaks. Cradled her head in place as Iason probed her abdomen with practiced fingers. "Kersei," he said, staring down into the face he'd known since they were children. The face of a lady and warrior. Dark lashes dusted the freckles from all her days in the sun sparring. "Kersei, can you hear me? *Kersei?*"

Iason pressed on her right side.

Kersei arched her back and groaned. Yelped. Then collapsed in silence again.

He met his man's eyes. "Break?"

"Likely," Iason said with a grim nod. "Possibly just a deep bruise. Either way, she'll breathe fire for a few days." He gestured to her face. "That she's unconscious is of concern—it could be a serious head injury."

"Kersei," Darius called again to her. He knew what it was to be knocked out, to lay thick in that vat of darkness heavier than a sodden blanket. "Kersei!"

She groaned. Squinted and winced. Whimpered. Then her eyes opened. Blinked. Fixed on him as she stilled. "Oh no."

Long had they argued over her training. "Aye." Though he would love to string her up for this foolishness, his anger with her never lasted.

She started to sit and tensed.

"Easy," he said, shifting to slide an arm under her shoulders. "Slowly, now."

Swallowing, gaze skirting the aerios and machitis, she tucked her chin and allowed his assistance. She guarded her side and squeezed her eyes, breath tight.

"Iason says you'll breathe fire for a few days. I've sent for the pharmakeia. You're injured and should wait for him."

"I'm fine," she said through gritted teeth and stiffly came upright with

his help.

"You're a bad liar, Kersei," Darius said with more frustration than he had intended. "You are injured."

"No," she insisted, pushing up from the ground. "Merely winded." As usual, she would not yield to him. She straightened, met his withering glare, then nodded to the yard. "In case you missed it, I was"—she seemed to work hard to find the correct words—"removed from my mount."

"Thrown. With great *force*."

"As you see." By all the Ladies, if she did not have a grin prying those lips apart.

Chuckles flickered through the afternoon, fueling her mischievousness. Darius flashed a glare at the machitis. "Who authorized this?" he demanded.

Kersei started, shifting to him—then shriveled beneath the pain of her injury. "Leave them," she bit out. "You have been gone these two years, and in that time I have leveled up in my training under my uncle."

"My lord prince." Minos inclined his head, his expression of deference yellow with fear. "Master Rufio said the lady could train with the others. Authorized javrod lessons."

"*Lessons*, yes," he roared, his face reddening. "Not trials. And most ardently not with *Myles*!" He jabbed a finger at the aerios who now lumbered toward them, wiping blood from his upper lip. "What sense in pitting a lamb against a lion?"

"Lamb? How dare you!" Kersei flared.

Darius spun on her. He rarely exerted his title over her, but he would now, for her own good. "Forget you to whom you speak, Lady Kersei?"

Only after an intense internal battle that she had many times—in private—made quite external, Kersei withdrew her objection.

Blood. Myles. Darius looked at the warrior who'd unseated her. "Did you not see whom you fought, Aerios Myles? What manner of warrior drives a javrod into the chest of a lady? What does that speak of your character? Of the family whose jerkin you wear?"

By the Ancient, why was his nose bleeding?

"You are right, my lord prince." Myles frowned, shoulders stooped and gaze down. "While I did hold back, ensuring she would not have been badly injured, I was out of line."

"*Hold back*?" Kersei's objection mirrored Darius's own, but for entirely different reasons.

Kersei rounded on the aerios. "You ... you *coward*!"

She moved quickly for someone with an injured rib—so, not fractured. But Darius caught her arm. Assaulting an aérios was a punishable offense.

Myles seemed to grow by spans as he turned a thick-knotted brow at her. “You know I—”

“Enough!” Darius ran a hand over his mouth. Restraint. *You are a Kalonican prince.* “Myles, return to your training.”

“Sire.” With a curt bow, the aérios retreated and left the training field.

Darius shifted back to Kersei. He must reason with her, but there had always been little *reason* with Kersei. Aye, he had been gone for two years, training in the middle lands, scouting the southern border, and receiving training from the Plisiázon, which both he and Father agreed would be of benefit to him in his role as commander of the armies. In all that time, none of Kersei’s fire had dimmed. She had a passion for training, for being a warrior. He had a passion for his family, for the crown, for ... her. And she very nearly ended any hope of joining their houses. “What were you thinking?” A hot breeze spilled from the west and tussled his hair into his face. “And on the night of your sister’s presentation?”

Indignation crawled through her expression. “What was I thinking?” she hissed. “I was *thinking* I would train, that I am willing to take a bruise to better myself and learn to defend our lands like any machitis.”

“You are *not* machitis!” Why did she persist? Why must she feel the need to don leathers and take up sword? “You are Kersei, *daughter* of Xylander, Elder of the Stratios, one of the Five.”

Her cheeks glowed with fury that ignited those dark eyes. “If you want a weak-kneed woman then find one. I will not be her. I *am* Kersei, daughter of Xylander—the greatest warrior in all of Kalonica.” She wrested from his grasp.

At her resistance, a tremor raced through his guard, who tightened their protective perimeter on him. Darius stilled them with a lifted hand.

She finally registered her breach of conduct and hesitated, eyeing him. But much had changed while he was earning his title and sword, his right to sit on the throne should his brother Silvanus, the crown prince, die or abdicate. Gone was the young girl who’d clacked wooden swords with him along the boundary river between Lampros City and Stratios lands. She was a lady—complete with fire, beauty, and curves. Even in the dingy britches and dirty tunic. He was heir to the land on which they stood. But they had a connection, a friendship built on years and understanding. Was he wrong to think that could become more? That she would understand what would happen tonight?

Darius erased the gap between them. “Is this the example you want for your sister, the legacy you choose to leave?”

Guarded, she lifted her gaze. “You have been gone. What know you of Adara?”

Darius nodded toward the golden fields where swalti grain waved for leagues. Standing on the lower rung of the training yard fence, arms hooked over the top rail, Kersei’s sister held a mock sword. Her light brown eyes and posture as defiant as Kersei’s.

“Blood and boil,” Kersei muttered.

Darius arched an eyebrow at her epithet. “Lady Stratios has always said you were not to encourage her. For you to let Adara to choose her own path.”

“I don’t need—” She bit back a yelp, holding her side again.

He touched her elbow, wanting to be near. Wanting to ease her pains. “Are you well?”

Her scowl darkened. “Better you had stayed wherever you were than treat me like this.”

“’Tis for your wellbeing and reputation that I intercede, Lady Kersei.” He did not recall her being so petite—or himself so much taller.

“What is this?” she whispered, not pushing him away. “We never allowed titles between us, Darius.”

He gave an acknowledging nod. “We are no longer children with fancies to pursue.”

She raised her chin. Turned to her sister and waved. “Be right there.” Then flung her anger at him once more. “Aye, not children indeed. Seems your training injected you with foulness as much as looks.” Her gaze scraped down him like the old Kersei. The one he’d sparred with—and not just with swords but with words. Yet there seemed something else in her gaze just then.

So she had noticed the changes in his physique. He grinned, angling in. “Then you find me much changed?”

Without another word, she stalked away.

“Lady Kersei.” Iason stepped forward, an edge to his words.

It was hard to stand there and allow his man to do what he must.

“’Tis unacceptable to show your back to the prince regent.”

Her old defiance flared, and he was sure she thought to offer more than just her back to him. Her gaze traveled the men around him, then finally came back to Darius. Kersei tucked her right foot back and curtsied with a tight-lipped smile, before slipping away.



Who was he to come and destroy a perfectly good sparring match? Angry with the pain in her side—she should’ve seen the thrust—and the way Darius ruined everything, Kersei trudged into the armory, tugging at the buckles of her greaves. She had worked hard since he had left to complete his training as prince regent. He had no right. She secured her practice armor in the tack room and stalked out of building.

“Mayhap he would have a better chance with his courting were he not throwing around his title and ego,” she hissed, rounding the corner. She drew up sharply—grabbing her side as pain lanced her.

Myles blocked her path. His deep frown, interrupted by a scar that ran down his chin into his neck, shook what little confidence remained.

“Aerios.” Kersei lowered her gaze, recalling what her refusal to back down had caused him. “I beg your mercy for my hand in the dressing down given you by Prince Darius.” Silence stretched between them, forcing her gaze to his angry countenance.

“You did well,” came his gravelly response.

Surprise held her fast, but she knew he must only jest. “Aye, I flew well from my mount and pounded the earth.” She started walking, unwilling to face his mockery.

“Not many manage to unseat me.”

Kersei stopped short. *She* had unseated *him*?



“Sir?” Symmachian Commander Tigo Deken of Eidolon Detachment 215 couldn’t have heard right. The Coalition had a strict pact with the Droserans. He stared at the comms screen. “Please confirm—Drosero?”

“Your coordinates are confirmed, Commander.”

“Sir.” He gritted his teeth. “Entering Droseran space—”

Rear Admiral Jair Krissos silenced Tigo with a hand. The band of admiralty around the thick neck glinted even in the low lighting as he leaned toward the viewer, the cerulean blue planets of his rank visible. “We know the uneasy relationship—”

“Uneasy? It’s downright hateful.” Tigo tried to laugh. “On a good day. In fact, there is no relationship. To send Two-one-five there . . . if we’re detected—”

“Careful, Commander,” Krissos said, his voice terse, his facial features tight beneath that regs-approved goatee. “The admiralty has done its homework. Believe it or not, we are aware of the tensions there.”

Aware, yet ignoring. Sensing the reprimand hanging beneath the sarcasm, Tigo withdrew his objections. “Of course, sir.”

“The target is there and extremely dangerous. It’s vital we remove him from Droseran soil before he can do harm there and unleash a war nobody wants. Am I clear?”

“Crystal, sir.”

“I’ll wave you the details and this goes no further than our communication. Give Baric the coordinates, then make it happen.”

“Yessir.”

His brown eyes squinted beneath a nod. “Don’t fail me, Commander.”

“Death first.”

“Well, let’s not go there. I’d have to face your father if anything happened to you, and he’d likely rip the planets off my neck—from behind.”

Tigo almost smiled. “I believe he would, sir.” After the Miritol Descent, a mission on an uncharted planet, grew dangerous, the strike group had been abandoned by a panicked officer. All died. Admiral Domitas Deken had



brought the full measure of his anger against the captain in charge, leaving him stripped of rank and working the mines on Tryssinia. His reputation remained notorious—and that went tenfold when it came to his son.

“Orders are incoming. Of note, pay attention to the drop-suit settings. They’re provided by a source on the ground to work in tandem with the environment.”

Tigo glanced at the gauntlet display strapped over his tac sleeve. Low body temps. Stealth protocol. And— Tigo jerked. “Sir? Oxygen levels—”

“Your team has handled worse. The Ymini-Rhianta mining incursion, you went low-intake—”

“Yessir, due to lethal gas levels. Rhinn spent a week in a depri chamber.”

“Are you saying I need to send Two-two-five?”

Tigo tightened his jaw. “No, sir.”

“Then get those coordinates to Baric and get underway.”

“Aye, sir!”

The screen winked out and Tigo hung his head. Closed his eyes. Forbidden planet. Hostile relations. Violent target. Low oxygen.

What in the black were they extracting?



## KALONICA, DROSERO

So foolish. So strong. So fiery ... so *very* fiery.

Darius stood outside the solar, hands behind his back, enjoying the cool breeze drifting up to Kardia, the royal residence that had been his home. He had missed it. His gaze traced the fields, the Hill of Andrios, to the great turrets of Stratios Hall—a formidable sight in the near south—and the blot of black stone fortress in the far west belonging to the Xanthus. More than a day’s ride, that. The sea to the east and the falls above that bathed the air in moisture. His focus returned to Stratios Hall, where Kersei had grown up. Where she now most likely walked, experiencing a blistering remonstrance from Lady Nicea.

By the aetos, she deserved one.

“You are a Tyrannous, Darius.”

“Yes, my lord Father.” He did not pull his eyes from the hall, nor his thoughts from the dark-haired beauty. Long had he intended to claim her as his bound.

"You must choose carefully," his father-medora continued. "Though Silvanus is crown prince, you are second in line. Should anything happen to your brother, Ancient forbid, you will be medora. That means whomever you take as bound will be kyria. Even as prince regent, you will have duties heavily invested in the people, as will your bound." His father's presence loomed behind him. "You are certain this is the path you want? You're sure ... about her?"

Turning, Darius faced his father. Inclined his head. "I am."

"Does it not bother you, Brother," Silvanus said as he stood from the guilt chair with a chalice in hand, "that you cast this girl off more than two cycles past? That she chooses to wear britches and tunics, and engage in battles with hardened warriors?"

"Kersei need not wear omnir and a bliaut to be feminine or beautiful. And full well do I understand my duties as a prince of Kalonica." He jutted his jaw and rested his hand on the hilt of his sword, but it did nothing to dislodge her accusation on the field. "Long have she and I been friends. She understands me better than any other, and I her." He shifted to their father. "She *is* a daughter of the Five—there is a fire in her veins that will make her an asset to this kingdom. It will do Kalonica well to blend our lines and houses—you have said so yourself."

"Aye, with the intent of Silvanus binding with the eldest daughter, Lexina."

"And he has been slow of wit and guile in securing that alliance." It never hurt to get another jibe in at his brother's expense. "I am ready, my father-medora."

