

The Owl House: Within The Cosmos

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Prologue

Two Months Later...

Two months had passed since the harrowing events of *Into The Cosmos*, and the galaxy had grown colder for the fugitives aboard *The Donati*. Time had not dulled the memory of what had transpired—if anything, it had sharpened it, etched it into their bones. Luz Noceda, King Clawthorne, Atlas—the once-mighty Collector—and the Illustrian rogue Hesperos Holmes had become little more than phantoms in the systems they're situated in. Heroes turned fugitives, as their names carried an edge of fear and bitter betrayal. Their faces flashed across every known terminal and bounty hub, replicated in grainy wanted posters and holographic alerts with ever-increasing reward figures. Each image was paired with damning descriptions: Dangerous. Armed. Treasonous. Potential Reality Disruptors. In markets and cantinas, in starports and sensor grids, they were whispered about like myths—ghosts who slipped through wormholes, who crossed solar boundaries in the blink of an eye, always one step ahead of justice. Or so the propaganda claimed. In truth, there was no justice left to run from, only survival.

Behind every headline and every posted bounty loomed a far darker force: The Grand Huntsman. Dispatched by Orion, the Huntsman was not a bounty hunter in the traditional sense. He was a myth rendered flesh, a nightmare whispered into existence from the Archive Tower itself. Cloaked in a flowing mantle of cosmic fabric and star-forged armor, he bore no name, no face, only purpose—single-minded and absolute. His objective was not Luz, nor even Atlas. It was King, as he is the last Titan. His orders were brutal and unrelenting: eliminate the final living Titan, recover the Celestine Compass, and silence the anomaly before the convergence could begin. For the Archivists, King's survival was a loose thread in their tightly woven tapestry of order but for the Huntsman, it was personal. He remembered the war ages ago, when Titans and his people clashed in a battle of magic and belief. He had seen comrades fall under Titan claws and had watched in horror as magic twisted and fractured reality. The extinction of the Titans had been, to him, a necessary purge. That one had survived was an insult, an unfinished sentence. King was a threat not only to the Archivists' order and their ambitions but to the Huntsman's pride. Now, with the Celestine Compass stolen, and the final Titan in hiding, the chase had escalated into a galactic game of cat and mouse.

The fugitives could no longer afford the luxury of respite. No star system was safe. No backwater moon or silent asteroid belt could hide them for long. They changed routes frequently, sometimes mid-flight, erasing their ion trails, modifying their signatures, and relying on Hesperos's deep knowledge of cosmic cartography to stay one jump ahead.

Every few days, The Donati would drop out of warp travel in a new power down all nonessential systems, and drift like space debris, silent and invisible in the cold expanse. These pauses were moments to catch their breath and to recalibrate but they never lasted long. There was always a ping, a patrol, a coded transmission intercepted. Always the Huntsman's shadow, just a breath away.

Luz had started dreaming about him. In her sleep, she saw stars bleeding into black, heard the hum of his blade, and felt the weight of cosmic judgment pressing down on her lungs. She would wake in a cold sweat, reaching for her staff, while her mind raced with escape scenarios. And every time she looked at King—smaller than he should be, brave beyond measure—she felt her resolve harden. She knew that they couldn't fight like this, as their only choice was to run but they wouldn't run forever.

Atlas had once been a cosmic force—a celestial child capable of warping the fabric of space with a flick of his wrist, a Collector with boundless power and immortality built into every fiber of his being. However now, two months after the disastrous confrontation with the Archivists, that spark was gone. His powers drained, stolen, extinguished. The Archivists hadn't just taken his magic. They'd taken something deeper: his confidence, his agency, his sense of safety. What remained was a child stranded between godhood and humanity, stumbling through a reality that felt colder and heavier with every passing day.

At first, Atlas struggled to function. There were days he refused to speak and nights when he would wake up screaming in shared quarters aboard The Donati, drenched in sweat, the sound of the Archive Tower's humming walls still ringing in his ears. The phantom sensation of his Collector powers, once second nature, haunted him like a phantom limb. He'd reach out, instinctively, to summon a portal or levitate an object, only to be reminded of the void where his magic used to be. He was no longer a being of limitless power. He was just... Atlas, although he wasn't alone.

Luz, King, and Hesperos never let him fall far. They picked him up, not with platitudes, but with purpose. Luz began to train him practical, physical, and emotional resilience. They sparred in the cargo hold, practiced evasive maneuvers in zero-gravity simulations,

and taught him how to adapt to hand-to-hand combat. Hesperos showed him how to leverage his regained super strength, helping Atlas rediscover the power still coiled in his muscles and bones. And for King? King just sat with him. On the quiet nights, when the stars flickered outside the viewport like dying embers, he would curl beside Atlas and let the silence say what words couldn't. Even so, the loss changed Atlas in ways none of them could fully anticipate.

He became clingy—not in a childish way, but in a way born from deep, rooted fear. Fear of abandonment and being left behind if he couldn't keep up. The trauma of being torn from his siblings, imprisoned, and drained had left scars deeper than magic could ever reach. He began carrying with him three deeply personal items, symbols of connection he clung to like lifelines. The first was a crude but heartfelt drawing of himself, Luz, and King—smiling together under a sketched sun, with The Owl House in the background. The second was a small clay snake sculpture Luz had crafted for him during one of their shared story nights, an attempt to replicate the protective staff Eda once wielded. The third was Francois, King's beloved plush, now shared and cherished between the two of them. Atlas rarely let any of them out of reach, tucking them into his cloak or under his pillow depending on where they docked for the night. He refused to sleep alone, as the empty silence of isolation was too reminiscent of the Archive Tower.

So the trio—Luz, King, and Atlas—shared quarters, often squeezing together into the same bed aboard The Donati. They found comfort in proximity, a fragile sense of peace in knowing they were still together and alive. It became their routine, their sanctuary. Whenever the horrors of the galaxy loomed too close, whenever nightmares gripped one of them too tightly, they turned to each other.

Through it all, Luz bore a silent weight. She had been the one to lead them into the battle where Atlas lost his powers. She had seen it happen, she had watched as he was restrained, drained, and nearly broken while she fought to free him. She had failed. That guilt ate away at her day by day. She didn't speak of it often, but it lingered in her actions, how often she checked the ship's defenses, how she triple-scanned the sectors they entered, and how fiercely she insisted on taking patrol duty with Hesperos. She blamed herself not only for Atlas's loss, but for King's capture, and for not stopping Orion when she had the chance. His voice still echoed in her thoughts, chilling and absolute as he spoke of the convergence, an apocalyptic event he had no intention of preventing. That word alone haunted her within her soul.

In her mind's eye, she saw countless stars extinguish, felt the fabric of the realms begin to buckle. She had battled many foes—Belos, the Collector, even her own doubts—but Orion was something else. He wasn't a tyrant born of grief or arrogance. He was orderly, cold and calculating, a force that believed extermination was mercy. As he viewed that all life itself was lesser and failed at being able to evolve into its true potential, in his own eyes, the 'perfect specimen'. So because of that, Orion believed it is necessary to eradicate their existence, as if he were giving them his divine judgment of extinction. Then from the very ashes of their extinction, create new lifeforms that are capable of things perceived as impossible, yet these new lifeforms would be devoid of the abilities to think for themselves and feel emotions. As Orion believed these two aspects in any organism, whether they had sentience or not, were the reason they're unable to progress into a higher existence such as him. Luz could see now that Belos had been a monster of ideology but Orion was a monster of inevitability. Luz vowed to not let him win, ever. Luz understood, with unwavering clarity, that stopping Orion wasn't just a mission—it was a necessity born from love, not just guilt. Her resolve didn't stem solely from the shadows of her past failures or the trauma of seeing Atlas broken or King terrified. It came from the present, from the life she'd fought to build, and from the people who made it worth fighting for. Ever since she had first witnessed the terrifying extent of Orion's ambition—the cold, calculated reach of his power, the way he spoke as if entire worlds were pawns—an unshakable fear had rooted itself deep within her. Not a fear for herself, but for what might happen to those she held dearest if she failed. In her quietest moments, she could picture the smile of Amity, her partner in love and in life, fading into dread; she imagined Willow's courage twisted into despair, Gus's laughter drowned out by war, Hunter dragged into battle once more just when he'd begun to find peace. She thought of Vee, her sweet, brave sister, who had once been hunted and was finally safe until now. Lilith, who had tried so hard to atone. Eda, her fierce, wild mother who had given her everything. And Camila... her human mom, who had already endured the fear of losing her daughter once. Luz could not—would not—let any of them suffer for a threat they never asked for. The thought of the Celestine Compass falling into Orion's hands made her stomach twist. It wasn't just a key to cosmic domination, it was the match that could ignite both the Demon Realm and the Human Realm into chaos. She saw the two worlds she called home burning not in metaphor, but in vivid flashes; schools turned to warzones, forests to battlefields, safe havens to graves. The idea alone was enough to make her bones feel heavy with dread. Luz knew the price of inaction would be unbearable. So she stood, not as a girl running from her past, but as a protector of her future—and of everyone who gave her a reason to keep going. Though as every day and every week that had passed since the trio's stay in the cosmos, they had all deeply missed

the Demon Realm and wished for the opportunity to just return and put all of this danger that lingered around them to rest.

Still, the damage was done, as King had changed too. Once the bright and curious member of the group, he now walked with the quiet burden of his lineage. He had learned of Orion's vow: to eradicate every last Titan, to wipe their legacy from the cosmos and all of existence, as he believed that not only they'll stop his ambitions but the deep relationship and their experiences he had with the Titans. A vow that had been made long before King was even born. Luz had told him the truth, and in doing so, shattered his illusions of safety. King began to avoid using his powers entirely, even in times of need. Drawing attention could mean exposure and with that exposure could mean death. Instead, he spent long hours in the navigation room, poring over star maps, marking out dead zones or areas with the least traceable energy where they could hide if the Huntsman or Orion drew near. He barely spoke during these sessions, his small claws trembling as he held the marker in his hand, tracing escape routes over and over again. His voice grew quieter. His presence, more withdrawn.

They all bore scars but they were healing nonetheless. Their healing is best described to be slow, imperfect, but together. Amid the scars and the sorrow, there were moments of peace with one another that helped slightly to adjust to their new lives. Each evening, they told different stories amongst themselves, which some were real, while some were made-up. However, these stories shared a common theme whenever they've been told; they're wholesome, silly, and vivid stories that became a shared ritual amongst the trio. They laughed, they cried, and they remembered who they were before the galaxy itself took them in. They made talismans together during the two months that had passed since becoming trapped in the Realm of Cosmic Space. Luz carved hers in the shape of an owl and wore it over her heart, next to the necklace Amity had given her long ago. King's was a crowned medallion etched with a Titan glyph. Atlas wore his—a crude but heartfelt recreation of the Owl House's window—hidden in the folds of his cloak. Symbols of a world they longed to return to, a world where he truly belonged. A world they vowed to protect after having witnessed what Orion was truly capable of. During their time of trying to keep themselves together despite the various obstacles that had been in front of them, they would also write unsent letters. Luz to her mother and to Eda. King also wrote letters to his adoptive mother, Eda. Atlas, trembling, wrote his letters to Luz and King. His letters were filled with things he didn't have the strength to say aloud. While admittedly, the trio felt hurt when they wrote their letters but at the same time it helped in a way in their journey of healing.

While during all of this, Hesperos Holmes kept his usual charm and bravado intact, and he was far from being unshaken. He and Starry did everything they could to provide comfort aboard the Donati. Starry, with their comedic gestures and warm starlight, regulated the ship's environment to feel like a second home when they powered the ship. Hesperos, meanwhile, cooked when he could, told stories, and cracked jokes at all the right moments to lift the heavy atmosphere hanging over Luz, King, and Atlas. He maintained their schedules, kept up repairs, and handled negotiations with the quieter worlds and star systems they passed through. Outwardly, he was a captain, a guide, a friend. One who was reliable and in control. However, when the lights dimmed and the halls of the Donati fell silent, the mask slipped. In the privacy of his quarters, Hesperos mourned.

It had been two months since he learned the truth about the Play of Tributes, the cataclysmic event that decimated most of the Illustrian population. He figured out that the Archivists had orchestrated it, coldly and methodically. Not as a consequence, but as an act of cleansing.

His people were stargazers, dancers of light and symphony, historians of ancient memory but now their stories had ended in silence. Hesperos kept a holo-disc buried beneath his bunk, one of the few surviving archives from his home. It played ancient Illustrian ballads when activated. When no one was watching, he would sit and listen to them in the dark, hands folded, eyes closed. Though he didn't cry, as he had no tears left for that. All he could do was grieve, however, his mourning alone wasn't enough. He had made a vow—not loudly, not dramatically, but with quiet finality. He vowed that The Archivists would answer for what they did and pay. If it took the rest of his life, he would make sure their reign ended, not with fire, but with remembrance and truth. His desire for resistance was born not of hate, but of justice.

For now, though, he had a different mission. The Celestine Compass, a stellar artifact capable of charting hidden paths between Realms, was in his possession. And the Archivists were hunting it with fury. They knew it could undo the veils they had cast across the cosmos. They knew Luz and her companions—especially King—posed a growing threat. The Compass, in the wrong hands, could spell disaster. In the right ones, it could unravel centuries of manipulation.

Hesperos knew where he stood because of it. He guarded the Compass fiercely, locking it in the Donati's starlit vault, warded with the last enchantments of an Illustrian soulweaver. He kept Luz and the others on the move, jumping from minor slipstreams to realm-fissures, evading the Grand Huntsman at every turn. Each day brought close calls. Each night, Starry would alert him to new sightings of pursuit ships or scout familiars. And through it all, he kept his smile sharp, his coat stylishly fluttering in the artificial breeze, his voice full of light because he couldn't afford to break, not yet at least.

Not until the Archive Tower fell and the Archivists finally heard the song of the stars they tried to silence and when that day came, Hesperos Holmes would be ready—not as a courier or guide, but as the last voice of Illustria's defiance.

Meanwhile, far from the drifting safety of the Donati, a different force was moving in silent pursuit. Markus Star, a knight of an important cosmic order, had been dispatched by the Council of Arbora—the governing body of an ancient, secretive organization known as the Order of Arbora. Respected across the realm itself for their dedication to preserving the balance of magic, the Order entrusted Markus with a mission of utmost urgency: to investigate the mysterious break-in at the Vault of Alkanos to find leads that could hopefully lead up to him retrieving the stolen artifact known as the Celestine Compass.

Two weeks had passed since the heist; Markus had traveled tirelessly across several worlds, each one echoing with whispers and fragments of truth. His search was methodical—marked by long nights in broken temples, quiet interrogations in dimly-lit markets, and coded correspondence with members of both the Council and the shadowy Syndicate on Alkanos. Every trail he followed—every dust-covered clue, faded memory, or frightened witness—led him to one inevitable conclusion: the Celestine Compass was now in the hands of four individuals. Luz Noceda, King Clawthorne, Atlas, and a rogue cosmic courier named Hesperos Holmes.

While others in the Order viewed the mission as an issue of protocol, for Markus Star it had become personal. For the past two months, he had been plagued by visions—harrowing, celestial dreams filled with fire, unraveling stars, and the sound of something vast cracking across the heavens. These weren't ordinary nightmares. They were prophetic echoes, fragments of a possible future tied directly to the Nine Star Pieces: ancient crystalline fragments of immense magical potential, believed to be scattered across the Nine Realms nestled in the Great Tree of Magic. And according to

ancient doctrine, the Celestine Compass wasn't merely a navigation tool, it was a key. A living map that could guide its wielder to all nine Star Pieces. In the wrong hands, the consequences would be catastrophic.

The timing only worsened matters due to The Convergence; a long-foretold cosmic alignment that was approaching rapidly with mere days away. When the Nine Stars aligned, the barriers between worlds would grow thin and potentially unstable. If the Compass was used to collect even a fraction of the Star Pieces during that alignment, the wielder could reforge reality itself. Whether it would be in service of peace or annihilation, it depended entirely on who reached them first. Markus couldn't let that happen, to him retrieving the Compass wasn't about glory or duty. It was about preventing a prophecy from becoming reality. He carried his burden quietly, concealing his dreams even from the Council. Each one felt more vivid than the last: a dark figure looming at the roots of the Tree, a burning sky over Illustria, a realm collapsing into stardust. He didn't know if they were true visions or warnings—though there was a common theme with each one of them, only that they all began the moment the Compass was stolen. He traveled light. Though he wore the badge of the Order, Markus rarely announced his affiliation. Instead, he worked in the shadows, in order to further advance his efforts into his investigation. Now, his trail was narrowing. A recent transmission from a forgotten port confirmed a ship matching the Donati's description had passed through. And even more troubling—someone matching Atlas's appearance had been seen with it. Markus knew time was slipping through his fingers. He tightened his grip on the Compass case replica slung across his shoulder—both a reminder and a warning. He would recover the real artifact, even if it meant facing down a Star Person, the last Titan's heir, and a Human girl wielding star-forged magic.

Because if the visions were true, then the war to decide the fate of the realms had already begun. And it would be won not with armies... but with whoever held the map.



Chapter One: A New Status Quo.

The Donati touched down with a hiss of steam, its landing gear pressing into the rocky terrain of Xarax-4. The planet's surface was a barren, wind-swept wasteland, dotted with jagged rock formations and deep crevices that spoke of ancient geological upheavals. Overhead, the sky was a dull orange, hazed by dust storms drifting across the horizon.

Across from The Donati, another vessel had already settled—a rugged, battle-worn star cruiser with a history carved into its hull. Its exterior bore the marks of countless skirmishes: streaks of plasma burns, crude patchwork repairs, and insignias from different factions, each one a testament to a successful raid or conquest. The ship's engines let out a low, guttural hum, as if still simmering from recent action. The ramp of the battle-worn cruiser groaned as it lowered, a plume of dust curling into the air as heavy boots struck the ground in synchronized steps. Five figures emerged, each humanoid in form but distinctly unique in their appearance. Their armor was as rugged as their ship, mismatched and reinforced in places where past battles had left scars. The first figure was tall and skeletal-thin, with cybernetic limbs clicking softly with every step. The second, broad-shouldered and clad in thick plated armor, carried a massive blaster rifle slung across his back. The remaining three walked with the ease of seasoned fighters, their eyes scanning the area, hands twitching near their holsters.

Then came Gorr the Decapitator. The pirate lord stepped forward with a confidence that was earned, not feigned. He was massive, his presence enough to make lesser men reconsider their life choices. His long coat billowed behind him, the edges frayed from years of wear. The gleam of his cybernetic gauntlet was unmistakable, pulsing faintly with an eerie blue glow. His face was partially obscured by a hood, but his smirk—sharp and predatory—was clear as day.

The air between them was thick with unspoken history.

With the cruiser's crew in place, The Donati's rear entrance finally opened, releasing a hiss of pressurized air as its ramp lowered to meet the rocky terrain. The sound echoed through the barren landscape, a mechanical growl against the silence of Xarax-4. Then, stepping into view, came Hesperos Holmes. The feline captain carried himself with an effortless grace, his coat swaying with each measured step. His emerald eyes remained locked on Gorr as he descended the ramp, a quiet smirk playing on his lips and he didn't speak immediately. Instead, he let the moment stretch, taking in Gorr's stance, his crew's positioning, the subtle tension radiating from the group.

Finally, he halted just a few paces away. His tail flicked behind him as he offered a casual nod. "Gorr," he said smoothly. "You're looking well."

Gorr let out a dry chuckle, his voice deep and edged with amusement. "Holmes," he rumbled. "You have a way of making trouble seem like good business. Let's hope, for your sake, that you've brought what you promised."

Hesperos folded his arms as the wind kicked up dust around them, his eyes never leaving Gorr's imposing form. The pirate lord's mechanical gauntlet hummed softly, its faint glow pulsing with an almost rhythmic steadiness. It was a silent reminder of the power he wielded—not just in strength but in reputation. Between them, the deal hung like an unspoken promise, both men knowing the stakes but unwilling to be the first to yield.

"I trust you understand the value of what you're asking for," Gorr said, voice gravel-thick as he gestured behind him. A pair of his crew members stepped aside, revealing a reinforced hover crate, its surface adorned with warning labels and serial codes from long-forgotten manufacturers. The crate itself was unassuming, but the substance within was invaluable. Hesperos tilted his head, his ears twitching as he took in the sight.

"Star Dust," Gorr continued, his tone laced with satisfaction. "Refined. Pure. Straight from the outer nebulae of the galaxy itself. You won't find a batch this good on the open market—not unless you want to deal with the Archive Collective breathing down your neck."

Hesperos chuckled, his tail flicking lazily. "Oh, Gorr. If I were worried about the Archive Collective, I wouldn't be standing here with you."

Gorr's smirk widened, revealing sharpened teeth. "Fair point. But that just means you know exactly how much this is worth."

Star Dust wasn't just any resource. It was the lifeblood of the cosmic trade routes, a crucial element in the construction of high-grade starship engines, advanced weaponry, and even deep-space communication arrays. Industrial firms across the galaxy would pay a fortune for even a fraction of this shipment. Legal or not, it was the kind of asset that turned small-time operations into empires.

Hesperos approached the crate, running a clawed finger along its edge. "I take it this is the full shipment?"

Gorr's cybernetic fingers flexed. "All fifty kilos. Enough to keep a fleet running for months."

"Fifty thousand credits." Gorr's voice hardened. "Non-negotiable."

Hesperos let out a slow breath, as if considering. "A steep price," he mused. "Especially when I could get half this amount on the black market for—"

Gorr's eyes narrowed. "Don't test me, Holmes."

The tension between them thickened, the unspoken challenge was clear. Around them, Gorr's crew remained still, hands near their weapons but not yet moving. They were waiting for their orders to take actions if the transaction were to go awry.

"I don't like games, Holmes," he rumbled. "I brought what you asked for. Fifty kilos of Star Dust, pure as the nebula it was pulled from. And all I ask for you is to give me your end of the deal—fifty thousand credits. Now."

Hesperos remained perfectly still, his eyes locked onto Gorr's with the practiced ease of a seasoned negotiator. He knew that Gorr was dangerous, that his reputation as a ruthless pirate wasn't just for show. He also knew that if he handed over the credits too soon, they'd lose their only leverage. He exhaled slowly, shaking his head. "And you'll have your credits, Gorr. I didn't come all this way just to waste your time."

Gorr's brow furrowed. "Then why are we still talking?"

Hesperos gave a casual shrug, flicking some imaginary dust from his coat. "Because, my dear Decapitator, I'm a man who values transparency. You claim this Star Dust is pure, but how do I know you haven't cut it with something cheaper? You've been known to be... resourceful in past dealings."

"I don't cheat my clients, you know me Holmes." Gorr snarled.

"No, you just rob them blind when they're not looking lad," Hesperos quipped.

Gorr took another step forward, his fists clenching. "You're stalling."

Hesperos smirked. "Am I?"

Unbeknownst to Gorr and his crew, Luz had already slipped past them. The moment The Donati's ramp had opened, she had inhaled deeply, channeling her magic through the glyph drawn on her palm. The invisibility spell took effect instantly, bending the light around her as she vanished from sight. Luz crouched lower behind the jagged rocks, pressing her back against the cool stone as she steadied her breath. The invisibility spell had worked as planned, but the moment she exhaled, the magic unraveled, allowing the dim glow of Xarax-4's moon to cast her shadow once more.

She winced slightly, knowing that even the smallest misstep could alert Gorr's crew. Still, she remained unseen, her position secure among the uneven terrain. She reached into the satchel strapped to her side, fingers brushing over the smooth, familiar textures of the glyphs she had carefully prepared; plant and fire magic, the essentials.

Hesperos had made it clear—this wasn't just about the Star Dust. It was about precision, timing. Luz's role wasn't to charge in recklessly, but to wait, observe, and strike when the moment was right.

She slipped down her goggles Hesperos had loaned her which were now part of her new uniform, adjusting the focus as she peered toward the ongoing standoff. The enhancements in the lenses allowed her to catch even the smallest details—the subtle twitch of Gorr's cybernetic fingers, the way his crew shifted uneasily as their captain's patience wore thin, the calm but deliberate posture Hesperos maintained as he continued to stall.

Luz's fingers drummed lightly against the goggles, her mind running through the sequence of her next move. A well-placed plant glyph could bind Gorr's crew, restricting their movement before they had a chance to react. Fire magic would be a last resort—destructive, loud, and impossible to ignore. From her vantage point, she could see how close things were to boiling over. Gorr's stance had changed, his weight shifting forward, his mechanical gauntlet flexing with impatience. His crew exchanged glances, their fingers hovering near their holsters. Luz took a slow breath, steadying her nerves, as it was almost time to act.

Hesperos adjusted the cuffs of his coat, his expression remaining carefully composed as he shifted his weight slightly. His emerald eyes gleamed under the dim starlight, reflecting the faint neon glow of Gorr's mechanical gauntlet. The tension in the air was thick enough to cut with a blade, but the feline captain didn't seem the least bit perturbed.

"Fifty thousand credits is a bold price, Gorr," Hesperos mused, his voice smooth as ever. "Surely, for an old acquaintance, you could come down just a bit? Let's say... forty thousand? A fair price for a fair product."

Gorr let out a short, humorless laugh. "You think I run a charity, Holmes?" His cybernetic fingers flexed, the glow of his gauntlet flickering in agitation. "I said fifty. You don't like it, you can turn around and fly back to whatever scrapheap you crawled out of."

Hesperos exhaled, shaking his head as if in disappointment. "Come now, Gorr. We both know this business runs on negotiations. Perhaps forty-two? A clean, reasonable figure."

Gorr's eyes narrowed. His crew, who had remained mostly still up until now, started shifting slightly, exchanging glances. A quiet tension ran through them, the kind born of experience of when something felt off.

The pirate captain tilted his head, his smirk returning, though there was no humor in it now. "You're definitely stalling."

Hesperos blinked innocently. "Stalling? Gorr, please. I'm simply a businessman trying to get the best deal."

Gorr wasn't buying it. His grip on his gauntlet tightened, and behind him, his crew began to spread out ever so slightly. Their hands drifted toward their weapons—not drawing them yet, but close enough that a single wrong word could ignite a shootout.

One of Gorr's lieutenants, a hulking brute of a man with cybernetic plating along his arms, took a step closer, eyes scanning the area. "This doesn't feel right, boss," he muttered under his breath. "Something's off."

Hesperos felt Gorr's grip tighten around his throat, the cold metal of the pirate's cybernetic gauntlet pressing against his fur. The pressure constricted his breathing, but he kept his expression composed, refusing to give Gorr the satisfaction of seeing him struggle.

The pirate captain bared his sharp teeth, eyes alight with fury. "I knew it," he growled. "You never had the credits, did you, Holmes?"

Hesperos managed a strained chuckle despite the situation. "Gorr, you wound me. I always pay my debts... eventually."

Gorr sneered and tightened his hold, lifting Hesperos slightly off the ground. The feline captain's boots scraped against the dirt as he tried to maintain balance. His ears flicked slightly, catching the faint shuffling of boots from his crew behind him—his men were tense but hadn't drawn their weapons yet. Gorr's suspicion was growing, but he wasn't the type to pull the trigger without reason.

One of his lieutenants, a wiry woman with a cybernetic eye, stepped closer, scrutinizing Hesperos with a knowing smirk. "Boss, I bet he's got something up his sleeve," she said, her voice edged with amusement.

Gorr scoffed. "I know he does." He turned his glare back to Hesperos. "That's why I'm squeezing it out of him."

Hesperos gritted his teeth as the gauntlet pressed harder, a low mechanical whir indicating its increasing grip. His breathing became more labored, but he still met Gorr's gaze with unwavering defiance.

"Gorr... my friend," he choked out, voice strained but laced with amusement. "You're making this... unnecessarily difficult."

The pirate's lip curled in frustration. "You insult me, try to change the deal, and waste my time... and I'm the difficult one?"

His grip tightened further, and for the first time, Hesperos felt his pulse pounding against the unrelenting metal. The edges of his vision blurred slightly, but he held firm. He just needed to buy a few more seconds.

His lips curled into the faintest smirk. "Alright," he rasped. "Let's get this over with."

From her hiding spot, Luz's heart pounded in her chest as she watched Hesperos struggle against Gorr's grip. She had been waiting for his signal, and there it was—that familiar smirk, even while being choked. No more stalling, it was time to act.

With a deep breath, she slammed a fire glyph onto the ground, activating it with a spark of energy from her staff. A surge of flames erupted from beneath the feet of two of Gorr's crew members, sending them stumbling back with startled yells. The sudden eruption of light and heat against the cold night shattered the tense standoff in an instant.

Before the pirates could fully react, Luz was already moving. She conjured a plant glyph in one hand, slamming it into the rocky terrain. Thick vines burst forth from the ground, lashing out like whips, wrapping around the legs of two more of Gorr's lackeys, yanking them off their feet.

"Surprise, suckers!" Luz shouted, flipping her staff in her hands as she ran from her cover, keeping her momentum going.

The crew scrambled to regain their footing, their surprise quickly morphing into rage. One of them, a burly man with a mechanical arm, recovered fast and snarled, yanking a blaster from his holster. "It's an ambush! Take 'em down!"

Blaster fire erupted into the night, Luz ducked behind another rock as crimson bolts of plasma shot past her, striking the dirt and sending up sprays of dust. She gritted her teeth, gripping her staff tightly as she peeked out.

Meanwhile, Hesperos took advantage of the chaos. With Gorr distracted, the feline captain twisted sharply, using the thrusters in his boots to push off the ground and break free from the pirate's grasp. He flipped midair, drawing his twin pistols in the same motion, and fired down at Gorr's men. The stun rounds hit one of the pirates square in the chest, sending him tumbling backward with a grunt. Another ducked and returned fire, forcing Hesperos to swerve mid-flight.

Luz wasted no time. She pressed another fire glyph onto her staff, channeling its magic into the weapon. The tip ignited with a concentrated flame, and she swung it in an arc, releasing a controlled blast of fire toward the group of pirates who were still struggling against the vines. The heat forced them to scatter, and that was all the opening she needed. Luz dashed forward, her staff humming with energy as she swung it at the nearest pirate, cracking him across the side and sending him to the ground.

Hesperos, still hovering above, grinned as he picked off another pirate with a well-aimed shot. "Well, Luz, I must say—your timing is impeccable."

"Yeah, yeah, less talk, more shooting!" Luz called back, pressing another glyph she later traced with her staff onto the ground.

Hesperos kicked off the ground, activating the rocket thrusters in his boots. With a sharp hiss and a burst of blue energy, he shot upward, twisting midair as blaster fire zipped past him. From his elevated position, he had the perfect vantage point. His eyes were soon locked onto the scrambling pirates below, and with a flick of his wrists, he unleashed a volley of stun rounds from his twin pistols.

One of Gorr's men barely had time to raise his weapon before a precise shot struck him in the chest. He crumpled to the ground with a grunt, unconscious.

Hesperos chuckled to himself. "You lot really should've taken my deal."

Below, Luz moved with practiced speed. She ducked behind a rock as plasma bolts slammed into the terrain, sending sparks and dust flying. She exhaled sharply, adjusting her grip on the blaster Hesperos had given her. It wasn't her usual style—magic was more her thing—but she had to admit, the weight of the weapon in her hands was oddly reassuring.

A pirate rushed her position, a jagged vibroblade in his grip. Luz didn't hesitate. She quickly traced a plant glyph onto the ground with her staff, activating it with a quick stomp of her foot. Thick vines shot up from the rocky soil, wrapping around the pirate's legs before he could react.

His eyes widened. "Oh, come on—!"

Before he could finish, Luz aimed her blaster and fired. A stun round hit him square in the chest, and he collapsed into the tangled vines, groaning. "Man, this thing's handy," she muttered, giving the blaster an appreciative glance before ducking as more shots were fired her way.

Two more of Gorr's crew flanked her, their weapons raised. Luz quickly rolled to the side, pressing a fire glyph against the barrel of her staff. The moment she swung it, a concentrated arc of flames shot out, forcing the two to dive for cover.

Above them, Hesperos continued his aerial assault, weaving through the sky with fluid precision. A pirate on the ground took aim at him, but the feline captain saw it coming. He twisted, engaging the thrusters in his boots to shift his position instantly, narrowly avoiding the blast before returning fire. The stun round struck true, and another pirate hit the ground.

One by one, Gorr's men fell. Some unconscious, some bound by Luz's magic. The tide of battle had shifted. Luz and Hesperos moved in unison, each covering the other as they took down the remaining stragglers. It was quick, efficient, and almost effortless.

Then, just like that, the battlefield fell silent. Luz adjusted her stance, lowering her staff as she scanned the area. "That's the last of them."

Hesperos descended gracefully, his boots kicking up a small cloud of dust as he landed beside her. He holstered one of his pistols and smirked. "I must say, Miss Noceda, you make an excellent partner in crime."

Luz huffed, smirking back. "You mean partner in bounty hunting."

Soon a deep, guttural growl interrupted their moment of victory, they both turned. Gorr The Decapitator still stood, his massive frame heaving with fury. His crew was defeated,

but he was far from finished. His gauntlet pulsed with raw energy, and his sharp teeth curled into a wicked snarl. "You're gonna regret this," he rumbled.

Hesperos dusted off his coat, adjusting the lapels as he eyed Gorr with casual amusement. "Well, that was entertaining," he mused before pointing one of his pistols at the pirate captain. "But let's get to business. I heard you got more than you offered, the rest of the Star Dust—hand it over, now."

Gorr stood firm, breathing heavily, his crimson eyes burning with rage. His crew was down, his ship vulnerable, but defiance still clung to him like a second skin. He rolled his shoulders, metal gauntlet crackling with energy. "You think I'm just gonna hand the rest of it over?" he snarled. "You have no idea who you're messing with."

Luz scoffed, stepping forward and twirling her staff in her hands. "Dude, your crew is out cold, your fancy glove isn't scaring anyone, and we could really use that Star Dust." She planted a hand on her hip. "So how about we skip the part where you act all tough and go straight to the part where you give up?"

Gorr sneered. "Over my dead body."

Hesperos sighed, shaking his head. "Always with the dramatics. Fine. Luz, would you like to do the honors?"

Luz grinned. "Gladly."

She grabbed a handful of glyphs from her belt, eyes gleaming with mischief. With a flick of her wrist, she tossed them into the air. As they floated, she tapped her staff against the ground, activating them all at once.

A swirl of fire, wind, and crackling vines exploded around her, the elements intertwining in a controlled but chaotic storm. Flames flickered against her skin but did not burn her. The air itself seemed to hum with raw magic.

Gorr's bravado faltered. His eyes darted to the glowing glyphs, then to the arcs of fire spiraling around Luz's staff. He took an involuntary step back.

Luz tilted her head. "Still wanna play tough guy?"

For the first time, Gorr hesitated. His fists clenched, but his breathing had quickened, and the tension in his stance wavered. He looked at Hesperos, then back at Luz.

"...Fine," he spat, barely containing his fury. "Take all of it. It's in the cargo hold of my ship."

Hesperos clapped his hands together. "Now, was that so hard?" He motioned toward The Donati. "Luz, let's get what we came for."

With Gorr reluctantly leading the way, they boarded his ship and made their way to the cargo chamber. There were five more crates of Star Dust, making it a total of six counting the one Gorr and his crew showed Hesperos before the battle, each crate sitting neatly stacked, their metallic surfaces reflecting the dim interior lighting.

Luz whistled. "Wow. That's a lot of credits waiting to happen."

Hesperos smirked. "Indeed. Let's not waste time, mate."

Working quickly, they loaded the crates onto a floating cargo lift, guiding them down the ship's ramp and toward The Donati. As the last crate was secured, Hesperos turned to Gorr, who glared daggers at them both.

"You know," Hesperos mused, "I was going to let you walk away from this, but given your reputation..." He pulled out a holo-pad, bringing up the bounty listing for Gorr The Decapitator. A hefty sum of credits flashed on the screen. Hesperos grinned. "You're worth quite a bit yourself."

Gorr growled. "You wouldn't—"

Luz aimed her blaster at him. "Oh, we totally would."

With little choice, Gorr was restrained and escorted onto The Donati, locked securely into the ship itself.

As they began lifting off inside of the elevator compartment, Luz leaned against the wall, exhaling with satisfaction. "Not a bad payday."

Hesperos chuckled, setting The Donati's course. "And we're just getting started."

Soon the trio would reach their designated floor, that being the main hold, Luz Noceda and Hesperos Holmes stepped back onto the room, they were instantly met with the familiar, high-pitched patter of feet and then a booming voice.

"Well, well, well! Look who finally dragged back a walking paperweight!" King shouted, eyes wide as he caught sight of the bruised and chained form of Gorr the Decapitator slumped between them. "I thought 'Gorr the Decapitator' would be taller. And, y'know... have more head." The Titan chuckled smugly, crossing his arms as he circled the prisoner. "More like Gorr the Beheaded! What's next? Are we catching 'Larry the Mildly Inconvenient' next?" His voice pitched with gleeful sarcasm, drawing a burst of restrained laughter from both Luz and Hesperos.

Luz's amusement, however, shifted the second she caught sight of Atlas. The young Collector's eyes had gone wide the moment she stepped aboard, and without a word, he rushed forward and wrapped her tightly in his arms. "I'm glad you're okay," he whispered, voice trembling slightly. "I was really scared. I thought... I thought maybe something went wrong. That you might not come back."

There was a faint ache behind Luz's smile as she hugged him back. She kept her voice light, her tone practiced. "Hey, I'm tougher than I look, remember? Besides, someone's gotta drag Hesperos out of trouble." Atlas didn't say anything, instead he held onto her just a second longer before reluctantly letting go.

Breaking the heavy moment, Luz turned toward King and raised an eyebrow. "Think you and Atlas can keep Gorr here from gnawing through his cuffs until we drop him off at Honkoko?"

King gave a sharp salute. "You're looking at the finest glorified babysitters in the galaxy!" He marched dramatically over to Gorr, who groaned lowly in response. "You twitch, you lose a finger. Or five. Just sayin'."

"I'll make sure he doesn't get bored," Atlas added, as he slightly moved his fingers in a motion that hinted at a playful menace behind his grin.

"Perfect," Hesperos muttered with a dry grin, slapping the controls beside the ramp as it closed behind them. "We'll be back before he even gets the chance to miss his decapitations."

Inside the cockpit, the atmosphere shifted into focused determination. Luz slid into her seat and began flipping switches, while Hesperos leaned over the main console, entering coordinates for the Honkoko system. The warm hum of the ship's systems coming back online echoed through the corridor, and the soft glow of lights reactivated panel by panel.

"Starry," Hesperos called over the comms, fingers moving with practiced speed. "We're green on all systems. Time to power up the warp core."

From deep within the ship's heart came Starry's unmistakable voice, high-pitched and giddy, crackling through the speakers. "Ooooooh! You got it, boss buddy!! Crankin' up the cosmic juice—WOOOSH!!!" A vibrating hum built steadily beneath their feet, signaling the warp core coming alive.

"Warp core's stable," Luz confirmed, watching the console's readings stabilize.

Together, she and Hesperos activated the final sequence. Outside, the view of Xarax-4's dusty crimson terrain shrank rapidly as The Donati roared to life, thrusters launching them upward. In a flash of light, space stretched and twisted—the ship slipped seamlessly into the warp, stars streaking past them like ribbons of energy.

Inside the cockpit, the mood settled into a quiet, reflective hum, the adrenaline fading but the weight of unspoken thoughts lingered just beneath the surface.

After a while, The Donati emerged from warp travel, the shimmering veil of warp energy peeling away to reveal the Honkoko Star System. The main planet in the system, Honkoko, was a massive golden-brown planet, whose surface had many deep orange canyons that stretched across its surface. The planet's terrain is mostly barren but with occasional dark scars, those 'scars' happened to be wreckage fields from ancient star battles, it dotted the land like wounds. Massive storm systems swirl slowly across the surface, kicked up by powerful desert winds, often forming towering sand cyclones visible from space like swirling ochre spirals. The planet orbits two blazing suns, casting intense dual shadows and creating a fiery glow across its day side. The light reflects off the sand, giving Honkoko an almost metallic shimmer from a distance, like burnished

gold. From certain angles, you might catch a flash from the colossal husks of derelict ships half-buried in the dunes, leftovers from different long-forgotten wars. A faint reddish haze surrounds the atmosphere, making it look like the planet is perpetually glowing from within. Despite it being a desert planet, it served as a bustling hub of trade, industry, and no small amount of danger. The twin suns cast long streaks of light across the dense asteroid belts and towering space stations that littered the system.

The Donati glided smoothly toward the planet's tropopause, revealing it was dominated by sprawling cityscapes, its surface marked with trade hubs that moved like veins across the land. Hesperos expertly maneuvered The Donati down toward a designated landing pad just outside the heart of the marketplace. The landing thrusters hissed as they deployed, and with a final, gentle touch, the ship settled onto the platform.

Luz leaned against the co-pilot's chair, stretching. "Honkoko, huh? This place looks... lively."

Hesperos chuckled, flipping switches on the control panel. "Lively" is one word for it. Dangerous is another." He stood, dusting off his coat. "Keep your wits about you, Miss Noceda. The market here attracts all sorts—some 'friendlier' than others."

As the rear ramp of The Donati lowered, a rush of market sounds greeted them—merchants shouting their wares, the hum of speeders zipping overhead, and the chatter of countless species haggling, arguing, and laughing. The scent of sizzling street food mixed with the acrid smell of engine grease, creating a strange but oddly comforting aroma.

Inside, the sterile quiet of the main hold was quickly replaced with footsteps as Luz and Hesperos moved in, both alert and tense. Gorr shuffled behind them in magnetic cuffs, his head still lowered. King and Atlas stood at attention near the back of the hold, lounging near the sealed brig where Gorr had been temporarily held. Atlas tilted his head as Luz entered, his golden eyes scanning her face for any sign of distress. King clambered up on a stack of crates and immediately began speaking, his voice sharp but tinged with concern. "So what's the plan, sister? We storm the streets with this giant oaf on a leash?"

Luz shook her head firmly. "You two are staying on the ship," she said, her tone gentler than the words themselves. "It's for your own safety. I don't know how bad it can get

down there, and I can't risk either of you getting recognized—especially not in a place like Honkoko." Her voice was calm, but there was a protective edge underneath it.

King opened his mouth to argue, but paused when he caught the look in Luz's eyes. It wasn't a request—it was a quiet plea. Atlas nodded first, stepping forward and placing a hand over his chest in mock solemnity. "Fine. We'll man the ship. But you better come back, okay?" His voice wavered ever so slightly at the end. "No weird hero stuff."

Luz gave a faint smile. "I promise." She turned to King, who narrowed his eyes but eventually relented with a nod and a wave of his clawed hand.

"You break that promise, I'm coming after you," King muttered. "And I'll bring snacks for the trip—out of spite."

With a soft chuckle, Luz moved to the nearby console and pressed a circular button on the wall. A mechanical whir followed as a second ramp hissed open at the rear of the ship, revealing the shadowed cargo hold. Inside, six sealed crates, each glowing faintly with the subtle shimmer of compressed Star Dust, lined the wall. A subtle hum pulsed from within them, barely audible, like bottled starlight waiting to be unleashed.

Hesperos let out a low breath and adjusted his coat as the two of them each took hold of a gravity dolly and began loading the crates with practiced care. With Gorr tethered to Hesperos via a reinforced plasma leash, Luz gave one last glance toward the ship's interior, toward the figures of King and Atlas now silhouetted by the hold's light. Then, together, she and Hesperos descended the ramp into the cityscape beyond, as each step away from the ship feeling heavier, as though the Star Dust wasn't the only thing they were carrying into the heart of Honkoko.

Luz and Hesperos descended onto the marketplace floor, navigating through the sea of vendors and travelers. To their left, a towering Drimariun trader—eight feet tall and cloaked in layered gray sashes—haggled with a squat Nufflekin over enchanted sun-shields. The Drimariun's four eyes blinked independently, while the Nufflekin, resembling a fuzzy orange orb with stubby legs and a single curling horn, squeaked indignantly and tossed up a pouch of tokens.

Two Nahrivellians, elegant and amphibious with fins crowning their heads, strolled past them like tourists, marveling at the colorful hanging fabrics that danced with the breeze.

One of them caught Luz's eye and smiled—polite but wary, as though unsure whether to nod in greeting or retreat.

A Vulpinari merchant barked over the din, her voice raspy yet melodic as she waved down customers to her stall of "Genuine Ether-Crystals." Her body was covered in soft bioluminescent fur that pulsed gently with color, matching the stones she sold. Luz paused to admire the shifting lights, but Hesperos tugged at her sleeve. "Don't stare too long," he murmured. "Vulpinari charmworks have a bite."

The crowd thickened near the central square, where a massive stone fountain burbled—not with water, but with shimmering, gravity-defying droplets of green liquid known as virellian nectar, harvested from Honkoko's deep-sand roots. Children of the local Skaldrin species, small beings with insectoid limbs and glittering compound eyes, splashed in the nectar as their caretakers bartered for spices.

From overhead, a Soari Wingflier, humanoid but feathered and lithe, glided down with a rustle of golden wings and perched atop a vendor stall, her talons curling on the edge as she shouted out her wares: rare fangs, wind-dried fruits, and desert scrolls written in a long-lost language. Her voice echoed like birdsong through the marketplace.

Luz's eyes kept darting—taking it all in. Despite the press of bodies and the chaos of sound, she couldn't help but feel a sense of awe. There was magic here, but not the kind she was used to. It was older, quieter, woven into the creases of the sandstone, in the rhythm of the barter, the way the sellers chanted incantations between sales. It was the kind of magic that endured.

Hesperos stopped at a spice stall run by a hooded Varnathi, their obsidian skin shimmering beneath the shade. Their face was mostly hidden, but glowing azure eyes peered from the folds as they gestured to racks of dried powders in shades of crimson, emerald, and blue.

"Looking for something to make your mind forget reality?" the Varnathi asked. "Tempting," Hesperos smirked, tossing a few coins onto the table. "But we're actually here for other businesses as you can see heh."

They moved on, the thick heat pressing in from all sides. Hesperos walked with an easy confidence, his feline eyes darting around as he assessed their surroundings. Luz, however, couldn't help but be drawn to the interactions happening around her.

Near a fruit stand, an elderly alien merchant—her skin a soft blue, her hands worn with age—offered samples of produce to passing customers. Soon a pair of armored Archive Collective scouts loomed over her, their white armored uniforms pristine in contrast to the dusty, well-worn marketplace.

"You're three cycles late on your tariff payments," one of them said flatly, his visor reflecting the merchant's anxious expression.

"I—I just need more time," the merchant pleaded. "Business has been slow, and—"

The second scout shoved a crate off her stall. It hit the ground with a hard crash, scattering ripe, golden fruits across the dirt. The merchant gasped, scrambling to gather them.

"More time?" The scout sneered. "You off-worlders are always asking for more time. Maybe you should pack up and leave Honkoko if you can't keep up."

Luz felt her fists tighten, she wanted to do something. She wanted to step in, to use her magic, to wipe that smug look off their faces but she knew better.

She cast a glance at Hesperos, who hadn't broken stride. His ears twitched slightly—he'd seen what happened, but he didn't react. He simply pressed forward, as if nothing had happened. Luz took a breath, forcing herself to follow.

Hesperos spoke without looking at her. "I know that look, Luz."

Luz exhaled sharply. "It's messed up."

"Of course it is," Hesperos said, adjusting the cuffs of his coat. "But we don't have the luxury of noble heroics today. We have a bounty to cash in, and the Archive Collective is the last thing we need on our tails."

Luz clenched her jaw but said nothing. He was right. Drawing attention to themselves would be reckless—especially after what happened with Orion.

Still, as they moved deeper into the marketplace, the sight of the scattered fruit and the defeated look on the merchant's face burned into Luz's memory. One day, she thought. One day, she'd do something about it but for now, she kept walking.

Hesperos and Luz weaved through the dense marketplace, eventually arriving at a heavily fortified structure near the trade district's edge. Unlike the vibrant vendor stalls they had passed, this one was built for function over aesthetics—thick metal plating, reinforced doors, and armed guards stationed at its entrance. A massive neon sign flickered overhead, displaying the unmistakable insignia of the Bounty Exchange.

As they approached, one of the guards, a broad-shouldered reptilian alien with dark, scaled skin, grunted and nodded toward them. "You got business?"

Hesperos smirked. "Wouldn't be here if we didn't." He motioned toward the cargo hover-lift trailing behind them, loaded with the secured crates of Star Dust. "We've got a delivery, and a guest." He gestured toward Gorr, who was still bound, his face locked in an expression of pure hatred.

The guard eyed the crates and then Gorr. His reptilian eyes widened slightly before stepping aside. "Go on in. The boss will want to see this."

Luz and Hesperos stepped inside, the air growing noticeably cooler as they entered the climate-controlled facility. At the far end of the room, behind a reinforced counter, stood a burly alien with four arms and pale, almost translucent skin. His lower pair of arms busied themselves with a holo-terminal, while the upper pair crossed over his chest as he observed them approach. His eyes were black and beady, reflecting the dim lighting of the room.

"Well, well," the alien rasped, his voice deep and slightly mechanical. "If it isn't Hesperos Holmes. Thought you were off chasing bigger fish."

Hesperos smirked. "Sometimes the biggest fish are the ones you reel in quietly." He patted the top of one of the Star Dust crates. "We've got six crates of high-grade Star

Dust, each packed with at least fifty kilos. And," he nudged Gorr forward, "this charming fellow."

The bounty manager arched what passed for an eyebrow, leaning forward as he accessed the holo-terminal. His lower hands tapped across the glowing interface while the upper pair adjusted a sleek visor strapped over his face. Data flickered across the screen.

"Let's see..." The manager's voice took on a professional tone. "Six crates of Star Dust, each containing fifty kilos... that's fifty thousand credits per crate." He whistled, an odd, warbling sound. "That puts you at a total of three hundred thousand credits just for the goods."

Luz blinked. "That's... a lot of zeros."

Hesperos smirked but said nothing as the bounty manager continued.

"And as for Gorr The Decapitator..." He tapped on his screen, bringing up a bounty listing. A glowing image of Gorr's snarling face appeared, along with a long list of offenses—raiding, smuggling, execution of prisoners, ship hijackings, and at least three counts of high-level treason against independent systems.

"Current price on his head is thirty five thousand credits," the manager concluded. He leaned back, clearly impressed. "That brings your total payout to three hundred thirty five thousand credits."

Luz's mouth fell open slightly. "I—I mean, yeah. Of course. That sounds about right."

The manager chuckled. "You two really know how to bring in a haul." He tapped a final command into his terminal, and a loading bay on the side of the facility hissed open. A mechanical arm reached out, grabbing the cargo crates one by one and securing them into the exchange system. Two additional guards came forward, grabbing Gorr and dragging him toward the detention processing chamber.

Gorr snarled, struggling against his restraints. "You think this is the end, Holmes?" he spat. "You have no idea who you're messing with!"

Hesperos gave him a lazy wave. "That's a future-me problem."

Luz grinned, arms crossed. "Yeah, yeah, we've heard it all before. 'You'll regret this! I'll come back stronger!' Yada yada. Just take the L already."

Gorr was forcibly escorted away, his curses fading as the doors slammed shut behind him.

The bounty manager chuckled again, shaking his head. "You two are a riot." A moment later, a small, floating drone hovered over to them, carrying a glowing holo-chip. "Here's your payment— three hundred thirty five thousand credits, transferred to your accounts."

Hesperos took the chip and nodded. "Pleasure doing business."

As they stepped out into the marketplace, the weight of the holo-chip in Hesperos' pocket and the sheer number of credits attached to it left an undeniable sense of triumph in the air. Hesperos stretched his arms, his tail flicking behind him in satisfaction.

"Well, that went better than expected," he mused, his usual smug grin present. "I was expecting a bit more haggling, maybe some bureaucratic nonsense. But no, smooth sailing all the way." He placed his hands on his hips and exhaled deeply. "Three hundred thirty-five thousand credits, Luz. That's the kind of payday that makes all this bounty-hunting nonsense worth it."

Luz, however, had fallen a few steps behind him, her mind lost somewhere else.

She held her arms behind her head, gazing up at the Honkoko Star System's sky, its hazy, violet clouds stretching endlessly into the atmosphere. There was something about today's bounty—about the way she and Hesperos had worked together—that reminded her of another time, another place. She remembered those odd-job bounty hunts with Eda. The Owl Lady was never the most conventional bounty hunter—most of the time, she took those jobs in order to just make a living for the two of them. Luz used to tag along, both out of necessity and because, despite everything, those moments had been... fun. They never pulled in anything close to the kind of money she and Hesperos had today, but the reward was never really about the payout. It was about the experience, about laughing off their failures when things didn't go as planned, about learning how to navigate a world that had, at the time, seemed so permanent. Though that was gone now. The Boiling Isles,

the Human Realm—they both felt so far away, like distant dreams she could barely hold onto.

"Luz?"

She blinked, suddenly aware that Hesperos was watching her. His expression had softened, the usual arrogance giving way to something more thoughtful.

"You good?" he asked.

Luz forced a smile, shaking off the creeping homesickness. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

Hesperos tilted his head slightly, clearly unconvinced, but before he could push further, his ears twitched, catching something in the crowd.

Luz caught it too—a shift in the atmosphere, a ripple of tension threading through the marketplace.

Two figures moved through the crowd with precision, their armor sleek, adorned with the telltale insignia of the Archive Collective. Their glowing visors scanned the crowd, methodical, predatory.

Hesperos' tail flicked in agitation. "We've got company."

Luz's heart skipped a beat. Her fingers instinctively hovered over her glyph pouch.

The Archive Collective were here and they were looking for someone. The moment Hesperos and Luz locked eyes with the approaching Archive Collective scouts, neither of them needed to say a word. They turned on their heels in near-perfect unison, moving swiftly through the bustling marketplace without drawing too much attention.

"Act natural," Hesperos muttered under his breath, though the tension in his voice made it clear that he was anything but.

"Yeah, because that's totally easy when literal space soldiers are tailing us," Luz whispered back, gripping the strap of her satchel tightly as they weaved through the crowd.

The Archive Collective scouts moved methodically, their glowing visors scanning the faces of merchants and travelers alike. Their slow but deliberate pace was more terrifying than if they had broken into a sprint—because it meant they weren't just looking. They were hunting.

As soon as they were far enough ahead, Hesperos nodded toward an alleyway leading to the docks. "Pick up the pace." Luz didn't need to be told twice. The two broke into a quick but controlled stride, slipping past rusted cargo crates and workers unloading shipments of exotic goods. The Donati was just ahead, its sleek frame standing in stark contrast to the weathered freighters surrounding it.

As they reached the boarding ramp, Hesperos slammed the emergency panel on the side, forcing the entrance to slide open with a hiss. "Starry! Get the ship online, now!"

From inside, a cheerful, echoing voice called back. "Oh-ho! I thought you'd never ask, Captain!"

A glowing, sentient star with a perpetually giddy expression floated down from the cockpit, spinning in excitement. "Ooooh, are we running from someone again? You know I love a dramatic getaway!"

"Less talking, more charging!" Hesperos snapped, bounding up the ramp with Luz right behind him.

"Fine, fine, killjoy," Starry huffed playfully, but immediately zipped toward the ship's core.

Luz barely had time to catch her breath before the Donati's engines roared to life. Through the open ramp, she caught a glimpse of the two Archive Collective scouts breaking into a sprint, pushing past civilians as they drew their weapons.

"We've got incoming!" she shouted.

Hesperos didn't hesitate—he slammed his fist on the controls, closing the ramp just as a burst of plasma fire ricocheted off the hull. "Starry!"

"Way ahead of you, Cap!"

The ship hummed with energy as Starry funneled his cosmic essence into the Donati's power core. Bright streaks of golden energy crackled along the ship's structure, the engines pulsing as they reached maximum output.

"Calculating warp coordinates... aaand done!" Starry announced.

"Punch it!" Hesperos commanded.

With a final surge of energy, the Donati rocketed off the landing pad, ascending into the vast expanse of space. The moment they cleared Honkoko's atmosphere, the ship's navigation locked onto a new course, and in the blink of an eye, the stars around them stretched into long, radiant lines.

With a shuddering jolt, they entered warp travel—leaving the Archive Collective scouts, and any trouble they brought, far behind.



Chapter Two: We Got Bigger Problems On Our Hands.

The interior lights of The Donati pulsed dimly in hues of violet and deep blue as it sliced through the swirling tunnel of folded space. Stars bent around them like smears of paint

on a cosmic canvas, and the quiet hum of the ship's engine mixed with the occasional rattle from the hull—typical signs of warp travel.

King sat cross-legged on the control deck, his tiny clawed hands gripping a rolled-out parchment filled with messy scrawlings, arcane symbols, and color-coded stars. It was a rough map of safe warp zones, abandoned moons, and forgotten backchannels between planets where they could hide if Orion or the Archivists caught their trail. He squinted at a corner of the parchment and muttered, "That moon crater on Zinus is definitely out. Too many fungal leeches... again. Yuck." he grumbled, scratching out one path and marking another. His tail flicked as he made another tiny note. He didn't like being the strategist. Not because he wasn't capable—he was the son of The Titan, after all—but because it reminded him just how much danger they were in but despite it, he knew how important it was to remain hidden at all costs. Especially with the artifact they were actively protecting.

Luz leaned over the railing behind him, quietly listening, her eyes heavy with the kind of tiredness that sleep couldn't fix. She didn't interrupt him as she had lately been letting King lead more often, especially when it came to navigation. He had grown since their time on the Boiling Isles—more thoughtful, more careful. There was a silent strength in him now that Luz was learning to rely on.

Soon a soft thump in the background caught her attention. Across the ship, Atlas was reaching up toward a narrow compartment nestled above one of the shelves. He was reaching for an old charm orb that had rolled onto a high shelf. He grunted softly, standing on the tips of his boots, white hair bouncing as he stretched with every ounce of effort. The orb glittered with a faint trace of magic, something that seemed to have caught his curiosity.

Luz would soon approach Atlas, "Need a hand?" Luz offered gently.

Atlas turned and gave a sheepish nod. "Yes, please. I can't quite... get it."

Luz stepped up, smiling. "Don't worry, I've got it." She grasped it, smiling. "There, see? No problem—" Her foot slipped. In one heart-skipping instant, Luz lost her balance. The orb slipped from her fingers and shattered on the metal floor with a sharp, crystalline crack. The soft blue light inside the starmote flickered, then dimmed entirely.

"Oh—oh no!" Luz gasped, immediately dropping to her knees, as she frantically grabbed onto the multiple shattered pieces of the orb. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to— I should've been more careful, I—"

"Luz," Atlas said gently.

"I can fix it, just give me a minute! Or maybe—" Her words tripped over each other like raindrops in a storm. She was already scooping up shards of glass and metal, her fingers trembling.

"Luz."

She paused.

Atlas knelt beside her, while his small hands reached out to stop her from cutting herself with the shards. Their eyes softened as he spoke. "It's uh, okay. Really."

"But it was important," Luz whispered, while her voice cracked. "You liked it..."

"It was just a keepsake," Atlas said, "and it's not more important than you."

Luz froze. The words settled over her like a warm breeze, but they didn't erase the cold in her chest.

King wandered over, looking between them. "You okay?"

"I—I don't know," Luz admitted.

There was silence for a moment, however, before Atlas opened their mouth, just about to comfort Luz further, the lights on The Donati's console flashed red and a deep, bone-shaking rumble groaned through the hull.

Then came the shriek. It wasn't a sound meant for air or ears—more like a vibration of space itself, echoing across dimensions in a way that turned the stomach. The ship lurched and shook violently from the very shriek that had occurred.

"What the—?!" Luz grabbed onto the nearby wall, steadying herself as the ship tilted.

Starry's voice rang through the comms in a mix of panic and professionalism. "Hostile anomaly detected! It's the Warp Eels! I repeat—Warp Eels, closing in fast!"

Atlas's eyes widened. "Oh no... not those things."

Before anyone could react further, a massive, glistening shape swept past the window—a shadow writhing through the warpstream like a serpent in water. It was longer than the Donati, with slick, obsidian-black scales that reflected distant starlight. Its maw split open, revealing rows of translucent, needle-sharp teeth and a glowing throat like the heart of a dying star.

Luz's instincts kicked in. "King—battle stations!" she barked, already sprinting toward the turret hatch on their ship. "On it!" King shouted, his voice already coming through a comm as he darted down a side corridor.

Atlas, startled but focused, turned to help Starry reroute power to the ship's shields. Meanwhile, Hesperos Holmes stomped down from the upper deck in order to focus on piloting the ship to safety and avoid the Warp Eels. "Warp Eels," he growled. "Why must they inhabit warp tunnels... Eh whatever, let's just fry these overgrown leeches and get outta of this warp tunnel immediately!"

Inside her turret, Luz gripped the twin control handles. The targeting reticle danced wildly over the void, tracking the first Warp Eel as it circled back for another pass. She exhaled, steadying her breath, "Here we go..."

With a burst of plasma light, she opened fire—a barrage of energy bursts lancing through space. The eel screeched as one shot hit its side, momentarily stunning it, causing its sinuous body to thrash against the warpstream currents. "Direct hit!" Luz called out. "But it's still moving!" King's voice buzzed in. "Let me try the left fin—those things hate getting clipped there." A second turret spun on the belly of the ship, controlled remotely from King's pod. He let loose a precision volley, his energy cannon rounds crackling with pink-purple energy. The eel jerked in pain and spiraled away from The Donati, momentarily disoriented.

"Nice shot, Your Majesty," Luz praised with a grin.

"I do have royalty-level aim," King replied smugly, though his tone quickly dropped. "Uh... Luz? There's more."

