

Chapter 1.

Michael.

How does one fight a god? How does one even muster the courage to fight something so incredibly gorgeous?

He lies on his side, his left arm falling asleep, but he doesn't care. His brain lies elsewhere. As if it's given to them, he cannot look away.

They reach into the depths of the unknown in prismatic hues, ocean blues transforming into sapphire. Golds in every shade possible becoming raw light from the stars glow. They coil and radiate in filaments around the planet, he watches as it responds in kind, like a battle between gods Sarfi, a gas giant that radiates a monotonous deep blue holds back as the tendrils try to rip the gas from its grasp. Eventually Sarfi surrenders to their might. Pockets of blue turn into a haze as the atmosphere disappears from the planet in waves. The Tendrils pull away like a snake receding from fear. Only the Tendrils don't fear, they coil around the planet encasing it in its might and the planet is powerless to stop its wrath.

He could watch this for his entire life. Everything about them is so inextricably beautiful. It's unlike anything he's seen, and he's watched these ~~monsters~~ gods since the day he was born and even in childhood he would stare at the sky and cry when he could not.

A dull metallic thud knocks on his door. One at first, two in quick succession and then three. "Hey, you in there?" Olivia asks, trying to cut through the ship's hum.

"Go away! I'm busy." He says irritated. Every morning it's the same thing. Yet she keeps going and he does not fight it. "Give me a sec!"

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath as he gets out of bed. The Mighty Temperetania despite its name is a small ship so his closet sits right next to his bed which lies receded into the hull of the ship. He opens the door and looks through until he finds a shirt. He picks out a dark blue V-neck shirt which he promptly pulls over his head.

The door opens with a dull rhythmic sound. "Come sit." He says to Olivia as she walks in and leans against the opposite side of his bed. He sits across from her and stares outside the window.

"Why don't I get a window?" She asks him smiling. "You're the only one."

"It's my ship and I was here first. If you want a window you must pay for it."

She ignores his comment. "I'd love to look out at this every day."

"Captivating, isn't it?" He asks her. She turns to face him. Her eyes reading the depths of his brain.

"It's not exactly describable. We've all seen them for our entire lives, yet nobody has the means to describe them."

"It's difficult to describe something we don't understand. Something we fear." He says calmly. He watches as they bolt out in small branches towards what he imagines are asteroids. "But I'd call them, resplendent."

"What does that mean?" She asks looking out the window. Her nearly black eyes lit up in an array of colors.

"Incredibly beautiful through iridescent colors."

She nods, only slightly. "How do you bear to be this close? After all they've done?"

"How do you?" He asks her. He thinks about it, but he can't find the right words. Why does he?

For a moment she stays silent, lost in thought, "Because they're magnetic. It's like I can't stay away, can't even manage to look away."

"Same. It's hard to fear something like this. Especially while seeing it."

For a moment they sit in silence looking out of his window. Warped and controlled by awe. And for a moment as the platform spins and Sarfi escapes his view he can see the haze of them. As if a spider spun this web of light, they wrap around the entire system. Encasing them in their strength. So far away they're hard to see but he can feel their presence. They course through him like a song playing within his bones.

"You know." She says. "I'm really going to need a window."

"If you get one, I have to get one for Jake and Analie too." He says drawn back into real life. He tightens his vision to avoid seeing anything outside of her.

"I'll just ask for a quote when we dock." She says chuckling. "Okay, c'mon, I was supposed to get you for breakfast."

He doesn't know how she manages to even look away, it takes an incredible amount of willpower for him to do so. Yet she seems to be so attached yet for her she can just walk.

Plus, this is so much better than any breakfast. He wants to stay and stare. But he gets up, nonetheless.

Olivia stands leaning on the doorframe and spaces out. He can tell because her eyes are vacant and empty.

"C'mon Let's get some food." He says to her patting her on the shoulder.

The hallways of his ship are narrow, the walls a gentle green fabric. He had installed padding after a fight and Jake got knocked out from slamming into the wall when the ship maneuvered to evade fire. Bright white light emits from strips in all four corners of the hallway illuminating and shutting down as they both pass by.