"But what of her?" His father sighed and raked a hand through his silver-black hair. Zarek IV was said to bear a striking resemblance to the Ancient, of whose line the medora of Kalonica had descended. And yet, Darius did not have those looks, favoring—he was told—their mother's fairer features. "You yourself said she has no intention of binding."

Darius could not help but laugh. "She was but fifteen when she said that. Four cycles past."

Pale eyes, the same blue as Darius's, sparked with amusement. "Then she no longer wishes to train, to fight?"

Knowing he had never been a good liar, Darius chose a safer path. "Kersei will accept the petition."

His father moved to the soaring arched windows, a great weight settling on his shoulders. "It is not she who must accept. The laws only require her father's consent, but I would not bring a woman unwillingly into our house.

We are fortunate in that Drosero's other ruling houses are comfortable enough not to threaten war or demand bindings for the sake of peace." Hands behind his back, he faced the realm. Wind toyed with his black, shoulder-length hair, a few rogue strands of silver betraying his age. "You must know there are concerns over how she might fill the role of princessa."

"Fear not, my lord Father." Pride dented, Darius bristled. "May and true, Kersei has a heart that takes flight for the protection of our realm, but she also possesses the grace and beauty of a lady. Truly, her courage, her *adunatos* would match that of any Lady of Lampros, or even a Lady of Basilikas."

"Guard your tongue." His father glowered.

"Aye, he speaks like she's a Faa'Cris." Silvanus sniffed.

"Had Kersei unimaginable gifts and wings, mayhap." Darius would not be dissuaded, nor would he allow his brother the upper hand. "Would you have me bind with a weak woman so you feel better about yourself, Brother?"

"Darius." Disapproval knotted his father's brow. "I do not question her strength. What gives me pause is her impetuosity. Her heart is as untamed as her beauty."

"Mayhap." He thought of watching her flying off that mount. The heavy thud when she hit the ground. How she lay, unmoving. But ... she had unseated Myles.

Rubbing his full, silver-strung beard, Father let out a sigh as he returned to the center of the deliberation room. "Pray, when did you last converse with the Dragoumis heir?"

Darius shifted. Glanced at his brother. "Prior to today, two cycles past."

"Two cycles," his father repeated, eyeing the clouds in the distance. "And to what end?"

"Sir?"

"How did that conversation end?"

Darius shot his brother a glare. So, his father had been informed of his last moments with Kersei before he departed for his final training and education. "Strained."

"Why?"

Gaze on the pearl floor, Darius stifled his frustration. "She was angry because I ..." He was tempted to leave out the parts that would put ill favor on Kersei, but he knew better. Silvanus had betrayed his trust. "She was angry because with my departure, she lost her only sparring partner, the only one who gave little measure for her being a woman."

"The only one," his father repeated quietly. "No other machitis would

fight the girl in full combat—as no man should!”

“She and I had an alliance,” Darius argued, his defense of his honor weak. “We battled well. I knew her tactics, she mine.” He heard his voicing rising and forced himself to calm. “We are friends and respect each other. It is a natural connection.”

“Yes.” Silvanus cut him off. “When you were frolicking in the fields and woods. But here?” He raised a hand to the stone walls that ensconced them safely in Kardia, the heart of the kingdom. “As a princess, a representative of the Kalonican kingdom?”

Heat infused Darius’s chest. “Of what concern is that to you?”

“Every concern.” Silvanus frowned. “One day I will hold the throne. I must have reassurance that whichever bound you choose will honor our family’s name, the realm, and the people.”

“At least there is a girl I am willing to take as my bound. What of you? Last I heard, you ran scared at the thought of binding.”

Silvanus straightened, indignation as thick as his quilted and embroidered jerkin. “I take my role as heir apparent seriously. My bound will be kyria. I will not blaze a path to this sacred vow as you are doing.”

“Our father-medora has ordered us to bind. Be the fault mine that I have a perfect candidate?”

“Enough.”

Darius felt his hope slipping that his petition would be granted. “My lord Father, did you not once tell me that our mother had a wild heart and spirit as well?”

His father shook a finger. “Do not betray her memory to buy favor.” He stalked to the deliberation chair and sat.

“Fath—”

He lifted a hand, silencing him. Breathed out a long sigh as he considered him. “I will allow your petition, Darius. However, be warned: You’ve chosen a wild daughter of Stratios. Binding hands is much easier than binding hearts.”



T S C M A C E D O N

Tigo made his way to the Command deck, where the door took a biometric scan before snapping aside to grant him entrance. Somehow the muted grays and blues softened the din of activity as the crew focused on their

tasks at four curved stations around the central work area.

The *Macedon's* executive officer, Wellsey Dimar, stood in the center, a vidscreen in hand as he talked with the engineering officer. Blue lights from the screen dancing off his flexing jaw muscle, he looked up. "Commander Deken," he said with a drawl that easily betrayed his Capital Colony heritage. "Welcome to the bridge."

"Thank you, XO."

Dimar glanced at the channeler Tigo held and arched an eyebrow. "Orders?" Tigo gave a small nod.

"Might want to leave your weapon out here. You know—"

"Regulation 17.925 requires Eidolon to be armed at all times."

"Letter of the reg, not the spirit."

"No, I'm the spirit." Tigo grinned.

With a huff, Dimar angled his head toward the captain's office. "Tread softly—he's in a black mood." He returned his attention to the petty officer.

*When isn't he?* "Understood." Tigo crossed the bridge and palmed the reader embedded in the bulkhead. As he waited for the captain's approval to enter, he slid a glance at Dimar. "Shouldn't have hung up your wings."

"Better lost wings than lost legs." Dimar's hair was still cut in the tight crop of the Eidolon. "I didn't want to make that *Nephesh* moniker literal. Too much risk."

*Nephesh*—ghosts—from the Eidolon's ability to get in and out without being seen. Tigo wore it like a medal. "Without risk, what fun is there in life?"

"A wife, a family—"

Tigo snorted. "I said 'fun.'" The door sprung back, admitting him into the glaring white of the captain's office.

"What is it, Deken?" Baric barked, his gaze glued to a half-dozen screens. While the man might be mean and easily agitated, he was a competent captain, and Tigo had heard word floating around that TSC was looking to promote him. It'd be smart to stay on his good side. If he had one.

"Orders from Command." Tigo clicked the disc into the nodule on the captain's desk and stood at ease.

Ignoring the disc, the captain used short, irritated gestures to sort through the scans and streaming data on his oversized displays.

Tigo watched with unabashed curiosity as Baric swiped away a topo map and a system chart he didn't recognize, then pulled up new files. Spotting a brain scan, Tigo frowned. Splaying his fingers against the display, the captain opened an overlay Tigo recognized. The Engram.

Something hot and white shot through Tigo. He hated that machine. Couldn't believe Symmachian Command hadn't destroyed every scrap the day its use was declared inhumane. Squinting, he eyeballed the dates and names.

The dates were recent. *Slag me*. They were *using* it? Where? "I thought TSC overruled use of the Engram."

Baric jerked around, his eyes black with indignation. Snapped his fingers and the screens went blank. "You may have authority to commandeer my ship for your excursions, *Commander*, but you have no authority to peruse the files of the ship's captain. Might I remind you that regulation 13.491 of the—"

"Easy, Captain," Tigo said with a lazy smile that took more effort than he'd admit. "I know regs. And I'm not commandeering your ship, though you do have to answer to TSC if you defy orders and don't deliver my Eidolon team as instructed. As for perusing intel? No effort was made to conceal it, so I had no reason to suspect it was classified."

Glowering, Baric lifted his channeler and glanced at the file. "Going to"—he flung a scowl at him—"Drosero? You know what will happen if this gets out, right?"

"To you?" Tigo grunted. "Not a thing in the 'verse. To my team—"

"This could cause an all-out war! Drosero has refused every attempt we've made to establish a way station there. They won't allow colonization."

"Which is why my team and I aren't colonizing." Tigo hauled his annoyance into line. "Do I need to wave Command that Two-one-five has no transport?"

Lips tight, Baric stared him down, anger flickering in his gaze. "No."

"You have the coordinates. Per SOP, Dimar should probably monitor for hostiles or unusual activity."

"They don't have technology—what hostile acts are you expecting? Swords? Spears?" He plucked the disc and tossed it back at Tigo. "Remember, this is my ship. You don't give commands."

Tigo's irritation skidded into his hands, balling his fingers into fists. "We need to be over Droseran airspace in two days. From our current coordinates, that's plenty of time." He left the Command deck and took the lift down to Hangar Deck 14. As he walked, he tapped into his channeler, which was rigged with faster and higher tech than most, ordering his unit to report to the corvette that would take them planetside. Though they had some time before the *Macedon* arrived at Drosero, they might as well get started on the prep work.

That his boots were squeaking jerked his attention to his location. He

wasn't on a hangar deck. Rubberized floor ... This was M Deck. What in the black?

But then life didn't disappoint, did it? Because heading toward him was the *Macedon's* chief medical officer, Dr. Teeli Knowles. She'd been cold as space to him, but he'd win her over. He always did. She was no different from most women he aimed his attention at. And she seemed to need some positivity in her life.

Deep in conversation with an orderly, she glided past Tigo without a glance. Huh. Maybe a little different.

"Well?"

Tigo flinched at the Eidolon who appeared beside him. "Blood and boil, Esq. Always sneakin'."

"So's it true? We dropping?"

Tigo nodded. "Two days."

"Hoyzah!" She pumped a fist. "I am so *sick* of this ship and its whiny, petulant popsicles. I'm ready for warm air and warm blood. Catchya down there later."

She banked right, and Tigo went left, where the passage opened to the medical bay. Again, he spotted the long, lean figure of Dr. Knowles. Black hair, rich mahogany skin. She was from Tryssinia, a planet replete with ore and mining colonies ... and one plague after another. Most Tryssinians didn't survive much past young adulthood. But here was the beauty of them all.

"Dr. Knowles."

Turning with a data pad in hand, blue lettering scrolling over the screen, she didn't look up. "Yes?" she asked, shaking her head. Then she swung back to the orderly. "Wait—no. Tell him I can't do that. I won't." Slipping the pad into its sheath, she pivoted back to Tigo. "How can—" Delicious caramel eyes widened. "You." With a huff, she started down the hall.

So maybe a lot different. "Hold up," Tigo said, trotting after her. "I just wanted to see if you had an answer yet."

"I supplied my answer when you first asked. I won't repeat it."

"Then I'll ask a different question. Will you have morning rations with me?"

"Wow, can you make that sound more romantic, Captain Deken?" She lifted a patient's chart, read the vitals, then moved on.

"Um, I'll bring a candle—a cell-powered one, since fires are banned—"

"The only thing that changed in your question, Captain Deken—"

"Tigo."

"—was the meal. Last time, dinner. Before that, lunch."

“So Tryssinians don’t eat?” He grinned, determined to be unflappable.

She gave a longsuffering sigh. “No. We don’t. Not with egotistical, adrenaline-seeking, womanizing *Nephesh*.”

“Hey!” He paused. “I’m no womanizer.” He harnessed the charm that had done him many favors. “But I do know how to recognize a woman who is as intelligent as she is beautiful.”

“Unless you’re in a med-bed, I don’t have any intelligence to waste on your kind.”

“My kind?”

“You PICC-necks.”

Tigo stiffened at the nickname derived from the ports implanted in the Eidolons’ necks that fed vital boosters from their mech-suits straight into their spinal columns. Without them, an Eidolon could become incapacitated by injury during battle or an imbalance after a hard-g drop, but the ugly truth was they were also a quick and easy way to inject other things. And despite regs, some Eidolon did. Still he’d never expected that kind of vitriolic labeling from Knowles.

“You’re all alike,” she snarled. “And anyone who would authorize that machine and on my medbay—”

“Wait.” Tigo’s pulse jammed, recalling Baric’s intel wall. “What machine?” *Tell me he isn’t doing this.*

Lips compressed as if to hold in further words, she pointed to a door where a dozen engineers worked with drills and other tools. He looked more closely. Doors had been thickened. Walls padded with some film.

His channeler on his arm buzzed. He glanced down and saw a curt *WE NEED TO BRIEF FOR THE DROP. WHERE ARE YOU?* from Diggs. “I have to—” When he looked up, Tigo froze. He stood alone.

Dr. Knowles was at the far end of the bay, talking with a patient. Her black braid coiled at her nape. The gray medical coat way too blasé for her fierce personality and stunning looks. And Knowles had more than beauty. In that head was a mind that had gotten her not just a medical degree from the Tertian Science Academy, but honors qualification that planted her on a battle cruiser. That took persistence. They had that in common. She might have rejected him a few times, but he wouldn’t give up. He glanced back at the door. But what was she upset about?

Two days later in Hangar 14, his team was prepping gear and readying for their mission. He checked his weapons and ammo, then performed a safety inspection on his mech-suit. After preflight checks on their corvette,



the *Renette*, he donned the nearly skin-tight flight suit that would monitor his vitals and oxygen mix. Next, he stepped into the lightweight body armor and tested his comms, night-vision, thermals, heads-up visor displays, and ballistic protection. With an ear out for the telltale click, he stuffed his feet into the grav boots of the mech-suit exoskeleton, then threaded his arms through the upper appendages and felt the suit auto-adjust and mold around his body. He locked the dome into place and angled his neck back, engaging the PICC-line, which infused him with a lightning-fast shot of icy fluid that carried the digital neura, connecting his suit and brain.