Through the front viewport, three more Warp Eels surged out of the cosmic stream, their hunger made manifest in writhing tongues and gnashing, needle-like sharp teeth. They moved in eerie sync, weaving between the aftershocks of the warpstream.

"Of course there's more," Luz muttered, narrowing her eyes.

Atlas helped stabilize the ship from the bridge, reading out pressure and hull integrity as Starry rerouted magical shielding around the engine core. "They're flanking us!" Starry shouted. "One's making a dive for the rear boosters!"

"I've got it!" King said, rotating the turret. "No, I've got the front!" Luz yelled. "You handle the tail!" Blasts of shimmering light and flares lit up the tunnel itself, as The Donati dodged and dipped through the warp currents. The crew's coordination was like a ballet of urgency—tight, synchronized, and desperate but despite their efforts, the Eels were relentless.

The ship jolted again as one of the eels clipped the hull. Sparks flew from a panel above Starry's head, forcing them to duck. "Shields at twelve percent! We can't take another direct hit!" they cried out. In the cockpit, Hesperos braced himself against the shaking console, his gloved hands gripping the helm. His pirate coat swung with every sudden lurch of the vessel, the ambient glow of space flickering across his feline features. "They're herding us," he growled, narrowing his sharp eyes at the sensors. "Trying to box us in like prey."

"And I really don't wanna get digested today," King piped in from his turret pod, despite his voice being sharp, it was still laced with his classic sarcastic edge. He then peered through the viewport at the largest eel weaving its way through the warpstream like a predator ready to strike. "I like my guts where they are."

Atlas stood amid the flashing lights of the navigation console, as they scanned readouts with lightning speed. Their eyes widened as a specific curvature in the warpstream caught their attention—an unstable bend in space, where reality thinned just enough to create a temporary escape route. "There!" Atlas said, pointing to the swirling fold in the tunnel ahead, glowing faintly with temporal turbulence. "That ripple in the stream—it's a fold in

the spatial weave. If we hit it at the right angle, it'll sling us out of the tunnel and drop us into neutral space!"

Hesperos didn't hesitate. "Starry, full power to engines! Reroute from life support if you have to!"

"I'm already doing it!" Starry barked back. The ship's frame groaned in protest, but it held.

"Luz, King—cover the wings!" Hesperos barked. "Give us room to breathe!"

"You got it!" Luz called over the comm, as she gritted her teeth as she lined up a shot on the eel approaching from the right flank. Her crosshairs hovered over its glowing eyes. "Say cheese, you slimy nightmare." She pulled the trigger. A burst of concentrated fire—laced with glyph-enhanced plasma—lanced out and struck the eel square in the face. The monster shrieked, a garbled screech echoing across the fold, and it recoiled violently, spiraling out of control. Its serpentine body slammed into another eel mid-charge, tangling the two in a chaotic collision of fangs and coils.

"Nice one!" King yelled, unloading a flurry of bursts from his own turret. He swept the barrage across the oncoming swarm, not aiming to destroy but to scatter—just enough to make them hesitate. The eels veered back, disoriented by the blasts, and in that brief window, the Donati had its opening. The front of the ship aligned with the unstable fold, shimmering like a ripple in water, its edges crackling with potential energy.

"Now!" Atlas shouted, their voice ringing through every comm channel with clear urgency.

With a thunderous pulse of the overcharged engines, the Donati launched forward, its hull shimmering as it pierced the fold in the warpstream. Reality bent around them. For a moment, time stretched—sound dulled, stars distorted, and the world became a blur of light and speed. Behind them, the Warp Eels surged forward, their open maws yawning with anticipation. Their elongated bodies twisted in pursuit, snapping within meters of the fleeing ship's wake but they were a second too late.

The fold collapsed behind the Donati with a thunderous implosion of light. A brilliant flash swallowed the warpstream's final stretch—cutting the eels off mid-charge, trapping them in the sealed corridor of space.

The ship coasted into stillness, surrounded by a calm field of stars—real stars, twinkling in the still, cold cradle of neutral space. No warpstream currents and no twisted predators. Just only the silence of the cosmos itself, signifying that they had made it.

The ship coasted forward, battered but intact, into the serene silence of neutral space. The stars outside twinkled like tiny beacons of hope, framed against the vast black curtain that now surrounded the Donati. The sudden absence of chaos felt surreal—like waking from a nightmare only to question whether you were truly awake. Inside the cockpit, the hum of the ship's core slowly stabilized, transitioning from a frantic whine to a steady, rhythmic thrum. The lights flickered once, then held steady.

"We made it..." Luz whispered, her voice shaking slightly, the adrenaline still coursing through her veins. "We made it!" Starry burst out, spiraling in a glittery corkscrew around the cockpit, his radiant form twinkling like a disco ball. "I told you all we'd be fine! Just a few warp eels, a little danger, a little screaming—classic Tuesday in the star lanes!"

King slumped back in his turret seat, letting out a long breath. "Whew. I am so not gonna miss those creepy space worms. Can we please not do that again?"

Luz pulled off her headset, her fingers still trembled slightly as she turned to glance at King through the glass barrier. "That was way too close. I thought we were toast—like, deep-fried and swallowed whole."

"You and me both," King muttered, hopping down from the turret with a grunt. "And I don't even like being deep-fried." From the front of the bridge, Hesperos Holmes leaned against the console, catching his breath. His tail flicked sharply, still agitated from the attack. "Everyone alright?" he asked, his voice low but firm. "No injuries?"

"I mean, emotionally I may never be the same," Starry said, peeking up from behind a console with a little singed smoke trail rising from one side of his glow. "But physically? I'm still a twinkly little beacon of survival!"

"Hair's a little frizzed," King noted, squinting at him. "Looks like you kissed a live wire."

Starry gasped, spiraled up to a mirror, and then dramatically wailed. "My glorious shimmer! It's asymmetrical! This is a disaster!"

Atlas, who had remained near the navigation terminal, stepped away slowly, their expression unreadable. "We were lucky. The fold was unstable. Another second later, and we would've been shredded mid-jump."

Luz moved toward them, her brows drawn with worry. "Atlas... are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Atlas said softly, though the distant look in their eyes betrayed how shaken they truly were.

Hesperos pushed off the helm and strode across the room. "You pulled us out at the last second," he said, placing a hand on Atlas' shoulder. "You did good, starlight." Atlas looked up at him, blinking slowly. Processing. "I just- I guess that was close. Too close."

Hesperos turned toward them, his expression gentle but firm. "But you got us through it. Whatever comes next—we wouldn't even be here without your timing."

A small, hesitant smile touched Atlas's lips. "Thanks. I just... didn't want to lose anyone. Not again." Luz walked over and gently bumped her shoulder against Atlas's. "We're still here. That counts for something."

The crew fell into a rare, welcome quiet. The kind that didn't feel heavy or tense just... earned. In the background, the ship's systems gave a reassuring hum, and the stars outside flickered peacefully.

Luz let herself slide into the co-pilot's seat, limbs finally giving in to the weight of exhaustion and relief. She tilted her head toward the stars beyond the viewport, letting the silence soak in like a warm bath. A long, slow breath eased from her chest—finally steady.

"I forgot stars could just... be pretty," she murmured, her voice soft and filled with quiet awe. "Not screaming, not imploding. Just... shining."

Hesperos leaned back in the pilot's chair beside her, his arms draped loosely across the console. "It's easy to forget what peace feels like when you've been running so long," he said, his tone low but not mournful. "Stillness has weight."

King hopped onto the panel in front of them, curling his small body into a loaf position. "Yeah, well... I vote we hold onto this moment for as long as it lets us. Just a little longer." He yawned, sharp teeth peeking out. "Five more minutes of not dying, please."

"Five?" Starry gasped, floating into view upside-down with his tiny arms thrown dramatically to either side. "I vote for fifteen! Fifteen minutes of sparkle time, quiet reflection, and celebratory dance! In that order!"

Atlas looked up from their seat near the nav console, eyes still a bit distant, but more grounded now. "Celebratory dance? We just barely escaped being shredded within warp."

"Exactly!" Starry declared, spinning like a gleaming disco ornament. "What better reason to bust a move than not becoming star spaghetti?!"

Luz chuckled under her breath. "You know... he's not wrong."

With a chirpy hum, Starry zipped to the corner and activated a soft, ambient glow from the ceiling lights. "Mood lighting: check! Space cleared for safe spinning: check! Emotional catharsis pending!"

King grumbled, but even he couldn't hide the small grin creeping across his snout. "Fine. But no glitter in my ears this time."

"I make no promises!" Starry sang as he began orbiting in wide, slow circles, leaving behind trails of soft stardust like a comet's tail. The lights dimmed to a cozy blue-violet hue, and for a moment, the Donati's bridge transformed into a floating pocket of warmth and safety in an otherwise uncaring void.

Luz gave in with a tired but genuine grin. "Alright, fifteen minutes of fun before we figure out where the heck we're going next."

King pumped a paw into the air. "That's what I'm talkin' about! Victory nap time!"

Atlas chuckled quietly, a sound that hadn't graced the bridge in a while. "You earned it, King. You sounded terrifying on the turret."

"I am terrifying," King said, striking a heroic pose atop the central console. "The dread beast of the Boiling Isles, now dread-er in space!"

While King and Atlas reveled in the moment, Luz turned toward Hesperos, "You said the Manturn Star System might be within reach?" Hesperos gave a small nod, already bringing up a holo-chart on the panel. "Manturn should be within reach from this quadrant. If we reorient the drive vectors now, we can start plotting our course. We need to stock up on supplies once more if we are going to keep avoiding The Archive Collective and... him..."

A tight silence settled between them for a moment. The reference alone made Luz's stomach knot. The Grand Huntsman—the Archivist enforcer who had turned entire worlds into charred graveyards. She clenched her jaw, trying to shake the memory of their last close call during a previous encounter. "He's still tracking us?" she asked, though part of her already knew the answer. "He always is," Hesperos said grimly. "He's a predator. He doesn't give up... but neither do we. Rest assured my friend, once we restock on necessities, we'll be out of there in no time before the Grand Huntsman is even able to spot us."

Luz leaned against the side console, arms crossed, eyes fixed on the shifting stars outside the viewport. "Two months," she muttered, "and every system we jump to, it's like he's already been there... or is just about to arrive."

Hesperos kept his eyes on the chart as he spoke, "He moves like a shadow. Not fast, not erratic, just steady and relentless."

"I still remember that elder on Virellis," Luz said, "She wouldn't even say his name. So instead she referred to him as the 'Burning Ghost.' She told us how he came down from the stars and turned their entire moon-city to instant nothingness because someone there refused to give up a relic."

Hesperos gave a slow nod, "And on Callora, there were murals. Painted in blood. The refugees there said he strung up the bones of a thousand different species on his prow like

trophies." He glanced over at her. "They called him 'The Last Howl.' because you only ever hear the shriek of the engines of his ship right before your world goes dark."

Luz shivered. "Then there was the story on Aeris-Kantar... those nomads called him a 'divine executioner' for what he did to their people! It's so horrifying..."

"It's the same pattern everywhere we went," Hesperos muttered. "Different names. Different stories. But always the same bloody figure. The Grand Huntsman."

Luz gulped before speaking, "There was that one guy on Orven Prime... the one who said—" She hesitated.

"That he bathes in Titan blood?" Hesperos finished for her. "Yeah. I remember." However, when he did so, the tone of voice reflected his hesitancy to mention the terrifying rumor.

"We always knew about the Grand Huntsman back home, I mean, he had a literal cult that worshiped him. They called themselves the Titan Trappers and they tried to hurt King when they found out who he really was." Luz clenched her fists when she spoke once more, however her voice came out as brittle, "After escaping, I honestly thought that would be the end of it but I guess not anymore considering what's happening around us right now."

Luz kept her eyes trained on the readouts, watching the soft blue glow of the route projection slowly paint itself across the console. Her jaw tightened, her hands steady on the edge of the dashboard. "I hate that he's this close... That he can track us like this." she said. Hesperos flicked a few switches, the map zooming out to show the wider system—routes, obstacles, gravitational tides. "He's good at what he does, that's why the Archivists rely on him." he said, tone clipped. "Although, aye, we're just as good as that Huntsman bloke. We're practically ghosts in the Realm now."

"But ghosts can still be caught," Luz replied quietly, almost to herself. "We've barely had a breath since the Archive Tower. Every time we think we're ahead—he's one step behind. If he gets the Compass..."

"He won't," Hesperos said firmly, turning to face her fully. "We've been able to keep this up long enough and we're okay. We'll be okay Luz." Luz nodded, but there was still a flicker of doubt in her eyes. Although all she could say simply was, "Alright then."

Hesperos sighed with a heavy breath before he spoke again, "Well mate, for now, let's try resting before we head to Nanturn. We've dealt too much... they dealt too much." He said while he turned towards King and Atlas.

Luz followed up, "You're right..." she added quietly under her breath as a whisper, "I don't want them to suffer more..."

Behind them, laughter and music hummed in the background. Starry had conjured a small lightshow—gentle prismatic waves cycling above the control dome like a living aurora. King laid flat on a cushioned console pillow, one leg twitching in sleepy contentment, while Atlas leaned near the viewport, watching the stars drift slowly past with a thoughtful gaze.

"Can't believe I'm actually enjoying this," Atlas said in a soft tone.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," King replied, eyes still half-closed. Atlas explained, "I'm just not used to... surviving. Let alone celebrating."

"Well," King yawned, "you better get used to it. We plan on doing it a lot more. I mean—to be fair that's what we've been doing for like what? A while now?" King would open both of his eyes and look at his friend solemnly. He added, "All I'm saying is to make the most of it right now. You know, to relax and unwind for once after with everything we've been through. We honestly needed this." Soon King laid back and shifted his body into a position where he would feel best comfortable as he rested on his bean bag. He closed his eyes as he prepared himself to take a relaxing nap.

Atlas, meanwhile, looked on at the viewport one more time before turning back to his dear friend. He soon spoke quietly to King, asking him a simple question, "Hey.. King?". Shortly after, King spoke although his eyes still remained closed as he was clearly partially half-asleep, "Hm? What's up buddy?" he said. Atlas continued, "Would it be alright if I... slept alongside you?"

There was a pause. A beat of silence that hung between them but it wasn't cold or uncertain, just tenderness.

King opened both eyes fully now, his expression losing every trace of sleepiness for a moment. He turned his head to properly look at Atlas, and for once, his usual snark and bravado melted away. What he saw wasn't just a request to lie down—it was a quiet call for comfort. A small, vulnerable offering of trust. King gave a warm, gentle expression. "Yeah. Of course. There's plenty of room, dude."

Atlas's shoulders released a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. He nodded silently, crawling carefully onto the bean bag beside King. He moved slowly, as if afraid he might disturb something sacred in the quiet. Once settled, he curled inward—shoulders slightly hunched, back still tense.

King, sensing it, nudged his shoulder gently against Atlas's arm. "Hey. You can relax, y'know. I don't bite in my sleep... not anymore at least."

That earned the faintest of chuckles from Atlas—small, but real. His body softened gradually, the tension bleeding from his limbs as he let himself sink into the comfort of the bean bag. He wasn't sure how long it had been since he last shared space with someone like this—without fear and pressure, without needing to act like a being of cosmic power. He can be just a kid being beside his best friend.

King let his eyes drift closed again. "You're safe right now, okay? We both are."

"...Okay," Atlas whispered. He let the words settle in the air around him like a shield. They inched closer, just enough for their shoulders to touch, and let his head rest lightly against King's.

The ship continued to hum softly as the warpstream carried them forward into the stars. Somewhere ahead waited the Manturn Star System. Somewhere behind, danger still stalked in the shadows. Here at least, in this quiet corner of the Donati, there was peace, safety, and the opportunity to rest properly. For the first time in a long while, Atlas allowed himself to sleep.

In the quiet vacuum of space and a while later, The Donati glided gently through a sea of stars, its silver-blue-orange hull reflecting the distant shimmer of nebulae and the faint

glow of distant galaxies. The ship's engines hummed at a low, soothing thrum—barely audible through the walls—as it drifted slowly on autopilot toward its next destination: the gas planet of Manturn. For now, though, the journey was paused. After a string of difficult battles and close calls, the crew had agreed—without words but with heavy eyes and slouched shoulders—that they needed a night of peace. A single night to breathe, rest, and to dream.

Inside the ship, all was still.

In his dimly lit quarters, Hesperos Holmes lay sprawled on a circular hammock woven from old scavenged netting and reinforced cables, snoring softly with one paw draped lazily over the holster of his blasters. Posters of star charts and pirate insignias fluttered faintly in the recycled air, while his tail twitched now and then, perhaps chasing something in a dream of his own.

Just a floor below, nestled in the engine room, Starry hovered in a passive state—their body suspended in the air like a glowing cocoon of translucent light. Though they slept, their form still emitted a gentle pulse of luminous energy, which coursed through the ship's conduits in subtle waves. Their very essence had become one with the vessel, keeping the systems warm, the lights dim, and the gravity stable. Their dreams, if they had any, whispered through the circuitry like a lullaby.

In her private quarters, Luz lay curled under a thick blanket on a makeshift bed. Her hair was a bit messier than usual, her face serene, no trace of fear or worry for once. On the nightstand beside her, a tiny hand-drawn picture of the Boiling Isles rested quietly—as it was a token of a world she once knew and the one she now fought for.

And in the cozy nook just beyond the main deck, the two small figures of King and Atlas were tangled together in slumber atop a massive bean bag chair. King's snout gently rose and fell as he snored. Nestled against his side, Atlas lay curled with his back turned, his arms wrapped around a tattered pillow. He murmured now and then in his sleep, brows furrowing and relaxing in soft intervals. Though they had long since lost the powers that once made him untouchable, his dreams remained vast and untamed. Though tonight... one of those dreams stirred to life.

In an instant, the cold, darkened corners of the ship faded from Atlas's mind, replaced by a sudden warmth and a burst of vibrant light. He blinked open his eyes not with fear, but with the wide-eyed wonder of a child seeing something new and impossibly beautiful.

He stood in the center of a meadow unlike any he'd ever seen. The sky above was a dazzling gradient of twilight pink, sapphire blue, and radiant gold, with swirling constellations dancing in slow circles across the heavens. Giant toadstools as tall as trees bloomed in spirals around ponds and rivers that flowed gently through the hills, whispering soft lullabies in a language he couldn't quite understand.

The air sparkled with motes of color—blues and violets and glowing yellows—that drifted like fireflies, giggling with tiny voices that made Atlas grin without knowing why. Trees with candy-glass leaves swayed in a breeze that smelled faintly of caramel.

Atlas stepped forward, barefoot in the soft, cushiony grass, and laughed—a pure, unburdened laugh—as a cloud-shaped creature bounced past him like a jellybean with wings. He followed it, running freely now, his cloak fluttering behind him like a cape. Everything in this place seemed to reflect something deep within him: his curiosity, his playfulness, his longing for joy without consequence. A hill of soft moss curved upward before him, and at the top, he spotted a carousel-like structure made of spinning planets and glowing comets. As he climbed, dream-flowers bloomed in his footsteps, bursting in soft puffs of color. And at the summit, he paused, taking in the dreamscape with awe. Here, the rules of reality no longer applied, only imagination did. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, Atlas didn't feel small... or forgotten... or afraid, he just felt alive.

Atlas wandered deeper into the dreamscape, each step carrying him further into a realm stitched from whimsy and forgotten lullabies. The landscape shifted gently around him like a painting in motion—meadows turning to fields of floating lanterns, waterfalls cascading upward into the clouds, and giant blossoms opening as he passed, revealing constellations tucked within their petals. Everything shimmered, pulsed, and breathed with magic. Yet despite its beauty, something began to shift.

At first, it was faint—just a whisper on the breeze.

"Atlas...?"

His steps slowed. His head turned. The voice was soft, distant, yet unmistakable... It was the voice of Luz. Her voice carried a warmth he knew by heart, but it felt far away, too far for how close it sounded. He spun around, his eyes darting across the dreamlike terrain until he spotted a distant grove where glowing willow trees wept golden leaves. A figure moved between them—tall, familiar. Atlas's heart leapt as he bolted forward, his voice breaking with excitement. "Luz?! Luz, wait!"

He reached the grove, ducking beneath the glittering branches... but no one was there. Only silence, and the soft rustle of leaves. The ground shimmered with her fading footprints, but even they vanished after a few seconds. Confusion knit across Atlas's face. His small fingers clenched at his sides. "I heard her," he whispered to himself. "I know I did..."

Then came another voice, this one raspier and more playful. "Hey dummy, where are you?" The voice came from King.

Atlas turned to see a silhouette bounding over a hilltop in the distance. Atlas ran again—this time faster, and more desperately. The terrain beneath his feet shifted once more, the grass turning to patches of floating platforms, each leap taking him closer to where King had appeared. However, when he reached the crest of the hill, there was nothing. No footprints and no King, only the sound of his own breathing.

A cold feeling began to nibble at the edges of the dream—small, invisible teeth that hinted at isolation. Atlas turned slowly in place, scanning the impossible horizon. The vivid colors of the dream began to feel sharper now, less comforting. Shadows beneath the flowers grew longer. The laughter of the cloud creatures faded. Then again— "Atlas... Come on, we're waiting..." Luz's voice again. And King's followed, faint and overlapping, as if echoing through multiple layers of the dream at once.

Atlas sprinted through a field of mirrors that showed him versions of himself—laughing, crying, confused. He ran across a floating bridge made of music notes that trembled under his feet. He tore through a tunnel of stardust that curved in on itself, chasing voices that always danced just out of reach. "Where are you?!" he shouted, frustration breaking through his voice. His chest burned with panic now, and tears began to sting at the corners of his eyes.

The cycle repeated. Again and again, he heard them. Again and again, he ran to where they should have been—and again, he found nothing. The silence that followed each failed encounter was worse than the last. The dreamland, once wondrous, now felt too big and hollow. It was like a playground with no friends.

Atlas slowed. His breath came in short gasps as he stumbled onto a quiet plain made of soft, glowing moss. He fell to his knees, trembling. "I... I just want to find you," he whispered. His voice cracked. "Why can't I find you?"

The wind was gentle as it swept across the plain, and with it came a final chorus of their voices—clearer now, more centered. No longer scattered echoes, but grounded and real.

"Atlas... we're here."

He lifted his head, as he saw that far ahead at the base of a hill crowned with spiraling trees and a crescent-shaped archway, he saw them. Luz stood with her hand raised, waving to him with that familiar grin—the one that always made him feel like everything would be okay. King sat beside her, tail wagging, eyes wide and hopeful.

The sight hit Atlas like a warm wave, and he shot to his feet. "Luz! King!"

He ran—not with desperation now, but with overwhelming relief. Laughter, wet with leftover tears, bubbled from his throat as he darted through the glowing field. This time, the terrain didn't shift beneath him. The dream didn't change its mind.

He reached them. He didn't stop running until he collided into Luz's open arms, and she caught him, spinning him slightly before kneeling down to hold him close.

"Hey, buddy," she said softly, her voice full of affection. "Took you long enough!"

King hopped up and hugged Atlas's side. "Yeah, what gives? You get lost in your own weird brain dream again?"

Atlas didn't answer. He just clung to both of them, burying his face into Luz's shoulder. His small frame shook as the last of his tears fell, this time not from fear or sadness, but from the pure, aching relief of not being alone anymore.

However, even as Atlas remained nestled in Luz's arms with King's warmth pressed close at his side, a sudden stillness passed through the dreamscape. Not the gentle kind that soothed like a lullaby, but a hollow, unnatural pause—like the breath held before a scream.

The colors around them—those vivid, dreamlike hues—began to mute. The crescent arch behind them fractured silently, splitting apart like brittle glass. The spiraling trees faded into silhouettes before dissolving altogether. One by one, the details of the meadow unraveled, as if being erased by an invisible hand. What had once been a wonderland of stars and magic now fell away like old paint peeling off a canvas.

Atlas blinked in confusion, his arms still wrapped tightly around Luz. "Wait... what's happening?"

The ground beneath them cracked and vanished, exposing an abyss of nothingness that was black, cold, and infinite.

His eyes darted around in a frenzy, panic rising in his chest like a choking tide. "No—no, no, no!" he cried, clutching Luz and King tighter. "Don't go! Please don't go!"

Luz's expression didn't change. She just stared at him quietly, with a soft, almost apologetic smile. King blinked slowly, his tail unmoving. "Luz?" Atlas whispered, his voice trembling. "King?" Neither of them answered.

He reached out, hands shaking, and touched Luz's cheek. The moment his fingertips brushed her skin, her entire form began to disintegrate—dust rising from her body like smoke from a dying flame. Her arms, her hair, her face—all dissolved into fine black ash. Her eyes were the last to go, still filled with quiet warmth as they vanished. King followed next, his small frame crumbling in silence, his silhouette blowing away like dandelion seeds in the wind.

"No—NO!" Atlas screamed, scrambling to gather the remnants of their ashes, desperate to hold on to something—anything. His hands moved in frantic sweeps, but the dust slipped through his fingers no matter how tightly he clenched them. He cupped his palms around what little he could catch, tears falling freely down his cheeks as he hunched over their remains. "I'm sorry," he choked out. "I didn't mean to lose you. I didn't—please—come back—"

Then everything went silent... Atlas froze as the void stretched endlessly in all directions now. No more colors, no more sky, no more warmth. Only him, the cold, and it's stillness. Then out of nowhere... a voice appeared. It was low and smooth. Yet familiar in the worst possible way. "Well, isn't this pathetic?"

Atlas's entire body tensed. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. The ashes he held scattered from his grip as his hands fell limply to the ground.

He didn't need to look up to know who it was but he did anyway, slowly and unwillingly.

When Atlas looked up he saw him. There he stood, towering and pristine in the dark, Orion. His face was a perfect sculpture of superiority and disdain. Those cold, gleaming eyes stared directly into Atlas's soul, unblinking.

Atlas couldn't move while his breath caught in his throat, limbs locking in place as if the void itself had become chains around him. The warmth he'd felt just moments ago was gone, smothered under the crushing weight of terror. He was back in that place again—not the dream, but the feelings of helplessness. His heartbeat thundered in his ears. His lips parted, but no words came. No cry for help or shouting, just nothing and silence.

Orion didn't need to speak again. The presence alone—the look alone—was enough. Atlas remained frozen in place, paralyzed beneath the gaze of the one who had stolen everything from him. Not just power or pride but safety, family, and self-worth.

The void around them pulsed once, low and deep, as if it too recognized the nightmare had begun.

Orion stood tall in the void, casting a long, unnatural shadow that twisted and reached far beyond where it should have ended. Atlas remained frozen beneath that gaze—his small frame trembling, his chest rising and falling in shallow, rapid breaths. The remnants of Luz and King had vanished into nothing, and the silence around them throbbed with tension, heavy and suffocating.

"You can run to the far ends of the cosmos, hide behind illusions, behind their affection, and behind your childish dreams but I will always see you. No matter how far you go

brother." Orion said, his lips curling into something too cold to be a smile. His voice slithered through, as it was too steady and too composed.

Atlas's breath hitched as the words entered beneath his skin, festering where old wounds had never healed. He wanted to look away, to close his eyes, to pretend it wasn't real but he couldn't. Orion's voice kept him rooted, held fast by fear and shame alike. "You think dreams will protect you? That they'll save you from what you've done?" Orion stepped forward slowly, his boots making no sound against the blackened floor. "You've forgotten what you are and who you served."

Atlas flinched, taking a half-step back, though his legs wobbled like jelly. The darkness around him seemed to shrink, the space between him and Orion closing in without either of them moving. Each breath felt heavier than the last.

"You turned your back on us," Orion continued, tilting his head slightly, as if he were speaking to a child who failed a simple lesson. "On your own people and the destiny they laid out for you. All for what?" He gestured with a single hand, sweeping toward the emptiness. "Fleeting affection? Earthbound nobodies? Weakness disguised as love?"

The air rippled with heat. "And for that treason," he said, "you will be punished."

A low rumble echoed in the distance—so faint at first it could've been mistaken for thunder. Then, all at once, it came alive.

Fire.

From the edges of the void, jagged lines of flame erupted, devouring the darkness like parchment soaked in oil. The flames weren't warm because they burned with a strange, alien heat that warped the air and made the very ground groan beneath them. They rose like tidal waves, licking hungrily toward the sky, consuming what little space remained untouched.

Atlas's eyes widened in horror as he spun in place, trying to outrun a circle of fire that now rapidly encroached. Every direction and path was swallowed by infernos that burned with impossible colors of violet, crimson, and black. Sparks erupted like stars being torn apart. "You will lose everything you've stolen," Orion hissed, his voice now everywhere

at once. "Every smile you earned under false pretenses. Every bond born from your selfish delusions. Your comfort. Your safety. Them. All of it will be taken."

Atlas clutched his head with both hands, squeezing his eyes shut as if that would wake him. As if the fire would disappear. But he could still feel Orion's presence behind his eyelids—closer now. Always closer. The heat gnawed at his skin, yet it was the voice, the words, that stung deepest. "You don't deserve what you were given," Orion said coldly. "And you will answer for your betrayal."

The flames surged higher, forming walls, enclosing Atlas within a searing cage. The world around him roared with destruction. Everything burned—everything that had ever made him feel safe, whole, loved. The dream was no longer a dream. It was a judgment.

At the center of it all stood Orion, as he was untouched by the fire and unshaken by the very sight around him, as if he had always belonged in the middle of ruin.

Atlas collapsed to his knees, while the flames closed in on him, his mind a swirl of guilt, panic, and unbearable grief. Tears fell freely now—not just from the smoke, but from the crushing weight of those words because some part of him... a part still broken and buried deep... feared Orion might be right.

A sudden gasp shattered the silence.

Atlas shot upright from the bean bag, while he hyperventilated in shallow but panicked breaths. His eyes were wide with terror, the pupils small and dilated as if they were still locked onto some phantom horror that hadn't followed him out of the dream. Sweat clung to his forehead, dampening the strands of hair that now stuck to his skin. His trembling hands gripped the edge of the bean bag as if the ground beneath him might give way.

Beside him, King stirred with a groggy grunt, his tiny body nestled under a scrap of blanket they had been sharing. He perked up, and he blinked blearily as he turned toward his friend. "Wha—Atlas?" he mumbled, his voice thick with sleep. "What's going on?"

Atlas didn't answer, due to his breath being caught in his throat as he stared into the dim interior of the ship's lounge. His eyes darting around the space as if to reassure himself he was no longer in that void of flame and judgment. The holographic starmap on the far

wall glowed gently, casting a faint blue glow over the darkened room but to Atlas, it felt like too much light, too much shadow—as if it were too real and dreamlike.

King pushed himself upright, now fully awake and watching with concern. "Hey. Are you okay?" he asked again, a bit more firmly. "Atlas?"

Atlas's lips parted slightly, but no words came. His body was stiff, curled into itself, as though any movement might shatter the fragile line between sleep and waking. His shoulders quivered, and his eyes shimmered with unshed tears, his silence louder than any scream.

King's expression softened, as he knew that look. The kind of fear that didn't need to be spoken to be understood. The kind that said something inside had broken—quietly, deeply, and completely. "You had a nightmare," King said gently. Atlas didn't nod, as he didn't have to. The tremble in his breath was confirmation enough.

King hesitated for only a moment before scooting closer. His small clawed hand reached out and rested lightly against Atlas's arm, just enough to let him know he was there. "You don't have to talk about it," he said quietly. "It's okay."

The contact seemed to ground Atlas just a little. His shoulders sagged as his breathing began to slow, though it remained uneven. He didn't look at King—he couldn't—but the presence beside him began to cut through the lingering fear like a gentle beam through smoke.

King shuffled closer still, pressing his side against Atlas's. "I'm here," he muttered, softer now. "You're safe. It was just a dream."

Atlas let out a shaky exhale yet there were still no words but his posture eased ever so slightly, as his hands unclenching from the bean bag's edge. Slowly and hesitantly he leaned toward King, resting his head atop his small friend's.

King didn't say anything else. He simply stayed there with him, unmoving, eyes staring forward into the soft hum of the ship's systems. In the quiet of the room, in the stillness of the moment, he offered the only thing Atlas truly needed; company.

Soon Luz emerged quietly from her quarters, her boots making only the faintest sound against the padded floor. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes which was followed by the faint crease of worry already pressing into her brow. Just behind her, Hesperos followed, stretching with a feline yawn and adjusting the bandolier strapped across his shoulder, his usual light-hearted demeanor still hazy from rest. Though their steps slowed the moment they turned the corner and saw the scene in the lounge.

King sat nestled beside Atlas, as his tiny body pressed close as a small arm rested over his friend's hunched frame. Atlas, though still visibly shaken, had begun to calm down. His breaths came slower now, no longer caught in the panicked gasps of someone drowning in nightmares. Yet his eyes were still distant, hollow in a way that Luz recognized all too well.

King looked up and noticed them standing there. His voice was gentle, but steady. "I've got him," he said with quiet confidence, giving Luz a small nod as if to tell her she didn't have to worry.

Though Luz did worry, her heart twisted in her chest at the sight. Atlas, once a celestial force of nature, had been now reduced to a child haunted by his own mind. It wasn't the first time he'd woken like this—and deep down, Luz feared it wouldn't be the last. She knew the depths of his fear because she had swum in similar waters. She had stared into the same void.

She forced herself to smile faintly, giving King a nod in return. "Thanks, buddy," she said, her voice calm, even soothing.

Hesperos moved past her with slow, measured steps, giving the two space as he walked to the far side of the lounge to check the systems display, but Luz lingered by the threshold. Her gaze lingered on Atlas—his shoulders still trembling slightly, eyes still unfocused—as guilt gnawed at her quietly, insidiously.

He should never have had to endure any of this.

Though he had because of the Archivists and everything that had been done to him. Luz couldn't shake the feeling that she should've done more—especially protecting him, should've found a way to spare him from the pain. However, she didn't let it show, instead she stood tall. Composed and in control, she had to place herself as a leader first, always.

She buried the knot in her stomach, locked the guilt behind her ribs, and wore her strength like a mask. No tremble in her voice. No tears in her eyes. Because if she crumbled now, then what would that say to the rest of them? What would it say to Atlas? He needed her to be strong. Still, her hand balled into a fist at her side—just for a moment and then relaxed.

She stepped into the lounge with even steps and crossed toward them, crouching down gently beside King and Atlas, though she didn't speak nor didn't press. She simply sat close, her presence steady and warm like a lighthouse on a distant cliff. The silence lingered for a few more moments as the soft glow of the lounge cast gentle halos around Luz, King, and Atlas. The calm had mostly returned, if only superficially—Atlas's breathing was steady now, but the distant look in his eyes remained. Luz gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze before rising slowly to her feet, her gaze shifting toward the forward corridor that led to the cockpit.

From across the room, Hesperos finally broke the silence with a quiet yet focused tone. "We should start prepping the ship," he said, adjusting the strap of his gear as he turned toward her. "We'll want to be in the Manturn System before any of the Archive Collective's forces find us."

Luz took a breath and nodded, brushing a loose strand of hair from her face. "Right," she said softly, her voice regaining its usual clarity. "Let's get ready to move."

She soon got up and she gave one final look over her shoulder—at King, who had now guided Atlas to lie back down again, whispering soft reassurances, the kind only close friends could offer. Though Luz's heart ached to stay, she knew there were things that needed to be done, and she carried that responsibility like a familiar weight on her shoulders.

The doors to the cockpit parted with a smooth hydraulic hiss as Luz and Hesperos entered, the room dimly lit by soft orange lights and a curved interface panel that glowed with soft pulsing icons. The view ahead revealed a vast expanse of stars, scattered like diamond dust across a canvas of darkness. The Donati hovered in still space, quiet and patient.

Luz slid into the co-pilot's seat, her hands already moving instinctively across the dashboard. The familiarity in her movements betrayed the many months of experience she'd gained—back when they had first set out, she could barely tell the difference between a navigation toggle and a retro-thruster. Now, she worked in tandem with the ship like a seasoned traveler of the stars.

Hesperos leaned into his seat beside her and activated the ship-wide comms with a flick of his clawed finger. "Starry, rise and shine," he called, voice tinged with his usual charm. "Time to wake up and warm up that warp core. We've got places to be."

A brief static hum followed before Starry's voice responded, laced with sleepy enthusiasm. "Ughhh... okay, okay! I'm up, I'm up! initiating warp core ignition sequence... now!"

Panels along the walls began to flicker with motion as energy conduits sparked to life. The faint, rhythmic hum of the warp drive stirred beneath their feet, growing louder with each second as the system aligned itself for interstellar travel. A stream of soft blue light spiraled upward from the central core behind them, glowing brighter with each rotation.

"All systems online," Starry confirmed, her tone shifting into crisp professionalism. "Warp drive is charged and ready for jump, cap!"

"Thanks, Star," Hesperos said, giving the comms mic a two-fingered tap.

Luz focused in, her gaze sharpening as she reached for the nav-console, keying in the coordinates for Manturn. Her fingers moved fluidly across the console as holographic projections bloomed above the controls—a star map of the surrounding systems, paths traced in faint golden lines. She located the Manturn System and tapped the central star icon, locking in the coordinates.

"Coordinates locked," she announced, voice steady and certain. "Engaging navigation stabilizers."

Outside the viewport, the stars began to blur. The void twisted as streaks of light stretched forward like threads being pulled across a loom. The warp tunnel opened with a shimmer—an otherworldly corridor of swirling colors and bending space. Then, with a

surge of light and a gentle shudder, the Donati entered the tunnel and vanished from its stationary perch.

The ship glided forward into the bending corridors of warp space, its path set, its crew in motion once more—toward Manturn, and toward whatever awaited them in the next leg of their journey.

The Donati soared gracefully through the warp tunnel, its sleek frame gliding along a highway of swirling starlight and refracted time. Outside the reinforced glass of the cockpit, the cosmos bent and twisted like colored silk in water, the stars stretching into luminous ribbons that curved and danced around the vessel as it hurtled toward its destination. Inside the cockpit, the atmosphere was quiet, almost peaceful, with the exception for the low hum of the ship's systems and the occasional flicker of a status light on the console. Luz sat with her hands firmly on the controls, her posture straight, eyes locked on the navigation readouts. The quiet wasn't uncomfortable, but it held a certain weight—a subtle, unspoken tension that clung to the space like mist.

Hesperos, seated beside her, had noticed it long before she even spoke. The way her fingers occasionally curled into the edge of the console. The brief, sharp inhalations that she tried to mask as steady breaths. The way her jaw clenched ever so slightly when she thought no one was watching. She was holding something in, that something so happened to be a heavy feeling.

Hesperos leaned back in his chair, arms crossed loosely, tail flicking idly near the base of the seat. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye, weighing his words before speaking. "Hey," he said, his voice low, gentle, and just light enough not to sound intrusive, "you've been on edge since Atlas woke up. And I get it—we all care about him. But maybe... you should let me handle things from here for a bit. Give yourself a chance to breathe before we touch down."

Luz didn't respond right away. Her fingers continued to work the controls with smooth precision, and her expression remained unreadable for a few more seconds. Then, finally, she spoke calmly and evenly. "I appreciate it, Hesperos," she said, her tone warm but firm, "but I'm good. Really." She shifted slightly in her seat, fingers adjusting a dial that didn't really need adjusting. "Besides... someone's gotta make sure the ship doesn't fly us into a supernova or a space jellyfish hive or something."

Her attempt at humor was light, casual—too casual.

Hesperos didn't laugh at the remark but instead tilted his head slightly, brows drawing together. "Luz, I get it. You're trying to keep us steady but you don't always have to carry everything. Especially not by yourself."

"I'm not," she replied, her voice soft, but edged with quiet conviction. She glanced toward him now, her eyes tired, but clear. "I'm just doing what I need to. We're heading into something big—Manturn's not exactly gonna be a vacation. I need to be sharp. For them. For everyone."

Her voice carried a weariness that didn't quite match the confidence in her words. She wasn't raising her voice. She wasn't brushing him off but there was something practiced about her answer, as if it was something she'd told herself dozens of times just to keep on moving.

Hesperos leaned forward, resting one elbow on the console. "I'm not saying don't be strong, Luz. But burying what you're feeling... that's not strength either. I saw the way you looked at Atlas earlier. I see the way you keep pushing past what you need. You're not a machine. You're allowed to break a little."

Luz looked at him fully now, and for a moment, her expression softened—not with anger, but something far more vulnerable. Her lips parted, but she hesitated before responding. When she finally spoke, it was with calm finality. "I know you're trying to help. And really, I appreciate it, Hesperos," she said, her voice carrying that familiar mix of sincerity and restraint. "But I'm fine. I promise. I just... I need to focus right now, okay? We've got a mission, and I can't afford to fall apart in the middle of it."

Hesperos didn't argue. He leaned back in his seat, folding his arms with a quiet sigh. "Alright," he murmured, voice low and respectful. Though, he didn't stop watching her—not with suspicion, but with silent concern. He respected her boundaries, he always had. though it didn't stop him from worrying.

The ship sailed on through the vast tunnel of light and distortion, a small vessel caught between the stars—its crew bound together by shared burdens and unspoken wounds. And though Luz sat tall in the pilot's seat, the ache in her chest remained, that being a weight she'd chosen to bear alone, for now, as they pressed forward into the unknown.

Chapter Three: Unknowingly Sighted.

The Donati emerged from the warpstream like a ghost slipping out of a dream. The quiet rumble of the drive core slowed to a low purr as the ship arrived at Manturn. It was unlike any world they had ever seen, a vast gas giant that dominated the entire viewport with its overwhelming presence. Its atmosphere pulsed with life and motion, a mesmerizing blend of molten gold, rusty crimson, and pale ivory that churned in colossal, spiraling belts across its surface. Each layer of cloud seemed to ripple like waves in the ocean, catching the distant light of its sun in ghostly, fluid waves. The planet seemed to breathe with its storms the size of continents rotated in slow, eternal spirals. One storm in particular caught their attention: a massive golden vortex with a deep, eye-like center that blinked with flashes of internal lightning. It was as if the planet was watching them back, aware in some ancient, cosmic way.

Inside the bridge, the mood was hushed. Luz sat at the helm, her eyes focused, yet heavy with unspoken thoughts. The controls hummed gently beneath her fingers, casting soft cyan glows on her face. Hesperos stood beside her, silent for once, his usual charm tempered by awe. King perched quietly atop the console, ears twitching as the dense beauty of Manturn filled the viewport. "Descending into the upper cloud layer," Luz announced, her voice steady but low. The thrusters tilted, angling the Donati downward into the amber fog.

The Donati's hull trembled faintly as it pierced through the upper veil of gases. The ship's shields shimmered in response, repelling pockets of pressurized wind and ion-charged vapor that sparkled like stardust in the sun. Outside the main viewport, Manturn's clouds shifted in turbulent waves, glowing from within with lightning flashes that cracked and rippled through the lower depths. Great spirals of gas twisted below like planetary whirlpools, the full scale of them impossible to measure with the naked eye. Then, through the haze, a floating structure appeared.

Upon further inspection, this floating structure turned out to be a city, floating above the crushing layers of gas and pressure, as it were suspended on massive anti-gravity pylons and anchored by weather-worn support struts. The structure was vast but tired, its towers jagged and mismatched like a patchwork skyline built atop itself over generations. Metal platforms, walkways, and external piping sprawled in every direction. Rusted panels glinted dully in the filtered sunlight, and wind-blown grime stained the sides of every

building. Neon signs flickered in and out, many half-lit or cracked, clinging to life like the people who lived beneath them. It was a city suspended between storms and survival. Inside the cockpit, the crew silently watched as the landing pads of the city came into view. The city glowed beneath them—metallic spires jutting out from the cracked land, illuminated by neon signage and orbital lanterns. It was a place that felt both lived-in and dangerous. Not quite safe, but not entirely hostile. The sort of haven that didn't ask questions, so long as your credits were good and your stay was brief.

As The Donati pierced the cloud line, the windshield tinted to shield their eyes from the sun's glare. The descent was smooth—Hesperos's hands steady on the controls, Luz leaning beside him, while he stared at every detail of the map as the docking sequence engaged. "It's bigger than I expected," Luz murmured. Her voice was quiet, but not uneasy. Just wary. Hesperos nodded, tapping a few glowing runes on the dash. "The settlement was built on an old mining colony. Most of it's been repurposed for trade, but... well, trade in these parts can mean a lot of things."

Atlas stood behind them, his gaze fixed to the world beyond the glass. There was something almost melancholic in his expression—an echo of something old and forgotten, triggered by the alien beauty of the bioluminescent ravines that glowed far below. "It's... strange. So many lights, yet it still feels dark."

King, perched comfortably atop a crate near the rear of the cockpit, squinted out toward the approaching platforms. "That's 'cause it's one of those places where people hide in plain sight. Like a smile that doesn't reach your eyes."

A subtle clunk echoed through the ship as the docking clamps locked into place, accompanied by a soft shift in gravity that told them the engines were powering down. "Docking complete," Hesperos confirmed, unbuckling his seatbelt with a metallic click. "Let's keep it short. No sightseeing. We get what we need and leave." Luz nodded. "I'll grab our credit chits."

"Don't forget to lock the starboard bay," King reminded her, hopping down and stretching his arms wide. "Last time we were docked somewhere shady, some creep tried to steal our food rations!" While Atlas walked beside him, adjusting the worn cloak over his shoulders in order to not draw any attention from the crowds of visitors at the station.

As the team prepared to disembark, the ship's internal lights dimmed to standby mode. The hum of the systems faded into a low, reassuring murmur, like a heartbeat at rest. Outside, the mechanical whine of cargo cranes and the echo of dockworkers shouting into the dry air filled the spaceport. Towering walls of alloy and flickering ad screens hemmed them in on all sides, painting the walkways in hues of blue, violet, and sickly green. For a moment, no one moved. They each stood at the threshold of the ramp, bathed in the artificial glow, staring out into the city that could either give them sanctuary or sell them out.

King broke the silence with a quiet sigh. "Well... Here we go again."

Luz glanced back toward the ship, her hand brushing the hull gently, almost like she was patting the shoulder of an old friend. Then she straightened, as her own resolve settled in her chest like a weight she no longer feared carrying. "Let's keep our heads down," she said. "And our eyes open."

They stepped out into Maturn itself.

However, almost immediately, they were met by a dock worker. A floating figure about the size of King—they were luminescent with a light yellow colored star-shaped head, they were a Star Sprite. They wore a navy blue uniform that had reinforced stitching that was doubled, while they had padded shoulders. On the front of their uniform, it had at least four pocket compartments to store small tools and utilities. The uniform is meant for mechanical expertise and storage for the tools they used for ship repairs. "Howdy travelers!" the sprite sang in a bubbly, high-pitched voice that rivaled Starry's. "Welcome to Manturn! Dock E-12, huh? That's a prime spot! I'll be watching your vessel while you browse our lovely civilization!"

Luz blinked at the Star Sprite. "Uh... thanks?"

"Of course, of course!" the sprite said, twirling mid-air. "Name's Zizi! I'm assigned to keep your baby bird safe and sound while you flutter off into the stars of capitalism!"

King snorted. "That's one way to put it." Luz then followed up with, "You remind me of someone back home-" However, before Luz could continue, Zizi cut her off and floated closer to The Donati, peering around with overly eager interest. "My, my, that's some old tech! Been flying long?"

Hesperos narrowed his eyes just slightly. "Long enough. She's temperamental, but loyal."

Zizi added while their voice still carried the strange, 'starry' pitch "The ship's integrity looks good! Ooh, what a sleek little vessel. Bet she's fast," they chimed, swaying gently from side to side like a lazy comet.

"Just don't touch anything mate," Hesperos muttered under his breath as he and Luz disappeared into the crowd ahead.

Atlas hesitated for a second longer, glancing back toward Zizi. His eyes, dimly glowing with soft hues, scanned the dockworker's face. "You're... different from most Star Sprites I've known," he noted, his tone tentative but curious.

Zizi giggled, spinning midair. "Aww, thanks, sparkle buddy! I get that a lot. Gotta shine in your own special way, right?" They gave a playful wink before floating off toward the edge of the docking zone. "Now go on, go have your little adventure! I'll keep your pretty ship nice and safe. Pinky-promise!"

Atlas walked slowly after the others, though a faint crease of unease lingered on his brow. Something about the overly peppy attitude felt... off but he said nothing.

As they turned to lead the crew away, the sprite paused mid-spin and gave a quick glance toward the far end of the dock where no one else seemed to be watching. "Well! Enjoy your stay, starlighters!" With a little finger-gun gesture and a wink that sparkled a beat too long, Zizi twirled mid-air with their usual flamboyant flourish and began hovering back toward the ship, humming a carefree tune that sounded like wind chimes caught in a solar flare.

The moment their back was turned to the departing crew, the cheerfulness cracked like thin porcelain. The glow in their cheeks dulled slightly, and their movements stiffened into something more mechanical—more calculated. Zizi's eyes narrowed, darting left, then right, scanning for any dock workers, guards, or curious locals. None. The loading bay was quiet aside from the distant clatter of crates and the hum of hovering freighters.

Without a word, Zizi floated toward a shadowed alcove behind a set of stacked fuel canisters and exhaled. From beneath their sleeve, they tapped once on a glowing band

around their wrist, revealing a tiny embedded communicator that shimmered with a faint red glow. With a moment of hesitation—almost regret—they hovered a finger over the central button and pressed it.

Meanwhile, Aboard The Eclipse, the hollow stillness of space was matched only by the haunting interior of the vessel itself. From the outside, the ship resembled a massive yellow crescent—a celestial blade suspended in the void. Its shape was warped and angular, covered in layers of mismatched plating and patchwork reinforcements that glinted faintly under nearby starlight. These modifications weren't aesthetic choices but brutal necessities, made after centuries of conflict and cosmic attrition. Cracks in the main structure had been sealed with jagged alloy slabs; some scars were still faintly glowing, remnants of failed sieges and forbidden energies the ship had endured.

Yet despite its battered hull, The Eclipse remained a weapon of fearsome authority. Inside, the ship was a tomb. The air was cold, dense with the scent of ionized metal and something old. Something similar to dust, perhaps even a memory. Its hallways were steeped in shadow, illuminated only by the occasional flicker of ethereal flame that hovered near the ceilings like silent sentinels. The silence was never complete, however. A low, rhythmic hum pulsed through the walls—alive, deliberate, like a heartbeat. No crew walked these halls. Only the ship, and its master.

The architecture was unlike any modern vessel: archaic and sacramental. Star sigils floated and turned slowly in the air above obsidian walls, casting fleeting shadows. The languages they whispered were long dead, scrawled in patterns that invoked not just meaning, but intent. Every corridor narrowed as it approached the center of the ship, drawing the unfortunate like a funnel toward judgment. At the heart of it all, past a gauntlet of glyph-locked doors. Each was engraved with seals of obedience and pain—there stood the Chamber of Penitence. There was one thing the chamber had been known for, it was a cathedral of suffering. It was vast and circular, its ceiling extended into a black dome littered with faint, artificial constellations that moved with slow deliberation. Four towering statues loomed in the corners, each one carved from a dark colored concrete-like material. These statues were depicted as faceless figures with their body language reflecting their righteousness and agony. The floor was carved with intricate patterns that glowed and pulsed like a heartbeat.

The chamber was a cathedral of suffering. Hovering above the central dais was a device of unholy design: an inverted prism constructed from fractured crystal, bound in iron and

gravity tethers. Its presence exuded a nauseating pressure, as if reality bent around it unwillingly. Screams, ancient and faint, sometimes echoed from within its core. It was not merely a torture instrument, as it was a reliquary of confessions, forged to rip secrets from souls. It was here that the Grand Huntsman delivered his judgment.

The Grand Huntsman, donned a long hooded robe. Where the left portion of his robe was black, while the right portion was grey. The grey portion of his robe had large spots that resemble suns. On the black portion of his robe, contained large grey crescents and small, glowing white stars. These patterns were scattered all over his robe. Underneath his robes, he wore a black-colored fusion of ritualistic armor and battle gear, the design is asymmetrical in places, with a layered scale-like texture and hard surfaces to reflect both his authority and aggression. The armor is etched with the symbols of his people and religious motifs but they were done so by the blood of the titans he had hunted, giving these symbols a dark blue appearance in contrast to the dark armor he wore. He also wore thick, metallic gauntlets and boots to complete the ensemble, hinting at his durability and strength. Finally, on his neck, he wore two necklaces where one was longer than the other. Although, these necklaces shared something in common and that was the fact they had the bones of the titans he had hunted. He wore them as trophies for the successful hunts he had led during the days of the war. In a way, it truly was the perfect jewelry cosmetic for a sadistic hunter.

The Grand Huntsman stepped through the chamber's threshold, his footsteps measured and reverent. His cloak flowed behind him, while he crossed the hall slowly, each step echoing with ceremonial weight as he approached a dais set at the room's center where pain and purpose met.

Ahead of them is where his prisoner was located, the prisoner in question was a member of a species known as a Zrullian, who were an amphibious, humanoid race from the world of Zrullia. The Zrullian's body was long and lithe, humanoid in structure but undeniably otherworldly. Translucent, amphibious skin glistened beneath the cruel illumination, shifting hues of pale lavender and soft cerulean rippling subtly with each tremor of pain. Semi-luminescent patterns traced along their limbs like bioluminescent coral reefs, dimming now under the weight of their exhaustion and suffering. Most striking were the frilled gill crests that flared gently from the sides of their neck which were delicate, feather-like structures reminiscent of Earth's axolotls. Once vibrant and finely tuned to the rhythm of Zrullia's oceans, they now drooped due to the hours of torture they had to endure. They also had slender webbing stretched between their

elongated fingers, and the lower half of their body had fin-like extensions that had once allowed for elegant aquatic movement, now hanging limp like torn silk. Their once-white robes were torn and stained, clinging to their wiry frame as they trembled in the air. Bloodless cuts lined their limbs, which these cuts were ritualistic and precise. These wounds were not meant to kill, but rather to extract memory. Although the extraction was meant to be done in a slow yet painful process. The Zrullian clinged onto dear life on the very inverted prism in the chamber they were being held restrained on.

The Grand Huntsman stopped a pace before the prisoner and looked up, his face partially shrouded beneath in the hood that he wore. What little of his eyes could be seen gleamed with merciless purpose. "Your silence is both pitiful and predictable," the Grand Huntsman said, voice smooth yet thunderous, with the cadence of scripture being read aloud in judgment. "I offer you a final opportunity for redemption. Speak, Zrullian. Where have the thieves taken the Celestine Compass?"

The prisoner trembled but lifted their head with great effort. Their luminous violet eyes were dim, but defiant. "I-I told you... I don't know them. I've never seen these beings you speak of. I... I was only traveling through the Rift Corridor when your patrol took me—unprovoked..."

"A lie," the Huntsman interrupted flatly, not with rage, but with cold certainty, as though pronouncing the inevitability of the sun rising. "The Archive Collective intercepted psionic echoes from the rift weeks ago. You—a Dream-Warden—were present. The energy signature of the Compass resonated within your presence. That is not conjecture. It is doctrine."

The Zrullian flinched, their gill frills fluttering with each desperate breath. "Resonance...? T-that was residual! I—I was meditating in the astral wells! It must have... bled into me! I swear it wasn't mine! I don't know where they are—I never even saw them!"

The Grand Huntsman slowly tilted his head. "So even now you deflect responsibility and you expect mercy? Typical... for what you speak is that of a coward's hymn."

"Please... I beg you," the Zrullian rasped. "I'm not your enemy! I haven't harmed anyone! I only wish to return to Zrullia! My people need me! My oceans are dying—"

"Your people abandoned their purpose the moment they rejected the Archive Collective," the Huntsman growled. "Your oceans are dying because the stars themselves no longer weep for heretics such as your kind." with a swift gesture, his gauntlet ignited with a swirling column of concentrated Star Magic—vicious white and blue light brimming with divine wrath. "I have given you every chance to repent," he declared. "But it is clear your soul is steeped in rebellion. So be it."

The arcane light surged toward the prisoner, slamming into them like a collapsing sun. Their body convulsed as threads of starfire tore through their nervous system, fracturing the energy fields that sustained their bioluminescence. Light flickered and dimmed across their limbs. Their scream—shrill, alien, and almost melodic—filled the chamber like a mournful aria.

The Huntsman stood unmoved, watching the Zrullian writhe in the air. There was no satisfaction in his expression—only a cold, ritualistic resolve, as if inflicting pain was a sacred act. "I cleanse not out of malice," he intoned, "But because your existence obstructs divinity's course."

The prisoner gasped, a whimpering sob spilling from their lips. "You're... a monster..."

"No," the Huntsman said, stepping closer, lowering his voice to a lethal whisper. "I am the consequence."

Just then, a soft chime echoed through the chamber, which is to be revealed as an incoming communication. The Huntsman raised his hand, halting the flow of starfire. The Zrullian sagged forward, unconscious or near enough, their body steaming in the cold air of the chamber. The gauntlet retracted its magic, and he turned toward the golden interface emerging from the wall.

"Speak," he commanded.

"My Star," said Zizi, their voice devoid of its earlier chipper tone. "The fugitives have arrived on Maturn. Docking quadrant 12-A. Celestine Compass confirmed aboard." She added, "The Human girl, the Illustrian pirate, the traitorous spawn, and finally.. The Titan."

The chamber fell into silence. For several long moments, the Grand Huntsman did not respond. His gaze sharpened, almost imperceptibly, while the fingers of his gauntlet flexed.

Then came the whisper. "The Titan..." His tone was a breath, yet it carried the weight of prophecy. His tone was something more restrained but deeply, profoundly satisfied. "At last," he murmured, stepping forward slowly, each bootfall ringing with holy purpose. "The final affront to divine order. The orphan of chaos... still clinging to life." He turned his face partially toward the dim reflection in the polished walls where his own visage stared back.

"I've hunted his kind across the Demon Realm. Their bones line the path to salvation. Their screams once echoed across the void, heralding the return of rightful dominion. And now—after so many centuries—I am to seize the last one."

He looked at Zizi's projection again. His voice was low but cutting as he asked them. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, Your Radiance. Identified visually and through arcane signature. His presence is undeniable. He... he looks younger than the records suggested."

The Huntsman's face twisted slightly with restrained malice. "The last wretch of a forgotten lineage, wearing innocence as a mask. But his blood remembers. It always remembers."

He raised a hand, and a column of glowing starlight emerged in the air beside him—projecting a slowly rotating image of King in miniature, followed by the others: Luz, Atlas, Hesperos.

"Four fugitives. Four threads binding the tapestry of heresy," he said aloud, pacing. "But it is he who offends the heavens most grievously. That creature is not a child. He is an abomination born of titanic rebellion. His very breath is a trespass against the stars."

Zizi remained quiet, the gravity of his words sinking in like weight pressing on the chest. "I want no more interference," he continued, turning back toward the interface. "No third-party bounties. No detainments by local governments. This is not a retrieval—it is a cleansing."

"Understood, Your Radiance," Zizi replied quietly. "Shall I alert the planetary authorities of your approach?"

"No," he said firmly. "They will know when judgment arrives." He then turned away, as his cape trailed behind him like the curtain of a closing sanctuary. He passed the Zrullian's twitching form without a second glance. "Prepare The Eclipse for immediate descent," he called. "We shall descend upon Maturon not as hunters... but as executioners." As he exited the chamber, the runes flared one last time. The lights dimmed, and in the silence, The Eclipse groaned as its engines aligned, the ship's form shimmering into warp-phase. They were already moving—toward Maturon, the fugitives, and the hunt. The Eclipse would soon enter into warp travel and within seconds it vanished out of existence and disappeared instantly into the cosmos.

Meanwhile, Maturon's capital was a glittering sprawl of towers and winding bazaars that shimmered under the planet's pale sun. Its streets pulsed with life as its vendors shouted in dozens of dialects, hovercrafts zipping overhead, alien creatures bartering exotic wares beneath draped awnings of woven light. Amidst this vibrant chaos, the crew of The Donati moved with wary purpose, their eyes sharp, and their steps were steady but quick. The crew moved through the crowd together, weaving past vendors selling energy capsules, dried krill bark, forged relics, and imitation star maps. Luz walked slightly ahead of the group, as she looked around their surroundings with a calculated focus. She kept her hand near her staff, instinctively protective. Her eyes flicked from alley to rooftop to shadow with quiet intensity. Every loud noise or sudden movement made her shoulders tense. She wouldn't admit it, but the tension hadn't left her since they touched down.

"I still say we should've parked closer to the core," Hesperos muttered, "This place is a maze."

"I told you," Luz said without looking back, "less surveillance in the outer rim. Fewer patrols too. It's safer." she added, "No one won't find us while we blend in with the crowd itself!"

King, walking beside her and Atlas, looked up at her. "Safer, huh? We've got like twelve cameras pointing at us all over this place and I'm pretty sure that food stand is sentient."

"Relax, matey," Hesperos Holmes said with a small smirk, adjusting his coat as he responded to King. "We've got credits, a clear exit route, and a few quiet hours before anyone even thinks about checking the docks."

Luz cracked a small smile but didn't respond. They turned a corner into a quieter alleyway lined with glowing signs in alien script when she suddenly froze mid-step.

Her heart thudded in her chest. Just ahead, between two vendor stalls, stood a tall, hooded figure in indigo robes. Adorning their neck and wrists were star-shaped pendants, cosmic bangles, and rings that gleamed with constellation-like etchings. The hood shadowed the face completely but Luz didn't need to see as the shape, posture, and jewelry screamed Archivist.

The noise of the city fell away, drowned beneath the roaring in her ears. Her vision tunneled, focusing only on the figure unmoving and unblinking. Her chest tightened as though invisible hands squeezed around her lungs. The world around her spun as fear began to take hold of her, which she stumbled back because of it.

