

# AT SOME POINT

# Table of Contents

<b>AT SOME POINT</b>	<b>- 0 -</b>
<b>PRIMER</b>	<b>- 2 -</b>
<b>BOOK I</b>	<b>- 3 -</b>
CHAPTER 1	- 3 -
point blank range	- 3 -
CHAPTER 2	- 22 -
origins and introductions	- 22 -

# **Primer**

## **KNOWN GALAXY**

Nadiem Federation – (equivalent to League of Nations//United Nations//NATO) – joint assembly of overseers

Yanived Division – (Humanoids)

    Diem

    Violets

    Inconnu

    Peridot

    Barracuda

440B Division – (Other)

Xigxi Division – (Androids)

# Book I

## Chapter 1

### POINT BLANK RANGE

"Have you found out who he is yet?" He nudged her as he took a seat beside the slender figure.

"No, and I ask you to stop inquiring," she replied pertly, crisply turning a page.

"Sorry I asked..." He gazed at her for a moment longer then looked away. "Weather sure is nice today..."

Leigh turned to her intruder. She stared at him for a moment, looked up at the hundred skylights above that filtered through its millions of light rays that danced around the indoor pools scattered in the university's library, then back down to her childhood friend, Tiggy.

"Hey," she said in a softer tone, "I really don't get too much time to myself these days, okay? I'm sorry, it's just...I really need to concentrate on this."

Tiggy hung his head in shame for a sarcastic moment, then looked up and nodded. "Sorry. I'll leave you alone. Will you be going to the fundraising banquet tonight?"

Leigh shook her head. "I don't care about raising capital to support a civilian militia that won't do a thing in those mountains. If it's there, it's there."

"I'm surprised with you!" Tiggy faked an appalled expression. "You care so much about the past but you don't--"

Leigh raised a finger. "None of it! I have some more important matters at hand." And she turned down to her tome.

"Fine. I'll see you tonight." Tiggy stood up and trotted off, his shirttails spinning lazily behind him.

Leigh looked at him go from the corner of her eye until he disappeared behind the double doorway. She frowned for a moment, then shook her head and returned to her book.

--

"Come on Leigh," a muffled voice called through the thick door, followed by a steady pounding.

"Not now," Leigh answered. The unwanted guest barged in, her formal gown swishing a pearlescent streak across the glistening hard floor. The rising moon wafted in through the skylights, setting the polished floor ablaze.

"I said not now, Reise," Leigh grumbled, her head leaning into a tome.

Riese huffed and stopped. "It's required, Leigh," her hands on her hips.

"What are they going to do about it?"

The intruder scowled when she figured out the silent answer and marched back out of the room. At least she was courteous enough to close the door behind her.

Charity banquet; it may have been a requirement preceding the Harvest Break, but she would deal with her professors after the two weeks. She had a plan, an agenda, a fire that would keep devouring her concentration, her vitality, a fire that would need to be quenched lest it consume her life force. She had been calculating this for the past four years of her life. The moment she walked through the doors of the most extensive library of the highest-esteemed university of the most cultured of cities, Bienfang, she had been researching and probing for any clue, a sign, a lead for the solution. At last, the past three weeks had been the most resourceful and she would waste no time. One last clue and her bags were already packed. Her so-called friends were upset at the neglect, but Leigh had no friends. If she wasn't happy, she was sure no one else was, acquaintance or not. Ignorance was no explanation for her actions. Despite the ones who knew her disdained her attitudes and expressions, needless to say, she was indeed one of the most gifted students in the history or the university. The intelligence and senses radiated from her eyes; the foolish desired it would exude into their persona, the wise knew the danger and limited their exposure and interaction with her. Leigh was impervious and immovable. She closed her book slowly. Her inquisition was complete and it was unnecessary to jump to conclusions yet. She would depart tomorrow, alone. A partner would only hinder her mission – and they would never understand. Their lack of passion would invade the drive. Simply said, it would be an unnecessary intrusion.

Leigh folded her hands and spun around to survey her university residency. She stood up and made toward the universal pathway to arrange her transportation. Unlike most of the students attending alongside her, she had no parents to backup any extra costs and fees for recreational activities outside the university's code. No matter, her deceased guardians had left with her a slip; Leigh's inheritance far exceeded the imaginations of any of her peers. Of course, Leigh was already aware of the tricks and leeways of the system; Leigh wasn't a walking textbook for civics, and neither was she ready to start. There was no interest or investment spent toward her government. As long as they kept away from her, she could care less. Her interests were elsewhere. The government had no knowledge of her assets – just the way she wanted it. The plans for tomorrow were complete, and she would rest peacefully tonight.

--

The light rays were barely above the horizon when Leigh clicked her door closed and secured it. The halls were empty and silent; everyone had either gone their ways immediately after the banquet or had quaffed too much and was soundly asleep in their rooms. Leigh shook her head: "So immature." She had been here for four years and none of her peers had grown up. No matter, Leigh considered none her friends – they were too intimidated, she reminded herself. What is a friend? Leigh wondered, but immediately shoved her repressed thoughts back into the recesses of her mind. This was not a time of reminiscing and self-hatred. She was at the elevator in moments down the hall and the transport tube arrived instantly; and just as instantly, as soon as she gave the signal, she was on the main foyer floor. She glided around the corner and strode down the vaulted corridor. She was dressed in her slacks, her city's colors of blue and green the way she liked them: a deep aquamarine blue and misty turquoise green. She wore a light jacket – they said it could get a little cold at night in the Lacus Mountains. Her backpack slung casually over one shoulder, she briskly swished through the glass doors – the door attendant was nowhere to be found. Well it wasn't her business. The light was just beginning to send its golden streaks spilling over the roves, making the brick and stone city look made up deep gold and silver. The air was crisp and cool and she paused to inhale deeply.

"Leigh!"

Her brow immediately furrowed by the interruption. She looked down and saw the new student of this season galloping up the pearl stairs. Gaij.

"Leigh! I heard you were going away! I want to come with you!"

Now Leigh's entire face frowned. "Who told you that?" Lying was not part of Leigh's standards.

"Tiggy did, he was telling everyone." Gaij stood quite a bit taller than Leigh. Leigh was smaller for her race, something that had always bothered her. There was something awry in her genetics, and the answer to this dilemma lie in her biological parents; the one problem that relentlessly occupied her mind. Leigh peered up at Gaij.

"Well, that's nice. Listen, you're from Jerusalem, right?"

"Yes," Gaij looked at her oddly.

"You've been through the Lacus Mountains?"

"I...I took the A-Transport."

Leigh harrumphed. It wasn't the answer she was looking for. "Well that's where I'm going." Gaij was silent. Leigh continued. "I don't know you, and you don't know me. Why do you want to come with me?"

Gaij's countenance fell. "It's...Gillian, he...he...I...I can't take it back," Gaij's clear green eyes closed and the tears come pouring out. She collapsed to her knees and started bawling.

Relationships, Leigh rolled her eyes. Something she never understood about the human race. She didn't want the hassle, and this, this, anguish, that lay at her feet. What is this? What makes one feel that way? Whatever it was, she was glad she was never in such a predicament as that. "Get up," Leigh commanded. She didn't know this girl, but her human nature couldn't suppress the pity. Gaij didn't stand up. "Gaij," Leigh exhaled. The city was as gold as it would get now. "I can't keep loitering here. Calm down." She could already feel the regret coming. "Pack your essentials; I'm not waiting for you. I'm going to the 1671 pier." Gaij was still crumpled and shrouded in tears as Leigh strode past her and quickly walked down the avenue.

--

It had been too long; her transporter was more impatient than she was and the sun had just appeared above the towering skyline of Bienfang. Even from here, she marveled at the view. Her university glistened brightly above most of them. Her pity was coming to a close now. She was ready to go, it wasn't like her to stick around and wait for a straggler. Gaij was in her advanced civilizations group but a hi and good-bye was all that had ever been exchanged between them. Did everyone talk about her that much? They'd better mind their own business, that's what they should do. And who was Gillian? No matter, she barely knew anyone anyway. It was none of her concern.

"Okay, b-man," Leigh exclaimed. "I'm ready," She turned and walked down the plank to the jet propelled compact b-train. I knew it, Leigh groaned internally.

"Leigh! I'm ready! Wait!" Gaij came bounding down the pier steps and stopped, huffing as her echoes faded away. "I'm sorry I'm late," she apologized. Her eyes were glazed over and red, ready to burst again.

"In," Leigh growled.

Gaij listlessly teetered over the plank and plopped down; the b-mail was ready in a split second and took off. Leigh sighed, her journey was finally beginning. With an intruder.

She frowned and glanced at Gaij. She was staring off into the distance with Bienfang slowly disappearing into the early morn mist and fog. Leigh looked away. Let her drown in her misery. She folded her hands and concentrated on her operation. They would have to pass through the Flumen Plains before reaching their

destination – and her b-man, as well as any other b-man, refused to take her into the Lacus Mountains because of recent rumors. Leigh was frustrated, as it would delay her by a day.

“So why are we going to the Lacus Mountains?” Gaij suddenly turned to her. Good, she wasn’t crying.

“I’m looking for my father,” Leigh replied pertly.

“What happened?”

“I never met him.”

Gaij puckered, confused. “Oh, you’re an orphan?”

“I believe so, that’s what they told me. But I knew they were ignorant. I can feel him.”

“What about your mother?”

“I don’t know her either.”

“Oh...I never had a mother...but wait, no one lives in the Lacus Mountains.”

“Yes, I know,” she better not mention the rumors, Leigh thought as her nostrils flared. “Don’t question my motives and decisions; I don’t even know why you’re here.”

Gaij looked down at her feet, not even feeling the breeze that blew a clump of hair into her forlorn expression. “My...boyfriend dumped me...he’s the one! I know it! But...there’re some things that he won’t forgive me for...oh, I love him so, Leigh, he’s my everything!”

Leigh looked at her distastefully. “Then why are you here? Go bother him, not me.”

“Because I can’t! I know he’s...that he’s...” She took a deep breath. “I know he’s going to be looking for someone else, and I can’t take it, I can’t, I can’t-“

“Quit saying that,” Leigh said sharply.

“I’m sorry...I just...wanted to run away.” She started weeping uncontrollably.

Leigh shook her head. What a miserable pile of flesh, I’m so glad I don’t have to deal with such trivial topics and fixations. She lightened up for a moment as she looked at the tormented Gaij on the floor of the boat. B-man hadn’t heard a word of their conversation, as he was heated enough that the earliest hours of the festivals had to be spent dancing around a dangerous and forbidden precinct. But she had given him quite a tip. Leigh scrutinized Gaij – and decided it better to let this sensitive girl be. Now was not the time to reprimand. But her brutality got the best of her.

“So screw him,” she said coldly.

Gaij whirled up to look at her. “I can’t, I told you! He’s the one!”

Leigh shook her head. “I give up, whatever. Listen to me, Gaij. I’m going to set some ground rules for you; I wasn’t expecting anyone to come along, so one: no talking unless I allow it. Second, do what I do unless I say otherwise. Third, keep your mouth shut. At all times.”

Gaij looked at her again, a bewildered scowl growing. “How...cruel of you!”

Leigh smiled sweetly. “I will accept your compliments later, Miss Gaij.”

“Say,” Gaij started. “We’re going to the *Lacus* Mountains? Isn’t that where all the rumors are? About monsters?”

“I said keep your mouth shut!”

Now the b-man took a quick glance to see what was going on behind his back. He rolled his eyes when he saw the short nerd-looking girl trying to terrorize the anorexic pity-me chick. He sighed and pulled out a smoke; it would be another hour before they reached their destination. He might as well enjoy the easy sailing while he still had the chance.

Gaij glared and tightened her face, her face still glistening with tearstains but taunting nonetheless. “Monsters. I heard there are monster in the Lacus Mountains. Why are we going there? I think you’re making a mistake, Leigh.”

“Don’t question me, wench!” Leigh stood up and knocked Gaij back. “Then don’t come with me! End of the story!” She promptly sat back down and turned her head, fuming. Gaij continued to muffle on and whine but she heard none of it.

The b-man rolled his eyes some more and puffed away. They had sailed approximately thirty kilometers out of Bienfang’s city limits. Little did they know that through the fog, a pair of golden eyes followed their expedition.

--

She was the heir to her father’s seat. Albeit her position in the Chamber of Agents was negligible, the people adored her. The next election would hold an extremely excessive progression for her, and it was nothing she didn’t take with pride. She chose this position among all others to ease her free spirit. To remain retained inside the marble palaces and halls was as torturous as a beheading. Tonight, she would ride to new places; all she had to do was wait patiently for the mundane activities to pass by.

“Spokesman Ischmen, Aratheah. Please proceed.”

She rapidly flung her wandering thoughts aside and stood up. “Tonight, I proceed to the capital city of Bienfang, of the Children of the Prophets.” She scanned the semi-circular vertical room that housed twenty-five chambers, in every other one was seated a representative for every office. All eyes rested on her. “There has been

reported of strange activities occurring in and around the Lacus Mountains. So far, to the public, they have been affixed as rumors; however, our reports have shown otherwise. You all know of the so-called ancient ways – the Fidem Logos speaks of it. According to the information we have gathered,” she glanced at her executive, Agent Kolixis, for affirmation, and continued: “a Synhedra, an assembly destroyed and banded during the Bellicose Era and thus, never seen again, has been alleged by a few sources. This Synhedra has been said to be terrorizing the locale, creating so-called ‘monsters’ in the area. I go to Bienfang to assist their military forces in sweeping the precincts said to have sighted these ‘monsters’. If it is by your ballots, I request a small portion of our standing militia, more specifically, the mercenaries, to accompany me in this short reconnaissance mission. Thank you.”

Mumbles and grumbles echoed around the court. Aratheah looked down at her lap and nervously twisted her fingers. Despite her excitement of finally leaving this compound, her situation was nothing to be thrilled about. If she didn’t obtain a few mercenaries as Agent Kolixis had advised, she was almost certain that his warnings would hold true. Although her sect, the Sticky Children, were on common speaking terms and relations with the Children of the Prophets, there was no doubt of their dissimilarities and silent odium. She would be accompanying military forces, but forces of the other side nevertheless. If they encountered danger, the odds of the military forces of the Children of the Prophets protecting her were particularly slim. Her concerns would be lessened if her own special forces of mercenaries would escort her.

“The poor girl,” Aratheah didn’t look up but eavesdropped on the next office beside her. “She’s got to do all the dirty work.” “Mercenaries? Is she crazy?” Another voice whispered. “Why waste the time and money? Don’t we have other things to do?”

“I believe,” a voice thundered through the chamber before the mumblings became too loud. “That funding this sort of thing is unnecessary.” Aratheah looked up to observe the impending argument. It was one of the many arguments that would arise today, like every day.