He trunked over to the deck, where they inspected each other's gear.

Lance Corporal Theodore "Diggs" Diggins, the team's pilot and senior communications officer, secured the shoulders strap of his rifle as their eyes met. "Where to, Commander?"

"We're heading to Planet Nine—"

"Drosero?" Lieutenant Jez Sidra jerked around, her grav boots thunking heavily on the deck that radiated with objections to their destination. Though she had more curves and "pretty" than any woman should, Jez also had a spine and attitude of steel. Sharp like a blade. Nobody got close without getting hurt. And she liked it that way.

"Complaints noted and understood," Tigo said, holding up his hand. "We have a priority-one fugitive hiding out in the mountains of northeast Kalonica." Tigo splashed the specs of the location to their displays. "He's dangerous, so be on alert when we hit ground."

"Ice," Esq grunted, then whined, "I wanted *heat*, Commander."

"Hey, I'm hot, Esq," Corporal Sevart "Rhinnock" Crafter taunted.

"Not even close, Rhinn."

Two pats on his shoulder by Rhinn said he found Tigo's mech-suit in order. "Sending O<sub>2</sub> and ambient suit settings now."

Beeps registered the receipt. "What the slag?" Diggs turned near-black eyes to him in question.

"I know," Tigo conceded. "O<sub>2</sub> is *low*. Thermals are scuzzed."

"That should be good for AO, right?" Rhinn said. "He has already ice in his veins."

Corporal Jaigh "AO" Eggleston said nothing. Annoyed or amused, his expression never changed. But he was the fiercest and most controlled of the team. And the oldest—yet newest to join Symmachian Marines. Which is where he'd gotten the nickname, Ancient One. A blasphemous one if you, like a lot of downworlders in the quads, believed in an ancient being who

orchestrated lives and wills.

“What’re they sending us after?” Diggs asked.

Tigo splashed the image of their target.

“What has he done to earn the wrath of Tascan?” Jez asked, using the nickname for Tertian Space Coalition.

Tigo shrugged, a gesture only roughly translated by the mech-suit. “We all know Drosero is an uncoop, so we need to get in and out before anyone is the wiser. No weapons unless absolutely necessary. The less proof of our presence we leave, the better.”

“We scuz this,” Diggs said, “and we’re torched. Nobody will know either way.”

Tigo grinned as he started toward the light corvette, which was thrumming after Diggs’s preflight check. “Then we’ve got nothing to lose!”

“Hoyzah!”

Rigged in, they were cleared for launch by the *Macedon* and were soon making their descent. As they broke Droseran space, staying high to avoid being spotted, Tigo reviewed with 215 the schematics of the cave system they’d search.

“This image is sanitized,” AO’s growl from the jump seat raked the comms.

Tigo’s gut clenched. *Exactly what I thought.*

“Why?” Esq asked. “How can we catch him if this doesn’t look like him?”

“Memorize the structure, the eyes,” Diggs replied. “They don’t change.”

“Unless he’s got enhancements,” Esq countered.

“This is Nine, remember? No tech.” Rhinn leaned forward and met Tigo’s gaze. “This already feels off.”

“Jitters?” Tigo teased. “Thought you were Nephesh.” The team getting buggy before they hit atmo was a bad sign.

Onboard lighting went red. Tigo braced as the light attack craft tore through the atmosphere. To avoid being spotted, they approached from straight north of their targeted landing spot, keeping clear of the populated areas south of the mountains in question. Still, they could only hope nobody was looking up at this moment, or they’d see a shooting star. The hull groaned like a wounded beast. Might unnerve a downworlder, but Tigo found the sensation thrilling—it meant he was about to deploy.

He couldn’t imagine life on a planet with no technology. Lights. Comms. Toilets—did they have toilets? Weapons. It was like one of those digitals Esq loved reading when she thought nobody was looking, men with no tunics riding horses bareback. Women stuffed in the hut pushing out buns—from

the ovens and from their wombs.

Archaic. His mother would've never put up with that.

Entry complete, Tigo and 215 clomped to the bay door as Diggs maintained high altitude and aimed toward the jagged peaks. He gave the all-quiet signal. Engines silent, they rode an air current to forbidding, snow-packed cliffs.

The landing countdown blipped on their heads-up display.

The *Renette* settled with a thump, and the bay door started opening.

Wind buffeted his suit, gusting up into the corvette. Advancing, he monitored the formidable cliff for unfriendlies through the heads-up. But who was he kidding? Nobody would be here. Brutal cold. External readings were in excess of negative forty temps.

Ahead, Diggs and Jez hustled to the yawning maw of a cave, indiscernible from the air. But it'd been right where intel stated it would be.

AO, Esq, and Rhinn fell in behind Tigo as they breached the mountain. Dark emptiness constricted in a tight tunnel. He slowed his breathing as the passage narrowed, nerves grating when his mech-suit scraped rock. Nothing anyone could hear, but in the vacuum of the suit, it was like metal on metal.

"Ambient adjustment," intoned the digital voice of his suit as it detected and compensated for the darkness, affording a thermal cave readout.

His muscles contracted beneath the chill. On any normal mission, his suit would keep his core static. But the numbers demanded a low core temp.

"This is wrong," AO subvocalized, his teeth chattering.

"Quiet," Tigo hissed back, then mentally kicked himself. This place must be getting to him—the suits were soundproof. Anything they subvocalized wouldn't be heard outside their comms.

*Shake it off.* Tigo pressed forward, nearly cursing the passage as it squeezed tighter. And tighter. Until it forced him to turn sideways to pass. He shoved himself through and stumbled into what felt like gaping emptiness. Slack jawed, he stared around the gaping chasm. His visor glimmered, switching from a gridded scan to a navigable map of the cavern. But what it relayed froze him. They stood in a large area with four square openings around its perimeter. Doors. Doors hewn from granite. A drop that had to be easily a hundred meters separated them from a small circular cleft in the center.

As he processed the information, the surreal and impossible setting, Tigo realized the chill he'd felt had nothing to do with atmospherics. That AO had it right. Something was off. The chill was a death knell.



“You are not to speak of it,” Kersei said, gritting against the pain that had grown as she and her sister returned to Stratios Hall. She cradled her waist, protecting ribs that seared with each breath. “Do you hear, Adara?”

Snapping her wooden sword against grain sacks along the inner bailey wall, her sister groaned. “I heard you the first thousand times.”

“And I will insist another thousand times until I am decided you understand. It is your presentation night. There are oras of preparation remaining, and no doubt Ma’ma has been looking for you. She will be most displeased to learn you’ve been to the fields.” As they made their way through the side entrance to the house, she nodded. “Now, be gone with you. And say naught.”

“Thank the Ancient,” Adara breathed and darted up the stairs.

Kersei slowed, eying the steps, and moaned. Why were there so many stairs? She huffed and took the first one, the move clenching her breath in a fist of pain. Wincing and twitching, she climbed. There were sure to be bruises, but those could be hidden. An awkward gait could not. And oh Mercies! If she were made to wear bindings—*Ancient, be kind, please!*

She climbed ... and climbed. Made the landing of the main level and turned, deflating at the next hundred—or so it seemed—up to the residence wing. Teeth gritted, she caught the rail. Thoughts pushed her on: blood on Myles’s lip. His amused smirk. Her victory at unseating him had truly been sweet, even with the ruin of Darius’s chiding and her injury.

As she gained the residence level, Kersei dragged herself toward the apartments—and froze.

Tall and gracious, auburn hair secured in a meticulous plait atop her head, Ma’ma stood with hands clasped. Had she watched Kersei’s entire ascent? By the disapproval on her imperious face, she had. She glided forward with a smile. “Daughter.”

That was a warm welcome. Mayhap she did not know.

“Ma’ma,” Kersei managed, stiffening for the embrace sure to come.

Her mother's cool fingers tipped her chin. "Stand erect, Kersei. You're a lady."

Every fraction she straightened made tiny daggers pepper her abdomen. Cry out and she'd reveal herself, so she bit down that which begged for freedom.

With a nod, her mother shifted aside, sliding a hand to Kersei's back. Another to her stomach. "Straight." She pressed.

Kersei cried out, tears blurring her vision.

Ma'ma held her gaze, void of remonstration or anger, which made it all the worse.

She knew. Blood and boil, she knew. Tears slipping down her cheeks, Kersei closed her eyes. Breathed through the agony. Gritted her teeth as she tasted the full measure of her mother's displeasure.

"You were with the machitis again." The Lady of Stratios held court right there in the main hall, for all to hear and see. Sergii shuffled along the shadows, intent on their duties and pretending not to hear. "On this day, the very day I expressly forbade—"

"I unseated him, Ma'ma," she blurted.

Fire slashed through her mother's schooled features, her chest rising and falling unevenly as she let silence hang between them. "And you are injured. On the night warriors gather to honor your father's house, you disgrace him."

The words stabbed hard. Pierced Kersei's stubborn veil. Father. She had wanted to make him proud. Could Ma'ma not understand that she ached for adventure, for freedom from the cold stone walls of Stratios?

"When Xylander's daughter cannot stand erect as he presents his final heir to the crown and the Ancient One, what will be said of him?" Her mother huffed through the next several breaths. "Very badly done, Kersei. Even he who might ignore your foolishness would not approve. Can you not think beyond yourself for one tick of the clock?"

Hurt cloyed with shame, beating at her victory, which seemed silly now. "I beg your mercy."

"It is not mine you need beg." Her mother tossed her head in the direction of the private wing. "Go. Soak and have your injuries tended. Rest. Whatever it takes, be ready to stand tall as a daughter of Stratios. And though you would wretch from pain, do not disgrace your father before his entoli and medora."

Kersei trudged to her chambers. Reaching the bed, she eased—ever—so—slowly—against the mattress. Why had the draw determined she ride against Myles *this* rise? The one day she need be Xylander's daughter before

all? Her effort to gain his approval, to show him that though he had no sons, he did not have weak heirs, had failed her. And him.

Palms pressed to her eyes, she fought the sob that tightened her abdomen—and cast flames through her muscles. Her hands were burned from losing her grip on Bastien's reins. Raw proof of her irresponsibility.

The door opened and Conti strode in. "Let us get you out of those clothes, mistress. If the lady sees you—"

"She has already." Kersei pried herself upright, grimacing. Lifting her hand hurt. Lifting her arm much more.

As she removed Kersei's tunic, Conti groaned then clucked her tongue. "That be right angry, mistress."

Kersei peered at her side. Red and purple vied for supremacy—yet it was no more ugly than the black marks that coiled in sinuous lines the length of her right forearm. Mother refused to speak of the brand—which was an odd term, since the lines were not burned into her, Ma'ma promised.

"Keep it concealed, Kersei. They will not understand." Beyond that, she would say no more, no matter how Kersei cajoled.

She rotated her arm, eyeing the lone line bisecting the half-arcs that ran randomly. She'd tried to research it, sought texts from the Readers. But there was very little about brands or the unique marks.

"Just embarrassment," she murmured, pressing the arm to her side and stepping into the tub.

Hazy and vague, a memory rose—the brand had burned after the fall. Probably just more of her imagination, as everything had hurt afterward. At least the discoloration on her torso would fade with time. Years had already proven the marks on her forearm indelible.

"Don't give it no thought," Conti said as she bathed her. "The pharmakeia can make up a right good salve for this."

"Can he do something for this?" Kersei said, splashing her arm into the water.

"I know it ails your heart something fierce, mistress, but it's a holy mark."

She snorted. There had been no iereas in Stratios Hall in her memory. Lexina said Father had forbidden the priests further entry when Kersei was just a babe. "A mark none will or can explain."

"Not all in life can be explained."

Kersei rolled her eyes. She carried her mother's beauty, her father's passionate nature, and this mark of the Iereans, the Holy Order of Iereania. At least, that's what she'd read in her academics—all brands were tied to them.

Well into the darkening day, Conti ministered to the injuries with a bitter-herb tea, a pack of chilled fruit for her ribs, and salves the pharmakeia had sent up for the swelling and scrapes.

"You should have seen him, Conti," came Adara's squeaky, lighthearted voice as she flew into the room, bathed and hair in coils, but no dress yet. "Myles flew through the air, unseated by *my* sister!" Pride puffed the small chest. "I thought for sure there would be a hole in the ground where he hit." Her giggles riffled the cool evening as she clambered over the bed to where Kersei lay resting, as ordered.

"Give care, sister! It hu—"

Adara plopped down, sending shards of pain through Kersei. "I can't believe you beat him!"

With a smile, Kersei looked at the hand-embroidered coverlet beneath her. But she did not see the corals and sage greens. She saw the fierce machitis bearing down on her. Myles! "I did not. He unseated me as well—as is plain."

"I wish I could tell Ma'ma!" Adara was on her knees, bouncing the bed, jarring Kersei with those daggers of pain again.

"Cease!" she hissed, then relented, moving to the chair for relief and so Conti could work her hair into something manageable and less voluminous. "No word of that will be spoken beyond this chamber."

Her sister dropped against the gold-threaded coverlet, her enthusiasm sinking with her. "But why?"