"No—no, not here. Not now—" she gasped, hands rising instinctively to her temples. "Luz!" Atlas and King rushed to her side. "Luz, what is it?!"

"Breathe!" King shouted, scrambling to her feet. "Luz, it's okay—it's okay! Look at me, not them!"

Hesperos darted ahead, placing himself between Luz and the hooded figure. His hand reached under his coat for his concealed blaster. "What did you see?"

Luz barely heard them. Her fingers trembled. Cold sweat dotted her brow. "They're here—they found us," she muttered in a panic. "I saw them—he looked just like Orion, just like—"

"No, no, no," Atlas said gently but firmly, kneeling beside her. He gripped her hand tightly.

With a cautious nod from Hesperos, the hooded figure finally turned and revealed a face with multiple blinking eyes. It was not human, nor Archivist. It gave a confused blink, then shuffled away, mumbling something about "weird tourists."

Hesperos relaxed and stepped back. "Just a vendor. A particularly overdressed one."

Luz blinked. Reality returned in fragments. The tension in her shoulders slowly bled out. Her breathing steadied, though she quickly wiped her face and stood up. "I—I knew that," she said quickly, forcing a chuckle that didn't reach her eyes. "Just... testing your reactions. You uh, all passed."

Atlas gave her a long, heart-deep look, but said nothing. King, however, was less subtle.

"Luz," he said softly, "it's okay to—"

"I'm fine," she said sharply, brushing dust from her pants. "I overreacted. It won't happen again."

"Luz..." Hesperos approached slowly, voice gentler now. "It's not overreacting. You've been through a lot. We all have."

She turned her back to them, looking down the street toward their original path. "We don't have time for me to fall apart. Not now. The Huntsman could already be on his way. We need those supplies, and then we're gone."

"Luz—" King began, but she cut him off. "I said I'm fine." Her voice cracked slightly, but her gaze was fierce. "Let's move." Her voice had regained that clipped, commanding edge. She rolled her shoulders and walked ahead again, back straight with her chin up high. "I'll grab the rations. You three check the gear shop."

King watched her go. "There she goes again," he murmured. "Turning it all into armor."

"She thinks she has to protect us," King added quietly. "She doesn't realize we're trying to protect her too," Hesperos added.

For a beat, they stood in the alley, watching Luz disappear into the crowd—composed on the outside, unraveling within. They exchanged a silent nod and followed her, weaving through the crowd with urgency. Though Luz walked ahead, shoulders high and chin set like steel, the shadow of her panic lingered in her eyes which were haunted, heavy, and unspoken.

Meanwhile, across the stars on the planet Tibbocarro—a wind-scoured world of golden sands and deep ravines—a small outpost lay nestled among jagged cliffs. Its cantina, a rough circle of stone and glass, buzzed with low conversation and the occasional scrape of metal on metal. Smoke curled up from hookah-like vents, mixing with the scent of dried spice and engine fuel. The desert sun had begun its descent behind the fractured mesas of Tibbocarro, casting elongated shadows over the outpost and painting the sky in hues of rust and yellow. The air was dry, humming with the faint buzz of wind-driven power turbines. From the nearby cliffs, dust plumes curled into the sky, kicked up by mining haulers grinding their way toward distant settlements. In the heart of the outpost, the cantina's door hissed open with a tired, mechanical groan.

A hooded figure stepped inside, the hem of his long cream-colored tunic brushing against the floor. A navy-blue tabard flowed over his chest, belted with polished silver. Though the shine had been dulled with dust for the sake of anonymity. Several pouches were strapped to his waist in even formation, and his cream-colored pants were tucked neatly into weather worn brown boots. A cloak draped over his shoulders, shadowing his face just enough to hide his identity without raising suspicion. Markus Star scanned the dimly lit cantina through the narrow parting of his hood. Low chatter, the clink of drinks, and the faint croon of a three-armed alien singer filled the space. Booths circled the curved walls. He moved quietly, choosing a shadowed corner near a flickering data terminal.

From his cloak, he withdrew a palm-sized holo-projector and activated it beneath the table. Flickers of blue light formed rotating schematics: a fractured vault door from the ruins of Alkanos, grainy footage of four fleeing silhouettes, and a 3D replica of the Celestine Compass. He muttered under his breath. "Entry via collapsed service tunnel. Tampered surveillance. The Compass was removed within two minutes of breach..."

His finger swiped across the air. Four stills appeared: Luz with her defiant expression; King, mid-leap with glowing eyes; Hesperos Holmes, cocky and armed; and finally, Atlas, his cloak trailing like a comet. Markus's lips tightened by understanding the timing of their escape, the efficiency of the job—it wasn't amateur work due to how well planned and surgical it was. "Two months," he muttered bitterly. "Two months, and I'm still combing dust-covered corners of backwater planets chasing phantoms."

His jaw clenched as he flicked between files and stills for the hundredth time, as if one more glance might unlock some hidden clue he'd missed. "They vanish, reappear, and

vanish again. They're always one step ahead." His voice dropped lower, sharp with irritation. He slumped back against the bench, glaring at the holo-map projected over the table. Pins marked dead ends: outposts, ports, ruins. Places he'd scoured only to find fading footprints and smirking locals unwilling to talk. "This is becoming much more irritating and harder as time goes by... and that's something I'm gradually losing."

Suddenly, a burst of laughter erupted from a booth nearby with five beings huddled around a pitcher of steaming violet brew, as their conversation caught his attention. "I'm telling you, it was them!" barked one of the drinkers, a scaly-skinned Yarkanian with a long snout and glowing red cybernetic eyes. "Four of 'em. Human girl looked like she'd been through hell—she led the group like a war general. They saved my caravan from raiders on Orvon-9." Another leaned in, a rodent-like creature with flickering antennae. "I saw 'em on Efrune! That pirate—Hesperos—he hacked an entire blockade just to get us offworld. Charged me nothing but a smile."

"Pfft, no way," a third chuckled. "They stopped here on Nuruta. Took out a crew of smugglers and handed them to the port authorities. One of them—tiny, fanged little guy—said something about 'making bounty hunting look cool again.'"

Markus's eyes narrowed. He rose, casually, and approached the group with a steady gait. He kept his voice even, unreadable. "Evening," he said. "Did I hear correctly? You encountered a group—human girl, Illustrian pirate, small furry mammal lifeform, and a young Star Person?"

The table quieted as Markus made his presence known. The Yarkanian squinted up at him. "Who's asking?"

Markus offered a tight smile. "No one official. I'm... investigating a theft, specifically a vault robbery that contained a rare relic. The details match a group like the one you just described. I'm trying to confirm if they were spotted this far out."

The group exchanged glances. "They probably stopped at Honkoko," said the rodent alien. "From what I've heard, I'm pretty sure that's where they tend to hang out at times. Although, before that? Word is they cleared out some local scum. Fast. Clean. Real pros."

"They ain't just bounty hunters," added another. "They're the best I've seen. That human? She's got something in her eyes, like she's seen stars die."

Markus tucked that detail away. "Thank you for your testimonies. That's all I need."

He turned before they could ask more questions and made his way toward the door. The desert wind howled as the cantina doors hissed open once more.

A dusty public transport station sat just across the square, its neon signs flickering in the twilight. A long, bullet-shaped cruiser—part of the intergalactic bus network known as the Stellarline—was being loaded with passengers and cargo.

Markus stepped into the terminal, purchased a ticket from the automated kiosk, and boarded without hesitation. He chose a seat by the window, cloak wrapped tight, eyes fixed on the stars. As the cruiser rumbled to life and began its ascent into the heavens, Markus allowed himself a quiet exhale.

Honkoko.

Within several moments, the ship would finally leave its warp tunnel and begin making its way to land onto the planet. When the ship entered into the skies of the planet, The cityscape of Honkoko shimmered beneath the sky, its sprawling bazaar thrumming with life as Markus Star descended the crowded ramp of the public transport ship. He adjusted the hood over his head, hiding the glint of his silver belt buckle and insignia beneath the folds of his cream tunic and navy tabard. The scent of iron-rich sand and grilled meats mixed in the air, and alien merchants shouted in a dozen languages, hawking wares from colorful stalls.

He kept his stride deliberate and steady, eyes scanning every face that passed. However, that comfort was short-lived. As he turned a corner near a vendor selling rusted starship parts, he caught sight of two patrolling Archive Collective guards, their white armor gleaming, their glowing staves pulsing with quiet menace. Markus slipped into a nearby alley, flattening against the rough sandstone wall and waited for them to pass.

Once clear, he re-entered the flow of pedestrian traffic and approached a merchant at a spice stand.

"Excuse me," he said politely, lowering his hood just enough to show his face. "I'm looking for information. I've been told that four travelers came through here. One was a

human girl with short brown hair. Another, a Collector child. They may have been accompanied by a pirate and a small mammal-like lifeform." The merchant blinked slowly, then scoffed. "You and every bounty hunter in this quadrant, friend." He waved a dismissive hand. "Try the Bounty Manager's palace up the tier—if anyone would know, it's him."

He followed the merchant's directions through winding streets, moving uphill toward the more fortified district. He would soon notice the massive neon sign displaying the insignia of the Bounty Exchange. A pair of guards, both heavily armed, crossed their halberds as he approached.

"No entry without an audience scheduled. State your business," one barked.

Markus stood tall, voice firm and steady. "I have information regarding fugitives who may have passed through here. It's urgent. I request to speak with your Manager."

The guards looked at each other, unconvinced. One of them moved to shove him back—until a melodic voice echoed from within.

"Let him pass."

A door slid open behind the guards, revealing the tall, robed Bounty Manager, adorned in glimmering rings and a crimson sash that marked his authority. His near translucent skin caught the light, and his four eyes scanned Markus with mild amusement. "You've got the look of someone who's walked through stars just to knock on my door. Come. Speak."

Inside, the palace was opulent but well-worn with trophies that lined the walls, weapons from across various worlds, and portraits of infamous hunters who'd died in glory. The Manager led Markus to a chamber draped in red cloth and low light. "You're looking for a human, a mammalian creature, and... a pirate?" the Manager said, lounging in a seat that floated slightly off the ground. "You're not the first to come sniffing after them."

Markus removed his hood and folded his arms. "I'm not sniffing. I'm tracking. And I believe they're in possession of an artifact stolen from Alkanos. I need to know where they went after Honkoko."

The Manager tapped his ringed fingers together thoughtfully. "You're not Archive Collective. You don't carry their stink."

Markus's lips twitched upward faintly. "No. I work alone. That makes me reliable."

There was a pause, then the Manager gestured toward a starmap on the wall. "They didn't stay long. Sold off some bounty and left just as quick. My guess? Nanturn. It's the next system over—it's remote yet it's a massive trade hub nowadays. Just enough edge for people on the run."

Markus dipped his head in thanks. "That's all I needed." as he turned, he gave only a subtle smile to himself as he left the palace. The wind kissed his face as he descended the steps and made his way to the public docks. His boots echoed against the metal causeway as he boarded another cruiser—this one rusted, patched with scavenged plates, and bound for Nanturn.

As he took a seat near a window, he exhaled slowly, eyes distant. "No more dead ends," he whispered to himself. "Not this time." The engines on the intergalactic transit spacecraft rumbled to life, lifting the vessel into the dusky sky toward his next destination... and the fugitives he was determined to catch.

Chapter Four: A Confrontation on Both Sides.

Back on Nanturn, the main city's bazaar sprawled across layered terraces and steel-plated bridges, crowded with beings from every corner of space. Neon lights flickered in forgotten languages, steam hissed from vents, and through the chaos Markus Star walked with deliberate purpose. He kept his hood low, while his cloak brushed against the dust-caked floors, he gazed and scanned at every alien face in the crowd. The holoprojector on his gauntlet flickered with grainy images—snapshots from witness

testimonies, blurry stills from security feeds—each one of them a piece of the puzzle he'd been hunting for months. "Come on," he muttered, irritation mounting as he checked the last row of food vendors. "They have to be here. This is the last thread!"

Meanwhile, at a lower level of the station's market bazaar, Luz, King, Atlas, and Hesperos Holmes pushed through the crowd, their arms filled with supplies—food packs, spare fuel canisters, and a bag of assorted alien tech that Hesperos had "generously haggled" for (although he paid for it all with the credits that he and Luz had earned from their bounties, even pirates have to be reasonable businessmen).

"Food packs, fuel cores, water filters, emergency first-aid..." Hesperos listed, tapping each item in his satchel with a clawed finger. "If we were bounty hunters before, we're definitely living like them now."

"Well, it's much better than being Archive prisoners," Luz muttered with a forced smirk, though her fingers clenched tightly around the strap of her bag.

Atlas clung to Luz's side, one hand clutching her cloak and the other holding tightly to King's. "Can we go back to the ship now? Please?"

"We're almost there, Atlas." Luz glanced down at him, offering a soft smile. "Then we can go."

Though just as they turned the corner toward the docking platforms—they collided. A firm shoulder brushed against Luz's as a figure moved to step past. "Oh—pardon me," the man said reflexively, straightening his posture as he stepped back. Luz froze mid-step and so did he.

Their eyes locked—hers wide with alarm, his narrowed in sharp recognition. "Wait..." Markus Star's voice dropped. His eyes flicked to Hesperos, then to King and Atlas. His expression sharpened, and he drew himself upright like a knight from a legend. "You—you're them..." Markus Star's hood fell back slightly, revealing his striking features as he appeared to be similarly like a feline like Hesperos though his face was a cross between a feline and a rabbit and so were his ears, which were large. His eyes were purple. His hand slowly lowered to his belt, hovering above a small device clipped at his hip. "It is you!" he raised his voice. He added, "By authority of my investigation, I demand that you hand over the Celestine Compass now!"

"Wait—what?!" Luz instinctively stepped back, thrusting her arms out to shield Atlas and King behind her. Her heart spiked, thundering in her chest. "You're with the Archive Collective, aren't you?"

"What?! Absolutely not!" Markus snapped, gaze flicking between all four. "But I will not let that artifact slip through my fingers again! I know what it is and what you did on Alkanos. You must understand! That artifact is of dangerous origin! It belongs in protective custody—"

"You don't know anything," Hesperos growled, stepping forward until he was shoulder-to-shoulder with Luz, while his hand hovered near his blaster.

"You don't understand the stakes," Markus said, his voice growing sharper. "That compass is not just a relic. It is a key. If it falls into the wrong hands again—"

"We're the wrong hands to you, aren't we?" Luz barked. "You don't know what we've been through. You don't know what they did to us." Behind her, King flinched at her tone. Atlas gripped the hem of Luz's jacket tightly, his voice barely a whisper.

"Luz... please don't fight again." She didn't turn to look at them.

Markus paused. His hand, still hovering near his belt, slowly relaxed. He looked into the fire in Luz's eyes and saw, beneath it, the desperation—the trauma.

He spoke lower this time. "You're not enemies but if you keep running and keep holding that compass, you'll paint targets on yourselves. You've been running for two months. I followed you through multiple systems and it has to end here!"

Hesperos tensed, eyes narrowing. "You call that running. We call that survival!"

King poked his head from behind Luz, glaring up at Markus. "If you're here to arrest us—then good luck. Because we're not letting anyone make that happen again!"

Markus hesitated, caught in a moment of internal conflict. They weren't what he'd expected. The wanted profiles, the reports—they hadn't captured this. This wasn't a gang

of cosmic criminals, this was a family on the run. Still... he couldn't walk away empty-handed. Before Markus could continue, The sky over Nanturn rumbled.

A low tremor rippled through the market street, subtle at first but it grew louder and deeper. The clouds overhead shifted with unnatural speed, parting like fabric torn by unseen hands. Every light flickered. Every voice fell silent. Even the metallic scent of the air grew sharper, electric then it ultimately reached its climax.

Soon a ship appeared, yellow and angular tore through the atmosphere. It hovered low over the city, its engines roaring with eerie resonance... The Grand Huntsman had arrived. The crew watched in horror as they witnessed the arrival of the very being they had worked tirelessly to avoid. Luz muttered quietly in horror, "He- He couldn't have-" she turned to Hesperos as she frantically asked him for an inconclusive answer, "H-how did he find us?!" During her brief frantic state, she would soon turn towards Markus and once she noticed him, she soon developed an expression that reflected her deep anger. "You! You lead him to us!" as she raised her voice in an accusatory tone towards Markus.

Markus was soon quick to defend himself from Luz's accusation, "Me-? I- What? I didn't do anything! I just arrived here!" Before anyone could react, a column of light blue beamed down into the center of the plaza just ahead. The ground cracked as the air around them twisted, while people screamed and scattered. From that light, like a nightmare made into reality, The Grand Huntsman emerged, his cloak moved softly from the breeze that had come from the beam of light. His steps echoed like thunder, despite the chaos around him. His gaze fixed immediately unerringly on King. "There you are," he said, "The last heartbeat of Titan blood. The one I've waited centuries to silence." King froze but Luz immediately stepped between them, her staff snapping to her hand as her eyes widened with dread. "Run!" she screamed.

The Huntsman raised a hand, conjuring a crescent blade attached to several dark colored chains that had small nebulae clouds and clusters of stars attached that slammed into the plaza, erupting with explosive force. The shockwave sent Luz and the others sprawling. Atlas cried out, gripping Luz's sleeve as she shielded him with her body.

Markus, eyes wide in stunned disbelief, dove behind a pillar. Hesperos was already up, claws slashing out as he fired a barrage from his twin blasters toward the Huntsman. The blasts ricocheted off the Huntsman's armored hide, he didn't even flinch.

"You think you can delay me?" the Huntsman spat, lunging forward. His blade extended in a blink, striking the ground where King had been seconds ago. The young Titan scrambled behind a supply cart, his eyes wide with panic.

"Stay away from him!" Luz shouted, launching a glyph combination of fire and plant. The glyphs exploded across the Huntsman's chest. Smoke hissed from his armor, but he merely turned toward her, unfazed. "You are insects, unworthy of your borrowed power," he growled.

Markus gritted his teeth, pulling a sword from his uniform. He activated it with a snap-hiss and rushed forward. "If we're insects, then let's swarm," Markus growled, slashing across the Huntsman's flank.

For the first time, the Huntsman grunted, staggered by the unexpected hit. Luz, Hesperos, and Markus surrounded him now—fighting not as allies, but as survivors desperate to protect something sacred. The battle was chaotic; Hesperos darted like lightning, pelting the Huntsman with plasma shots. Markus struck with surgical precision, keeping the Huntsman off balance. Luz drew the Huntsman's focus with waves of elemental glyph combinations, each attack more ferocious than the last.

Though the Huntsman was relentless, he threw Markus into a wall with a single blow which resulted in his sword being shattered in the process, cracked Hesperos's shoulder guard with a backhand, and slammed Luz into the ground with a gravitational pulse. All the while, he stalked toward King, step by step, his voice guttural with joy.

"I can smell the end of your kind," he crooned, "Your blood sings to me, beast. It remembers me even if you don't. Come now, little Titan... Let your death echo across the stars."

King froze while his breath was caught in his throat, his heart was pounding loud enough to drown out the noise of everything else around him. The Huntsman's presence alone curled around him like invisible chains, which locked his limbs in place. It was the kind of fear that dug deep into his bones and into his very mind. It felt like a feeling of fear that's primal, if his very soul recognized this being as death incarnate. The Huntsman's blade pulsed with a shimmer that reflected their master's hunger and ultimate desire. He raised it with reverence like a priest conducting a sacred rite. King backed into a shattered crate, but at the same time his claws slipped against the ground. "Luz...?" he whispered.

Before the Huntsman could close the final steps, a figure moved in front of King—they were shaky and full of hesitation when they did so, it turned out to be Atlas who stepped in front of him

Atlas's hands trembled so violently it was a miracle they even stayed raised. His expression was stricken, panicked, and his eyes were glassy with tears but they stood his ground. The faint sunlight reflecting off his face made his pale cheeks seem even whiter. "No..." he breathed, his voice fragile and trembling. "Leave him alone. Don't touch him..."

The Grand Huntsman stopped as he soon tilted his head slowly, like an owl amused by the twitch of a dying mouse. "What is this?" he murmured, stepping ever so slightly to the left to better study Atlas. "A traitorous coward trying to shield a relic? Or something more pathetic... like affection?"

Atlas couldn't respond due to every part of him screaming to run but his legs remained rooted, defiant in their trembling. The shadows around the Huntsman seemed to stretch unnaturally toward him, as if they too longed to consume him.

King, behind Atlas, reached out weakly, his small claw gripping the hem of Atlas's sleeve. "Don't..." he choked out. "You'll get hurt..."

The Huntsman's laugh was low, more vibration than sound. "How sweet. Perhaps I'll make you watch him die first, Titan. That would be poetic."

At the same time, Markus managed to slowly get up but still dealt with the pain he received from the Grand Huntsman's attack, and overheard the Grand Huntsman reveal King's true identity which partially confused him yet made him curious, "A Titan?"

He raised the blade, Atlas winced but didn't move from his place, while King shut his eyes, holding his hand with Atlas as they braced for death.

"DON'T YOU DARE!" Luz's scream cracked the air like a thunderclap and then she collided with the Huntsman in a blinding burst of glyph-light. "ARGH!" yelled the Huntsman upon being blinded by Luz's light.

"NOW!" she shouted. "Get to the Donati! Hurry!" Hesperos, bleeding from a slashed eyebrow, scrambled to his feet. Markus blinked away his daze and sprinted toward the others. "Wait—you want me to board your ship?" Markus barked.

"Unless you wanna die here, yes!" Luz yelled over the chaos. "Just get on, we'll argue later!" Markus swore under his breath and grabbed King by the arm, hauling him along. Hesperos supported Luz while she cradled Atlas, running as fast as they could back through the twisting alleys of Nanturn toward their docked ship.

Behind them, the Grand Huntsman roared. It wasn't just a sound, it was a seismic force. It was a force that was ancient and furious, that tore through the air like an object so fast it broke the sound barrier. His voice carried with it a pressure that made the back of Luz's skull throb. A second later, a blistering shockwave burst outward from his outstretched palm. The ground cracked open beneath their feet, and a boom of kinetic force sent crates, carts, and civilians hurtling into the air like weightless debris. "RUN!" Luz screamed over the chaos, at the same time, The Donati's loading ramp hissed open ahead, a single sliver of salvation in the collapsing world around them. Hesperos Holmes was already up front, shouting back from the cockpit as the ship's engines whined to life. "You've got twenty seconds, tops! Move like you mean it!" he soon added with, "Starry, activate the warp drive! Hurry!" Starry zipped into the warp drive compartment instantly, "Aye! Aye! Captain!". They soon began to use every ounce of his energy to power up the ship's system instantly.

Markus Star, though clearly wounded and dragging a leg, pushed from behind. His usually sharp composure was shattered by sweat and exhaustion. "Go! Go! I've got the rear—"

A tendril of starfire coiled past them, narrowly missing King's head and searing into the ground with an explosion of white-hot sparks. The temperature dropped sharply as the Huntsman closed in, walking through the destruction with slow steps, untouched by the panic he caused. "Do not flee," he growled, his voice carrying effortlessly over the din. "There is no escape. The Titan must bleed... for it is his judgement."

King's eyes were wide with terror. He clung to Luz's arm now, practically shaking. His breathing came in short, panicked gasps. "He's going to kill us—he's going to kill me—"

Atlas, trembling beside him, didn't answer. Only the noise of desperate, silent murmurs were heard. His pupils were dilated, his hands locked into clawed fists as he tried to force his body to move.

Luz gritted her teeth and shoved them both toward the ramp. "We're not dying here. MOVE!"

They reached the ship just as another blast of magic slammed into the platform behind them, disintegrating metal and sending the entire dock listing sideways. Markus was thrown forward onto the ramp but managed to crawl to his feet, hauling himself inside as The Donati lurched upward.

The Huntsman reached out with one arm, a vortex of dark cosmic energy spiraling in his palm, ready to hurl it straight at the ship's engine but just before he could throw it, Hesperos triggered the rear defense turret. A blast of concussive energy fired from the ship's hull, exploding around the Huntsman and forcing him back momentarily. It was the first time the alien warlord even flinched. The ramp sealed shut with a hydraulic hiss. Inside, the airlock pressurized with a gasp, and then—

BOOM.

The Donati launched into warp seconds later, tearing away from the planet and into the safety of warp travel. Inside, everyone collapsed. Luz crumpled to her knees, gasping, while King practically crawled into her lap, burying his face in her arms. Atlas was slumped against the wall, hands over his ears, rocking slightly with watery eyes.

No one spoke for several long, breathless moments. Then quietly, between sobs, King whispered, "He's not gonna stop, is he?"

Luz didn't answer at first. She just held him tighter. Then finally, her voice barely above a whisper, she said, "No. He won't."

Back on Manturn, a low hum reverberated through the shattered air of the ruined docking bay, the smoke and crackling remnants of destruction curling in the wind like whispers of a missed kill. The Grand Huntsman stood at the heart of it all, motionless yet emanating fury like a dying star on the brink of collapse. The once-bustling terminal was now silent—emptied by terror and its structure fractured from his rampage.

His gloved hand curled into a fist, trembling under the pressure of his own rage. "They slipped through." His voice, calm yet thunderous, echoed across the broken floor. "They tasted fear... but still managed to escape." He added.

From behind, Zizi cautiously stepped forward, keeping their gaze low. "My Star... should we pursue?"

The Grand Huntsman's eyes gaze turned toward the high ceiling, where the last traces of The Donati's warp trail shimmered and vanished. He didn't turn to her as he answered, "Board the Eclipse." Just three words, but each one carried the weight of impending doom.

With a mechanical whirr, the beam from their ship caught them both in vertical shafts of light, and within seconds, the two vanished—beamed aboard the large looming vessel known as The Eclipse. As soon as they were aboard, the massive ship roared into warp travel, stars blurring into trails of light as it began its relentless pursuit.

Aboard The Donati, the silence was heavy. Luz sat with her back to the cockpit wall, cradling King in her lap. He had finally drifted into a restless sleep, though his hands twitched every so often, as they were still gripped by the memories of the Grand Huntsman's cold stare and his hateful whispers. Luz gently held him, brushing a hand through his fur in slow, steady strokes, her expression a mask of calm—one she wore for him. However beneath it, her chest ached with dread and fury. Just a few feet away, Atlas sat curled against the floor, his knees pressed tightly to his chest, a blanket loosely draped around his shoulders. His eyes were wide as they stared out into the warp tunnel through the viewport. He was still lost in the shadow of the Grand Huntsman's voice, the way it lingered—taunting, cruel, intimate. It made his skin crawl.

In the pilot seat, Hesperos Holmes clicked through the navigation system with tense fingers, muttering under his breath as he brought up stellar charts and encryption protocols. "Closest nebula cluster is still six sectors out... rerouting through an alternative route that might buy us time," he said, more to himself than anyone else.

"I can't believe we got out," Markus finally muttered, breaking the silence. "That thing... it wanted blood."

"He wanted King," Luz said flatly, "He was going to kill him..."

Atlas whimpered, pulling the blanket tighter around himself.

"He talked like... he knew me," King murmured groggily, waking slightly in Luz's lap. His voice cracked with exhaustion and fear. "Like he'd been waiting." Luz hushed him, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "You're safe now. It's gonna be okay."

"We should land somewhere soon," Hesperos murmured, "We're too exposed in the tunnel. If the Grand Huntsman really wanted to—"

"No." Luz's voice was hoarse but firm. "We just need to find a quiet place but for now, Let King rest and Atlas breathe for a bit." Before Hesperos could respond, a shrill alarm tore through the cockpit. A sharp alarm chimed from the control panel, while the cockpit bathed itself in an ominous pulse of red light. Each flash illuminated the raw tension painted on their faces; exhausted, terrified, and barely holding it together. Hesperos stared blankly at the screen as new data lines flooded in. His fingers hovered over the controls, but they didn't move. His voice dropped, thin and dry. "...No."

The single word made Luz's heart stop. She gently eased King aside and stood, her hand instinctively resting on the hilt of her staff. "What is it?" Markus demanded, stepping forward with urgency.

Hesperos turned toward him, and in the flashing red light, his face looked ghostly pale. "We're not alone in the tunnel anymore." he said. Across the room, Atlas stirred in his blanket cocoon. He had barely spoken since they'd left Manturn, but now he slowly looked up, dread curling through every syllable. "It's him." before immediately rushing towards Luz for protection and emotional reassurance.

Markus pushed past Hesperos and leaned over the console. The readings were clear: an energy signature far too large for a merchant vessel... matching the profile of a warship. "I don't understand," Hesperos muttered, trying to calculate. "There's no way he could've followed us. I scrambled our signature, he shouldn't be able to track us, he shouldn't be able to be here!"

"But he is," Luz snapped, her voice cracking. "He followed us, Hesperos. And now he's in the tunnel with us." Through the cockpit window, the swirling current of warp energy

began to distort and flicker—bending unnaturally. Then, slowly and with terrifying grace, The Eclipse emerged. Its hull gleamed like burnished bone, sleek and silent. While it unleashed streaks of silver energy snaked from its underbelly.

King whimpered, clutching at Luz's side. "No... not again." Atlas muttered, "It's not possible... he can't find us here... this isn't real..."

"I've got you both," she whispered fiercely, shielding both King and Atlas with her arms but her voice reflected her fear that had become very clear.

The eerie hum of gravitational interference crept through the ship like a shiver. The Donati shuddered, causing tools to clatter to the floor, and the ship's artificial gravity began to weaken. "He's activating a beam," Hesperos said, his hands flying across the controls. "An artificial grav-lock—he's going to pull us in whole."

Luz felt King and Atlas begin to rise off the floor again. She grabbed onto the two of them and they slammed behind the nearest steel support beam, bracing herself as the ship lurched. Markus lunged and anchored himself behind a control console. "It's like he's playing with us!" Atlas shrieked, his voice high with panic.

"Hold on!" Hesperos shouted. "I'm overriding the warp flow but he's tampering with it, bending it. Like it's responding to him!"

Outside, The Eclipse hovered directly overhead, positioning itself like a spider about to strike. The glow from the tractor field deepened, and the currents of warp around them warped and shrieked. They weren't just being pulled—they were being suffocated.

The light inside the cockpit dimmed unnaturally. Something cold and dark pressed against the hull, like an invisible hand tracing the seams of their ship. For a horrifying second, the crew could hear a whisper—no source, no direction—just a voice rippling across the metal.

"So close now... I can taste you..."

King let out a strangled gasp and buried his face against Luz's neck, his small body trembling. And then—CRASH.

From the tunnel beyond, a shadow moved fast. The shadow belonged to a massive serpent-like creature burst from the side stream—It was a Warp Eel, twice the size of The Donati. It lunged without hesitation, drawn by the predatory energy of The Eclipse. Its fangs sank into the outer hull, electricity crackling from its glowing tendrils. The Grand Huntsman's ship jerked sideways under the impact, the tractor beam disengaging instantly.

Hesperos blinked. "It's attacking him. This is our escape window!" He fired the engines, burning the emergency reserves he'd been holding in case of total system failure. The Donati roared as its thrusters ignited, surging forward like a panicked animal fleeing its predator. Behind them, the Warp Eel writhed around The Eclipse, electricity crackling through its translucent tendrils. The Grand Huntsman's ship began to distort, its hull splitting and reforming in ways that defied natural geometry. Its eerie calm had shattered—now it was thrashing, caught in the coils of something even older and hungrier than it was.

The tractor beam died completely. "Plotting alternate escape route—now!" Hesperos shouted. With a final series of keystrokes, The Donati rerouted itself down a fresh warp stream. The ship jolted hard, stars twisting, and with a guttural surge of energy, it dove away from the fight. For now, they were free but the image of the Huntsman's ship—how it moved, how it felt—clung to them like a sickness. They hadn't just escaped a pursuer.

In the rear of the cockpit, King clung tightly to Luz. Atlas had slumped down beside them. Even as they put distance between themselves and The Eclipse, the horror lingered in their minds. The touch of the beam. The voice in their heads. The sensation of being prey. They had survived a predator but deep down, every one of them understood: the Grand Huntsman wasn't finished.

Chapter Five: The Real Stakes.

The Donati drifted silently among the shadows of fractured asteroids, its outer hull cloaked in a thin veil of the various clusters of stars that were all over in the sector of space the ship had arrived on. The field around them was vast, quiet—an abandoned region of space littered with ancient rock and remnants of shattered moons. It was the perfect hiding place, far removed from warp lanes and patrol scans, forgotten by time and

too treacherous to navigate that only the most experienced of pilots are able to traverse. There were jagged rocks that floated in slow motion, some the size of buildings, others like drifting pebbles, orbiting each other in a gravitational ballet. The distant stars blinked behind the debris like silent witnesses.

Hesperos Holmes sat in the pilot seat, as his hands still remained on the controls. He watched the scanner like a hawk, his eyes scanned for the slightest anomaly. His tail flicked nervously over the floor, betraying the tension he tried to mask with his usual sardonic calm. Around him, the others waited in silence, the adrenaline of the chase ebbing into cold dread. Every creak of the hull made someone flinch.

Luz paced near the rear of the cockpit, biting her thumbnail, her eyes never leaving the small viewport. Each rotation of an asteroid felt like a threat and each flicker of static on the console felt like a countdown to a horrifying discovery. She occasionally glanced down at King, who sat on a bench beside her, his small form trembling slightly beneath a blanket draped around his shoulders. Atlas sat cross-legged on the floor, his arms wrapped tightly around himself, their cloak pooled beneath him. His wide eyes never blinked, as they were fixed toward the faint glow of the ceiling lights. Hesperos had seen that look before—on prisoners of war and orphans pulled from burning ships.

"Still no sign of him," Hesperos finally said, his voice low, as if it were afraid to disturb the fragile air around them. "The cloak's holding. If we're lucky, that Warp Eel gave him more than he bargained for."

Markus Star stood near the cockpit door, arms folded, his posture straight but tense. His gaze shifted between each of the four. "That... was close," he said, "You saved my life. I owe you all for that." Luz gave a quiet nod, while she still petted King. His fur was bristled, and his wide eyes stared blankly out the window, barely blinking.

Though the quiet gratitude was short-lived as Markus's tone sharpened. "Now. Hand over the Celestine Compass."

The words cut through the stillness like a blade. Hesperos turned slightly in his seat, eyebrows raising. Luz's body tensed, and King immediately pulled himself up beside her, while Atlas stood up softly near Luz and King. Luz narrowed her eyes as her expression showed off her disbelief. "Excuse me?"

Markus took a step forward. "I've been tracking that artifact for two months. The vault break-in on Alkanos, four suspects, and one ancient artifact stolen from a classified chamber. I finally found all four of you, and you want me to just ignore that you're in possession of a highly dangerous object?"

King's eyes flared with offense, his voice sharp. "Dangerous to who? The monsters you work for? No way."

"I literally said before that I don't work for the Archive Collective or their leaders , The Archivists!" Markus snapped, his tone defensive now. "I'm not one of them."

The tension in the cockpit remained palpable, a dense fog of mistrust and frayed nerves clinging to the corners of the dimly lit ship. Outside, the asteroid field drifted in slow rotation, offering the crew a fragile sense of security. The cloaking device hummed gently beneath the floor panels, the only sound beside the occasional creak of metal and the subtle breath of those inside. Markus stood near the rear bulkhead, his arms no longer crossed, but hanging by his sides. His eyes darted toward Luz, then King, then the others. "Alright," he said, voice steady but subdued. "I need to ask... that thing—what or who was it? Why was he targeting you?"

Luz didn't answer immediately as her stance guarded, and one hand was still resting on the back of King's head as he leaned against her side. Atlas had moved closer, curling protectively into Luz's other side, while Hesperos remained standing and his arms were folded, leaning against the control panel near the cockpit. "Before we answer anything," Luz said, she added further, "We want to know who you are. Really. And who you're working for. Because you've also been chasing us across systems for- who knows how long and now you've shown up at the worst possible time and you're over here demanding that we give up the compass and hand it to you! If you want us to trust you, start there."

Markus's brow furrowed, the lines of stress deepening across his face. He hesitated for a moment—just long enough to release the weight of the decision before exhaling sharply through his nose and raising both hands slightly in a gesture of surrender.

"...Fine," he said, the edge in his voice softening. "You want answers? You deserve them."

The silence in The Donati's cockpit grew heavier, broken only by the low hum of the ship's systems and the occasional ping of debris brushing along the hull. Luz didn't speak but her eyes didn't waver from Markus. "I'm not a bounty hunter and I'm definitely not working for the Collective," Markus continued. He took a step back and leaned against the console near the navigation display, his posture finally breaking into something more fatigued. "My name is Markus Star," he said quietly. "I'm a Knight of the Order of Arbora and I've been sent by the Council of Arbora themselves. The highest ranked members in our order."

"I didn't come after you for glory," he continued, quieter now, but no less firm. "Ever since your break-in at the Vault of Alkanos... the Order has been in crisis. The Celestine Compass you stole—" his eyes flicked toward King, Luz, Atlas, and Hesperos, "—it wasn't just a relic sitting on a pedestal." Markus took a breath, then looked toward the darkened starscape beyond the viewport. "It's far more than what it appears to be. The Compass is... a key, yes, but it's also a map. A guide that points to pieces of something greater. Something sacred. Something that was never meant to be scattered... or found again. The compass contains things tied to Arbora itself." Markus concluded with, "And if the compass were to fall into the wrong hands... Every realm, timeline, and universe that it supplements will be at risk."

A heavy silence settled again after Markus's cryptic declaration. The hum of the ship's systems was the only sound, until Luz finally stepped forward. "All right," she said, her voice steady but laced with tension. "You've told us just enough to make me ask more questions." She folded her arm once she made her statement, "What is the Order of Arbora? And what exactly is Arbora?"

Markus gave a short breath—almost a scoff—as he turned his gaze back to Luz. "I figured you'd ask that next." He paused. "But... you made a deal, remember? You'd tell me who that monster was, the one chasing you."

Luz frowned, clearly not happy about the deflection, but she nodded toward Atlas.

Atlas, who had remained quiet until now, hugged his knees closer to his chest. His voice trembled slightly as he spoke, but there was a quiet strength behind it—like he was done running from the truth. "He's the Grand Huntsman," he said. "One of my kind... or, at least, what used to be my kind."

Markus blinked. "Used to be?"

"He's a Star Person just like me," Atlas continued, eyes flicking up to meet Markus. "My older brother, Orion, commands him. He and my other siblings... they're not just watching from afar anymore. They're making moves. Dangerous ones."

"Which now they're after the Compass," Luz added grimly, glancing at a small box at the far corner of the room on top of a shelf. "Whatever it leads to, they want it so badly that it's enough to send that psychopath after us."

Markus stood completely still, processing their words. His brow furrowed deeper the longer he stood in thought while his ears rose slightly. Then, as if a realization was beginning to form beneath the surface, his tone shifted. "Why?" he asked slowly, voice low and deliberate. "Why does the Grand Huntsman want the Celestine Compass so badly? What is Orion really after?"

His tone wasn't accusatory, but there was weight behind the words. A tension. Then, almost hesitantly, he added, "Does this have to do with the upcoming Convergence? During our investigation, we began to notice an eerily close pattern between the break in and with the timing of the convergence... it's suspicious."

Luz stiffened. King looked up with wide eyes. Even Hesperos turned in his seat. Atlas's expression darkened as he slowly buried his face in his arms. A long silence passed before Luz spoke. "Yes," she said, her voice quiet. "It does."

Markus exhaled slowly, as if he'd been hoping and praying that wouldn't be the answer. "Stars above..."

"Orion told me himself," she said. "Back when we faced him in the Archive Tower. He plans to use the energy from the nine stars that will align during the Convergence—which will power a device he called the Travelscope." Markus's brow twitched by responding, "The device of Star Person craftsmanship that can pierce between realms... continue."

Luz nodded. "Yeah. With it, he'll open doors to all Nine Realms at once. Not to just visit but to invade. He wants to tear it down and reshape it all into an existence where it's just pure 'perfection' in his eyes. It's horrifying and crazy." Atlas flinched slightly, his voice

low as he added, "And once everything they deem 'imperfect' is gone, the Archivists can twist each realm into whatever image they want. Whatever serves their vision."

"And to do that," Luz continued, "Orion's trying to collect these... artifacts. He called them the Star Pieces. And with what I've been told from him, there's at least nine of them." Markus's eyes narrowed, as the term alone sounded very familiar to him. "Star Pieces..."

Luz said, "Ever since we took the Celestine Compass, things haven't felt... safe. Hesperos told me before we headed to Alkanos that the Compass wasn't just an artifact—it was rumored to be a map, a path to other artifacts. Though... it seems that's likely true now, considering how you mentioned it being a map too." Luz then walked towards the shelf at the far corner of the room; her hand drifted to the small box on top of it and reached for it with her two hands. She would soon approach Markus once more and open the box to reveal the compass to him. In awe, Markus exclaimed, "The compass..." Luz then said, "At first, I didn't believe it. But now... after everything we've seen, everything Orion's after... I think the Compass is connected to the Star Pieces. Maybe it even leads to them."

Markus closed his eyes for a moment, face paling. He let out a slow, uneven breath, like someone realizing they'd been standing on the edge of a cliff the whole time and only now dared to look down.

"I was afraid of that," he said quietly. Luz tilted her head. "Wait—what do you mean?" Markus opened his eyes, the weight of years of knowledge and duty suddenly evident in them. "Because you're right," he said. "The Compass... is connected to the Star Pieces."

Markus stepped closer, his gaze still locked on the Compass resting in Luz's hands. The atmosphere in the room had changed—thickened into something reverent and weighted, like a sacred moment pressing down on them all. He extended his hand, palm open, voice low but steady. "May I see it? The Celestine Compass. If what I think is true... there's something inside it I need to show you."

Luz hesitated for only a second. Her fingers lingered on the edge of the compass's ornate box as she looked to King, then Atlas. They each gave small nods of reassurance to one another, with quiet trust, Luz placed the Compass into Markus's waiting hands.

The moment it touched his skin, the etched lines along the compass began to glow faintly pale gold at first, then shifting into a soft, glimmering white. Markus exhaled deeply, as if the object itself was drawing breath through him. Carefully, reverently, he turned the Compass in his hands and pressed his thumb into the central glyph.

The Compass clicked.

There was no mechanical grind or sharp release. Instead, it opened with a whispering hum, like wind moving through leaves. A beam of gentle light shot upward from its center, widening into a spectral bloom of magic. The projection took form slowly, first the glowing base, then the rising trunk of a radiant, ghostly-white tree.

Its bark shimmered with light and its branches stretched outward like celestial arms, there were a total of nine of them. Each of them curled and twisted toward a different direction. At the end of each branch, a swirling, semi-transparent nebula bloomed—each one painted in a different color. Within each of these clouds, several glimmering dots blinked into view, their positions scattered like constellations across a night sky. Above it all, arching gracefully like a crown, were nine golden stars that hovered over the structure. They were all arranged in a perfect arc over the entire structure. The room fell completely silent upon the sight of the structure.

Markus looked up into the glowing light, his voice hushed. "There it is," he murmured. "Arbora."

Luz's breath hitched. "Wait... that's Arbora? The tree-like thing?"

Markus kept his eyes on the projection, its light softly illuminating the quiet reverence etched into his features. His voice, when he spoke again, carried the cadence of someone reciting both history and sacred truth.

"Yes," he said. "That's Arbora. The Great Tree of Magic. The lifeblood of everything that exists." He stepped back slightly so the others could get a clearer view of the radiant branches, then turned to face them. "As I've stated before, I'm part of the Order of Arbora, it's an ancient order that has existed for many centuries. We are not warriors in the traditional sense, but we're peacekeepers, scholars, guardians... but above all, we are believers. Our mission is simple: to protect the balance between the realms and their magic. As well to ensure Arbora's lifeline remains undisturbed. We've existed in the

shadows of history but we're unified by our devotion to Arbora and the sacred flow of magic it provides."

King tilted his head in wonder. "So... the tree isn't just some metaphor or symbol?"

"No," Markus answered. "It's real. Arbora is the source. The one constant in an ever-shifting cosmos. It exists beyond space and time but its branches pierce into every realm, anchoring them together in harmony. It's what holds all of reality in place."

Atlas lifted his head slightly, eyes flicking up to the tree with a mixture of child-like curiosity and weariness. "And magic... that all comes from the tree?"

"All of it," Markus affirmed. "Arbora breathes magic into everything, it all flows from its roots and branches."

Luz took a cautious step forward, her eyes locked on the nine glowing nebulae. "And each of these branches... each of them represents a realm?"

"Yes," Markus said. "Nine branches for nine realms. Each realm is cradled in one of Arbora's arms, they're all fed by its magic."

Luz took a cautious step forward, her brow furrowed. "Lemme guess, since the Celestine Compass is tied to the Star Pieces and each of those branches represents a realm... so does that mean each realm has one of those artifacts?"

Markus gave a solemn nod. "They're not just artifacts, the Star Pieces are ancient crystalline constructs of great power—each one is a reflection of a fundamental force in existence." Hesperos leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, his gaze fixed on the ethereal display. "So they're not just powerful... they're essential?"

"They're more than essential," Markus said. "They're archetypes. Each Star Piece embodies a singular concept that shapes the very laws of all existence itself. Space, Time, Reality, Creation, Destruction, Life, Death, Order, and Chaos."

Atlas let out a soft breath and looked toward the compass. "And all of them are tied to Arbora?"

Markus nodded. "They are Arbora. Or rather, we believe they're born from fragments of its bark." King stepped closer and asked, "So let me get this straight. These pieces... they're each hidden somewhere in one of the realms?"

"Precisely," Markus confirmed. "Each realm houses one Star Piece, whether its people know it or not. Some have guarded theirs for generations. Others may not even realize they possess one."

Markus raised his hand and touched one of the stars on the projection. A branch shimmered, and the nebula at its end pulsed a rich indigo hue. "This is the Realm of Cosmic Space, where we are—the Star Piece that rests there is the one that represents Space. It's tied to distance, dimensional rifts, and cosmic manipulation. It's located on a planet known as Astralis Prime, it is also where the Order of Arbora was founded and headquartered in."

Hesperos leaned closer, his eyes narrowing. "So you've guarded one of the Pieces this entire time?" Markus nodded. "Yes. Our sacred duty was to protect the Star Piece of Space and ensure it never fell into the wrong hands."

His fingers moved across the projection. Another branch pulsed—this one bathed in hues of silver and blue. "Here," he said, "in the Valley of Time Realm, rests the Star Piece of Time. Its energy influences timelines, aging, and temporal anomalies." Markus tapped the next branch. The nebula glowed softly in a deep violet. "This is the Dream Realm. The Star Piece of Reality is hidden there. It governs perception, illusion, what is and what could be."

Markus said quickly. "We move to the Foundry of Origins Realm next." A fiery red nebula shimmered as he touched the fourth branch. "There lies the Star Piece of Creation. It empowers invention, birth, genesis. The Foundry's smiths don't just forge weapons—they forge potential." King blinked. "So like... magical blacksmiths who can create whole realities?"

"On a very small scale," Markus replied with a faint smile. "But yes, that's the idea."

He moved again, and a cold, dark nebula pulsed. "Here is the Hollow Cradle Realm. It holds the Star Piece of Destruction. It has the power to erase, unravel, and to annihilate at a large scale." The next branch bloomed into a lush green glow. "The Verdant Hollow

Realm," Markus said. "The Star Piece of Life lies here. It breathes vitality into the soil, the water, and the wind. It's a force of nurturing and rebirth." Markus tapped another branch—this one was a dark, dry, golden-brown colored one. "The Barren Sands Realm," he said. "It guards the Star Piece of Death. This one isn't evil—it simply enforces the natural cycle of death itself. It represents the final breath of all living things."

King swallowed hard. "I don't like that one."

"No one does," Markus admitted. "Though it's necessary. As it is a natural occurrence."

He hovered over the second-to-last nebula, a familiar swirling blue and white. "This one..." His voice softened. "Is your world," he gestured to Luz, "The Human Realm. And it holds the Star Piece of Order."

Luz's brows rose. "What? Seriously?"

"Yes," Markus said. "Order governs structure, law, and unity. The human realm's balance but simplicity made it the ideal place to house this piece."

Finally, Markus touched the last nebula. It burned with chaotic reds, purples, and greens. "And here... the Demon Realm. It harbors the Star Piece of Chaos—it has been described as being wild, unrelenting, and ever-shifting due to the amount of magic the realm has."

Markus's gaze lingered on the radiant image of Arbora for a long moment. Though the projection glowed with a serene majesty, his expression darkened as if the knowledge he carried weighed heavier than the air itself. Then, softly, he spoke. "Since you now know about The Star Pieces, you must understand that they must never be brought together." His voice, once calm and informative, now trembled with unease.

Luz blinked, stepping closer. "Wait... why? What do you mean? You just said they're each important, since they keep the realms balanced."

"They do," Markus said. "Separately they stabilize the realms. But together..." His voice faltered, then steadied again. "Together, they can either be a blessing or a curse."

King perked, "A curse?" Hesperos narrowed his eyes and spoke after. "You're being cryptic again, monk. Spit it out."

Markus exhaled slowly and spoke, "Together they form The Wishing Star," Markus said, his voice grim with a sense of incoming danger. "A relic of unimaginable power and magic. If all of the nine Star Pieces are united, they fuse into a cosmic instrument capable of granting the deepest wish of its wielder."

Luz's lips parted in stunned silence. "It... grants wishes?"

"Yes," Markus replied. "But it does not grant them without cost. The Wishing Star etches itself onto the soul of whoever activates it. Their soul becomes bound to their wish permanently. They won't just see the outcome... they'll feel it with every second, ripple, and consequence, no matter how small or catastrophic."

Atlas shifted uncomfortably, "So if someone wished to bring back the dead..."

"Then the Wishing Star would be forced to find someone else of equal emotional or cosmic value who must die in order to restore their soul," Markus finished.

Markus added another example, "If someone wished to create a 'perfect world'... the inhabitants of that new existence will be stripped of their free will. Everyone will be forced to conform to an artificial harmony, essentially making the wisher a tyrant of utopia. The "peace" that has been created will be hollow, enforced, and loveless. The Wishing Star fuses identity with intent."

A heavy silence settled over the room once more, but this time, it wasn't the silence of confusion but it was the silence of clarity and revelation.

Luz stood still, eyes fixed on the faint, fading projection above the Celestine Compass and Arbora, as its massive white branches stretched outward like veins through space, the nine golden stars hovering above it. Slowly, her gaze drifted down to the Compass itself. "It's all connected now," she whispered. "While Orion wants to rewrite everything, he needs the compass... it's a way for him to start since it's a map to each of the Star Pieces." King twitched, his breath catching as the realization hit him like a punch to the chest. "And he's planning to use them—all of them—to make that wish..."

"...during the Convergence," Markus added grimly. "The moment when all nine stars align, it'll amplify the magic across every realm and connect each of them with one another. He'll have the power of Arbora itself at his fingertips with the Wishing Star."

Hesperos's tail flicked behind him as he leaned forward, brows furrowed. "So, if he gets the Compass, he gets the map. And if he gets the map, he finds the Pieces. And if he finds the Pieces..."

"...He'll make the Wishing Star." Atlas finished quietly, his voice shaking as he hugged his knees.

Luz took a sharp breath, her chest rising and falling faster now. "And there are two Star Pieces in the realms we know, The Demon Realm and the Human Realm." King's stomach twisted. "He'll come for them," she murmured. "He's going to."

"And if he finds either of them," King added, his voice rising slightly, "he'll be that much closer to completing the Wishing Star."

The thought hung like poison in the air. It wasn't just about stopping Orion anymore. It was about protecting the very foundations of the realms they called home. Luz clenched her fists, her voice was low but fierce. "We can't let that happen!"

"But how?" King asked, pacing back and forth now. "We can't just waltz back into the Demon Realm! The Archive Collective is watching everything. They'll spot us in seconds."

Hesperos added, "Plus, it's also worth mentioning that we had past attempts at trying to get you guys back to your home but we've been unable to. We literally attempted different warp jumps three separate times, each with adjusted coordinates that could travel us far beyond our realm's boundaries, remember? However, the second we entered warp-space near its region, reality began to distort around us!" He added, "Space stretches and that's the reality of it. Just when you think you're about to cross the threshold... it shifts and gets further. The harder you push, the farther it recedes. With that, we can't risk making any more attempts. We almost lost the Donati's warp core integrity on the last jump. Its shielding wasn't designed to endure that kind of recursive bend in spacetime. One more attempt like that, and we're not just talking about a failed jump—we're talking about tearing the ship apart and losing everyone onboard."

Luz ran a hand through her hair, frustration tugging at the edges of her voice. "There's gotta be a way back into the Demon Realm. If we can just—"

"Wait," Markus interrupted, his eyes narrowing as they shifted to King. There was a curious flicker behind them—calculating, probing. "Before we talk about strategy... I need to ask something."

Everyone paused. Luz lowered her hand, sensing the weight in Markus's tone. Markus stepped forward slightly, folding his arms. "Why exactly is the Grand Huntsman after you, King?"

The question hung awkwardly in the air. King froze mid-step, "Why...?"

Markus explained. "During the last skirmish. He mentioned you—not by name, but by lineage. It wasn't just hostility. It was... deliberate and targeted." His tone lowered with suspicion. "You're not just any furried being, are you?"

Luz's gaze darted toward King, concern tightening across her face. "King...?" King looked away, fidgeting with the edge of his tail. He didn't speak right away while the others waited—Hesperos silently watching, Atlas nervously glancing between his friends. After a long breath, King finally spoke. "Because I'm a Titan," he said softly, voice laced with reluctant weight. "That's why the Grand Huntsman is after me. It's always been..."

The weight of his words fell heavy and real. Luz looked at him, her heart tightening. Even now, it was hard for him to say aloud. The memories—of being alone, of being hunted, of learning what he truly was—still lingered and unresolved. Markus blinked, genuinely taken aback. "You... you're a Titan."

"Yeah," King mumbled, "I didn't always know but the Archivists did. They knew before I did. They wiped out my kind... and now the Grand Huntsman is trying to finish the job."

Markus spoke. "That changes everything." King swallowed hard. "Yeah, well, being a Titan hasn't exactly helped lately."

But Markus smiled gently, but with unmistakable optimism. "Perhaps not yet. But it might help now."

King frowned. "What are you talking about?" Markus turned to face the group fully. "Your presence, King—your essence—is unlike anything in existence. Titans are the original progeny of Arbora, born of the Great Tree itself. That kind of power leaves a very specific... impression."

"With your power, King," Markus began by adding, while being steady and certain, "I believe I can forge something. A weapon—not of destruction, but of protection."

Luz raised an eyebrow. "A weapon?"

Markus met Luz's gaze with a newfound certainty, the glimmer of an idea now fully formed behind his eyes. His voice carried the weight of clarity as he stepped forward, standing just between the soft pulse of the Celestine Compass and the uncertain firelight that flickered across the chamber's walls.

"A sword," he said at last. "Most importantly—infused with Titan magic. Which will be provided by King!"

The words lingered, heavier than they should've been.

He turned slightly, eyes falling to King. "With your power, King, we could create a blade that resists the will of Star Magic. That severs the threads woven by the Archivists. If we do this correctly, the weapon could create a kind of nullification field—one powerful enough to hide the Celestine Compass from their cosmic sight."

King blinked, taken aback. "You want to use my magic... to make a sword?"

Markus gave a solemn nod. "Not just a sword but a safeguard. One that disrupts the very kind of power Orion and the Grand Huntsman wield. With it, they'd never sense the Compass—not even if it was in the same room."

Luz's eyes widened with a memory rising from deep within her. "Titan magic can cancel Star Magic."

Markus nodded slowly, affirming her realization. "Exactly. It can unweave the energies Star People use to bind reality. That's why this is possible."

But the moment of insight didn't spark excitement in Luz—it sparked dread. "No," she said immediately, the edge in her voice was sharp. "Absolutely not."

Markus looked confused. "What—"

"He's still a kid!" she snapped, stepping between King and Markus, as her protective instincts flared. "He's still figuring out how to control his powers, let alone channel them into something as ancient and delicate as a weapon. You don't know what that kind of strain would do to him." Atlas moved beside her, placing a hand on King's shoulder with quiet, deliberate care but with a fierce expression. "She's right," he added. "Using your power that way... it would make you a target. A bigger one. The Grand Huntsman already wants you. If he senses that Titan magic's been used to nullify something of this scale, he won't stop. He'll descend like a meteor."

Markus interjected, his tone careful now, measured. "The weapon would only need a fragment of essence. You know, something similar to a breath, maybe even a 'whisper' of his magic. Nothing more really."

Hesperos, who had been leaning against the stone archway with arms crossed and tail still, finally spoke, his voice unusually serious. "It doesn't matter how small the spark is," he said. "A flare's a flare. Someone will see it, and that someone is going to be somebody we don't want to attract."

Markus exhaled slowly, his shoulders easing with the breath. He glanced around the group—Luz's fierce, protective stance; Atlas's calm but unwavering presence; Hesperos's watchful, narrowed eyes. Then finally, his gaze returned to King. "I understand," he said gently, voice laced with sincerity. "You all care about him. I would never ask something of a Titan—of a child—without respecting the weight it carries."

"That's why..." Markus continued, his tone shifting to less directive and with more openness, "the decision should belong to King."

All eyes turned toward the young Titan. King, still partially obscured by Luz's arm, blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected that. He'd braced himself for another argument, another wave of reasons why he needed to be protected. But now the weight of choice was squarely on his small shoulders.

Markus crouched slightly to meet King's gaze. "This isn't about obligation or destiny," he said. "You're not a tool, or a weapon. You're a person, especially a young one. That means your voice matters most in this discussion. So... if you say no, I'll drop it."

King's brows furrowed as he looked down, arms crossing tightly over himself. The world around him blurred for a moment as he withdrew into thought—deep, tangled thought.

"I am still learning," he admitted to himself. "I mess things up sometimes. I don't even know the full reach of my powers."

The fear coiled deep in his belly. It wasn't just about the Grand Huntsman or the Archivists—it was about not being ready and failing.

Then... his mind circled back to what they'd just uncovered about Orion, The Celestine Compass, and The Wishing Star. The realization that the Archivists weren't just conquering—they were planning and if they got all the Star Pieces... They'll remake everything.

King's claws clenched tighter, as he remembered what Luz had said in her most vulnerable moments—how she'd feared failing them again, how she couldn't carry the weight alone. He remembered the quiet nights when Atlas couldn't sleep, haunted by the echoes of his siblings. He remembered Atlas's voice shaking as he recounted what he'd seen at the Archive Tower. And he remembered himself, curled in Luz's lap, wishing he wasn't so afraid.

He was still afraid but maybe courage didn't mean not being afraid—it meant choosing to act anyway. He lifted his head. "I..." King's voice was soft at first, while Luz turned to him. "I'm scared," he admitted. "I really am. I don't know if I'll mess it up, or if using my power will make the Grand Huntsman come after me again."

Atlas placed his hand back on King's shoulder gently, silently supporting him. "But..." King inhaled deeply, grounding himself. "If there's a chance this sword can help us stop him and Orion—really stop him—then... I want to try. I have to try."

Luz's eyes widened. "King..."

"I know you want to protect me," he said, while his voice was gaining strength. "But I don't want to sit on the sidelines while everyone else fights. If I can do something to keep all of you safe—then I want to."

There was a long pause.

The silence reflected the quiet emotions that the group was experiencing. Such emotions that consisted of fear, pride, awe, and that aching thing that grows only when a child chooses to carry something too heavy. Luz looked at him, her throat tight. Slowly, she knelt down, pulling him into a quiet embrace. Luz didn't let go of King for a long moment, her arms wrapped protectively around his small frame, as though she could shield him from the weight of the universe itself. Atlas rested a hand gently on King's back, steady and warm, while Hesperos offered a solemn nod—a silent vow that they'd all watch over him, no matter what came next. "Alright, if that's what you want to do, we'll do this together," Luz said, her voice hushed but firm. "Every step of the way."

"No one's leaving you to face this alone, King..." Atlas added. His usually aloof expression had softened, the faint starlight catching in his eyes.

Even Hesperos, ever the sardonic pirate, leaned in slightly, his tone more serious than usual. "If we're going to drag a Titan into this mess, you can bet your horns we'll be there to make sure he walks out of it too."

The warmth of their reassurance settled into King's chest like the embers of a fire—small, but steady. He still felt afraid and the feeling of uncertainty gnawed at the edge of his resolve but at least now, he didn't feel alone in it. Markus gave a nod of approval, standing and brushing imaginary dust from his paws. "Good. Then let's put this courage to use." He turned, motioning toward the holomap resting in the center of their navigation hub. "Our destination is at the Nebula Sanctum," Markus began, his tone shifting into a purposeful cadence. "It's an ancient archive... or rather, was. Before the fall of the Old Star Empire, it served as a knowledge sanctum—part museum, part observatory, part greenhouse. It's pretty much a planetary-like structure floating in neutral space. It's been dormant for a while, but I know someone who's kept it functional."

"A friend?" Luz asked, stepping beside him.

Markus nodded once. "They're an old ally of mine, with their forge and King's magic, we'll have what we need to craft the weapon. The very weapon powerful enough to protect the Celestine Compass from The Archivists, and the Grand Huntsman." Markus continued, "Once the weapon is forged and—hopefully my ally joins us—we'll make our way to Astralis Prime." Markus added, "Astralis Prime is hidden deep in the nebula strata, as it's protected by arboreal starlight and cloaked from even the keenest of eyes. When we arrive there, we will speak with the Councilmen of Arbora and hand over the Celestine Compass as I've been tasked with. If anyone can keep the Compass safe, it's them." He concluded, "I also know that my friend at the sanctum is familiar with the Compass, she would know what to do with it."