“Objection!” The Agent of Public Affairs loomed over his office. “Will you say that this is none of our concern? Nonsense! Spokesman Ischmen, Aratheah! What sources claim these reports?”

“Sir, the Agent of Armed Forces from Jerusalem sent us these reports. They requested our Chamber to aid them. They only wish to overpower strange forces before they become imperative, as well as before it could become a major concern.” Aratheah dumbly sat down, stoic. It was rare she had to speak in the Chamber, but when she did, a strange feeling always overtook her.

The speakers sat down again, and the crowd began murmuring again.

“Aratheah,” a voice buzzed into her earpiece. It was her executive, Kolixis. “Well done. I’m not sure how compassionate this Chamber is, but you have my guarantee that if you do not receive proper protection, I myself will send you my personal guards to look after your well-being.”

“Thank you, sir,” Aratheah said gratefully. That was considerate, but nothing compared to the brute force of the mercenaries.

“Any further misgivings?” The Speaker of the Hall announced.

The Chamber was soundless.

Aratheah looked up as her father monotonously repeated his daily rant: “All those in favor, set your marker.” He waited a moment. “All those in opposition, set your marker.” He waited another moment more as the Agents placed their private ballots from their offices into the central machine. The results were sent instantaneously to the Herald of the Sticky Children. “Five ayes, eight nays.” For a moment, Herald Ischmen appeared sorrowful, but at a second glance, the expression was gone. He set his papers down. “The Chamber will have a moment’s recess.”

Aratheah was flustered, but accepted her fate without sentiment. Such were the ways of the Chamber of Agents. The door to her office buzzed and opened without consent. “Father!” Aratheah was surprised to see him here so soon.

“Aratheah,” his voice was not as intimidating in person as it was on the bass-heavy microphone system. “You know your mother is sick. I request of you to visit her before you leave tonight. I hope Agent Kolixis is assisting you with any quandaries?”

“Yes...Father,” Aratheah looked away. She despised both of them.

“The crowd would help you anytime else. Your citizens live in complete hatred of the unknown, and you know that.” He put a hand on her shoulder as she tried not to wince away. “Good luck, and get back safe.”

“Yes, Father.” Aratheah resisted his gaze and looked away. Without another word, he turned and left her office, the door hissing closed behind him. “Kolixis is not my father!” She stated, staring at the door. She seethed and her hands turned into shuddering fists. “You are not my father!” As soon as she left the hall, she knew she would find herself weeping at her mother’s bedside, a place her father barely attended, if even for a moment. Ever since her mother contracted that fatal illness, her father, the Herald of the city of Sanctum and all of the Sticky Children, turned ever more cold, detached, impassive, and angry. Every night, Aratheah would lay beside her mother and weep, for Lady Ischmen was the only one who understood, who took care of her and most of all, loved her for all she was worth. She said that the reason why her father was cold was because he held such a stressful position in such a profession as anyone could have. But Aratheah knew it wasn’t true, especially once she was inside the same building and room as his job entailed. But long ago, Aratheah had denounced her father.

Although she was doomed with his name, she accepted it as her personal fate for the ages. But the ages were so long...

The day passed on uneventfully, and by noon, the Hall was closed and everyone retired to finish incomplete business in their personal bureaus. Aratheah sat stiffly in the chair facing Kolixis' desk. Her encounter with her father had set everything off.

"Don't be miserable," Kolixis comforted, unaware of Aratheah's actual turmoil. "My guards are equipped with excellent arms. You have nothing to fear."

"I appreciate everything you're doing for me, sir," Aratheah replied out of courtesy. She sighed.

Kolixis handed her a few documents and scripts, informing her of what to expect, who to speak to, where to go, et cetera. "You may leave for the day. Your a-trans will depart port 22 at XX hundred hours, arriving in Bienfang XXI hundred hours. It's a short trip; but go straight to bed Aratheah. You'll be departing the following day – tomorrow – and be gone for a while. I won't be seeing you till the moon's quarter is complete," he said grimly.

"I will be alright," she assured.

"Oh, the guard's names – I'm sending Margeis and Regaken to escort you. They will not present a problem so long as you introduce them as your own personal bodyguards. The Children of the Prophets, I know, will not protest."

"Thank you," Aratheah stood up, impatient to leave the hall, hoping the misery would be left behind, too. "I will report to you when I arrive, as well as when I depart tomorrow." Procedures, procedures, Aratheah groaned to herself as she walked out of Kolixis' office. Next time, it's a vacation I'm taking.

--

It was once one of the most ornately decorated rooms of the palace, but now the shades were drawn and maintenance had been neglected. A few times, Aratheah had even offered to clean up the place, but her mother's caretaker would have none of it, claiming that the dust would put a strain on Lady Ischmen's lungs. Not even the most professional of doctors could give an estimation of how much longer she had, as well as how she even contracted the terminal illness. She had been slowly deteriorating for the past fourteen months. Aratheah was, to say the least, disgusted in ever sense. Now she quietly trod in; a sickish orange hue from the drawn curtains stained over everything and the air was as still as a dull drum. She kneeled beside the bed, offered a prayer, then took her mother's hand into hers. The steady rise and fall of her chest was the only sign of life that exuded her.

"Mother, I'm going away for a few days."

Lady Ischmen didn't move a muscle.

"Mother..." Aratheah lowered her head onto the bed and blankly stared into nothing. A tear slowly spilled down her smooth complexion, but nothing else gave away the pain in her heart. Her mother was already dead to her ever since the surgery: a helpless victim in the shortcomings of mankind. Technology may have taken an enormous leap, but the first inhabitants of this planet arrived with barely a grasp of reality. Perhaps the Fanumni may have been the first populous; but the rulers in this Age of Theories would never admit to that. Their extreme traditionalist mindsets could not accept such, and would go by all means to destroy any evidence in support of that theory. But such was the Age of Theories; a generation persisting throughout the past three hundred years. Advancements and ideas multiplied by the day, but always remained along convention; it was as if the people were too comfortable now, than to taking on new ideas despite the risks. Aratheah was distressed of all the politics, but deemed being involved was the only means to beginning a revolution in ideology. She didn't want to change the world, but rather introduce efficiency, an elimination of old and tedious methods, a design meant for this planet. They were fast approaching the tenths century, fifth generation; yet, all was the same as existed from the commencement of the eras. There were many cures, and all was game to carry out. And so Aratheah lay beside her mother in thought, alone, until the light settled below their horizon and the stars and swirling sea of asteroids glowed in the night sky.

--

Because Sanctum rested in the sky, it glowed from the light's reflection from below. Like spotlights, the lux lucis of old create mirrors of a perfect slant to make the metropolis Sanctum float, defy gravity, and appear such a spectacle to be observed in the dark hours.

Aratheah was blind to this. She had never departed the city of Sanctum; all she knew was at night, the sky above her was dark and churning, while the outer limits of the city was surrounded on all side by heavenly beams of light. A single divot in the wall of light marked the only entrance and exit of Sanctum.

To say in the least, Aratheah was thrilled to finally leave the city of Sanctum; however, the weight of the sorrow from seeing her mother in such a state dampened her mood extensively. She arrived at her destination and didn't utter a thank-you or goodbye to the palace chauffeur and quickly grabbed her carrying bag before he even had a chance to politely open his door. He sped off as Aratheah absentmindedly gazed at the shimmering rays. She shivered despite her warm black overcoat that enveloped her into a stuffed snowball. The two appointed

escorts stood patiently beside the A-train in similar fashion to Sanctum's Army – they were probably the rejects. Aratheah had no interest in them. The trip's outcome would be the same with or without them. They saluted her as she approached them.

"A good evening, Princess Ischmen," they exclaimed in unison.

Aratheah nodded irritably and entered the cabin of the Sanctum mission A-train. Heads would turn and wonder tonight as they saw this special vehicle disappear into the horizon. She sighed when the agents seated themselves and spoke into their voice devices as if they were on a top secret mission. Princess Ischmen, Aratheah mused, a sneer on her face as she turned to look out her window. This planet was ruled by a meritocracy – rule by the wise – not by family blood. Well, that's what was established at the start of the Age of Theories in 604; but as of late, that didn't seem quite so.

The Sanctum populous was too lenient to acknowledge such a discrepancy. While everyone else had the opportunity to take a seat in the Chamber of Agent for a term or two, Sanctum's Chamber had been ruled by the Ischmens for the past four centuries. Which was quite alright. Everything was working out quite well: she came from a very reputable family, and her citizens unanimously adored her. Centuries would pass though before she ever saw the highest seat in the city of Sanctum, unless by her father's will, he stepped down early – or in the case of her grandfather, was assassinated. It was a gloomy day for all of the metropolis when the beloved Herald was killed by angry underground rebel factions. Aratheah hadn't been too close to him but showed distress from the public's sake.

Her people's culture was one of detachment and individuality. Religion was not strictly kept to like the Children of the Prophets; the Sticky Children were much more liberal in thoughts and deeds. She would be the first Lady Herald, and under no circumstances was this considered a controversy. But surely, the Children of the Prophets held them in contempt for this; such actions by the Sticky Children were scoffed at, labeled as ignorant and foolish. At the same time, the Sticky Children held the Children of the Prophets in low regards, making jest of their trendy ways, traditional customs, and the methods of management over their citizens; the Sticky Children were convinced that their populous either lived in denial or angry acceptance. What a ridiculous way to go on about life! The Children of the Prophets were the ignorant fools, claimed the Sticky Children, for the Children of the Prophets would accept anyone into their sect, while the Sticky Children did not tolerate converts. Once a fool, always a fool. The two sects had had countless skirmishes, broken treaties, overlooked pacts, guerilla warfare, infiltrating spies, and battles throughout the past nine centuries, and there was no perceivable end in sight. No one grew tired of their disagreements, and either were too proud to admit their faults. Neither did they see the future as bleak; arguments and resentment was a way of life, just the same as paying homage to the gods or awakening when the day became bright. And so, Aratheah took her trespassing into her foe's territory in stride.

After a few moments passed, they arrived at the A-train harbor toward the outskirts of the city. Before landing, Aratheah greedily observed the truly marvelous and intricate architecture of the city. Bienfang wasn't the capital of the Children of the Prophets, but it was sprawling and magnificent nonetheless. This was the metropolis of knowledge, housing the most intelligent of individuals. Bienfang contained the apex of universities and even allowed the Sticky Children's students to attend during the semesters.

Bienfang's ancient lux lucis and their element earth had created an impenetrable foundation holding the city firmly on the raging waters of the Lacus River. The city stood almost teetering over the edge of their Stratum. The Lacus River dashed off the rocks into the atmosphere; and on these falls, Bienfang sprouted up like a fortress. It had grown significantly over the past three centuries and the city had now spread out into the rocky soil surrounding the rapids. The docks fanned out from the western end of the main section of the city; it was in the night hours and importing and exporting ships had ceased for the night. It was known that at night, the Lacus Mountains that divided Bienfang from its capitol city, Jerusalem, were feral and risky, especially now because of the recent rumors of threatening monsters lurking in them. Even the Flumen Plains, where few resided since the beginning of time, were under a watchful eye.

Before descending to the horizon, Aratheah stared curiously at the lone light of a small B-train drifting into port. That was an odd sight to see – the guards would certainly have an investigation on their hands tonight.

"Ma'am," one of her bodyguards interrupted her thoughts.

Aratheah turned her head.

"The people here may not welcome you warmly. I advise that you stay near us to prevent any disturbance."

"I believe I can manage myself," Aratheah retorted pertly.

"As you wish, madam, but our orders are austere."

The ship slowly hovered onto the designated landing pad and smoothly landed, the steam hissing in spurts as the engines cooled down. The door slid open and a warm gust of air rushed into the cabin. Aratheah wasn't sure if it was the heat from the a-train, but then realized it was actually the natural air of this region. If it was this warm on the second stratum, how warm could the fourth stratum be! Her bodyguards grudgingly fell in step behind her as she resolutely marched into the port. Not many graced the port with their presence as it was too late for any flights. The three outsiders quickly made their way outside where a transport waited for them.

Their lodge was not far and by the time they arrived, Aratheah was ready to strip off her heavy coat. Rather, she gracefully waited until she was in her room and her bodyguards had secured her in confidence.

For the whole of the ride, her jaw hung limp and her eyes were wide. She knew her home, Sanctum, was one of the most cleanest and striking cities on this planet, but Bienfang was nothing like she had ever imagined. The pictures she had seen of it did it no justice; the buildings were gargantuan. They hadn't traveled far – they weren't even on the main isle that housed all the government buildings and renowned and towering universities. She couldn't imagine how ornate it must be. Even from her window that overlooked the side scape of the isle, she could distinguish the antique architecture and designs.

Aratheah gently pushed the window pane open – they had the waterfront lodge – and the roar of the rapids hundreds of meters below thundered and swirled in the darkness. The blend of technology and the ancient arts astounded and intrigued her inner senses. She disappointedly closed the windows as she recalled that she had to call the agent and most likely would be retiring afterwards. She sighed and made for the universal pathway.

---

They had been walking for hours and kilometers before it was dark enough for Leigh. It had been dark enough for Gaij as soon as the b-man had dropped them off. A few independent farmers resided in the Flumen Plains, but so far they had not seen a single sign of civilization. Perhaps it was because they were within a days walk from the rural Lacus Mountains. Like the sick and twisted horns of the Orbis Sea's leviathan, they arose in the distance. Leigh didn't think them threatening and scolded Gaij likewise. After an hour, Gaij had given up and accepted her fate. She said that it were better to die than live on without Gillian by her side.

"You lovesick fool," Leigh grumbled. Before the tearful girl could angrily hurl something back at her, Leigh went on. "We'll stop here for tonight."

Gaij scowled and decided to remain silent. They didn't have any sort of tent to speak, but no bother. It never precipitated on the second stratum except over the Orbis Sea at midnight.

"It's creepy over here, Leigh," Gaij finally groaned after they had set up a campsite.

"Deal with it," Leigh knew it'd get worse – not that she was frightened – but refrained from enlightening Gaij. Gaij sighed sorrowfully and Leigh looked at her disdainfully. "Hey you. You're lucky you're even here. Now lay off this depressed attitude or I'll make you walk all the way back to your pathetic dormitory alone. Now shut up or speak like any normal human being."

Gaij whimpered and without a word, slumped over and turned her back.

Good, Leigh sighed. She kindled the fire and took note of her surroundings. It was pitch black despite the swirling sea of clouds and stars above her, and the only thing in sight was the mountains to the west. Somehow, somewhere, her father was in there; she didn't even need a tome to prove it to herself here, she could feel his entity. Somewhere in those mountains. The sparks of the fire flew off in crazy twirls as a light breeze swept through. She wasn't tired yet. The moons were almost in place to signify midnight; but Leigh was a night animal with endless amounts of energy. She hardly slept since her younger days and barely nourished herself; and people still credited her as being one of the sharpest individuals they'd ever met. And thus, her keen senses gave away something.