"*You* weren't supposed to be there," Kersei reminded. "Ma'ma has forbidden it."

Arms crossed, Adara pouted. "It's not fair that you can train, and I am not even to watch."

Kersei tensed beneath the twisting and tugging turning her scalp to embers. "You must find your own path, Adara. She wants you to make your own choices, not follow mine."

"But I like your path. I don't want to learn how to carry a book on my head when I can carry a sword!" Her sister hefted an imaginary weapon and swung it in wild arcs. "When he came out, I thought for sure you were going to meet the Ancient."

In the reflecting glass perched before her, Kersei lifted her shift and eyed the darkening bruise once more—then the cut on her cheekbone—and set the pack of chilled fruit aside. "Hush before Ma'ma overhears."

Adara's smile slipped, her wide eyes darting to the side. "Too late."

Releasing her shift, Kersei turned toward the side door, a passage between

apartments that afforded the family unfettered access to one another. Kersei stood, hands pressed to her thighs, mustering every bit of etiquette, and instinctively covered her right forearm. A chill traced her shoulders, making her acutely aware of her bare arms.

Wreathed in grace and beauty, Ma'ma remained poised and somehow above every menial element in this realm, including Kersei. She could never rise to the level of elegance that defined Nicea Dragoumis.

Eyebrow arced, Ma'ma glided toward her. "You allowed your sister to watch, to be swayed by your insanity and disregard for the welfare of Stratos?"

Adara hopped off the bed and dashed to their ma'ma. "I wasn't in danger. I watched from the fence as Kersei unseated the aerios."

Curse her naïveté!

Rich brown eyes fastened onto Kersei. "Leave us," Ma'ma ordered.

Oh no. Kersei braced as Conti gathered Adara and left.

Ma'ma trailed a slow path around the chamber, then stood on the balcony, where the doors were spread wide to invite a breeze.

Kersey dreaded this part—the silence. The long pause designed to let the guilt fester. She moved closer, hoping to convince her mother to speak and end the painful void.

Yet, no conversation came. The silence exceeded the point of being unnerving. Ma'ma had never held onto her anger this long before. And in truth, Kersei did regret—well, not her actions, but her timing. But should they not be readying for the ceremony? Anything to get this over with. "I—"

"You have always been so ... strong."

The gentle words pulled Kersei's gaze to her mother, who stood facing the fields below. What was this? No remonstrance? No chastisement?

"Sometimes," Ma'ma said as she lowered her head, "the price we pay for what we want with all our hearts is ... very high." With a heavy exhale, she turned. Came to Kersei and slid her hand to the brand on Kersei's forearm. She squeezed. "Other than the bruises, you are ... well?"

There was something beneath the soft question. Something worried, concerned.

Though curious, Kersei did not dare invite more lectures. "Yes, Ma'ma. I thank you."

Relief seemed to flood her mother. Then her eyes clouded. Glossed ... tears? *Tears?* From Nicea Dragoumis?

After another squeeze, Ma'ma glided away, then hesitated. "You should change. We ride within the ora for the Plains of Adunatos." Sadness clung to her like the first-rise dew on the fields. "Never doubt, Kersei, that ..." She



straightened. “No matter what comes, know that I love you and your father very much. Had there been another way ...”

Kersei stared. Frowned. “Another way to what?”

Shaking her head, Ma'ma seemed to throw off some great weight. “The blue dress tonight, Kersei.”

She blinked at the change of topic. “I'd planned the green—”

*“Blue.”*

Kersei watched her ma'ma leave the chamber, wondering at the near command to wear blue. It was a Delta Presentation. The wearing of green signified unification with the medora, with the heart of Kardia.

Why would Ma'ma insist she wear blue?



#### K A L O N I C A , D R O S E R O

“Eyes out.” Tigo firmed his grip on his weapon, wishing that his orders had not required stun only. He traced the layout, recalling the low oxygen. The strange settings. All so that their suits would not register. But against what? There was no technology here.

“This is wrong,” AO muttered again.

The team filtered around, arcing into the space, their mech-suits seeming strangely appropriate in this harsh environment.

“Do you know, Commander ...” boomed an unfamiliar voice.

“Registers as an external,” Diggs reported.

Their target.

“... what is more noticeable,” the voice continued, “than the stench of space swine?”

“Where's that coming from?” AO growled.

“I don't see anything!” Jez said.

“Is he calling us pigs?” Rhinn complained.

“Quiet!” Mind buzzing, Tigo swiped the pad on his forearm. “Recalibrate metrics,” he ordered his mech-suit. Weapon up, he circled, scanning, letting his mech-suit search out the enemy.

“Negative on visual,” AO said.

Tigo signaled the team to spread out along the circumference of the ledge that overlooked the drop. He punched the external mic on his suit. “Enlighten us.”

“The absence of smell and heat.” A shape dropped straight down from the fathomless heights above. The landing proved soft, the slightest of thumps against the hewn stone. Three meters ahead, the man unfolded his frame, draped in a long black overcloak.

His insertion stunned the team, leaving them immobile for a fraction. Then light danced and splayed across the gaping void. Blasts sparking from the muzzles.

But just as fast, the shadowed form launched away. Legs. Arms. Flurry of movement. Blending back into the shadows from which he’d come. Not spiderlike, but not far from it either. Soft thumps and thwaps carried along the walls.

AO cursed. Someone went down.

Confusion coursed through Tigo as he whipped around, trying to sight the target and realizing at the same time a terrible truth: this man had been waiting for them.

So. Ambush or trap?

“Target lock,” Tigo ordered his suit as the reticle slid in and around, trying to home in on the lightning-fast man, who seemed to ricochet off walls. Hit one, bounced off it to another. Hit and bound.

“What the slag?” muttered AO.

“Is he even human?” Jez whispered.

Tigo tucked their distraction and awe away to focus on the blurring shape. The shadow that fluttered here and there. Flipped in the air. Leapt from one ledge to another as if he were some creature. Body bent to the side, he kicked Jez backward and simultaneously punched Diggs so hard his visor cracked.

“What is he?” Rhinn growled. “Stun has no effect.”

“Switch to low yield?”

“Negative,” Tigo barked, losing sight of the target for a second. A blur from the side. He ducked but felt the *thunk* against his helm. Rattled, he pushed upward, trusting his sighting technology. Let it guide. “Anticipate,” he said to himself.

“Esq is down!” Jez said.

“My visor isn’t working,” Diggs noted.

“Tech won’t work on this guy,” AO said. “Go manual.”

“Manual?” Rhinn objected. “I can’t see him without the visor.”

That was the point. They were relying on the suit too much. “He’s right. Go manual.” Tigo pressed the button at the base of his neck ring. The visor hissed up and the suit’s quiet hum vanished.

“Why aren’t the stun blasts working?” Diggs asked.

“No idea,” AO said, shouldering forward. He backed up against Tigo, who closed his mind to the chaos. Listened to what he couldn’t see.

A gentle thump to his right.

Tigo came around. Threw a fist. Connected with something hard—a jaw.

The man grunted. But still came.

After a heavy thunk against his suit, Tigo flew backward. The armor ensconcing him crunched as he landed, the man atop him. Hands on Tigo’s neck, but the suit’s steel ring prevented him from tightening that grasp. With a thrust of his leg, Tigo kicked him in the back of the head.

The attacker pitched forward.

Using the suit’s amplified strength, Tigo flipped, landing atop the man and throwing a fist—that hit solid rock. Even though the gauntlet cushioned his hand, pain exploded through his knuckles. Distracted him long enough for the target to upend him again. Though Tigo fought it, he could not prevent the thick shock of his mech-suit’s spine colliding with the stone. His head rattled in the helmet. The man punched him, and stars sprinkled across his vision.

“Webbing!”

Tigo heard AO’s shout, and despite his instincts, he flattened himself.

He heard the *thwump* of the webbing ropes wrapping around the man. A whistling preceded the man being hauled backward, and the acrid scent of small electrical charges burning flesh filled Tigo’s helmet.

Tigo scrambled around. Hurried to the man writhing in the webbing ropes. Held the anchors to prevent escape. “Sedative!”

Jez slid in and aimed the injector, but their fugitive had a life to lose and seemed intent on fighting. He bucked and Jez shifted back, waiting. Came in again with the sedative.

The man focused his energies and threw his weight at her, knocking Jez and the needle backward. She scrambled for it, snatching it before it lunged into the gaping chasm. She spun around, glaring. “Kill the webbing charge and hold him!”

Diggs dialed back the charge, then he and AO dropped on the target. Tigo fell across his legs as Jez shoved the injector against his thigh. A click, then a hiss.

They hopped away, the man still jerking and fighting until he slowed ... slowed ... went limp.

“Scuz me,” Diggs muttered, lifting a hand. “What is he?”

“Not what we were told.” Tigo glowered. This man wasn’t a fugitive. In fact, Tigo was pretty sure by the marks on the man’s face that this man hadn’t committed a crime. Ever. Which made exactly no sense at all.

“What do you mean?” Jez squatted beside Esq, who was sitting up, looking dazed but otherwise unhurt.

But he wasn’t going against orders—not from High Command—and leaving their quarry behind. “AO, help me,” he said, bending toward the target. “We’ve been here ten too long.” They hoisted the burly man up and ferried him out of the passages. Moonlight washed over them as they exited the cave, revealing AO’s expression. The seasoned veteran had realized the same thing Tigo had. No need to talk about it. “Not here.”

AO quietly said, “You know what will happen—”

“Too well.”

“Two treaties were broken—”

“Not. Here.”

“They—”

The sound of Jez swearing broke into their muted discussion. She had forged ahead out of the cave and now spun slowly in a circle with her arms splayed in mystification. “Where’s the *Renette*?”

Tigo glanced to the side. He stilled, his mind refusing to take in what his eyes told him. The corvette was nowhere in sight. Had something happened—avalanche, maybe?—or had the *Renette* been stolen? Or worse?

They lowered the prisoner’s body and Tigo keyed his mic. “TSC *Macedon*, this is Eidolon Two-one-five. We need an emergency evac.”

Crackling silence met his distress call.

“Repeat, TSC *Macedon*, this is Eidolon Two-one-five Actual—come in. We are stranded and—”

“Two-one-five Actual, this is *Macedon*,” came Captain Baric’s very flat voice. “You are breaking radio silence—”

“Request immediate evac. Our exfil is compromised and we are heavy one package. Over.”

“Negative, Two-one-five. We are forbidden in Droseran airsp—”

“*Macedon*,” Tigo bit out. “Repeat—we are heavy one package and six Eidolon stranded.” Silence filled the connection, agitating him. He shifted and groaned. If they left them down here ... “*Macedon? Mace—*”

“Easy, Two-one-five Actual,” came the calm, distanced voice of Commander Dimar in warning to Tigo. “Research One is en route. Glad you’re alive. Thought you’d gone Nephesh for real when *Renette*’s signal blinked out.”

"Thanks, Commander. I owe you."

"Oh, I know," Wellsey said. "I'm already working out how to make you pay."

Tigo almost smiled. "Roger that. Two-one-five Actual out."

"So," Diggs asked, "lost or stolen?" He'd moved to the top of a nearby boulder and stood surveying the snow-laden landscape. "No smoke. No sign of any ship. I thought this planet was filled with backbirthers, so how would any of them even know how to pilot a corvette? Who could have stolen it?"

Tigo had no answers but to look at their fugitive. "The same one who fed Krissos intel on this man."

"Who is he?" Jez asked, her brown eyes filled with concern.

"Look at the sigil on his face." He nodded to the arcs and swoops winging out from the man's nose to his eyes. "He's a hunter."

The team shifted, some stepping back. However, Jez moved closer. "A *Kynigos*?" She visually traced his face. "I've never seen one up close."

Diggs growled. "Did you know who we were coming after before—"

"No." Tigo wasn't foolish enough to go up against the one form of authority in their universe that transcended planets and territorial boundaries.

"Word gets out about this," Diggs hissed, "it's war."

"Then word doesn't get out."

# PREPARE!

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The scent of fear reeked in the hot twilit air, rifling highly attuned receptors. Marco inhaled deeply. There were many types of fear, each one carrying its own unique scent. Reverent fear was not painful to receptors, but it often offended his sensibilities. Too many bowed to empty idols and statues. Threat-based fear given off by someone being attacked was stringent. But fear flooding from a quarry who had committed a crime and knew justice had come ...

How sweet the stench.

Crouched at the base of the sanctuary spire, a lofty height that provided a hazy view of the river churning off to the south, Marco Dusan had the perfect vantage for a hunt. He rotated, each foot resting on a different ledge—one facing the lower sector, the other the square. The church sat in the armpit of the alley, as if deliberately diverting traffic from the town square to the lower village overrun with miscreants, vagrants, and gypsies. The emanating smells proved putrid. Thankfully, a north wind sifted the scents.

Voices, barking dogs, dinner cooking ... The onslaught of sensory information could paralyze him—were he a hound, a first-year at the Citadel. Experience and time had taught him to wade through the scents plaguing a heavily populated area and ignore the irrelevant. Home in on the one he sought—fear. Separate it from ancillary smells and signatures—the hormonal and chemical combination unique to each person.

Marco fisted his hand and closed his eyes, angling to the side as he mentally navigated the odors of the passage and its trespassers.

A crisp, clean signature struck him. Mixed with a touch of frustration. Roman deBurco.