Luz exhaled slowly, a flicker of relief stirring in her chest. "And from there?"

"We will find a way to get you, King, and Atlas back home," Markus concluded. "We'll send you to the Demon Realm. Me and my fellow knights will keep the Archivists off your trail, so you'll be able to reach your realm's Star Piece before they're able to locate it... and make sure Orion never gets close to it."

A heavy silence followed, broken only by the soft hum of the Donati's systems. Luz looked to King, then to Atlas, who stood quietly behind her, his eyes shadowed beneath his hood. They all felt the weight of Markus' words, not just the hope they offered, but the risk they demanded.

Markus stepped forward, resting a hand lightly on the holotable. His expression grew more serious, his voice steady and commanding.

"There's something else we have to keep in mind," he added, "King will still be a priority target to the Archive Collective and the Grand Huntsman."

King twitched and he looked away uneasily. Luz instinctively reached out, gently placing a hand on his shoulder. Markus continued. "They want him not just because of his bloodline... but because he's the last remaining Titan. If they can't kill him, they'll find other ways to break him."

Atlas's small hands curled into fists at his sides.

"So what are you suggesting?" Luz asked, her voice tight.

"We can't take a direct route to the Nebula Sanctum," Markus said, activating a star map over the holotable. "Instead, I recommend a staggered path—through scattered star systems that border the Sanctum's corridor. Stop at one, recalibrate your trajectory, then jump to the next. It'll help throw off anyone tracking us and give us fallback points if we need to refuel or hide."

Hesperos tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Hmm... not a bad strategy. Makes our trajectory look like static drift instead of a calculated path. Riskier in some ways, but if we keep our warp intervals irregular, we'll avoid most scan sweeps."

Luz nodded slowly. "Alright. We'll take the long road."

Markus turned to Hesperos. "What's the nearest star system from our current coordinates?"

Hesperos tapped a few keys on the console, his tail flicking as lines of data flickered across the star map. After a few seconds, he smirked. "Locking onto it now—Gleirion System." Hesperos leaned closer to the screen in order to get a full scope of the planet itself, "Hm, it's pretty isolated from where it's positioned, it's a good place to start. It'll give us the necessary coverage we need."

Markus gave a satisfied nod. "Then that's your first waypoint. Keep quiet, stay off major star routes, and don't engage unless you have to."

Luz exchanged determined looks with her crew, her voice calm but firm. "We'll make it. We have to."

Markus leaned closer to the star map, fingers gliding across the controls with practiced precision. The galaxy unfolded around the central projection like a blooming flower—spirals of star systems, warp lanes, and gravitational fields glowing in gentle pulses.

"I'll transmit the coordinates to the Nebula Sanctum directly to your system," Markus said, tapping his wrist module. A blink later, the Donati's console chimed in confirmation. "But I'm embedding them under a fractal encryption pattern—something even the Archive Collective's scanners won't pick up unless they're sitting inside your nav-core."

Hesperos nodded approvingly as he slid back into the pilot's seat. A string of numbers and data scrolled across the forward holodisplay. Hesperos' fingers flew across the controls, locking in the main destination first. "Nebula Sanctum coordinates... received and set. Locked on."

"Good," Markus replied, then raised a hand. "Now don't activate the full route. I want you to thread in a divergence path for manual entries. Scatter your jumps across the outlying systems here, here, and here." He marked several glowing points: the Gleirion System, the Seraphyx System, and Kailor's Drift, each a flickering location set just beyond the primary corridor leading to the Sanctum.

"These locations are on the edges of navigational space," Markus explained. "No one will expect a route this unpredictable. But they still keep you aligned—just barely—toward the Nebula Sanctum."

Hesperos' tail flicked as he set the first leg. "Plotting the Gleirion jump... then vector drift into Seraphyx... and a cold-boot jump through Kailor's Drift with a three-minute scramble interval in between. This is gonna make the ship sweat but she'll hold."

Atlas, who had been silent until now, stepped forward. "And after that?" he asked. "Is it a clear run?"

Markus gave him a sharp, knowing look. "Nothing from here to the Sanctum is clear, young one. But you'll be close enough that if they do detect you... you'll be too far in for them to drag you back out."

Luz exhaled slowly, watching the thread of star jumps come together like a constellation in motion. "It's a long shot..."

"But it's our shot," King finished, voice steady despite the tension behind it.

Markus nodded, satisfied. "Stay light, stay fast. And above all else—trust your instincts. The Archivists fight with power. You fight with purpose. That's something they'll never understand." Hesperos initiated the warp prep sequence, and The Donati's lights dimmed slightly in response. Luz joined him, cross-referencing the trajectory. "Course is locked." Luz took the helm, her hands gliding across the controls. The hum of the engine

deepened as the ship stirred to life, energy gathering like a storm ready to leap through the void. The ship gave a soft hum, and with a flash of light, the Donati vanished into the starlit dark.

As the stars outside the viewport stretched into ribbons of light, King looked back once more, then he faced forward, knowing they had a mission now. For the first time, he wasn't just a Titan hiding from his fate that he was a part of the fight to change it.

Meanwhile, in a far corner section of space itself, The Eclipse drifted like a silent predator through the velvet stretch of space, its silhouette barely discernible against the vast canvas of stars. The scars of the battle with the Warp Eel still marked its hull, which were long gashes and burns streaked across its surface. Inside, the silence was oppressive but broken only by the occasional groan of the ship's inner workings adjusting after combat. Within the heart of the vessel, behind massive double doors, the Grand Huntsman sat on a throne carved from obsidian—an unforgiving structure that suited him well. Crimson lighting bathed the chamber, illuminating the blood still drying on his crescent blades, which now rested against the armrests of his throne like loyal hounds awaiting their next command. Earlier, following the escape of The Donati due to the attack that occurred from the Warp Eel, he had killed the Warp Eel with brute force alone. He cleaved through its serpentine neck with a single, feral swing of both blades. The beast had shrieked before its gnarled head tumbled into the abyss of space. The victory was absolute, but not without cost. The Compass had slipped from his grasp... Once more...

Soon a pulsing circle of starlight expanded outward, coalescing into a glowing figure. Soon a projection of a Star Sprite was displayed, her head was the shape of a comet, as the 'tail' of it resembled her hair. Her skin was blue but her hair was a much darker shade. She wore a white colored uniform that was neat and clearly reflected her allegiance to the Archive Collective. Yet the uniform was adorned with cosmic patterns such as stars and crescents. Her voice was as smooth, which reflected her professionalism and the need to remain perfect was clear. "Grand Huntsman," the sprite intoned, floating above the floor with formal poise. "I come bearing the will of the Archivists. They seek word of your progress. Have you retrieved the Celestine Compass?"

The Grand Huntsman didn't rise from his throne, but his voice carried across the room with enough weight to shake the air. "No... The Compass was not recovered." The sprite's form pulsed. "Explain yourself, Huntsman."

"There was a setback due to the same fugitives from before. They've grown bolder... craftier. They have a new ally who fought alongside them and resisted my efforts, I was close, but—"

"You failed," the sprite cut in, her voice becoming suddenly sharper, "And now the Compass is still unaccounted for. Do you understand the timing you have jeopardized?"

The Grand Huntsman clenched the armrest of his throne, metal groaning under the strain of his grip. "Give me more time! I will recover it! I swear, I will bring it before the Convergence!"

"Time is a luxury we can no longer afford," the sprite replied coolly. "The Archivists have lost patience."

Before the Huntsman could respond further, the projection flared suddenly as its light expanded into a vortex of radiant energy that spilled across the throne room walls. The familiar space of his personal chamber dissolved in a flash of white heat.

And then—

—he was elsewhere.

With a crack of magic and displacement, the Grand Huntsman materialized in the center of the Archive Tower's throne room, his boots striking the smooth crystalline floor with a heavy thud. The temperature dropped; the air became thinner, purer, cold with cosmic judgment. The ceiling stretched high above, glittering like a fractured nebula. Before him, seated on thrones of starstone, were the Archivists—they were looming, radiant, and each were cloaked in living constellations and veiled in judgmental silence.

Orion, the most commanding among them, leaned forward first. His presence was a gravitational force all its own—draped in a gown of swirling galaxies, his gaze remained unblinkingly on the Huntsman. Beside him sat Andromeda, her expression was the quiet burn of disappointment that flickered in her eyes. To her left was Aster Nova, her posture precise, while her arms were folded across her chest. Her aura pulsed with subtle hostility upon seeing the Grand Huntsman's presence. The last was Badar Comet, who lounged

more casually, yet the sneer etched across his face revealed a more disdainful, mocking displeasure than the rest.

"You've had two full cycles," Orion began, his voice deep and metallic. It echoed as it had been caught in the vast chamber of the throne room. "Countless reinforcements. Endless resources. And yet here you stand... Still empty-handed."

The Grand Huntsman held his ground, though the air around him had grown colder and denser. "They've eluded me longer than expected. These fugitives have proven to be... persistent, My Star."

Aster Nova narrowed her glowing eyes. "You've said that before. Multiple times." Badar scoffed, "Your excuses are starting to sound as stale as the Warp Eel you dismembered much earlier."

"They're not just fugitives anymore," the Huntsman growled, the words slipping out with a bitter edge. "They have allies, weapons, and strategies I didn't account for!"

"You were given everything the Archive Collective has to offer," Andromeda said in a calm tone. "You commanded legions, starships, recon units, and yet you failed to acquire one object despite all we provide for your mission."

Aster soon followed, "And you do know that we can't constantly throw our forces into pointless battles, as we need them to maintain order in our domain. Let alone, they're very hard to replenish."

The Grand Huntsman's fists clenched at his sides. His pride ached, not from the criticism, but from the truth in it. "It's been months since our last encounter with them," Orion continued, "And now the Convergence approaches. The Nine Stars are about to align. We are on the cusp of becoming new gods for an existence of perfection, and the Compass—the key to it all—is still lost in the hands of lesser beings."

Orion rose from his throne. He descended a single step, and the lights above dimmed, stars blinking out as if cowed by his movement. "You and I, Grand Huntsman... we were forged in the aftermath of their arrogance. The Titans—false gods wrapped in flesh and ego—took from us more than time or legacy. They took meaning, purpose, and entire

histories erased under the weight of their 'natural order' during the First Realm War. We both know we were only trying to correct the chaos they desperately defended"

The Grand Huntsman growls lowly, as the chains around his arms begin rattling like distant thunder. However, Orion continued further. "I know that rage in your marrow. The helplessness of watching our people reduced to ash while they called it balance. But we are no longer bound by their design. This is our moment. Our chance to unwrite their tyranny from the very fabric of existence."

Orion spoke further in a sharper tone, "We will purge the realms of their poison. We will reshape what they warped. And when it's done, the stars will no longer sing their names in reverence, but ours in revolution." He added, "But make no mistake, The Compass is still out there. Without it, Our future to save what's left of us will be locked. You know what's at stake. If we fail to claim it first... if it falls into their hands... then all we've bled for will be nothing. And I won't allow your grief to blind you to that truth."

He concluded, "Get the Compass. Or everything we've sacrificed—everything you've lost—will be for nothing but dust."

The threat hung in the air like poison.

Andromeda remained silent, but her eyes remained on the Huntsman with a flicker of something deeper—perhaps pity and the memories from similar experiences the Grand Huntsman is currently dealing with. Aster Nova stepped forward next, her arms unfolding as she raised a hand of glowing starlight. "This is your final chance," she said, every syllable she spoke was deliberate. "Obtain the Celestine Compass. Kill the Titan. If you fail again—"

"—You won't live to fail a third time," Badar finished, a cruel grin spreading across his face.

Orion added, "Heed our warning Huntsman. Since you can't capture just four measly outlaws, you will be assisted by General Arulieus. He will arrive at your ship shortly with his personal fleet. Till then, you have a mission to uphold. That is all."

Before the Grand Huntsman could respond—before the weight of those words could settle into his bones—he was ripped from the throne room in a blaze of white starlight.

In an instant, he was back. The Eclipse's throne chamber stood around him, still and dark, exactly as he'd left it. He sat once more in the seat of command, blades resting at his sides, crimson light casting long shadows on the floor. For a moment, it almost seemed like nothing had happened at all.

Almost.

However, now his breathing was heavier and slower. The tension in his jaw had hardened and the fury in his eyes burned hotter than any star. His mind swirled with rage and desperation, no longer concerned with subtlety or strategy. Now he was presented with a situation where there wasn't the need for patience and restraint. "They want a monster," he growled to himself. "Then I'll give them one."

His thoughts turned to King—the Titan child who had humiliated him with nothing more than survival. That insolent whelp, hiding behind magic and mortal protectors, had evaded him too many times.

Now it was personal.

He would claim the Compass. Tear through any world and its inhabitants that stood in his way. And when the time came, he would finish what he had started—with the Titan's head in his hands and the stars burning in his wake...

Meanwhile, back on The Donati, as the ship continued forward through the warp tunnel, surrounded by a veil of shimmering currents that twisted and danced like living threads of starlight. The walls of the corridor weren't physical, but a metaphysical passage—the very fabric of space stretched, folded, and funneled forward. Beyond the reinforced windows, the kaleidoscope of motion made time feel suspended, as though the universe was holding its breath.

Inside the ship, the lights were dimmed to match the cosmic glow outside. The hum of the warp engines pulsed like a heartbeat beneath their feet. Luz stood near the observation window, arms crossed, her gaze locked on the lightstream outside, deep in thought. Markus stepped beside her, quiet at first, his cloak rustling gently with each step.

"I'll be honest about something," he asked softly, his voice low but steady. "I didn't know in the conventional sense," Markus replied, tilting his head slightly. "But during the earliest days of my investigation, I began having... visions. Fragments. Dreams. Pieces of possibilities." His eyes narrowed slightly, distant and focused. "Though, they didn't feel like dreams because they felt extremely real. In those visions, I saw realms crumbling and this very existence being wiped clean..." He became quiet and took a deep breath, he soon gained the courage to continue, "...I also saw the Wishing Star itself. I didn't think of it at first but the feeling managed to stay with me, warning me that something ancient and greater than any one of us, was behind all of this."

Luz turned her head to him, brow furrowed. "You knew something like this would happen?" She added with caution, "But... how? How could you have been able to see any of that?"

Markus turned fully to face her now, his tone calm, almost reverent. "The magic of Arbora, it's something I've been able to harness the essence of," he said. "It lingers everywhere. In the stars, in the soil of each realm, and in the spaces between atoms. It's not like the glyphs or the magic you're used to, Luz. It's something deeper and more foundational."

He took a step closer to the central console, where soft light illuminated his face, casting gentle shadows beneath his eyes. "The Order of Arbora has passed down knowledge for generations—teachings on how to listen to the essence. And if you listen long enough, while your spirit aligns with it... Arbora speaks."

Luz's eyebrows drew together. "Speaks? Like... actual communication?"

"In a sense. Sometimes it comes as an emotion. Sometimes as images. Even in rare moments of perfect stillness, it manifests as visions." He tapped lightly on his temple. "The essence of Arbora lives inside everything. Even you. Every sentient being carries a spark of it. And those taught to harness it can tap into latent abilities. Foresight. Empathy projection. Even healing beyond the physical."

He let the words settle before adding, more softly, "The vision I had... the one that warned me of this path we're on... it wasn't mine alone. It was given. Which makes me believe that Arbora might be aware of what's coming."

Luz fell silent. Her eyes flicked back to the warp tunnel, the streams of color flowing endlessly. For a moment, her expression was torn between belief and uncertainty, awe and skepticism. "I mean... I believe in magic. Of course I do," Luz said softly, almost defensively. Her eyes remained fixed on the stream of light outside the viewing panel, watching the warp tunnel ripple and twist like the folds of a dream. "I've seen things most people wouldn't even dream of. I know magic has rules, and depth, and a life of its own."

Her voice trailed off, not because she didn't have more to say but because she was carefully choosing how to say it. Her brow furrowed, lips pressed in a tight line. There was weight behind her silence. "But this idea... of a consciousness behind it all?" she said finally, her voice dipped in quiet disbelief. "A presence that knows us, that can... guide visions or fates? That's a lot to take in for me, honestly."

Markus didn't interrupt. He simply watched her, patient, steady, as though he expected the thought to come with time and it did.

Luz turned slightly, folding her arms. Her voice softened, shaded with the honesty of someone who had spent years trying to piece together where she belonged, both in the human world and in the magical one. "I used to think magic was just cool. You know—glyphs, spells, and flashy stuff. Then I realized it meant something. That it was history, emotion, pain, and love all tied together. That it hurt when it was taken away. That it could be twisted. That it could heal."

She paused, the corners of her mouth twitching with the ghost of a sad smile.

"And yeah, maybe I don't totally get the whole 'magical consciousness' thing yet," she admitted, lifting her shoulders in a small shrug. "But I'm not gonna shut it out either. I mean, if I hadn't been open to learning weird new things... I wouldn't be here."

King looked up at her from the floor, eyes wide with quiet admiration. Atlas—still leaning against the doorframe—shifted subtly, his expression unreadable but clearly listening, feeling the sincerity behind every word.

Luz looked back at Markus, this time with something more resolved behind her gaze. "So, maybe I'm skeptical," she said, the edge of her voice firming up. "But I'm also curious. If Arbora is real... if her essence is really everywhere... then I wanna understand that further."

Her fists clenched slightly at her sides, not in anger but in determination. "If we're dealing with something this big—like cosmic, destiny-level big—then yeah. I'll keep my mind open to learn what it's all about"

Markus smiled, a quiet and knowing expression that didn't feel patronizing—only proud. "That's more than most would offer, Luz and it's enough." He added, "When we head to Gleiria, I will show you how Arbora is everywhere with us, even at its most subtle moments."

For a fleeting moment, in the depths of the warp tunnel, surrounded by stars and uncertainty, Luz didn't feel overwhelmed by the vastness of it all. Instead, she felt grounded by choice, by belief, and by the quiet promise that she was still learning. Still growing. Still becoming.

Chapter Six: Gleiria

The stars beyond the warp tunnel stretched like endless streaks of liquid silver, pulsing in and out of focus as The Donati continued its voyage through the temporal corridor. Within the cockpit, soft pulses of sapphire light reflected against Luz's focused face, her fingers tight around the navigation console. Hesperos Holmes sat at her side, his usually easygoing expression shadowed by a hint of concern. King lounged in his crash-couch behind them, his tail twitching anxiously, while Atlas sat silently near the rear, arms

wrapped tightly around his knees. Markus Star stood near the systems monitor, his eyes flicking over streams of data with practiced calm, though the muscles in his jaw were clenched.

It had been quiet on board the ship though eerily so. The only noise that had been present was the smooth hum of the warp engine guiding them toward Gleiria. That calm shattered in an instant when a violent jolt surged through the ship. The jolt caused the panels to rattle and send a sudden shudder through the hull. Alarms flared to life, their red lights flashed. The Donati groaned as if she was straining against invisible chains that were constricting her. Luz instinctively tightened her grip, her heart skipping a beat. "What the—?" she gasped, as her eyes darted to the dashboard.

"We've got turbulence, but not the natural kind," Hesperos muttered, already flipping switches with blinding speed. "Something's choking the warp stream! Luz—take the helm! We need to pull out, now!"

"I'm on it!" she responded, voice sharp but steady.

Together, they maneuvered The Donati into an emergency de-warp sequence. The lights inside dimmed as the warp tunnel twisted unnaturally around them, convulsing like a wounded beast. The sudden pressure drop made King yelp, gripping the armrest with his claws. "Ahhhhh!! What's going on????!!!" he yelled. Atlas whimpered softly, pressing himself further into the corner, while Markus quietly braced himself against the console.

Soon with a deep thrum and a pulse of golden energy, The Donati burst free from the warp tunnel and into open space. The sudden stillness felt deafening. Outside the windows, a planet loomed in the distance; it was Gleiria.

Luz leaned forward, exhaling slowly, her eyes wide. "We made it..."

"Yeah, but whatever happened doesn't seem normal," Hesperos muttered, flipping the intercom switch. "Starry, report. What just happened back there? How's she doing?"

A static pop crackled over the intercom, followed by a familiar, sing-songy voice that buzzed with boundless, slightly chaotic energy. "Heeeyyy, Hesp! So, uh—slight hiccup in the stellar juice department! You see, the warp core kinda... hic!... burped. Like, a big sparkly burp. Not my fault, I promise! I think it's due to all those trips we did trying to

send our besties back home!" Starry's tone then dipped slightly, losing its usual bounce. "The core's tired... all that stretching and shrinking and bending reality—it's catching up with it. Poor lil warp core..."

Luz blinked, then gave a small, sympathetic frown. "Is it... safe to keep flying?"

"Safe-ish!" Starry chimed, chipper again. "Just no warping for now! Gotta give the core a good nap. Probably a good ol' repair included too. Or both!"

"Noted. Thanks, Starry," Hesperos replied, rubbing the bridge of his nose with a weary smile. "You're a star."

"I knooooow!" Starry giggled, the transmission cutting off with a soft sparkle sound.

Hesperos leaned back, pressing a hand to his chest as he exhaled. "Huff Well, the good news? We made it out in one piece. The better news? That giant popsicle out there? That's Gleiria. We're in its orbital path, though it's just farther out than expected."

He turned toward the others, his voice carrying a calm, steady reassurance. "We'll make it down to the surface just fine, but The Donati's warp core is officially on cooldown. Once we land, I'll begin diagnostics. We'll need a full maintenance cycle and system check to see how bad the damage is. Until then, we stay grounded and remain low. No broadcasting signals and no drawing attention. The last thing we need is the Archive Collective looking for us or worse, the Grand Huntsman."

The name alone made the temperature seem to drop further inside the ship. King glanced nervously at Atlas, who sat unmoving, eyes unfocused. Luz gave the star child a soft look, her heart aching at how small he seemed at that moment. She moved to gently rest a hand on his shoulder, and he leaned into it without a word. Luz turned her gaze back to the viewport, where Gleiria now dominated the field of stars.

The frozen world shimmered with a piercing beauty. From orbit, the planet looked like a brilliant, icy jewel. Glistening white snowfields blanketed the surface in endless waves, broken only by mountain ridges and ancient, yawning crevasses that split the world like fractured glass. Glaciers stretched for miles like frozen rivers, glittering with hints of blue and violet under the light of its distant star. Pale auroras danced across the polar skies, painting the atmosphere in streaks of green and purple that pulsed like a slow heartbeat.

Violent snowstorms churned across vast regions, veiling entire valleys in an ever-moving stormfront of mist and frost.

Luz swallowed hard. "Let's take her down."

The descent was slow and careful as every motion deliberate as Hesperos and Luz co-piloted The Donati through the swirling clouds and atmospheric frost. Ice crystals pinged off the hull, the ship groaned under the drop in temperature. Even Starry's voice was quiet now, as if holding their breath with everyone else.

Eventually, the ship broke through the final layers of cloud and touched down with a soft crunch on a remote tundra—for a moment, no one spoke.

Then Luz stood slowly, her voice soft, filled with both awe and unease. "We made it." Hesperos nodded beside her, his breath visible in the rising cold. "Welcome to Gleiria, mates." Outside, the wind howled across the barren plain, whipping snow into spirals beneath a sky tinged with soft auroras. The cold had only just begun but so had the next step of their journey.

The ramp of The Donati hissed open with a low mechanical exhale, allowing the biting cold of Gleiria's air to creep inside like a ghost. Frosted wind curled into the ship's corridor, swirling around the crew's boots and ankles, wrapping itself in the metal scent of hull and wire. Outside, the tundra stretched in all directions, blanketed in layers of thick, untouched snow, broken only by distant formations of jagged ice. Pale light glimmered overhead through streaks of auroras, casting an ethereal glow through the ship's entryway.

Hesperos Holmes stood near the open ramp, his cloak fluttering against the chill as he clutched a diagnostics tablet close to his chest. He gave the horizon a calculating glance before turning back to the others with a serious, focused tone. "Alright," he said, his voice firm but calm. "The warp core's condition is top priority right now. I'll be staying here to run full diagnostics and start repairs. If Starry's right—and let's face it, they usually are—this core's been running on fumes since our last jump. If we don't treat it right now, we might not get another chance."

From the side, King straightened with a determined little hop. "Then I'm staying to help." He adjusted the scarf wrapped around his neck and puffed out his chest. "I know I'm

small, but I know how to follow instructions. Plus, someone's gotta keep you from getting distracted by shiny buttons."

A grin tugged at the corners of Hesperos' mouth. "Appreciated, Your Majestic Assistance," he said with a small, amused bow.

Markus adjusted the thick winter coat slung over his shoulder and stepped forward beside Luz. "Then we'll take a short recon sweep. Get a sense of what's out here—paths, landmarks, and potential shelter points. If this place hides danger, I'd rather it not surprise us later." Markus added, "Plus, I believe this is my opportunity to show Luz how Arbora's influence is everywhere around us."

Atlas lingered close to Luz, hands wrapped tightly around the edge of her jacket. His eyes never once left her side, the nervous tremble in his frame betraying the calm mask he tried so hard to maintain. Luz glanced down at him gently, her features softening. "I'll stay with her," Atlas murmured, voice almost lost to the wind. "I... I don't wanna stay behind."

"You're coming with us," Luz reassured him, resting a hand on his head. "We'll stick together."

Before anyone could take another step, Hesperos held up a hand. "Hold it." His voice grew more serious, almost parental. "If you're leaving the ship, I want all of you on high alert. Gleiria might look like a frozen wasteland, but that doesn't mean it's empty."

Luz nodded solemnly, already feeling the weight of responsibility settle on her shoulders again.

Hesperos continued, tone edged with caution. "Keep your pagers on at all times. If anything—and I mean anything—starts to feel off, you call me with no hesitation."

He turned to the weapons locker near the ramp and pressed his palm to the biometric panel. With a soft click, the cabinet hissed open, revealing a modest cache of gear. He reached inside and pulled out two sleek blasters—compact, matte-black, and well-maintained. "You'll need these," he said, offering them forward.

Luz accepted hers without question, giving it a quick check before holstering it at her side. She'd carried blasters before. They were never her first choice, but she'd learned to respect their utility.

Markus, however, hesitated as he stared at the weapon with a faint scowl, brows furrowed. "You know I prefer blades," he muttered, reluctantly taking the blaster in hand. "This thing's... impersonal."

Hesperos raised an eyebrow. "So is a frozen corpse. You don't have to like it, you just have to use it when it counts."

With a sigh, Markus holstered the weapon, his movements stiff and reluctant.

Luz gave him a supportive nudge. "It's just for safety. Let's hope we don't need to use them at all."

As their preparations were completed, the trio stepped out into the snow. The wind was louder out here, keening softly across the tundra like a mourning voice. Their boots crunched against the ice as they moved forward into the pale wilderness. Atlas stayed close to Luz's side, his fingers occasionally brushing against hers for reassurance. Markus led ahead, his coat flaring behind him like a dark banner against the white.

Behind them, Hesperos watched from the ramp alongside King, who had already begun tapping at the diagnostic console Starry had prepped for him. For a moment, Hesperos' eyes lingered on Luz—on the way she bore the weight of others without complaint, on how Atlas looked to her like the world might shatter without her presence.

"She's not just a light in the dark," he murmured to himself. "She's the anchor holding everyone together."

As the wind rose and the trio disappeared beyond the first rise of ice, Hesperos turned back to his tools, his mind sharp, and his hands already working because if anything happened out there, The Donati would have to be ready to fly again.

The frozen wind rolled across the Gleirian tundra in slow, sweeping gusts, tousling hair and tugging at cloaks as Markus took the lead, his pace steady and precise. Snow crunched beneath their boots with each step, muffled slightly by the thick frost clinging to

the uneven terrain. The sky above shimmered faintly with violet and green auroras, casting pale halos over their path as the frozen horizon stretched far and featureless ahead. Yet Markus' gaze remained fixed not on the landscape, but on something invisible—something only he could feel.

His eyes were partially closed, his breath rhythmic, controlled. Every few steps, he would raise his gloved hand slightly, fingers spreading as if testing the very air. His ears moved like satellite dishes, as they moved in different directions trying to find a singular direction to listen towards. Luz noticed the way his expression shifted from alert concentration to deep, inner focus. Atlas walked beside her, quiet and observant, his fingers gently clutching the edge of her sleeve for reassurance. He glanced between Luz and Markus with curious uncertainty.

Finally, Luz broke the silence, her voice low and careful. "Markus... what exactly are you doing?"

Without looking back, Markus replied, "Essence Sensing. It's a technique every member of the Order of Arbora learns early in their training. It allows us to feel the movement of Arbora's essence when it's present in the environment. Sort of like following the current of a river but with our souls instead of our sight."

Atlas raised their eyebrows, impressed. "You mean you can actually feel her magic out here?"

Markus nodded. "If there's a breach—if even the smallest trace of her essence leaks through—it leaves behind a signature. A resonance. It's rare to find it in places like this... but not impossible." He opened his eyes fully and pointed toward the distance. "And right now, there's something powerful calling out from that way."

They pressed on as the wind grew sharper the farther they went. The terrain began to shift—ice crunching underfoot giving way to smooth, glassy patches where frost had frozen into thick plates. Soon the ground dipped downward in a slow decline, and before long, the trio found themselves approaching the edge of an immense glacier ravine. The sight brought them to a slow, collective stop.

The ravine was vast, stretching for miles in either direction like a wound carved into the surface of the world. Its edges were jagged and layered with thick, blue-white frost, while

deep below, darkness swallowed the canyon's depths whole. Faint trails of mist coiled from within, moving against the breeze like breath exhaled from some ancient sleeping giant. Markus stepped forward, boots crunching softly, until he reached the very edge of the icy cliffside. He inhaled deeply through his nose and let the breath go slow. Then he knelt, folding one leg beneath the other and resting his hands palm-down onto the snow-covered surface. "It's here," he murmured, eyes slipping closed.

Luz approached cautiously, eyes drawn to the sheer drop only a few feet from Markus' position. "You sure this is the source?"

"It's the strongest I've felt since we landed," Markus replied, his voice steady, almost reverent. "The essence is seeping up from somewhere deep below the glacier."

Atlas crept closer, staying slightly behind Luz as he peered over the edge with wide, apprehensive eyes. "It looks bottomless..."

Markus opened his eyes slowly and looked at Luz. "I'm going to show you something," he said. "When a soul has attuned itself to Arbora's essence, it can interact with her magic in ways that defy most systems of spellcasting. It's not about willpower and control, it's about resonance and harmony. The two most important components of harnessing her magic."

He touched a hand to his chest. "When I link my soul to the essence here—what's leaking through the glacier's core—you'll see a glimpse of that connection. It becomes... magnified and strengthened. Think of it like two voices harmonizing into something larger than themselves."

Luz's mind stirred with memories of their conversations aboard *The Donati*, of Markus speaking about the nature of Arbora's magic, about the soul being the bridge between desire and reality. Her thoughts drifted to something else he'd said—something she hadn't forgotten.

"The Wishing Star," she whispered aloud. "You said it only works if it etches itself onto the soul of the one who makes the wish... because it's tied to Arbora."

Markus gave a faint nod. "Exactly. The Wishing Star isn't just a cosmic artifact—it's a fragment of her. Her essence incarnate. And the only way to tap into it is to connect on that level—soul to soul. Just like this."

Luz felt a deep, quiet awe settle over her. Beside her, Atlas looked from one to the other with an expression full of childlike wonder.

Markus spoke. "I'm going to show you both what that looks like. What it means to connect with her."

He returned his attention inward, hands still pressed to the frost, and closed his eyes. His breathing slowed, becoming near-silent. A faint warmth began to emanate from him as it was not visible but rather felt. Luz's chest tingled faintly, as though a soft vibration passed through the air itself. The snow beneath Markus' hands shimmered slightly, tiny flecks of ice catching an unseen pulse of energy.

The ravine grew quieter, while the wind stilled. For a moment, it felt as though the glacier itself was holding its breath.

Markus sat motionless at the edge of the icy cliff, his hands pressed gently to the cold ground as the soft, rhythmic pulse of his breathing echoed through the quiet ravine. The frigid wind no longer seemed to touch him; the biting cold, once so present, now melted away in the presence of something deeper and older.

Luz and Atlas stood a few steps behind, watching with wide, captivated eyes. The air around Markus had begun to change—shimmering subtly, as if reality itself was bending in slow reverence. A faint golden light flickered into being around his body, at first no more than a soft glimmer, like sunlight seen through frosted glass. Though as seconds stretched on, the aura grew brighter and more defined. He was soon completely surrounded in a gentle halo of pure, living light.

Atlas gripped Luz's arm tightly, not out of fear but awe. "What's happening?" he whispered, barely able to look away.

Luz didn't answer immediately. Her gaze was fixed on Markus, heart beating just a little faster. The sight wasn't just magical, it was sacred.

Then Markus moved slowly and gracefully, he raised both arms upward, palms open to the sky. The light surrounding him pulsed brighter, as if it responded directly to his intent. From each of his hands, a glowing orb began to form in each palm. They were radiant, almost fluid in appearance, swirling with golden-white essence that sparkled like sunlight on water. The light danced, not chaotically, but with a quiet purpose like it was alive.

He held the orbs aloft for a moment longer then slowly brought his hands down. With utmost care, he placed both orbs on the snow-covered ground where he had been sitting. He began pressing them into the frost as if he were planting a seed and then... everything changed.

The snow around the orbs shimmered, cracked, and melted away in a soft, hissing mist. From beneath the ice, green erupted. Specifically, Grass, which was impossibly vibrant and lush, which had unfurled from the earth as if awakened from an ancient sleep. Vines coiled outward in slow spirals, threading through the newly formed meadow. Wildflowers bloomed across the patch like stars, delicate petals in hues of violet, blue, and gold waving gently in a breeze that didn't exist.

It was a surreal contrast—the bloom of spring in the heart of a frozen world. The biting air around them remained but this patch of land had been changed completely. It wasn't an illusion nor a trick because life itself had returned to this small part of the glacier, made sacred by the touch of Arbora's essence.

Atlas' mouth dropped open, breath fogging the air. "Did... did he just grow life? On an ice-covered planet?"

Luz stepped forward slowly, her boots crunching at the edge of the transformed ground. Her eyes were wide, almost shimmering. "You're right... That wasn't just magic, Atlas," she said softly. "That was life. Pure life."

Markus slowly opened his eyes, while the radiant aura that had encased him flickered and then faded in a soft exhale of light. He exhaled slowly, as his exhaustion crept into his features but there was a sense of peace there too. A peace that resembled a quiet sense of pride inside of him. Markus took a slow breath, his shoulders rising and falling as the last traces of golden light dissolved into the thin, frigid air. He remained seated for a moment longer, grounding himself, as if reluctant to leave the sacred stillness he had just channeled. Then gently, he turned to Luz, his voice low but steady. "You see," he began,

"Arbora's presence isn't confined to one place. It's everywhere. Woven into the foundation of the cosmos. Wherever her essence lingers—even faintly—magic finds a way to manifest."

He motioned to the lush patch of grass and flowers now blooming beneath them like a sacred wound in the ice. "Even here," he said softly, "in the heart of a frozen wasteland. Her touch remains. And because of that, so does possibility."

Luz nodded slowly, still marveling at the vibrant petals beneath her fingers, their softness a sharp contrast to the glacial chill all around them. The words resonated deeply in her, unlocking something she'd only just begun to understand.

"That explains a lot..." she murmured, thoughtful. "Back when arrived here, I was somehow able to use glyph magic here, even though we were far from the Demon Realm. Though before that, I had to rely on King to make it work due to its limitations anywhere else. I remember thinking it shouldn't have worked—not out here but... it did."

Markus gave her a knowing look. "Because Arbora's essence was there. It allowed your magic to respond."

Luz exhaled through her nose, slowly rising to her feet. Her gaze drifted outward, toward the distant glacial ridgelines and the pale auroras swirling above them. The wind tugged at her cloak, but she barely felt it now. Her thoughts had drifted elsewhere—reminding her of home. Back to the bones of something ancient and colossal.

"You know..." she said slowly, her voice tinged with a kind of reverent nostalgia, "what you're saying... it reminds me of the Titan."

Markus tilted his head slightly, intrigued.

"Even after he was gone—his spirit was pulled into the In Between which caused his magic to stay around, even if his body was lifeless." Luz continued. "The Boiling Isles, my home, were literally shaped by it. His magic still worked through every part of his body for many years."

Atlas listened silently beside them, eyes wide and absorbing every word.

"I met him once," Luz added quietly. "Not just the magic or his voice, but his actual spirit. I saw how much he loved his son... how much he loved the Isles. He wasn't just a god. He was someone who gave everything to protect something he believed in. And... now that I'm seeing all this, everything you're showing me... it makes sense."

She turned to Markus, her expression steady, illuminated by understanding. "The Titans weren't just powerful," she said. "They were born from Arbora. They are her legacy. That's why their magic is so unlike anything else."

Markus didn't respond right away. There was a look in his eyes, a quiet spark of approval and hope.

"Yes," he said at last, voice calm and resolute. "That's exactly it. The Titans are direct descendants of Arbora's will. Carriers of a fragment so vast and enduring, that even death couldn't silence it. You're beginning to understand what it truly means to be part of what Arbora had created, Luz. What it means to be connected by more than just spells or symbols... but by soul." She turned toward Markus, her brow creased slightly, her eyes earnest. "So... does that mean my glyph magic—and the magic that comes from my palisman staff—do those count as a kind of link? A connection to Arbora?"

Her question lingered in the air, soft but weighted with genuine curiosity. It wasn't just academic, it was personal. Glyphs had been her first real bond to magic, to wonder, to a world that changed her life forever. To know whether those symbols—those drawings, those spells—held meaning beyond function.

Markus nodded slowly, folding his hands across his lap. "Technically, yes," he replied, his tone gentle. "Your glyphs and your palisman staff are forms of magical connection to Arbora. They're powerful conduits and sacred in their own right but they rely on external materials to channel their effects. Paper, ink, wood, the natural elements."

He glanced down at the grass still thriving beneath them, then looked back to her.

"But the magic I just performed... that came from my soul directly. No runes. No tools. Just a connection between my spirit and Arbora's presence leaking from this place."

Luz tilted her head slightly, her expression caught between awe and thoughtfulness. "So you didn't cast anything. You just... let your soul align?"

Markus gave a quiet chuckle, amused by her phrasing. "More or less. The magic isn't forced, it's remembered. It flows when you surrender to it instead of commanding it. That's the core difference between soul magic and, say, glyph-based or staff-based techniques. One depends on a spark from within. The others guide a spark from without."

Luz took in his words carefully, eyes narrowing slightly in concentration. Then a flicker of recognition lit her face.

"You know," she said, "that reminds me of something back home. In the Demon Realm, witches are born with this organ called a bile sac. It's part of their biology—it lets them cast magic naturally, without needing glyphs or wands."

Markus raised his eyebrows, intrigued. "Fascinating."

"Yeah," Luz continued, nodding. "I always thought it was unique to witches, but what you're describing—it feels like a spiritual equivalent. Witches use their bile sac, you use your soul. Both are natural, just different in origin."

Markus smiled at that, an approving glint in his eyes. "That's a sharp comparison. And you're right. Both are manifestations of natural magic, tied into the fabric of life itself. Witches rely on a biological anchor. Arbora's essence... it weaves into something deeper. The soul, the core of being. Where body and spirit touch."

Luz folded her arms, staring into the horizon, her voice softer now. "It's strange... but kind of beautiful, isn't it? No matter where we are—no matter how different we all seem—magic finds a way to live inside us. Whether it's through a heart, a soul, a bile sac, or a piece of wood carved with care."

Luz let the thought hang between them for a long moment, her gaze drifting from Markus's calm presence to the soft patch of living green beneath their feet. It felt like something sacred had been shared, something layered and ancient. But there was still more she needed to say—specifically about pieces of the past that weighed on her heart. "You know," she began, her voice a quiet murmur, "when the Titan passed on... his magic did too. That's why the old glyph language I once used stopped working."

Markus looked at her, eyes narrowing with quiet attentiveness.

"I didn't understand it at first," she continued. "Back then, glyphs were everything to me. They were my only way to fight, to protect people. And when they stopped responding the way they used to, it felt like I was losing a part of myself." She looked down, curling her fingers into her gloves. "But I realized later—it wasn't that the magic disappeared entirely. It just... shifted. His essence faded, and with it, that connection."

There was a beat of silence before she added with a faint smile, "But King... he's been helping me create something new."

Markus tilted his head slightly. "New glyphs?"

Luz nodded. "Yeah. King's been learning to channel his Titan magic, and it's like the magic inside him started forming its own language. Not as powerful as his dad's glyphs, not yet anyway, but it's real. We've been practicing together. It's slower, harder... but it works."

Her smile faded slightly, replaced with a flicker of concern. "Or... it did work. Before we had to stop."

Markus's expression softened. "Because of the Grand Huntsman?"

Luz nodded. "King's powers were drawing too much attention. We felt that with how willingly Orion and the Grand Huntsman are at trying to hurt King, he stopped using it for our safety."

Markus looked out over the ravine, his voice lowered but certain. "I always knew he was a Titan. I suspected from the moment I first laid eyes on him, but I waited for confirmation. I figured it wasn't my truth to uncover."

Luz glanced at him, surprised. "You did?"

"I did," he said simply. "Those who've trained in Arbora's essence can sense other kinds of magic too. If someone else is resonating with power, especially ancient power, you can feel it. The echoes of it brush against your own."

His eyes flicked toward the snowy horizon, almost contemplatively. "With King, it was different. His essence wasn't just strong—it was old. Primordial. And it sang the same tune as the winds that stir the branches of Arbora."

Luz fell quiet, her arms folding again as she sank down next to the thriving patch of grass. "He never wanted to only be seen as some powerful being with a lot of magic he'll inherit one day. He just wants to be... a kid. And yet, even without trying, he carries something inside him that makes the world shift when he breathes a little too hard." She let out a breath, watching it cloud in the cold. "It's a lot for him but he's trying every day."

Markus spoke softly. "Then he's already succeeding. The greatest strength lies in choosing not to use it. Especially when it's easier to let it control you."

Atlas had stayed close beside Luz, clinging gently to her sleeve during the conversation, wide-eyed and quiet, but the moment wasn't lost on him. His eyes were thoughtful, full of wonder, maybe even hope. In this vast, cold place, the warmth of legacy and new beginnings stirred something quiet but undeniable in him too.

Luz's gaze lingered on the grassy patch Markus had created, the colors so vivid and alive against the cold white nothingness surrounding them. There was something deeply humbling about it—how magic, even in the bleakest of places, could still thrive. She shifted her attention back to Markus, her thoughts churning beneath the surface like a quiet storm.

"Markus..." she began, her voice soft but edged with a tentative kind of curiosity. "Do you think... it'd be possible for someone like me to learn that kind of magic? The kind you and the Order of Arbora practice?"

Her words were careful, casual enough on the outside. Though beneath that, her heart beat faster. She wasn't just asking out of fascination—though she did love magic with all her heart. She was asking because a part of her still felt helpless. In the quiet spaces between battles and escapes, she remembered the look on King's face when he hid his power out of fear... the tremble in Atlas's hands when he clung to her, terrified of being left behind. She had to be stronger, strong enough to shield them both—no matter what came next.

Markus looked at her, not with surprise, but with a calm thoughtfulness, his eyes narrowing just slightly as he considered her question. The wind tugged lightly at his cloak but his presence remained still and anchored.

"Yes," he said after a beat. "It is possible, since it flows through all living things, humans included."

Luz blinked, holding her breath without realizing it.

"But," he continued, "It's not something learned like a spell or drawn like a glyph. It's... awakened. It's only discovered through the soul. You'd have to be willing to see yourself completely. To open yourself to parts of you that you've buried, even painful experiences and emotions."

"However, I must admit," he continued, voice thoughtful, "when we first met... I was confused. Not because you were human, but because I sensed something in you—something powerful." He turned toward the crevice again, letting the cold wind push through his fur before glancing back. "Your soul was radiant. Not just in strength, but in depth. It was like looking into a current that refused to be still."

He paused again, his tone softening. "And that wasn't all. I also sensed Titan magic lingering inside you. Not yours... but a trace of it."

Luz's eyes widened slightly. "You... you felt that?"

Markus nodded. "It made no sense to me at the time. I knew King was a Titan, but you carried something of him with you. Or maybe it was from the Titan before him."

Luz's gaze dropped to the grass patch Markus had created moments earlier, her thoughts tangled in everything he had just said. The idea that someone could sense something within her, something ancient and powerful, still felt surreal. But as the memory returned, her heart grew a little heavier. "There's something I need to mention," she began, her voice almost swallowed by the hush of the glacial winds. "As I've said before, I met King's father—the Titan."

Luz let out a breath. "He... he reached out to me through the In Between Realm, when things were at their worst. There was this very evil man named Belos who was about to destroy everything, and there was nothing left I could do."

Her fingers clutched the fabric of her sleeve, remembering the cold clarity of that moment, the vast cosmic silence she had stepped into. "He gave me his magic. Whatever remained of it... just enough of it to stand up one last time to stop Belos. And it worked. We saved the Isles... but he vanished after that."

She looked up at Markus, eyes shimmering with a quiet mix of pride and sorrow. "He used the last of himself to help me and everyone else. He didn't hesitate because he knew his time was about to end."

For a moment, Markus said nothing. The wind curled around them in a soft hush, like the glacier itself was listening.

Then, with a voice weighed by reverence, he finally spoke. "That's... remarkable."

His words weren't hollow praise. There was a raw, genuine astonishment in them, as though he was trying to reconcile the scale of what she'd just told him. "You harnessed the power of the Titans," he said, voice quieter now. "Even if only for a short time... Luz, do you realize how rare that is? The Order has spent millennia trying to trace their lineage back to Arbora. Some of us—like myself—train our whole lives to simply touch the current of her essence. And here you are, having once carried the magic of a being forged from her will."

Luz didn't speak. She only nodded slowly, her chest tight with the weight of those memories. She hadn't let herself think about that battle in detail for a long time—not the fear, not the desperation, and not the parting. Markus's expression had grown more contemplative now. "It makes sense," he murmured. "That trace I sensed in you—it wasn't just exposure. It was connection. You didn't just use his power. You shared it."

"It explains so much," Markus continued, his voice more assured now. "Why your soul felt the way it did. Why your essence echoed with something larger than yourself. Arbora's essence responds to those who act out of love and of selflessness. That Titan... he must have seen that in you."

Markus was quiet for a moment, allowing Luz's words and the weight of her experience to settle between them. The wind that rolled across the glacier ridge seemed gentler now, as if acknowledging the solemnity in their exchange. His eyes remained fixed on the patch of green he had created—still thriving amid the frozen wasteland—before he slowly turned his gaze back to her, a thoughtful calm resting on his face.

"...You deserve the chance to explore what this really means for you," he said softly. "Not just what happened, but what's possible from here."

Luz looked at him, a small crease forming between her brows, her lips parting slightly in anticipation of what he meant.

"I can help you," Markus continued, his voice gaining purpose. "My ally who resides at the Nebula Sanctum, she's one of the oldest and most revered members we have. She's not just wise but she also lived through centuries of practice and study. She was the one who trained my father."

Luz's eyes widened at the mention. "Your father?"

Markus nodded, his gaze drifting momentarily to the horizon beyond the ravine, as if trying to glimpse a memory he had never truly held. "His name was Cassian Star. He was... everything I ever wanted to become; Brave, brilliant, and devoted to protecting others. To many, he was a legend, as he was one of the greatest knights to ever serve under Arbora's guidance."

There was a subtle shift in Markus's expression—his usual composure flickering to reveal something more vulnerable. His jaw tightened slightly, and his voice dropped into a more somber tone. "But I lost him when I was very young, so I ended up not knowing about him personally. Most of what I know about him comes from my mentor. She was his closest confidante. She always said he had a soul that burned like a beacon, and that... I carry a piece of that same fire."

He glanced down at his hands, as if trying to see the reflection of his father's legacy within his own fingers. "I've always hoped that I'd live up to who he was," he admitted, the truth of it carrying a raw honesty. "That maybe, if I trained hard enough and followed Arbora's path, I could be worthy of the name he left behind."

Luz's heart ached at the sincerity in his voice. He had always struck her as steadfast and capable, but now she could see the quiet grief that had long accompanied his journey—the longing to know the man whose shadow he walked in.

"She'll help you," Markus added after a moment, his voice steadier again. "My mentor. If anyone can teach you how to unlock your connection to Arbora's essence, it's her. And I'll be there too, every step of the way."

Luz felt a soft ache swell in her chest as she listened, the emotions in Markus's voice brushing against something tender and familiar inside her. His words—his longing for a father he barely knew—resonated deeply. She let the silence linger for a moment longer, not out of hesitation, but respect instead. The wind carried the cold, but the weight of the moment kept her grounded, rooted like the green patch beneath them.

She took a slow step forward and knelt beside him, her eyes meeting his. They were gentle, but steady. "I know how that feels," she said quietly. "I lost my dad too... when I was a kid."

Markus looked up, his eyes searching hers with sudden understanding.

"I didn't get a lot of time with him," she continued, her voice calm but edged with that same old sorrow. "But with what I remember of him... he made me feel safe and seen, like I mattered. And even now, I still think about whether I'm making him proud with the choices I've made." She offered a faint smile that was not forced but just as soft and real enough. "I think that feeling never really goes away."

Markus's posture shifted slightly, less guarded now. A quiet kinship passed between them.

"You said you want to be worthy of your father's name," Luz added, voice steady now. "But Markus... from what I've seen, you already are. You're brave, thoughtful, and you carry this... deep respect for the power you wield. That's something even the greatest teachers struggle to pass on. But it's already in you."

He blinked, caught off-guard by the sincerity in her tone.

"And I know," she said with growing conviction, "that you're going to be a great teacher. Maybe not just because of who your father was... but because of who you are." She smiled warmly now, the cold momentarily forgotten. "Thank you for offering to teach me. It means more than you know."

For a long beat, Markus didn't say anything. His throat tightened, and he looked away briefly—toward the snowy expanse and the crevice that still whispered with Arbora's quiet magic. Then, when he turned back, the corner of his mouth lifted into something subtle but real: a smile, shaped by both gratitude and quiet resolve. "Thank you, Luz," he murmured. "I won't let you down."

In that moment, between the grief they both carried and the hope they now shared, something wordless and strong began to form—a mutual trust, a silent vow, and a beginning.

Meanwhile, aboard The Donati, the cold steel corridors hummed faintly with energy, the ambient flickering of diagnostic lights reflecting softly against the inner walls of the engine chamber. The warp core loomed in the center of the room—an intricate lattice of containment rings and glowing conduits now partially disassembled. Tools hovered mid-air in the grip of Hesperos's magnetic gauntlet, while Starry floated just overhead, emitting occasional bursts of shimmering light as they ran scans with their integrated sensors.

King stood beside them on a stack of secured crates, a pair of oversized goggles slipping slightly down his snout as he worked a wrench on one of the auxiliary junctions. His stubby claws moved with impressive focus for someone so small. The room buzzed with a quiet rhythm of purposeful movement—until Hesperos, his voice calm but curious, broke the silence.

"So, King," Hesperos said without looking up from the readings in his gauntlet, "how are you feeling about the mission ahead? You know, the whole... 'forging a Titan-made weapon' part?"

King didn't answer immediately. He gave the bolt one last twist before dropping the wrench onto the crate with a clink. Then he crossed his arms with exaggerated confidence. "Well," King said, puffing his chest and throwing on his usual dramatic tone, "I mean—obviously—I'm thrilled! Absolutely honored! I mean, who wouldn't want to

forge a magical soul-sword with cosmic destiny written all over it? Sounds like peak King behavior, if you ask me!"

However, Hesperos only raised a brow at King, as he wasn't entirely convinced with King's answer.

Realizing this, King only sighed as his small shoulders began deflating. "...Okay, yeah, I'm still scared." he admitted, his voice softer, more real.

Hesperos gently powered down a panel and turned his full attention to the young Titan. "What are you afraid of, exactly?"

King hesitated, then looked down at his paws. "It's... a lot of things. I mean, sure—I volunteered. I said I'd do this. I want to help. But every time I even think about using my magic, I can't stop thinking about him."

"The Grand Huntsman," Hesperos murmured.

"Yeah," King nodded. "That guy is like... the worst kind of attention you can get. And the last time I really let loose with my powers... It didn't end well. I keep thinking that if I use my magic again, he'll find us. Or worse—Luz."

He kicked lightly at the crate beneath him, eyes lowered. "She's been trying to play it cool, but I can tell. She's always trying to protect me and I get it! I really do. But I hate seeing her stressed out, like she has to carry me and everything else on her back."

He added further. "And now, with what Markus told me... that Titans aren't just 'big magical gods' of the Demon Realm. Instead we're supposed to be, like, these important cosmic beings across the entire multiverse? That our magic comes straight from Arbora herself? I mean—c'mon! That's a lot! What if I mess it all up? What if I'm not the Titan they need me to be?"

Hesperos had been listening intently the entire time, his quiet gaze never once wavering from the young Titan's small form. As King's last words trailed off into the mechanical hum of the warp chamber, the silence that followed felt heavier than the gravity generator humming beneath their feet. The pirate exhaled slowly and crouched down to King's level, resting one knee on the floor. "Hey," he said gently, his voice low but steady.

"Markus might've told you the truth about the legacy of the Titans... how your kind shaped the realms, how their magic is directly linked to that cosmic tree. But you need to know something really important—that legacy doesn't own you."

King looked up at him, eyes wide and uncertain.

"You still get to write your own path, kid." Hesperos continued. "You still get to choose who you are. Whether you're a Titan, a talking dog, or the self-proclaimed 'King of Demons'—none of that changes the fact that you've got people around you who care about you, not because of your legacy, but because of you."

King blinked, his mouth opening a little in surprise.

Hesperos offered a small, encouraging smile. "Forging the sword? Yeah—it's risky and dangerous. You're gonna have to channel power most people couldn't even dream of. But it's also a chance. A chance to show everyone what it really means to be a Titan—not the scary kind that people feared, not the ancient warrior kind... only you. The kind who stepped up because you wanted to help. The kind who volunteered not because someone told you to, but because you care. That takes courage, King. Real courage."

King's throat bobbed while he looked down at his paws again, as they held his goggles.

Hesperos leaned a bit closer, his voice softening even further. "And yeah... I've noticed it too. How protective she's gotten since what happened with the Archivists. I'm worried about her too. She's carrying so much... trying to keep it together for everyone else."

King nodded slowly. "She doesn't let herself rest."

"That's because she loves you," Hesperos said. "Not because she thinks you're weak or doesn't trust you. But because you matter to her. You're her family. And I bet you obviously feel the same about her, don't you?"

King didn't need to answer that. The way his eyes shimmered was enough.

"She protects you because she loves you," Hesperos said firmly, "and you're afraid for her because you love her. That's not a burden, King. That's a bond. A powerful one at best, mate."

He reached out and gently placed a metal hand on King's tiny shoulder. "No matter what happens when you forge that sword," he said, "Luz is going to be there. I'm going to be there. So will Atlas, and Starry, and Markus. We're not going to let you go through this alone."

King's breath hitched softly. Then he sniffed and nodded, his voice small but steady. "Okay... okay. I—I still don't know if I'm ready... But... thanks. That helped. A lot."

Hesperos gave his shoulder a light pat, then stood, returning to the console. "That's what pirate-therapists are for." King let out a small laugh, wiping at the corner of his eye.

The atmosphere just a bit lighter, the trio returned to their work one step closer to the storm ahead, but stronger together in its shadow.

Soon a sudden low whirl echoed through the engine chamber—faint at first, then rising steadily as pale cerulean light pulsed from the newly realigned warp core. The stabilizers hummed back to life, casting smooth lines of light along the deck plating. A final spark popped from a terminal, followed by a sharp hiss of pressure release.

Hesperos, crouched beside the main conduit junction, held a hydro-spanner in one paw, his welding goggles askew and a streak of black oil across his cheek fur. His tail twitched with barely restrained excitement as he tapped a final sequence into the control panel mounted near the energy chamber.

"Yes! C'mon, baby—talk to me," he muttered under his breath, voice buzzing with anticipation. "Stabilization node's holding... core harmonics steady... containment field's firm... just one more alignment."

He leaned in close, ears flicking toward the rising hum of the chamber, and delicately twisted the final flux regulator into place. The device clicked into its port with a satisfying snap. Immediately, the glowing blue lattice at the core's heart surged with a brighter, steadier pulse. Then... hum.

A deep, rhythmic vibration settled into the floor as the warp core locked into its restored cycle, its crystalline heart now glowing bright and steady at the center of the ship.

"Ha-HA! That's what I'm talkin' about!" Hesperos grinned, leaping up and wiping the sweat from his brow. "Ladies and gentlemen—and star sprites alike—we officially have ourselves a warp core!"

King, perched just behind a small diagnostic console, gave a triumphant little jump and pumped his paw. "Yeah! Knew we had it in the bag!" He turned to Starry, his eyes gleaming with excitement. "Did you see that? We didn't even need emergency rations this time!"

Starry let out a cheerfully drawn-out wheeze that mimicked a trumpet fanfare, their eyes spiraling in exaggerated spirals before settling into stars again. "Wooooo! Victory sparkles for Team Core Fixers! That's us, right?! I'm so happy the Warp core is all A-Okay now!"

King chuckled, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, we get it, you sparkle nut."

Hesperos chuckled under his breath as he began flipping switches on the primary nav panel to test the flow of power. The warm pulse from the engine core now coursed smoothly throughout the Donati, giving the old ship a comforting, familiar breath—like a living thing waking up from a long nap.

"Alright," Hesperos said, tone shifting into something focused and ready, "Now that she's purring again, we should let Luz, Markus, and Atlas know from their pagers that they can head back."

King hopped off the console and gave a small nod. "Yeah... I think they've probably had enough spiritual soul-magic snow bonding time for one day."

Hesperos smirked. "Starry, patch me through to the frequency."

"Ooooooh! Buttons and beams and beeps—engaging pager uplink!" Starry twirled around with a flourish of his arms, then slammed one of his nubbins down on the console. "Bee-doop! BZZZT! Paging the magic trio of soul-searchers! Come home, the ship is alive! And she misses you!"

King blinked. "...Was that the official message?"

Starry nodded enthusiastically. "Uh-huh!"

Hesperos shook his head with an amused breath. "Close enough."

He looked to King, who stood quietly for a moment, watching the warp core cycle as it sent soft pulses of blue light dancing across the walls. Though nervousness still lingered behind his eyes, there was a renewed steadiness in his little frame—something forged from more than just victory over machinery.

"You good mate?" Hesperos asked gently.

King gave a small, confident nod. "Yeah. I think I am."

Hesperos ruffled his head. "Good. Because the next part? That's where it really gets fun."

As the call beacon blinked with confirmation and a low chime echoed across the ship, The Donati waited as she was ready for her crew to return and face what came next together.

Elsewhere, As the pale sun hung low behind the jagged ridges of the glacier ravine, casting long indigo shadows across the ice, Luz, Markus, and Atlas made their way back toward the distant silhouette of The Donati. The winds had calmed to a gentle breeze now, allowing them to move quickly and speak with ease, but their breath still crystallized with every word. The snow crunched underfoot, muffled by the sheer quiet of this far-off corner of the realm.

"Feels weirdly peaceful now," Luz remarked, glancing up at the sky streaked with faint aurora ribbons. "Almost too peaceful."

Markus adjusted the strap of his travel satchel, nodding as he kept a careful eye on the ridgelines. "Peace always feels strange after the kind of things we've seen. Which is why it's best to cherish it."

Atlas walked a bit ahead but still near Luz nonetheless, his cloak drifting like a soft shadow over the powder. He looked thoughtful, pensive even, his usual cheeky glimmer dimmed by the weight of everything they had discussed. However, before anyone could respond, his eyes widened suddenly.

"Wait. What's that?" Atlas stopped and pointed up, their voice strained with a growing panic.

Up ahead, hovering just above the ice, a strange figure slowly drifted into view, it was a levitating drone. Its polished, reflective blue body shimmered like a crystal in the low light, shaped like a rotating five-pointed star. At its center, a circular face with black sclera and piercing red pupils stared in two opposite directions at once, each eye adorned with two twitching eyelashes. The five rounded triangle blades orbiting its core moved slowly, hypnotically silent and watching.

Luz froze. Her heart sank into her stomach. "Oh no..." she whispered.

Markus inhaled sharply through his nose. "Archive Collective."

"Spy drone!" Atlas barked, backing up. "We have to—"

Before the words were even fully out, Luz and Markus had already drawn their blasters. Their fingers were instinctive, their stances solid. In an instant, they fired twin bolts of concentrated light at the drone. The star-shaped construct flinched and spun, returning fire with sharp beams of violet laser energy that scorched the ice in rapid, lethal bursts. It shrieked with a synthetic distortion—inhuman and mechanical—as it wove through the air, trying to dodge the attacks.

"Keep it away from Atlas!" Luz shouted, narrowing her stance and firing again.

Markus wordlessly moved to flank it, his shots careful and sharp, precise in their rhythm. Atlas, though shaken, quickly conjured a brief shield of stardust to deflect the drone's retaliation. But after a final, well-placed shot from Luz's blaster, the drone gave one last jolt, spun wildly out of control, and exploded in a burst of sparking fragments. Pieces of metal and glowing shards scattered across the icy ravine, the glow fading fast into silence once more.

They all stood still as the silence returned but now, it was heavy.

Atlas asked, voice trembling. "D-do you think it transmitted anything that it had taken while it spied on us?!"

"We can't risk it," Markus said firmly, lowering his weapon. "We need to warn the others."