Leigh didn't flinch or pause in her breath but immediately sensed someone staring at her. The breeze settled and she casually looked up into the sky. Her defiance got her better and she immediately glared at the imperfection in the midnight blue not too far away. In fact, it was only about ten meters above the ground. Two yellow eyes camouflaged against the sky; an invisible creature sat still in midair. She had never seen anything like it. It blinked at her again, then its silhouette shifted. Wings unfurled and the eyes disappeared. An owl, Leigh gazed at it as the crafty creature indifferently glided away in the direction of the mountains.

She looked till the owl completely vanished and made a mental note of its direction, then allowed perplexion to settle in. In all of physic's facts could such a creature sit in midair without resting on something. There wasn't a single tree for kilometers around. The owl had sat on nothing.

"Kooky," Leigh breathed. A supposed monster? She wondered. Not an ounce of fear had slipped through her mind. Refreshing her mental photograph of where the owl flew once more, she laid down and stared at the grass.

---

Dawn brought with her her usual spectacular morn. The orange and white hue blazed over the horizon, awakening everything in its path. Leigh was already up and had bundled everything up by the time Gaij stretched and opened her eyes. Her eyes were swollen but she appeared indifferent and didn't say a word as she mutely started packing.

Good, Leigh said to herself. Since Gaij didn't work as quickly as she'd have liked, she shrugged and started for the mountains by herself, the image of that owl still branded into her mind. She had barely slept the night past. The owl hadn't reappeared once; Leigh was determined that the owl was an omen, a sign, an entity of her father's.

"Do you know where we're going?" Gaij said when she caught up.

"Yes," Leigh retorted.

"Where?"

"We're following an owl."

"An owl?"

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Um...actually, yeah, I do; an owl? What's an owl have to do with anything?" Gaij began chuckling to herself but was cut short by Leigh's sharp answer.

"Don't ramble about things you don't know about. There are many, many things, Gaij, which you are not aware of."

"Like what?" Gaij trotted up beside her and glowered down, insulted.

Leigh mechanically turned her head and coolly looked at her roadside companion. "Many things."

"Well tell me," Gaij glanced at the mountains. "We have a lot of time, come on."

Leigh smiled, appreciative of the inquisitive mind, but shook her head. "You wouldn't understand me."

Gaij sighed angrily. "Are you talking about lux lucis and all those ancient arts and all? You believe that stuff?"

"It exists today, correct?"

"...correct," Gaij said, her mind not quite as quick as Leigh's.

"Thus, you cannot say it does not exist."

"Um, hello! What century are we in? We're smarter than that!"

"So you ignorant fools believe," Leigh said quietly.

"Oh please; can you know lux lucis? Even if it was real, no one knows it because everything and everyone associated with those enigmas are long gone. You're the one that's ignorant."

Leigh just shook her head. "I may not have competent knowledge of lux lucis, but I am learned in the way of the Fidem Logos."

"You call yourself of the Children of the Prophets? We are not an oblivious people!"

Leigh snickered slightly for a moment; Gaij never spoke like this in the hall, and she was glad for the argument. It would make the morning go by faster. She knew they'd reach the foot of the Lacus Mountains by the time the light reached its peak. "Yes, of course, we do not live in oblivion; however, I do believe there is a point in every individual which divides reality from ignorance. I believe that the Children of the Prophets live in reality and deny ignorance, when, in fact, their reality is created from ignorance."

"I don't follow...so you're mocking your own people! You *are* of the Children of the Prophets, right?"

"Of course."

"You certainly don't speak like one," Gaij huffed.

"It is not what I say that determines myself as my kind."

"What?" Gaij was incredulous.

"Ah!" Leigh looked at Gaij as if she had caught her in a lie. "Do you note the ignorance in your inflection? I advise that you reconsider your opinions."

"I don't have opinions, I have facts," Gaij bantered.

"Good reply," Leigh smiled. "Yet, you fail to realize that the facts are actually tainted by our sects."

Gaij looked at her in confusion.

"Allow me. At the beginning of the Age of Theories until today, the eras afore are purely words passed down from the generations. During the Bellicose Era, the military powers destroyed written records, as well as banished and annihilated historians and relics alike. This and everything relevant to lux lucis, because they couldn't injure their pride by knowing that something held power over them. Now because of this inane purgery of documents, perceptions were built upon the times rather than the mistakes and solutions from the past. I feel that this preventable obliteration of information has scarred everyone into a kind of ignorance of information."

"Yes, everyone despises the Bellicose Era; but that's nobody's fault," Gaij interceded.

"Correct!" Leigh smirked. "However, rather than embracing what we had, we further purged those documents and relics in a complete act of arrogance. Our new leaders are too good and wise to learn the ways of old."

"You mean lux lucis?"

"Well," Leigh shrugged innocently, "it certainly could include lux lucis."

"Lux lucis didn't do anything for anyone except create power struggles."

"That is the fault of their users. Other uses of lux lucis can be implemented. We only hear of the power struggles because all the good was taken for granted."

"How do you know?" Gaij interrupted.

"Silence, fool." Leigh growled and stared at Gaij until she shrank back a few steps. "What holds Bienfang above those raging waters? How can Jerusalem possibly not implode from the water pressure? Or even, how does the city of Sanctum possibly stand midair? Lux lucis is not obsolete, it never was. It is the blood of this world. We may not be expanding upon them now, but it's still here."

Gaij was quiet.

Leigh smiled as her point was made.

"Well I don't think it'd be a good idea to bring it back."

"I agree with you strongly on that," Leigh mused aloud. "The leaders of today, as well as the system, are asking for a tyranny." She was quiet for a moment but spoke up as soon as her thoughts came together. "Gaij? Have you read the Fidem Logos?"

"Not really; well I did but I wasn't paying attention."

"Fool. Then I supposed you don't know of the prophecy of the Xdeuxi?"

"Never heard of it."

"Also known as the 'elected ones'. Three individuals, supposedly. No one knows who they are or when this will come to pass, but according to the second chapter in the twentieth verse, they speak of a savior with two followers who will control this world."

"Sounds stupid to me," Gaij was getting distracted, and Leigh was furious.

"Ahem."

"Yeah?"

"Stop thinking about your lost love," Leigh said harshly.

"Hey, don't tell me what to think! Who do you think you are? You think you're one of those Xdeuxi people or something?"

"I never said such a thing."

"Well you're not! Quit acting like you're some knowledge god or something. Yeah, so I'm ignorant! So what, I'm happy with who I am."

Leigh shook her head. "Fine," she raised her eyebrows and looked away. Would she ever find someone to have a pleasant argument with? A few moments passed in silence. Leigh noticed that the ground they tread on was becoming rough and a few rocks scattered here and there.

Gaij sighed. "I'm sorry. Go on, Leigh, I don't mean to ruin your um...your speech. I think you've wanted to get it out of your system for a while."

Leigh pursed her lips. "I'm writing a manuscript. So you believe there is no need for the Xdeuxi?"

"Of course not. Everything's fine the way it is."

"Hmph. You and the hundreds of thousands of majority."

"Say," Gaij broke her off, "you're not one of those cult people, are you?"

"No. I don't take part in absurdities and needless rebellions."

"What's your point?"

Leigh screwed up her face and glared in loathe of Gaij's smugness. "I don't have a solution."

Gaij looked back at Leigh but in less contempt. She shrugged. "What's your manuscript about?"

"It's a compilation of all that is known of lux lucis and the eras before the Age of Theories."

"Hm...maybe I'll read it someday. If it gets published."

Leigh grinned slightly. "You're beginning to understand."

---

"We're here," Leigh quietly stated, coming to a stop in her tracks. Having been in regretful thought for the past hour, Gaij wistfully looked up. They stood at the foot of a vast forest that crept up the mountains ahead of them. The mountains stood tall and forbidding, taunting someone to enter in blind oblivion to its devious nature it kept locked inside. Not a creature was in sight for miles; no birds fluttered to and fro among the fauna except for a solitary vulture that sat on a branch bordering its territory. It peered curiously at the strangers. It had been long since it had seen something of that kind wander into this region. It sat, patiently, waiting, watching their thoughts.

"So um...do you have a map or anything?" Gaij asked, raising an eyebrow to her leader. "I don't see your owl anywhere."

"Not any of substance." Leigh pulled out a small book from her pack and leafed through till she found her source. "I guess we'll just go on in, there's not much else we can do."

Gaij huffed and started after Leigh. "Some guide you are," she muttered. "Whatever we're looking for, it better be good. Just out of curiosity, Leigh, what makes you want to follow an owl?"

"It's not normal," Leigh said pertly, ignoring her companion as she carefully picked her way through the brambles that littered the edge of the woods. She didn't want to ruin her dress – not like she was trying to impress anyone, but if by any chance she did run into a passerby, they wouldn't gleam at her appearance.

"Normal? And how, exactly," Gaij hopped and skipped over the thorns, still managing to drag along the entire brush in her trail, "is the owl not normal? Does it have three eyes or something?"

"Wrong." They made it through to the cool shade of the trees and Leigh squinted at the simpleton. "It's magical. It defied gravity. And it was watching us."

Gaij shuddered. "Watching us? Yeah...you're making this stuff up."

"Why would I do something like that?" She started walking west, uphill.

"And you know where this owl lives, too, right?"

"Stop your childish behavior," Leigh said sharply, walking faster to prove her point.

"Sheesh, sorry. I just think this whole thing is a little ridiculous. I thought you were looking for your father anyway. Any ideas on how to find him?"

"We ask the first person we see."

"But no one lives here!" Gaij wailed. "Not for kilometers all around! You're crazy!"

"Go home," Leigh grumbled, trodding her way up the first mountain, which was really more a large hill than a true mountain with snowcaps and such. There was no trail or distinguishable path. There weren't any paths leading to this forsaken forest either. She didn't want to admit it, but Leigh highly doubted they would run into any human being here for a long while. But she was on a mission, and although she couldn't feel her father's spirit near her anymore, she kept on, hoping for some small twinge of memory, a glimmer of a sign. They hiked uphill for a ways until they reached the top. There was a small clearing which looked like a feeding ground, but no tracks marked it as so. Westward, the Lacus Mountains loomed above them, making their trek up the hill like climbing an anthill.

"Whoah," Gaij said under her breath. "We're going to go through that?"

"Yes." Leigh was stoic. North, south, and west spread the mountains. Behind her was an endless field that faded into the haze. The river disappeared behind the hill. "I think we're better off if we stay by the river."

"But the pirates!"

"We're not taking their stuff so you don't have anything to worry about!"

"But they're...murderers. They don't care, don't you know?"

"Hmph, I've never traveled this way before." She resumed her trek, now downhill southward, to the river.

Above them, an owl much larger than the one Leigh had seen the night before emerged from the treetops and slowly swooped downwind, its sharp receptive eyes tracing their every step.

---

The day had fallen and long shadows had caught up to their trail, and they decided this day was enough. They had traveled, slowed by the growth and lack of a pathway to guide them, and were rested on a small ledge over the water.

"Keep your eyes open," Leigh said tiredly. "We don't know what's in this place."

Gaij shrugged. "Don't know. I haven't seen a thing this entire day. It's weird. Even on the plains, there was always some kind of animal roaming around."

Leigh said nothing, preferring silence than to mindless chit chatter. She unrolled her bedspread and put together the fire pit. The stars above slowly peeked out, one by one, and the belt of cloud and dust began ebbing its light from horizon to horizon, leisurely swirling around and around the planet. Or whatever this planet could be called. It wasn't a sphere; it was a floating plate of massive land, broken off into four sections. Ages ago, the ancient inhabitants had linked together each stratum with the same lux lucis that had created each city and their unique traits. Most did not venture past the second stratum. The third stratum was the largest and supplied food to the rest of civilization, but was desolate in comparison and housed the foreigners, the Fanumni, a sub race whom amounted to nothing in particular; a species of drunkards and filthy mud people. The citizens of the Children of the Prophets and the Sticky Children sneered at them but maintained a superficial relationship with them, for without them and their land, their food source would take an enormous lacking. The fourth stratum was quite unknown: the Sticky Children's "other" resided in the lowest regions of the planet, cut off from the rest of society. The average citizen only knew that those Fourths lived in a literal hell called Ignibyss and that they really did drink flame like water. Everyone shudders at the thought. Thankfully, those Sticky Children were never seen in anyone's lifetime, and hopefully they never would in the future. Perhaps they didn't even exist anymore.

Leigh laid back and contemplated these things, knowing that the Fourths had to be alive, and what an adventure it would be to see a real Sticky Child from Ignibyss. She wouldn't discriminate like everyone else would. High and pompous citizens of these ridiculous sects, Leigh griped to herself. It was all nonsense anyway. She looked up to the night sky, past the flying belt and into the smallest stars her eyes could glimpse. Who lived on those stars? She wondered casually, inhaling deeply, beginning to put away the worries of the day to a full night's rest.

"Did you hear that?"

Leigh frowned and glanced over at Gaij. She was staring up at the sky like herself, but with tears streaming out of the corners of her eyes. But sorrow wasn't on that face anymore, rather, suspicion and fear. "I heard something, Leigh," Gaij whispered. "Over there," she pointed to the trees beyond Leigh.

Angrily, Leigh sat up. Whatever it was, she wasn't scared of it. It was silent and she didn't breath for minutes. She looked into the midnight shadows of the woods but saw nothing.

"Leigh," Gaij's voice faltered. "I - I - I see it - !"

"Where?" She hissed back, turning her head toward her companion without taking her eyes off the shadows.

"It's - it's invisible but it's - it's right in front of me..."

Leigh turned her eyes swiftly. The simpleton wasn't lying. About six meters in front of her was a shadow, a puff of breath seeping out unhurriedly in the cool, low to the ground. A pair of small orange eyes glinted and hovered, but it wasn't looking at them...Leigh jerked her eyes behind her, her suspicions coming true. Dozens of orange gems floated in the shadows of the trees.

"Gaij, run!" Leigh cried. She hurdled into the air, grabbed her pack, and sprinted for the woods. She heard Gaij fumbling behind her. Her eyes immediately adjusted to the darkness. And it was dark as dark could be. Trees appeared before her eyes.

“Leigh! I can’t see you!” Gaij shrieked behind her. Her longer legs caught up quickly. Almost colliding with the shorter Leigh, Gaij grabbed her hand and tugged her ahead.

A bloodcurdling scream almost too high for their ears pierced the silence and came closer by the second. They couldn’t hear the trampling of paws. Rather, a rushing of wind roared behind them.

“What are they!” Gaij moaned ahead of Leigh. “I can’t see anything!”

“Just run!” Leigh yelled. The screams were only tree lengths behind but they kept on. The roar was almost in their ears, and she could feel the hellish breath on her back.