Aye, this quarry had proven most elusive. Yet it should not surprise the master hunter since the Decree requested three Kynigos. The revered hunters had jurisdiction to hunt on all planets of the Herakles Quadrant, save Drosero, unless a quarry had gone to ground there.

A warm, bitter efflux puffed down the alley and into Marco's receptors.

Eyes still closed, he searched, splaying his hands, fanning the scent to himself. Scent could not hide in the shadows. It required no light to betray.

The smell of fear grew stronger. The quarry was closer.

Opening his eyes, Marco scanned the dark passage. *Come. Show yourself,* he willed the fugitive. Eventually he would. They all did. He unhitched the monocle from the rhinnock vambrace on his right arm and peered down into the depths. No good. Too dark. He reattached it and verified there were no waves from his brethren.

At last the crisp scent swelled. Both Roman and Rico Ohlson, his advocate, had drawn in as well. Strong bergamot drifted through the alley—by that particular scent he knew the man had been with a chatelaine. Fear roiled—then collided with balsam, stinging Marco’s nostrils. Panic. The Brethren had been spotted. The quarry knew he was hunted.

Marco slowly rose, keeping his movement organic so as not to draw attention. Fear tumbled, leaving a heady lure. Coming nearer. The reek watered his eyes and urged him from the ledge. Warm night air buffeted him as he silently dropped the six feet to the cobbled path. Touched down, reacquiring as he came to his full height.

A woman started and shouted as she shoved away, realizing who he was. What he was.

He rolled his shoulders, unfurling his long black Kynigos cloak with its stiff collar, hyperfocusing his gift. Receptors filled with the scents, he shifted naught but his eyes as he scanned crates, alcoves.

*Here. He is right here.*

Yet ... where?

A shadow darted out of the alley and up the building.

His pulse ricocheted. The shadow had gone *up*, not down. “He runs!” Marco called to his brethren. A laugh stole into his shout as he vaulted across the passage. Grabbed the downpipe of a dwelling and scaled it. Thrust himself to the right, toeing a ledge, before swinging up onto the roof. Spied a shadow spiriting away and threw himself in that direction, hopping over a ledge and the gap between row houses.

Behind came the telltale thumps of his brethren closing in. It was Roman’s Decree, so Roman must finish it. The Creed cared not what aid came in completing the Decree, only that it must be completed or all honor would remain suspended until then.

“Marco, this way!”

He skidded to a stop at a corner, confused. Rico called him toward the



clock tower, but he clearly scented the quarry north. *Trust those before you.* In a sprint to reach his advocate, Marco felt the taunting edges of frustration.

Exquisite odors of yeast and sugars rose thickly from the baker on whose roof they came to a slow, maddening stop.

“Where?” He trotted to his advocate.

“I ...” Roughing a hand over his face, Rico shook his head. “I had him—just past the chimneys. Then he was gone.”

“Marco, backtrack south,” Roman growled as he joined them, moonlight grabbing his well-worn duster. “I *will* fulfill the Decree. My honor will not be impugned by this miscreant.”

Inclining his head, Marco eased away, annoyed that he had been pulled from the scent. He flung himself around. Back to where he’d last had the scent. With a running start, he leapt across a narrow alley, landed in a roll, and came up jogging, scanning. He veered right, grateful the same wind that had carried away the stench of the lower sector now guided him in the hunt.

Yet as he reached the river, the scent wafted out. Marco slowed, eyes closed. Chin tucked. He drew in a long, slow draught of air and licked his lips, using every receptor in his nose, throat, and mouth to find the signature. But ... nothing. How was this possible?

Scowling, he traced the shadows, the rooftops.

*Need to get higher.*

Marco launched at the wall. Bounded to the right, where another building jutted up, and then caught the ledge to his left. He flipped up and over it, then shot upright. Basilica light caressed him as he turned a slow circle, smelling. Tasting. He stilled. Cocked his head to the left. Craned ... a ... little ... mor—

*There!*

Marco bolted toward the basilica, noting the bustle and lights of the square grew as he two-handed a ledge and sailed over it. Used the next as a launch point. Eyeing the edge of the commons building that rimmed the southern portion of the square, he grabbed it and sailed over, immediately sighting the façade for a toehold. Found one. Dropped to it. Shimmied to the window. Shoved off. Twisted around and landed, facing the fountain.

He groaned inwardly, hating how water and moisture dampened scents. Thickened and blurred them. Smart of the quarry to come here. “Cut off the fountain!” Marco shouted to a sentry, who gaped, then scrambled to comply.

“Kynigos!” The pronouncement swelled the crowd into a frenzy. Villagers fled to the passages. Interfering with a hunt warranted branding. And yet,

their very flight could provide the quarry a throng in which to escape.

Rico burst from the side, wide eyes hitting Marco. Asking if he had him. Knew his location.

With a shake of his head, Marco hopped up on the ledge of the fountain and turned his back to the now-still water.

*Fear smells like honor.* Because that scent was strong and foul, making it easier to track. Making it easier to fulfill a Decree and gain honor.

*Abh. There.*

He tilted his head to the left and grinned. "They cannot hide for long."

Formidable Roman stormed forward, his Kynigos cords swaying against his black vest. His long cloak swung back over his shoulders as he angled forward, his thick dark eyebrows tightening and nostrils flaring.

Deathly silence blanketed the previous buzzing. Readyng themselves to capture the fugitive, Marco and Rico started in opposite directions to make a slow circuit around the fountain of the goddess Eleftheria, who held a tipped jug.

"To the Decree," Rico said.

"And the hunt," Marco added.

"For honor." Roman breathed a long sigh, as if centered by the mantra.

A heavy lemon smell wafted on the hot winds, drenching Marco's receptors and piquing his thirst. Grimacing, he glanced down at a large barrel. Filled nearly to the top with dried flaxinella petals, the bin sat like a sentry at the magevo's shop. He swiped a hand through the petals and grunted.

Fear and anger scents slammed him from behind. He spun in time to catch a woman throwing herself at him.

With her neck in his vise-grip, she widened her blue eyes. Cried out. Dropped a knife, the metal clattering against the cobbles.

Processing her smell in a tick, Marco grunted. Rage. Vengeance. Innocence could stay his hand from marking her, but she had none. "Consider yourself marked." The small iron was in his hand in a flash, searing her crime into her throat.

Screaming, she sagged. The Kynigos sigil blazed against her skin. "You beasts!"

He glared as he released her. "It would serve you well to leave."

After a glance at the magevo's shop, she shuffled away. Her efflux reeked of worry.

What had she been looking at? Finding nothing, he slowly backstepped. Something here gave her concern.

Marco wiped his forehead as he surveyed the shop. Then the lingering scent on his hand stilled him. He stared at his palm for a tick, then slowly raised it to his face. The faint odor of lemon mixed with a distinct ... *signature*. He considered the barrel again. The scattered dried petals around the base.

He grinned. Over his shoulder, he caught Rico's gaze. With a gentle nod toward the magevo's shop, Marco inched closer to the waist-high crate. "Have you heard, Brethren, how flammable certain plants are?" He scooped a handful of the dried white flowers. He held them above the barrel and let the petals fall through his fingers. "Flaxinella is particularly potent in hot climates—highly flammable, if I remember correctly."

Roman smiled, palming his webbing gun and activating its charge, should the quarry again run. "It was a double rise day."

"Indeed." Marco nearly laughed at the acrid balsam erupting now—panic. "I'm sure this entire barrel would be enough to launch a Symmachian warship."

"At least," Rico said with a wink.

"Shall we test it?" Marco took a step away, as did Rico. This hunt belonged to Roman. Only he could attain the honor it would imbue.

"I have a sparking stone here." Roman lowered his head and relaxed his arms at his sides, fingers rolling. "What say you—two sparks enough?"

Petals flew upward as a body launched from the barrel. "No!" the dusty man gasped, a rebreather in hand. "Mercy, no!"

Roman grabbed the scruff of the man's neck, fury coursing through his dark eyes. "Firkin, you have cost me my honor long enough."

"I beg your mercy, Master Hunter. I've changed my ways."

"What? Bedmate with Symmachia now?" Rico taunted.

It was an old jest among the Kynigos. Those who claimed they changed their ways had either taken up with Symmachian warlords or claimed to sing Eleftheria's praises in the high temple.

The man's face fell. "How do you know about that?"

Marco tensed, frowning at his brethren.

Firkin shook his head. "I didn't know they were going to use my work to kill people. I swear!"



KALONICA, DROSERO

Pain, she decided, was merely another name for retribution.

A column of machitis escorted her family. On most days, she would ride Bastien out this far, but this ceremony was sacred and beasts were not allowed past the river. Kersei rode behind her father and mother, who led the machitis and councilmembers toward the Plain of Adunatos. The forty-minute journey on horseback was nothing compared to the ensuing twenty on foot, where she stumbled on every uneven patch and hole in the road.

Kersej felt Ma'ma's glower and refused to meet it. Instead, she lifted her chin as the proud daughter of Xylander Dragoumis that she was and kept walking. Teeth gritted.

Relief swept her at the distant sight of the basalt arcs of the Delta platform. Already a sea of Stratios swelled around it to attest to Xylander's final heir presentation. Kersei marveled at the structure. A triangular stone platform sent three arches up from its corners, the fingers joining in the center to uphold a large crystal orb, as if offering it to the stars. It was, in reality, an offering to the first Lady of Basilikas, who emerged when Vaqar returned after a cycle-long journey to bless the lands of Drosero and present him with his heir. Just as the Lady presented her heir, each elder and those of his entoli presented their heirs to Vaqar, the Ancient.

There, the story diverged. Some said the heir the Lady presented was a son, Kynig, strong and equal to none, save his immortal father. Others said the heir was Eleftheria, the Lady who watched over all daughters born to the medoras of Kalonica since.

Once her father took his place on the dais with Adara, Kersei joined her mother and eldest sister at the base. Behind them, rows of machitis and the entirety of the Stratios entoli and other clans who ventured into the night for this celebration. Those who did would be rewarded with festivities. Cakes, music, and dancing.

A horn blast was quickly followed by the slap of overcloaks as the machitis snapped to attention in anticipation of the royal family.

Kersej stole a glance at her elder sister, reading there the expectant glow as she watched for the crown prince. Willowy, yet fuller through the hips and breasts—and ego—Lexina skated a look down the long path formed by striking green uniforms of the machitis.

The medora strode into the column, tall and proud. The Light of Kardias sat atop his head. In full regalia, he was an imposing, handsome figure. More than either of his sons, may and true. Father had spoken of the medora taking a new bound, yet he had not. He had remained true to Kyria Athina after her death. His crown somehow caught and dazzled torchlight across its twisted

vines that held five different colored gems, representing the five provinces of the Kalonican kingdom. To his right and back two steps strode Crown Prince Silvanus, but the only thing remarkable about the bland-faced prince was his military regalia that squared his shoulders. The Great Star of Kalonica pinned to the gold sash marked him a member of the royal family, but the blue garter sash was that of the heir apparent. His straight black hair hung in a plait or queue, she guessed.

Kersei twitched her nose. Too skinny. Too pale. Too stuffed full of himself. Though some might call Silvanus beautiful, as Lexina had over and over, he had no allure for Kersei.

On Medora Zarek's left and back four steps, Darius cut an impressive figure. Closer to his father's height and good looks. Though his near-blond hair made rumors fly that the kyria had shared someone else's bed. But the square jaw and piercing blue eyes affirmed who'd sired him. He wore the gold sash and white cord of a Tyrannous heir, but unlike his brother, Darius was adorned with the gold belt and cords of the commander of the aerios. It was not merely a hereditary title but one of experience and expertise. It said much of his fighting skills. Below his heart also rested the Great Star of Kalonica, mark of the royal family.

He was more handsome than his brother in the green-and-gold jerkin and black pants, but still too ... pretty. Though she'd never call him that on the sparring field. The thought plied a smile from her lips—which drew Darius's gaze. There was something strange and intense in his eyes tonight. His brow rippled as he took in her gown—blue, as Ma'ma insisted. Not green. Was he offended that she had not worn Kalonican colors?

As the medora took the dais with his sons, thirty aerios, the medora's personal guard, arced out behind their sovereign. It was an impressive sight. And she smiled at the way Adara beamed up at their father, who squeezed her hand as they stood at the front for the presentation.

"Hear ye, hear ye!" a caller proclaimed. "Give ear and witness to the events this sacred night of the Delta Presentation, following in the manner of the first Lady and Vaqar and this eve presided over by Medora Zarek, Fourth of his name and ruler of Kalonica."

After a speech from the medora about the importance of this night, he asked, "Xylander Dragoumis, Praeceptor of the Realm, Elder of Stratios and one of the Five, have you a presentation to make?"

"I do, Your Grace."

"Bring forth your heir."

Taking Adara by the shoulders, Father moved onto the platform. The aerios shifted, encircling her father, Adara, the medora, and the princes.

“Who is this child?” Zarek asked.

“Adara Nicea, daughter of Xylander,” her father replied, lifting his bearded jaw, “born of Nicea Dragoumis. Sister to Lexina and Kersei.”

“Has she ten cycles, Xylander?”

“She does, my liege.”