Luz didn't waste another moment. She yanked her pager from her belt and pressed the signal channel. "Hesperos, come in—this is Luz. We just took out an Archive Collective Spy drone," she said quickly, her voice tight. "Repeat—a spy drone. It found us!"

There was a beat of silence, then Hesperos's voice crackled through with urgent intensity. "You what? That's not good. You three need to get back to the ship right now. We got the warp core online—we can take off the second you're back."

"Understood," Markus responded, already pivoting. "We're on our way."

Luz tucked the pager away and turned to the others. "Let's move. Fast."

Without hesitation, the trio turned and began sprinting across the frozen path, the snow crunching beneath their feet. They pushed through the biting wind, urgency in every breath, heartbeats pounding in sync with their footfalls. Time felt thinner now, every second stretched by the dread clenching in their chests. However, what they didn't see was something none of them would have expected, what stirred quietly behind them.

Amid the scattered pieces of the drone, its central circular brain, barely more than a burnt-out disk, gave a single pulse. A red flicker sparked in its center. Its secondary battery, a backup system deeply embedded in its core, reactivated with a whirring click. Though its outer shell was destroyed, the central eye flickered open—bright red, alert, and silent.

It hovered slightly above the snow, then angled upward. With a single mechanical twitch, it sent a small beam of light flashing skyward—a signal. A silent transmission cutting through the atmosphere and deep into space. The Archive Collective had received the message.

Back to the trio; snow and frost still clung to their boots and cloaks as Luz, Markus, and Atlas sprinted through the cargo ramp of The Donati, their breaths sharp in the chilled air and hearts still pounding from the skirmish near the ravine. The hatch hissed shut behind them with a mechanical clunk, sealing them away from the bitter winds of Gleiria's

surface and more importantly, the growing threat that now loomed with the drone's survival.

Without pausing, Luz turned toward the front corridor. "Cockpit—now!" she called out.

Hesperos was already halfway down the corridor to meet them, his dark coat flaring as he pivoted. "We've got everything prepped! Starry's heading to the core!" he shouted as he ran beside her.

Markus gave Atlas a light nudge toward the living quarters. "Go get warm. We've got it from here," he said, his tone tight with concern, but Atlas simply nodded, his eyes still darting behind them as if the drone might have followed.

The corridor lights flickered slightly as the ship's systems reactivated from standby, giving a low hum of life that reverberated beneath their boots. Luz and Hesperos burst into the cockpit, the panels lighting up in quick sequence with every button press and lever pull Hesperos initiated. Luz quickly strapped herself into the co-pilot seat, her fingers flying over the navigational interface. "Coordinates set?" she asked, panting slightly.

"Already loaded to Seraphyx," Hesperos confirmed. "Assuming we don't explode on takeoff, we'll be back in the stars in five!"

"Let's hope Starry doesn't keep us waiting," Luz murmured, glancing at the small monitor that showed a live feed of the engine chamber.

Meanwhile, in the glowing chamber at the heart of the ship, Starry floated forward with theatrical flair, their wispy arms curling upward like spirals of ribbon. "Ooooooh, time to sparkle and ignite!" he sang, voice melodic and high-pitched, echoing faintly like a songbird dipped in cosmic sugar. They positioned himself directly over the warp core, his usually playful expression dimming into one of focus. Starry's floated toward the engine's crystalline containment chamber. A moment of stillness passed—and then, with a dazzling surge of radiant energy, they pressed their palms forward.

A brilliant beam of starlight pulsed from their chest and eyes, flooding the core chamber with glimmering light. The warp core spun faster, its crystalline rings aligning perfectly

with a loud whirrrr, before bursting into a glowing golden-blue pulse. The ship trembled then steadied as its power was restored.

"Warp core fully juiced!" Starry called out through the intercom, their voice bouncing with excitement. "Like a cosmic fruit smoothie of velocity and glamour!"

Back in the cockpit, a soft chime confirmed it. "Power levels are stable. Core's back online," Luz said, exhaling with a wide-eyed sigh of relief.

Hesperos tightened his grip on the flight controls. "Buckle up, everyone."

The ship lifted off the icy terrain with a deep, rising hum. Outside the viewport, the cold white wasteland of Gleiria began to shrink as The Donati ascended rapidly through the dense, icy clouds. As the last hints of the blue-glowing planet faded below, the stars blinked back into view as it was serene, infinite, and welcoming.

With a final calibration check, Hesperos engaged the warp drive. In a thunderous flash of blinding light, The Donati cracked through the fabric of space, vanishing from Gleiria's orbit. The streaking colors of warp travel wrapped around the hull, and the crew was once again cast into the endless, beautiful sea between stars. Their next destination awaited: Seraphyx. Though their unease still lingered in their chests, for a moment, they could all breathe again.

Meanwhile, far across the stars and nestled within the shadowed sectors of a forgotten region of space, loomed a vessel as imposing as it was mysterious—The Eclipse, the personal warship of the Grand Huntsman. Alongside it now drifted a fleet of Archive Collective warships, their pristine dark exteriors reflecting the dim glow of distant stars, forming a stark contrast to the Huntsman's brutish, almost feral monstrosity of a vessel.

Inside the throne chamber of The Eclipse, the air was sharp and heavy, thick with the scent of engine oil and scorched metal. The walls were lined with dark, archaic etchings depicting ancient hunts and beasts long extinct. Twin braziers burned with ethereal violet flame beside the elevated obsidian throne, upon which the Grand Huntsman now sat, armored and unyielding, his cloak draped across his shoulders like the pelt of some great beast. The doors at the far end creaked open, metallic groans echoing like a warning. General Arulieus entered with his usual swagger, his Archive uniform pristine, his pale

silver cape billowing as if caught in a wind that didn't exist. Behind his mask of cold control, his smile was smug.

"I trust you're enjoying the reinforcements," Arulieus said coolly, stepping into the ring of light cast by the throne above.

The Grand Huntsman did not turn to greet him. His voice was firm, deep, reverberating like the toll of judgment across an empty hall. "I did not summon you, General. Nor do I require your assistance. This hunt is mine alone..."

Arulieus allowed a small, practiced smile to curl at the corner of his lips. "Ah, but the Archivists seem to think otherwise, as their orders were quite clear. The Celestine Compass is of... mutual interest. As are the fugitives."

Finally, the Grand Huntsman turned. His crescent emblem on his hidden face burned with holy fire. "Spare me your paraphrasing of bureaucratic decrees, Arulieus. You and your Council whisper from shadows, while I bring justice with blade and fire. I do not need the luxury of a fleet to carry out my mission."

Arulieus did not flinch. Instead, he slowly folded his hands behind his back, his voice so ever calm. "Yet, for all your proclamations of divine purpose... you've struggled, haven't you? The fugitives continue to elude you. And the Celestine Compass remains... conspicuously absent."

There was a beat of silence. Not from shock but from boiling restraint. In one swift movement, the Grand Huntsman descended from the dais, boots slamming against the floor with finality. His cape flared like the wings of judgment itself.

"You overstep," he growled, low but thunderous. "I will not have this victory tarnished by a glory-hound parading as a diplomat. You must remember that while you're assisting me, I'm in charge of this entire operation!"

But Arulieus remained unmoved. He stepped closer, his voice like silk drawn over steel. "I do not seek glory," he replied, "Only results. Something that your righteous zeal has yet to deliver, even if you're in charge of everything."

The Grand Huntsman's gauntlet twitched at his side, a half-second away from reaching for the hilt of the blade sheathed upon his back but he stopped. Not because he lacked the will but because he knew this battlefield was not one of weapons but of words.

Arulieus smiled faintly, their singular eye glinting beneath the ambient glow of the starmap. "You want the Titan for yourself," he said quietly and confidently. "You believe slaying him will enshrine your legacy in the stars, don't you?"

The Grand Huntsman stepped closer, face inches from Arulieus's, his voice dropping to a hoarse whisper laden with fury and conviction. "It is not the legacy I seek. It is absolution. The last of his kind must fall by my hand. Not yours. Mine."

The words hung between them like a guillotine blade.

Arulieus blinked slowly, then spoke with clinical precision. "Then you'd best move quickly, Huntsman. Because should you falter again... the Archivists will not wait for your crusade to find its end."

The Grand Huntsman exhaled slowly, the tension in his shoulders coiled like a predator poised to strike. Then, with biting sarcasm curling through his otherwise righteous cadence, he tilted his head slightly and asked, "And tell me, General... how exactly do you intend to sniff out these fugitives of yours from the infinite dark? Will you lecture the stars into surrender?"

Arulieus's expression did not shift. Instead, he took a calculated step forward, voice even and unhurried, his words precise as a scalpel. "The stars may not yield, but information does. I've already enacted a wide surveillance initiative. Several of our Spy Drones have been deployed to a number of unregulated sectors and territories beyond our direct dominion. If they're hiding, as I suspect, it will be in the fringes, outposts, and in remote worlds where our reach has waned."

The Grand Huntsman gave a dry, humorless chuckle, stepping past him with slow, armored grace. "You hope to net truth from chaos," he muttered. "A fool's errand wrapped in protocol."

Before Arulieus could respond, the throne chamber doors hissed open. An Archive officer in a steel-gray uniform entered briskly, his posture rigid with urgency. "Apologies

for the interruption, Lords," he said, bowing his head deeply. "We've just received a signal. One of our spy drones... it appears to have been destroyed. But not before its secondary core was reactivated. It transmitted a data burst before full termination."

Both men stilled, and soon Arulieus's eye narrowed with sharp interest. "Show us." Without another word, they swept from the throne chamber and entered the main corridor—a cold, angular artery of black alloy and red lights—marching in step toward the bridge of The Eclipse. As they moved, officers and technicians parted around them like shadows giving way to a storm.

The bridge itself was a domed command center of immense scale, its wide viewing windows revealing the endless cosmos like a canvas of war yet to be painted. Archive technicians worked in tiered stations, their eyes fixed on flickering holographic data projected from the ship's central core.

One of the bridge operators, a star sprite with half their scalp covered in neural interface plating with a red ringed planet shaped head, looked up as they entered. "Transmission trace complete," they reported crisply. "The signal originated from the planet Gleiria. Outer fringe system, neutral status. No current Archive presence in orbit."

Arulieus approached the display and folded his hands behind his back, his eyes viewing the readout. "Did the drone upload visual data before it was compromised?"

"Negative," the operator replied. "It sustained catastrophic damage before full memory dump but the burst included trace biometric signatures and trajectory scans."

Arulieus gave a slight nod. "Still useful. Have the data isolated. I want a full reconstruction of the drone's final seconds."

The Grand Huntsman loomed beside him, arms crossed. "Gleiria," he repeated, voice heavy with implication. "A forgotten rock. Of course they'd hide beneath the crust of obscurity."

Arulieus murmured. "Even ruins can offer clues. Prepare a retrieval squad. I want the drone's remains brought aboard. If the fugitives were there... we'll know soon enough."

With the order issued, the bridge crew moved into action. Keys clacked, relays blinked, and the dull thrum of the ship's core began to crescendo beneath the deck. Lights across the bridge shifted from cool ambient blue to crimson readiness.

The technician closest to the core's command interface called out, "Warp core charging. Engines spooling to full capacity." "Coordinates locked," another echoed. "Course plotted for Gleiria."

Arulieus stepped forward with composure, gazing into the vastness beyond the viewports. "Engage."

A brief, blinding pulse illuminated the forward window as The Eclipse's warp engines roared to life. The ship shuddered with restrained fury as the massive energy coils aligned. Within moments, space itself bent and twisted before the hull, forming a churning tunnel of light. Then the warship lunged into the warp tunnel, its frame consumed by acceleration and the promise of blood-soaked discovery.

Inside, the bridge fell to a disciplined calm. The Grand Huntsman stood like a statue of war made flesh, fists clenched behind his back. "They will scatter when they sense us coming," he said gravely, voice laced with grim prophecy. "But it will not save them."

Arulieus remained silent for a moment, his gaze locked on the shifting lights of the warp tunnel. Then, almost as if to himself, he whispered with unshakable certainty, "They never had a chance to begin with."

Chapter Seven: Seraphyx

The Donati exited warp above the Seraphyx Star System, its polished hull catching the dim light of a dying star. What came into view was not a world but the haunting remains of one. Seraphyx loomed ahead, fractured and desecrated. Once a full, ringed planet, it now resembled a colossal wound torn across space, its broken form clinging desperately to what little gravity it still possessed. Two sets of dark blue rings shimmered faintly

around it, like bruises suspended in orbit, their density disrupted by the destruction of the world they once crowned. Smaller planetary shards hovered in uneven clusters, loosely aligned by the tattered remnants of the planet's natural gravitational field. Yet the larger fragments, those massive geological remains once part of Seraphyx's crust and mantle, were unnaturally still. Vast metallic pylons floated among them, each emitting a dull hum, generating artificial gravity fields that tethered the larger pieces together like a grotesque jigsaw puzzle locked in time. They were silent but persistent machines that kept the planet's corpse from drifting into the void.

However, it was the moon that struck the crew most or what was left of it. The satellite had shattered in a similar cataclysm, but unlike its parent planet, it had no machinery to keep its remains from scattering. Its fragments drifted listlessly, suspended in a slow ballet of inertia. As their trajectories were erratic and purposeless, as though the very concept of order had been abandoned.

Aboard the bridge of The Donati, silence fell. Luz remained silent as she remained sitting at the pilot viewing deck. King perched beside her, his tail tucked tightly, not out of fear, but in stunned reverence. Hesperos Holmes' usual swagger faded, replaced with a rare, quiet tension. His hands rested on his belt, while his thumbs tapped in a nervous rhythm as his eyes scanned the debris. Markus Star stood behind the pilot's chair, his mind working as he was trying to fit the scene into his mind. Atlas pressed their face closer to the viewport, which caused his small fingers to splay across the glass. There was something deeply unsettling in his eyes. It wasn't fear but grief and recognition of a buried, forgotten memory brushing the edges of his consciousness.

As the ship descended into Seraphyx's atmosphere or what little of it still remained of it, their horror sharpened. What had once been a lush, vibrant world of sapphire lakes and radiant flora was now reduced to a cracked, barren husk. The terrain bore the scars of immense trauma. Endless stretches of wind-blasted stone spanned the horizon, interrupted only by mountain ridges and gravity-defying rock formations that curled into the sky like frozen waves. Some peaks floated just above the ground, which had been suspended by unseen forces. While others twisted in unnatural angles fused with what remained of the planet's deep tectonic structures. The land howled with silence, as if it remembered the pain of dying. No wildlife stirred, no wind howled, and even the atmosphere seemed to hold its breath.

As The Donati flew toward a massive canyon that split the land like a gaping wound, the remains of a once-great megapolis emerged from behind a veil of atmospheric haze. Towering spires, once proud symbols of civilization and progress, now stood shattered. Some had collapsed in on themselves; others were severed midway, their upper halves lodged sideways into neighboring structures or buried beneath layers of ash and broken concrete. Although, it wasn't just the devastation that silenced the crew, it was the presence of something alien. Scattered across the skyline were multiple star constructs. Each was different in size, as several of them bore their own unique hues—azure, violet, gold, pink, red—and each had pierced through the buildings in eerie silence. Some had skewered towers from base to spire like cosmic spears, others rested partially embedded in walls, streets, or support beams. A few hung in midair, rotating slowly as if caught mid-motion before being forgotten by time itself. And there were some that had not pierced anything at all, they simply halted in space, pulsating faintly, as if waiting.

Luz's question hung in the still air of the bridge like ash. Her voice had barely risen above a whisper, yet it struck with the weight of a falling star. She took a cautious step closer to the center of the bridge, her eyes locked on the fractured skyline below, then turned slowly toward Markus, her expression caught somewhere between disbelief and grief.

"Is this.. Actually Seraphyx?" she asked, more a plea than a question. "This can't be it...."

Markus didn't answer right away. His brow furrowed deeply, gaze locked on the desolate landscape. Then, slowly, his shoulders rose with a breath that seemed to carry the burden of memory and responsibility. "It is," he said at last with a low and steady voice. "This is Seraphyx."

A beat passed before Hesperos pulled up the navigational panel from his pilot's console. A shimmering holographic map appeared in the air between him and Luz, with a blinking blue marker overlaid directly on the fractured terrain they hovered above. "These are the coordinates I received when we entered warp," Hesperos confirmed, his tone unusually subdued. "It matches up perfectly."

Luz stared back out the viewport, the revelation hit harder now that it had a name—now that the ruin was no longer abstract but real. This wasn't just another casualty of the Archive Collective's crusade. This was a place people had called home. A once living world, now silent with the deceased. "I thought..." she murmured, "I thought we'd find something left or alive."

Markus took a step forward, gently tapping the map on Hesperos's projection to zoom in on a point to the southeast of the ruined city. "There's a settlement, it's small but resilient. It's located within the city." he said, with a softer timbre.

King tilted his head. "There are people down there? After all this?"

Markus nodded slowly. "Yes, they're people who refused to abandon their homes even after it was destroyed. Since then, the planet's native inhabitants are scattered, many of whom are struggling to rebuild what little they can from the remains of their world. The Order of Arbora has been assisting them. We've sent supplies, medicine, power cores—whatever we could use. Some of us even stayed for weeks at a time to help."

He hesitated a moment, as though weighing how much to say next. There was a flicker of conflict in his eyes. "I've visited this settlement before," he continued, voice quieter now. "Several times with members from the Order. We came to do what we could. To give them hope. Or at least something close to it."

Luz narrowed her gaze slightly. "And what happened here? What really happened?"

Markus didn't meet her eyes. "There was a... cataclysm," he replied after a pause. "One that scarred the planet far beyond what nature could have ever caused. That's all I can say."

Silence once more took the bridge, but this time it was heavier. Not out of shock but instead of tension. A shared, unspoken recognition that whatever had torn Seraphyx apart wasn't just history. It was part of something much larger and it was far from over.

Hesperos broke the silence with a low sigh, folding his arms across his chest. "Whatever caused this... it wasn't natural. I've seen worlds hit by orbital bombardment, even wiped clean by celestial anomalies. But this?" He nodded toward the pulsing star constructs dotting the skyline. "This was surgical. Deliberate. A message..."

Markus leaned slightly forward in his seat, his eyes scanned the route as the settlement's location neared. His voice broke the stillness, quiet but firm. "Hesperos," he said, "start hailing the settlement. Let's make sure they know we're coming. We don't want to risk being mistaken for scavengers or raiders."

Hesperos gave a small nod, already reaching across the communications panel. "Copy that," he muttered, fingers dancing across the interface. "Switching to local broadcast frequencies. Let's hope their receivers are still intact."

A soft hum vibrated through the ship's frame as he activated the comm array. Static crackled through the speakers. "This is The Donati requesting communication with the Seraphyx settlement," he said clearly, voice professional but tinged with a subtle edge of tension. "Repeat: this is The Donati, requesting contact. Please respond."

Silence answered.

Hesperos adjusted the dial, recalibrating to a slightly lower band. "Attempting alternate frequency," he murmured.

Another broadcast. Another pause.

Nothing.

He sighed and adjusted again, trying a broader signal sweep this time.

"Seraphyx settlement, this is Hesperos Holmes of the starship Donati. We're requesting permission to approach. Does anyone read?"

The crew watched him in heavy silence, the tension mounting with every passing second. Luz fidgeted, fingers drumming the surface of the ship's pilot wheel. Atlas stood near the rear console, his normally bright eyes dimmed with quiet unease. King had settled on Luz's shoulder, tail flicking anxiously.

"I don't like this," Luz said under her breath. "Feels like we're knocking on a door no one wants to open."

Just as Hesperos was about to switch frequencies again, the speakers cracked and popped. A sudden, sharp burst of static startled the group. A voice came through, it was rough, mechanical, and tinged with the distortion of old tech but unmistakably alive.

"Identify yourself," the voice commanded. "Name, vessel model, ship designation, crew count. And state your purpose."

Hesperos straightened, relief flickering briefly across his face as he responded, tone crisp.

"This is Hesperos Holmes," he began. "Pilot and weapons technician aboard an Elerune-class light freighter, Type-6 retrofitted—designation: The Donati. Total crew complement is six, including myself."

He paused, then added with measured clarity, "We're requesting permission to enter due to depleted fuel reserves. We're en route to a distant location and require safe passage for continuation."

There was a long silence. Then, Hesperos leaned slightly toward the mic again, glancing at Markus. "We also have someone with us you might recognize," he added.

Markus stepped forward. "This is Markus Star," he said calmly, but with unmistakable familiarity. "I've visited your settlement before. The crew with me are friends, they're not a threat."

There was a longer pause on the other end. Longer than before. The voice didn't return immediately. The comms filled again with a low, unsteady static like the system itself was struggling to decide whether to accept or deny.

Then at last, the voice returned. "...Markus Star. Acknowledged."

A brief crackle, then the tone softened—less formal now, though still cautious. "You and your crew are cleared for descent. Maintain current heading. The gates will be opened upon visual confirmation. Don't deviate."

"Understood," Hesperos replied.

The signal cut abruptly after that. As the cockpit settled into silence once again, a subtle shift passed through the group like a collective exhale. Not relief, not entirely. But something akin to forward momentum. The kind that came after standing still for too long. "Well," King muttered, stretching slightly. "That wasn't ominous at all."

Luz cracked a faint, humorless smile, but didn't say anything. Her thoughts lingered on the voice that had answered—the wariness in its tone, the weight behind its words. It hadn't been hostility, but it wasn't trust either. It was survival and paranoia baked into instinct.

Markus returned to his seat, staring ahead. "They've been through a lot," he murmured. "Can't blame them for being cautious."

The Donati pierced the thin veil of smoke that clung to the upper skyscrapers, its silhouette casting a long shadow over the scarred land below. As the settlement came into view, a low voice crackled once more through the comms—firm, but now with a touch of familiarity.

"Adjust your heading by three degrees to port. Follow the beacon signal to the refueling station. Landing coordinates transmitting now."

Hesperos nodded as he received the data, quickly entering the approach vector into the console. "Coordinates locked," he said to the crew, the engines humming beneath their feet as the ship responded. "Taking us in."

Below them, the makeshift settlement slowly revealed itself from between the destroyed city center and the soot-stained ruins of what was once a thriving region. The outpost was modest in size, cobbled together from salvaged pre-cataclysm tech, rebar, and domed shelter plating. What little structure remained of the old world had been reforged—repurposed into something new and survivable. Solar panels lined the rooftops of squat buildings. Vapor collectors churned slowly along the edges of the camp, distilling moisture from the arid, dust-choked air.

The refueling station itself was nothing more than a large concrete slab reinforced with metal scaffolding and floodlights. A wide circular platform had been cleared, and at its center waited the retractable fuel mechanisms, humming with a dull green glow.

As The Donati descended, its repulsors kicked up a whirlwind of ash and grit. Hesperos gently guided the ship onto the platform, the landing gear settling with a sturdy clunk. Almost immediately, figures emerged from the shadows—station crew dressed in faded murky utility gear and rebreather masks. Without hesitation, they approached the starboard side of the ship, dragging heavy fuel lines across the ground. With practiced

ease, one of them connected a thick tube to the ship's fuel intake port, while others ran diagnostics on pressure valves and energy flow.

Inside the bridge, Atlas peered through the viewport, eyebrows rising slightly. "They're fast!" they noted.

"They have to be," Markus replied, already rising from his seat. "Out here, every second counts."

The sunlight was dim, filtered through veils of smoke and faint atmospheric shimmer. The wind carried the faint, acrid scent of scorched rock and something metallic remnants of a wound that the planet had not yet healed from.

Waiting just ahead was a tall, dark-skinned woman draped in layered robes of desert-beige and dusk-blue. Her hair was tightly braided and bound with silver rings, and her piercing eyes shone with a quiet, composed strength. Despite the hard lines of her face, there was kindness behind her gaze.

"Markus Star," she said, her voice carrying both surprise and warmth. "You're a long way from Arbora!"

Markus smiled gently and stepped forward. "Anor," he greeted, placing a hand over his chest in a customary sign of respect. "It's good to see you. You're looking well."

"I've had better days," she replied with a chuckle. "But all things considered, I'm alive and that's enough. And oh? you've brought guests!"

He nodded. "Friends. Allies. We're passing through en route to the Nebula Sanctum, but I wanted to check in... see if you and the settlement needed anything."

Anor waved a hand modestly, though there was genuine appreciation in her expression. "We're stable at the moment. Power's holding, crops are manageable, and trade has been fair these past few weeks. Still," she added, tilting her head, "it means more than you know that you asked."

Behind Markus, Luz, King, Atlas, and Hesperos all watched her with a blend of curiosity and subtle admiration. There was something about Anor—grounded, unshaken by the

chaos around her. Her presence had gravity. "You're welcome here," she said to the crew. "Fueling will take some time, so while you wait, I'd be honored to offer you a meal. It's not extravagant, but it's hot and made with care."

Luz blinked, caught slightly off guard by the generosity. "We'd appreciate that. Thank you."

With a gesture, Anor led them away from the refuel station. As they walked, the surrounding settlement opened up around them. The crew moved quietly through the winding walkways of metal, tarp, and stone, taking in everything.

Children ran between pillars of rubble, laughing as they played a makeshift game with chalk and metal rings. Vendors stood behind repurposed stalls, selling everything from filtered water to small devices built from salvaged tech. Some individuals were repairing solar conduits, while others carved new bricks from the ruins to build sturdier walls. Every person had a role. Every action had meaning.

Atlas lingered for a moment near a group of engineers who were reassembling a wind turbine out of old shuttle parts. His expression was unreadable but there was a flicker of something—perhaps awe, or guilt, or both. "They've lost so much," he said quietly to King, who padded alongside him. "And yet... look at them."

"They're still standing," King replied, eyes wide. "Holding on. I don't think I'd be that brave."

"You would," Luz said from ahead, glancing over her shoulder. "You are."

They passed beneath a steel archway into the heart of the settlement: a large, patchwork tent made of stretched synth-canvas and old starship sailcloth. It was stitched together with care—each panel bearing a different faded color, a mosaic of salvage and survival. The flap at the front had been reinforced with scavenged rebar, and hand-painted symbols adorned the outer seams—simple symbols that, if one looked closely, appeared to represent nourishment, unity, and protection.

Anor stepped forward and pulled back the flap, gesturing for them to enter. "Welcome," she said, her voice low with familiarity, "to our mess hall."

Inside, the air was noticeably warmer, filled with the aromas of seared spices, slow-roasted vegetables, and something sweet and earthy bubbling in clay pots. The interior was lit by warm orange lanterns, each glowing softly with bioluminescent gas harvested from native flora. Tables crafted from alloy scraps and polished stone were scattered throughout the space, while a long, stone-slab counter ran along one side—the beating heart of the kitchen.

Behind the counter stood a stout Seraphian man with a heavily scarred left arm and a white cloth wrapped around his brow. His vest was stained with years of oils and spices, but his movements were surprisingly quick, which were the mark of someone who had made a sacred art out of feeding those who needed it most. His piercing gray eyes lifted as he spotted Anor, and his weathered face broke into a wide smile.

"Anor," he greeted in a gravelly tone. "You've brought company!"

She smiled. "They're friends of Markus, these travelers are in need of a warm meal."

The chef gave a short nod, then turned to the group, his eyes sweeping over each of them with quiet curiosity. "Then you'll eat well today," he said. "Let me show you what we've got simmerin'!"

"Yay Food!" King exclaimed which earned a chuckle from Anor. Without delay, the chef set to work.

The first dish he unveiled was a Seraphian Rootspice Casserole—a layered medley of deep-purple tubers, honey-glazed flamefruit, and thin slices of seared fernleaf stalks, all slow-cooked beneath a crust made from powdered grainstone and sun-dried salt moss. The colors shimmered faintly beneath the glaze, making the dish look almost iridescent under the lanterns.

Next, he brought forth a platter of Charred Glowfish Skewers, the meat having been sourced from underground aquifers where bioluminescent fish still swam in the darkness. The meat was tender and flaky, spiced with citrus brine and garnished with pickled spiral kelp. The glowfish retained a soft luminescence, casting gentle light across the skewers like tiny lanterns of their own.

A bubbling pot was carried over to the center of the table, revealing Embercorn Stew—a savory, crimson-colored broth infused with smoky heat from volcanic peppers and filled with chunks of firestone beans, roasted root medallions, and slivers of sweetened blue onion. The scent alone made King's nose twitch eagerly.

Alongside the main dishes were smaller plates and sides: Shattergrain Flatbreads, paper-thin and crisp, infused with sprigs of frost-thistle and dusted with white herb ash. Craterfruit Chutney, served chilled, its tangy sweetness balanced with a touch of fermented spice. A bowl of Starseed Nuggets, bite-sized and nutty, coated in syrup and rolled in crushed petalflame leaves for crunch. And for dessert, a surprise addition: Molten Skycake—a rich, steamed sponge dessert made with cloudfruit extract and drizzled with crystal sap, glowing faintly with a soothing cyan sheen.

Luz's eyes widened slightly as the dishes began to cover the table, her initial hesitation melting into a smile of cautious wonder. "Woah," she said softly, glancing at Markus, "This looks honestly good!"

Markus chuckled under his breath. "Anor's people have always taken pride in making the most of what they have. Even after everything."

Atlas lingered at the edge of the table at first, eyes studying the softly glowing stew and strange colors with hesitation. But after a moment, he sat down beside Luz, slowly extending a hand to touch the flatbread before quietly pulling off a piece. The crunch echoed in his mouth as he chewed thoughtfully, then gave the faintest nod of approval.

King didn't hesitate—he practically dove into the skewers with wild abandon. "Finally!" he mumbled, mouth already full. "Something that doesn't taste like freeze-dried regret!"

Anor laughed gently, watching as the tension began to fade from the travelers' shoulders. "Food brings people together," she said, folding her arms. "Even in a broken world. Maybe especially so."

As the group continued eating, the warmth of the tent, the richness of the flavors, and the unspoken solidarity among strangers began to settle in. Outside, the wind still howled across the bones of Seraphyx. The world was still scarred, cracked, and mourning. However here, under the canvas and the glow of lanterns, life went quietly forward. For

the first time in what felt like hours, the crew of The Donati allowed themselves to rest for now.

After a while of their feast, The late afternoon light of Seraphyx, dimmed by the haze of fractured rock and the distant shimmer of the dark-blue planetary rings, cast long shadows over the refueling station. The gentle noise of The Donati's systems filled the air, rhythmic and consistent, as the final gauges on the fueling panel inched closer toward full capacity.

Luz sat on a rusted bench near one of the makeshift towers, her gaze lingering on the horizon, where the ruins of the once-proud megapolis jutted like broken fingers into the pale sky. Atlas leaned quietly against the support beam beside her, their arms crossed and eyes vacant, while King perched on a crate near the edge, his tail flicking in restless thought. Hesperos stood with his hands behind his back, while he watched the sky more than the ground. Markus remained close to Anor, who stood solemnly with her hands tucked into the folds of her tattered utility cloak.

There was a pause in their conversation—just enough silence to make the wind's whistle between the rock formations feel like a low mourning cry.

Luz broke it gently. "Anor..." she began, her voice respectful, but curious. "What... What happened here? To Seraphyx, I mean. What really happened that caused all of this?"

Anor's eyes didn't immediately meet hers. Her lips parted slightly, as if the words caught on the edge of her breath before forming. She hesitated—not from unwillingness, but from the weight of the truth. Her eyes wandered to the sky, to the dark ring that circled her fractured world like a scar that never faded.

"Seraphyx was... once beautiful," she finally said, her voice soft and distant. "Before everything, the valleys here were so deep and green that the wind itself would sing as it passed through. Our oceans were so blue, they rivaled the rings you see above us now. It was a paradise. And like most things of beauty... it came at a cost" Her fingers clutched the edge of her sleeve tightly.

The group listened intently, the silence around them deepening. Luz leaned forward slightly, her brow knit with concern. Markus lowered his gaze, already knowing what was to come.

Anor continued, her voice gradually steadier. "Seraphyx was selected for one of the Archivists' annual 'Plays of Tribute.' It's... their way of flexing dominance across the stars. A celebration, in their twisted eyes, of 'order' and 'balance.' Each year, one world is chosen to provide tribute—resources, artifacts, sometimes even people."

King frowned. "That sounds more like theft."

Anor gave him a hollow smile. "You're right but we weren't just any world. Seraphyx had Rasamonium... a rare metal used in the cores of high-performance engines. It made us valuable in their eyes." She paused again, this time longer. "And yet, we resisted." The words hung in the air like a blade.

"Our people rose up when they came, we refused to offer up our tribute. As we believed that if we stood together and made it difficult for them... they would move on." She let out a slow, bitter breath. "We underestimated their cruelty."

Anor's voice wavered. "They didn't retaliate with soldiers. No... they answered our defiance with annihilation. I still remember it. The day the stars fell." Her eyes glistened, but she didn't look away. "They summoned those star constructs that you see now. They tore through the sky like divine spears. Each one a weapon of destruction. Our forests were burned, our mountains shattered, and our oceans dried up. They didn't just destroy our cities—they erased the land itself."

Atlas shifted uncomfortably, his hands curling into fists.

Anor looked down at her boots, her voice quieter now. "I watched our leader stand on the high platform in our central square, ready to meet them face to face. He believed diplomacy could still win. But then..." She swallowed, the memory vivid. "He came."

She didn't need to name the figure. The crew already knew who he was.

"One of the Archivists," she whispered. "He didn't speak. He didn't yell. He just walked calmly to the square and with just his pinky, touched the stone beneath himself." Her voice broke for a moment. "And just like that, the world cracked."

King's eyes widened. His hand instinctively reached out to brush against Atlas's arm.

"The ground split like paper. Our capital city, gravity, and moon fractured in an instant just from a single touch." Anor shook her head slowly. "And I survived... Somehow. I don't know why but I did. And the guilt..." Her voice faltered. "I carry it every day."

No one dared speak for several moments.

"But," she continued, a little more resolute, "there were other survivors. Though the ones that had been found were few in numbers. As most of us were scattered and lost... but overall I'm just grateful we were able to find one another in the end. In the wreckage of what used to be our megalopolis, we built this settlement—not to replace what we lost but to honor it."

Hesperos stepped forward, his voice quiet. "The machines that hold your world together, how did your people manage to construct them after everything?"

Anor turned toward him. "Well, we didn't do it alone obviously. Some time after the fall, we were contacted by the Order of Arbora. Markus and others like him... they helped us. They brought supplies, technology, and minds that could see beyond the loss. They worked with us. Guided us. Piece by piece, we built the graviton stabilizers. It's the only reason we're still here at all."

She looked over at Markus with a small, grateful smile. "Your order didn't treat us like a lost cause. For that... I'm thankful."

Markus nodded solemnly, though guilt still stirred behind his eyes.

"But," Anor added, her voice quiet again, "I'm still afraid it could happen again. And I still carry the guilt... that maybe, by resisting, I doomed us."

"No," Luz said firmly, stepping forward. "You stood up for your world and your people. You did what"

Anor gave her a look of deep appreciation. "Then let's hope the galaxy still has use for courage."

As Anor's final words faded, a heavy quiet returned to the group—one filled not with relief, but with reverence, sorrow, and something unspoken. Although among them, one figure trembled.

Atlas remained sitting in silence as his stare lowered to the cracked ground beneath his boots. He hadn't spoken since Anor began her story. His arms hung limp at his sides, fingers twitching slightly. From the outside, he seemed still—quiet, composed even—but within, something sharp and suffocating had begun to wrap around his chest like a vine of thorns. He couldn't bring himself to meet the eyes of the woman whose home had been shattered by the very same hands by his family, who once lifted him into the sky and told him they loved him. Now, hearing Anor describe the horrors of Seraphyx's fall—the star constructs, the silence that followed, the disintegration of her culture with a single touch—it all pulled Atlas back into the memory. A flash of light and his scream echoing through the void as the magic was siphoned from his core. The cold hands that gripped his shoulders. The blinding sensation of his own power being twisted into something unrecognizable. That pinky... the same one that destroyed a world, had once touched him with gentleness and cruelty.

Atlas's chest rose and fell unevenly, while the colors around him dimmed, and the edges of reality blurred. The tower's balcony, the people, and the sound all began to fade into a ringing silence. "Not again... please not again..."

"Atlas?" Luz's voice was soft, but alert.

She had noticed it—how his posture had stiffened, how his fingers had curled against his sides as if bracing for a fall. She took a careful step toward him, concern knitting across her face. When he didn't answer, her heart dropped.

"Atlas," she said again, more firmly, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder.

He flinched.

Everyone turned then—King, Hesperos, Markus, and Anor—each catching a glimpse of the boy's pale face and wide, glassy eyes. But before they could speak, Luz stepped forward protectively. "Um—excuse us," she said quickly, forcing a small smile. "Atlas and I... just need a moment. We'll wait for you all."

Anor blinked, confused but polite. "Of course."

Without waiting for further questions, Luz guided Atlas gently but firmly by the arm, leading him down the makeshift tower and into the bottom of Seraphyx's ruined skyline. As they passed through, Luz's expression shifted, no longer masked by composure but cracked open by worry. She had seen this before, too many times now. The same look in the mirror after she thought she failed them. The same look in King's eyes when Orion's threats haunted his dreams. The same crushing guilt that never quite let them breathe. Luz hated that she recognized it so well. Hated even more that she still believed, deep down, that she could fix it. That if she just tried harder, did more, then maybe—just maybe—things wouldn't fall apart again.

Back at the tower, a hush lingered in the aftermath of their exit. Markus shifted his weight uncomfortably. Anor frowned, casting a glance toward the entrance. However, it was Hesperos who remained the most still, his expression unreadable. His hands, usually so precise and poised, had balled into fists at his sides. He hadn't missed a single word of Anor's story. Not one tremor in her voice and every sentence had rung like an echo from a time long buried beneath a soldier's resolve. The very memory of learning of what had happened to his homeworld of Illustria. He wasn't there when the Play of Tributes happened but ever since he received the news about the planet's fate, as he always pictured it so vividly in the crevasses in his mind. The blazing cities and their great towers turned to rubble in seconds. He imagined hearing the laughter of the Archivists overhead, while also imagining how loud his people's screams were. As they all witnessed such horrible destruction and atrocities all around them. Hesperos's jaw clenched with anger while his emerald eyes narrowed slightly that reflected his very pain.

Anor's account was too familiar and precise. While he sat there silently, his heart twisted—not just with sorrow but with a cold, buried vengeance. The kind that never spoke aloud but stayed sharp and deep in one's bones. The Archivists hadn't just destroyed a planet, they had made a pattern and a ritual of it.

He took a slow, deliberate breath and looked away from the group, eyes falling to the broken skyline beyond the tower. One day, he thought, "They'll pay for what they did to Seraphyx. And what they did to mine."

But for now... he waited for the right opportunity to do so.

The silence at the tower lingered just a few moments longer after Luz and Atlas's departure, the air still heavy with everything Anor had laid bare. Then, quietly, Hesperos shifted in his seat. His hands rested calmly on the railing, but the slight tension in his fingers betrayed a storm of thought behind his composed gaze.

He looked at Anor, his voice more intimate than casual. "I'm sorry for what happened here," he began, not out of obligation, but from a place of genuine weight. "And I wish I could say that what you described was rare but the truth is... it's not."

Anor offered a slow, solemn nod. "I know."

Meanwhile, Markus's eyes briefly stared at the spot where Luz had disappeared with Atlas, then back to Anor where he finally spoke, "That's why we're trying to end all of it for good."

Her brows rose gently, curious but cautious. "Trying to stop the Archivists?"

Markus exhaled through his nose—a soft, steely breath that hinted at the burden of the mission they carried. "That's the plan." He leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice to keep the conversation between them. "We're heading to the Nebula Sanctum. There's a forge where we'll be able to craft a weapon. Though, not just any weapon... one infused with Titan magic."

At the mention of it, Anor's eyes widened ever so slightly. She straightened, visibly intrigued. "Titan magic? I thought that kind of power had vanished."

Markus glanced toward King, who until now had been quietly watching the conversation unfold with cautious ears and downturned eyes. He gave the younger Titan a small, encouraging nod. "Not all of it," Markus said. "It still lives with him."

King blinked and looked up, caught slightly off guard as the focus shifted to him. There was a moment of silence as the realization settled again—that he, the smallest one at the tower, carried within him the spark of something ancient, something that had once rivaled the stars.

Anor turned her gaze to him, her voice softer now but more reverent. "You're going to forge this weapon?"

King scratched the back of his head, while he shrugged with forced nonchalance. "Well... yeah. That's the idea. My magic is said to cancel theirs out. Afterwards, we'll use it to protect ourselves when me, Luz, and Atlas return home."

Anor smiled, not a condescending one or one of doubt, but something genuine and rare. "Then I hope you succeed," she said, with a conviction that carried far more weight than just well-wishing. "If anyone can reshape what's broken... it would be someone who survived it."

The words hit King like a warm wind cutting through a stormcloud. He blinked, his tail giving a small flick. No one had ever said something like that to him before—not like that. People saw him as cute, or as a curiosity, or as a symbol. But not as a survivor or as a creator of change.

For the first time in a long while, he sat up straighter. Not with pride, but with purpose. "Thanks," he said, his voice quiet but sincere. "We're gonna try. I promise."

Anor gave him a nod, then looked to Markus. "You've got a long road ahead. But if you succeed... it will mean everything. For all of us who've lost something."

Markus met her gaze evenly. "That's the hope."

Soon Luz and Atlas returned back to the makeshift tower, Luz stepped in first, her expression noticeably steadier than it had been before, though the concern in her eyes for Atlas still lingered beneath the surface. Walking beside her, Atlas kept close—his hand held onto Luz's. A third figure followed them: a Seraphian fuel station worker in a patchwork uniform made from salvaged metals and dyed cloth, a blend of function and resilience.

"Hey guys," Luz spoke gently, addressing the group seated around the table. "The Donati's fully fueled and ready to go whenever we are."

The moment felt like a quiet turning point. Hesperos was the first to rise, brushing imaginary dust from his sleeves as his golden eyes flicked toward the tent opening. "Then we shouldn't waste time." King let out a quiet sigh through his nose as he stood up,

clutching his satchel of scrolls and trinkets tighter than usual. Markus gave Anor a nod, rising beside them with that familiar mix of weight and resolve in his posture.

They all stepped out together—Markus, Anor, King, Hesperos, Luz, Atlas, and the Seraphian worker—each step through the cracked earth drawing them closer to the next chapter of their journey. Above them, the sky had deepened into a slate-purple twilight. The silhouette of The Donati loomed in the distance, quietly humming with new life at the refueling platform.

Although, unbeknownst to them in the higher reaches of the ruined skyline, a metallic shimmer blinked against the pale light.

An Archive Collective Spy Drone hovered in perfect silence, its body cloaked in semi-invisibility, which was barely noticeable to even the sharpest eye. From its internal core, a low noise was heard as its lens refocused. In its first-person view, the world below was a sea of fractured stone and resilient life. The silhouettes of Luz, Hesperos, Markus, King, and Atlas were perfectly framed as they walked toward the fuel station.

Click. Whir.

A series of photo-captures, then video recordings. Each one tagged with biometric data and spatial coordinates. The drone observed without conscience and judgement but only purpose.

Down below, the group reached the open platform of the fuel station. The Donati stood proud and still, its hull gleaming faintly with renewed power. Fuel lines had been disconnected and rolled away, and a faint plume of energy hissed from its cooling vent. The worker gave Hesperos a thumbs-up before moving to the side.

Anor turned to face the crew, her arms crossed—not with distance but with fondness. "Whatever lies ahead of you... may you walk it with clarity," she said, her voice strong despite the weight of goodbye in it. "May Arbora guide your path."

Markus turned to her and repeated the sacred words with quiet reverence. "May Arbora guide your path."

Anor's gaze lingered on Markus. "Will I see you again?"

Markus gave her a small but sincere smile, the kind born of hard-earned hope. "You will. I'll be back whenever I'm able to!"

With that, the group stepped toward The Donati's ramp. King gave a final wave; Atlas, still somewhat distant, offered a soft "thank you" under his breath. Luz squeezed Anor's shoulder gently before joining Hesperos inside the cockpit. The ship gleamed to life, as her thrusters engaged in a soft glow as systems initialized.

Inside, Luz and Hesperos slid into their chairs. Buttons were pressed. Levers shifted. The familiar tones of navigation software filled the cabin.

"All systems are ready to go!" Luz reported, her tone calm but with a hidden tension—one that only came from carrying too much responsibility for too long.

"Engaging takeoff," Hesperos responded.

Outside, the engines roared softly to life. The Donati lifted off with a low rumble, rising into the sky above Seraphyx's fractured landscape. The people below—those who had survived, those who remained—watched from a distance, some lifting their hands in farewell.

High above, the drone refocused its lens.

Click. Whir.

Another round of images. Another clip of footage—this time, capturing the ship's ascent as it rose through the shattered layers of atmosphere.

As The Donati broke through the last clouds and crossed the boundary into the silent reaches of space, the warp core began its rhythmic pulse. In a flash of radiant blue light, the ship blinked out of sight, leaving only the wind and dust in its place.

The drone did not move, it instead lingered. It floated slowly back over the settlement, hovering at strategic angles. Click. Whir. It scanned rooftops, cargo crates, solar panels, and the layout of the mess tent. It captured the structural integrity of the artificial gravity core embedded deep within the remains of the city center.

Then, without any further sound, the drone's central lens pulsed with an ominous red glow. Transmission initiated. From its body, a ripple of energy surged as encrypted data packets were fired through a subspace relay, vanishing into the void bound for unknown coordinates. The Archive Collective had seen enough and now... they knew where to strike.

Elsewhere, The darkened void of space fractured with blinding threads of light as The Eclipse and its fleet of Archive Collective Warships emerged from warp, their colossal hulls slicing into the cold silence of the Gleirian Star System like judgment incarnate. The icy world below loomed like a wounded beast, its jagged glaciers and endless tundras illuminated only by the blue sheen of the planet's moon.

One by one, the warships adjusted their formation, descending slowly into the planet's lower atmosphere. Engines thrummed with an ominous resonance, kicking up blizzards as the ships held a fixed hover over the pale white crust of the tundra.

Inside the command bridge of The Eclipse, an unnatural stillness reigned, broken only by the soft beeping of consoles and the hum of data streams crawling across translucent displays. At the center of this chamber stood two commanding figures. The Grand Huntsman stood with his hands clasped behind his back. His head was held high, his view locked upon the trembling fingers of the bridge engineer manning the scanning console. Each breath he took fogged lightly in the chilled air, not from cold, but from the tightly restrained fervor that burned within him.

"Speak," the Grand Huntsman commanded, his voice as clear and cold as a blade drawn across marble. "You said you received the drone's final pulse. Where?"

The engineer flinched slightly but recovered. "Y-Yes, my Star. Cross-referencing the last transmission's data signature now. We've triangulated the coordinates. It's just below us—on the southeastern ridge of the Tundraline Expanse."

The Grand Huntsman turned his head slowly, his voice spoke with grim satisfaction. "Then we stand at the edge of revelation."

Beside him, General Arulieus observed in calculated silence, his hands still remained folded neatly behind his back. He tilted his head ever so slightly as he peered at the

holo-map projection of the terrain. "So this was their waypoint..." Arulieus murmured, the words quiet and deliberate. "Which means their journey is outbound. A short-term stop. Possibly to refuel or gain safe harbor."

The Grand Huntsman offered a curt nod before stepping toward the teleportation dais at the rear of the bridge. "Then we descend."

With a sharp motion, he raised his hand. A beam of radiant, veil-like light cascaded down over him, Arulieus, and several heavily armored Archive soldiers. In a split second, their forms dissolved in a shimmering flash.

They reappeared amidst the howling frost of the Gleirian surface. The wind was biting, flinging snow sideways like shards of glass but neither commander flinched. The Grand Huntsman stepped forward, his cape fluttering dramatically behind him, while his boots crunching into the hardened snow as he scanned the blank horizon.

Then he paused as he tilted his head back and inhaled deeply, audibly. "I smell him..." he muttered, "The scent of the Titan...The fugitive's ship was here."

Arulieus stepped beside him, the lens of his visor narrowing to analyze ambient trace particles. "Residual emissions confirm it. Warp ion trails, star engine exhaust, heat patterns on the landing vectors—all consistent with The Donati. Our quarry has passed through."

A call rang out through the static-laced comlinks. One of the scouts broke formation and sprinted across the snowdrifted slope. "General! We've located the wreckage of the drone!"

The Grand Huntsman turned, gesturing for the scout to lead them. The party advanced to a half-buried cluster of mangled metal and scorched snow—twisted shards of drone plating, still faintly humming with residual energy. One of the scouts knelt, delicately lifting a charred fragment of its optic lens.

"This," the Grand Huntsman said, kneeling beside it, "is the final gaze of obedience."

He turned toward the scout. "Recover every fragment. Every wire and scrap of memory alloy. The truth lies in its deathrattle."

The scout nodded quickly. "Yes, my Star."

With practiced precision, the soldiers began gathering the drone's remains, carefully loading them onto a floating hover cart equipped with magnetic containment fields. The soft hum of the cart echoed faintly in the quiet space around them as it began its slow retreat back toward The Eclipse.

The Grand Huntsman and General Arulieus watched them go. The former straightened, his expression sharp as ever. "We follow the ember trail," he declared solemnly. "They will burn in Arbiter's light."

Arulieus said nothing at first, but glanced toward the jagged cliffs in the distance. His voice was a quiet murmur—measured, cold, and certain. "They believe themselves to be clever. Elusive and hidden beneath layers of empathy, grief, and hope." He turned his head slightly toward the Grand Huntsman. "But all paths, no matter how winding, converge under the gaze of inevitability."

The Grand Huntsman's tone spoke with much pleasure. "In time," he said, "we shall see their hope break before the weight of absolution."

With a final glance at the snow-swept landscape, both commanders stepped back onto the teleportation circle. A rush of cascading light consumed them once more.

They rematerialized aboard The Eclipse just as the drone fragments were being delivered to the ship's primary data core chamber. Already, engineers and technicians were moving to begin decryption of its final moments.

The warships hovered still above the frozen wasteland like silent gods of judgment.

Back aboard The Eclipse, A hiss of sealed air and the low, mechanical hum of reinforced doors preceded the entry of the Grand Huntsman, General Arulieus, and their retinue of Archive Collective soldiers into the data dissection chamber deep within The Eclipse. The room—sterile, dimly lit, and veined with circuitry—pulsed faintly with the cold breath of machines. Blue-white lights shimmered down from above, casting long shadows across rows of elevated consoles and diagnostic stations. The wreckage of the

drone, now stripped of outer plating and laid open like a dissected cadaver, rested atop an illuminated slab at the chamber's center.

Engineers and technicians worked in wordless synchrony, their gloved hands dancing across displays and interfaces. They worked to isolate the drone's fragmented memory core, by stabilizing its power nodes and initiating a forensic scan of its data feed.

"Stabilization holding at ninety-eight percent," one murmured. "Memory sector fourteen responding. Reconstructing now."

A sharp tone sounded, and suddenly the holoscreen before the commanders flickered to life. The image sputtered—dark at first, filled with static snow and a muted mechanical whine. Then, clarity.

From a first-person perspective, the drone's camera revealed the cold, ruined terrain of the Gleirian tundra. The subtle whirl of its internal gyros was audible as it tracked movement through the frost-laced air. Then came shapes which soon morphed into figures. The camera zoomed, framing them one by one. "Magnify," Arulieus said calmly. The technician obeyed and the image sharpened.

Luz Noceda. Her stance, confident, alert, her hand resting on the grip of her blaster. Beside her, Markus Star, eyes scanning the environment with measured calm. Then Atlas—the fallen Collector. Pale, slight, cloaked in guilt and weariness.

"Identification scan succeeded," another technician reported. "Facial data cross-referenced with Archive profiles. Ninety-nine percent certainty."

A moment later, the footage accelerated—jerky and urgent. A sudden burst of light filled the screen.

Luz and Markus, both drawing their weapons. The drone's system rapidly flagged incoming threats. The feed froze as twin flashes of plasma—one violet, one electric blue—struck the lens.

A long second of blackness followed. "Feed loss duration: seven-point-two seconds," said the data specialist. "Secondary battery activation confirmed. Emergency optics online."

The screen returned. The view was crooked, the camera tilted and damaged, but the surroundings were the same. Snow. Smoke. The aftermath. Then, the system cuts again, this time more naturally—its task has been completed.

General Arulieus studied the data quietly, "Their decision to disable the drone instead of fleeing implies awareness of surveillance but they underestimated the redundancy protocols."

He turned slightly to the Grand Huntsman, his voice precise. "We now have timestamped proof of their presence. The fact that they risked conflict suggests they had time. Meaning they obtained something."

The Grand Huntsman's stare never left the screen. He spoke with a grim, solemn, and absolutist tone. "Cunning is a serpent's virtue," he said. "But they forget—the light of judgment is not so easily eluded."

He stepped closer to the feed's final frame and gazed into the still image of Luz mid-motion, frozen in the act of defending her own. "This girl," he breathed, "carries the weight of rebellion as though it were righteousness. And yet, her defiance is but dust upon the wind when weighed against the will of the stars."

Before Arulieus could respond, a junior officer entered the chamber briskly, helmet under arm, posture rigid with urgency.

"Commanders," the officer said, saluting, "We've received fresh data from one of our Drones stationed on Seraphyx. Drone Forty-Seven successfully captured a full series of images and video feed—The Donati was tracked exiting the planet's atmosphere. We also obtained clear visuals of the fugitives within the ruins of a native settlement. All five targets are confirmed."

The Grand Huntsman turned to him slowly. His voice dropped into a thunderous decree. "Then our quarry left footprints in ash that we must follow."

"Yes, my Star," the officer replied immediately, tapping a command on his forearm bracer. "Setting course to Seraphyx."

General Arulieus stepped to a nearby holomap, watching as coordinates were triangulated, and the vector path adjusted. "They are acquiring allies," he said evenly. "Strategic ones. Each planet is a node in a growing resistance network."

He folded his hands behind his back. "The planet Seraphyx... known for its fractures. A fitting cradle for fractured hopes."

The Grand Huntsman allowed himself a breath. Not quite a sigh—too composed for that—but a draw of certainty, of divine resolve. "Let them gather. Let them kindle their fragile spark. We shall become the wind that snuffs it out."

Moments later, the order was relayed. The command bridge darkened briefly as the lights of Seraphyx's coordinates pulsed across the nav-chart. The Eclipse's engines groaned low with tension, and then—

Warp engaged.

The stars stretched. The icy world of Gleiria vanished behind them, and in the silence of their pursuit, vengeance sharpened its blade.

Chapter Eight: Kailor's Drift.

The Donati emerges from the Warp tunnel she had traveled through. The void beyond the viewport had transformed into something alien. It was no longer an open canvas of stars as the surrounding area itself was choked with a dense, swirling nebula. Its mist is

colored in muted tones of dusk-blue and tarnished gold. Suspended within this sea of shadow were the fractured remains of ancient worlds: splintered asteroids, crumbling relics of long-dead temples, and rust-bitten outposts whose purposes had long since faded into dust. The occasional flicker of light from a distant beacon tower cast eerie shadows that slithered across the hull of The Donati like phantom limbs reaching from the dark.

This was Kailor's Drift.

To most, it was nothing more than a myth whispered between exiles and smugglers—an unreachable, hidden labyrinth of floating ruins and lost treasures. To the crew of The Donati, it was now their next uncertain refuge or their last mistake.

Inside the cockpit, the tension was palpable. The only sounds were the occasional creak of the hull adjusting to the gravitational eddies that rippled through the Drift like invisible tides. Hesperos Holmes scanned the erratic terrain unfolding ahead as he held onto the helm of The Donati. "Ease us in, Luz," he said calmly, though his voice carried a subtle edge. "We're navigating through more than just rocks out here. This place may hide something that might be more than we bargained for."

Luz nodded with focused determination. "Alrighty." Her hands hovered over the controls, fingers already adjusting stabilizer frequency, compensating for the gravitational anomalies blinking across the nav sensors. The Donati veered gently to port, narrowly avoiding a serrated chunk of rock that spun lazily in its own slow orbit. Derelict scaffolding clung to its surface, remnants of a failed mining post or perhaps something older. Beyond it, a broken ring structure floated silently with carved runes that had been weathered by time.

Markus stood behind them, arms crossed tightly over his chest, his usually analytical gaze fixed on the darkness outside. "Still no clear exit route," he muttered. "If we stay too long, we may not be able to leave without tearing the hull apart."

"Noted," Hesperos replied, hands light on the controls but every muscle in his frame taut with focus. "This isn't a sightseeing tour. We'll scout the safe zone and turn back before the Drift decides to swallow us whole." However, the deeper they went, the darker it became. The nebula mist thickened around them, dimming external visibility to mere yards beyond the ship. The scattered beacon lights grew rarer and more distorted. Even

the stars beyond the Drift faded as it was swallowed by the fog. It felt like they were drifting into the lungs of something vast and sleeping.

However, the deeper they went, the darker it became. The nebula mist thickened around them, dimming external visibility to mere yards beyond the ship. The scattered beacon lights grew rarer, more distorted. Even the stars beyond the Drift faded, swallowed by the fog. It felt like they were drifting into the lungs of something vast and sleeping.

Luz couldn't shake the feeling that their movements were being tracked—not by scanners or signals but by the silence itself. From further inside the ship, King's voice broke the stillness. "Does anyone else feel... weird?"

He emerged slowly from the main corridor, his usually sprightly step noticeably sluggish. He looked around, as his expression had risen with uncertainty. While his claws lightly tapped a nearby panel, "Like... it's too quiet?" he added. "Not the good kind of quiet. Specifically the kind that makes your fur stand up."

Atlas, seated near the communications console, had barely moved since their descent into the Drift. His hands were clasped together tightly in his lap, and though their eyes remained open, they stared unfocused into the fogged viewport. He said nothing, but the slight tremble in his shoulders spoke volumes. The vastness around them had hollowed him into silence.

King stepped closer to Luz, as his tail twitched anxiously. "It might sound ridiculous, but... it feels like something's watching us. Like the ruins are alive or something. Is that just me?"

Luz's hands paused over the console. She hesitated, her brows pulling together. "No," she said softly, her voice steady but laced with unease. "It's not just you."

She glanced at the viewport again, heart knocking against her ribs. The shadows beyond the glass seemed to shift even when the ship wasn't moving—subtle warps in the mist that felt less like movement and more like presence. And the deeper they went, the heavier the air seemed to press against her lungs, like she was being slowly submerged.

"I've felt it since we've entered," she admitted. "I thought maybe it was just the pressure flux or paranoia, but... now I'm not so sure."

Markus moved forward, checking the ship's motion sensors. "Nothing on proximity scans. No heat signatures. No tracking pulses."

"That doesn't mean they're not here," Hesperos said grimly. "The Archive Collective wouldn't use conventional tracking if they were laying low here. They'd watch and wait for us to slip up."

Markus responded to Hesperos' comment regarding the possibility of the Archive Collective hiding amongst the multiple asteroids and ruins that laid before The Donati, "I can assure you captain, there's no Archive Collective here. As this place is located in a sector that's beyond the boundaries of their dominion."

Luz turned in her seat to look at Atlas. "You okay?"

Atlas didn't respond at first. The question hung in the air like a held breath, lingering between the quiet hum of the ship and the slow churn of nebula fog pressing against the viewport. Luz turned her gaze toward him again, as her concern began softening her expression. "Atlas?" she asked once again.

The star child blinked slowly, as if waking from a dream, their eyes glazed with the weight of something he couldn't quite name. His fingers curled slightly tighter around his knees. Then, as if compelled by an unseen force, he turned his head just slightly toward the side window near his shoulder and instantly froze. For a heartbeat, he said nothing. His breath caught in his throat. Luz noticed the change immediately; his body had gone rigid, eyes wide and fixed on something outside the glass. "Atlas?" she said again, her voice firmer now.

"I think I saw... someone." Atlas whispered.

Everyone turned as soon they heard Atlas' comment, though it was the unease evident in his tone that further gained the crew's attention. Hesperos looked up sharply from his seat. Markus moved closer, scanning the viewport. King, already feeling uneasy, his fur bristled at Atlas' remarks.

"What do you mean someone?" Markus asked.

"There!" Atlas pointed, his voice quiet and tense. "By that curved piece of ruin, it looked like... like a statue!"

The others followed his line of sight, pressing in slightly toward the window. But there was nothing now—only drifting debris, skeletal rock formations, and the slow, cold pulse of forgotten towers floating in the abyss.

"There's nothing there," Hesperos muttered.

"No," Atlas insisted, his voice wavering. "It was there and I saw it but the second I blinked it was gone!"

King's claws curled tighter against the console's edge. "You're really not helping the creepy vibes right now."

"Could be a trick from the mist outside." Hesperos offered but his voice lacked conviction.

"It wasn't," Atlas replied quietly, still staring out the window. "It knew we were looking. That's why it vanished."

A silence pressed down on them again, heavier now. The tension was no longer ambient—it was suffocating, however, the darkness got worse.

Luz noticed it first. The color drained from the fog outside the ship. The faint golds and violets that once swirled like dancing smoke began to dull, collapsing inward into gray, then black. The starlight vanished, even the ancient beacons—those flickering and distant eyes in the night—dimmed until they were no more than phantom glows. The Donati had drifted into a pocket of space so utterly black that it felt like they were moving through a blindfold.

"We just lost all external light," Markus said, his voice low.

"Visibility's zero," Hesperos muttered. "We've drifted into a blind zone."

No one moved.

Then—

Click.

It was faint, almost like a drip of water against metal. It came from outside the hull.

Then another.

Click... click.