And suddenly, it was silent. They crashed on through the brush anyway until Gaij slowed. Leigh stopped too, out of breath.

Nothing stirred.

“What, in all of creation, was, that?!” Gaij still gripped Leigh’s hand.

Leigh shook her head, though she knew Gaij couldn’t see her. She tried to catch her breath as quietly as possible.

“Leigh-“

“Shh!” Leigh crouched low, pulling Gaij down with her and stared at her surrounding. Barely a stream of night light made it through the canopy of leaves and branches high above them. “These mountains are cursed,” she said to herself. “Something’s not right. There’s no such thing...”

“Leigh, look!” Gaij’s hand thrust upward.

Leigh followed her direction. A small glow floated down a few meters away from the sky and drifted into the shadows behind the solid broad trunks. It landed and after a moment, started wobbling toward them.

“Oh no,” Gaij groaned. She started to get up but Leigh yanked her back down to the ground.

The radiance glided over the roots and promptly came upon them. Its soft yellow light glowed on their faces.

“Why, hullo,” Gaij said dumbly. Leigh pried her hand out of the simpleton’s grasp and stared, awestruck. It was significantly larger than the one she’d seen, but nonetheless, the owl stood noiselessly in front of them, staring back at Leigh. Its saucer golden eyes revealed nothing.

Follow.

Leigh narrowed her eyes. Owls can’t talk!

Follow. We are waiting.

Leigh looked incredulously at Gaij, her façade disappearing for the moment. “Did it say something to you?”

“Huh?”

Leigh swirled back to the owl. It blinked unhurriedly. You want me to follow you? She said in her mind.

Yes. We are waiting for you.

It blinked again, then turned and began waddling away from them hastily.

“Come on,” Leigh scrambled up and started after the creature.

“So this is your owl...” Gaij mumbled. “So much for sleep.”

---

She arose the moment the sun peeked over the golden city. It felt so warm and calming compared to the cold white pearl shimmer of the city of Sanctum. It wasn’t late, but Aratheah hurried anyway. She was down in the foyer in half an hour; Margeis and Regaken were already standing sentinel, stoically ignoring the curious onlookers that slunk by. The room stifled immediately the moment Aratheah entered, and even the clerks paused for a moment when they noticed the high runes and sleek colors of the Children of the Prophets emblazoned on her attire. Even the most naïve would recognize that she held some sort of high command somewhere in the land of higher uppers. Some turned their noses but most looked away and pretended as if nothing was askew.

“Are you ready, madam?” Regaken – or Margeis, Aratheah couldn’t tell – questioned, respectfully nodding.

“Of course I’m ready,” Aratheah replied impatiently, moving past them toward the front door. She knew she couldn’t pretend to feel the tension, the dislike and the arrogance toward her. I guess it is quite real, I didn’t want to believe it but the Children of the Prophets are certainly bigheaded. The sun washed gold into the streets and her cab was ready and waiting.

They arrived at their destination about five kilometers deep into the Lacus Mountains by the shores of the river. The sandy shore didn’t stretch for long and the river’s edge was crowded with the Children of the Prophet’s militia, as well as mercenaries looking for a few pieces of silver to score.

Aratheah stood alongside her bodyguards near enough to the officers to hear their plans. An officer hastily strode to her and saluted her quickly.

“We’re going in as soon as our orders are clear, Miss Ischmen,” he said courteously.

“Call me Aratheah.”

“As you wish. There’s a clearing ahead over those two ridges. We’ll bed there for the night. You may house with the officers if you’d like. The men are somewhat diffident about your presence here, but we know your reasons. Any help would be appreciated.”

“Of course, sir,” Aratheah replied politely, nodding.

The squadron was in order in minutes and the first group went in, spreading out. The second group, the observers went in after, followed by the last group to keep an eye on their trail. Aratheah went in with the observers. It was odd that not a living thing mingled in the forest, or anywhere to be exact. Apparently, it wasn't always like this she learned as she overheard the men around her. Not even an insect, fly, or sign of beasts and critters was seen.

The trip so far was uneventful as they bagged down for the night. Rumors will be rumors, Aratheah sighed as she lay on her side, absently listening to the hushed conversations around her. The tension was thick in the air, as well as the skepticism that wafted through once in a while. Maybe the rumors weren't true. No! That couldn't be so! The Council wouldn't waste their time like that. It couldn't be a trap either because Jerusalem's inhabitants, the other half of Sanctum, had grumbled about strange disappearances of their trade ships. But no one had mentioned what exactly these odd occurrences were. Engulfed in her thoughts, Aratheah drifted quietly into sleep.

---

The sun was rising, and the owl hadn't taken a break yet. Gaij moaned and groaned, sometimes even lapsing back a few dangerous meters, but managed to stay awake enough to keep Leigh in sight. Leigh, on the other hand, was wide awake, feeling more alive by the minute. They didn't encounter any creatures; the lone bird of prey maintained its speedy dawdle atop the forest floor steadily until the sun was bright enough to pierce through the overbrush and lighten the path.

Stop.

Leigh halted, Gaij crashing into her from behind. She couldn't hear a sound and the scenery looked the same as it had been for the past hundreds of kilometers they had tread.

Listen.

Leigh shook her head. "I can't hear a thing," she said softly. She barely noticed Gaij collapsing onto the mossy ground in exhaustion.

*Listen.* The owl turned around and stared at her with those golden saucer eyes.

Leigh strained her ears but failed to hear anything. She looked around even though there was nothing to see. Opening her mouth to exclaim her bewilderment, she snapped it back shut instantly. A low humming radiated from the ground, gradually growing until even Gaij opened her eyes and muffled confusion.

The owl blinked twice and shuffled to stand next to Leigh. The ground where it was standing a moment afore began vibrating, loose twigs and leaves shaking out of place. The humming grew louder. Leigh took an uneasy step back. The owl clucked in disagreement but remained staring at the ground. The humming pulsed in rhythm now. Gaij hastily scrambled to her feet and peeped over Leigh's shoulder in fear and amazement.

An orange halo arose from the ground and sparkles of light scintillated in unison. The lights shifted and swerved, forming into a circular gate of light that glowed in a feverish orange and yellow hue.

The owl hopped forward and stood in front of the portal, blankly staring back at the two women, both trembling in apprehensive wonder.

Come. He is calling for you.

Leigh's brow knitted together, upset that something had the better of her. But she took a step forward in defiance of this 'he' that she wasn't aware of. My father? She asked in her mind.

Certainly not.

Leigh frowned. "Come on, Gaij," she said without turning around. Not waiting, she took a stride and suddenly vanished from sight. The portal faltered slightly but regained its composure.

Gaij's eyes were as big as the owl's. The owl clucked again in irritation. Gaij was frozen in stance, only her eyes darting back and forth from the portal to the owl, and back to the portal. The owl shrugged, as only a bird could do, and rotated toward the portal and evaporated into the glow. It faltered again, only this time it wasn't fixing its wavering light.

"Leigh you can't leave me-!" Gaij threw herself at the portal just as the sparkles blinked out. The leaves gently settled onto the moss.

---

Leigh found herself looking down a tunnel of leaves and brush. Apparently, even she was too short, and she hunched down in pursuit of her guide, the owl. It didn't even occur that her companion was amiss. The owl said nothing.

The tunnel wasn't far. Leigh stopped in awe, shocked by what she saw. Was she still in the Lacus Mountains? In front of her, the forest canopy rose drastically and formed a dome of leaves. Sunlight languidly fluttered through as thin streams in the misty air of dawn. Furniture was deviously crafted by raw materials to tastefully decorate the domed area. She glanced around curiously: two doors, well they were actually large slabs of bark and twigs twisted into the shape, and presumably, the function of a door, hung silently almost aside each other.

The playful chirps of two encircling birds zoomed across the room. It was the first sign of life Leigh had seen since she had step foot into the woods.

Is anyone here? Leigh mused. The owl looked back at her blankly.

You have forgotten your companion.

Her brows instantly met and she swirled behind her.

"She was supposed to be behind me!" Leigh cried in indignation. "That bumbling fool," she growled, peering down the tunnel she emerged from. Certainly, Gaij was nowhere in sight. "Didn't you make sure she came with us?" She stared at the owl.

She is your friend, not mine. She is your responsibility.

Leigh grunted in anger and huffed her bottom onto a bench made of slender shaved dogwood and a mossy slate seat. "Well this is just wonderful.

The owl waddled up to her and cocked his head. You have naught to fear, young apprentice.

Somewhat holding a grudge, she didn't look at the owl but squinted an eye. "Apprentice...?"

Yes. Your Master is arriving soon.

"Master? I have no Master."

The owl clucked. It spread its wings and floated up to a camouflaged perch high above. Leigh eyed him discontentedly and straightened immediately when she heard huffing and puffing approach the door nearest her. The bark flew open in a bang and a short old man with white wavy hair that streamed behind him galloped into the domed room. His tufts wafted to normal gravitational pull as he stopped suddenly and looked wide-eyed at Leigh.

"And who-" his who's sounded like the owl's evening call, "are you?" (as well as his you's)

"I am Leigh, from Bienfang." She stood emphatically. "Who are you, and where am I?"

"Oo-oo!" The old man cried. He tossed his hair back and placed his hands on his hips. "You do not speak to your Master like this!" He stamped his foot, and shaking his finger, stomped up to Leigh. He only came up to her shoulders. "Leigh from Bienfang! Shall you speak to me like that again," (he dragged his n's too) "you will pay for it dearly, mind you." He shook his head vigorously and swished around, his long brown robe tickling his ankles.

"My Archimedes," he called, waving and holding out his arm. The owl glided down gently onto his master's outstretched arm and impassively ignored the Master's irritated shakes and moans of claws.

"Now, where were we?" He twirled around swiftly, spun too far, and corrected himself. The old man, with his free hand, for his other hand was outstretched 90 degrees to the discomfort of his pet, stroked his beard and mustache and squinted at his guest.

Leigh contemptuously straightened her figure and looked defiantly at her host.

"Leigh of Bienfang..." he twisted his long beard and mustache into one strand and almost pulled his entire face down amid his concentrated musings. "Yes! Confound it! You are the one my unwelcome guest speaks of! Come this way!" He turned his heel and stamped to the other door.

Leigh frowned and followed him, not particularly taking to this quirky old man in the middle of the woods. He hadn't answered a single question.

He thrust this door open as well and sidestepped in, not wanting to disturb Archimedes' roost. It was a tunnel again, not unlike the first. After the first curve, it suddenly opened into another domed room, this one much larger than the first. Neatly cut shrubs divided this room, but it was entirely opened to a fresh breeze that wafted in from an open circle in the ceiling of leaves above. Ornately carved cases of books walled three quarters of the entire dome. Inside the nearest section was something like sofas covered by animal skins. Atop one lay Gaij, asleep.

"Why is she asleep," Leigh demanded.

"She-" he pointed his finger at her. "Would not close that blasted hole in her skull."

Leigh smirked. Gaij certainly was someone else outside the class halls.

"So I put her to sleep." The old man shrugged and clucked at the owl, who responded by shrilling loudly and flapping himself away from the humans.

Leigh caught his sentence. "Put her to sleep? How do you mean?"

"Like this!" He turned and snapped his fingers. Leigh saw Archimedes suddenly cease flapping his wings midair and fall lifeless ten meters to the ground.

She screwed up her face. "I think you killed your pet, sir."

"Nonsense!" He clapped his hands this time and grinned.

Archimedes squawked in aggravation, flipped up, and waddled the rest of his way to his destination.

"Who are you? Are you a synod?"

The old man cackled. "Oh good heavens, no! I'm just a mere magi. I'm unbiased, mind you."

Leigh sniffed, cringing at the old man's way of entwining ooh into every word. She jumped when a camouflaged door swung open just past the sofa that Gaij slept on and a young man entered. He wore black robes bordered in gold runes and symbols. A broad gold belt encircled his waste, carrying pockets and purses that contained the unknown. But his dress was not so unknown to Leigh's intelligence. This young man, whose eyes

of crystal green and black silken hair held her rapt, was nothing less than a pupil of the Orions, one of the many gods of the Sticky Children. It was like she had found the rift in time.

"Where are we?" She instantly demanded the moment the man glided up to the old man. He glanced at her baffled and ignored her. He leaned over and whispered something into the old man's ear, hidden in his wild white strands. After a moment, the old man twitched and clutched his hands. "I knew there was a reason! Oh praise the gods!" He grinned toothily at Leigh. "A new apprentice. I am delighted."

She couldn't take it anymore. "What is going on here!?" She screamed. Somewhat surprised that Gaij didn't even most a muscle at her outburst, she turned and glared at the two men who looked back dumbfounded.

"Miss, allow me to explain." The young man stepped forward and bowed. "I am Samael, named after the Prince of Fire." He took another bow and took a step back. "You are still in the Lacus Mountains. We noted your coming from the moment you stepped foot outside your city's walls. We have been waiting earnestly for you, as well as your companion. Is it true that you are the daughter of-"

"Stop your insolence, you!" The old man cried. "We will get to all that later! Now," he swished around, his arms outstretched. "This is your quarters. Here, you study. Here, you learn. Here, you are my apprentice."

"Magi, should she not be-"

"Your pledge? I see you have nothing to say. Very well." He resumed his grand speech. "As I will show you in the times to come, you will learn the ways of lux lucis, your elements, your powers, you will become the queen of the generations!"

Leigh looked at him incredulously. "What in the world are you talking about?"

The old man didn't hear her. "Now, I must retire to my room. Your first lesson will be tonight!" He waved his finger in the air and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

She gaped at the empty air where the old man had once stood. She didn't look up as the young man, Samael, started towards her.

"Madam, you appear exhausted," he put his hand on her shoulder and waved another hand toward another sofa.

"Oh! Call me Leigh..." She shook his hand off and looked at him. He wasn't much taller than her, which was surprising to see in a male. Males were always taller by at least a third of a meter – and this man was only centimeters taller than Leigh!

"Samael?"

He nodded, folding his hands inside his robes.

"What is going on? Queen? Lessons? Lux lucis? Elements? Tell me what is happening here!"

"Please, sit, I will tell you," Samael insisted.

She grudgingly sat down on an amazingly soft sofa as Samael materialized a stool in front of her. Lux lucis, Leigh breathed to herself. Things were happening much too quickly for her.

"You said something about I being the daughter of – you never got to finish your sentence. I came to these forsaken woods to search for my father."

"Your father...?" Samael peered at her interestingly.

"No! I know he's here! Somewhere! I felt it the moment I came near the woods."

"I am truly sorry madam – er, Leigh. Whatever you felt was just a ploy the magi and I set up to lure you in."

"Why?" She was furious.

"No one comes into these mountains, not of their own accord anyhow. You are the one we've been searching for, although the magi," he said this name in contempt, but Leigh couldn't tell; the man's expression gave way so quickly, "wishes to disregard this omen."