Medora Zarek lifted a Lampros ampule and held it overhead. “On this night, beneath the light of the Ancient and the Deltas, I, Zarek, Medora of Kalonica and ruler of the Five, acknowledge Adara, third heir of Xylander.”

He set the wreath on her head, then lifted his scepter to the entwined orb overhead. They waited until moonlight struck the orb then danced into his scepter, which he touched to the small ampule dangling above Adara’s eyes.

Ahhs filtered through the crowds, followed quickly by applause.

It seemed that light also somehow found its way into Kersei’s arm, the brand exploding with shards of fire.



“Fare you well?”

Entering the hall resonating with music and dancing, Kersei smiled up at her father. “Aye.” She watched her sister turning a circle as she stared, near cross-eyed, at the still-glowing ampule on her forehead.

“You were in pain, Kersei.” Concern touched his eyes. “After Adara’s presentation—I saw it in your face.”

The memory of that startling moment singed her, but this night was for her sister and her father. “What you saw was my jealousy. Did you see how brightly her ampule glowed?” She laughed, keeping her arm close to her side, convinced the fire that had burned at the presentation would betray her. “Go, dote on Adara. She has earned her celebration.”

“If you need rest—”

“And miss all the dancing?”

“I was told you were thrown by Myles.”

She started to react but tempered it. “Actually, by his javrod.”

Consternation creased his dark brows. “You’ll be the death of me, Kersei.”

“Not till your head is silver and your heart roiling with grandchildren—borne by Lexina.”

His expression grew serious. “And by you, I would hope.”

“After training. You promised.”

“Foolishly mayhap.” He laughed, pressed a kiss to her forehead, then strode off.

As the crowds thickened, there again came a great shout from the caller, announcing the arrival of Medora Zarek and the princes. Here? Why would they come to Stratios when other entolis had also brought heirs to be presented? Mayhap because Stratios was closer to Kardia.

Regardless, there were too many bodies pressed into the space. Kersei pushed herself to the far side of the great hall, where the many doors had been removed to allow the party to flow onto the veranda. She hung near the sheer curtains, not quite brave enough to dance and risk pain from the injury.

And the nagging, nervous curiosity zipped through her again, drawing her gaze to her forearm, sheathed though it was in blue fabric. What had caused the marks to hurt so much? It had never happened before.

“Blue, an interesting choice.”

Kerseil lowered her arm. “The gilded prince,” she teased Darius, who joined her by the doors, hands behind his back as he watched the dancing. “Can you breathe, Darius? Your collar looks a bit snug.”

“There is air enough around you, my lady,” Darius said, his tone light. He pivoted and extended a hand. “A dance?”

Her gaze connected with Aerios Myles passing nearby. “I beg your mercy, Prince Darius, but I would dance with Myles.”

“I fear you will not,” Darius said in a low warning. “I must have a word—”

It was this behavior that forbade her from ever thinking of Darius as anything more than a straw-stuffed target. “I beg your mercy, but I must. I promised Myles the first—”

“Kerseil!”

She pivoted and winced at the flare of pain from her side as she sought the one who had called her and spotted the scruffier version of her father.

Wider through the belly, but just as quick and wise, Uncle Rufio had been the machitis who started her training. Her heart vaulted. “Uncle!”

His hairy arms welcomed her into a thick-chested hug—yet he did not crush her. “Little Warrior.” His voice rumbled in her ear, then he cupped her face. “How fare ye?”

“I am well,” she said, tucking aside mention of her injuries and hooking her hand in the crook of his arm, grateful when he led her from Darius. Guilt forced her to glance back, not surprised to find that stern expression he was so very famous for—that temper.

“You unseated Myles,” Uncle Rufio said with a rueful expression.

She breathed a laugh. “Poor aerios—his ego must be severely wounded, much like my side.”

“Bet your prince didn’t like that.”

“He is not *my* prince.” But then she nodded with a smile. “But yes, Darius went into a rage.”

His laughter echoed as they returned to the great hall, where a fire roared in the corner and warmed cordi had been prepared by the barreiful. “I am sure he means well. It is no secret he intends—”

“I hear you have been to the south,” Kersei blurted, anxious to not spend more time speaking of the prince. May and true, she wanted to know how



the meetings fared. Few ventured past Prokopios lands.

"How came you by that news?" He scowled, then waved. "I forget you have those brown eyes to work your wiles."

Heat bled through her cheeks as they navigated the crowd, making their way toward the tables at the front of the hall. "No wiles. I merely asked."

Again, he laughed. "I have no doubt, niece. There is yet to live a machitis who can resist Nicea's daughter."

"You make me sound the seductress, Uncle. We both know it is not my appearance but my position—they seek the favor of Xylander, mightiest of the Five."

His expression sobered as they reached the inner columns. Now he seemed forlorn. "Kersei." He took her hands. "I—"

A blast of the horn of Kardia dropped silence on the crowded hall.

Turning, Kersei frowned and tried to see the head table. Had her father already gained his seat beside the medora? That was fast. Why the rush?

"Stratios!" Her father shouted to be heard in the far reaches of the hall. "A petition has been set!"

Hoyzah! shouts went up.

Kersei grabbed her uncle's arm. "Lexina!" Excitement rang through her. "He has finally done it. Silvanus has set petition for Lexina." She let out a caustic laugh. "I will at long last be rid a sister who whines more than she flutters. Come. Let us move closer." She started through the crowd, fighting her way to the family table, but when she glanced back to catch his hand, he was gone. She frowned and searched for him amid the throng.

On the dais, her father bowed aside for the medora, then returned to the family table. "A petition has been set this eve," Zarek announced, drawing her attention once more. All petitions for binding were brought to the medora for permission or denial. Normally, an entoli elder would preside over the austere occasion, but with the medora present, the task was his.

Kersei gained her parents' side at the head table, grinning at her sister.

Crown Prince Silvanus and Prince Darius joined their father on the dais as he presided. Unorthodox, yet a nice gesture about the match to be made between the crown and the Stratios.

Medora Zarek held a scroll. "The petition has been set"—eagerness thrummed through the crowds—"for Kersei Dragoumis."

She shouted, glancing at her sister, excited for—

*What?* Her heart staggered to a stop amid crackling silence, then the roar of exultation that rang through the hall. The machitis and aerios grew raucous.

“No,” Kersei breathed.

Pulse thundering, Kersei could not move. Could not breathe. No. This was ... wrong. She swung her gaze to her parents—father was proud, Ma'ma lowered her gaze. Lexina threw daggers from her eyes.

It should be her. It needed to be her. “You mean Lexina,” Kersei said, her voice quiet, uncertain. Shaken. She nodded to her sister with a doleful smile. Zarek was medora. He could not be expected to know the names of all in the realm and keep them clear. “My sister,” she said more firmly. He had merely mixed up their names. “*Lexina* Dragoumis, you mean.”

Her father shifted, clearing his throat.

She shook her head. Then saw something in his expression that struck her dumb. Terrified her.

No.

“Kersei Dragoumis,” the medora called, his deep voice rattling the beams overhead, “stand present.”

“No,” she whispered, digging her nails into her palms.

“Kersei,” her father said, an edge creeping into his voice. “Our medora summons you.”

She caught his arm. Like a lifeline. “Father, ’tis a mistake. This is not ...”

He nudged her forward.

“Nay,” she hissed, planting her feet and nearly crying out at the pain that flared under his pressure.

“Be not a fool, Daughter.” His grave eyes sparked. Firmed. “Do not humiliate me and the entire entoli. This is a great honor. I would not have otherwise accepted the petition.”

Panic squirmed through her restraint as Kersei licked her lips, then surrendered, allowing her father to guide her before the medora.

Medora Zarek nodded, his expression ... grave.

*This gives him as little pleasure as it does me. Then why?*

Zarek towered over the whole of Stratios on the dais, but his great height and broad shoulders that bore the weight of all Kalonica demanded respect. As did those sharp blue eyes that had overlooked her many a time and did even now, as he scanned the great sea of warriors to find the machitis fool enough to take her to bound. To claim the wild daughter of Xylander. She was not ignorant of what others thought of her, nor did she give care in that respect.

He lifted his chin. “Who has set petition for Kersei, daughter of Xylander? Speak now and set petition before her father, entoli, and medora.”

"It's a mistake, Father," she whispered aside, but he squeezed her shoulders to make her face forward again. This was wrong. Who would saddle her with obligations she did not want? Her periphery was ablaze with green capes. Who? Could it be Myles? Her heart skipped a beat—would he do this to punish her for unseating him? Put her in her place by getting a child on her? Mayhap. He *had* seemed intent in the bailey.

She skidded a glance in his direction but found only bored irritation.

Movement behind the medora distracted her for a moment and her gaze hit Darius's. He seemed amused, his eyebrows raised. Annoyed that he found sport in her humiliation, she huffed and glanced away. To each side to rout the traitor.

"The petition is mine, my lord Father."

Amid a raucous cheer from the aerios, exulting in their commander's petition, Darius broke rank from his father and brother.

Kersei hauled in a breath as he hopped from the dais as if dismounting a horse. At her side, he swung around and looked up at his father. His neck was lovely and long. Easily snapped in two, had she a javrod. Mayhap more easily strangled. Or severed.

Curse his black-hearted *adunatos*. He *knew* she did not want to bind. Not yet. Not until she'd finished training.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at him.

"The petition is claimed by Prince Darius, second in line to the throne of Kardia," Medora Zarek announced. "Prince Darius, make your request known to her entoli leader and father."

Taller than her by a couple of hands, Darius smiled at her, faced her father—a move that put his shoulder directly in front of her—and extended his palm in a gesture of submission. "Elder Xylander Dragoumis, I, Darius, son of Medora Zarek of Kalonica and the Great Seas, set petition and cause to be bound to your daughter, Kersei Lysandra. To claim her as my own, to protect and honor her, to assume the role you have served since the Ancient gave her breath. Will you grant my petition, sir?"

Wonder and rage warred within her. In her fists she crushed the sheer overlay and taffeta of her gown, heart thundering like a summer-tide storm. "No—"

Her father clamped her shoulder. Drew her back.

Darius's light brown, shoulder-length hair hung in waves like the shores of Kalonica. His boyish charm that had always drawn dithering females like maggots on rotting flesh had vanished amid the stubble etching his jaw.

Handsome, yes. Arrogant, definitely. Fool, absolutely!

*We were friends. Why ...?*

The clap as her father's palm met Darius's crackled through the hall and severed her thoughts. Marveling at their stacked hands, she watched her father receive the petition and with it, the bound price of yet another measure of land. Sealing her fate. Bartering her off like a prized bovina.

Breathing hurt. Living more so.

Her father offered a broad smile. "Tis an honor, Prince Darius, to welcome you to Stratios, where you will sit in council among our leaders and be second only to myself among the Stratios."

Was that it? Was Medora Zarek after more control in the kingdom? Is that why Darius would so wholly defy her will?

"Long have you and Kersei been friends," her father continued. "It is an honor now to call you son." Father jutted his jaw. "In the ways of the Ancient, by the strength of Vaqar, and the blessings of the Lady of Basilikas, I grant you the hand of my daughter."

Darius's chin and chest lifted. "Thank you, Elder Xylander." He shifted back to the medora and caught Kersei's hand.

She resisted. Clenched her fist and yanked it back but felt his grip tighten. The surprise in his blue eyes. The warning, subtle yet clear. Her arm trembled as they stood in a silent duel. But there, too, lay her defeat. If she refused, her father would be shamed. The Stratios would be shamed. Perhaps even lose their voice among the Five. Grave repercussions, especially with the lingering threat of the Symmachians trying to insinuate themselves on Drosero.

Strong and warm, her father caught her other hand. Fingers coiled tight. Easily, he could hurt her. But he did not. And that forced Kersei to tear her gaze from the medora's knees, where it had locked, and travel the distance to her father's chest. Up his shoulders. To his face. Those dark eyes. And there she pleaded with all she had been gifted.

*Please do not allow this. True and blood, I do not want to bind. I don't want to be restrained, forced to bear children rather than armor and sword.*

Kindness. There had always been kindness in his gaze. Though he whipped and sharpened his warriors, he was a loving father and husband. Always had he given her latitude. Yet not this time. This time he stood resolute.

Tears stung before she could stop them. This was it. He was giving her away. Sending her away. *Forcing* her away.

He lifted her hand, kissed her knuckles, and nodded. Only then did she realize they were not the only ones privy to her resistance. She felt the glower

of Zarek and Silvanus. The concern of the aerios. She had stood on their training yard and demanded respect. Would she now act the child when she had not gotten her way? Stiff-backed, she would be better than this. She would fulfill her role. It could be worse—she could ...

Blood and boil! There was no worse. This was the end of all she knew and loved.

Darius raised their hands to eye level and spoke to his father. “Medora Zarek, in the presence of the aerios and machitis of Stratios, Elder Xylander Dragoumis has accepted my petition. Therefore, I present myself and the Lady Kersei to Your Grace for approval and anointing of her to join the royal family and represent your kingdom as princessa.”

Kersei pulled in a startled breath. Princessa. She had never thought to bear such a title. The room swayed.

“Speak now, my lord Father,” Darius continued, “and make known your will before all.”