The mess hall sits across from the bedrooms which are lined up on the starboard side of the ship. The room is small, big enough for a kitchen, a retractable dining table with seats so soft it's basically a couch. Jake and Analie stand right beside each other. They're muttering something about the temperature. She leans her head onto the side of his arm for just a moment before she spins around.

"Hey!" She says awkwardly. Jake turns his head towards him and Olivia and gives a small smile.

"So, guys, I have a surprise." Jake says excitedly. "Eggs, eight of them!"

"Holy shit, how much was this?" He asks him walking over to look in the pan. Olivia walks over beside him with a giant smile.

"This requires more than pajamas." She says quickly going to her room.

"That's for another time. For now, sit down and enjoy." Jake says not commenting on Olivia's departure.

He grabs 4 plates and silverware from their magnetic holders and sets them down. All the kitchen stuff is magnetic, so they don't fly around when on tables or in drawers. But that also means everything is a pain in the ass to remove.

He sets them down and Jake dumps an almost equal amount onto each plate. With a little more for himself. He watches as Jake turns around humming to put the pan away and Analie switches his and her plates up. She shoots him a sly smile and puts one finger over her lip.

Analie scoots down into the L-shaped couch. He quickly interjects himself between Jake and sits next to her against the wall. Jake shoots him a harsh look. "Just a joke man." He says standing back up. "Here you go my master." He says his arms outwards pointing at the empty seat.

They both laugh and take a seat. He sits down beside Jake and looks at the eggs. He hasn't had real eggs in years. Since most agriculture stations in space were abandoned or destroyed, anything not synthetic is very hard to come by. The price must have been exorbitant. "Thank you." He says looking at Jake.

"You're welcome boss. My gift."

Distant steps come closer, and he spins his head back. Olivia stands in the doorway in casual dinner dress. Yellow and white flowers dot the blue background. She had bought it a year back on Lira Station for Jake's birthday dinner. Now she stands here wearing it again. It sucks to think that nothing good has happened in an entire year where wearing something nice would even be entertained.

She sits down beside him and smiles. "How do you all like it?" She asks semi-twirling her torso.

He gives her a slight smile. "Sure, I like it. It's been a long time since you've worn a dress."

"Haven't had a reason."

"So, Michael." Jake says shoveling eggs into his mouth mid-sentence. "I was thinking it'd be nice for some shore leave."

"We do have the money for a week or so." Olivia remarks jumping into the conversation.

"Maybe Lira Station?" Analie says peeking her head around Jake's to look at him.

Lira Station stood as the pride of the Confederations power. It became the new seat of the Confederation Parliament as to not be bias to any single nation state within the Confederacy or the Republic. Grand and immense unlike anything other. At least that's what they say.

"Okay. One week. I'll set course."

He continues to eat his eggs, Jake and Analie mutter to each other with intermittent laughs in between. Him and Olivia sit in silence, not knowing what to say. They've been friends since he'd been 12 when her parents adopted ~~rescued~~ him.

He shoves that thought down to the deep hell hole within his mind. "Excuse me." He asks Olivia trying to stand up. "Let me know when everything is cleaned up so we can go." Olivia stands up wiping the last of her food off her plate into her mouth. She hands him her plate and fork and pries his off the table. He takes them and puts them into the dishwasher where they latch into notches on the rack.

"Got it boss. Almost done."

He walks out of the mess hall without a word and makes his way towards the bridge. His center console sits behind four other consoles. Walking in screens that wrap from floor to ceiling, wall to wall encase the room. A hologram lights up projected into the middle showing where they stand.

They sit in Lagrange Point S3 just outside Sarfi.

LAGRANGE POINT A3 à LIRA STATION

3GS ACTUAL, 1.5G INTERNAL

APPROVE, DECLINE

"Hey boss. We're all ready to go." Jake says through the intercom clearly.

He sits down and straps himself to his seat. The straps tightening around his chest and lap automatically.

APPROVED, COURSE SET

In a moment the ship begins to rumble as the platform retracts to sit perpendicular to thrust.