"I don't care; where is my father? If he's not here, then at least tell me his name."

Samael looked at her peculiarly. "You are the daughter of Sedoraphim."

"Sedoraphim... I know that name," Leigh breathed. She dug frantically into the deepest recesses of her mind. "The son of Goap?" She gasped.

"The king himself."

"Isn't that – isn't that igni?"

Samael smiled. A cold smile, or perhaps just a learned twitch of the facial muscles. "Yes."

"So I'm not... I'm not a child of the prophet?"

Samael's eyes narrowed and shook his head slightly.

Jealous, aren't we, Leigh fumed to herself as she looked at him in contempt. "Well that's just great. Now what?"

"Unfortunately, you have aged forty four years in apathy. Those years have taken a toll upon your-"

"Wait, wait, wait. So lux lucis is still very alive and real? I was right?"

"You certainly were," Samael replied. He crossed his legs and looked afar in disinterest. "Very much alive... thank the gods the rest of you do not know. This world would be in complete agony. Perhaps, it wouldn't be able to hold itself together."

Leigh raised a brow at his musings.

"Ah!" Samael spied her mocking expressions. "My fault. Moving along: we summoned you here because you are a descendant of the gods." He smiled at her, almost scornfully but again, Leigh couldn't catch his twinkles

fast enough. "We have been ordained to apprentice you. Magi though," he lowered his voice and growled, "Magi desires to teach you in the ways of neutrality and the elemental powers of air. His theories are mangled and erroneous because of his ill and late mind." He stood up. "I would offer you what services you should be deserving of; of the fire, from the flames and ever churning lava that flows from Mount X."

"You've been there?" She still couldn't believe she was from that netherworld. That's why I could never agree with that city's concepts.

"Of course not, no one dares to step foot past the Flumen Plains – unless," he paused and stared at Leigh. "You are of their blood."

"What of are you?"

"Sanction. The Ancient Sanction, that is."

"How so? You certainly don't look ancient."

"Believe what you may, my skills do not lie. I am 535 years old. Believe me or not."

"You must be accustomed to being disregarded."

Samael raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He began pacing. "As for your training, you may choose—"

At that instant, Magi came crashing through the wall sputtering. He held a translucent scroll in his hands. Galloping to Leigh, he took her hands. "My lady??"

"Pardon?" She said gently – normally, she would hold forever in contempt the individual who confused her identity.

"Are you Heskoint's only daughter?"

"No, I am not."

"Confound it! Get out! You do not belong here!" He screamed, falling down to his knees in agony.

"Magi!" Samael knelt down beside his master. "Cease this nonsense!"

"Tis a catastrophe!"

"Magi! Do you not see the aura surrounding her?"

"Leave me be!"

"Sir!" Samael lost his patience and stood up. "She will receive what she desires, close-minded as she is. You are blinded by your incessant craving for power."

"Silence," the Magi stood up, thoroughly consoled by the sharp words of his pupil. "She is your student. Leave me be forthwith unless you discover the one." He put his hands together and bowed as he said this, then turned without acknowledgement of Leigh's existence and disappeared into a step.

Samael shifted steps and a smile crept onto his slim, pale face. He looked at Leigh. "Now you are my student. I shall instruct you in the ways of your true calling. Hopefully, your lull of learning has not affected you too much."

"Heskoint?" Leigh was still pondering what the Magi had just gotten flustered over. "Who is Heskoint?"

"Do not pry into business that is not yours. I will take leave for now; I must gather my things to prepare us for the work ahead. There will be much learning in store for you, months, perhaps years, depending upon your body's acceptance." He turned and disappeared, like the Magi.

"But what about..." Leigh still had so many more questions, among which she looked down at Gaij. "And what will become of you, this poor, heart-broken soul?" Gaij rested peacefully; a smile even twinkled on her lips. "Enough," Leigh exclaimed and began shaking the unconscious girl. The owl suddenly shrieked from its unknown perch and both girls jumped at the sound.

"Where – what happened?" Gaij sat up, rubbing her head.

"We're in some sort of hidden cove in this forsaken forest. My theories have been proven correct," Leigh added smugly.

"Good for you. Did you find your dad?" she inquired, misreading the grin on her companion's face. It fell.

"No. it was a mere ploy to draw us here."

"A ploy?"

"We've encountered one of the last, perhaps the last, persons who practice this planet's true power. Lux lucis—" Leigh raised her eyes.

"I'm not that dense," Gaij said flatly.

"I hope not. Samael, one of the two individuals here, is going to instruct me on my abilities," her face suddenly fell again.

"Your abilities? Looks like you had a lot to take in today already."

"Yes...I'm not from Bienfang...I'm from Ignibyss," she said quietly.

"That's ridiculous! You couldn't be," Gaij took a step back anyway.

"No? Why am I of less stature than everyone else? Why have I always been afraid of height? Disliked water? Never been burned? Explain that!" Leigh clenched her jaw and sat down. Was she really of those cursed firebloods?

"Wow...oh Leigh, I hope this isn't too disappointing for you. Come on, isn't this what you've always wanted? To know lux lucis? Heck, what's going to happen to me? At least you've got something to look forward to!"

Leigh looked up at her coldly and said nothing.

“So what about me?”

Leigh shook her head. Maybe you’ll fall in love with Samael, she wanted to say, but restrained her piercing tongue.

Gaij’s face screwed up, sat down, almost started crying but then stopped and turned to Leigh. “So what other of your theories are true?”

“Nothing.”

“And what about the monsters? Do they know where these monsters are coming from?”

Leigh didn’t reply.

“Sheesh! All you care about is yourself! Haven’t you got a soul inside of there?” In that moment, Samael appeared amid them. Gaij stumbled backwards and fell on her rump; Leigh stoically remained staring at the forest wall.

“Ignibyss aborigines are known to be soulless, calloused, malicious, as well as merciless. So observers say. Not many had ever seen this race; if they have, few return to tell the tale.”

Gaij swallowed and frowned deeply. “Well that explains a lot. Who are you?”

“Samael,” he shifted his gaze to Leigh, still staring at tree trunks. “Leigh, it is time.”

“Hey!” Gaij stood up, towering over Samael. Her people from Jerusalem were the tallest of the planet. “What about me?”

He looked up at her languidly. “You may be a giant, though gentle and green. You will receive your share, although your aura is not half as strong as this lady here.”

Insulted, she glared away.

“You may accompany us,” he stated as Leigh finally stood up. Simultaneously, the three disappeared.

--

It was still dark outside; the moons were still high in the sky when Aratheah stepped out of her tent. Something pulled at her heart but she couldn’t put her finger on it. A few guards were nodding asleep at their posts. She didn’t want to bother them and put them to shame and she silently slipped past them. The lamp she had taken with her barely illuminated the seemingly enchanted forest. It was as if there was a black mist resting on the lush floor, restricting curious eyes. Turning around, the glow of the campfires appeared a faint speckle, though she couldn’t have walked but a few meters astray. It was as silent as the day; there were no sounds of night insects or scuttling rodents.

Oddly enough, the fear that she had entered this forest with was completely gone.

“Just apprehension, that is all,” Aratheah said to herself aloud more to put her mind at comfort in this darkness. But she was not afraid.

Suddenly, she heard a blood-chilling scream, too high pitched to be human. It wailed again and stopped as soon as it had started. She stopped; it had to be at least two mountaintops away (and the mountains had begun to get larger the deeper they went in – she could see from the campsite that some even had snowcaps); nevertheless, the scream pierced through the crisp night air. Wondering for a moment if anyone else had heard it, and hoping not, she continued her night stroll.

So there are monsters in these mountains, she mused. Having been a city girl her entire life, pent up in her father’s palace and studying the art of political science, there was no need for her to fear. What of this world is but an anomaly, something that cannot be logically explained and reasoned with? Life was as hard as you made it, in which life was really quite simple. Aratheah firmly believed this philosophy. And thus she attempted to open the eyes of the old agents and leaders of the Counsel. They weren’t so reasonable. She wouldn’t give up though, it was something she had years and years to work on. She set her mind on how to convince those old folks of change.

Again, another scream echoed through the mountains. This one was from the mountains behind her, more specifically in the valley behind her. She had to have been walking for quite a bit; she figured she was more or less a kilometer away from the camp.

It screamed again, and this time, Aratheah did stop and swerve around. She was as good as blind past two meters in front of her, but it was better than nothing. Her ears didn’t lie.

A second scream came from another creature, this one somewhat farther away. Its preceding scream indicated that it fell down the mountainside at rapid speed. A third, a fourth echoed down the mountain.

Lines of concern materialized on her face. They were heading for her camp!

Gasping, she fumbled forward. I have to warn them! She panicked and began sprinting, hoping it was the way she had come. Nothing looked familiar. Nothing was friendly. She crashed through bramble and brush, her nightgown torn save the little night coat that covered her back.

A sudden pain shot through her right foot. Cursing her clumsiness, Aratheah fell headfirst.

The ground was cold and hit her like a sheet of ice, hard and unforgiving. The lamp flew out of her grasp, dashed down the mountain a few meters before shattering itself on a boulder.

Midnight fell over her like a soft, heavy blanket.

She heard only her breath, but this she even stopped.

Those screams had reached the camp.

Terrified shrieks of men and clambering armor mingled with the sound of the bloodthirsty howls of those creatures. Aratheah helplessly stared into the blackness. The moon didn't even trickle in through the leaves; she couldn't even see her hand in front of her face.

She made the sign of her gods. The ruckus not too far away was dying down. In a minute, everything was as silent as when she had confusedly left the now nonexistent camp.

Why did I leave? What was I looking for? Aratheah remained on the forest floor. If she wriggled her big toe, lightning nerves of pain streaked up her leg. It was all gone. They were all gone in a blink of an eye. It hadn't even hit her yet.

I'm out here all alone without even a light to guide me. Everyone's dead. I don't even know where I am. No one lives in this place. In an instant, everything rushed over her. Her face flushed and tears began to well in her eyes. I'm all alone! She put her forehead on the ground. It would be pointless to wander in this darkness. Perhaps in the daylight, she could find the camp and retrieve something of help.

It was the last thing on her mind, but something told her to look up.

--

"NO!"

In tandem, Leigh and Gaij looked up in the direction of the Magi's laboratory.

"Is he okay?" Gaij blurted.

Leigh grumbled her embarrassment, ashamed that she had even let the crazy old man's outburst distract her. Samael hadn't looked up, so why should she?

"Don't mind him," their tutor commented, now looking up to peer strangely at Gaij. "He's a mess."

"?" Gaij was taken aback. "But he sounded really um..." before she could finish her thought, Magi burst into their study.

"Yes, Magi?" Samael unconsciously stood up and bowed. His two students jumped up a second later and did the same.

"Stop it! The Xdeuxi gone!"

"Pardon?" Samael was stoic, uncaring.

"It's gone! I don't see the aura!"

"Don't be ridiculous Magi, nothing has gone wrong. It can't, it's written in verse 45 of the --"

"I don't believe it! Oh, the humanity! What will become of this planet?" He wailed, waving his arms and then suddenly disappeared.

"What was that all about?"

Samael turned around; he didn't look as aloof as he sounded. He put a finger to his lips and blinked a few times before muttering his thoughts. "The Magi is not as weak as he seems. Could he possibly be..." he paused, looking up quickly at the two girls who stared wide-eyed at him. He scowled. "Think nothing of it. Let's continue."

Leigh and Gaij shrugged, but Leigh silently stored away everything that had transpired. What did he use to see people hundreds of kilometers away? The curiosity only deepened her craving to learn.

--

It was only half a meter from her pair of eyes. All she could see were two orange dots that illuminated nothing except for the emptiness inside of them. She saw nothing of it but knew it saw all of her. A hot, fowl stench crept up her nostrils.

Aratheah didn't want to move, she couldn't move. Her heart stopped. The lump in her throat had shot up into her brain and numbed her from the spine down.

The dots squinted.

I think it's smiling.

A leaf under whatever was holding it up cracked.

Aratheah wanted to cry, to scream, but nothing came out. So this was it.

A ball of flame suddenly exploded behind her.

Whatever was in front of her screamed and disappeared behind the trees. Its scream jolted Aratheah and knocked her backwards into a sitting position.

The ball of flame still blazed behind her and she scrambled to her feet and faced the source. The moment she saw, she struggled for breath and fell back down.

A skeletal, feminine figure loomed taller than any tallest man that walked this planet. Her cranium jutted out over her face, which was nothing less than delicate and exquisite in every sense. She had no hair to adorn her; she didn't need any. Her brows arched exotically, the eyes were of a clear aqua green, her nose small and sharp, her lips were puckered and pale, her ears pointed at the tips. Her skin was white, her limbs and fingers long, as well as her nails, which appeared more like the claws of a wild animal, black and menacing. She wore a constricted

red robe, the collars high and pointed well above her head. She had no need for frills and ornaments. The light came from the only thing she possessed: a staff that held a swirling orb of the colors of fire. It illuminated far more than a hundred of Aratheah's torches could in this forest.

"My sincerest apologies," escaped from her lips, she bowed. Her voice was soft and flowed from her lips like syrup. "I had no intention of frightening you, child." She tilted her head slowly and stared at her, silent.

Aratheah was subdued by her mere presence; she felt something in that lady's air, something about her wasn't right other than the fact that she hardly resembled Aratheah's kind besides appearing human. And something about her eyes weren't right. She dismissed these thoughts for the moment and swiftly stood back up. Perhaps it was because she was so skinny, or that she had been staring at her from the ground, but suddenly the stranger seemed to have lost some height. An illusion, Aratheah assured herself and bowed in return.

"And please excuse my embarrassing behavior. I am Aratheah, daughter of the Herald of Sanctum."

The woman's lips turned up to a smile, but her eyes were still as flat as ice. "I am called Lillith. I am new here; as you have noticed, I am not of your kind."

Putting herself into a diplomatic mode, Aratheah pressed on despite her unexplainable trepidation of this foreigner. "Thank you for saving me from that monster. How did you get here? What are you here for?"

"To be frank, I'm not sure how I came to be here. I do recall journeying through the stars above. Something must have gone awry; otherwise I would be able to explain my memory loss."

"You're from another planet?" Aratheah forgot her courtesies. No wonder she looked so odd!

"Why yes, Lady Aratheah."

"Please, just Aratheah. From what planet? What is it like there?" She gulped down a hundred other questions and looked down at her feet. She felt like a child again, she could hear her co-workers in the counsel shaking their heads and whispering of how young she was to take part in government affairs. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry."

"Do not be ashamed, Aratheah. Please," she turned her staff. "Come with me and I will enlighten your inquisitive mind." The corners of her mouth lifted again, expressionless.