The medora motioned them onto the dais, and it startled Kersei to realize how very tall and broad he truly was. Cupping their hands with his own, he looked to the people. “With honor and with pleasure, I authorize this petition.” He smiled at Darius, then to Kersei—and she saw there was no truth in his words—there was no pleasure in his acceptance of her, but a flash of warning and disapproval. “From this night that Kersei Dragoumis shall be known as Princessa Kersei of Kardia and Kalonica.” He elevated their hands until she was forced to go to tiptoes. “Tonight, the royal House of Tyrannous and the House of Stratios are joined!”

Shouts thundered through the great hall, drowning her will and raging heart. It felt like a childhood game of pretend they’d played, vowing to save each other from mere mortals. To cut down the worst of diabolus. Escape to the high mountain where they’d live forever and train longer.

“Prepare the hall,” her father shouted over the din, which escalated at the proclamation.

“What?” Kersei gaped. “*Now?*” But her father didn’t hear or respond as he launched into motion, barking orders. She balked, shifting to Darius. “Why now?” she demanded. “I would have preferred time to prepare ...”

“Prepare a pack and horse to run?” he taunted, then lost his smile. “When set by a royal, petitions are always carried out immediately. Leaves no time for harm to befall the intended.”

“Or for them to flee, apparently,” she murmured, eyeing the excitement as sergii worked to dress the hall for a binding ceremony. “Why, Darius?”

But he was pulled into a strong-armed back-pat by Myles, who offered his congratulations. More aerios lined up to congratulate their grinning commander.

Kersei's anger rose to boiling. How dare he!

He turned to her. Leaned in.

Her stomach protested, realizing he meant to kiss her. She angled aside, his kiss hitting her coils. "How could you do this?" she hissed in his ear.

A frown flickered through his smile as he laced their fingers. "Smile, Princessa." His tone was cold. "You will see this is good for both our families." He was drawn into conversation with another aerios.

Oh that she could speak her piece, ride his thick hide to the sea and back. *You beast!* Tingling heat trickled into her cheeks and neck, no doubt coloring them with a wretched shade of crimson.

When he faced her again, Darius wavered. He touched her arm.

She yanked from him, then schooled her reaction when her father and Medora Zarek glanced their way.

"You are truly angry," Darius said as he guided her aside.

She took refuge behind a column, finally breaking Medora Zarek's piercing gaze. "*Now* you discern my thoughts?"

"Kersei, we are a good match," Darius said, his tone calm and maddening. "You know me better than any woman, and I you."

She glowered. "You think you know me, yet you do *this!*"

He drew back. "Do you feel so ill toward me?" The softness in his tone was gone. In its place, an almost impatient, hurtful tinge. "Think about it. These long years we have been friends and sparring partners. Is being my bound so wretched?"

"Friends *play*. Sparring is training. Those who are bound ..." Heat infused her cheeks at the thought of what would come later. She glanced away—just in time to see her mother and sergii gliding toward her. Kersei groaned.

Her mother inclined her head. "Prince Darius, we must take your bound to dress her for the ceremony."

He hesitated, no doubt thinking she might flee. That she might humiliate them all. Curse the man because she had more honor than that. She would not hurt her father. And she would have a lifetime to make Darius regret this.



Marco stood at the balcony overlooking the great city of Vaqar, capital of Kynig and home to the training grounds for all hunters, the Hall of Judgment, and barracks. A weight had settled into his thoughts after Roman gained his honor finishing the Firkin Decree. Something ominous thrummed in the air. Unlike others, he could not discount it as lack of sleep or—he looked at the near-full tankard of warmed cordi juice he held—inebriation.

As a hunter, he sensed things others could not. But it took no great imagination to realize something had changed. He unlaced the forearm plating and tugged it off, wondering at the heat that'd been there earlier when they returned to the gathering hall to celebrate. He'd given no real thought to the marks—they had no purpose he could discern and wearing the armor and vambrace hid them. All children brought to the Citadel were taught to shut out the past and their lineage, to claim the honor and training of a hunter. Now the mark was demanding attention. Distracting him.

A hand slid along his shoulder then down his chest as a woman curled in front of him. "Come inside, Marco," she murmured, kissing his jaw and pushing up to catch his mouth.

He angled away, lacing up his plating. "Not tonight, Ezretia."

She pouted. "But—"

"Not tonight."

"You say that every time," she whined, pushing herself against him once more. "You deserve pleasure. Everyone knows *you* saved Roman's honor."

Anger doused the distraction. "Enough." He straightened. "Do not speak against the master."

"I speak against no one." She huffed, planting her hands on ample hips. "Come, let me work that tension out of you—"

"Will he still not yield, Ezretia?" Rico taunted from the hall.

Marco glanced at his advocate, who was being led away by a chatelaine, the two laughing and kissing as they stumbled toward a bedroom. Irritation

flashed. It was common, acceptable—nay, a supposed *honor* for a woman to bed a Kynigos. An allowance supposedly approved by the original hunter, Vaqar the Tahscan, who had said no greater honor was to be had than the love of a woman.

But had Vaqar intended *this*? How could this be honor? It was weakness.

Ezretia was plying him again with her wiles. Her scent reeked of rotten onions and soiled clothes.

Another arrow that severed the Kynigos from other enforcers across this quadrant—no heirs. They were committed to one thing only: the hunt. For that reason, they did not bind. They did not divide their loyalties. Which was why, most likely, they allowed the strained interpretation of law and allowed hunters the pleasures of women.

“Come, Marco. Warm me.”

Annoyance struck hard and fast. “Release me, woman,” he growled.

She huffed. Hands dropped to her side. “Fine.” She shuffled to the hall. “Julian wanted me anyway.”

Did she think to make him jealous? He snorted. More he should pity Julian.

Glad to be rid of her and that scent, he gripped the rail and stared out into the star-littered night. Something was happening, changing. He felt it. Smelled it. Lived it. Dreamed it. Not just his mark. Whatever surged through the air stirred in his veins, too. Made his blood itch for relief, much as he had as a boy when he’d first come into the scents.

“For one who handed me a victory, you are much chagrined,” came grave words and the scratching of boots on the stone floor.

At that voice, Marco straightened. “Master. Think I would make it easy for you, handing a victory of such importance—if even I could do such a thing?”

“So humble.” Roman chuckled as he joined him in the cool of the evening.

Marco grinned, then leaned against the balustrade as a shuttle departed Keighra dock and climbed to break atmo. Another hunter off to fulfill a Decree.

“You are not taking your pleasure.”

“I beg your mercy, but I am.” Marco nodded to the sky, to the stars. “Great pleasure.”

“It is allowed—”

“Just because it is allowed does not make it right,” Marco countered.

“Still holding fast to that?”

“It guides me.”

“The Brethren talk.”

“It’s what they do best when not hunting.”



They stood in silence watching the stars for a several long minutes and, in the far distance, the busy Onoria port with drop ships and passenger shuttles. It was not long before he wondered why the master lingered.

Hair streaked with the light of the moons, Roman stared at the starry sky, his expression blank. Similar in build to Marco, he wore his hair in the tradition of the Kynigos, queued back loose. “We’ve been summoned.”

With a sidelong glance, Marco considered the words. Hunters received Decrees, but they chose which to accept, which to deny. To be summoned was unusual and typically indicated a monarch or ruler of some note held the Decree. That Roman had not yet mentioned the holder ... “Who?”

“Iereania.”

Marco jerked. “The Holy Order?”

With a slow nod, Roman sighed. “Much to my chagrin.”

A religious order did not mix well with mercenaries, which is how they often referred to the Kynigos. The hunters had gained respect for their decisiveness, their ability to rightly pick a Decree, but mostly for their effectiveness in delivering fugitives for justice. Worlds depended on their swift action. Symmachia, the Tertian Space Coalition, and most worlds in their nine-planet quadrant authorized Kynigos to operate autonomously.

“What have we to do with the religious?”

Roman shrugged. “Nothing, unless a purse is dropped.”

It was part of the process—money deposited after the subject of the Decree was established, along with details of the guilt. The Kynigos then decided whether to accept or refuse, a decision never made lightly. And at the point of the purses, rarely refused. “But ... *priests*.” Marco’s lip curled.

“Aye.”

“No good comes from the White City.”

“Agreed.”

“Yet you consider giving them audience?”

“Honor is the hallmark of who we are. Personal feelings have no place in a Decree. We hear the accusation, consider the subject, weigh the laws, then—if convinced justice has been truly maligned—we accept.” He took another sip of his drink. “Our honor is not tied to preferences, Marco. You know this. It is tied to what is true, what laws govern and keep this mad, twisted ’verse from collapsing.”

“Of course, Master. It’s just ... they pervert truth to bend wills.”

“Give care. You know not what Decree may be your next.” Roman eyed him, smirking. “Prejudices can negatively affect your ability to hunt.”

"That would not happen." Marco straightened. "To the Decree."

Roman inclined his head. "And the hunt. For honor. Rest you well, Marco." He slapped his shoulder, then disappeared back into the gathering hall.

Marco's gaze shifted to where the sun slumbered in the north. Lyryst was bad, but to be thrust into the rigid, archaic dictates of the Iereans ...

*Curse the reek!*



## KALONICA, DROSERO

Green. They dressed her in Kardia green. The bliaut danced beautifully with gold threads over the green brocade. Gold ribbon embroidered with the Lampros torch trimmed the bodice, waist, skirt, and gathered section of the sleeves. White gossamer flounced dramatically from green puffs at the shoulders and dangled to where the white petticoat flared at her calves. There were no omnir pants now. No comfort and practicality. Just ... Green. White.

Holding something, Ma'ma dismissed the sergii who had assisted Kersei into her gown. Only four in Stratios Hall knew of the black marks scrawled over her arm. Some of the black arcs reminded her of a scythe, others of the fingernail of the farthest moon. "I will have to tell him."

"He will know soon enough." Ma'ma fastened a brooch over Kersei's left breast, then tucked a train of gold lamé through the fitted part and over her shoulder, the material dangling past her feet.

Kersei cringed. The brooch was the crest of the royal house. But it could not shield her from the marks. "He will cast me off, break the vows."

"He cannot. Will not," her mother declared, securing the buttons at the back of the gown.

"His father is medora."

"Exactly the reason he will not break them. It would shame the Tyrannous name, bring dishonor to a house that holds honor above all—"

"Is that why you said nothing?" Kersei asked, an edge to her words she had not intended.

Her mother straightened. "You think I would do this—allow this if I were offered a choice? It is not decided at a woman's table, but an elder's chair."

"I beg your mercy," Kersei said miserably. "I ... I have never felt so powerless."

"You know not what it is to feel powerless," her ma'ma said. "Not yet."

"I cannot do this." She dropped her head, tears stinging.

"You *will*. And you must." Ma'ma lifted her arm and tugged down the brocade sleeves, overlaid with lace that hung in fluttering waves from her wrists, and secured the hooks, then slipped the ties around Kersei's middle fingers. It kept the material drawn tight and also ensured the sleeve did not slide up and reveal the mark. "Gather that iron courage, Kersei. There are days and times ahead that will test your mettle and make you wish for the whip, but remember—you *can* control much from this point forward."

Curiosity caught her by the throat and forced her to eye Ma'ma. There was something hidden in her words, a meaning Kersei could not grasp. Though nearly fifty cycles, her mother had not been touched by wrinkles. "You give me a fright, Ma'ma."

"It will be in your power, Kersei," her ma'ma said, "to sway the heart of the prince, who holds the ear of the medora. That is a great honor, a great power. Few have it."

She let her eyes flutter closed for just a moment. "I wanted what you and Father had—love."

Grief pursed her mother's lips. "Our situation was unique. You know that." She held Kersei's hand, gaze downcast. "I paid a very high price for that love."

A high price? What was this? Kersei studied her ma'ma, the weight in her expression. A thought crept into her mind she'd never considered before. "You regret it?"

Serenity wreathed Ma'ma's face as she shook her head. "Nay. I would give a lifetime of grief for the love of Xylander. I have known no better man." She touched Kersei's cheek. "And he gave me three beautiful daughters."

A light rap came at the same time the door opened. Lexina slipped in, seething but aiming her gaze at Ma'ma. "They are ready."

Her ma'ma smiled at Kersei, then embraced her again. "Know happiness for as long as you can, Ker—" Her mother swallowed, convulsed, looking aside and down as she rushed to the door. "Father and I will wait at the foot of the stairs. Come when you are ready—but do not dally."

Why was she ...? Kersei stared after her, confused. "She was crying," she murmured.

"Have you considered," Lexina snarled, "that Ma'ma is sad you're only binding to the second in line?"

"If you believe that, you know our mother not."

"What do *you* know? Always off with smelly men, riding horses, pretending

to be a son! When I marry Silvanus, you'll know your place then."

"Why would Medora Zarek bind his last son to another Stratios?" She regretted the sharp dagger she'd just thrown in her sister's heart.

Lexina's expression darkened. Then grew panicked. "Why did you do this? I'll hate you forever!" Her sister whirled out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Defeat strangled her. Realizing this would be her last night here, Kersei turned, taking in her room. Her bed. Simple compared to what she would have in Kardia, she imagined, yet lavish compared to the Stratios, who lived in uncomplicated homes within the keep. Should she take something? A memento?

Strange, but there was nothing here she would miss.

The door creaked, and she spun, half expecting to find Father insisting she come. Instead, a pair of smaller eyes peered at her. Wide with awe. "You're going to bind with Darius?" Adara asked.