King slightly jolted up with fear. "What was that?!"

The clicking repeated—again, then again—coming from different directions now. First above, then to port, and then beneath the ship. It wasn't rhythmic but scattered, sharp, rapid—like the staccato tapping of clawed fingers across steel.

Click-click-click-click.

Dozens of them were heard now, as the noises began to surround the ship like an invisible army that could only be sensed by sound itself.

Hesperos' blood ran cold. "That's not mechanical."

"Echolocation," Markus whispered. "It sounds like echolocation... but not from one source. There's many."

"Something's out there!" Luz breathed with fear.

The cockpit fell into a paralyzed hush. It was like the space around them was alive, filled with invisible things that clicked and listened, skittering silently between the rocks and ruins.

"We can't see anything!" King said flatly. "We're blind out here!"

"I don't like this," Atlas said, trying and failing to hide the tremor in his voice. "I don't like this at all..."

"Neither do I," Hesperos replied grimly, reaching toward the console with a slow, deliberate motion. "But if we stay dark, we're sitting ducks. We need to see what we're dealing with."

"No guarantees we'll like what we find," Luz muttered. He hovered over the switch. "Headlights on." As they flipped the switch, everyone on board braced for whatever may lie ahead of them.

The moment Hesperos and Luz flipped the switch, the cockpit was bathed in harsh, sterile light as The Donati's front-mounted headlights cut through the oppressive darkness.

What laid before them as the light illuminated in the darkness ahead stood not one, not dozens, but hundreds of humanoid forms clinging to the floating ruins and asteroids like skeletal gargoyles. Each one was bone-pale and sinewy, their elongated limbs ending in clawed digits gleaming faintly with reflected light. Their skin was leathery, veined with faintly glowing threads that pulsed like blood caught in stasis. They all wore dark colored armor with engravings, textures, and patterns that resemble skeletal parts and pieces.

They were the Strixari, vampiric-humanoid exiles from the Nyxion Star System—though they've been driven out from their homeworld by the very same Archivists who now hunted Luz and the crew... And they were very angry as the light struck them like fire. They're an aggressive species, which their aggression is known to amplify in total darkness.

The horde hissed with sharp, insectile sounds in unison. Their mouths parting to reveal double-jawed mandibles wet with dark ichor. One nearest the beam's core let out a shriek that rippled through the vacuum like telepathic static, vibrating deep inside Luz's chest.

Then they moved.

The Strixaris began clambering from their perches in a frenzy, alerting the others in a wave of guttural clicking and screeching. Those nestled in ruined towers or hiding beneath derelict ships suddenly took flight with unnatural speed, launching themselves into open space toward The Donati.

"Stars—! They're everywhere," Hesperos barked, backing away from the viewport, his hand going to his blaster out of instinct, though they all knew it would be useless against a swarm this massive.

"They're not just watching anymore," Markus muttered, teeth clenched. "They're hunting."

Blaster fire lit up the darkness—thin bolts of green energy screamed across the void as dozens of Strixaris opened fire. The first barrage struck the hull with dull, sizzling thuds, shaking the ship in sharp pulses. Several bolts scorched across the armor-plated side of the cockpit, one narrowly missing the starboard wing stabilizer.

"We're under attack!" Luz shouted, slamming her hands onto the console. The ship jolted beneath her, engines whining as she engaged evasive thrusters.

"Some of them are leaping towards us—" King started to cry out, only to be interrupted by the harsh clang of impact as something hit the dorsal plating. Then another... And another...

Atlas cried out, clutching the edge of his seat as the ship rocked violently. "They're climbing on!"

"We need to move now," Hesperos growled. "Luz, take the yoke. I'll boost the rear thrusters."

She nodded without hesitation, taking full control of the helm. "Strap in!"

As the Strixari surged forward in growing numbers, The Donati roared to life, its engines firing hot as it surged forward. The sudden burst of momentum dislodged several of the creatures that had latched onto the hull—some spiraled off into the Drift, others dug in harder.

"They're not letting go," Markus said through gritted teeth, bracing himself against the wall.

"We won't give them the chance," Luz said, voice sharp and focused, guiding the ship through the debris field like threading a needle through glass. "Hold on!"

She veered hard to port, spiraling between two massive, broken pillars of what had once been a stellar gate. The Donati scraped past them with only meters to spare as the enemy fire continued—green bolts flashing in every direction.

Though it didn't stop there at all, from behind the ruins, flocks of monstrous beasts emerged—Nocturnis. Which were giant bat-like creatures with glowing red eyes and leathery wings that spanned twenty meters across. Upon each of their backs, armored Strixari riders clung with spears and rifles drawn.

King let out a strangled gasp. "You've got to be kidding me!"

"They have mounts?!" Hesperos cursed, watching the new arrivals dive toward them in deadly pursuit.

"They're launching a full aerial assault!" Markus snapped.

"They're attacking because we've upset them!" Atlas whispered, voice shaking. "Like a hive. The Drift... it's their hive!"

The first wave of Nocturnis dived toward The Donati, their shrieking cries reverberating through the hull like thunder. Their wings pushed aside floating debris like paper, and the riders on their backs began open-firing mid-flight. Soon three Nocturnis were able to fly and hover over The Donati, where three of the Strixari were able to place down several ropes with grapples attached to them. They then slide down onto the surface of The Donati's roof with precision.

Soon a heavy, metallic THUMP! slammed down on The Donati's dorsal plating. Then two more in rapid succession. THUMP!—THUMP!

The entire crew felt the tremors echo through the deck, as though the ship itself had been punched by the universe. Hesperos snapped his head up from the navigation console. "Something just landed on the roof."

"No... someones," Markus said, "Three of them. I can feel it."

Everyone went silent, the cockpit suddenly filled with the suffocating stillness of dread. The thuds weren't random impacts—they had weight and intention. The kind of sound that said something was hunting from above.

Luz rose immediately from her co-pilot seat, heart pounding but expression steeled with determination. "I'm going out there."

Hesperos turned toward her, eyes wide. "What?"

"They'll breach us if we don't do something. I can't risk everyone's safety." Luz was already moving toward the lockers, her steps fast, decisive. "I'll draw them away from the hull. Give them something to fight that isn't us."

"You can't be serious!" Hesperos yelled out, "You don't have to do this! There's got to be another way—we can shake them, we can—"

"There is no other way right now!" Luz snapped, but there was no anger in her voice but only desperation. "If they punch through and decompress the cockpit, we're dead. Let me stop that from happening."

"You're not thinking straight," Markus argued, stepping closer to block her path. "You're running off like this isn't a suicide mission. You have no cover out there. You're going to be alone out there!"

"I've done it before," Luz said quietly. "I can handle it." she added further . "If they get through, we won't make it to the Nebula Sanctum."

Her mind was already made up. She moved quickly into the gear chamber just beyond the bridge, fingers working with practiced familiarity. The mechanical hiss of the compartment greeted her as the retractable space suit unfurled from its rack—a sleek, graphite gray armor plating overlaying a flexible bodysuit. She stepped into it with precision, locking each segment in place with smooth clicks before securing the oxygen tank to the reinforced spine mount. Her staff snapped into her hand with a single call. She clipped a compact plasma blaster to her thigh.

Behind her, King had followed, paws trembling slightly. "Luz... don't." His voice cracked. "Please... You always jump in and protect everyone. But lately, it's not just about protecting, is it?"

Luz didn't respond right away. She paused, one hand tightening her suit's shoulder strap. Her expression faltered—just a flicker—but she wouldn't let it grow.

"I have to do this," she said softly.

King stepped forward. "Even if it's killing you?"

Luz looked down. "I'll be back," she whispered instead.

At the same time, Atlas had edged toward the doorframe, his childlike voice tight and breaking. "Luz, don't go... What if something happens? I don't want you to get hurt..."

Luz turned to face him, then knelt quickly and pressed her gloved hand gently to his shoulder. "I promise, I'll be okay. I just need to hold them off."

However, Atlas didn't look convinced. His lower lip trembled, his fingers wringing the hem of his oversized sleeves. She gave him a soft look—one filled with a kind of tenderness she didn't always allow herself to show anymore. Then she went through the exit hatch, into the airlock chamber, and out into the void.

The door sealed behind her with a heavy clunk. Hesperos swore under his breath and slammed his palm against the console. "Damn it, Luz..."

"She's going to get herself killed..." King finally muttered, voice cracking.

Hesperos' jaw tightened. "She's not thinking. Her guilt's clouding her instincts."

"Then we bring her back," Markus said, already heading toward the suit lockers. "I'm not letting her do this alone."

Hesperos didn't argue as he was already pulling up internal status logs and re-stabilizing the ship's gravitational envelope to buy them more time. "There's another suit in compartment seven," Hesperos called. "It's oxygen-integrated and should hold for a few

hours. I'll keep the ship moving, but I need someone out there to watch her back... so suit up fast!"

"I'm on it." Markus yanked open the indicated compartment, revealing a reinforced suit with an integrated pressure hood and magnetic boots. As he began strapping in, Starry moved to assist, helping him attach the power link on the oxygen line and calibrate the ambient pressure seals.

Atlas turned away, eyes clenched shut. "This is all wrong..."

"She's scared," Hesperos said, glancing back at him. "And she thinks the only way to stay brave is to bleed first. But she's not alone anymore. You hear me?" Atlas didn't reply but he nodded.

Moments later, Markus sealed his helmet, ran a systems check, and entered the secondary exit chamber. With one final glance at the crew, he stepped into the lock, exhaled—and launched out into the black, following the trail Luz had left.

Outside above the battered hull of The Donati; three Strixari soldiers had already begun tearing at the roof, preparing to breach it from above but they weren't alone anymore. Luz was coming for them and Markus was right behind her. Luz landed on the hull of The Donati with a magnetic clang, her boots locking onto the ship's surface as the stars spun quietly above her. Despite the shielded glass of her helmet and the hiss of oxygen feeding through the suit, she could hear her own pulse like thunder in her ears. The suit's HUD blinked softly, highlighting the movement of three silhouettes crouched near the dorsal access panel, which were the Strixari soldiers.

Luz raised her blaster slowly but didn't fire yet. She took a careful step forward across the sloped curvature of the hull, the stars reflecting faintly in her visor as she spoke through her external speaker, her voice calm but firm. "Get off our ship," she said. "Now."

The Strixari twisted to look at her. Three heads, six unblinking eyes, but none of them moved.

"I know you're only defending your home. Believe me, I get it." Her voice wavered slightly, but she steadied it. "But this ship and the people on board? They're my family

and my home. So if you stay and keep pushing—someone's going to get hurt. And it's not going to be us."

The windless silence of the void carried her words outward but there was no understanding in the Strixari's gaze. One of them cocked its head to the side in an almost mechanical twitch, and then—

A series of guttural, static-laced syllables escaped their mouths in chorus. < Ksh'tenh nar Xiriin... Rrakth'tel Vass'ka >.

She didn't need a translator to interpret their intent, as the three raised their blaster rifles in unison. Luz exhaled softly, lowering her chin. "I did try to warn you."

She fired.

The bolt struck the lead Strixari center mass, the explosive force of the point-blank impact blasting the creature backwards with enough velocity to launch it clean off The Donati. Its body spiraled into the black, weightless, limbs outstretched as it vanished into the shadows.

As a second soldier lunged, Luz holstered her blaster in one swift motion, diving to the side, narrowly avoiding a blast that seared past her shoulder. As she rolled along the curve of the hull, she reached into a side pouch built into her suit—her gloved fingers closing around the cool texture of folded glyph paper.

She slapped the glyph against her palm and triggered the spell with a pulse of raw intent.

A sharp crack split the silence as a wall of jagged ice erupted in front of her, translucent and spiked like frozen teeth. The second soldier barreled into it headfirst with its full momentum too fast to stop. The impact hurled it backward, and with a shriek that no vacuum could silence, it tumbled into space.

The third and last Strixari opened fire, Luz ducked low and crawled fast across the ship's surface, her magnetic boots clicking with each movement. A bolt glanced off the plating beside her. Another scorched across her forearm guard but didn't pierce. She reached for another glyph, her heart pounded as every muscle of her body screamed in tension.

She slapped it against the hull and a second spire of ice burst upward, this time beneath the final soldier's feet. It lifted and tilted, throwing the creature off balance. As it scrambled for a handhold, claws screeching against metal, Luz rushed forward—shouldering into it with her full weight.

The creature slipped. For a moment, it dangled as its claws scrabbled at the ledge. Luz met its eyes through the visor of her suit. Then it was gone—falling into the void like its brethren.

She stood there for a moment, chest heaving, each breath echoing harshly inside her helmet. Her fingers trembled around the hilt of her staff. The cold emptiness of space gnawed at the edges of her resolve—not physically but mentally. The void had a voice here and it whispered you're still alone.

Just as Luz steadied herself atop the curved hull of The Donati, watching the last of the Strixari disappear into the endless dark, a second set of magnetic footsteps clanged down onto the ship behind her.

Markus had arrived, his gleaming, angular plating of his suit caught the fractured glow of the surrounding nebula. His visor dimmed against the flicker of distant gunfire and star-fog. He carried no weapon in hand—just his glowing palms and his measured expression beneath the mask.

"I saw your ice show," he said through the comms, though his voice was edged with concern. "Not bad but we still got company."

Luz didn't have time to answer as six more Strixari emerged from the haze around the ship, having leapt from the craggy sides of drifting asteroids. They landed on the hull with bone-shaking force, fanning out into a staggered formation. A few hissed in that same guttural tongue, mandibles twitching, spines raised like hackles. One of them raised its blaster rifle. Which prompted Markus to move with a sudden leap, boosted by the magnetic coils in his boots and the low-grav field of the ship, Markus hurled himself toward the armed Strixari. He closed the distance in seconds, twisting midair to avoid a shot that skimmed past his shoulder.

His hand slammed against the side of the soldier's helmet. For a moment, nothing happened, then Markus's eyes flashed white.

The Strixari's body stiffened as if struck by lightning, its arms seizing up—then, slowly and methodically—it turned its blaster away from Markus and raised it toward two of its own allies. The others barely had time to react.

BZZT–BZZT!

Two clean bolts cut through the black. The first soldier dropped instantly, twitching as their limbs froze mid-motion. The second was thrown backward by the blast, limbs curling in toward their body as they tumbled into space, a dim afterimage fading in Markus's HUD.

Luz flinched. "What—did you just—?"

"I connected with its mind," Markus said, voice clipped and calm. "It's a technique earned once you're able to perform soul magic. Though it's only temporary and it only lasts—"

The Strixari regained control with a violent, spasmodic jolt. The soldier screamed in rage and swung its rifle back toward Markus. The lights in its eyes pulsed red with feral intensity.

"—a few seconds," Markus finished.

The shot fired but Markus was already inside the guard.

He caught the barrel with one hand, twisted, and slammed his armored fist into the soldier's helmet causing its visor to crack. The second punch knocked the creature's head back with a sharp, almost mechanical snap. It went limp in an instant, as it lost its consciousness following the punch. With a final shove, Markus let the body slide off the ship's surface, where it drifted into the emptiness below.

However, within seconds, another Strixari snarled and charged him from the left. It unsheaths a thin, curved blade that gleamed with violet energy.

Markus turned and instinctively reached down. Lying on the hull near his boot was a discarded blade, left behind by one of Luz's earlier opponents. It was heavier than it looked, crafted from obsidian-colored metal and humming faintly with energy pulses.

He raised it just in time to deflect a blow. Sparks exploded as the Strixari's sword clashed against his.

The impact shuddered through Markus's arms, but he stood firm, rotating his hips and driving his blade into a counter-strike that pushed his attacker back. The Strixari adjusted immediately, whirling with an inhuman grace, its sword slicing down in a deadly arc. Markus parried, steel singing against steel. Their duel unfolded across the hull—two figures silhouetted against the stars, while their blades flashed in the dark like lightning. Each movement was calculated, vicious, the clash of instinct and training. The Strixari fought like a creature bred for war, its limbs moving with practiced brutality.

Meanwhile, Luz whirled her staff with a practiced hand, with a fluid command, she summoned a gust of force that slammed directly into one of the charging Strixari soldiers, sending the creature skidding backward across the hull, weaponless and stunned.

"Don't mess with the girl with the stick!" she proclaimed, tightening her grip—

—but that moment of satisfaction cost her.

She didn't hear the second soldier approach from behind until it was too late. A bone-jarring tackle hit her from the side with full force, knocking the wind from her lungs and sending her hurtling across the sloped plating. Her staff flew from her grip, spinning violently before it skittered to a stop several meters away on a higher section of the hull.

Her legs kicked beneath her in the vacuum, trying to find footing where there was none, she was hanging off the ledge of the far left side of The Donati.

Clang.

Footsteps.

The soldier that had tackled her now loomed above, a shadow framed in light. It let out a guttural hiss through jagged teeth as it stepped closer, lifting one foot.

"No, no, no—" Luz gritted through clenched teeth, arms shaking from strain.

The soldier raised its leg and then slammed it down toward her fingers.

She yanked her hand away just in time. The boot scraped the edge where her knuckles had just been. She winced in pain but didn't let go. The soldier pulled back for another stomp, then suddenly—

A blur of purple streaked in from the right. A clang—followed by a squelch—and a sharp cry of pain.

The Strixari was struck square in the head by a massive, comically oversized mallet, conjured in midair. The blow was enough to knock it off balance, and in the zero-g drift, it lost its footing entirely and went tumbling back across the hull with a stunned shriek.

The mallet wobbled in the air—then twisted and shimmered—shrinking down and shifting shape in an instant.

Luz blinked, breath still heaving in her chest. "...Stringbean?"

Hovering just above her was her palisman—now in their natural serpent form, eyes wide and brimming with concern. With a soft chirrup, Stringbean darted forward and coiled herself around Luz's forearm, morphing again—this time into the form of a sturdy gauntlet.

"Smart girl!" Luz whispered, smiling through gritted teeth. "Okay. You lift, I push."

The gauntlet glowed with a surge of magic as Stringbean braced herself. Luz adjusted her grip with the other hand and strained upward with all the strength she had. Her boots scraped the hull, catching finally on the ridge's edge. With one last heave and a cry of effort, Luz swung her upper body back onto the surface and dragged herself to safety.

She collapsed for a second. "Thanks Bean," she muttered, and Stringbean purred warmly in reply through the glove interface.

But there was no time to rest.

As Luz climbed back to her feet, she spotted Markus a few meters ahead—locked in a chaotic duel not with one, but two Strixari soldiers. The three of them moved like phantoms across the hull, blades clashing in bursts of sparks and arcs of metal. Markus

was holding his ground, but only just. He deflected one strike only to nearly be caught by another and he was outnumbered.

Luz's eyes hardened, without hesitation, she sprinted across the roof of the ship—Stringbean transformed back into her staff and Luz instinctively held on. The ice-cold wind of space whipped at her suit, but her mind was clear, her focus razor-sharp.

Meanwhile, Markus gritted his teeth as the clang of steel echoed against the cold hull of The Donati. The twin Strixari soldiers before him circled like wolves, their movements sharp, calculated—one attacking from the left with sweeping sword strikes while the other darted in from the right with sudden jabs meant to pierce through his defenses.

His pulse thundered inside his helmet. He parried one blade, but the second followed a heartbeat later. He deflected that too, only narrowly. The strain of blocking two attackers simultaneously was beginning to show. His boots scraped along the hull, magnetic anchors struggling to keep traction against the jarring impacts. With each exchanged blow, Markus found himself giving more ground, edging closer to the limits of his balance.

His breathing grew heavier, more ragged. One of the Strixari feinted left, then delivered a punishing upward slash that scraped against Markus's chest plate. The strike wasn't deep enough to penetrate, but it rattled him. The second soldier followed with a brutal downward swing, and Markus barely brought his sword up in time to block. The force behind the impact shuddered up his arms, nearly making him drop his blade. They were beginning to overpower him while he staggered.

Then—a sharp hiss of plasma cracked through the air. A bright bolt of light shot past Markus's shoulder and struck the Strixari on the left squarely in the chest.

The creature let out a choked screech as it staggered backward, its weapon slipping from its hands. With the blast's momentum and no anchor to hold it in place, the soldier lost its footing entirely and was flung off the ship's hull, spinning helplessly into the abyss of Kailor's Drift.

Markus whipped around.

Luz stood a few meters away, blaster still smoking in her hand, her chest heaving beneath her suit. "You good?" Markus called out through the comms, half-grinning despite the adrenaline still surging in his veins.

"I'm good," Luz answered between breaths, eyes still sharp with focus. "You?"

"Getting there." Markus replied, with one enemy gone, the remaining Strixari lunged but Markus was ready this time. He sidestepped, pivoting on his heel and bringing his blade around in a powerful, sweeping arc. The steel collided with the soldier's sword, wrenching it from the alien's grasp. The weapon went flying across the hull and vanished into the mist.

Before the soldier could react, Markus surged forward and launched a solid fly-kick to its midsection. The impact knocked the wind from the creature—if it even breathed—and sent it skidding backward across the smooth plating. With nothing to grab hold of, the Strixari slid over the edge of The Donati and disappeared into the yawning dark below.

Markus exhaled hard, the fog of his breath clouding the inside of his visor for a moment. Then he looked over to Luz again. "Thanks for the save."

"Anytime," she said, already beginning to walk toward him.

Just then, their comms crackled with static then snapped into clarity.

"Luz! Markus!" Hesperos's voice rang out, sharp with urgency. "I think we're nearing the exit of this place. Get inside—hurry!"

They sprinted across the hull, boots clanking and hissing as the magnetic seals pulsed with every step. Shards of derelict ruins floated dangerously close now—wreckage shifting within the nebula's distorted gravity field, threatening to crush them with even a moment's delay. They reached the secondary roof hatch together. Luz slapped the emergency access pad, and the circular door hissed open, revealing the narrow entry shaft leading down into The Donati's upper corridor. Markus entered first, then turned and extended a hand.

Luz grabbed it, gripping on it tightly. The door sealed behind them with a thunderous clang, locking the chaos of Kailor's Drift out.

The interior of The Donati greeted Luz and Markus with a harsh hiss of pressurization as the hatch sealed shut behind them. The moment gravity normalized beneath their feet and the atmospheric systems stabilized, they didn't waste a second. They rushed through the narrow passages of the upper deck, streaked with emergency lights and the low hum of the warp drive thrumming through the walls like a pulse. The adrenaline still coursed hot inside of them but their focus was razor-sharp.

Luz reached the cockpit first, sliding back into the co-pilot's chair with a practiced familiarity. Her fingers flew over the console, reactivating controls and re-engaging the auxiliary thrusters. Her breath was still ragged in her throat, the aftershocks of survival clinging to her muscles.

Hesperos didn't take his eyes off the control displays. "You good?" he asked without looking.

Luz nodded, catching her breath. "Still in one piece."

Markus arrived seconds later, steadying himself on the edge of the cockpit entryway before moving to the rear operations console.

Hesperos turned toward Starry, the spherical droid humming with faint starlight as it floated near the upper port screen. "Starry, do we still have company?"

A moment passed. The soft flickering of the camera feeds blinked across the displays—then Starry's voice responded, gentle but firm. "Yes, Captain! Additional Strixari signatures have been detected, they're all clustered just beyond the central asteroid ring! Estimated pursuit count: thirty-two and rising! We better get outta here pronto captain!"

Luz stiffened in her seat. "They're not done with us."

"Then we make sure we're done with them," Hesperos muttered, hands moving swiftly across the nav controls. "If we're going to warp, we've got to clear the Drift's exit threshold before we punch it. If we try to warp from inside this gravity shell, we'll be torn apart." Hesperos concluded with, "In other words... let's fly like there's no tomorrow, mateys."

Outside the cockpit, the last of the fractured ruins gave way to a narrow channel—a corridor of floating debris and splintered asteroids, like the ribs of some ancient dead god. Ahead, the pale shimmer of the nebula's edge began to take form, a gradient of distant starlight barely cutting through the shadowed dust.

The exit.

"Luz, I'll steer pitch, you manage roll and rear thrusters," Hesperos barked, eyes darting between navigation vectors and hull integrity.

"I'm on it," she said, already adjusting trajectory with both hands on the yoke.

The Donati groaned under the pressure. The ship shuddered violently as they banked hard to avoid a spiraling satellite fragment, the hull skimming dangerously close to a jagged rock wall on their starboard side. A warning light flared red.

"Ten seconds to break free of the Drift's gravity swell," Starry warned, voice tight.

"Incoming hostiles closing in fast!!"

"Then we'll be faster," Hesperos snapped.

The Donati surged forward, thrusters igniting in a roaring burst. Luz leaned into the yoke, her jaw tight, hands steady despite the sweat beading along her temple. She and Hesperos moved as one—pilots in perfect synchrony, their bond forged not just in practice but in shared danger.

The rear-view camera feed lit up, showing dozens of Strixari riders on their Nocturnis mounts tore through the void with monstrous grace, their wings slicing the dark as they closed the distance—blaster fire beginning to pepper the edges of The Donati's shields. Though, it was too late on their end.

The Donati cleared the final asteroid wall. Starlight engulfed the ship as it broke through the edge of Kailor's Drift and Hesperos didn't hesitate once they exited through. "Warping now!" he shouted.

With a thunderous thrum and a burst of luminous energy, space twisted and folded around them. The air inside the cockpit rippled as the starlines stretched and blurred—and in a single, beautiful moment, the Drift fell away behind them like a fading memory.

Silence.

Just the steady hum of the warp engine, the soft glow of instruments, and the exhausted breath of a crew who'd narrowly escaped death. Still gripping the controls, Luz allowed her shoulders to slump slightly as she stared into the glowing tunnel of folded space ahead of them. Her heart still raced and her muscles ached but they were safe for now...

A while later, The stars beyond The Donati glimmered like distant, unreachable lighthouses, their cold glow casting the motionless ship in a still, melancholic calm. After the chaos at Kailor's Drift, silence had become a strange comfort—a rare reprieve from the constant storm of survival. The ship floated adrift in deep space, as her engines had powered down, her shields stable, and systems running on low output to preserve fuel. A moment carved from time itself, gifted to the weary.

Inside, there was less panic now but instead more the weighty kind of silence that came after a close call.. Hesperos stood near the central observation panel, his arms crossed, and his eyes fixed on nothing in particular. From this angle, he could see the soft flicker of the control lights reflecting in the glass, and past them—Atlas and King.

They sat side by side in the corner of the lounge, near the recharge pods. King clutched a pillow that didn't belong to him. His tail had coiled tightly around his legs, and his eyes darted toward every creak of the ship. Atlas, sitting beside him, was deathly still—his arms wrapped around his knees, eyes staring wide into the distance, lost in thoughts far beyond the present.

They weren't just scared, they were haunted, and at the heart of it all, Hesperos knew why that is, he soon turned on his heel and began making his way to the med station.

Down the corridor, he found Luz alone in the med station. The overhead lights were low, tinted in a calming blue, illuminating the small space with a soft haze. Luz sat on the edge of the examination table, sleeves rolled up, a sterilized cloth pressed to a shallow cut just beneath her shoulder. She hissed quietly through her teeth as she dabbed the antiseptic, then glanced at the forming bruise on her side with a wince.

Hesperos knocked once on the frame, then stepped inside. "You're supposed to let someone else look at that," he said flatly.

Luz didn't look up. "Well, I'm used to taking matters into my own hands. Literally!"

He didn't laugh. "Luz." His tone made her glance up, finally meeting his eyes. There was no mistaking the tension in his jaw, the frustration behind his glare. However, more than that—buried under it—was something else, worry.

"You nearly got yourself killed, you know that?" he said, voice low and edged with heat. "What were you thinking?!"

"We... we were in danger alright?" she replied, reaching for another antiseptic pad. "So, I did what I had to."

"No," he snapped, stepping closer. "You didn't have to but you chose to anyway. You jumped out there on your own, with half a plan and a hive full of aliens trying to rip our hull apart."

"Look, me and Markus handled it," Luz muttered, not looking at him this time. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Hesperos's fist tightened at his side. "Aye, while that's true but you think that makes it any better? You still acted recklessly!" He added, "Look, I'm reckless myself but you had a dozen other ways to handle it. You keep doing this thing where you run toward danger like it owes you something. Like your life's the price that has to be paid every time something goes wrong!"

Luz didn't answer, as she just kept dabbing at the wound, too aggressively now. The pain flared but she welcomed it, as it was something to distract from the heat behind her eyes.

Hesperos continued, his voice quieter now. "What if you hadn't survived? What if Stringbean hadn't been there to save you? You could've risked Markus' life! You have no idea what could've happened—"

"I know exactly what could've happened!" Luz barked back suddenly, slamming the medkit shut. "I've seen what happens when we don't do anything. When we wait and hesitate!"

Hesperos was taken aback for a moment, not by the volume of her voice, but the tremble behind it. The way it cracked slightly not by anger but fear instead.

"I wasn't going to sit there while those things tore their way into the ship," she said, more quietly now. "I wasn't going to let anyone else get hurt. Not again..."

Silence fell between them.

Hesperos exhaled slowly, lowering his voice. "Listen... I know you guys haven't been okay ever since what happened at the Archive Tower. However, after what happened earlier, King and Atlas are terrified, Luz." He added, "They were scared because they thought you weren't gonna come back."

Luz said nothing.

Hesperos stepped closer, his voice losing all edge now which had been replaced by something much more gentler and rawer. "Look... I get it. I know you want to feel like if you just do more, it'll somehow make up for everything. But this?" He gestured to her bruised side, to the fatigue etched into her face. "This isn't helping anyone."

"I can't let them go through it again," she whispered, her eyes watery now but blinking it away. "So if I have to throw myself in front of the fire to keep them from ever feeling that way again, I will."

Hesperos leaned against the counter, arms folded. "You think they want you to suffer for them?"

"I think I'd rather be the one who suffers than watch them do it." she said softly. There it was, the truth bleeding through the cracks but as always, Luz caught herself too late. Her voice stiffened while her eyes darted away again, and then came the sarcasm like a reflex that functioned as armor.

"Besides," she added with a half-hearted smirk, "what else am I gonna do? Sit around and play space poker while a bunch of hostile aliens throw a party on the roof?"

Hesperos didn't take the bait. The air between them was thick, brittle like a cord stretched too far and ready to snap. Before it could, Markus stepped into the room. His approach was quiet but deliberate, as he glanced between the two of them. He had clearly heard enough from the hallway—maybe even longer than either of them realized. The soft ambience of the ship around them gave way to his voice, calm and grounding.

"Alright," Markus said, raising his hands lightly. "Let's uh, dial this down before someone says something they'll regret."

Hesperos didn't respond immediately, his jaw still locked tight and eyes flickering with restrained emotion. Luz, for her part, shifted slightly on the medbay bench, her posture guarded, her hands still holding the edge of the medkit like it might anchor her to the floor.

Markus first turned toward Hesperos. "I get where you're coming from. I do. What she did? It was risky, dangerous, and frustrating. But let's not forget why we're even here right now." He gestured lightly toward Luz. "I went out there with her and faced down those lifeforms. And we made it. The crew is safe because of that."

He paused—letting it settle before continuing. "I'm not saying it was the smartest call, but it worked. She put herself on the line, and no one on this ship was harmed because of it."

Hesperos's gaze lowered, jaw loosening slightly, though his brow remained furrowed.

Then Markus turned to Luz. "But that doesn't mean it wasn't reckless," he said gently. "And that's the part you need to hear too, Luz."

Luz met his eyes, trying not to flinch.

"What you did was brave," he continued, "and yeah, maybe even necessary in the moment. But you can't keep treating your life like it's expendable. It isn't. You're not a shield. You're not invincible. And if things had gone even a little differently out there..." He let the sentence trail off, the weight of the unspoken ending louder than words.

Luz looked down at the floor. Her fingers slowly released the medkit's edge. The silence was longer this time, more reflective than defensive.

Finally, Hesperos let out a long sigh and moved to lean against the bulkhead beside the door. The storm inside him had quieted into something softer—less like a crashing wave and more like the tide pulling back to reveal what it had stirred up.

"I'm not mad because you fought," he said. "I'm mad because you keep doing this to yourself."

His eyes flicked toward the closed medbay door, then back to Luz. "All I'm really concerned for is that if something happens to you... what then? Who's going to protect King? Who's going to look out for Atlas?"

"They care about you, Luz," he said, softer now. "They look to you to keep going when they feel like they're unable to. So if you're gone... what happens to them?" The quiet that followed lingered longer than any of them intended.

Luz sat still on the medbay bench, her posture slumped now—not in defiance, not even in exhaustion, but in something heavier. Her gaze had dropped again, not in avoidance this time, but in thought. The kind that itched at the edges of her mind, a quiet gnawing she could no longer ignore. She didn't answer right away. Markus and Hesperos exchanged a glance but didn't press. Something had shifted in her expression—her brow tensed faintly, while she sat in silence and for once, she listened.

Hesperos's words played over in her head, every syllable hitting with uncomfortable precision. The thought of the look on King's face curled up. Atlas, silent, clutching his knees with eyes far too haunted for someone his age. And she thought about her own hands, still trembling faintly. The bruises, the pain, and the reflex to throw herself at danger like it was the only way to do something.

The realization came slowly like a mist parting just enough to reveal what lay beneath. This wasn't about courage, as she had been punishing herself again and again. Every risk, every selfless act, every moment where she volunteered to stand in the line of fire—it all traced back to the same wound: The Archivists. The moment when she couldn't protect Atlas and when King had become a target after their interactions. The helplessness had burned itself into her memory like a brand.

And ever since then, she hadn't stopped trying to rewrite it.

She had told herself it was about being strong, about protecting her friends. But deep down... it was guilt. A deep-rooted belief that she had failed the people she loved most. That if she could just do enough such as fighting harder and acting faster, it might balance the scale of her dilemma but Hesperos was right.

Every time she leapt into danger without thought for herself, she wasn't just risking her own life—she was teaching King and Atlas something she didn't want them to learn, that their lives were disposable, too. Now, seated in the aftermath of it all, her body bruised and aching, her mind beginning to slow from its adrenaline-fueled fog, Luz saw it clearly. Protecting them didn't just mean shielding them from harm. It meant showing them how to survive. How to care for themselves and how to heal. That was the part she'd been avoiding because healing meant stopping. And stopping meant feeling. A feeling that meant acknowledging that she was still stuck in that moment—still trapped in the terror and helplessness of the Archivists.

Hesperos's confrontation didn't fix her but it cracked something. The thoughts that spilled through were impossible to ignore now.

Luz blinked slowly, her throat tight. She wasn't ready to say any of it aloud, as she didn't know how to. So instead, she did what she could, "I think I'm gonna... go lie down for a bit," she said softly, rising from the bench.

Hesperos studied her for a moment, then gave a small nod. "That's probably a good idea."

Markus stepped aside as she passed, offering her a quiet, understanding look that lacked judgment and pressure.

Luz gave a faint smile that was half apology and half gratitude. She soon slipped out into the hallway, the soft hiss of the medbay door sliding shut behind her. Though she didn't say it, the truth followed her like a shadow. She had taken the first step toward healing. Not loudly, boldly, but quietly and privately. Even heroes needed time to rest and permission to be human.

Back in the medbay, Markus stood beside him, silent at first, his hands resting on his belt. He watched Hesperos carefully, his normally casual demeanor traded for something more contemplative.

"I can feel it," Markus finally said, his voice quiet but sure. "There's something... hurting her. It's not just exhaustion or stress—it's in her soul."

Hesperos didn't flinch, but his jaw subtly tensed again.

"She's carrying the weight of her own guilt that's deep within her." Markus added, his tone gentle and not accusatory. The words sank like stones into the stillness.

Hesperos pushed off from the wall with a slow exhale, his voice gruff but softened by honesty. "Yeah. She's been through a lot. All of them have. King... Atlas... they've been dragged through more than most adults could handle. But Luz..." He shook his head. "She blames herself. For all of it."

He turned his eyes to Markus and added. "She thinks if she just keeps pushing and fighting, she can somehow fix every mistake. Undo every failure and save everyone, even if it breaks her in the process."

Markus nodded slowly. "Sounds familiar." Hesperos raised a brow upon hearing Markus' remarks.

"She reminds me of my friend at the Nebula Sanctum," Markus said. "She's just like her—fighting ghosts she can't lay to rest, trying to atone for things that weren't fully her fault to begin with." Markus crossed his arms, his voice more introspective now. "Both of them are chasing redemption like it's the only path forward. But neither gave themselves the space to actually heal."

He looked back toward the medbay door. "When we get there... I think she'll understand. When she meets her."

Hesperos nodded slowly, as a faint thread of appreciation in his expression had appeared. Before he could speak, Markus's gaze drifted back toward him—unwavering now and more focused than before.

"There's something else," Markus said while Hesperos stilled.

"I can feel it in you too. Not the same as Luz, but it's similar. Though unlike her, your's isn't revolved around guilt but loss instead. Something... or someone you cared for. And now there's this storm building inside you." Markus tilted his head slightly. "You're not chasing redemption, you're waiting for the right moment to settle a score."

Hesperos didn't answer right away but the flicker of something in his eyes said enough. He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, then met Markus's gaze. "You soul-readers really don't miss much, do you?"

Markus offered a faint, knowing smile. "Not when it's this loud."

Hesperos glanced toward the front of the ship, toward the starlit path stretched endlessly ahead. "When the time comes... I'll explain all of it. But not right now. We've got a mission to finish first."

He stepped past Markus and placed a hand on the control console, watching the drift of stars outside the viewport, their path bending ever so slightly as the ship inched toward its next destination.

"We've cleared the final leg," Hesperos said, more to himself than anyone else. "The Nebula Sanctum is ahead of us now."

Markus remained still for a moment longer, watching Hesperos's posture—steady, disciplined... but tight and controlled.

He nodded. "Then let's hope it holds the answers we're all looking for."

Though in his heart, Markus already knew. The fire inside Hesperos hadn't faded—it had only quieted.

Waiting...

The low thrum of The Donati reverberated softly through the cockpit, a sound that had become as familiar as breathing to those who'd been aboard long enough to know its moods. Hesperos stepped in, the lights on the console blinked patiently, awaiting his

command. He lowered himself into the pilot's seat with a quiet exhale, the worn padding groaning beneath his weight. His fingers danced across the control panel—flipping switches, checking navigation, and rerouting power. The stars outside shimmered in place, distant and unmoving, as if waiting to see what came next.

Behind him, Starry floated gently near the ceiling. The little cosmic wisp was humming an off-tune melody to itself, spinning slowly in place.

Hesperos didn't glance back. "Starry. We're ready."

"Warp jump? Ohhhh! I love the whooshy part!" Starry chirped with a giggle, twisting midair in a bright, playful loop.

"Then let's not keep ourselves waiting," Hesperos replied dryly, though there was a faint trace of amusement buried in his tone.

"Okie-dokie! Time to go ZOOOOM!" Starry sang, little arms flailing in excitement as it zipped toward the warp core embedded in the central chamber of the cockpit wall.

As Starry hovered close, their body pulsed with radiant starlight as the ship's systems detected their interface. Tendrils of magic and circuitry intertwined, glowing threads of power surging outward like veins of light across the cockpit.

The Warp Core lit up, deep within the heart of The Donati, resonating with the pulse of Starry's energy. The ship shivered not from instability but anticipation.

Hesperos leaned forward, eyes focused, hands steady on the controls. "Coordinates locked. Warp tunnel initiating in three... two..."

A deep tremor rippled through the ship's bones. Outside the viewport, the stars began to stretch and pull outward, smearing into luminous trails like wet paint across glass.

"...One."

The moment hit like a drop into gravityless space—silent, then sudden.

The Donati surged forward, propelled not by engines alone but by the rippling arc of warped space-time. The stars vanished into lines, and then into a glowing tunnel of bending color—prismatic and endless. The ship sailed into the Warp Tunnel with smooth precision, enveloped in a veil of astral light. From within the cockpit, the cabin dimmed as the soft blues and violets of the Warp Tunnel cast their glow across Hesperos's face. For a long moment, he said nothing—only staring ahead, letting the rhythm of motion and the hum of energy surround him.

Starry floated back toward the ceiling, now curled lazily in a slow orbit. "That one felt extra tingly!"

Hesperos allowed the corner of his mouth to twitch into the ghost of a smile. "Next stop," he muttered, eyes still fixed ahead, "the Nebula Sanctum."

And with that, The Donati sailed forward into the cosmic stream—carrying its bruised, burdened crew onward, toward the next chapter of their journey.

The Warp Tunnel outside Luz's window shimmered like a living cosmic river yet in constant motion—an endless, swirling colored current of lavender, cobalt, and fractured white. Within her quarters aboard The Donati, however, the silence felt heavier.

Luz sat at the small desk tucked into the corner of her room, a soft, ambient light casting a golden hue over the silver-gray walls. Before her lay a weathered envelope, unsealed and folded neatly. The paper inside had been folded and unfolded so many times that its creases were beginning to fray. Her fingers hesitated above it, trembling slightly before she finally lifted it free and unfolded it.

Her eyes scanned the words—familiar yet distant, written in ink that had faded only slightly, as though time itself hadn't had the heart to erode it. It was a letter she'd written weeks ago but never sent. One addressed to both her mom, Camila, and to Eda. She read the first line aloud under her breath, "Hi, Mamá... Hi, Eda... I hope you're okay." A pause followed along.

"I miss you both so much. I miss our talks, your hugs, the way everything felt... normal." Her eyes lingered on the word. "I didn't realize how much I'd need your voices. Your advice especially. Just... about everything that makes you two amazing..."

Her hand gripped the paper a little tighter as her gaze drifted to the rest of the room. Her voice cracked slightly as she continued, this time not reading—just speaking, quietly, to no one but herself. "I miss everyone... Amity... Gus... Willow... Hunter... Vee. I keep thinking about what they're doing right now and if they're all okay..."

Her fingers gently brushed the corner of the letter before she slowly set it aside, returning it to the small compartment beneath her desk drawer. Next to it sat a leather-bound journal that was mostly unused. The pages are still blank beyond a scribbled header. She opened it, stared at the untouched paper, and placed the pen beside it. Her hand hovered but she couldn't bring herself to write. So as a result, the page remained blank.

The weight in her chest pressed down just a little harder as she didn't know what to exactly write yet. Still, she left the journal open, not to write at the moment but to remind herself that she wanted to try. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week but the intention was there and that mattered.

Luz exhaled shakily, trying to blink back the moisture in her eyes as she turned her attention to the necklace that lay beside the journal. The same necklace Amity had given it to her years ago, back when promises felt easier to keep.

She picked it up, her thumb running along its smooth edge. "I swear, Amity," she whispered, voice fragile but certain. "We're going to be together again. When all of this is over. When King and Atlas and I get back to the Demon Realm... I'll find you. I promise." As if sensing the emotional shift, a soft rustle stirred behind her. Stringbean transformed into her serpentine form from the wall where she was leaning on in her staff form. She floated toward Luz, her body undulating with care. Without a sound, she coiled around Luz's shoulders, resting her head softly beneath Luz's chin.

Luz gasped, caught slightly off guard but quickly smiled. Her hand rose to stroke Stringbean's head, eyes soft with gratitude. "Thanks, girl," she murmured. "You always know when I need you."

The palisman squeaked gently, her body curling closer in an embrace. Luz leaned into it, resting her forehead against the top of Stringbean's smooth head.

"You're one of the only things that still reminds me of home," she admitted, barely above a whisper. "Of who I was before all this. Before everything changed."

After a long moment, she gently pulled away and re-clasped the necklace around her neck, letting it settle under her uniform. She closed the journal and placed it back into its drawer, this time with less reluctance.

Her gaze moved toward the door. Beyond it, somewhere in the quiet stretch of The Donati, King and Atlas were no doubt waiting—perhaps not physically but emotionally. She didn't know what she would say to them yet. Perhaps nothing or maybe of everything but she knew she wanted to be with them. For now, they were what's left of her family and that was something worth holding onto.

Luz stood, Stringbean coiled like a scarf around her shoulders, and walked softly toward the door. It slid open with a gentle hiss, and as she stepped into the corridor, the Warp Tunnel light outside shimmered brighter—like it too understood that even small steps forward were still steps toward home.

Elsewhere, far and distant, The sun over Seraphyx was veiled behind a layer of copper ash and soot, casting an orange pall over the settlement that once stood defiantly in the cradle of a ruined metropolis. The ground was scorched, the air thick with smoke and the smell of burning canvas and alloy. What had once been a testament to survival—ramshackle homes, repurposed towers, and stone-hewn sanctuaries were now a graveyard that collapsed into rubble and fire.

Charred banners of the settlement's crest fluttered limply in the wind. Craters and impact zones pocked the terrain, marking where Archive Collective dropships had descended with cold precision. The attack hadn't lasted long—barely minutes. Resistance fighters, armed with scavenged rifles and makeshift gear, had stood their ground. They had fought with passion and purpose, but in the end their passion was not armor. Their bodies now lay strewn in alleys and along crumbling staircases as it was where they fell. In fact, many of them were still gripping onto their weapons, even in death. Smoke curled from shattered solar panels and twisted metallic beams. Tents had collapsed under concussive blasts. Others burned still, nothing more than molten cloth tangled in scorched wire. However, the true horror lay at the heart of the ruins.

At what had once been the settlement's square—its last remaining semblance of order—there now stood a single, grim line of survivors. Scorched, dust-covered, bruised and bloodied, they knelt or stood in silent resolve, their eyes hollow but defiant. Among

them was Anor, her long robes torn, her cheek streaked with dried blood. Her shoulders sagged from exhaustion but her spine remained unbowed.

Across from them, in perfect contrast, stood two orderly rows of Archive Collective soldiers. Their polished white armor gleamed in the polluted light, visors black and unreadable, their rifles raised and perfectly still. Their formation radiated menace—not rage, not hatred—just efficiency.

A hollow silence fell over the square. Then came the sound of footfalls—measured and deliberate. General Arulieus emerged from the ranks of soldiers with the poise of a man walking into a lecture hall. Unbothered by the carnage around him, his expression was calm, while his hands remained folded behind his back. His uniform remained pristine and clean, untouched by the blood and ash staining the world around him.

He stopped several paces before the survivors, while the moment remained around them. He then spoke, "This could have unfolded... so very differently."

His gaze swept across the surviving defenders. Each word fell like a needle, precise and painless until one considered the depth of what it pierced. "There was no necessity for this outcome. No need for destruction. We were not here to wage war on the broken. We were here... to gather information."

He turned slightly, now addressing Anor directly with quiet deliberation.

"We possess undeniable visual confirmation," he said, gesturing subtly toward one of the soldiers who held a data pad aloft. On the screen: grainy but unmistakable images. Luz. Markus. Atlas. King. Hesperos. Standing amidst the ruins. Smiling. Talking. Walking.

"They were here," Arulieus continued. "In your midst. And you sheltered them."

He took a single step closer. His tone remained perfectly even, a master of calculated grace. "All you had to do was tell us. Share with us the direction of their departure. Their intended route and hints of their next destination. We would have left your quaint little haven untouched, preserved, and be given the right to exist, however marginally, as a footnote outside the tide of history."

The surviving Seraphians said nothing. Their silence was not born from fear—at least, not entirely. A raw, unspoken defiance that refused to die, even as their world had burned. None among the tattered group met Arulieus's gaze. Not Anor. Not the wounded soldier clutching a broken arm. Not the young woman kneeling with ash in her braided hair and tears still drying on her cheeks.

They stared instead at the ground, or beyond the soldiers, or into the ruins behind them. A kind of sacred stillness clung to the moment. As if to look at the man before them—to acknowledge him—was to offer him something he had not earned.

General Arulieus's eye twitched ever so slightly. He stepped forward, the calculated rhythm of his boots against the cracked stone echoing like punctuation marks in a poem of war. The silence around him thickened, like pressure in the atmosphere just before a storm. He stopped before Anor, his presence unnervingly close as his eye studied her face with the cool interest of a surgeon examining a living subject.

"There is a common misconception," he began quietly, "that resistance is noble. That defiance, when done in silence, holds some inherent power."

He let the statement hang, then pivoted slightly to speak to them all. "You mistake silence for strength. You mistake pride... for purpose."

Still, not a word from Anor or any of her surviving comrades. His voice remained soft, but there was now a surgical edge beneath it, "We are not monsters in the way your minds may wish to shape us. We are instruments of preservation, order, and inevitability."

His gaze fell back on Anor. "You had a choice. You still have one."

No response and no movement. Only the wind, whispering over the broken skyline of their ruined city.

For a moment, Arulieus allowed his hands to fall from behind his back. He clasped them together in front of him making it less formal though not less composed. "There are those among your dead," he said, gesturing subtly to the scorched edges of the square, "who might have lived. They might have endured long enough to be repurposed—employed in our beloved corp or perhaps reassigned to more useful outposts. But because of your decision to protect criminals... What has happened to them now? hm?"

His voice remained low, unraised, unhurried. "You know exactly what your silence has cost." He took another step forward, and this time, a flicker of tension moved through the survivors.

Still, no one spoke, while Anor's expression remained firm but not arrogant. She was exhausted but not broken. She simply inhaled through her nose and held the breath like a shield.

Arulieus tilted his head slightly, as if studying a particularly difficult line of text. "It does not matter to me," he continued, "whether you tell me now, or whether we extract the data from the pieces of what remains of this settlement. We will find the fugitives. We will intercept the artifact. And we will correct the course of this story you seem so desperate to prevent."

The air stood still in the shattered square of the ruined Seraphyx settlement. The quiet hung thick—smoke and silence swirling like ghosts through the skeletal remains of a world that had dared to endure.

And then... at last... a voice broke through.

Anor lifted her chin. Her voice, rough from dust and strain, still held clarity carved from her unshaken conviction. "You speak of inevitability," she said to General Arulieus, her tone steady despite the tremble in her frame, "but all I've seen from your 'beloved corp' is destruction dressed up as destiny."

The survivors beside her didn't flinch, as they instead stood straighter.

Anor's eyes locked onto Arulieus's with unblinking fire. "What your leaders did to Seraphyx was far worse than this. Far more merciless than even your calculated cruelty. You think you've broken us? No. They tried first. They shattered the sky, burned our seas, ripped the soul from the land itself... and still, we endured."

She took a breath—deep, controlled, but marked with grief as much as resolve. "You look at us and see weakness in our unity. But our strength is each other. When we say we'll stand together... we mean it."

Her gaze shifted now—not just to Arulieus, but to the rows of Archive soldiers. And then finally, to the silent figure standing beyond them: tall, motionless, cloaked in dread authority, The Grand Huntsman.

Anor turned her eyes to him without fear. "That's why I won't tell you where they went. They're not just fugitives, they're our friends."

She straightened her shoulders, her hands still bound at her sides, and added with a final, quiet defiance, "And we protect our own."

A long silence followed. The wind moaned low through the ruins, catching flecks of ash and ember as if even the world held its breath.

The Grand Huntsman stepped forward slowly. The soldiers near him instinctively cleared a path—though he hadn't spoken a word. His boots clicked upon the fractured stone as he approached the line of survivors. Each step echoed like a tolling bell.

He stopped a few paces from Anor. His gaze studied her with a cold fascination. "Such passion," he finally said, his voice deep and lyrical, "Such conviction."

He turned, arms outstretched slightly, as if addressing an unseen audience. "I have always admired the endurance of mortal spirit. Your kind is persistent... painfully so. You build from ruin. You find hope in the dust. You speak of unity while the soil still bleeds beneath your feet."

He looked back to her, the faint smile now sharpened with something darker. "But admiration does not outweigh truth. And the truth is this..."

His tone hardened. "You made the fatal error of defiance. You harbored the enemies of divine order. And worst of all... you're in the way of my destiny."

His voice dropped low, velvet and venomous. "The prize is the last Titan. And your silence... has placed you between my blade and fate."

There was no further warning. With a flourish faster than breath, he unfurled both arms. Twin crescent blades—each chained to bracers bound around his forearms—flared to life

with a crimson gleam. The chains rattled with metallic hunger as the weapons danced into the air like serpents unleashed. Anor never blinked, neither did the others.

The blades sang through the air in two elegant, sweeping arcs. A heartbeat later, silence returned. Then—thud. As one, the bodies of Anor and every last surviving defender slumped to the ground, headless, lifeless, and perfectly still. Blood pooled across the broken stone in neat lines, staining the ash. Their deaths had been instant, clean, and merciless.

The Grand Huntsman slowly retracted his blades with a gentle flick of his wrists. The chains slithered back into their housings, leaving only the aftermath of his judgment behind. He stood in the quiet, his voice calm, reverent. "I do not revel in cruelty," he declared to the watching soldiers. "But I do not flinch from it either."

He turned, cloak billowing behind him as he walked from the square. "Let it be known," he said, never raising his voice, "that this world had its chance to kneel... and chose instead to fall."

The square was silent once more—save for the crackle of flames and the soft hum of Archive Collective tech still running diagnostics through the bodies of the fallen. The scent of scorched stone and vaporized blood hung in the air like a sacrament.

The Grand Huntsman stood still amidst the aftermath. He raised his head slightly, as though listening to the cries of the planet's soul in its final throes.

Then, with solemn grandeur, he turned. "General Arulieus," he intoned, his voice cutting through the smoky air like a divine edict, "the heretics are no more, and their resistance has been extinguished. This world has served its final purpose, it is no longer useful to the Collective and the Archivist's decree."

General Arulieus, who had stood silently among the perimeter with his arms folded behind his back, met the Grand Huntsman's gaze and inclined his head with a subtle nod. There was no argument nor protest but only the quiet weight of inevitability.

"Return our forces to The Eclipse," the Grand Huntsman commanded, his tone formal, absolute. "Let the warships retrieve what remains. There shall be no further need for occupation."

He cast one last look at the desolate ruins. "This world has lost the privilege of continued existence. It shall be unmade—cleansed from the stars. Its silence shall become its only legacy."

Arulieus stepped forward, his voice as ever calm and layered with measured precision. "I shall see to it that all deployed units are extracted within the next rotation."

Without hesitation, he turned to the nearest command officer and issued the return protocol. "Recall all forward detachments. Rendezvous at landing zones. Prioritize command assets. This is a full fleet withdrawal. All units... return to orbit."

One by one, the soldiers began to move. In disciplined rows, the Archive Collective forces disengaged from their positions. Boots stamped through ash, through rubble, through the traces of once-defiant life. Some paused to reload or assist a comrade with equipment; others passed the slumped forms of their victims without a second glance. The whirring engines of the transport shuttle carriers ignited across the fractured skyline. Mechanical limbs extended, their cold metallic frames descending onto what was left of the streets. The soldiers began loading up—rows of expressionless visors disappearing behind armored hatches.

General Arulieus himself boarded last. His pace remained unfazed and as he stepped inside the shuttle's main bay, he turned once to observe the Grand Huntsman still standing alone amidst the square—unmoving, like a prophet awaiting the final act of scripture.

The bay doors hissed shut.

Above, The Eclipse and its accompanying warships gleamed like predatory eyes through the stratosphere. Their hulls shimmered with reflected firelight from below, forming an apocalyptic constellation against the smog-veiled sky.

The transport carriers began to rise. Dust was kicked up in violent gusts as they ascended, spiraling toward the waiting dreadnoughts high above. The last echoes of their engines rolled like thunder over the scorched land.

The Grand Huntsman remained grounded, his arms spread wide as if welcoming divine communion. His voice was deep but firm as it steeped into the grandeur of zealotry.

"Let this wretched world return to void and shadow," he whispered to no one... and to everything. He soon flew upwards at a high velocity that, due to the speed of his flight, caused a massive shockwave around the settlement, ultimately destroying whatever ruins had remained from the invasion.

Soon the Archive Collective warships breached the upper layers of the stratosphere in rigid formation, their shimmering hulls reflecting the molten scars of Seraphyx far below. One by one, they peeled away from the planet's orbit like shadows withdrawing from firelight, preparing for departure and warp alignment.

Though not all had left, Suspended in the cold vacuum above Seraphyx, the Grand Huntsman hovered alone.

He stood in the void as if gravity still obeyed him—his long cape unfurling in the solar winds like a battle standard from an ancient crusade. Behind him, the curved underbelly of The Eclipse loomed like a silent monolith, waiting for its master's return.

His gaze turned downward. Below, Seraphyx drifted in its fragile state of unnatural cohesion. The rings of the planet still glistened like shattered glass and the artificial gravity machinery still functioned tirelessly. As it did everything it could to hold the dead planet together by engineered force.

It was, in his eyes, an act of defiance, a corpse refusing burial.

With a low exhale, the Grand Huntsman stretched his arms out to his sides. Starfire ignited around his forearms—veins of gold and crimson pulsing with divine fury. His fingers curled, and from the radiant aura around him, dozens of ethereal weapons began to manifest. Crescent-shaped blades, bound in celestial chains, spiraled to life around his form, each one gleaming with destructive purpose.

His voice cut across the void—low, righteous, and filled with cruel finality. "No sanctuary shall stand... where heresy has taken root." He raised both arms toward the planet. "Let this fractured world suffer the judgment it so brazenly delayed." swiftly he struck.

The chained crescent blades launched forward like divine serpents, arcing through space with impossible speed. They spiraled and weaved around each other, a constellation of wrath converging on their singular target: the central gravity core of the artificial containment array.

The impact was immediate, as a burst of brilliant, golden-red energy erupted as the first few blades pierced through the primary stabilizers. Then, the final blade—larger than the rest, forged from the purest core of his Star Magic—drove itself straight into the heart of the machine.

There was a moment's silence... like the world itself was taking a final breath, then came the explosion. A rupture of light and force tore through the skeleton of the machinery. Fragments of steel, glowing with unstable energy, flung outward in every direction like the bones of a mighty beast. The containment field flickered violently before collapsing altogether. Blue energy surged and died with a shriek as the artificial gravity's hold over Seraphyx vanished.

The Grand Huntsman soared backward, effortlessly weaving between the shockwaves and burning debris, his cape trailing like the tail of a comet. Below him, Seraphyx began to die its second death.

The vast chunks of the planet—once barely tethered together—now broke away completely. Mountains, city ruins, and barren plateaus drifted apart in all directions. Great canyons opened as tectonic scars that had unraveled. What remained of the moon had dislodged further, as it spun into a chaotic drift. The rings surrounding the planet fractured, scattering into a kaleidoscope of drifting minerals and cosmic dust.

Yet despite it all, he still watched silently but both steady and satisfied.

His emblem reflected the devastation with a grim, almost reverent glow. His hands slowly returned to his sides, while the radiant blades he had used faded one by one. He had spoken, and the stars had obeyed.

This was no mere military action. No cold calculation, this... was merely punishment.

"Let the cosmos bear witness," he muttered under his breath, voice steeped in cruel exaltation. "Those who shield the last Titan shall inherit ruin in his name."

He turned away from the drifting remains of Seraphyx, his expression composed but far from detached. He meant every word and action because to him, this was not an atrocity—it was justice. Cleansing fire to light the way for destiny. Without another glance, the Grand Huntsman flew toward The Eclipse, his figure cutting across the star-speckled dark like a blade.

The massive dreadnought opened its lower hangar in silent welcome. As the great doors closed behind him and the planet began to fade behind the veil of distance, the stars bore no witness, no cry, and no monument. Only drifting silence and judgment was fulfilled.



Chapter Nine: Enter The Sanctum.

The Donati emerged from the stream of warp travel, its hull shimmering with residual stardust as it approached its destination. The ship pierced through the fabric of space, leaving behind a fading trail of iridescent energy. Before them, the Nebula Sanctum unfolded in breathtaking spectacle, a haunting yet beautiful remnant of a lost age. Suspended in the vast cradle of the Realm of Cosmic Space, the Nebula Sanctum stood like a celestial lantern adrift in a velvet sea of stars. From a distance, the structure looked almost ethereal; a perfect, planetary-sized sphere crafted from light blue-tinted glass that shimmered faintly against the ever-shifting nebula clouds surrounding it. The glass wasn't smooth or plain but interlaced with intricate patterns. Each line of the metallic framing formed graceful, almost organic curves that spiraled and webbed across the surface. These ornate frames served both function and form, binding the immense dome together while giving it a look that resembled a living constellation.

At the exact center of the spherical glass lattice, embedded in the structural heart, was a circular insignia: a radiant star enclosed within a ring of symmetrical arcs. The star motif wasn't just decoration. It was a symbol of purpose, a guiding light for what this place had once been and still was in a new form.

Hovering around the structure in slow, dreamlike drifts were clouds of pink, magenta, and cerulean nebula mist, weaving and folding. Embedded within them were projections of stars and planetary models, some of them were static and glowing like crystal sculptures, others slowly rotating as if they were locked in a gentle orbit. These projections weren't merely for display as they were part of the Sanctum's atmospheric ecosystem. It was rather a blend of magic and science preserving the delicate balance between environment and aesthetic. Their glow cast a surreal, calming illumination onto the glass surface of the Sanctum, causing rippling patterns of color to dance along the metal framework. Emotionally, the Sanctum held a haunting sort of beauty. It carried the quiet of a library, the serenity of a garden, and the awe of a cathedral, which was all suspended in the endless theater of stars. For many who visited, it was more than a structure—it was a place of reflection. A place to remember where they came from, what had been lost, and what still remained worth protecting. The Nebula Sanctum, in all its luminous grandeur,

was a monument not only to the past but to the hope that knowledge and beauty could survive even in the coldest reaches of the cosmos.

Markus Star stood at the viewing panel, his gaze hardened with memory. "There it is, the Nebula Sanctum."

Luz Noceda pressed her hands against the glass, her eyes wide with fascination. "It's incredible but there's something kinda bittersweet about it too."

King stood on the console, his claws gripping the surface. "Yeah, but y'know it's also kinda eerie. Like, who just leaves an entire planet-thing behind?"