Aratheah opened her mouth but shut it instantly. Just moments ago, her entire camp had been annihilated by the very monsters they had come to investigate and terminate. She shrugged. The mission had failed, she being the only survivor. She was supposed to return to Sanctum the day after, but perhaps an unforeseen retreat would do her good. But only for a few days, it would do no good to worry the counsel into believing she was dead. Aratheah nodded and smiled at Lillith.

The woman turned without a word and shone her light high. Aratheah suddenly noticed a clear dirt path snaking through the trees, wide enough for three to walk side by side. We didn't see any sort of life of the kind, she mused in bewilderment.

"I have made a humble abode in these forests, I quite like it here," Lillith stated after a few moments. "My dwelling is not far from here."

"How long have you been here?" Aratheah inquired, looking at the foreigner with wide eyes. The woman was actually about her height, still slightly taller, and apparently looked ageless. There were no wrinkles on her pallid countenance, but there was no youth either.

"I have been here for what seem like but a few months. I came and am alone, as I do not prefer accompaniment with my travels. This is the first time I have seen any humanoid on this planet, although I have seen signs of life from afar. I have observed most of these mountains and have discovered not a soul. Is there a reason for this? These woods are rather homely and relaxing."

"I'm not quite so sure of that myself. Monsters live in this place, like the one you saved me from."

"Ah, yes. They are quite pesky, are they not? I do not mind them, and they do not mind me."

"Really? I didn't know they were so savage. They killed my entire party and apparently were coming after me."

"It seems they do not welcome strangers," Lillith replied.

Aratheah looked back at her. Maybe her culture doesn't acknowledge death as a tragedy? She looked away so Lillith wouldn't know she was staring at her. She was certainly very quirky, and now she seemed a little bit cold, too.

"Here we are," Lillith exclaimed.

Aratheah hadn't even noticed they had come upon a cavern nestled into the mountain. Now she understood why this outsider thought the Lacus Mountains relaxing and wonderful.

There was a clearing in front of the cave, which stood high above and far away from any nearby peak. A thin stream of clear mountain water trickled down the rocks from above, creating a small drinking fountain that ebbed into the forest. Moss spread its fingers onto the rocks and formed a soft, inviting greeting to the cavern.

"Amazing," Aratheah breathed. "I didn't know this kind of place existed in this cursed forest!"

"I insist that you refrain from calling this forest 'cursed'. Do you even have the slightest conception of what a curse is?"

"No," Aratheah turned around and looked at Lillith, surprised at her sudden change of tone. "I'm sorry."

"Hush, child." Lillith didn't look at her as she walked by her and toward the cave. She waved her staff and abruptly the cave lit up from the inside. "Come."

Aratheah's breath was taken away again. Apparently Lillith had done some shopping of her own; the cave was beautifully garnished with furniture she had never seen before. The single light source from inside came from a small pulsing globe that floated atop a three-pronged stand. It softened the moment they stepped inside. The cave recessed about twenty meters into the mountain; this space was filled with mechanical pieces and metal shards that appeared to be what remained of Lillith's ship.

Aratheah was suddenly tired.

"Are you alright?" Lillith approached her. "Your eyes have gone heavy," she noted.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Aratheah looked around and spotted a white sofa-like bed alongside the wall facing the entrance. "I think I'm exhausted from all that's happened to me tonight."

"You will be alright. If you are in need of some rest, you may make use of my divan."

"Thank you – and thank you for everything."

"Sleep well, Aratheah," Lillith murmured. She began humming a strange but alluring melody and began organizing some things in her cupboard. By the time Aratheah laid her head down on the softest bedding she had felt in her life, she was fast asleep.

Lillith continued humming slowly and paused her movements to glance at her guest. She pursed her lips, closed the cupboard door and moved to the armchair. She tilted her head and gazed at the young princess.

## Chapter 2

### ORIGINS AND INTRODUCTIONS

The next morning, Aratheah with Lillith accompanying her, retreated back to the campsite, now disheveled and gloomy. She found a few scraps that were salvageable and returned to Lillith's home by midday.

"So tell me about your planet!" The two sat comfortably at the entrance of the cave enjoying the warm afternoon sun.

"I am from 6x141a1."

"...6x141a1?"

Lillith turned her head slowly, somewhat mechanically, and looked at Aratheah. "You haven't heard of it?"

"Uh, I'm afraid not. That's the name of your planet?"

"Yes, my lady. And you are on planet 3x004b2."

"I beg your pardon?" Aratheah was beyond bewildered. "We call our planet Lubiem, named after the first man that created our Chamber of Agents."

"That is all nice and well; however, in the order of solar systems, planets are referred to by their identification number."

"Order of solar systems?"

"Please describe to me why you are not aware of the circumstances you live in?"

Aratheah stared at her.

"Do you not receive the teachings of Yanived?"

"Yani-what?"

"Oh my," Lillith tsked and shook her head. "I am safe to presume you do not receive any sort of teachings of space and the stars?"

"Astronomy, yes, that is a learning option. But no, we don't know anything about other planets; well, I mean it's not a common-known subject. We don't receive teachings about other planets or beings. We don't know anything outside of these revolving asteroids," she opened her arms to the sky; even in the daytime, the swirling sea of smoldering rocks and dust could be seen.

"Your Chamber of Agents must certainly know of the existence of other, larger and much more powerful forces at work beyond this planet?"

Aratheah tapped her finger on her cheek. "Well, we have an Agent of Foreign Affairs, but I've never heard of anyone speak of this Yanived or anything like it. I believe the Agent of Foreign Affairs is for business with the Fanumni."

"Pity. The Nadiem Federation certainly is slacking these days."

Aratheah put her head down in thought. Lillith's words flew through her mind; excitement and a small tinge of fear mingled in her adrenaline rush and she wanted to blurt out a million questions at the same time. "I must take you to the Chamber of Agents! Perhaps they're not aware of all this...stuff...that's going on without us knowing!"

The elegant lady laughed softly and patted the younger girl's leg. "One step at a time, young princess. Would you care to take me to this Chamber of Agents so I may enlighten your people?"

"Please, yes! Come with me! I know they're expecting me soon. And with that disaster back at camp, I'm sure they think I'm dead! Can we leave today?"

"Of course, I have naught to do these days."

The two women stood up, one more briskly than the other and eagerly followed the taller one inside the cave to help pack.

--

After assuring her that beasts would not harm them in the night, the two set off in a direction Lillith claimed was the river. Sanctum was too hard to get to, and Aratheah excitedly explained what better place to announce this breakthrough in history than the capitol city of Lubiem itself: the underwater metropolis, Jerusalem.

They made rapid progress by nightfall and Lillith claimed they would arrive the next morning at a small port she had spied during her exploring days. Nervously, Aratheah help setup the campsite, wondering if it was safe to trust this stranger's assurances. Once they had eaten their share of morsels and gotten comfortable under the churning night sky, Aratheah excitedly turned to Lillith.

"So this is planet 3b...?"

A faint smile playing on her purse lips, the woman turned to her enthusiastic audience. "3x004b2. Allow me to explain. The first set, 3x004, determines the location of your planet. The last two is the experiment classification number. Do you understand so far?"

Aratheah nodded.

“The breakdown is a little more complicated and may take you a while to comprehend and put it to use routinely. The first number, which is 3 in your case, is the galaxy ID number.”

“How many galaxies are there?”

“Thus far, there are eight occupied galaxies. The number 3 is known as the Pegasus Galaxy. You may save questions for later,” Lillith exclaimed, noticing Aratheah’s impatient mouth ready to interrupt her again. “The ‘x’ stands for which division the planet is in possession of. ‘X’ stands for Yanived, which is the humanoid classification. There are two other divisions: the Xigxi, which are animal-like creatures that vary in appearances. The last is the 440B which is considered a ‘mechanical’ specie. Moving along, when a galaxy is discovered, astronomers break each galaxy apart into sectors and blocks. You are in sector 00, which essentially means you are located in the center of the galaxy. How are you doing?”

“My head is spinning,” Aratheah answered. “But it’s all so interesting to me! I’ve always wanted to be a space explorer!”

Lillith shook her head. “You may if the time ever comes, but I’m afraid there isn’t too much to explore. True, the universe is never ending, but science is still limited. Perhaps you can help solve the puzzles of technology.”

“I would love to!”

“Are you not a princess? Would they allow you to do such a thing?” Lillith smirked and continued. “This planet is experiment ‘b2.’ This means that this planet has been inhabited already. The letter indicates by Greek the alphabet how many times the planet has been settled. The number shows how many times from that Greek letter the planet has failed in its inhabitation.”

“So if we’re beta two, that means we’ve been occupied...how many times?”

“My apologies. The numbers only go to three, then it resets the Greek letter to the next in order and restarts likewise. This means that independent settlers have tried to live on your planet four times. Your settlers have succeeded thus far.

“Thus far?”

“A planet can remain at an experiment classification number for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. A war, out of many things, can terminate a planet and its settlers.”

“So this planet really isn’t 786 years old like our history books claim?”

“I am sorry, but it is not.”

Aratheah put her head down. The implications that her planet, let alone everything else, was someone else’s discovery; that in fact, life was nothing she had thought it was. She was smaller than the tip of a pin compared to the entire known universe. She had always looked up at the stars and wondered if there was an end, and had always wondered if anyone else existed beyond their planet. And now, here in front of her, was an alien. A million more questions popped into her head.

“What’s your planet like?”

Once again, Lillith smiled patiently. “I will save that for another day, my young learner.” Without another word, she turned over and laid down.

Disappointed, Aratheah laid down on her mat and stared up at the sky. The dust made it hard to see, but every so often she would see a glimpse of the stars and blackness beyond it. If given the chance, she would abandon her responsibilities in the Chamber and leave this planet. But there were no means to go beyond! Nonsense, she argued with herself. If Lillith had somehow gotten onto this planet, then it was certainly possible to leave this planet. It was mind-boggling to hear that humans had already gone out of their boundaries and conquered what seemed to be a monumental amount of space. How long have we been on this planet then? Was anything certain anymore?

A sudden empty feeling enveloped her at the thought. All her life, she had been taught that there were numerous galaxies and stars to an infinite measure, but never had she even thought that other humans knew of other humans in other galaxies. So had humans been on other planets from the start, or did humanity evolve and spread out from one planet? There were millions that lived on this planet – how many more millions of humans were there? And Lillith had mentioned other “divisions,” things she couldn’t even comprehend. Creature-like beings, Aratheah had understood. Children constantly drew their imaginations of “other beings” onto their textbooks and drawing pads, but never had she thought that they were a reality. And 440B? Machines? Did she mean their boats and airships? There was so much she didn’t know – and Lillith made it sound as if it were all common-knowledge!

Aratheah lay sleepless for many hours before finally drifting off into sleep.

--

The rafters dashed by incessantly, spilling shattered red sunrays through the curved glass onto her lap. No one knew her, but knew better to keep their distance. Her uniform may have openly given away superiority, but her expression spoke millions of unsaid contempt and irritation. The name tag on her jacket introduced her as T. \_\_\_\_\_, but she was more well-known as “Tommi.” Of course, the general public didn’t know that, but Tommi knew very well that amity with the community meant compassion, and compassion had no place in her rulebook

of war. She was the Sub Commander of her planet's VSS, which basically meant she carried the most responsibility in carrying out her Commander's wishes.

This evening, she was on her way home for a much-needed vacation. Too long had she spent in the VSS headquarters at the Capitol. Too much wasted time spent in politics when she could have been training her troops and building moral. If only her commander weren't such an impractical whimpering bitch. Just images of her face made her cringe in her seat in pent-up wrath. Tommi clenched her fists and forced herself to look out the windows of the train. But how could she appreciate the landscape if she had seen it so many times? Of course, she was only 24 years old, but she had been on her own since the age of sixteen. Her mother was a drunk, and her father had abandoned the family when she was seven. It was no wonder that she had made it this far; she had nothing else to live to begin with. Idolizing the military had been and still was her favorite pastime.

Tommi sneered at the diminutive cottages and huts of the field people as it passed by, but it was hard focusing on one thing as the train, which was elevated on twenty meter high poles and encased in a safety cage of support beams in the rare case it slid off the railing, traveled at almost two hundred kilometers an hour. It wasn't exactly for sightseeing. She couldn't complain; she would make it back to her hometown within a few hours.

The sun was settling down rather slowly on this particular day. All Tommi wanted to do was curl up on her bed and be asleep for the following week. Who was she kidding, she told herself. The VSS couldn't survive without her for even four hours; and no one wanted to take her place, either. She threw herself back into her seat and folded her arms. Some vacation, she grumbled. The darting shadows of the rafters were beginning to make her dizzy. It wasn't even as if she hated her job, it was partly just the feeling of being everyone's mother, but mostly it was because of that bitch commander of hers.

Sonya. Even her name made her lip curl. That bitch Sonya. Always lecturing, always criticizing, always belittling. No one took her seriously, at least Tommi didn't. And hopefully no one else did. Tommi didn't fear for her reputation though, she knew everyone respected her, not only because of her position, but because of her ambition and insatiable love for warfare. The hostility between her and Sonya only aroused her more.

In the far distance ahead, she could see the peaks of the Dresden Woodland. Full of childish tree people. Why wouldn't they just move back to Vespen where they belonged? There was no purpose in trying to prove a point that simplicity was rewarding. Tommi worshipped technology, even craved it. Why would people want to think otherwise? How many times had it saved people, helped people, served people till it proved unnecessary for any other means to live? Tommi shook her head and for the first time since she had boarded the train, looked around at the people alongside her.

Fortunately, they had all given her a seat and a half between her. That was the way she liked it. Most were city people, probably returning from work at the Capitol. She spotted a few people who certainly looked out of place. It was easy to tell, for they were all sleeping uncomfortably. They were the people from the country, probably returning home from a vacation to the cities. Many were kids, which wasn't surprising because the school holiday season was drawing to a close. Tommi hoped they would all burn in hell. She hated going out after work only to find that these immature juveniles had vandalized her work vehicle. To make things worse, they would loiter the streets past curfew and cause pandemonium only kids could do. She had never been one of them. They were considered "popular," but they were far from popular in Tommi's book. More than once she had almost run one of them over. The stupid bastards. And now they were all returning to their small-town mentality, home to pronounce their big adventures and act like know-it-alls. For once, she wished they could have a chance to really know what it was like to roam the streets.

Tommi was from Sojourn, a flashy city in the northwestern regions of the continent. She made it a point not to be around there during the holiday season, mostly because it was such a huge tourist attraction. There was no place in Tommi's book of patience for sightseers. Though she made plenty of money from VSS, there was no need to show it off. She lived in a modest, somewhat high-end but definitely not the show-off variety apartment high up from the bustling streets below. When she was at her home, she wanted peace and quiet. But there was always a window open and plenty of pulled-back curtains to let in the lights and muffled sounds. Her worst nightmare would be to be put in a windowless, soundproof room. She needed something, anything, to remind her of the hum of life.