5 SECONDS UNTIL STABILIZED

A loud thud as it locks into place and now deep metallic humming begins as the fusion drive sparks to life. The weightlessness barely felt before being brought back. The gravity now sits only .5 Gs higher than centrifugal.

Most people that live in space use bone density and muscle enhancers to be able to handle higher gravity or come across less deterioration with lower gravity. Despite this it takes a few moments for him to adjust.

3 RELATIVE DAYS OUT, RETROGRADE ACTIVATION – 1.5 RELATIVE DAYS

"LIRA STATION CONTROL, PORT SIZE S REQUESTED IN 3 DAYS TIME. FARE PAID ONSITE." He sends.

31 RELATIVE MINUTES LIGHT LAG

He finally stands up resting his hands on the console and looks at the screens. Behind him Sarfi and the tendrils battle lies dormant. All around the night sky remains black with a light haze.

"Hey." Olivia says. He spins around his vision trailing behind his movement.

She's back in her sweatpants, a light shade of grey and a black sweater. "Why even wear a dress?" He asks her genuinely perplexed.

"You tilt your head like a dog." She says laughing.

He scowls at her. "I do not."

She walks closer. "Anytime your confused and ask a question your head tilts. It's hilarious."

He rolls his eyes. "Anyways were about 3 days out. What are you planning to do there?"

"Considering were in the middle of a resource crisis and famine probably not much eating. But I heard they have some zero-g amusement parks."

"That sounds cool." He hesitantly says.

"Yeah, Jake and Analie said they'll go."

"Yes, I'll go Olivia."

"You're the best, this'll be so much fun. I've never been in zero-g longer than a few moments." She says jumping up and down smiling.

He does not enjoy zero-g. In fact, he despises it. It always resurfaces shitty memories, and it's nauseating.

"You must have been tired of pirate hunting and this ship. You seem eager." *Why say that so condescending?*

"Uhh, you know it's tiring getting shots and sitting in a metal tube for a year on end" she says irritated her bubbly demeanor gone.

"Sorry." He says quickly before she thinks any more. "It'll be fun. I'm probably going to do a lot of swimming."

He'd always loved swimming. It was one of the activities sanctioned by his biological parents he was permitted to do. They let him because apparently building character and strength in a ten-year-old was important but nevertheless he enjoyed it a hell of a lot more than the screaming and arguments.

"Ooh, I haven't swum in forever. Can I join?" She asks him. Staring deep into his eyes. Probably because there's a giant bright star ahead of her and it hurts to look at that for too long.

"Uhm, sure. Sure." He replies.

"Not if you don't want me too?"

He resists calling out on her tilting her head and instead says, "It's okay."

"Okay, well I'm going to watch some TV, the ship seems to be in good enough shape to relax."

"Have, fun!" He says attempting to be friendly and happy.

He spaces off as she walks into the distance then into her room.

For the next few days, he did what he always did in between action. He read stories about the past. About how the Confederacy came to be, how it's cold war with the Republic came to

fruition. He would lay on his side and look out the window until his he was exhausted enough he wouldn't think before falling asleep. He'd listen to the constant low rumbles and the gentle humming of the ships reactor and fusion drive, or to the shows he reluctantly agreed to watch with the rest of his friends.

On the second day he sat on the bridge as he watches Analadin and Lira station come into view. Analadin no longer his home and is now his minds designated vault for every bad thing that's ever happened to him. Though Lira Station was different. It held the flags of all 3 nations across Analadin and felt unique and not stale like they do alone. The planets surface was a rich green with sapphire blue waters. The clouds normally white, reflected the incredible hues of the filaments.

As for Lira Station, it's metal hull painted a brilliant gold and red, with bands of illuminated interiors stretching across the 5 central platforms. He watched it come into view with Olivia by his side. She brought a blanket down from her room and proceeded to lie it across the floor in front of the screens. Jake and Analie had given them both a weird look when they noticed the two of them sitting beside each other. Olivia had shot Jake an angry scowl and he raised his hands, turning away chuckling to Analie.