Arms open to her little sister, Kersei had been wrong. There was something she would miss: her family. When Adara collided with her, she tensed against the pain that slashed her ribs, yet savored the hug. "I will miss you, beloved sister."

"Will you wear this?" Adara produced a small amulet. "So you won't forget me."

Kersei eased back. "Oh, Little Aetos, I could never forget you."

Small hands worked the crystal pendant around her neck. "There. Now you can't forget."

"Thank you." She straightened. "We should go before Father sends machitis in search of us."

As she allowed Adara to lead her from the room, Kersei refused to look back. Refused the grief that stood sentry this night. As she passed the guest wing, a shadow shifted at the far end. She squinted, catching sight of a man slipping into a room. Was that Uncle Rufio? What would he be doing in the guest wing?

"Father is waving," Adara warned.

Shifting her focus, Kersei found Father at the bottom of the stairs, waiting—impatiently—before nearly a hundred Stratios. Two columns lined the path into the great hall.



Had she any idea the beauty she possessed? She could make a prince a pauper with a mere turn of those dark, fathomless eyes. Hair bound atop her head with a riot of dark curls kissed by flowers and pearls, Kersei wore a thick ribbon woven through her near-black strands. Some loose curls covered the Tyrannous star, a brooch that gathered the train now identifying her as a royal. As his.

“On this eve,” his father began, “before the eyes of the Stratios and under the authority and blessing of House Tyrannous, by the power granted me by Vaqar the Ancient, I urge all gathered to join in the uniting of these two great houses and two young lives—that of Tyrannous Darius and Kersei Dragoumis.” His father peered down at them. “Stretch forth your hands.”

Darius lifted their hands, glancing at Kersei. He had not missed her consternation or her rigid posture—was it the pain of her injury? But he had also not missed her determination to see this through. To honor their ways, her father. He had known sense would prevail. That she would understand the necessity. The rightness.

The ceremony began to blur, his focus drifting to the fact that he would have the honor of loosing her hair, a symbol to all that she was bound. And those curls would forevermore bear a tiara.

“Darius.”

He stiffened, realizing he’d not been paying attention. Kersei faced him now, her cheeks flushed as she held her other hand to him. Right. The double blessing. He placed his palm over hers. Standing on either side, their fathers wove a leather cord around their hands, reciting the Prayer of Eleftheria in unison.

Darius watched the strap tighten, a symbolic gesture of the binding lives. He smiled at Kersei, but stilled at her blanched complexion. Uncertainty hit him again.

“For the—”

*Thud!*

Was that his heart?

*Thud!*

Startled, Kersei glanced over her shoulder from the dais and Darius followed her gaze. Across the field of white-and-green-clad aerios, beyond the green-tunicked machitis, stormed a blur of red.

“Halt!” a deep voice, angry and authoritative, rent the air. “The daughter of Nicea cannot be bound to the Kalonican prince!”



In the training yard, Marco ran along the foot-wide wall to where brick ended and sky began. He pitched off it and spread his arms, savoring the weightlessness, the freedom, and the gentle stroke of air against his face. He dove at the ground and tucked into a roll, then came up running toward bars. He vaulted at them. Grabbed steel and used the momentum of his body to carry him up and over. Hopped onto the one-inch bar. Toeing it, he eyed the rope dangling midair. Then threw himself at it.

Hand over hand, he pulled himself up to the wood platform at the top, twisted and let himself fall backward. Sailed out and caught the rope one more time, feeling its burn as he slowed his descent, then dropped onto the sand. He broke into a jog around the rest of the yard.

Nothing invigorated his receptors more than a full-body workout. Despite technology that assisted the Kynigos during hunts, Marco had determined to never allow himself dependency on machines. He'd been mocked for it, but he'd rather be in tune with his body than in tune with a grave.

He snatched his towel from the bench and wiped the sweat and matted hair from his face. Breathing hard, he lifted a corked bottle of water. Took a mouthful, swished, and spit it out. Time for a shower and—

A shout went up near the gate to the yard. Several Brethren hurried out, their scents weighted with surprise. Anger. Concern. Even panic.

*What is this?*

The strangeness of those scents here at the Citadel forced Marco after them, allowing the paved path circling the Fountain of Tears to guide him toward the commotion. Alarm and anger roiled through the Citadel.

Marco broke into a jog again, following the scent, which added voices and shouts as he stepped into the main building. Dozens of hunters huddled around the door to the intelligence wing, where they researched and studied the worlds under their jurisdiction.

“—downworlders took him.”

“—didn't have a chance.”

“The master will have their heads.”

“Let’s drown them and seize honor!”

“Mayhap you need more lectures on the meaning of honor,” Marco said as he edged through the crowd, noticing how hounds, first-years, gave him berth. Though Marco was not a master hunter or even an advocate, it was not for lack of eligibility. He waded to the front, where a glass separated them from a conference room. Inside, Roman, Rico, and Apelles the Curator argued heatedly with Urbain, Kynig’s premier, who shared first rank with Roman and Valerik, the head of Academics.

Not good.

Rico’s gaze struck Marco with fury and outrage.

Seeing Viator, the training yard master, Marco edged closer. “What is it?”

The blond man huffed. “Nobody knows for sure, but there’s word that Dolon is missing.”

Marco started. “Thought he was on a hunt.”

“Never reported in,” Viator said.

A thunking noise snapped their attention to the glassed-in room. Roman rapped against the glass, motioning Marco inside. He sidled past those gathered and entered the din, surprised at the scents in the air.

“Master,” Marco acknowledged as he closed the door. “What has happened?”

Roman huffed, glancing at the curator. “It seems one of our own has gone missing.”

So it was true. “Unusual.” Most people knew to steer clear of hunters.

“Very.”

“Who?”

After exchanging a long look with Apelles, the master said, “Dolon.”

Marco twitched. One of the six master hunters. Gone missing. “How does a master go missing?”

“Exactly,” Roman said, folding his arms over his chest.

The door swung open and in rushed Palinurus, another of the Six and the master hunter in charge of flight instruction.

Apelles stood, looking at his brother. “What did you find?”

“It is a good thing we have our own technology,” Palinurus said. “The primary Symmachian transponder on the shuttle was deactivated or damaged, but our locator is giving off a faint signal.” They’d acquired their entire fleet of small fighters from the Tertian Space Coalition, but had, of course, made modifications.

“And where is his ship?”

Palinurus sighed. “Where suspected—Drosero.”

Eyes sparking, Apelles turned to Urbain and Roman. “We must all agree

on this action.”

What action? What had he missed? Marco skidded a look to his master, not surprised at his firmly fixed scowl.

“I as well do not like it,” Valerik said, “but we must recover the ship. Perhaps that will tell us what happened to Dolon.”

“We all know what happened to him,” Palinurus hissed. “Droserans are not savvy enough to interfere with a shuttle. It must be the Symmachians.”

“That is a leap, Brother,” Roman countered. “We have long been allies with the Coalition. Though not cozy, we have cooperated. Why would they violate a pact? Why create a breach, knowing what our response will be?”

“Symmachians have been aggressive on every other front in Herakles. And though subordinate to the TSC, they have never been quiet about their demand for greater autonomy and power—or a station in Droseran orbit or a colony there,” Apelles said, stabbing the table in front of him. “We *must* confront this.”

“Agreed,” Valerik said.

“Swiftly,” Palinurus added.

“Doing this,” Roman spoke quietly, his thoughts weighted and plain in his hard expression, “takes us down a path for which we may not be prepared.”

“*They* dragged us down this path by taking Dolon.”

“We do not know that for sure.” Roman seemed angry, frustrated, but held his emotions in check. “We must first confirm what happened. Rico will find the jumper and bring it back for analysis. Then we decide which course to pursue.”



## KALONICA, DROSERO

“You have no say here,” Kersei’s father growled to the red-robed iereas.

“We beg your mercy,” the iereas said, “but we have every say.” His gaze slid to Kersei on the dais with Darius and lingered, making her uncomfortable. He turned back to her father. No! To *Ma’ma*. “Nicea, would you have us speak plainly here?”

Her mother started, then went white. “No.” She met Xylander’s stare, then both started for a side door, leading the wake of blood-colored robes out of the great hall.

*What in the plagues was that?* Since when did her parents yield to a holy order? Shifting uncomfortably at the chitter spiraling through the room and



the warmth tingling her forearm, Kersei started forward.

"Stay here," Darius barked as he strode off the dais with his father and brother, who were in step with her parents, as well as several aeries.

Kersei balled her fists. *I am no dog to be commanded!* Though a couple of aeries moved to protect—and restrain—her, she waited, then slipped in the opposite direction. It was her home and she knew the passages. Reaching the main foyer, she slid around the long, oval table arrayed with food and flowers. Grabbing fistfuls of brocade skirts in both hands, she started running, gritting through the throbbing pain of her bruised ribs.

Though she heard voices and her sister's call, Kersei continued.

"Hurry, lad!" a voice—her uncle—ordered.

Not slowing, Kersei diverted toward where she'd heard her uncle's command. Saw him slip past a hidden door. What ...? She slid to a stop and caught the door before it closed. What was Uncle Rufio doing in the secret passages?

"If you want to live, hurry!" his voice carried.

The words, so unreasonable and so unlike him, pulled her into the dank, narrow space. Enveloped in darkness and curiosity, Kersei plowed ahead, having had the black halls memorized since childhood. She rounded the last corner and came up short when only pitch-black swallowed her. Silence clapped her ears.

Hair teasing her chin, she looked over her shoulder. Where had he gone?

A warm breath touched her face. Twitching, she vaguely recalled that this passage led out of the fortress. Why would he go this way? Tentatively, she felt along the cool stone walls. Letting it guide her, she was surprised as the stone grew warmer with each step. Or was that her excitement warring with her fear? Why was it warm?

She paused. Peered back. Mayhap she should return. Father and Ma'ma—the iereas! Why had she let herself get distracted? She had to know what reasons they gave for interrupting—

"Niece, what are you doing here?"

Kersei snapped to the front and found her uncle a few paces away, his face haggard and awash in a red glow. Alarm made her hesitate. "I ..." She lifted her chin. "I could ask the same of you."

He huffed. Grabbed her arm. "Blood and boil!"

Kersei yelped at the stabbing through her side when he wrenched her. "You're hurting me!" But he continued on, unheeding, uncaring, hauling her down the passage that grew redder and hotter. "What is this? What is that light—heat?"

They broke into a wide cave, and she stumbled at the step she'd missed. Righting herself, she looked up. Sucked in a hard breath. There, at the mouth

of the cave, sat a ... a metal contraption. "What is that? Where—"

"Quiet! You can't have your answers and your life, too." He thrust her toward a ramp up into the glowing metal maw. "Get in!"

"What?" Kersei spun to him. "No! These things—we can't. We aren't allowed—we don't. It isn't right. I'm binding with Prince Darius tonight. They'll—"

Uncle Rufio shoved her hard, right at another man, whose face she couldn't see but who wrapped her in beefy arms and lifted her up. Something in her ignited. She kicked and screamed, but the injuries blinded her. Still she fought, using every bit of training and fire as he carried her into the ship.

Writhing, she only hurt herself—hand smacking the hull and foot scraping a sharp corner. He threw her against a strange chair, then all but sat on her as he wrestled straps over her body. Assaulted by the places he touched that no man should, Kersei punched him. He staggered back, even as the ship lifted and the ramp slowly raised.

The ship's scream bled into her own.

A distant call gave her hope. She tried to peer over the lifting door, but it was no good. Had she heard someone? "Help!"

The ship canted and she felt herself sliding off the chair, toward the door. She grabbed whatever she could and held on, terror clawing through her breast. Battled to secure the buckles.

Uncle Rufio's voice came from the front, talking to the other man. How did her uncle even know how to fly one of these things? They weren't allowed on Drosero. He had rejected the technology like the rest of Kalonica.

As they lifted, the front where her uncle sat rose so high, Kersei's panic thrummed. Her limbs trembled and she struggled to hold on as the ship reared like Bastien when she jabbed his flanks.

A small laugh trickled—he found so much pleasure in this. Why?

"Uncle, why are you doing this? Why did you take—"

The ship shot forward, pinning her. Pressing her back so forcefully that she felt as if her spine would pass through the fabric and steel. The fire of her bruised ribs proved excruciating. Her ears went strange, like she was underwater. Her vision danced and the edges blurred gray.

"Watch—"

The ship bucked. Flung sideways. Spun and tumbled. So fast. So very fast. Shuddering. Shaking. Her vision ghosted as the ship flew into a frenetic spin. Vision failing, Kersei felt the tears streaking down her cheeks.

*Boom! Boom! BooOOOOoom!*

Light exploded through the darkness and sucked her into its void.



UNAVAILABLE.

Tigo slapped the desk in frustration. His third attempt to reach Krissos. He roughed a hand over his face and stared at the flex screen. It wasn't unusual for the rear admiral to be busy, but it was remarkable that he hadn't been available on three separate occasions.....

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ronie Kendig** is an award-winning, bestselling author of over twenty-five titles. She grew up an Army brat, and now she and her Army-veteran husband live a short train ride from New York City with their children, VVolt N629 (retired military working dog), and Benning the Stealth Golden. Ronie's degree in psychology has helped her pen novels of intense, raw characters.

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