It would only be about fifteen minutes before they arrived at the Sojourn Station and she would have to switch trains. It was pretty easy getting into downtown Sojourn. She glanced at her watch. Might as well take a cab – it was late enough. Like Kissley, Sojourn had a few air highways running through town to reduce traffic, but was nothing near Kissley's contaminated air levels. Thank God for that, or else she'd have to find a new hometown. Never mind she hated the suburbia, she couldn't stand for pollution and city stench. Hence, the reason why she was fond of Sojourn.

They fast approached the forest and in a split second, the train was drowned into darkness. Her eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness – much more quickly than everyone else in the train, she noted – then kicked herself for noting so. You're on vacation now, she reminded herself. A week long one at that, too. She had tried to convince herself it would be nice to have a week without those snobby commanders and such, but a week away from her office frightened her somewhat. A feeling of helplessness, perhaps? Or was it insecurity? Maybe she didn't trust the others to not snoop around her things. She had even made a strict rule forbidding the alien garbage man from treading past her doorway.

Tommi immediately felt a prickle on her cheek and indignantly turned sharply in the direction of the stranger. He immediately looked away. The fleeting setting light's rays that came in through the trees barely gave anything away, but Tommi could see everything. His protruding brows and sharp nose seemed vaguely familiar. Had she seen him around the VSS Headquarters? Certainly not, but maybe he was a new recruit. She gave him one more patronizing glare and turned back to the window.

She felt the train pick up more speed which meant they would be approaching Sojourn quite soon, and in no time, she would be hidden in the recesses of her lonely apartment. Up till now, she hadn't given any thought toward what she would do on her vacation; perchance she wouldn't go straight home but rather pick up some necessary supplies so she wouldn't have to stray from her apartment. It sounded a good idea and she concentrated on the thought till they emerged from the forest. The setting sun had finally dipped below the horizon, and in the nearer horizon, the lights of Sojourn cast a fluorescent red glow, enticing the curious to wander inside. Numerous swirling light beams littered the sky, and for the first time, Tommi wondered if it had ever stopped to let its people rest. She shook her head, and more miserable than when she boarded the train, she sunk lower in her seat and stared aimlessly

--

The streets were still fairly crowded as Tommi had feared. Ignoring fearful but curious stares at her apparel, she quickly retracted some groceries and basic necessities and hailed a taxi to Penn Ave., a busy side street a few miles off from Star Square. It was an intersection of five main streets, hence, the title "star," where some of the classiest and expensive retail stores resided. Tommi lived just far enough away to avoid the Square's vivacity but near enough to the Central Stop Station, which paralleled the huge Parks Mason Retail store on Brick St., which Penn Ave so conveniently intersected with. There were countless small general stores in Tommi's neighborhood, but they didn't offer VSS discounts such as the store she had just been at. It wasn't that she was poor, she just considered herself frugal in a humble manner.

The cab pulled in abruptly and Tommi, tightly holding onto her bags, slipped the driver his due. She heard "you cheap-" before slamming the door and briskly walking to the swooshing front door. Not a moment before passing through, she noticed the same man who had been eyeing her in the train, leaning on the wall just before the entrance.

Angrily, Tommi, with her bags hugged to her chest, swiftly turned around and walked right back outside to confront the stranger.

But he wasn't there. Angrier than before, she huffed and turned back inside the building, checked in, and made her way to the private elevator which made a beeline straight to the pent housing.

And standing beside the elevator entrance was the stranger.

She saw him first and quickly looked away. Calmly, she made her way to the elevator and placed both her bags on the waiting bench. Before the stranger could acknowledge her behavior, he found himself a few inches off the ground and leather-strapped, pissed-off sub commander spitting in his face.

"Who the hell are you, and why are you following me?" Her light brown eyes had turned a ghastly yellow, in strange contrast to her beet-red face.

"Let me down," the stranger sputtered evenly, "and I'll tell you-"

She shoved the man farther in to the wall, then dropped him to the floor. Folding her arms, she looked him up and down until he finally stood facing her.

"I am Casper, from VSS."

"I've never seen you before," Tommi warned severely, taking a step toward him. "I warn you, you lie to me and I'll make your mother wish she'd washed you out when she had the chance."

The stranger took a slight back step and grimaced. "So crude, Miss. I'm a new recruit in VSS and my recruiter instructed me to seek you as a mentor."

"Who's your recruiter?" She bellowed.

"Langley."

"Go back and tell that fat pile of lard to quit dreaming. My job description is not to be a mentor." In all reality, it actually was part of her contract, but she had never mentored before and wasn't going to start now...or ever. Tommi glowered at the stranger. "Go before I break you in half!" He wasn't that scrawny, but Tommi had nothing to fear. Her years of training, she knew, far exceeded any new recruit.

The man stared back.

Before the blink of an eye, Tommi uppercut his sharp chin and smashed his temple. When she did blink, her stalker lay unconscious on the pristine glass marble floor. Emotionless, she retraced her shopping bags and waited for the elevator.

A moment later, the doors opened and a maid carrying a basket of laundry stepped out. Tommi stoically stepped in and pressed P3. The doors thankfully closed as soon as the maid noticed the body on the floor and started screaming her gibberish. Tommi rolled her eyes. It wasn't that she didn't like foreigners, it was just that they acted as if they were a natural part in society. Maybe on Spring Beach (hence, why she never traveled there), if they insisted. But if Tommi had her way, she'd send them all packing back to the miserable planet they came

from. The minute she saw signs that came in two translations, she'd put in a direct complaint to the Commander in Chief.

Still a little aggravated from the interruption a few moments ago, she arrived on her floor and made the way down the hall to her front door. She knew this was floor P3, but hadn't the slightest idea otherwise what floor it really was. All she knew was she was second below the top floor, and the view was quite exceptional. The P3-2 sign was engraved in the gold plate and dusty. The immigrants didn't even do their job, they just multiplied by the droves she noted angrily. She opened the door and room was exactly the way she had left in exactly ten months ago. Everything was dusty and looked rustic because she hadn't checked for maid service. Though nothing of much importance stayed in her apartment, she didn't trust anyone.

She placed her bags on the dining table and immediately retreated to her study on the other side of the apartment. She might as well have had a studio apartment, so much time did she spend in her study. Though the entire was only about six years old, the fittings and architecture were still modern and tech savvy. Her study's outer wall was made of curved glass, tinted bluish. Though she wasn't licensed, her interior designing skills were certainly one to compare with the finest. She may be frugal, but she didn't compromise when it came to her working situations. She sighed and pressed one of the multiple buttons that was inlaid into her desk underneath the face. The blinds that wrapped around the windows unfolded and wrapped themselves to the upper trim. The city lights spilled into her dimly lit room, bathing everything in a pale scarlet red. Her face lit in blood, Tommi stared coldly out the window. Her brown hair with unreflective black streaks obtruding the glow shimmered as she finally glanced down to her workspace.

Everything was lifeless until she pressed another button underneath the face. The entire desk lit up. Normally, these systems would greet her warmly in a feminine or masculine voice, it was her preference, but her preference was absolute silence and the elimination of any human voice intruding her beloved silence. She pushed off the stray papers and bric-a-brac onto the floor in tired frustration. Her personal setup pleased her to the eye until she noticed the blue message light blinking in the far right corner. Her lips tightening, she grudgingly pressed to listen.

The number of the missed call lit up in the open board space. of the screen. It was a call from Langley.

"I've got a right mind to tell you off," Tommi muttered. She was sub commander for god's sake. What position did a recruiter hold in the whole business of VSS? Slot number one hundred and thirty-eight if you wanted to get technical about it. Sure enough, he had left a message regarding Casper and her mentoring responsibilities, referable as Section 28A:3 of her contract. Sneering, she considered calling him and informing that his recruit had suffered a fatal accident. She stared back out the wrap-around window when a single beep emanated from the desk, indicating an incoming call.

Why would the VSS be calling her now? Tommi let her caller sit in suspense for a full minute before finally answering. The screen displayed blackness.

"Tommi?"

"Who is this?" Tommi demanded. "I'm on my free time, just to remind you."

"Never mind that. Your calling is a full-time position, may I remind you of that as well. This is Sonya, your Commander."

Tommi raised her brow and suddenly leaned back in her chair.

Sonya. Her most intensely hated and loathed individual she'd known since birth. Sonya. The daughter of an equally haughty individual. Sonya. The most beautiful of Violets, the highest of the lusted. Sonya. Her Commander. Daughter of the Overseer of this godforsaken planet.

"You are calling me on my personal line in regards to?" Tommi didn't want this conversation going any farther than it had to. She could just see Sonya now, sitting in all her glory, basking in forcing her politically weaker to a task she obviously knew she hated. Tommi knew Sonya hated her with as much hate as she hated Sonya.

"Recruiter Langley has just informed me that you have a recruit to mentor. He has also informed me that you have violated him. Now you may be on vacation, as some call it, but you are still obligated to your sworn duty."

Tommi could guess her dramatic pause was only for effect. Only to piss her off some more.

"Yes?" Tommi prodded. "I'm retiring soon; I can't spend all night on the line."

"Of course, Sub Commander. To make it short, I will not report your abominable behavior if you mend the situation. Now."

Tommi sat in silence. In hatred.

"Now, Sub Commander. I expect nothing less from my most trusted and capable of leaders."

Tommi heard the slight disappearance of static, indicating that Sonya had hung up the line. So that little brat had gone crying to his recruiter. And she knew Langley was standing by to kiss anyone's ass.

She opened a drawer of her desk and retrieved a pack of cigarettes. Lighting one slowly, she exhaled, leisurely watching the smoke curl and waft through her high-ceiling apartment. Let the stranger think she had gone to restore her hygiene.

Waiting till she was finished with her cigarette, she stood up and made her way to her bedroom. Slipping off her uniform, she changed into something more comfortable besides her night apparel. Glancing at the clock, reading at zero fourteen, Tommi unhurriedly made her way out of the apartment and down the hall to the elevators.

When the doors swooshed open at the first floor, she spied the stranger on the waiting bench in her peripheral vision (which was rather acute for a humanoid). She turned to him quickly.

"Come on, pest," she said without looking at him and turned around right back into the elevator.

"It's Casper, ma'am," he had to sprint into the elevator before the doors closed on him. He looked at her up and down. "My apologies for interrupting your rest."

"Not my fault," was all Tommi said for the whole trip up. Silently, she led him to her pent house, strode into the living room and led him right to her room where she stored all the old furniture that had come by default with the housing. The former master bedroom was beside the study, while her current master bedroom was now on the other side of the penthouse.

"You'll sleep in here for your stay. And don't touch anything."

Casper looked at her innocently. "But my tutoring?"

"Your tutoring can wait, pest! We have the whole goddamn week!" She slammed the door shut in his face. Scowling, she locked the door to the study and marched to her bedroom and slammed that door behind her as well. She looked at the clock; it was only zero thirty-two. She only needed four hours of sleep every night. No use going into her study now. There wasn't much in her bedroom. Sighing in pity for herself, she resigned to her bathroom suite to enjoy her only vacation time she now had with a hot bubble bath.

--

It wasn't too hard catching a ride with one of the merchants once they recognized her royalty. Aratheah didn't bother introducing Lillith farther than as a guest of honour to the nautical common folk. Enough hullabaloo would arise once she announced her as a specie from outer space at the Jerusalem Council.

The ride was smooth and relaxing, and they arrived at the Salem Port before nightfall. Without too much insisting, they caught the last subtrain into the underwater metropolis of Jerusalem.

"Your species are very fascinating and innovative, Lady Aratheah," Lillith commented politely. They say facing each other but both looked out the window with as much intrigue as the other. Aratheah had never seen or been to the Children of the Prophet's capital city, other than in pictures and glorifying artistic renditions. Now it was no more than ten thousand kilometers in front of them in all its splendor.

It was no doubt larger than Sanctum and Bienfang; it had a massive glass-like material that domed its sprawling buildings. Obviously, lux lucis prevented that glass-like material of imploding from the water pressure, Aratheah noted.

"Thank you, it truly is marvelous," she said, swelling inside with pride. "It is my first time here, as a matter of fact. It may be of my opposing sect, though its beauty is of equal pomp."

Lillith turned and smiled daintily at her. "I can see that you crave adventure and exploring."

"Oh yes!" Aratheah clapped her hands and looked dreamily back at the underwater domed metropolis city.

"Perhaps I may show you around my planet one day. What is it that you do, Princess?"

Aratheah turned back to her, the light spirit in her eyes gone for the moment. "Currently I'm on the Council as a sub-agent for the Agent of Public Welfare. But they want me to become the next Herald."

"Herald?"

"The Herald is considered the overseer, president, head leader, demagogue, the top of the administration," she recited those hated words learned from her educational years in the top university of Sanctum for political arts.

"I understand," Lillith interjected. "And how soon are you to be Herald?"

"When my Father decides to, which probably won't be until he's dead." She waited for Lillith to put in some polite reprimand for mentioning the death of her father, but there was none. She shrugged.

They arrived at the Salem Station located at the entrance of the city. Jerusalem's spires and scrapers rose kilometers above them now and the glow of the city light faded into the darkness of the Orbis Sea.

Suddenly, Aratheah felt a cramp in her stomach. Her heart fluttered, then tightened. Feeling her body tense, she cringed as the doors to the subtrain slid open.

"Are you alright, my lady?" Lillith leaned over, concerned.

"I don't know-!" She choked for a breath "-what's happening to me!"

Her body involuntarily curled into a fetal position. Beads of sweat formed and glistened on her feverish body.

"Conductor!" Lillith stood up in alarm, looking for a familiar uniform.

Aratheah collapsed to the floor, gripping herself tightly. Her face was turning blue from lack of oxygen.

A blue uniform sprinted down the aisle and immediately knelt to Aratheah. He tilted her head back and retrieved some sort of flask from his sack.

"How goes her?" Lillith inquired calmly.

"Oh," the conductor poured a liquid from the bottle onto Aratheah's forehead. "It happens every so often. People don't take a look upstairs till they reach the station down here. When they do look up and don't see the sky and stars, they panic and have a fit. Like this young lady." He patted Aratheah who was now breathing more regularly and seemed less tense. "Here," he reached in his pocket, took out a slim bottle and placed it in Lillith's hand. "Sprinkle this on her forehead if she starts to feel dizzy again. It's an ether that will take away the anxiety."

"Thank you, sir," Lillith turned to Aratheah and stooped down to her. "My lady?"

Aratheah was still shaky but managed to open her eyes. "What...happened?"

"You had a panic attack, most likely caused from claustrophobia."

"Claustrophobia? But we're..."

"I am presuming it is because you didn't see the skies."

"Maybe..." Aratheah sat up. The subtrain had emptied by now, most of the people had moved on, apparently accustomed to this sort of thing. She finally stood up after a dazed moment, taking Lillith's helping hand.