"I've known you for 7 years. Yet you haven't said anything." She says looking at him. Actually, looking at him. Her hair falls to her elbows as she sits crisscrossed now sitting in front of him.

"Anything about what?" He asks. Though he can guess. And he doesn't want to hear the question.

"Why did you leave your parents?"

She said it as if it was nay question. As if even thinking about it doesn't shake him down to his core.

"That's a story for another time Olivia."

She sits back and takes a deep breath.

"We just got this ship a bit over a year ago."

"So?"

"You've known the three of us since you were 12, invited us aboard for this life in space and said nothing about yours."

"My life is private."

"Why though? It doesn't have to be. You can trust us all. You can trust me." She says as if she's pleading for him.

"Why do you care about this so much? There are a billion other probing questions you could be asking. Why this one?" He asks with spite in his voice. Almost yelling.

Her face turns red. She's fidgeting with her hands. Her fingers dancing along her skin, her palm wrapping around her wrist.

He decides to break the silence, "I invited you all here because you're my only friends. You're the only people I can talk to. I'm not a great person. I'm an angry and rude and unfeeling man." She doesn't face him, but he's too far gone to stop, "I don't know what you got from me, but you've known me for long enough to know I don't talk about my past."

"Do you not trust us!? Do you not trust me!?" She's yelling now, and now she's too far gone.

"I don't! Not enough. I never will. I don't talk about anything before that day, I don't think about anything before that day. I never will!"

He's yelling, angry. Crying even maybe. He chokes on his own words. His thoughts race along neurons like a car on a road. Only all these roads lead to the same place and everything crashes. Colliding in spectacular fashion destroying any semblance of order and control.

He doesn't face her. He's too angry to look. Not at her though. At himself. Just she's there and he needs to let it go.

"Stop!" Jake says running in. "Before you both say something you can't take back." Jake looks at him, searching for any semblance of his ~~face~~ self. "Go, you're both acting like bumbling children."

"This is my ship!" He says standing up to face him. Jake stands a few inches taller than him. He can't beat him in a fight.

He looks down at his jacket. "Don't think about that. That's my sister and you're my best friend. Calm your ass down and go!"

"We will talk about this later." Jake says.

He walks away to his room without a single word. His steps reverberating through the hull. The door closes and he lies down and falls asleep, exhausted and angry.

He wakes up in a daze. *What the fuck just happened?*

He just screamed at Olivia. She did nothing wrong. She was curious, she's right. Jake is right too, they all are. He gets out of bed quickly and knocks on Olivia's room. She has an intricate gold/red flower hand painted on her door. In the center says her name in Sparkly letters. He knocks once more.

Before long the door slides open, and Olivia stands in front of him. She looks exhausted. Eye bags sit under her eyes and her normally clear face looks like it's been painted red. She stands weary and leaning with her shoulder braced against the doorframe.

"I'm sorry." Is all he musters.

"I don't accept." She says coldly.

"What can I do?" He says it like he's begging. He probably lost Jake, by extension Analie. Now Olivia.

"Tell me what made you act this way?"

"You know why. You're the psychologist."

"I know why you acted this way, you do too. I want what caused the why."

"You don't talk about it because your terrified we will think differently, or your terrified that you'll have to even entertain the thought of bringing up trauma."

"Then why would you make me bring it up?"

"Because, you can't sit with this forever. Over time it will eat more and more of your mind, it will fill whatever hole you dug to hide it. And then you will really be a broken man." She says. Her hips sag a bit towards the frame, her posture loosening.

Once again, she's splitting his skull open. She's reading each neuron like it's words on a page.

"My parents yelled and berated. Now I yell and berate."

She thinks for a moment. "But you're not, not to us? What makes us different than everyone else?"

"I don't love anybody else. I love you, I love Jake, I love Analie. You guys are my friends. Nobody else is. Nobody else matters." He's shocked at how easily those words left his mouth. He doesn't dare to look at her face. "If the people who were supposed to care for me and didn't why would anybody else? Why would anyone else be worth my capacity for kindness and empathy?"