Atlas, who had been silently observing the structure, finally spoke, "This place... it looks familiar... like something that had been made by my people. See those projections? Oh! Also look at the way the light refracts across the arches... the crystalline latticework—it's all so precise! If it is all true, then it's... beautiful and terrifying, because it reminds me how far we fell."

Hesperos Holmes, ever the pragmatist, crossed his arms. "The Star People must've abandoned this place long ago. Whatever knowledge was once stored here is likely lost or buried beneath the wreckage."

Markus turned from the panel, his expression firm. "Not all of it. That's why we're here. There's still something valuable left for us to use to create the sword. Since my friend resides here, she can help us find it." Markus soon turns to King, "Once we find the forge mold, with your powers King, it will allow us to create something strong enough to stand up against the Archivists."

King crossed his arms, tilting his head skeptically. "Oh, sure, no pressure or anything. Just forge a legendary weapon with my totally-not-terrifying Titan powers. Easy peasy."

Luz gave him an encouraging pat on the back. "Come on, King! If anyone can handle this, it's you!"

King sighed dramatically, puffing up his fur. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Just saying, if we're making a superweapon, I better at least get a cool title out of this. Like, 'King, the Cosmic Blade-forgers!'"

Markus smirked, shaking his head. "Alright, King, if it helps, you can call yourself whatever you want once the sword is made. Just don't let the title get to your head."

Luz chuckled, crossing her arms. "Oh, please, it's already too late for that. He has had many titles before, most famously, 'The King of Demons' back when I met him."

King puffed out his chest. "Exactly! A King must have many titles!"

Luz watched on, while she still was a bit hesitant and somewhat fearful for her brother, she was still supportive of him and she was willing to give this whole important task a chance, as she was well aware of the importance behind it.

Hesperos strode toward the ship's controls, glancing at the group over his shoulder. "Alright, everyone, strap in. The descent might get a little rough, but nothing the Donati can't handle." He smirked, his confidence unwavering as he guided the ship into position. As the vessel adjusted its trajectory, he turned to Markus with a nod. "We'll find your forager, Markus. Whatever it takes."

Markus gave a small nod of gratitude, his gaze shifting back to the planetary-structure below. "I know we will and we'll make sure it's done right."

As The Donati pierced through the final layer of shimmering nebula mist, the Nebula Sanctum came into full view—vast, awe-inspiring, and suspended like a sacred jewel in the void. Hesperos stood at the helm, he remained steady as the light-blue sphere grew larger with each passing second. Despite having traveled the cosmos more times than he could count, something about this place always stilled his breath. It wasn't just the Sanctum's beauty or its size, it was the atmosphere it exuded. A quiet, dignified presence that reminded him of a memory just on the edge of recall.

With Markus's careful guidance from the navigational console, the Donati angled its descent smoothly, the ship's wings adjusting with quiet, mechanical grace as they approached the designated landing sector. Unlike the chaotic landings that came with rushing into battle or fleeing danger, this descent carried a calmness. The stabilizers hummed in the background as the ship slowed, drifting down through a ring of magenta vapor that parted around them like a curtain.

The landing pad emerged from the Sanctum's surface—crafted not from cold steel, but from smooth quartz-tinted metal veined with silver filigree, forming starlike patterns beneath The Donati's landing gear as a result. The platform extended gently from the main structure like a bridge between space and sanctuary. As the ship touched down with a soft mechanical sigh, the surrounding nebula light reflected across the cockpit glass which was bathing Hesperos in rippling hues of blue and violet.

The engines powered down slowly, the vibrations easing into stillness. Inside the ship, there was a moment of quiet. No alarms or rush, just the low ambience of the Sanctum's gravitational field embracing their presence. Hesperos rose from the pilot seat slowly, feeling the weight of the moment settle in his chest. This wasn't just another stop on their journey, it was a threshold. The Sanctum had once been a place of discovery, of progress and potential. Now, as a museum and greenhouse, it preserved what remained of that hope. And yet, it was also a place of reckoning for quiet truths waiting to be uncovered beneath layers of time and silence. As Hesperos made his way down the ramp, the air shifted. It wasn't truly air, not in the human sense, but rather a breathable field generated by the Sanctum itself—imbued with a faint floral sweetness and a cool, airy texture that clung to the skin like mist. The projection of stars overhead shimmered and reoriented as if acknowledging their arrival, casting his long shadow across the platform. He paused just before the grand arched doorway, waiting for the others. The entryway itself was elegant and wide, framed with vine-like silver metal that curled up along the arch in leafy fractal designs. Bioluminescent moss crept along the edges, glowing faintly in hues of lavender and sky-blue. There was a quiet reverence to this place, a stillness that both welcomed and warned. The Nebula Sanctum did not shout its presence. It whispered, beckoning its guests not just to see but to feel, to remember, and to learn.

As the group disembarked from The Donati and entered inside of the massive gates of the sanctum, their boots pressed into the soft, overgrown terrain of the Nebula Sanctum. The ground beneath them, once pristine and metallic, was now covered in thick moss-like growths that shimmered faintly under the nebula's eerie glow. The air was filled with a strange, almost nostalgic stillness, heavy with the scent of unfamiliar flora and the faint traces of old, stagnant energy. The stillness wasn't just silence—it was history, lingering in the ruins, waiting to be uncovered. Yet, that silence was broken by the ambience of unseen creatures. There were some that made clicking and chittering within the towering foliage. While others produced soft calls that resonated like distant echoes in the cavernous remains of the sanctum. The shifting light of the nebula beyond the fractured ceiling cast an otherworldly illumination over the landscape, dappling the ruins in shades

of violet, blue, and green, making it feel as though the entire space existed between time—neither entirely abandoned nor truly alive.

The path before them was a mesmerizing fusion of ruins and untamed wilderness. Towering trees with luminous leaves pulsed gently in hues of violet and cerulean, their strange bioluminescent veins feeding off the residual cosmic energy left behind by the Star People's experiments. Their roots, thick and sprawling, had torn through shattered metallic walkways, wrapping around ancient columns and curling through gaping cracks in the walls, as if nature itself had decided to reclaim what was once contained. Between the trunks, vines with shifting iridescent colors hung like curtains, their tips dripping with liquid light that vanished before it touched the ground. Flowers with crystalline petals bloomed in the crevices of broken stone, exhaling glowing spores that floated lazily through the air like stars adrift in the cosmos. Strange, jellyfish-like creatures hovered in the mist, their translucent bodies pulsed with bioluminescent patterns, reacting to the presence of intruders in their domain. Some recoiled, vanishing into the deeper foliage, while others remained, gently swaying in the dim light as if assessing the new arrivals.

High above them, remnants of the Sanctum's artificial structures still clung to the moon's surface—floating fragments of walkways and observation platforms, held in place by weakened gravitational stabilizers. The shattered ceiling revealed the vast nebula beyond, its cosmic tendrils swirling lazily like an endless sea of color, giving the entire sanctum an open, dreamlike expanse that made it feel like they were walking within the stars themselves. The fusion of past and present, of ruin and rebirth, made the Nebula Sanctum feel like a place caught between two realities—one where the Star People had ruled, and one where the universe had decided to move on without them.

Hesperos adjusted his coat, his sharp gaze looked around his surroundings. "Nature doesn't waste time, does it?" he murmured. "What was once a place of order and containment has turned into a sanctuary of the untamed. The Star People's attempt to control it all—it didn't last."

Markus, leading the group, kept his hand near his belt. "They tried to preserve knowledge," he said. "But knowledge, like nature, doesn't stay caged forever. It finds a way to grow—sometimes in ways we don't expect."

Atlas knelt beside a fragment of a shattered statuette, brushing the dirt away with a hand. The carving was rough but a depiction of a celestial being with outstretched wings, its

arms open as if welcoming something unseen. His fingers traced over the familiar grooves, his expression unreadable. "I've seen these before," he murmured, his voice carrying a quiet reverence. "The Osirian Travelers... They carved these for the people they honored. They believed memories could be stored in stone, that even after they were gone, a part of them would remain." He paused, glancing around at the other scattered artifacts—devices from distant worlds, trinkets shaped by hands that had long since turned to dust. His gaze lingered on a rusted metallic plate etched with star maps, its constellations distorted with time. "With all of these artifacts lying around, this place really reflects what my people did... their habit for collecting things just for their own gain. These aren't just objects, but pieces of history and fragments of the various civilizations they came across to." He added, "And to think, my people spent their entire existence gathering knowledge from different worlds and bringing them to places like here. Now, so much of it is forgotten..."

Luz watched Atlas as he traced the grooves of the shattered statuette, his voice carrying a weight she couldn't ignore. She had seen that look before, the quiet mourning of something lost, something too big to hold onto but too important to let go of.

She took a step closer, kneeling beside him as she looked over the broken idol. "It's not forgotten," she said softly. "Not really. You remembered." She gestured around them, at the overgrown ruins, at the scattered remnants of history that had become part of the world itself. "And now we do too."

Atlas was quiet for a moment, his fingers still resting against the stone.

King, who had been watching, stood beside him. His tiny claws curled slightly as he looked up at the overgrown sanctum around them. "You know... I used to think remembering meant keeping things exactly the way they were," he admitted but his voice was steady when he did so. "That if you let something change, it meant you were letting it go. But maybe that's not true."

He looked up at Atlas, his golden eyes reflecting the faint glow of the moonlight filtering through the ruins. "Maybe remembering means letting things become something new," he said. "Maybe it means letting them live instead of just... keeping them."

Atlas let out a slow breath, his gaze sweeping over the relics scattered across the forest floor. Some had rusted beyond recognition, others had been overtaken by vines, and there

were some that had been claimed by the world they had been brought to. And yet, in their own way, they endured.

Luz offered him a small, understanding smile. "They're not gone. They're just part of something bigger now."

Atlas let his hand fall away from the statuette, exhaling slowly. "Maybe," he admitted, though his voice still carried the weight of something left unsaid. His fingers curled slightly, as if grasping at a thought just beyond reach. "But when I look at this... when I see all of this just left behind, I can't help but wonder if my people ever truly understood what they were doing." He gestured toward the scattered relics, his expression unreadable. "We took things in the name of preservation, but what if in the end, it really wasn't about preservation at all?"

Luz's brow furrowed. She glanced around at the relics, the fractured history spread before them, before looking back at Atlas. "I don't think it's that simple," she said carefully. "Maybe some of what your people did was... questionable, but perhaps they didn't do it out of malice in the beginning. Maybe at first, they only wanted to protect things, right? Keep them from being forgotten."

King chimed in. "Yeah! And look at this place now! It's not just a graveyard of old stuff—it's alive in a way if you really think about it. The things left here didn't just fade away, they became part of something new." He spread his little arms wide, as if to take in the entirety of the sanctum. "And you're still here to remember it. That counts for something, doesn't it?"

Atlas turned his gaze toward King, a flicker of something—maybe gratitude, maybe something deeper—passing through his eyes. "It does," he admitted, though his voice was quiet.

Luz gave him a small, encouraging nudge. "Besides, history isn't just in what's left behind. It's in the people who carry it forward. And, y'know, you're kind of a walking history book," she added with a teasing grin, trying to lighten the weight in his expression.

Atlas huffed out something that was almost a laugh, shaking his head. "I suppose I am," he said, his tone softer now. His gaze lingered on the relics once more, but the heaviness in their shoulders seemed just a little lighter.

King smirked, crossing his arms. "Yeah, and if you ever get tired of that job, I know a couple of nerds back home who'd love to help."

Luz let out a small chuckle, nodding. "Oh, I know for a fact that Gus and Hunter would lose their minds if they saw this place. Cosmic Frontier is one thing, but real space? A hidden alien hideout? They'd be geeking out so hard right now." she added, "Gus would be taking notes on every little artifact we found, and Hunter—well, he'd probably be arguing about space battles and old starship designs." The thought made her smile for a moment before another pang of homesickness settled in her chest. She looked down, the edges of her grin faltering just slightly.

Atlas noticed but didn't comment. Instead, he stood, brushing the dirt from his gloves. "Then let's make sure this isn't the last great discovery to be made here," he said, offering Luz a glance that was almost knowing.

Luz straightened, pushing her homesickness aside. There was still so much to do. "Yeah," she said, determination creeping back into her voice. "Let's keep going."

As they ventured deeper, the distant rush of water grew louder, guiding them forward. Then, through a break in the trees, they saw it—a colossal waterfall cascading down from the ruins above, shimmering under the nebula's glow. The water carried a faint, iridescent sheen, infused with the strange energies of the moon. Mist rose from where it crashed into the rocks below, creating an almost ethereal atmosphere.

Markus came to a halt, turning to the others. "This is it."

King peered at the waterfall, tilting his head. "Wait—you mean, like, inside the waterfall? That's where they live?"

Markus smirked. "You'll see." He led them forward, stepping carefully across the wet stones before slipping through a concealed opening behind the cascading water. The others exchanged glances before following him, their footsteps echoing softly against the damp stone.

Beyond the waterfall was a hidden cavern, its walls lined with glowing crystal veins pulsing with energy. And standing in the center, was a tall, imposing figure—Vaieth Xar. Her yellow eyes gleamed in the dim light. Her outermost garment is a long, half-cloak draped over her left shoulder and clasped at the collarbone with an asymmetrical silver pin shaped like a stylized tree—the emblem of the Order of Arbora. Embroidered across the hem are faint, shimmering motifs: constellations, spiraling galaxies, and delicate depictions of planets stitched in silver and soft pastel luminescence. It's clear the cloak is ceremonial in nature, but the way Vaieth wore casually flung to the side, it gave the impression of someone tossing on a hoodie before stepping out. Beneath the cloak, she wore a form-fitting tunic dyed in a gradient of dusky purples and smoky pinks. The sleeves are rolled lazily to the elbows and the cuffs slightly frayed. Across the chest and shoulders, a subtle, angular layering of woven silver strips resembles the segmented pauldrons typically worn by Arbora enforcers but here, they're decorative and softened into a design that appears more symbolic than practical. Vaieth's trousers are comfortable yet practical—made of dark, slate-gray material with flexible seams. They are tucked into her favorite knee-high boots: they were white and sturdy yet lovingly worn. She had facial features that resemble that of someone who was in their forties yet it was obvious she was a lot older than she appeared. She had dark purple skin, bushy blue hair that's been tied into a bun but it was messy and her eyebrows were the same color as her hair. However, her hair had streaks of light blue going through the sides of her hair bun which signifies her age, and an upward-pointing nose. Her face is covered with small light blue stars all over her face.

Luz's breath caught in her throat, her eyes widening as she took a step forward. "No way... are you a Star Person?" Her voice wavered between astonishment and uncertainty, the weight of the moment settling in as she took in Vaieth's towering presence. "I mean, I knew we might run into something unexpected, but—wow. This is next-level!"

"Travelers of light," she spoke, her voice airy and melodic, like wind brushing across a windchime in a forgotten temple. "You walk among the path of celestial memory. Few find their way to this sanctum uninvited... even fewer do so with such purpose."

Luz blinked, not quite sure how to respond. Vaieth's tone was calm, almost reverent, each word deliberately spoken, as if rehearsed in front of some eternal mirror. The others shifted uneasily. Even Markus, who was normally composed, watched her with an uncertain furrow of his brow.

Hesperos tilted his head. "Okay, weird question, but... are you always this cryptic?"

Vaileth gave a soft, elegant smile and extended one hand in a sweeping gesture. "To exist among stars is to wear many faces. The mask of the void, the rhythm of thought, the gravity of purpose—" Markus, arms crossed, cut in flatly: "Vaileth! Look, that's lovely and all, but where's the forgery my dear friend? I am in need to create a powerful weapon. You're the only one who can help us find it."

There was a pause.

Vaileth's glowing eyes narrowed ever so slightly. She let out an exaggerated sigh and raised both hands into the air. "Uggghhh—fine, fine. Stars above! I was trying to set a tone here!"

The entire group blinked as Vaileth dropped the ethereal mystique like a discarded robe. Her posture loosened, her voice shifted into a more casual, almost exasperated drawl. She added, "Look, I thought if I opened with the whole 'mystical cosmic oracle' thing, you'd be more impressed." She stretched her arms lazily, joints audibly popping. "Turns out, playing wise and all-knowing is exhausting. Anyway."

She stepped down from the floating platform she'd been standing on and made her way toward them, bare feet padding softly on the star-glass floor. "Alright, listen up," she said with a lazy wave of her hand. "Through there, you'll find a really, really old stairway—lots of steps, very annoying—carved into the northern portion of the hill nearby. Take that all the way down till you hit a big spooky-looking bridge. Cross it, and boom, you'll find the multiple forge molds for your sword." she then added, "It should be located near some pile of artifacts, I mean there's so much artifacts laying around here it looks like rubble to me! Heh." Soon silence followed as Atlas, Luz, and Hesperos looked at one another with slight concern; however the silence didn't last long as she yawned, while leaning against the cavern wall. "Oh, and, uh... be careful please, who knows what's lurking around. Try not to get vaporized or something."

She noticed Luz's, Atlas's, and Hesperos' reactions, Vaileth crossed her arms and leaned against the side of a hovering bench. "What? You're not the only ones under pressure. Being the only Star Person not trying to blow up a planet gets tiring. Gotta find ways to keep myself entertained, y'know?"

Vaileth Xar had just finished her causal explanation about the forgery's location, still leaning lazily against the side of a floating bench as she idly picked at one of her starlight-thread sleeves. Her tone had shifted fully into something warm and relaxed—almost too relaxed, as though she hadn't had company in ages. But as her eyes drifted lazily over the group again, they landed on King and everything changed.

Her expression froze, the humor draining from her face like starlight extinguished in a vacuum. Her body tensed so sharply it was as if someone had physically yanked her upright with invisible wires. She blinked once—twice—and then her breath caught in her throat.

"...No," Vaileth whispered, eyes wide. Her gaze locked onto King as though she had just seen a ghost—no, something worse. Her limbs jerked slightly, and before anyone could ask what was wrong, she stumbled backward with a sharp gasp.

"Nononononono—this isn't—this isn't real—he can't be—"

The laid-back act shattered.

Vaileth let out a strangled noise, turning suddenly and bolting across the chamber, nearly tripping over her own feet as she made her way to the far side of the sanctum. She pressed herself against a curved segment of the nebula-glass wall, her fingers splayed wide, while her glowing skin flickering erratically as though her entire body was struggling to maintain form. "Not a Titan," she muttered. "Stars above, no—not here, not again, it's not real—it's just in my head—it's not real—it's not real—it's just—"

She sank to the floor in a trembling heap, wrapping her arms around herself. Her breaths came in short, gasping bursts, each one sounding like it took everything she had. Her pupils were dilated, her glow dimmed. King, still standing near Luz, had taken a cautious step back in sheer confusion. "I... did I do something wrong?" he asked quietly, his voice heavy with guilt.

Luz shook her head immediately, crouching slightly so she could look him in the eye. "No," she said gently. "No, King. You didn't do anything, I think..." Her voice was hushed and careful. "She might be dealing with something."

King looked back at Vaileth, who continued to rock in place, her breath shaky, her voice muttering fragments that made no sense—and yet, did. "They're gone—they were all gone—he wasn't supposed to be here—they said they were gone..." There was real terror in her voice. Not fear of King, but fear of what he represented. A fear carved from history, not the present. Luz gently placed a hand on King's shoulder. "She's scared, but not of you it seems. Something happened to her..."

Markus Star could feel his heart twist as he watched his old friend unravel before his eyes.

It wasn't just panic Vaileth was experiencing—it was a full collapse of everything she'd so carefully held together. Her glowing form, once radiant with a faint starlit shimmer, had dimmed to a pale, almost translucent hue. Her breathing was ragged, shallow, and uneven. Each fragmented sentence she muttered struck like broken glass scraping against stone, disjointed memories clawing their way to the surface. The proud, enigmatic Star Person he had once known had vanished in an instant, replaced by someone fractured and frayed.

Without hesitation, Markus crossed the distance between them, as he was careful not to startle her.

"Vaileth," he said softly, kneeling beside her. His voice lowered to a murmur. "hey... hey, look at me. You're not in danger. You're safe. You're okay..."

She didn't answer, only curled further into herself, her arms clenched tightly around her knees. Her flickering form pulsed erratically, like a dying star trying to hold itself together. Her head remained bowed, her fingers digging into the embroidered hem of her robe as though grounding herself in something real. Markus gently placed a hand on her shoulder, not to force her to move, but to remind her she wasn't alone.

"They didn't come to hurt you," he said, calm and patient. "I brought them here, Vaileth. They're with me. Their names are Luz and King—they're not from here." he gestures to the both of them before resuming, "They're from the Demon Realm. They didn't know what this would mean for you."

Her breath hitched at that, her head lifting slightly. Her gaze flicked to the side, wary and confused. "Demon Realm...?" she repeated, as if the words were foreign to her tongue yet at the same time, it seemed familiar to her.

Markus nodded, keeping his voice steady. "Yes. That's where they're from. Luz is a human. King... he's a Titan, yes. But he's just a kid, Vaileth. He doesn't even know what happened here, especially what happened to you."

Vaileth blinked slowly, her breathing gradually slowing. Her form began to stabilize, as she struggled to push back against the tidal wave of memory and dread. "They... shouldn't be here," she murmured, not as an accusation, but as a statement of fragile disbelief. "This realm itself—it isn't for outsiders. Not anymore."

"I know," Markus said, the corner of his mouth tugging into a faint, sad smile. "But they came because they need your help. I wouldn't have brought them otherwise."

Vaileth's hands relaxed slightly in her lap. She finally raised her eyes to meet him. "Help... you want my help? with what?"

Instead of answering, Markus turned and looked back toward the others. "Luz. King. Come forward."

The two exchanged a glance, Luz placing a steadying hand on King's shoulder before they approached together. Luz reached into her satchel and slowly withdrew the Celestine Compass, holding it up for Vaileth to see.

The moment her eyes locked onto the artifact, something in her broke again.

Her body recoiled, breath catching in her throat, and for a second it seemed like she might spiral back into that same pit of dread. "W-Where did you—no, that's not—that's not supposed to exist," she stammered, backing slightly into the wall behind her. "I handed it over. I was there. I saw it get entrusted with the Luminara Syndicate and placed inside the vault at Alkanos—how could it...?"

She clutched her chest as though the air had been sucked from her lungs. Her voice grew unsteady, higher-pitched, choked with panic. "This isn't real—it's not real—it can't be!"

The Compass gleamed faintly, casting soft light across the chamber like a star reawakening from slumber. Its glow reflected in Vaileth's eyes, now wide with disbelief. Her breath came faster again, her whole form trembling.

Markus stood and took a slow step toward her, voice unwavering. "I know what you're feeling. I know what that Compass represents to you. Everything that happened, everything you lost. I can't take that pain from you," he went on, "but I can ask you this: help them, help us. Because if what they're trying to stop is real... then the pain we lived through might mean something after all."

Vaileth didn't respond immediately. Her eyes remained fixed on the Compass, its light dancing across her thoughts like memories stirred awake. Her breathing slowed again, the tremors in her hands subsiding. For a long moment, she said nothing. Her face remained unreadable, caught in a battle between past and present. Then, finally, with a sigh that sounded more like surrender than relief, she gave a slow nod. "...Alright," she whispered. "I'll help you. But not because I'm ready." Her gaze sharpened ever so slightly. "Because the world doesn't wait for us to be."

Markus allowed himself a quiet breath of relief. "I understand. As always, thank you for your assistance."

Vaileth stood still for a breath, her luminous eyes dimmed with residual guilt as she slowly stepped toward the group. The once-imposing Star Person, whose earlier outburst had rattled the room, now approached with noticeably softened features. A quiet pause followed her until she finally found the courage to speak. "I..." Her voice wavered. "I owe you an apology. To all of you." She cast her gaze toward the young Titan, her posture shrinking with sincere remorse which she added, "Especially to you... Seeing you triggered something I wasn't ready to face. So I wasn't really fair to you."

For a moment, silence clung to the air. Then Luz offered a warm, understanding smile and stepped forward, her tone gently reassuring. "It's okay, we get it."

King gave a small nod, his eyes sincere and earnest. "We forgive you. All of us."

Hesperos, arms casually crossed, gave a simple shrug. "Yeah, no hard feelings. Trust me, first impressions are overrated."

Vaileth exhaled slowly, visibly relieved, her starlit form settling back into a calmer glow. The tension that once crackled around her began to melt away, replaced by a quiet stillness that seemed foreign in the space she called home.

Then Markus turned to King, a note of determined energy entering his voice. "Alright, little guy. We've got work to do." King perked up as he turned toward him. "The Forgery?"

Markus nodded. "Time to make ourselves a weapon!" King squared his shoulders and gave a small, determined grin. "Let's do it!"

Before either of them could take a step, the gentle patter of feet scurrying across the floor interrupted the moment.

Atlas.

Without a word, the small Collector darted forward and wrapped his arms tightly around King's leg, pressing his forehead into the fur just above the knee. He clung to him with trembling hands. There was no tantrum or words, just pure, wordless fear threaded into a silent plea of 'Don't go'.

King blinked in surprise at first, but then softened almost instantly. He placed a paw against Atlas's back, gently petting the back of his head with his claws. He didn't need to ask why. "I'll be okay," King murmured. "I promise."

Atlas looked up at him with his glassy eyes, searching for something, anything, to anchor himself to.

"I'll come back. I swear it," King added, his voice firm despite the softness in his tone.

That seemed to do it. Slowly, Atlas nodded, his grip loosening as he pulled away, still visibly reluctant but trusting.

Vaileth, watching this unfold in quiet awe, tilted her head slightly. Her brow furrowed, not in judgment but in curiosity. There was something undeniably raw and genuine in that moment. Her eyes lingered on Atlas, then on King, and something in her expression shifted. It wasn't pity, It was recognition and understanding. Maybe even longing.

King gave Atlas one last nod, then turned to follow Markus. With each step toward the Sanctum's Forgery, the sound of their footsteps grew fainter, echoing softly down the metallic corridor as they disappeared from view.

That left only Vaileth, Luz, Hesperos, and Atlas behind in the open chamber. A long silence hung in the air between them but not uncomfortable, just of uncertainty.

Vaileth shifted slightly on her feet, casting a sidelong glance toward Atlas, who remained still but his eyes fixed on where King had walked off. Then she looked to Luz, the human girl whose presence seemed to center the group, and to Hesperos, whose nonchalant air betrayed a quiet protectiveness.

With a sigh, Vaileth broke the silence. "...He means a lot to you all, doesn't he?"

Luz nodded slowly. "Yeah. He's family."

Atlas didn't speak, but he inched closer to Luz instinctively, seeking her presence like a child to a familiar light.

Soon the chamber dimmed as the glow from the Celestine Compass began to pulse softly in Luz's hands. She then gently opened the artifact, the outer rings unfolding like petals of a rare flower. In a moment of hushed reverence, a luminous projection bloomed into the air above them. The familiar tree-like structure with its nebula-like branches arching across invisible skies, hovered in a spectral blue hue. The light that had illuminated from the artifact casted slow-moving shadows along the floors of the very chamber the group was situated in.

All eyes turned to the vision, but it was Vaileth who reacted most intensely. The moment the projection flickered to life, a shiver ran down her form. Her shoulders locked, then slumped forward as she turned sharply away, muttering something under her breath. With a fluid motion that was far too practiced to be anything recent, she reached into a cabinet storage compartment and yanked out a dark, swirling glass bottle labeled 'Dark Matter Brew'. She didn't pause and with an anxious huff, she uncorked the bottle and took a long, desperate swig.

Then another.

And another.

Within moments, she was three bottles in, the empties clinking softly against one another as they rolled into a quiet corner of the Sanctum. Her aura, usually calm and effervescent, now sparked erratically once more.

Luz, wide-eyed, stepped forward carefully, cradling the Compass against her chest. "Vaileth?" she asked, "Are... are you okay?"

Vaileth spun around with a nervous, twitching smile, her pupils dilated slightly, "What? Me? Pfft, yes, totally fine. Never better," she said with a forced laugh, though the way her hands trembled as she reached for a fourth bottle betrayed the truth. Her lie crumbled almost instantly under the weight of her own exhaustion. She exhaled sharply, setting the unopened bottle back down as her shoulders slumped again—this time not from tension, but from the sheer weariness of keeping up a performance. "No... No, I'm not okay!" she admitted. "You brought me that!—that thing! Of all things!"

Her eyes locked on the Compass again, not with wonder, but dread. "And I know why you did it," she added bitterly, turning her gaze toward Hesperos. A sudden flicker of magic passed through her pupils—glimmering spirals that revealed the faint traces of her mind-reading gift. She squinted, as if peering through layers of space and memory. "You... You're the one behind the Alkanos heist. Aren't you?"

Hesperos, caught mid-adjustment of his blaster holsters, stiffened. His tail flicked uneasily behind him. "Okay, yes—technically that was me," he admitted, raising both hands with a weak smile, "but in my defense, when I was hired by The Archivists!—"

However, Vaileth cut him off with a voice that showed how much disbelief she was in, "T-the Archivists?!!!" she added, "Are you insane?! Do you have any idea what you might've done?!"

Hesperos added, "I didn't know what it was at the time. I didn't even know the system it was connected to—"

"—To this," Vaileth snapped, gesturing toward the Compass. "To them."

Before tension could rise further, Luz stepped in. "Vaileth, he didn't know. None of us did. And we wouldn't have brought it if we didn't believe you could help. Hesperos isn't with the Archivists anymore—he's been helping to keep us safe from them."

Atlas stepped beside her and nodded in quiet agreement, offering Vaileth a hopeful glance. His expression was gentle, but his voice—though small—held conviction. "He's not like them... He protected Luz and King..."

Vaileth studied them all. Her arms crossed, and for a moment, it looked like she might shut down again—retreat into the protective cynicism she wore like armor. However, it was the sincerity in their eyes that pierced through the fog of her panic.

She gave out a long, slow and defeated sigh before saying, "I didn't think I'd ever see that device again," she murmured, walking toward the projection. Her fingertips reached out, grazing the luminous tree branches that shimmered above. "When you said it came from a 'dead star system' during the heist, Hesperos... that dead system wasn't just any system."

The room held its breath for the big reveal. "It was Celestialopolis," she finally revealed. "My homeworld. The home of the Archivists..."

The words hung heavy in the air as they sank into everyone's thoughts.

Luz blinked, stunned. Hesperos's ears drooped slightly in quiet guilt. Even Atlas's eyes widened in disbelief. "So..." Luz started, trying to wrap her mind around it. "We weren't just carrying a lost artifact..."

"You were returning a relic to its origin," Vaileth said softly, her voice almost reverent now. "A compass made by our own kind. One of the last remnants of the Old Star Empire... and you brought it straight to me."

The revelation was thunderous in its stillness. It wasn't anger that radiated from Vaileth anymore—but a mix of awe, grief, and something that almost resembled fate catching up with her. She stepped away from the projection, pressing a hand to her forehead.

"No wonder they wanted it back," she muttered. The room fell into a pensive silence, Vaileth's hand lingered against her forehead, as if she was trying to steady the tidal wave

of memories that were breaking loose from the depths of her mind. She stared into the heart of the projection—the luminous tree that spun slowly, patiently, like it had waited countless ages to be seen again. Her voice, when it came, was quieter and steadier. "I built the Compass, I am its creator." she admitted at last. "Long ago... back when I still believed we could map the threads of the cosmos like constellations on parchment. When the Nine Realms weren't myth, but places I could feel in my bones."

Luz stepped closer, her heart pounding, her thoughts drifting back to her strange encounter with Markus, "Markus mentioned about the other realms too. Like... entire universes tucked into corners of reality we could never reach by ship. I thought he was just trying to mess with my head at first but it's making much more sense now. Especially with what he's shown me so far."

Vaileth shook her head gently. "He was trying to prepare you, after all."

Vaileth added. "The universe doesn't split into alternate realities the way some theorize—instead it unfolds and expands. Each realm exists within the same reality but they're so wildly different in structure, magic, and distance... Most beings don't even realize they're there. They're not parallel worlds but they're instead exotic, unreachable places." She walked slowly beneath the projection, the starlight painting her pale face in shifting hues of blue and violet. "I've been to all of them."

She gestured toward the projection, and with a graceful motion of her fingers, the tree's branches pulsed, "Each realm on this map exists within the same cosmic web," she explained. "But you can't get to them by warp travel, or flying long enough. Not even the fastest ship could reach them. You'd burn out long before you crossed the threshold." She raised her hand again, and the projection shifted. Each branch and nebula flickered to life with unique magical patterns—some glowing with shifting sand, others with crystalline vines and emberlike patterns. "They're unreachable because the very laws that govern them are different. Each realm is defined by a different kind of magic. Cosmic Space, where I live, is structured around Star Magic. The Demon Realm is shaped by Titan Magic—organic, chaotic, and creative. And the others..."

Her voice softened, drifting into something that resembled longing. "There's the Valley of the Chronomancers, where time doesn't flow in a line, but blooms like a flower in all directions. The Foundry of Origins, where raw creation is made through everything like a heartbeat. The Hollow Cradle of Destruction, a realm constantly unmaking itself. The

Verdant Hollow Realm. The Barren Sands Realm. The Dream Realm, each of them being the embodiments of the concepts of Life, Death, and Reality."

Vaileth concluded solemnly. "They're beautiful but dangerous because of how hidden they are behind layers of cosmic insulation. They weren't meant to be found easily."

"Then how do we even get to them?" Luz asked. "If warp travel doesn't work and we can't fly there, what do we use?"

Vaileth took a step back from the projection, She seemed deep in thought, her eyes reflecting a cascade of starlight as memories, ancient and heavy, before drifting back into focus. "There was only one way," she said quietly, her voice now more grounded, shaped by experience. "You would've needed the necessary technology that is capable of allowing fast travel between realms. That's where my people came in." She added, "My people, the Star People, we created the very technology to reach them. Devices capable of bypassing the magical insulation that separates each realm from the next. The key wasn't brute force or speed, it was resonance. You had to harmonize with the natural laws of each realm to even graze their borders."

She turned, walking slowly across the floor as the projection rotated behind her, bathing the room in nebular light. "We developed countless tools over generations, but the one that changed everything... was the Travelscope. A trans-realm conduit forged with both arcane science and Star Magic. It didn't just pierce through space, it aligned with it, by absorbing a star and converting it into sustainable energy to create the very highways of light that functioned as fast travel to get to the other realms."

At that, Luz perked up slightly, her expression shifting from awe to intrigue. "Wait... the Travelscope. I know about that!" She stepped forward, her fingers tightening slightly around the Celestine Compass in one hand. While in the other, she snapped her fingers together. "We've used one before. That's how we got here, to the Realm of Cosmic Space. There was one in the Demon Realm and with King's help, we activated it and it brought us here."

Vaileth blinked, clearly stunned. "You used a Travelscope?"

Luz nodded. "Yeah. It was hidden at a cliffside that could only be reached through a network of caves. Besides that..." she added, "that's not the only way I've traveled across

realms. Back home, we have a portal door! One that lets me travel back and forth between the Demon Realm and the Human Realm. It's how I kept in touch with my family. I mean- there were two of course, the original one relied on Titans blood to function but it got destroyed. The new one however, was made by Atlas himself."

Vaileth stared at her for a long, silent moment. Her lips parted slightly, as if words had momentarily abandoned her. Finally, she let out a soft, stunned breath—half laughter, half disbelief. "You truly are something you know that?" she whispered, not unkindly. "Most beings never walked through more than one realm in their lives. And yet you've crossed three like it's as natural as stepping between rooms."

Luz gave a small, sheepish shrug. "Guess I never thought of it that way."

Vaileth soon spoke once more, "When my people made our breakthrough with The Travelscope, the events that transpired truly defined the golden age of the Star People. We soon began to integrate the technology of The Travelscope with our vessels and with that, the Old Star Empire was born. It was an age of discovery and innovations." She paused beneath the swirling light of the projection before shortly adding, "It ignited something in us. Wonder but also ambition. With the realms now easily accessible, we began to reach outward, not only to explore, but to preserve. In the beginning, my people sought knowledge, not for conquest but for understanding. We archived cultures, languages, magical phenomena, anything we could find. We called it the Doctrine of Collection, a pact to safeguard all knowledge and prevent its loss to time."

Luz, Atlas, and Hesperos listened intently, the air between them growing heavier with every word.

Vaileth added, "When we encountered the various life forms in each realm, we came bearing gifts, ideas, and understanding of who they were. And in return, the other realms welcomed us with cautious kindness. There was a shared wonder between us then."

Vaileth's eyes lowered slightly, her fingers unconsciously brushing the edge of the floating projection. "But ambition is a strange thing, as it always feeds onto itself. Our curiosity for what lies beyond and our desire to preserve... slowly transformed into something else. We began to see ourselves not as visitors... but as stewards and rulers. We whispered in the ears of the leaders of every realm and their nations, we offered solutions

to conflicts we subtly instigated. We embedded ourselves into the internal affairs of each realm."

Hesperos's brow furrowed. "You mean to say your people started the chaos just to fix it?"

Vaileth nodded slowly, her voice low. "Yes. And each time we 'restored order,' we were praised, it eventually got to the point we were depended upon. However, dependency... is a dangerous thing, one day, entire realms found themselves unable to function without us."

Luz shifted slightly, "You turned them into puppets." There was a pause as Vaileth's face trembled for just a moment, before she nodded again. "We did."

She stepped away from the group now, her voice growing more distant, as though remembering the light of a time long buried. "And then came the First Realm War. The cracks we'd carved across the realms—through deception, political manipulation, and engineered distrust—finally ruptured. Rebellions broke out, but instead of helping, we saw opportunity. My people seized upon the chaos with precision. They installed loyal governors, replaced leaders with sympathizers, and deployed armed legions. One by one, the realms fell under the banners of our empire."

"Although despite everything attributed with our conquest, we were still inclined to the general idea to understand everything, even what was never meant to be understood. That's when we found them." She turned fully now, her face half-lit by the tree. Her eyes met Luz's, whose expression was serious and unwavering. "The Titans." Vaileth said.

"We discovered their world, the Demon Realm, during the third wave of settlement expeditions and expansion. I was overseeing one of the research teams and I never expected we'd find living organisms so saturated with ancient power, so intertwined with the realm's very foundation. The Titans weren't just creatures, they were natural forces." Her voice faltered, ever so slightly. "And I was the one who reported it and catalogued their existence, their biology, and their connection to their own magic, Titan Magic." She took a shaky breath. "My discovery changed everything..."

The weight of guilt pressed itself across her posture, bowing her shoulders as she walked back toward the center of the room. "The Star Empire's leaders, The Archivists, saw the Titans not as protectors but as threats. They feared their unpredictability and raw might,

but what they feared most was their magic. During my discovery, I learned that Titan Magic was twice as powerful compared to our's. In fact, the Titans were immune to our powers due to the development of an evolutionary ability to cancel it out. Due to this revelation, We responded the only way an empire does when faced with a force it doesn't understand—we waged war against them."

Luz's eyes widened, her grip on the Compass tightening.

"It was the beginning of our end," Vaileth said, her voice a whisper now. "The Demon Realm became a warzone. We built outposts, orbital sanctuaries, and entire colonies. Each of them were designed to harness or weaken the Titans. But we were arrogant, as we underestimated them. They were the first to truly resist," Vaileth continued. "They refused to bow and to be seduced by our influence."

She closed her eyes. "The war lasted for decades, then centuries, ultimately culminating in a thousand year struggle. In our desperation, the Archivists began seeking alternative solutions. That's when the Star Pieces came into the conversation."

Atlas stirred. "The ones scattered across the Nine Realms..."

Vaileth nodded. "Yes. Artifacts of immense cosmic power. Each one attuned to a fundamental force of existence. We learned that if united, they could form the Wishing Star. A weapon—or a miracle—depending on how you used it. The Archivists intended to use it as a weapon in this case..."

She opened her eyes, her expression now tinged with quiet fury. "The Archivists approached me. Ordered me to create something that could find them all, as they were well aware of my journeys in each Realm. They wanted a device that is tuned to the essence of each realm. A navigational key."

She looked down at the Compass in Luz's hands. "The Celestine Compass." Vaileth said.

"I obeyed," she continued, "because I believed... perhaps foolishly... that it might end the war. That we could use the Wishing Star to restore balance. But deep down, I knew this was wrong. I knew that this wasn't the way for our civilization to survive... yet I still did it anyway. By the time I finished the Compass, it was already too late. Our forces were shattered. The Titans, too, had suffered mass extinction. We destroyed each other. Neither

side won. Though in the process, the realms we had under our control were liberated, though its inhabitants weren't familiar or never knew their liberators."

Luz swallowed hard, her voice soft. "And what happened after?"

Vaileth's jaw tensed. "Orion happened. He rose to power during the aftermath; He was young, calculative, and already deeply embedded in the Archivists' ranks. He needed someone to blame for our failure. Someone visible. So they made me the scapegoat because of it. I was the one who had discovered the Titans. The one who built the Compass." She turned away from them slightly, her back straight despite the emotional weight she carried. "They erased my name from our archives, stripped me of my position, and so I fled before I dealt with harsher punishments they wanted to inflict onto me. I took any information I've made that dealt with the Star Pieces with me, including the Compass. Not out of vengeance... but out of fear. I knew the moment they regained it, they would try again. They would try to hunt down every Star Piece and finish what they started." Her voice lowered to a near-murmur. "I couldn't let that happen."

Luz stepped forward, her expression a mix of grief and admiration. "So you've been running ever since."

Vaileth looked over her shoulder, her eyes shimmering. "No... I've been hiding ever since."

"When I reached this old research station," she began slowly, "I thought I'd find peace but instead, I found shame. I couldn't bear to keep it anymore. Not after everything that happened."

Her hand gestured gently toward the artifact in Luz's grip, her voice now little more than a whisper. "So I gave it up. I surrendered the Celestine Compass to the only ones I believed could protect it better than I ever could—the Luminara Syndicate on Alkanos."

Atlas raised a brow, curiosity piqued. "You trusted them?"

Vaileth nodded, albeit with a trace of hesitation. "The Syndicate is... not without flaws. But they value their possessions highly, so they fiercely defend it. I left it with them in exchange for one promise: that they would guard it with their lives, and never let the Archivists near it."

She fell into silence for a moment, as if the memory of that parting still clung to her spirit. "But even then," she continued at last, "I knew that simply hiding the Compass wouldn't be enough. The Archivists are patient and ruthless. If not in one age, then perhaps the next they'd come looking. And when they did, I needed to ensure that there were those who could stand against them."

Her voice grew steadier now, a quiet strength rising from the pain. "That's when I helped form the Order of Arbora." Hesperos blinked with astonishment, "You were its founder?"

Vaileth nodded, her hand now lightly touching the projection of the Great Tree. The image shimmered under her fingertips. "We were a small circle at first. It at first consisted of just travelers, scholars, and exiles like myself. We were individuals who had seen the truths buried beneath history's illusions. We devoted ourselves to the preservation of knowledge—true knowledge. Not just the locations of the Nine Realms, but the meaning behind them. As well as understanding the true origins of magic and the legacy of Arbora itself." Her hand fell to her side again, and she turned fully to face the group. "During my travels, I began to notice anomalies... strange patterns in time, subtle shifts in realm frequencies, bursts of power with no discernible origin. Most would've dismissed them but I... I recorded them."

She added, "Across ages and across realms, I kept notes of writings, sketches, magical residue samples. What looked like meaningless fragments slowly began to form a mosaic. A pattern of events that occurred thousands of years apart in places that had never touched. Yet each one left behind signs that felt familiar over time."

Luz leaned in, drawn by the gravity of her words. Even Hesperos, ever skeptical, had dropped the sharp edge of his gaze. Atlas remained silent but a faint tremble passed through his fingers.

"It wasn't until I began studying the Titans," Vaileth continued, her tone deepening, "that something clicked. Their magic resonated with a frequency I had encountered before. Not as potent, but undeniably familiar."

She waved her hand, conjuring a suspended orb of golden light. Within it shimmered intricate runes, swirling vortexes of realm energy, and outlines of titanic skeletons inscribed with glowing script.

"I began to run experiments. Though they were dangerous since I combined my own Star Magic with the elemental magics from the various beings of the other realms. Each time, the result was... startling. The energies didn't repel or clash but harmonized. And always, just beneath the surface, there was something else—something older. That's when I came to the conclusion of a greater force that exists beyond us."

Luz's eyes widened, "Arbora."

"Exactly," Vaileth answered, "These findings were what I used to create the Order of Arbora. As a means to understand and honor the source, to seek balance with it."

Hesperos let out a low exhale. "And you never thought to share this with the rest of the Star People? With your own Archivists?"

"I did," Vaileth replied quietly. "They dismissed it as a myth. Called me obsessed, said I'd lost myself in dreams. Maybe they were right... but I saw something they couldn't or wouldn't." She added, "When the order was founded, our ultimate goal was never to rise in rebellion. We knew we couldn't overpower the Archivists with brute force. But knowledge... real knowledge—that was something even they feared. And if we could pass it on to the right hands, maybe the cycle would finally break."

"Although with all honesty... I didn't expect this," she murmured at last, voice almost inaudible, while she turned her gaze towards the compass. "I truly didn't expect to see it again... Not in a situation like this."

She stepped forward, cautiously, as though approaching an old wound that hadn't quite healed. "I thought I had made peace with it," she continued as her voice grew steadier, though tinged with exhaustion, guilt, and pain that had been long buried. "After everything I gave to the Order of Arbora—every map, every theory, every truth I uncovered—I thought maybe... maybe I could atone with it. But standing here now..." She trailed off, shaking her head faintly.

Luz opened her mouth to speak, but something in Vaileth's expression stopped her.

"No matter how much I teach," Vaileth said, quieter now, eyes lowering to the floor, "no matter how much knowledge I offer, it never feels like enough. Because the truth is..."

Her voice cracked slightly. "I'm not just the one who created the Compass. I was their mentor..."

There was a beat of silence. She continued, "The Archivists," she said, barely above a whisper. "They weren't always what they are now. They were curious, brilliant, and passionate for knowledge. I saw so much potential in them... and I thought I could guide them. Shape them into protectors of truth."

Her jaw trembled, and she bit down hard to steady it, "But I failed." she said.

She didn't try to disguise the tremor in her voice this time. "I thought I was helping them build a better path, one built on understanding, not conquest. But somewhere along the way, they lost themselves... and I—I didn't see it happening. Or maybe I did and I just turned away."

"However, one thing is certain and that is that I failed them." she repeated. "Now... I live with the consequences because of it."

A thick, heavy silence fell over the room. The kind that seemed to press against the walls and weigh down the very air. Vaileth's confession hung there, raw and unshielded.

It was then that Atlas, who had been silent for some time, let out a soft, frightened noise. His eyes had gone wide at the mention of The Archivists, his fingers twitching at his sides, and without thinking, he moved closer to Luz—so close that he pressed into her side and clutched at her arm with both hands.

Luz immediately reacted, her free arm wrapping protectively around him. "Hey, hey," she whispered gently. "It's okay. I've got you."

Atlas didn't speak. His eyes remained fixed on Vaileth, though his small form trembled with visible fear. The name Archivists clearly struck deeper than just memory, it was trauma, fresh, jagged, and now it had resurfaced. Vaileth looked over and saw him. The expression on her face softened, folding into a grief so tender it felt almost maternal. She didn't reach for him, but she bowed her head slightly.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, as though addressing Atlas now. "For what they've done. And for the part I played in shaping what they became."

There was no excuse in her voice. No plea for forgiveness, only regret. The room remained silent, but the atmosphere had changed. The grief was still there, still clinging to the corners like shadows at dusk—but there was a current of something else now, too. Not hope but maybe the faintest flicker of redemption.

Chapter Ten: A Forge Of Hope.

Meanwhile, King and Markus traversed and managed to arrive at a cavern. The cavern stretched before them, vast and echoing, its walls adorned with bioluminescent fungi that pulsed in eerie, rhythmic waves of pale blue and violet light. Jagged rock formations jutted out from the ground like the ribs of a long-forgotten beast, and the air carried a damp, metallic tang, thick with the scent of earth and decay. Markus and King stood at the precipice of a sprawling underground chasm, their eyes drawn to the ominous bridge

ahead—a precarious construct of obsidian and bone, suspended by rusted chains that groaned under an unseen pressure. Below, the darkness seemed infinite, an abyss that swallowed all light, hinting at horrors long buried beneath the surface.

Markus exhaled sharply, his breath visible in the unnatural chill of the cavern. Shadows flickered across the cavern walls as the bioluminescent fungi pulsed, casting an eerie glow over the precarious structure. "That bridge does not look stable," he muttered, his grip tightening on a portion of a boulder near the bridge.

King huffed, puffing out his chest. "Well... this is our only way, so that really doesn't leave us with any choice, man."

Markus hesitated before stepping onto the bridge, feeling the wood flex beneath his boots. King, far lighter, scampered ahead with surprising agility, his claws clicking against the aged planks. With every step, the chains rattled like unseen whispers in the dark, and below them, the abyss seemed to stretch endlessly, swallowing sound.

"You sure about this, King?" Markus asked, gripping the frayed rope railing.

"Nope! But when has that ever stopped me?" King called back, his voice echoing.

Halfway across, a gust of wind surged through the cavern, sending loose debris tumbling into the abyss. Markus instinctively reached for King, but he planted his feet firmly, staring ahead. At the end of the bridge, an enormous set of stone doors stood partially ajar, revealing the chamber beyond.

As they stepped inside, the temperature shifted—no longer the damp cold of the cavern, but a dry, stagnant air filled with the scent of old metal and soot. The chamber was immense, its vaulted ceiling lost in shadow, while the walls bore ancient scorch marks, remnants of fires that had long since burned out. The forge itself stretched across the expanse, lined with towering molds carved from stone. Each was shaped to form different weapons—some crude, others intricate, their edges lined with arcane inscriptions that flickered faintly under the dim light. Forges of different sizes stood dormant, their once-roaring flames reduced to smoldering embers, and an array of half-forged blades and broken armor littered the floor, evidence of a time when this place had been alive with purpose. A massive anvil sat in the center, its surface etched with deep grooves from centuries of hammer strikes. Heavy iron chains dangled from above, swaying slightly as

if disturbed by an unseen force, and ancient tools lay scattered across rusted workbenches, their craftsmanship hinting at a level of precision rarely seen. There were piles of artifacts laying about in the forge room.

King's eyes widened. "Whoa... so this is where they made the big, bad swords, huh?" He looks around and notices the multiple piles of artifacts scattered around as a large mess. "My goodness, Vaileth wasn't wrong either. I get these are artifacts from other worlds left by her people but it's appearing more like rubble to me."

Markus ignored King's comments regarding the piles of artifacts as he ran his fingers along the edge of one mold, feeling the fine etchings of ancient runes. He then spoke, "Yeah. And now, we need to make one of our own. The kind that can stand against the Archivists."

King glanced up at Markus. "Then we better not mess it up." Markus nodded, rolling up his sleeves. "Let's get to work."

Markus continued running his hands along the rows of ancient forge molds, each carved from an un-worldly stone, their intricate patterns telling the story of weapons forged long ago. His eyes scanned the different shapes, his anticipation growing as he searched for the right one... then there it was. A perfect mold for an arming sword, its design simple yet refined, the kind of blade that could strike with both precision and strength.

King trailed behind him, his claws tapping against the stone floor. "Okay, not to rush your dramatic moment or anything, but do you actually know what you're looking for? 'Cause from here, it looks like you're just touching stuff and nodding like some fancy art critic."

Markus exhaled a small chuckle, shaking his head. "I know what I need, King. I just have to find the right one."

King crossed his arms. "Right because picking a sword mold is some deep soul-searching experience."

Markus smirked, brushing his fingers over a particularly large mold before moving past it. "You'd be surprised. A weapon isn't just about strength—it's about balance, control, and how it fits in your hands. The right sword feels like an extension of yourself."

King raised an eyebrow. "Huh. And here I thought it was just 'stabby end goes into bad guy.'"

Markus let out a laugh. "That's the simple way to put it, I like your spirit." He stepped forward, eyes drawn to a particular mold—an arming sword. The moment he saw it, something clicked inside him. It was perfect.

A grin spread across Markus' face as he carefully lifted the mold, his fingers tracing the worn edges. "This is it," he murmured, his voice filled with a mixture of relief and excitement. "The one we need."

King tilted his head, hopping up onto a nearby stone to get a better look. "Really? That one? What makes it so special?"

Markus' eyes glimmered as he traced the engravings along the mold. "An arming sword is reliable, fast, and versatile. It's not too heavy but has enough weight to land a solid blow. Perfect for both offense and defense." He smiled to himself. "It's the kind of sword that can adapt. That can last."

King, still catching his breath after crossing the bridge, tilted his head. "You're really into swords, huh?"

Markus chuckled, shaking his head. "You have no idea."

Markus set the mold down carefully, his gaze lifting toward the towering machine before them. It was massive, built into the chamber's very foundation, with layers of ancient metal panels adorned with engravings that pulsed faintly with residual energy. At its center was a large, circular chamber, its interior coated in a dark, soot-stained material that suggested it once held immense heat. The edges were lined with complex mechanisms—wheels, levers, and intricate tubing that twisted together like veins of some forgotten mechanical beast. Despite its imposing and technical appearance, there was something unmistakably medieval about it, as though the machine itself was a relic of two worlds—one steeped in ancient craftsmanship, the other in celestial innovation.

King looked impressed as he padded closer, "Okay, I'll admit it... this thing is kinda cool," he muttered, tilting his head as he examined the device. "Like... imagine how many marshmallows you can roast with this kind of thing!"

Markus let out a small chuckle as he ran a hand along the smooth metal. "This isn't just some random forge... Look at the craftsmanship, the structure—it's too intricate, too deliberate." His fingers traced over an engraving of a flaming hammer, surrounded by constellations woven into the metalwork. His eyes narrowed as a realization set in. "This... this was built by the Blacksmith Dwarves of the Foundry of Origins Realm."

King blinked. "Okay, I have a feeling you mentioned them earlier back on our ship but you didn't go into further detail about them!"

Markus turned toward him, excitement flickering in his expression. "Well you're not wrong King. While The Foundry of Origins Realm is where some of the greatest weapons in history were made, the ones who were responsible for their creation was due to The Blacksmith Dwarves. They were legendary—it's said they could forge weapons strong enough to cut through time itself." He gestured to the engravings. "The Star People must've taken this forge from them, or at least copied their designs, to make their own weapons."

King crossed his arms. "So, basically, we're about to use a celestial, magical blacksmith machine that may or may not still work... and the guy who's gonna power it has no idea what he's doing." He let out a dry laugh. "Oh yeah, this sounds safe!"

Markus grinned. "It wouldn't be an adventure if it was safe." He then motioned toward the center of the machine, where a circular indentation lay waiting. "That's where the power source goes. And that's where you come in."

King took a step back, "Uh, hold on." He jabbed a claw at Markus. "I know you want me to power up this thing but you do remember that my magic is basically a 'figure-it-out-as-you-go' situation, right?!"

King stared at the power chamber, his paws clenching at his sides. The forge, with all its ancient, imposing grandeur, that felt larger than life and him. The idea of using his Titan magic to power it sent a ripple of unease through his chest. He had come a long way since discovering what he truly was, but that didn't change the doubt gnawing at the edges of his mind.

"I dunno about this, Markus..." King muttered, shifting from paw to paw. His tail flicked anxiously behind him. "I mean, what if I mess up? What if I don't have enough power? What if I have too much power?" He gestured wildly at the machine. "What if I blow up this thing, or us!"

Markus, who had been adjusting the forge mold in its slot, turned toward King with a patient expression. He crouched down to King's level, resting his arms on his knees. "You're overthinking it."

King scoffed. "Oh, wow. Thanks. That totally fixes everything."

Markus chuckled softly, shaking his head. "King, listen... I get it. You don't know the full scope of exactly how your powers work yet and that's scary. But that doesn't mean you're incapable. You've done things before without fully understanding them—you've saved people. You just have to trust yourself."

King let out a heavy sigh, his small shoulders slumping. He could still feel it—that pull deep within his chest, the raw energy coiled inside of him, waiting. It was always there, but controlling it? That was the part that terrified him.

"I just... I don't want to mess it up," he admitted, his voice quieter this time. "Everyone keeps acting like I'm supposed to be this big, important Titan, but half the time I feel like I'm just faking it. Like if I try too hard, something bad's gonna happen."

Markus exhaled through his nose, considering his next words carefully. Finally, he spoke, his voice steady. "I get that. I really do. But you're not alone in this. You have people who believe in you—not because we expect you to be perfect, but because we know you can do this. And if something does go wrong, then we fix it. Together."

King glanced up at him, his golden eyes searching Markus' face for any hint of uncertainty but there was none, just confidence and reassurance.

"...Man, why do you have to sound so wise all the time?" King grumbled, crossing his arms.

Markus grinned. "Comes with the job."

King huffed but didn't argue. He took a deep breath and stepped toward the center of the platform, his paws tingling as he mentally prepared himself. "Alright... I'll try." He shot Markus with a narrowed look. "But if I blow up, I'm haunting you."

Markus smirked. "Duly noted."

King made his way to the platform at the base of the forge. Taking a deep breath, King began drawing Titan glyphs around himself—symbols of strength and endurance, ones he had learned back in the Demon Realm. As he positioned himself in the center, King pressed his paws firmly against the glowing glyphs, his small frame tense with concentration. At first, nothing happened—just the soft hum of his magic stirring beneath his touch. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to focus, but doubt still clawed at the edges of his mind.

"Come on... work," he muttered under his breath, his tail flicking anxiously behind him.

Markus stood close by, hands gripping the sides of the mold as he kept watch. The moment King's energy connected with the glyphs, a faint pulse of light rippled outward, illuminating the ancient symbols etched into the forge's platform. A low, mechanical groan echoed through the chamber as the machine stirred to life, gears grinding together in a sluggish awakening.

"There you go," Markus encouraged, his voice steady. "Just keep it going."

King took a deep breath, trying to steady himself as he channeled more energy into the forge. The glow beneath his paws intensified, spreading across the platform in a web of interconnected lines, reaching toward the machine's power chamber.

Then, the real pressure hit.

A sudden surge of energy raced up King's arms, like a jolt of electricity snapping through his veins. His ears flattened, and his claws dug into the stone beneath him. His Titan aura, normally a soft, ambient glow, flared into something far more intense—bright enough to cast Markus' shadow across the walls.

The forge responded in kind. The central hearth chamber roared to life, its burners flickering with a deep crimson fire, fueled by the sheer force of King's power. Markus

could feel the heat rising in the air, sweat forming at his brow, but he didn't dare let go of the mold. "Are you still with me, King?" Markus called over the growing hum of the machine.

King gritted his teeth. "Yeah—yeah, I just... wow, this is uh, a lot!" His entire body tingled from the energy coursing through him, and he could feel his magic fighting to stay contained.

Markus nodded, adjusting his grip on the mold. "Just keep steady. You're doing great."

King let out a shaky breath, his voice lower now. "You know, I never really thought I'd be doing something like this. My dad—he could probably do this in his sleep!"

Markus glanced at him, sensing the nervous edge in his voice. "Yeah, well... he'd be proud of you!"

King twitched at that but he didn't respond right away. Instead, he focused on keeping his energy steady, watching as the forge's mechanisms continued to shift and awaken.

The Titan glyphs around King pulsed faster now, reacting to the raw aura radiating from his body. The glow expanded, forming a swirling vortex of Titan energy around the forge's power chamber. The machine's ancient mechanisms, once still and lifeless, now moved with a renewed purpose—rotating hoops, twisting gears, and smoldering embers working in unison to prepare the materials for forging.

While King continued, something shifted. The energy flow grew stronger, wilder, and King's breath came out in short, sharp gasps. His limbs trembled as the light radiating from his body intensified, pushing the glyphs to their limits. His Titan magic—so vast, so untamed—was building too fast and he could feel it.

"Markus," he panted, his voice tight. "I—I don't think I can hold this much longer!"

Markus' gaze snapped toward him, immediately recognizing the strain in his expression. "Hang in there! You're almost done!"

King squeezed his eyes shut, his claws pressing deeper into the stone. "It hurts! I can't—I don't know how much more I can take—"

Markus' voice softened slightly, though there was urgency in his tone. "King, listen. I know this is a lot, but you're stronger than you think! You've got this!"

King let out a strained chuckle, despite the sweat forming at his brow. "Yeah? Says the guy who's just standing there while I do all the work!"

Markus huffed, shaking his head. "Trust me, I'm putting in my share. You think holding this thing steady is easy?"

"Pfft, I don't see you glowing like a magical sun!" King quipped through gritted teeth.

Markus smirked. "Fair point." But then, his expression turned serious again. "You're doing great. Just a little more, okay?"

The glyphs beneath him flared violently, their golden glow nearly blinding. The platform trembled, tiny cracks splintering outward from where King sat. The machine, now fully powered, hissed and roared, its internal mechanisms spinning at full force.

"King, listen to me!" Markus called over the noise, his tone firm but urgent. "You need to release the energy—now!"

King groaned as his head throbbed from the pressure. His entire body felt like it was on fire, his chest too tight, his power coiling too intensely inside of him. His glyphs flickered as they were barely holding him together.

"King, now!" Markus shouted.

King's eyes snapped open—and with one final, desperate push, he let it all go.

A blinding surge of energy burst from him in an instant, a massive beam of golden light erupting from his mouth. The sheer force of it shook the chamber, sending shockwaves across the stone walls. The air crackled with raw Titan energy as King's beam surged into the forge's mold, striking with such intensity that the entire chamber trembled. The ancient mechanisms of the machine whirled and twisted, absorbing the pure magic and directing it with precision into the frame of the waiting sword.