They stepped off the train and slowed in awe of the vast architecture of the station. Enormous steel-frames separated by glass pendentives arched above them while the minute-looking metal shops and ticket posts littered the lower portion. The end of the vaulted hallway wasn't far, and the two new arrivals inquisitively meandered their way to the exit. As soon as they departed the station, Aratheah held back in wonder.

The city looked alien; everything seemed to be constructed of steel. The cluster of buildings in the centre of the city appeared kilometers high as the two stood looking down one of the star-shaped main streets that radiated from Centre Gardens. The Children of the Prophets sure know architectural beauty, Aratheah marveled. She was astounded at how realistic the atmosphere was. Birds and the sounds of night creatures echoed around them. From inside, the dome was invisible. Feeling dizziness around the corner, Aratheah looked back down to the city.

"Everything alright, my lady?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"Forgive my unawareness, but have you ever seen a large city before?"

"Not like this," Aratheah said truthfully. "Though the city I come from is quite large, it isn't as large as this. See, we have two sects in our land." The two began walking down the main street leading to the center courtyard, where Aratheah knew the capitol building rested. She hoped they could catch a transport vehicle to shorten their trip – it looked many kilometers to that courtyard, which of now were only a small speck in the distance. "The sect I belong to, the Sticky Children, is a newer, more modern sect. The other, the Children of the Prophets, is more traditional and keep to the original ways."

"What are the original ways?"

"Things like keeping to religious ceremonies and paying respect to the gods. Including a traditional philosophy and outlook on things, such as leadership, rules and such."

"I see. Your land's configuration is much like the universe. There are divisions – five, to be certain – and each contains their own regulations and beliefs. Though your planet's beliefs may be interrelated in some sense, the divisions in the universe are much more complicated and diverse. In addition, there are millions upon billions of more individuals involved in the course of things."

"Billions?" Aratheah was incredulous.

"Yes, my lady. Have you ever looked to the skies and counted all the stars in the sky? The greater part of them are planets, each occupied by residents just like you; although your circumstances are somewhat puzzling. Though you are not unknown to the divisions, for you belong to the Peridot division, I am surprised you are unawares of the universe outside of your world. You are positive that there are not leaders associated with intergalactic communications?"

"I am positive."

Lillith tsked and shook her head. "My dear, there is so much for you, and all your fellow citizens, to learn."

"So teach us! Teach me! I'm so sick and tired and bored with the traditions and figures of this planet."

"It's amazing to even me that you have survived in isolation like this for so long. Your galaxy has been in contest among two divisions as of late. I am true when I state that you have not seen discord among your denizens?"

"Discord? None asides the division among the sects; but that has been for the majority of our history."

"I see."

"Lillith, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Pardon my rashness, but who exactly are you?"

"Ah, but I have shown you already, my lady. I am merely a rogue, you may call it. A wanderer, an explorer of new lands and cultures."

"Wow..." Aratheah's admiration glittered in her eyes. "That's exactly what I wish to be."

Lillith turned and made an expression which Aratheah interpreted as a pitying mother. "I understand, my lady. It can easily be done, though I did not have the chains of royalty binding me down."

Aratheah silently cursed her lineage.

Though it was already dark when they had arrived in Jerusalem, it had become darker still. Aratheah started to worry. "I don't think we'll make it to the Counsel House in time. Even if we made a ride, I believe the gates are already closed."

"It is alright, we really are not in any hurry."

"Perhaps," Aratheah trailed off. Already, she could imagine the arguments going back and forth among the sects about her disappearance.

"Let us rest here for the night," Lillith stated, stopping and turning to a hotel front.

"Yes, but, we have no way to afford it."

"Princess Aratheah, have you forgotten your position in this world?"

"You're right," Aratheah grumbled as the two shifted to the entrance. "But I wish it weren't so," she mumbled to herself.

--

She managed to have her rest at her usual hour, and woke up as always as the sun was peeking over the horizon. Suddenly remembering that there was a guest in her apartment, she got up quickly and changed into citizen attire. Already in a bad mood, she stomped out of her bedroom and locked the door behind her. The stranger was sitting at the dining table, waiting for her.

"Good morning, Subcommander."

"You will awake at this hour every day from now on," she said firmly. "What's your name?"

"Casper," he said disappointedly.

"Do you drink coffee?"

"Isn't that bad for your health?"

"Do I look like I'm in ill health?" She questioned. She went to the coffee machine and pressed a button. Two cups of black coffee immediately poured out. Taking both, she marched over to the dining table and smashed a coffee cup onto the table in front of Casper. "We'll see how bad your health is after that cup," she said as she sat down across from him. Sighing impatiently, she took a sip, retracted a cigarette, lit it, then looked at Casper: "I suppose these are bad for you health, too?"

"Y-yes, Subcommander."

"Just call me Tommi, or else I'll make you regret calling me that again."

Casper nodded and looked down into his cup, gingerly rubbing his temple where she had slugged him last night. Tommi sniffed – she noticed everything, and she noticed that there wasn't a bruise in sight – then decided she'd lay down the rules.

"One," she began. "Sit up!" She jumped up from her chair, knocking it over and causing Casper to jump up too. "I will not tolerate slouching, lazy recruits in my abode!"

She picked up her chair and sat down again, lowering her voice to her usual shout. "Two, you may never look through my private things, which includes no trespassing into my study or my bedroom. You may enter my study only upon my command. Three, you may resuscitate yourself whenever you feel it is necessary. Four, if you leave my abode without my bidding, do not expect to be allowed back inside. And five, absolutely no speaking unless you are spoken to."

"You are quite the strict mentor," Casper commented as soon as he had the chance.

Giving him the evil eye, she drained the last of her coffee and stood up. "Today's lesson is etiquette."

"But ma'am, I've already learned about all that in my training!"

"Show me what you know, then."

Casper obediently began rambling off everything he could possibly remember from his ten week training session in the suburbia of the Capitol City. After a few seconds, Tommi interrupted him.

"Enough! What else did they teach you in training?"

"Asides from etiquette, we learned the ranks, the rules of war and engagement, weaponry and armaments, defense, maneuvers, and our history in terms with the Nadiem Federation."

"Then what the hell do you need mentoring for?!" Tommi was furious.

"Well ma'am." Casper stuttered. "I-I guess because they want me to become an officer in the VSS."

"Oh really." Tommi started pacing. "I see. Go make yourself some eat and I will return." She stormed off into her study and slammed the door. Quickly checking her message tab on her workstation, she quickly tabbed over and found her library section, in which she pulled out the Rules and Theory of Command. Quickly finding the section on mentoring, she scanned it until she found what she was looking for.

"Officer in training...review...assist...tour...damn you to hell..." It looked like she wasn't going to have the week off after all. Now she had just wasted a pocketful of change on a week's worth of groceries. Now her plans of nothing absconded, along with the joy of not having to worry about whether or not Sonya would stalk her every move. Not that she wasn't doing that right now...

Tommi exhaled deeply and leaned back in her chair after swiping her hand across the console, erasing everything on screen. So she would be responsible for another of those snotty upturned noses floating around the halls of Headquarters with their clipboards and their reeking million dollar perfumes. Just another way of Sonya jeopardising my planet. And what did the bitch have to worry about? Head Councilman Schaffer just resigned a week ago, and who did Sonya have to live up to? Not that Kovlov, her head Head Overseer, as far as she was concerned, really gave a crap what all his sub-rulers were scheming. The Nadiem Federation was infallible, flawless, eternal. It was a thing to worship, a collaboration worth dying for. According to Tommi, anyway. Most of her colleagues complained about her diehard, gung-ho charisma, but no one was getting a paycheck quite like hers, either, thanks to Sonya's oh-so-easy-to-suck-up-to mother, the Overseer of this planet. And she knew it

burned Sonya's ego to know she was powerless to have control of Tommi's painless situation; so Sonya oppressed and repressed her as much as possible. Tommi would get her one day. Sonya could follow her every footstep, but she couldn't read her mind.

Now to take care of business. She returned to her guest who sat quietly and awkwardly in her dining section of her apartment.

"Do you know what is expected of this...mentoring business?"

"Ma'am?" Casper looked up timidly. "I do believe you are to take me on a tour of the upper levels of Headquarters."

"Anything else?"

"Acquaint me with the verve of Luxemburg."

Tommi rolled her gold-tinted eyes under her eyelids. And that's what supposedly took at least a week or two to rid a leech off a mentor's hindquarters. She'd make sure this recruit would see 'the verve' very quickly.

"Do you want me to spoil all your fun? The verve is a myth, a lie, it doesn't exist. It's merely put there in the books to lure you idiots in and make this all seem so exciting. After your training, you newbies should all be open-minded enough to comprehend that, right? Alright. So let's get this tour over with and you can go back to your momma by sundown today."

"I don't have a momma. And I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Do what?"

"End my...training so soon."

Tommi pursed her lips. "According to whom?"

"My recruiter."

Closing her mouth before imploding with expletives, Tommi screwed up her nose instead and stared blankly out the window. "And how long did he say I have to mentor you?" She fought the urges to begin a conspiracy against this Langley character.

"At least two weeks. He also mentioned—"

"He didn't mention it to me," Tommi interjected.

As soon as the words left her mouth, a quiet beep emitted from her office. Tommi stood motionless.

"Aren't you going to get that call?"

"No. I know who it is."

"I don't see a..."

"Nevermind pointless gadgets! I know how my fortune works! So what else did that Langley mention?"

"He also specified that I am to be your sub-commissioned officer."

"What?!"

Casper said nothing and looked down. Obviously, he wished it weren't so either.

Flabbergasted, Tommi stomped back to her study and slammed the door for the second time today. The light flickered intermittently on the desk screen indicating a message was left for her. She glanced at the caller identification. Sure enough, it was recruiter Langley from hotspot number one thirty-eight. Calling to tell her that she would now have her own personal clipboard-carrying, million dollar perfume-wearing freak floating in the halls of Luxemburg. She could laugh, the whole situation was so preposterous.

A beep emanated from the desk again. From hotspot number two. Sonya.

Licking her lips, Tommi folded her hands behind her back and absently ambled to her tinted wrap-around windows overlooking her hometown. Let her think that I'm out "mentoring" this pest. The beeping ended shortly. Perhaps she was in a hurry. Leaving ample time for her caller to leave her memo, Tommi strolled unhurriedly back to her desk. Selecting the second message on screen, she turned to her corporeal library that lined the wall behind her desk.

"I know you're ignoring me...Tommi. In case you haven't heard yet, Mother believes that it's time for you to have your very own attendant now. My regards and best wishes."

Tommi began perusing the sun-bleached titles on the spines of hundreds of books. They were all relics she'd collected before her profession became full-time; before she had found her new hobby. Many of the books were hundreds of years old to begin with, and the rest had just withered with age from her measly living quarters before this one. Every good thing had a bad thing that went along with it, Tommi sighed. With her new hobby accompanied a spoiled, stuck-up, headstrong, perverse bitch who never ceased to ruin at least one minute of her every day.

She paused in her musing, then tapped a finger to her lips, peering back at her desk. So this was Sonya's doing. Sonya had manipulated her mother, and in turn manipulated the recruiter in an attempt to manipulate and humiliate her rank. And suddenly it didn't seem all that bad anymore.

Grinning, Tommi sat down at her desk, a little more at peace with her mind than she was this morning.

"Don't you worry, bitch," Tommi spoke to herself. Her walls were soundproof, she didn't worry that her now-understood guest would hear her madness. "Your day will come. Oh yes it will."

Rather than hearing Langley's pitiful voice, she skimmed over the memo transcript and promptly erased it. Puppets, all of you, Tommi reflected.

Within five minutes, she was done with her personal obligations and she waved the desk screen off into lockdown. Standing back up, she glanced one more time at her shelves of unread manuscripts, then walked out of her office and locked the door behind her.

"Are you ready to go?" She exclaimed as she approached Casper, still sitting at the table.

Casper looked up inquisitively. Her offhandedness and spontaneity had caught him off guard. "Um, yes—I mean, let me get my things together. I wasn't aware that we would be leaving so soon."

"Well," Tommi sat down across from him at the table, forcing him to remain in his chair. She could tell he was anxious to obey her instantly. "Since you already know the 'verve' of Luxemburg, and since you will be my assistant for the next x amount of years to come, I see no point in letting you hang around my residence. I'll show you to your quarters and give you your tour. It's not my fault you're in a mentoring state for two weeks."

She stood up and watched the timid man trot quickly to the guest room. Now that that was taken care of, she returned to her bedroom and nonchalantly picked up her bags. Last night's mood hadn't inspired her to unpack, which was ultimately for the better. It was one less thing to aggravate her in her now tranquil state of mind. Carrying them back out to her foyer, Casper managed to catch up to her pace at the last instant.

"I hope you haven't forgotten anything," Tommi chided. "This will be the last time you're here...as well as I for the next year."

"My apologies," Casper replied curtly.

"Sure," Tommi said. "We have a ten hundred train to catch."

--

The morning's sun shone bright and clear through the hundred of fathoms of water above, thanks to the high technology placed into the solarium above their heads that gathered and expanded each ray of light that shown from beyond. The two walked out of the hotel front and turned their eyes to the west.

Jerusalem's streets were bustling in the morning commute. For a moment, Aratheah felt like she were in an overcrowded aquarium undersea, and a tiny wave of nausea wafted over her. Thrusting a supporting hand onto an outcropping, she stopped for a moment.

"Are you alright, my lady?" Lillith offered, noticing her momentary lapse of faintness.

"Yes," Aratheah took the hand that was offered. "Just...I shouldn't look around too much, I guess."

"No, you should not," Lillith reminded her. "Now let us be on our way. I am eager to convene with your Counsel."

"Right," Aratheah replied. Not that she was too eager to convene with her Counsel. But for the sake of earning up to her reputation, as well as throwing it in the face of all the Counsel members that she was not just some spoiled Herald's daughter following in his footsteps. She was now determined that whatever the Counsel's decision for Lillith were, that she would remain supportive of her, whether or not the Counsel approved.

"So," the two walked down the avenue. The Counsel House was not a few blocks away, within walking distance, and they would arrive in less than half an hour. "Forgive my ignorance, but whereabouts in the universe are you from?"

Lillith chuckled. "You shall see, one day, my friend. It is far, far from here; I would not even be able to describe the distance. However, once my ship is repaired, or if I acquire the proper technology and equipment to erect a new vehicle, you will be aware soon enough."

"You're...not going to kidnap me or something, are you?" Aratheah was suddenly wary of this stranger's language. But it seemed exciting nevertheless.

"Of course not! Only if you want to, my lady. I was only presuming from your language and postures that you wished to explore foreign lands."

Aratheah secretly smiled to herself and turned away. Kidnapped or not, she would go willingly. Lillith seemed more eager than any to have some sort of companion on her explorations.