She stands a full foot shorter than him. Her face at his chest and neck. She stops leaning and brings her arms to her side. She walks closer. Only a few feet between them both. "You've shown it to others. Your incredible capacity for empathy. I can name it more times than you think. You attack yourself so relentlessly beating yourself up over every little thing you don't let yourself heal. If you realized that these scars, the memories that run so deep don't have to be burdened alone. They don't have to be burdened at all."

He steps back. Maybe she's right. This feels like something that would of taken a lot more than one fake therapy session to accomplish. It feels nice though. To have someone who cares so much that she'll help him even though he was so cruel.

"You'll never forget those memories. They will stay with you forever. But they don't have to surface and run you. You seem to forget that your still here, still breathing and that you have the choice to be who you already are." She says almost crying. She guides her wavy black hair out of her eyes and steps back to sit down in her bed. Her head narrowly missing the frame above.

And she stays silent. In this moment that's all he wants. And he's grateful for it.

"Do you want to keep talking?" She asks. She asks it with so much calmness and kindness. Her sympathy and empathy palpable in the air he breathes. "We can continue tomorrow if you'd like that?"

"Yes. Yes please." And he walks away. Walks pass the mess hall ignoring Jake's quick stare. He walks to the bridge and sits down. The screen shifts from a live feed to a projected map. On that map sits a fleet. Just above it a Gold/Red diamond sits to mark the nation. Though this isn't an individual nation fleet. This is the Crown Fleet of the Confederacy.

"HAILING VESSEL 5009. POWER DOWN YOUR DRIVE AND DECELERATE RELATIVE TO CROWN FLEET. HEADING MARKED ON YOUR NAV."

What's going on all three of them say running into the bridge at once. He stands up and points to the message. "See for yourself."

Everyone straps in as they reorient the platform in line with the retrograde engines. They spin so slowly it feels like a lifetime, the force barely noticeable on his body. Until the latch clicks into place with a rumble.

"How many Gs to slow down relative to them?"

"5Gs actual, 2.5 internal. Should be relative in a few moments." Jake says as he clicks a button. The retrograde engines engage as each side of the screen turns to violent violets and purples.

"Hailing Alcrides, Prime of the Crown Fleet."

"Identify yourself Vessel 5009." A woman says seconds later. Her tone and voice covered by intermittent static and a voice changer.

"This is the Mighty Temperetania, a privateer corvette. I have 4 crew on board including myself. Forwarding all logs and flight details immediately.

"Understood Mighty Temperetania."

"What is your vessel doing here?"

"We were heading to Lira Station for some much needed shore leave?"

"Everything okay in this sector? Normally we don't get traffic stops."

They don't respond.

"Anybody else worried by this?" Analie asks calmly. She looks around searching our faces.

"I'm sure it's okay." Olivia says. Though he's not sure she believes that.

"We have had reports of a large converted pirate vessel on a heading to Lira Station." A man says this time. "You are free to continue your original course. If this vessel shows up on scopes act decisively and alert this frequency."

"Got it." Olivia says relieved.

"Why stop us? We clearly don't match its flight profile."

"It's a standard issue warning so we can identify ships without letting the enemy vessel know they exist. You haven't been a privateer long, have you?" The man asks.

"A bit longer than a year." He replies trying to sound respectful.

"Enjoy your shore leave Mighty Temperetania. Be careful." The man says before the transmission window closes.

"Well, that was stressful." Jake says. "Let's get going again."

Once again, he has to sit through the platform rotating and the engine firing. He looks around and Olivia catches his eye and shoots him a smile. For the first time he smiles back, not to be nice but because he wants too.

"Jake?" He asks.

"Hmm."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay boss. We all get heated sometimes. If you ever need a shoulder, I'm here for you."

"He might make some jokes in the wrong place and wrong time though. Just as a warning." Analie says chuckling. Jake air elbows her. "But seriously. Me too."

He just smiles, he smiles as the retrograde engines turn off, as the platform rotates, as the rear engines burn. And he smiles as Lira Station comes ever closer.