Markus watched with a mixture of awe and urgency as the glowing energy seeped into the mold, illuminating every intricate rune and groove etched into the metal. The sword's outline pulsed brilliantly, shifting from an intangible radiance into something solid—a weapon being born from raw Titan essence.

The forge's inner mechanisms began to rotate in response to the energy intake, refining the molten power into the very structure of the blade. The metal darkened from its initial blinding glow, cooling into a deep obsidian black, yet the edges of the weapon shimmered with a molten crimson hue, as if the fire of the forge had been permanently sealed within it. Markus could see it forming—the blade's sleek, arming sword design taking shape, its straight edges and tapered point giving it an air of both elegance and lethality. The runes on the mold flared brightly, carving delicate patterns into the metal that only flickered into visibility when the light hit just right.

As King's beam continued to pour into the forge, the molten energy condensed as it became denser. It shaped the fuller of the sword, reinforcing the structure so that it would withstand even the strongest of blows. The crossguard took shape next—a gleaming golden guard, angular and proud, with a small blue crystal embedded at its center. The crystal absorbed some of the Titan's lingering energy, glowing faintly as if it had been awakened from a long slumber. Markus barely had time to admire the details before the sword's final feature began to emerge—the handle and grip, forged with a blend of blue and gold to complement the crossguard, wrapped in a material that seemed both ancient and newly woven. Finally, the pommel settled into place—a triangular-shaped diamond, cut so precisely that it refracted the glow of the Titan energy still radiating from the blade.

"King, you're doing it!" Markus called out, trying to encourage him.

But King wasn't responding.

The Titan glyphs beneath him—strained beyond their limit—began to fracture. The very ground trembled as the platform buckled, and before Markus could react, the structure collapsed beneath King's weight.

The once-contained beam shot wildly across the chamber, scorching the stone walls, sending loose debris tumbling from above. The air filled with the sound of metal groaning and machinery bursting apart as his energy tore through the forge's mechanisms.

The ancient machine, unable to handle the untamed surge of Titan power, buckled under the strain. Gears snapped, pistons exploded in a shower of sparks, and several hoop-like mechanisms twisted and turned erratically before collapsing entirely. The forge, which had stood the test of time gave way, its once-mighty structure reduced to a crumbling ruin.

Markus barely had time to react before the platform beneath King finally gave in, collapsing into rubble beneath him. The moment the glyphs vanished, King's beam flickered uncontrollably, losing its cohesion. With one final, uncontrolled burst, his energy arced wildly before cutting off entirely.

King let out a weak, exhausted wheeze before dropping forward, his tiny body slamming onto the cracked stone. Dust and smoke filled the air, and the only sound left was the faint humming of the completed sword still resting within the forge mold. "King!" Markus shouted, immediately rushing to his side. His boots crunched against the broken stone as he slid to a halt next to the Titan, who lay on his back, his chest rising and falling with heavy, exhausted breaths. The Titan groaned, his tail twitching. "Did... did we do it?"

Markus let out a relieved chuckle, placing a hand on his back. "Yeah, buddy. We did it."

King gave a weak "Weh..." before flopping onto his side, too drained to say anything else.

Markus exhaled, turning back to the forge. Over there, resting in the mold, was the sword, black and red with a yellow aura glowing around. The air around it still shimmered with heat and raw magic, it was done.

Markus glanced back at King, who was still sprawled out on the ground, barely lifting a paw. "So..." King mumbled. "Am I now 'King, the Cosmic Blade-forger'?"

Markus snorted. "Of course buddy, your father would be very proud of you."

King groaned. "Ugh. Worth it... at least tell me it looks cool since it's my first time creating literally anything.. with my powers..."

Markus smirked, twirling the sword in his grip before resting it over his shoulder. The blade's faint glow reflected off the cavern walls, the energy within it still alive and waiting.

"Oh, it's beyond cool," Markus said. "It's legendary."

King gave a weak thumbs-up before sighing dramatically. "Good. Because I'm never doing that again!"

Markus chuckled, shaking his head as he looked back at the sword. It wasn't just a weapon—it was a symbol. A testament to what they had accomplished, and what was yet to come. As the dust settled around them, Markus let out a tired sigh, rubbing his forehead and briefly pulling his ears back before they flopped right back up. He glanced back at King, who was still sprawled on the cracked stone, his chest rising and falling in slow labored breaths.

Markus nudged him lightly with his knuckle. "Alright, champ. You good to move?"

King let out a groggy groan, barely lifting his head. "Define 'good'... Because right now, I feel like I just got stomped on by a titan. Oh wait. I am a titan!" He chuckled weakly before sighing. "I don't think I've ever used that much magic before. Feels like my bones turned into jelly."

Markus smirked and stood, offering a hand. "C'mon. We should get back to the others before they start thinking we fell into some trap."

King squinted up at him. "Technically, we did. But sure, let's get outta here before I accidentally blow up something else." He grunted, rolling onto his paws before attempting to stand. His legs wobbled the moment he put weight on them, and he nearly face-planted.

Markus instinctively reached out, steadying him. "Whoa—easy there."

King huffed, shaking his head. "I got this, I got this. Just... y'know. Testing the legs." He took a slow, careful step forward, his claws scraping against the stone. He slightly slanted a bit to the left as he concentrated on keeping his balance.

Markus watched him closely, arms crossed. "Not bad."

King puffed out his chest, taking another careful step. "Told ya. I'm totally fine!" He took a third step—too quickly—his legs buckled slightly, "Woah!" King shouted. Markus immediately caught him before he could fall.

King grumbled, reluctantly leaning against Markus' leg for support. "...Okay, maybe like... eighty percent fine."

Markus shook his head with a chuckle. "You'll be a hundred percent by the time we're topside. Let's get moving."

King sighed dramatically but started walking, still a bit unsteady but gaining confidence with every step. As they made their way out of the chamber, he glanced up at Markus. "Hey... thanks. Y'know, for not freaking out back there."

Markus gave him a sideways glance, smirking. "Oh, I was definitely freaking out. I Just didn't show it."

King snorted. "Yeah, right."

Markus laughed, patting King lightly on the head as they finally stepped back onto the path leading to the surface. "C'mon, let's go. I think we've earned a break."

King groaned. "And snacks. Lots of snacks."

With that, the two pressed forward, the faint glow of the newly-forged sword illuminating their path as they made their way back to the others.

Chapter Eleven: A Revelation to a Decision

The ambience of the Nebula Sanctum filled the space, punctuated only by the low, ambient swirl of starlight projections shifting overhead. The mood was momentarily still, the tension of earlier conversations now tapering into a calm lull as the group awaited King and Markus Star's return from the forgery chambers. Yet, even amidst the calm,

Vaileth's eyes soon caught on something—or rather, someone—who didn't quite share in that stillness.

Atlas was pacing in uneven circles near one of the crystalline walls, his fingers twisting together in a silent rhythm of nervous energy. Every few seconds, he'd glance toward the corridor where King had left, then back to the floor, lips pressed tightly together in a line that barely concealed the worry bubbling inside him. Vaileth, lounging against a curved support beam with her arms crossed and her usual laidback air about her, tilted her head slightly. Her gaze lingered on Atlas longer than a glance should have. She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, pushing off from the beam with a subtle sigh.

She crossed the room with a casual stride, she didn't rush him, didn't intrude. She just came to a stop a few steps in front of him and folded her arms again, this time in a more thoughtful posture. "You're going to wear a trench on my floor," she said lightly, her tone was playfully dry but not unkind.

Atlas blinked and stopped mid-step, as if caught in the middle of something forbidden. He glanced up at her nervously, a small guilty look flickering over his face. "Sorry," he murmured. "I'm just... waiting for King." Vaileth raised a brow. "Figured as much." Her expression softened. "You seem... a bit more than just impatient, though."

They hesitated, then nodded. "I just..." Atlas paused, trying to find the words. "I always get nervous when he's away. Even if it's just for a little while..."

Vaileth let out a soft, knowing hum. She tapped a finger against her chin. "You two seem pretty close."

Atlas perked up a little, as though grateful someone noticed. "Yeah. We are. King and Luz... they're both really important to me. Ever since we met... they've always been there for everything. Even when I didn't know how to ask for help."

There was something vulnerable in the way he spoke, a fragility just beneath his voice that Vaileth didn't miss. She saw it for what it was not weakness but deep-rooted attachment. "They didn't treat me like I was just some broken thing," he went on, quieter now. "Or some weapon. They saw me, they never used me. Even when I didn't know who I was. Luz helped me find pieces of myself I thought I'd lost forever. And King... he makes me feel safe. Like I have a family... for once."

Vaileth remained silent, watching him carefully. She didn't smile, but the warmth in her eyes deepened. "But lately..." Atlas looked down, twisting the hem of his sleeve between his fingers. "I keep getting scared. What if I lose them? What if something happens, and I'm alone again? I know it sounds childish—" they immediately stopped speaking. Vaileth asked Atlas softly, "Hey, are you okay?" Atlas replied, "Yeah- It's just- I'm sorry."

Vaileth's gaze lingered on Atlas long after he finished speaking. There was a weight to his words that settled in her chest, familiar and sharp like the echo of an old scar. His fear wasn't born of childish insecurity but it was the kind of fear that only bloomed after real, devastating loss. She tilted her head slightly, the more she watched him, the more something inside her twisted—not out of pity, but out of recognition. She had seen this before, in others, and in the mirror: that desperate grasp at something—someone—that made the world feel less like it was crumbling.

This wasn't just about friendship. Atlas' attachment to Luz and King wasn't some surface-level bond. No, Vaileth saw it now—clear as the stars etched into the sanctum walls. They were his tether. His last thread of stability, of love, of safety.

A thought flickered at the edge of her mind, one she hesitated to act on. But after another moment of silence, she stepped closer carefully and cautiously. Her voice, when she spoke, was softer than usual, stripped of its usual sarcasm and teasing bite.

"Atlas..." she said softly, enough to draw his attention without startling him. "Can I ask you something?"

He turned toward her, wary but listening. "I've been around long enough to know what it looks like when someone's holding themselves together by a thread." Her tone was calm, careful. "And I think... Whatever happened to you, it wasn't just about loss. I think someone hurt you. Someone close..."

Atlas stiffened slightly, his lips parting in a quiet breath. "I'm not asking to pry," Vaileth continued, more gently now. "But if you'll let me... I can look. Not everything, just a memory. One of the recent ones. I can find the truth, if you're okay with that. But only if you want me to."

Atlas looked torn. His mouth opened, but no words came. Instead, he turned his eyes toward Luz, who stood nearby, having overheard the exchange. She gave him a soft, encouraging smile, one that radiated the calm only Luz could offer. "It's okay, Atlas," she said. "Vaileth won't hurt you. You're safe."

He hesitated a moment longer, then slowly nodded. "Okay," he whispered.

Vaileth stepped forward, her movements deliberate and delicate. She raised both hands and placed her palms gently on either side of his head. Her touch was cool, but not cold—it was calming in a strange way. Her eyes fluttered shut as she whispered an incantation under her breath, one meant for memory-seeking, one she hadn't used in a very long time.

And then—

A rush of color, sound, pain.

She saw it. Not just the moment it happened but the silence before it. The sterile white of a cosmic chamber. The pressure of invisible restraints holding Atlas in place. A voice—two voices—echoing around him, both cruel and familiar. And then light. Blinding, burning light, tearing through him.

His screams echoed in her ears, but worse than that was the look in his eyes: not fear, but betrayal. A betrayal that carved itself into the core of his being. She saw the ones who did it; The Archivists.

Her breath caught in her throat as the realization hit her, The Archivists were his siblings. And they had drained his Star Magic with no remorse, no hesitation. They had left him broken and powerless.

The vision faded, and Vaileth's eyes snapped open, pupils dilated with horror. She staggered back a step, her palms trembling as they left his temples.

Atlas was already hugging himself, eyes wet, shoulders tense like he expected judgment or worse. There was no anger on Vaileth's face. Only grief and something far deeper—guilt. Her expression, for once, held no pretense of sarcasm or laidback ease. Only raw, aching sorrow.

"You..." she whispered. "You were just a kid." she added, "I didn't know," she said quietly, more to herself than to anyone else. "I didn't know they were your siblings..."

The silence that followed was thick but not empty. It was a silence that held—it held grief and understanding, it also held the delicate tension of two people quietly recognizing the bruised mirror between them.

Vaileth exhaled slowly, she didn't speak right away, as she needed a moment.

Atlas soon sat quietly on the edge of a bench, his hands clasped tightly in his lap, his legs swinging faintly—like a child unsure whether to run or stay. Obviously he didn't choose to run, so instead he waited. There was a tension in his shoulders, a hesitant glance upward as if preparing for rejection, or worse... pity. However, that wasn't what Vaileth wanted to offer.

She walked over, slower this time. Not as a mage, not as a former mentor of the Archivists, not as someone from a grander age of magic but just as herself. A woman worn down by years of silence and scars that still whispered in the dark. And now, someone who had truly seen him not by glancing.

"Hey," she finally said, her voice softer than before, but still laced with her casual bluntness. "Mind if I get down here with you?"

Before Atlas could answer, Vaileth eased herself into a crouch, then a full kneel so that her eyes were level with his. Her knees popped slightly with the motion, and she winced. "Ugh—yeah, this is why I don't do the whole mentor pose very often."

"You know..." she started, her voice softer than usual but still colored with her usual wryness, "they got both of us."

Atlas blinked. "What?"

"The Archivists." She gave a short laugh, one that didn't reach her eyes. "They betrayed you because they think you're insignificant in their eyes. They betrayed me because of belief." She added. "I thought I was guiding and teaching them. Preparing them to be

better than me but I ended up creating monsters who thought control was wisdom and domination was balance."

She looked at him, meeting his eyes without flinching. "They used you because of what you've become. They threw me away because I wouldn't become what they wanted."

Atlas's mouth parted slightly. He hadn't expected that. He had spent so long feeling like the only one—like the world revolved around the gravity of his own pain. But now, sitting before him, was someone who bled in the same colors. Whose scars didn't match, but mirrored his in their purpose. "I..." he started, voice fragile, "I didn't know."

"Course you didn't, starlight," Vaileth replied gently. "That's the whole trick of it." She continued "But here's the thing, they failed to erase what makes you strong."

Atlas's brows pinched slightly in confusion.

"They drained your magic. Took everything they could from you. But they didn't take your heart, Atlas," she said. "You still care. You still hope. You still reach out to people like Luz and King, and cling like hell even when you're terrified of being left behind."

He flinched but Vaileth offered a small, fond smile, "That there is stubborn, cosmic-level willpower."

Atlas stared at her, stunned into stillness. "You're stronger than any of your siblings," she continued. "Even without your powers. Because strength isn't in how bright you shine—it's in how long you keep shining, even when someone tries to snuff you out."

Those words, sincere and unwavering, struck deeper than he expected. For once, he didn't feel like the fragile thing in the corner, the burden to protect. He felt—seen. Not as a victim. But as someone who had survived something terrible and kept moving forward. A survivor. For a long moment, Atlas didn't say anything. He just stared at her while his face shifted. The hollow, helpless fear that had defined his posture for a while... it began to bend. Not into arrogance or bravado but into something sturdier and quieter.

And then, softly, so softly it might have been missed, he spoke. "I'm sorry... for what they did to you," Atlas said.

Vaileth blinked, as the words hit harder than she expected. She'd spent so long burying her pain beneath smirks and shrugs and sarcastic quips, she'd forgotten what it felt like to have someone acknowledge it. No excuses or pity but just... a simple, genuine sorry. Her throat tightened as she hadn't realized how much she needed to hear that. "...Thanks," she said, her voice just above a whisper. She gave him a small nod, as if sealing a silent pact between them. "That... means more than you think kiddo."

They sat in quiet stillness for a breath or two but something had changed. The energy between them had shifted, no longer mentor and child. No longer a cosmic elder and a fallen star. Just... two people who were survivors in the end. Two mirrors of the same reflection

Vaileth tapped a finger against her knee, then pointed it toward him. "You know kid, I hope you know that you still got that spark, especially at your age. That thing that makes people believe things can change by taking on opportunities to do so."

Atlas tilted his head, curious.

She rose to her feet slowly, exhaling as her knees cracked a little. "Which is why... I'm done standing on the sidelines."

He looked up as his brows lifted slightly. "I'm in," she said simply. "I'm going to help you all to stop the Archivists... whatever it takes. I'll do what I can to undo the very mistakes I've caused."

Atlas stared at her with wide eyes but no longer just full of fear. Something else was in them now, the beginning of belief. "Really?"

Vaileth smirked, hands resting on her hips. "Told you. You've got stubborn willpower. Turns out, it's kinda contagious!"

Atlas smiled, his smile was small but it was real. And for the first time in a long while, neither of them felt entirely alone.

Soon the low crunch of boots against the dry soil signaled the approach before the group came into view. Markus Star emerged first, his usually pristine uniform smudged with soot and streaked with the dull metallic dust of the Forgery. He carried himself with that

same air of composed regality, though his expression betrayed a hint of satisfaction beneath the soot. Clutched tightly in his hands was the newly-forged weapon: a short, sturdy sword. The blade glowed faintly with quiet potential. Just behind him trailed King—his stubby limbs carrying him with a bounce that was equal parts pride and nerves.

They had made it back.

Atlas's head snapped up the moment he caught sight of them, and his reaction was immediate. With a sound that was half a gasp and half a cry of relief, he rushed forward and threw his arms around King in a tight embrace. He didn't say a word, he didn't need to. The way their fingers trembled against the back of King's back, the way his eyes clenched shut and his shoulders relaxed, it said everything. King returned the hug without hesitation, his short arms barely wrapping around Atlas's middle, but his presence alone was grounding.

Luz's eyes immediately went to King and, more notably, the sword he carried. "Wait—hold on..." she said, blinking. "Is that—? You actually did it?"

King looked up at her, a sheepish grin forming beneath the ivory mask of his skull. "I, uh... yeah. I did." However, after a moment, he soon puffed his chest in pride for his accomplishment and gave out a much more confident answer, "You know what? Yeah, I actually did! I did that!"

Luz's face lit up like a festival lantern. Without hesitation, she rushed over and scooped him into a warm, gentle hug, peppering his skull with playful nuzzles. "I'm so proud of you, you little bonehead!"

"Ahhh! Stop!!" King laughed, the sound lighter than it had been in months. For a long time, he had been afraid of using his powers, of what they could attract, of what they meant. But here and now, in the warm safety of Luz's arms, that fear didn't feel so suffocating, it felt... manageable. For the first time since Orion's threat, King didn't see a weapon to be feared, he saw a tool of protection, purpose, and choice. King's shoulders relaxed at her touch. That old gnawing dread that his powers only ever brought ruin and fear seemed to soften. Being in Luz's arms, being told not that he was powerful, but that he was loved—that was the reminder he needed.

From behind them, Vaileth chuckled lightly, arms lazily folded but expression warm. "Now that was adorable. You three are like the world's most chaotic, overpowered found family."

King turned to her with a tilt of his skull. "And you didn't run off after all that bonding stuff?"

Vaileth smirked. "Me? Run? Please. If I ran every time emotions got messy, I'd never get anything done. Besides..." Her gaze softened as it fell on Atlas, "...someone's got to make sure this kid doesn't implode from feeling too much at once."

Atlas smiled again, a little more freely this time.

Markus, having caught up, eyed the group and gave a nod of approval. "Looks like things went better here than I expected."

"Long story short? I'm emotionally compromised and signed up for war but I'm not complaining!" she said. Vaileth soon spoke softly, "I'm just glad I'm able to have an opportunity to do what's right for once." She soon then asked her friend, "Sooo Mark, what's next? Is that all you wanted to do?"

Markus replied, "Well, forging the sword was just the first part of the plan. The second part is where our actual plan begins. We have the intention to head to Astralis Prime, from there, we must meet with the Council of Arbora to give them the Celestine Compass in order for it to be safeguarded in their hands. The Archivists won't be able to find it once it's been given to the council." He soon gestured towards Luz, Atlas, and King, "Afterwards, we need to send Luz, King, and Atlas back home. It's become too dangerous for them to stay here in our realm for any longer." Markus concluded, "Once they get home and the order has obtained the Celestine Compass, the Archivists and their plot will be stopped. They won't be able to act when the convergence occurs."

"Astralis Prime..." Vaileth murmured, more to herself than anyone else. "Color me impressed, this plan might actually work. If there's still a place left in the cosmos where hope breathes—it's there." she added, while cracking her neck. "Astralis Prime is as close to cosmic off-the-grid as it gets. The Council of Arbora won't just keep the Compass hidden—they'll make sure it vanishes from even the Archivists' dreams."

Her tone shifted when she turned to Luz, King, and Atlas. The smirk faded, replaced by something more sincere—quiet, thoughtful. "So. How's that sound to you three? Are you really ready to go back?"

Luz gave a small smile but her voice was steady. "Honestly? Yeah. I'm ready." She took a breath and continued, the words coming slower now, thoughtful and measured. "I know the Council of Arbora will keep the Compass safe, and that's huge. Without it, the Archivists will be fumbling in the dark. But... that doesn't mean we can just sit around. The Star Pieces in the Human and Demon Realm are still out there—somewhere—and we must find them soon! Going home means we're gonna protect it—before the worst can happen." She then crossed her arms loosely, she added in a soft yet quiet tone, "Although I won't lie... I miss home, like so so much. I really do. I miss my mom and Eda. I miss my friends, Willow, Gus, Hunter, and the others. I miss talking to Vee about literally everything. I miss holding Amity's hand like it's the best thing in the world." she chuckled quietly, Then she turned back to Vaileth, her expression much firmer now. "We've been through so much but I know where we need to be now."

King puffed up his chest a little, trying to present himself as the strong, confident Titan he was growing into but the flicker of emotion in his big eyes revealed the storm brewing underneath. "Yeah, same here," he said with a nod. He tapped his claw on his chin dramatically. "The Star Piece tied to the Demon Realm... it's probably connected to me somehow. It's my realm, my lineage. And if I don't take responsibility for that, who will? So yeah, we need to get it, hide it, and make sure no snooty space-wizard ever finds it." Then, despite the swagger in his tone, his voice dropped a little. "And besides... I miss Eda. And Lilith. I miss waking up to Hooty screaming the sunrise at us." He let out a tiny sigh and looked down. "I guess I just wanna feel like I belong again." He glanced toward Luz and Atlas, "At least, now we'll be able to."

Atlas had been quiet the entire time, he didn't speak right away, not until both Luz and King had finished. When he finally did, his voice was quiet, but full of emotion. "I don't have my magic anymore," he said, not with bitterness, but with quiet resignation. "When they took it from me... I thought I lost who I was. For so long, I thought being a Collector—having that power—was the only thing that made me... me." He looked up at Luz and King, and something warm sparked in his eyes. "But these two never saw me that way. They've never treated me like I'm broken. I'm still part of this team. Still loved." He smiled faintly, the edges of his voice lifting. "So yeah... I'm ready. I might not have

my star magic, but I've got something better. I've got them. And wherever they go, that's where I want to be."

Vaileth stepped forward slowly, she reached out and placed a hand lightly on Luz's shoulder, then King's horned head, and finally on Atlas's cheek with a tenderness only he had seen before. She said, "When you return home, you better find your Star Pieces and protect your realms. Not because it's a mission... but because it's your heart that leads you. And if the time comes, the final battle won't be won by magic alone." She concluded. "It'll be won by the ones who never stopped choosing hope. Even when everything else was taken from them."

The group stood a little taller now. Closer. The fractures between them, the wounds from past mistakes, were still there but they were beginning to heal. For the first time in weeks, the air didn't feel quite so heavy. There was a unity forming amongst them, not built from strategy or power, but from the simple, quiet choice to stay. To fight as one.

Chapter Twelve: An Ambush of Fate

The low hum of The Donati's engines echoed across the entrance of the Nebula Sanctum, a final call of departure. The ship casted blue thrusters across the reflective quartz flooring. Luz stood at the ramp with a tightened grip on her staff, watching the stars shimmer beyond the hangar shield. The moment felt tense, decisive. Hesperos adjusted his twin blasters at his hips, while Atlas walked close to Luz, despite being jittery, he was

also much more determined than before. King and Markus traded glances behind them, both acutely aware that this mission—this departure—meant the war was no longer looming in the distance but it had found them instead.

Vaileth Xar, unusually quiet, stood near the rear of the group as they boarded. Her eyes, a galaxy of emotion, never once left the compass secured within Markus' protective casing. There was a weight in the air—an unspoken knowing. This journey wasn't just a passage through space. It was the beginning of something irreversible.

As the crew began to settle aboard The Donati, the interior hummed with mechanical life. Gleaming control panels lit up in soft gradients of violet and blue, casting ambient light across the sleek, starship interior. The ship's central corridor curved outward like the inside of a crescent moon, its design elegant yet functional—clearly a vessel built for both diplomacy and war. Footsteps echoed briefly before being absorbed by the soft, enchanted flooring. Vaileth lingered near the back of the boarding ramp, her boots still hovering inches from the floor, as if she wasn't entirely sure she belonged. The faint sound of gears ticking and soft humming floated through the corridor, growing louder—almost melodic. Then suddenly, a series of flickering sparkles formed in the air like fireflies, converging into a ball of golden light that inflated like a balloon and—

"HIIIIIIII THERE, CREWFRIENDS! I missed you guys!" With a dramatic twirl of glittering particles, Starry zipped directly in front of Vaileth, spinning midair like a confused ceiling fan. Their five glowing arms flexed with theatrical flair as their voice boomed again. "Oooh, you must be the new crew member! I know that stoic, brooding look anywhere. You must be tragically haunted with a mysterious past and unfathomable cosmic power! Don't worry, I've got a playlist for that!"

Vaileth blinked slowly, while Starry didn't take her hint. They soon asked again, "Now let me guess—you're an ex-mentor who's grappling with deep guilt and a secret heart of gold, right? RIGHT?!"

Vaileth arched his brow, but she gave them a soft smile, "Well, aren't you the most enthusiastic Star Sprite I've seen."

Starry exclaimed with pride, "Of course I am ma'am!". Meanwhile, Hesperos chuckled softly, "Starry, mate, Vaileth is happy to see you too but give her some room will ya? Besides we have to leave quickly so please go back to your energy chamber to power up

our warp drive!" Starry confirmed the order, "Aye! Aye! Cap'!" Soon Starry zipped away and returned back into the chamber of where the warp drive was located.

Luz stepped up beside Hesperos at the control console, her eyes dancing over the array of switches, levers, and blinking panels with a mixture of awe and focus. Her hands hovered for a moment as if remembering a specific order from the last time they flew together. Then, without hesitation, she began flipping a row of toggles on the leftmost panel. Each switch gave a satisfying click, and a soft hum began to rise beneath their feet—the sound of The Donati awakening. "Starting primary ignition coils," Luz murmured to herself. Hesperos stood just to her right, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Alright, let's bring her where we need to go." He reached forward and pressed a series of buttons on a brass-rimmed interface that pulsed faintly with teal light. The internal lights of the cockpit dimmed for a moment, then shifted to a calming, blue hue as the ship adjusted to warp preparation mode.

Elsewhere in the ship, the faint, energetic hum grew deeper. In the heart of the warp chamber, Starry had returned to the warp core. Their glowing form now hovered at the center of the containment ring, his light intensifying with each second. Threads of starlight streamed from his body and were absorbed into the warp engine's conduits, which crackled to life with radiant energy. Starry let out a chirpy "Woohoo!" as he spun like a comet, sending ripples of kinetic energy through the chamber.

"All systems are showing stable power flow," Luz confirmed, glancing down at the monitor as it displayed readouts of the ship's core. "Starry's output is at... whoa, one hundred and twenty percent? Is that safe?"

"Only when Starry's excited," Hesperos replied with a chuckle. "Which is often." Luz replied with humor in her tone, "Well, you're not wrong with that!"

The whole ship gave a low, harmonious thrum, as the stars outside the viewfinder shimmered subtly, as if responding to the tension in the air. "Alright," Hesperos said, gripping the ship's main lever. "Coordinates locked. Navigation matrix is clear. We're set to jump!" He looked over at Luz, his tone softening for a moment. "You ready for this mate?" Luz nodded, a mix of nerves and purpose flickering behind her eyes. "Let's go."

Inside, the crew felt the subtle shift—the world going slightly weightless, timeless. The hum of the warp drive surrounded them like a lullaby sung by the stars themselves. It

wasn't just a jump across space; it was a moment suspended between worlds, carried by energy older than time. Luz let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding and looked over to Hesperos, then toward the others gathered near the navigation station. "We're on our way," she said quietly. For the first time in a long while, hope didn't feel like something they had to fight for. It felt like a direction forward.

The warp tunnel around The Donati shimmered like a river of living light, casting soft azure and lavender hues across the cockpit's glassy panels. Outside, spacetime bent in graceful arcs, forming a tunnel of radiant energy that hummed like a heartbeat. The ship glided smoothly within this slipstream, carried along by Starry's stellar essence and the careful navigation of Luz and Hesperos. For a time, all was calm but then, a series of sharp beeps broke the quiet.

Hesperos's hand darted across the console. His eyes squinted as he leaned in at the sudden string of diagnostics lighting up the main screen. "Huh... that's odd," he muttered, tapping a few switches to bring up a deeper scan.

"Anomalies," he said, his voice tightening. "A cluster of them, just outside our scheduled drop point. They weren't there before. Look—gravitational distortions, power signatures, and... what looks like faint energy pulses." Markus asked, "Could it be Warp Eels?"

Luz's eyes widened with concern, as her brows lifted upward. She tapped into the ship's readings herself, her fingers flying across the controls. "These aren't natural, are they?"

"No," Hesperos confirmed grimly. "It's artificial. I'm not entirely sure but it seems like someone or something is waiting for us."

By now, the others had gathered near the front of the bridge, drawn in by the rising tension. King walked up to the glass console beside Luz, as his tail waved anxiously. "Wait, are you saying there's something wrong? Where are we going? Because we kinda don't have time for surprises right now."

Atlas stood near the doorway, his expression cautious but composed. "Could it be the Archivists?" he asked, quietly. He added to his question, "Could it be The Grand Huntsman?"

Markus Star, spoke as he leaned forward to the ships control console. "We can't ignore this. If something's blocking our route, we need to find out what it is."

A heavy silence fell over the cockpit as Hesperos turned back to the helm, then gave a reluctant nod. "We reroute. I'll shift our course five degrees off-axis to avoid a direct drop into the anomaly. We'll exit warp a few clicks away—should give us enough distance to assess without being detected."

Luz's heart thudded in her chest, but she nodded. "Right. If it's trouble, we need to know what kind of trouble it is before it gets to us."

With a quick motion, Hesperos recalibrated the warp path. "Brace yourselves lads," he called. "Shifting trajectory now!"

The warp tunnel around them flickered erratically as the ship twisted in its lane. For a moment, the walls of starlight seemed to warp and convulse—then snap back into motion. A few seconds later, the tunnel ahead collapsed into a narrow funnel of spiraling light. With a sudden lurch, The Donati burst from warp.

The cockpit dimmed as the stars realigned and returned to their natural state but the sight before them stole everyone's breath. Floating in the vastness of space were dozens of ships—sleek, dark, and menacing in shape. Their hulls were plated with dark colored armor that reflected no light, giving them the eerie appearance of void-beasts drifting through starlight. Each vessel had the emblem of the Archive Collective on each side of their hull. The air in the cockpit felt heavier just looking at them. At the center of the formation hovered a bright colored yet massive ship. The fleet reassembled multiple crescent moons that moved in a synchronized pattern with precision and professionalism.

Hesperos breathed the name out like a curse. "The Eclipse."

Luz's stomach sank. "That's the Grand Huntsman's ship..." King looked worried, and he soon exclaimed, "Great. Just what we needed. A giant evil armada blocking the road to where we need to go!" He said sternly yet with a tone of fear in his words.

Atlas stepped forward, their voice quiet but filled with dread. "They were waiting for us... weren't they?" Vaileth's gaze was sharp as a dagger. "No. They weren't waiting. They were searching. We just so happened to stumble into their net."

The team stood frozen in the dim blue light of the cockpit, staring at the fleet that now loomed between them—an army of silence, dread, and shadow ready to strike.

Luz swallowed hard, her fingers tightening on the control panel. This wasn't just a detour, this was warspace.

Meanwhile, on board The Eclipse, the command deck thrummed with anticipation. The Grand Huntsman stood at the center of it all—still remaining tall, still, and cloaked in his flowing robes. His helm turned slowly toward the vast expanse of space itself before the command window. From this vantage, the darkness of it was broken only by the eerie outlines of his own warships, arrayed like chess pieces across the void and there in the cosmic abyss, was The Donati.

The Huntsman's breath hissed out through the vocal modulator in his helm, more exhale than sound—measured, cold, and laced with irritation upon seeing the small ship.

"They're here," he said flatly, his voice layered with synthetic distortion, like a chorus speaking through one throat. "The fugitives... and the unholy spawn."

Around him, his lieutenants tensed. One of them, who was a star sprite, wore a white uniform with gold accents, while their head was a red crescent, which they only had one eye. They stepped forward, bowed in salute. "Your orders, my star?"

For a long moment, the Grand Huntsman said nothing. His hand lifted slowly and hovered above the control node built into the floor of the command bridge. A field of light bloomed from it—illuminating The Donati's coordinates and trajectory.

He lowered his fingers. "Unleash the Starfighters." He commanded with authority.

The command echoed through the ship, relayed from bridge to bay in a cascade of cold efficiency. Deep within The Eclipse, the war engines rumbled to life. Vast hangar doors peeled open along the undersides of multiple vessels in the fleet, revealing rows upon rows of the sleek, jagged ships—Starfighters—hovering within their magnetic bays. They resembled stars sculpted from machinery, each one tipped with twin arc cannons and a pulsating energy core embedded at their centers.

Their pilots, wearing white armor with neural interfaces laced through their spines, climbed into cockpits as sirens pulsed red. No words were spoken. There was only motion—trained, deliberate, and merciless.

Within seconds, the first wave detached from their carriers, shooting out into the void like arrows loosed from a drawn bow. Dozens followed, then hundreds, forming a sweeping swarm that curved through space in synchronized formation.

From the command deck, the Grand Huntsman watched with quiet satisfaction as his forces surged forward. The space between The Eclipse and The Donati—once empty—was now alive with movement.

"Box them in," he ordered darkly. "Cripple the ship. Do not destroy it. I want them alive." He leaned forward slightly, watching the screen as the Starfighters bore down on their target like a tidal wave of shadows. "They thought they could slip past our domain," he murmured. "They've only run straight into their end."

The first tremor hit The Donati like a gut punch—subtle at first, just a shudder along the bulkheads—then followed by the unmistakable, shrill whine of energy blasts scraping across the shields. The ship's interior lights flickered for a moment before stabilizing, but everyone on board felt the shift. From the cockpit, Hesperos Holmes cursed under his breath, while his eyes directed rapidly across the control panels now sparking to life with red alerts. "Incoming!" he barked, yanking the flight yoke to the left as warning sirens began to blare throughout The Donati. The ship veered sharply, narrowly avoiding a barrage of plasma fire that streaked just past the starboard side. The viewport lit up in chaotic bursts of blue and gold as dozens—hundreds—of Starfighters closed in like a collapsing net.

Luz didn't hesitate. "Battle stations now!" she shouted, already sprinting toward the dorsal turret access hatch. "King—come on!"

"On it!" King shouted, racing after her on all fours, his claws tapping against the floor as he made a beeline for the ventral turret pod on the opposite side. His eyes burned with determination. "Let's show 'em what we can do!"

From the pilot's seat, Hesperos kept his hands firm on the controls, his fingers danced across the toggles and dials with the precision of a conductor mid-symphony. He toggled

the weapon systems and activated the primary frontal cannons, which were twin barrels that extended from The Donati's bow with a mechanical hiss. "Starry—reinforce forward shields and balance the power grid!" he ordered. "Luz, King—cover our flanks!"

Luz slid into the left turret control pod, strapping herself in and gripping the targeting handles. The holographic interface blinked to life before her, tracking incoming fighters in glowing red trails. "Oh-ho yes, time to get flashy!" she grinned, teeth bared, slipping her goggles on, and squeezed the triggers—twin bolts of energy spat outward, vaporizing a lead Starfighter in a flash of light.

On the right side of the ship, King's claws clenched the turret controls. "This one's for Atlas!" he snarled, blasting another fighter out of the sky. A moment later, three more looped around, firing twin plasma bursts that rocked the ship violently. "Whoa! Okay, ow! Gotta be careful, gotta be careful!"

Markus Star staggered into the cockpit, hands braced against the doorframe. "What can I do?!" he asked urgently. "Bottom turret!" Hesperos called, veering the ship hard to avoid a cluster of pursuing fighters. "Starboard access hatch! Go!"

Markus didn't need to be told twice. He bolted through the narrow corridor, as his boots slammed against the floor, while his heart was pounding. As he slid into the bottom turret seat, the control panel flickered to life. Outside the viewport, enemy ships darted like agile and relentless hornets. He gritted his teeth and opened fire, soon there were blasts streaking from the underbelly cannon and clipping the wing of a Starfighter, sending it spiraling into another before both detonated in a brilliant fireball.

Back in the cockpit, Hesperos weaved through the chaos, flipping switches with one hand while the other adjusted the throttle. Starfighters streaked past them in tight formations, their movements too coordinated, too practiced. "They're herding us," he growled, eyes narrowing. "Trying to box us in for a kill shot."

"Not if I can help it!" Luz shouted through the comms, pivoting the turret and lighting up a squad of ships that had been circling around the rear. "Tell me where to shoot!"

"I've got ten at four o'clock!" King called out. "Wait—make that fourteen!"

The turrets fired in concert—pulses of color painting the stars in controlled fury. Enemy fighters exploded in bursts of flame and debris, their remnants spinning away like shattered glass. The dogfight intensified with every passing second—twisting, swerving, dodging. The space around The Donati became a whirling ballet of light and destruction.

Though their efforts weren't enough. No matter how many they shot down, more kept coming. For every fighter they incinerated, two more seemed to emerge from the flanks of The Eclipse's vast fleet. The swarm was endless.

Inside the ship, its systems were beginning to feel the strain. Its shields buckled under repeated impact, sparks flew from cracked consoles, and the hull groaned with the pressure of repeated near-misses. Hesperos's jaw clenched as he pulled the ship into a sharp corkscrew maneuver, spiraling between two enemy formations. "We can't take much more of this! They're trying to wear us down!"

"Then we don't let them!" Luz shot back, voice trembling with adrenaline but fierce as ever. "We're not going down without making them!"

Markus, sweat dripping down his temple, picked off another fighter and muttered to himself. "C'mon, hold together. Just a little longer..."

Through the chaos, the shadow of The Eclipse loomed larger—its massive silhouette casting an oppressive darkness across the battlefield. The Grand Huntsman was closing in. And yet, aboard The Donati, battered and outnumbered, the crew refused to yield. Each of them—pirate, witch, star people, titan, knight—stood their ground with fire in their hearts.

Amid the chaos of the battle, The Donati rocked once more as another blast struck its weakening shields, and sparks cascaded from an overhead conduit in the cockpit. Inside, everyone was focused, locked into survival mode—until a quiet, purposeful presence moved toward the aft corridor.

Vaileth Xar.

She was silent and composed, Vaileth moved with a calm that contrasted the alarm and urgency around her. She passed through the back threshold of the ship without a word, stepping into the decompression chamber. The doors sealed behind her with a hiss. Inside

the chamber, her eyes closed. Her chest rose with a deep, steady inhale then she exhaled, and the faint glow of her aura bloomed into something much more. When the outer hatch opened and exposed her to the vacuum of space, she didn't flinch.

With a single, gravity-defying stride, she launched herself into the void.

The Donati's external cameras caught the image first—Vaileth suspended in open space, backlit by a sea of stars and an ever-growing wave of Starfighters that buzzed through the blackness like a swarm of mechanical locusts. She hovered mid-air, weightless, her arms slowly raising, palms open. From her fingertips, tendrils of incandescent starlight twisted outward like serpents made of celestial fire. Constellations blinked to life around her, swirling into patterns far too ancient and intricate for mortal minds to comprehend. For a moment, everything slowed. Even the Starfighters paused, sensing the shift.

And then—

Detonation.

A thunderous surge of light erupted from Vaileth's body, faster than thought, brighter than any supernova. The starlight struck the first formation of fighters like a tidal wave of divine wrath. Ships vaporized mid-flight, incinerated in a fraction of a second. Pilots didn't even have time to scream. One after another, the entire wave of Starfighters disintegrated. Fire trails and twisted shrapnel cascaded across the void as the shockwave radiated outward, bathing the battlefield in burning light. Even the mighty Donati was momentarily rocked by the force.

Still at the left turret, Luz stared at the sight of the destruction that had taken place, she was wide-eyed and slack-jawed. "Wh-What... was that...?" she asked cautiously.

King's turret controls went limp in his grasp. "I-I- don't know," he whispered. "I don't even want to know what that was honestly..."

Markus Star, still at the bottom turret, could hardly tear his gaze away from the viewport. "She... she just wiped them out. All of them."

Up ahead, the Grand Huntsman stood aboard the bridge of The Eclipse, his clawed hand frozen mid-command. For the first time in countless eons, he felt something cold slip down his spine.

Fear.

His fleet's elite Starfighters—engineered for speed, resilience, and precision—now floated as wreckage across the stars without any warning or resistance, the only thing that had been present was obliteration.

He grit his teeth and snarled. "That's impossible... there is no one else besides The Archivists who are capable of unleashing such destruction... unless..." He soon realized before quickly blurting out their idea, "It must be the traitor! The great deceiver who discovered The Titans!"

Back in open space, Vaileth hovered in silence, her arms slowly lowering as the light around her began to fade. Her expression remained impassive but her eyes—those distant, storm-swept eyes—spoke of exhaustion and sorrow. The toll of such magic weighed heavy both in body and in soul.

Inside The Donati, the crew tried to steady themselves. The tension that followed wasn't relief. It was awe, dread, and understanding. Vaileth Xar wasn't just a mystic. She wasn't just a mentor or an ancient being from a forgotten time. She was a weapon—one made from the core of the cosmos itself. And now everyone, friend and foe alike, had seen it.

Aboard The Eclipse, silence had curdled into fury. The bridge lights cast a crimson hue over the Grand Huntsman's shadowed form as he stormed down the corridor, every heavy footstep echoing with restrained violence. The destruction of his entire Starfighter fleet—accomplished within mere seconds by one woman—gnawed at his pride like acid. Even though his face was covered underneath his hood, deep down, his eyes burned with unyielding hatred. His jaw clenched so tightly that it seemed on the verge of fracturing. The doors hissed open before him as he approached the cannon chamber, a vaulted metallic corridor lined with enormous mechanisms of destruction. The main deck held the ship's star cannon—a weapon so massive and volatile it had only ever been used in dire circumstances. A weapon of last resort but this was no longer strategy, instead this was vengeance.

He ascended the steps to the primary firing platform, as his fingers hovered over the glowing control panel. The interface came alive beneath his touch. Targeting systems flared, homing in on the distant glint of The Donati, still drifting among the debris of fallen fighters.

"Let's see you shield them from this," the Huntsman muttered coldly. With a final slam of his palm against the trigger console, the cannon ignited.

From the underside of The Eclipse, a massive chamber unfolded like the jaws of a predator. Light swelled in its heart—concentrated, pulsing, unstable—and then it launched. A blinding beam of condensed energy shot across the void, shrieking through space like a lance hurled by a god.

Outside, Vaileth, still suspended in the aftermath of her own destructive spell, felt it before she saw it. Her senses, attuned to the harmony and disharmony of the stars, picked up on the fracture in the cosmic rhythm. It was like a dissonant chord strummed in the fabric of space itself—a reverberation that rippled through her body, turning the warmth of her magic cold in her veins, as something was wrong.

Her head snapped toward the looming outline of The Eclipse, that monstrous vessel now ominously poised in the dark expanse. The airless silence around her was suddenly filled with a low, rising vibration—like the tremor before an earthquake, except it came from nowhere and everywhere all at once. Her sharp eyes caught the pulse of energy blooming beneath the enemy ship. A moment of horrifying recognition passed through her. She'd seen such cannons before—on ancient battlegrounds between planets and realms, weapons powerful enough to crack moons and scatter fleets. And now, one was aimed directly at her dear friends.

There was no time to think, only to act. Soon with a surge of will, she thrust both hands outward, palms open, and let the magic erupt from her once more. This time it wasn't a weapon—it was a wall. Starlight spun into a radiant, dome-shaped shield before her, encompassing The Donati in its celestial embrace. The runes on her skin blazed white-hot, and her eyes became twin comets.

Then came the impact as the beam collided with the shield in a violent crescendo of force and light. The explosion that followed didn't just illuminate space—it devoured it, for one blinding second. A blinding eruption that turned the void into a sea of white, lighting up

the distant moons and casting shadows across the husks of wreckage. Inside The Donati, everyone was thrown back. Warning sirens wailed, lights blinked, and for a moment, all gravity seemed to bend and twist from the force of the blast. Luz gripped the console, her eyes squeezed shut as the brightness overwhelmed the viewport.

And then—just as quickly as it had come—darkness returned. A haunting, suffocating stillness took its place. Out in the cold vacuum, the shield dissipated like dust scattering into the stars. And Vaileth, her form trembling and spent, drifted aimlessly, unconscious, her arms slack and her body limp as she floated weightlessly away from The Donati.

"Vaileth!" Atlas's voice broke through the silence inside the ship, panicked and sharp. He had watched the entire thing occur, from where she used her Star Magic to defend The Donati by destroying the multiple Starfighters and shielding the blast from The Eclipse.

King scrambled to the viewport, eyes wide with alarm. "She's not moving!"

"Her magic... It shielded us," Markus breathed, his voice low, full of awe and horror.

Luz exclaimed with worrisome and urgency upon seeing her friend float unconsciously in space, "We have to get her! Hurry!"

"On it!" Hesperos yelled. Hesperos gritted his teeth as he stabilized the ship's thrusters, tilting the vessel into a slow, careful maneuver toward Vaileth's limp form drifting amid the star-strewn wreckage. The silence was pierced only by the rapid beeping of proximity alerts and the occasional sharp hiss of steam from the engine room.

King clung to the console beside Luz, both of them watching the external cameras, their hearts pounding. Luz's knuckles tightened as she pressed a hand against the viewport, her eyes locked on Vaileth's fragile figure outside. "We're almost there," she murmured, almost like a prayer. "Just a little closer..."

Markus Star was near the rear exit, he had a tether cable in hand, and he was ready to launch into space the moment the airlock was cleared. His voice crackled over the intercom, "The hatch is primed. Once we're close enough, I'll bring her in!" but before they could close the distance—space itself twisted.

Without warning, a violent tremor rocked the ship. The tremor caused the stars outside to flicker strangely, warping as though something massive was displacing the very fabric of space. A sharp, metallic clang rang out through the hull like a bell of impending doom. Hesperos's eyes widened as he checked the scanners and then he saw him. The Grand Huntsman emerged from the black void ahead like a phantom conjured from the ether. His figure loomed, backlit by the cold light of The Eclipse, his armor glinting with threads of starlight. His presence was suffocating even across the distance, it was imposing yet seething with restrained fury. Even though his eyes were covered under the darkness of his hood, his head was positioned and locked onto The Donati with murderous intent.

Soon with a smooth, almost theatrical motion, the Huntsman raised both arms. In each hand, he gripped his iconic twin crescent blades—wicked weapons that shimmered with ancient power. He crossed them once before hurling them into the void. They spun through space with terrifying precision, blades slicing the vacuum in elegant, spiraling arcs. From the hilts, magical sigils pulsed to life, and in their wake, chains of brilliant starlight unfurled—long, serpentine strands of energy laced with cosmic geometric patterns. The chains moved like living things, their ends splitting and coiling until they lashed around the hull of The Donati. The impact was immediate as the entire ship jolted with such force that everyone aboard was nearly thrown from their stations. The sound of groaning metal echoed through the corridors as the chains tightened, slamming into the outer structure and wrapping around it like a predator claiming its prey. Sparks flew across the bridge as power flickered momentarily, screens glitching with static. Alarms screamed to life within the ship.

"We're caught!" Luz shouted, nearly losing her footing as The Donati lurched. "No, no, no!" Hesperos growled, struggling against the controls. "He's reeling us in!"

Outside, the Grand Huntsman hovered effortlessly, one gauntleted hand outstretched as the star-chains responded to his command. His expression was unreadable beneath his hood but his aura exuded satisfaction—such as when a predator had caught their prey.

However, he wasn't done, with a flick of his wrist a third chain surged from one of the crescent blades, arcing through space like lightning. It streaked toward Vaileth, who still floated unconscious in the aftermath of her own shield spell. The chain coiled around her midsection with a sickening snap of magical force, jerking her limp form violently from

her path and yanking her toward the Huntsman. Her limbs hung slack, her hair drifting behind her like a comet's trail as she was dragged closer to the cosmic hunter.

"No!" Atlas screamed, slamming his fists against the viewport. "Let her go!"

Markus swore loudly, rushing back to get his weapon to try to sever the chains. "Give me my sword now! We've got to break those binds!"

The Donati shuddered as the chains tightened. The engines howled in protest, but they couldn't break free—not without tearing themselves apart. They were being dragged into the belly of The Eclipse, toward whatever cruel fate the Grand Huntsman had planned.

Hesperos stood at the helm, one hand gripping the edge of the console. While the other hovered over a small compartment embedded in the floor just beneath the captain's chair—concealed, reinforced, and obscured from scanning. The Celestine Compass was stored inside in a new location. It pulsed faintly during the chaos that was occurring around them, a beacon of ancient power that was far too valuable to fall into enemy hands.

"Luz," Hesperos said quietly, never taking his eyes off the viewport, "we can't let him find it. No matter what happens next."

Luz nodded grimly, her fists clenched. "We won't."

The crew had come to the realization that they were surrounded, bound, and helpless but none of them were willing to let the Compass go without a fight.

Suddenly, a deep shudder rocked the ship from stem to stern. Panels burst in showers of sparks. The lights overhead flickered wildly before plunging into red emergency glow. The hull groaned again—this time higher-pitched, unnatural. No one needed to say it aloud, they all knew what was to occur.

"She's not going to hold," Hesperos murmured, panic creeping into his voice. "The structural integrity is too far gone... the pressure from the chains is causing our systems to fail... The Donati... she's not going to make it." He soon pressed a communicator button on the console, "Starry. Exit the chamber, this is it..." Starry's voice came through the intercom, "Oh... y-you sure captain?" Despite the amount of hesitancy that Hesperos felt,

he had no choice but to force himself to contend with the reality that was about to occur, "Yes mate." Starry's voice came out one last time, "Aye, Aye Captain."

Hesperos soon got up from his chair and stood at the center of the ship's living quarters, his hands trembling slightly as he reached out and gently brushed his fingers across the console. The controls still hummed faintly beneath his touch, like a tired friend trying to hold on just a little longer. Hesperos closed his eyes and inhaled deeply through his nose. "This ship... she's been my home. My family. She raised me when I had nowhere else to go. Kept me alive for so long. She carried me and Starry through nebula storms, pirate ambushes, and heists." His voice quivered.

Luz turned to him, her throat tight. "Hesperos..."

"I knew this day would come," he continued, his tone softening, filled with reverence and resignation. "Ships aren't immortal. Not even legends like this one. But stars above, I never thought I'd have to leave her like this."

He soon added with a smile yet he did his best to keep his composure from the sadness that was beginning to take over him, "Thank you, girl," he whispered, "For everything..."

For a moment, the ship responded—not with sound, but a gentle flicker of the overhead lights. A farewell blink. One last sign of acknowledgment. It was as if The Donati understood. That she, too, was saying goodbye.

The ship jerked again, dragged closer to the looming maw of The Eclipse's hangar bay. Pressure surged through the hull, causing loose panels to buckle and spark. Fire suppression foam began leaking from the walls in one of the back corridors. They were almost out of time. "Everyone," Hesperos said, turning to face the others, forcing calm into his voice, "get to the side chamber. When they board us, we don't talk and we don't give them the Compass. We act normal, got it?"

They all nodded grimly.

King clambered into Luz's arms while Atlas stood behind and held onto Luz. Hesperos turned away, but not before wiping at his eyes with the heel of his palm. Hesperos and Starry took one last glance around the cockpit—their cockpit—committing every light, every lever, every dent and scratch on the panels to memory.

Then with heavy steps, Hesperos turned and led his friends out, leaving the soul of The Donati behind. As they moved into the side chamber, the lights behind them dimmed, flickered... and held. The ship, once a rebel's pride and a starmap's legend, was ready to face her final voyage not with fear but with quiet defiance.

Chapter Thirteen: The Huntsman's Court.

The groaning, sparking wreck of The Donati was dragged across the obsidian-lined hangar floor of The Eclipse, the massive flagship of the Grand Huntsman, its shadow

casting a gloom over what remained of the once-proud vessel. The ship was now nothing more than a broken husk of scorched metal and shattered glass. She emitted the occasional flicker of dying light across its hull—each weaker than the last. The hangar echoed with the sound of dripping fluid and crackling circuits, signs of a vessel pushed far beyond its limits. It was clear The Donati would never fly again following that encounter. From the outside, the ship was a ruin of artistry and violence—its once-sleek silver-orange-and-cyan frame was now torn asunder by deep gashes and seared plating. The ship was covered with impact craters that were all over its hull like battle scars. One of its stabilizer fins had been sheared clean off; the other hung loosely by tangled, frayed cables that sparked and hissed with unstable electricity. The cockpit window was blown out entirely, leaving jagged shards of reinforced glass clinging to a fractured frame. Blackened scorch marks traced the paths where energy blasts had raked the ship's surface. Then there were the deep slashes from the crescent blades that left parts of the vessel hollowed and exposed—its skeletal internal structure laid bare to the cold artificial light of the hangar. The proud crest of the Donati was charred, nearly unrecognizable beneath layers of ash and ruin.

The ship hissed one final time before the forward hatch creaked open with the noise of its hydraulics. From within the broken craft, Luz stepped out first, her hands slowly raised above her head, each movement cautious, as her staff was in her hands. Behind her followed King, his eyes darted nervously, while his paws were raised as well. His fur was singed in places, and his golden collar tag bore a new crack from the impact. Atlas stumbled next, their legs trembling as he exited the wreckage, while his face was pale with fear and dried tears streaking across his cheeks. Despite his surrender, his gaze still remained on Vaileth's unconscious body dangling on a separate chain, his mouth parted into a silent gasp.

Markus Star emerged silently behind them, his usual charm replaced with a grim, unreadable expression. While he held the very sword that he and King had forged together tightly in his right hand. Then came Hesperos Holmes—his coat scorched at the edges, while he dropped his dual blasters to further prove his surrender. He would soon place his hands up but his gaze never left the ship behind him. His mouth twitched, as his jaw clenched with a grief too heavy to hide. Starry followed last, their usual flamboyant gait reduced to a numb shuffle. Their overall form drooped under the invisible weight of loss and they hovered much closer to the ground due to the sadness they felt that weighed them down. Their eyes were also fixed on The Donati as if hoping—both desperately and foolishly—that the ship might somehow pull itself back together and fly one last time.

They stumbled slightly, catching himself against the ruined hull before turning to face their captors. Neither Hesperos nor Starry said a word but the devastation on their faces said everything. The twin crescent blades that had pierced it, still faintly glowing with residual star magic, hung suspended above like a grotesque trophy. The chains attached to them slithered and coiled with a life of their own, having completed their task of dragging both the ship and its crew into where they were needed. Dangling in one of those chains was the unconscious form of Vaileth Xar, her body still limp, the glow of her aurora dimmed to barely a flicker.

As Luz, King, Atlas, Hesperos, Markus, and Starry slowly moved away from the shattered remains of The Donati, the cold, echoing stillness of the hangar was shattered by a sudden wave of motion. Dozens of armored soldiers, clad in white shiny armor while their purple-gradient capes with small star patterns that gave it the appearance of the cosmos, waved behind them. While at the same time they darted from the surrounding shadowed alcoves. Their weapons, spears, swords, and magi-tek blaster rifles were raised and ready in their hands. Their boots thundered against the polished floor, synchronized with military precision, and the soft hum of their rifles powered up as they closed in with brutal efficiency.

The Archive Collective's insignia—an eye hovering over a vortex—gleamed coldly on each of their shoulder guards. Their helmets obscured their faces entirely, glowing visors scanning and analyzing with an artificial, predatory vision. Yet their helmets still had the different designs that were solely based off of the cosmic aesthetic of their realm. Several soldiers had star-shaped, ringed planet shaped, and crescent shaped helmets. Their formations honed from years of indoctrination and subjugation, the soldiers encircled the group in seconds, surrounding them in a tight radius near the smoking wreck of their ship. Each squad member moved with mechanical discipline, blocking off any conceivable escape route.

"Do not move!" one of them barked through a voice modulator, his tone sharp and authoritative, devoid of emotion. "You are now under the custody of the Archive Collective. Comply, or you will be forcibly restrained."

Several of the soldiers stepped forward, their rifles now aimed squarely at the group's heads and torsos. One raised a scanner, its pale blue light sweeping across Luz and the others with an ominous whirr as it captured their biometrics and identified each target. "Confirmed. High-priority fugitives located: Luz Noceda. King Clawthorne.

Atlas—formerly of the Collector line. Hesperos Holmes. Markus Star. Subject: Starry... flagged as an unregistered Star Sprite."

A tense silence fell as the group slowly raised their hands higher in compliance, their backs straightening with involuntary tension. Luz's fingers curled slightly, resisting the urge to summon her staff. King stayed close to her leg. Hesperos muttered something under his breath that was lost in the mechanical hum of the rifles, while Starry still remained hovering but they placed themselves behind Hesperos. Markus glanced around, as he had never seen this level of Collective enforcement firsthand and the way they moved, like a single mind split across many bodies, sent a chill down his spine. Atlas, meanwhile, looked between the soldiers with wide, terrified eyes, his breathing shallow. He would then stare toward Vaileth's unconscious form, as she was still suspended in the chains of the Huntsman across the hangar. The sight alone made his lip quiver and twitch—not out of fear for himself but for her. He soon shuffled closer to Luz and King, trying to disappear into their shadows, even as red targeting beams briefly hovered over his chest.

One soldier took a step closer, rifle still trained on Luz. "By decree of the Archivists, you are to be detained, processed, and delivered for judgment. Resistance is punishable by immediate execution." The threat hung in the air like smoke.

Despite their exhaustion, despite their wounds, no one from the group broke. They stood firm—silent, battered, but unyielding—as the Archive Collective tightened their circle around them, ready to deliver them into the cold, merciless grip of the stars.

"Stand down." out of nowhere, a stern and deep voice was heard from the far corner of the hangar. The simple command instantly made most of the soldiers place their weapons down in compliance. Soon a figure emerged from the far end of the hangar—they were a tall, sharply dressed man in a pristine white and gold Archive officer's coat. His face was chiseled, his expression smug, and his yellow eye glittered with the kind of self-importance that demanded attention. He was a familiar figure, a figure whose most notable trait was their head, it was the shape of a star, a blue colored one specifically. This figure was General Arulieus, one of the Archive Collective's most elite officers, and for the last two months, a specter of dread across the various worlds The Donati crew would flee to.

"Well, well..." Arulieus said, his voice silken with sarcasm. "The elusive fugitives finally dragged in by their tattered cloaks. I must say, this is a moment I've envisioned for some time. All that bluster. All those last-minute escapes. And for what? To be hauled in like broken toys." He smirked as he slowly approached, "How far the mighty have fallen."

General Arulieus took a slow step forward, his posture pristine, his hands still folded neatly behind his back. His tone was measured, precise—each word chosen like a brushstroke in a grand painting only he could see. "Do you know what always fascinated me about rebels?" he began smoothly, pacing before them as if lecturing a class of eager students. "It's not their courage—no, as that's too common for a trait to be interesting. Nor is it their persistence, however it is admirable in its futility. What truly intrigues me... is their belief in moral immunity. This notion that because you feel righteous, you are exempt from consequence."

He paused, turning his head just enough to make eye contact with Luz. "You've cloaked yourself in heroism, Luz Noceda. And yet, you carry with you the same trail of devastation that tyrants leave behind. Curious, isn't it?"

Arulieus moved his gaze to King, then Atlas, speaking now with a cool detachment. "A Titan. The fallen prince. You're children, yet you wield powers that once sculpted galaxies and entire civilizations, and yet here you are... chained in a corridor, brought low by your own sentimentality." He soon gestured towards Atlas, "As for you, you no longer have your powers. How pathetic." The statement alone only made Atlas feel saddened with himself, however, his friend King soon stood up for him, "Leave him alone! He's already dealing with so much!". Arulieus only gave him a cold response, "Oh hush up. You're going to bore me with your sentimentality."

He walked toward the smoldering remains of The Donati, letting his gaze linger for a moment as he addressed Hesperos and Starry without turning to them. "I will admit, I once admired the craftsmanship of this ship. Elegant, if inefficient. A shame it had to end this way—but art, like war, is defined by endings."

Finally, his eye settled on Markus. "And you... you're the most intriguing of all. A piece that didn't belong on the board, and yet here you are. You're bold, unfinished, and unfortunately... disposable. That weapon of yours won't save you..."

He turned his back to the group now, staring off toward the end of the hangar, where the command corridor loomed in regal menace. "You see," Arulieus continued, his voice just above a whisper, "the Archivists did not ascend by brute conquest alone. It was knowledge—understanding our enemies, their myths, their dreams, and their weaknesses. To crush a people, you do not simply strike their armies. You unravel their stories."

He pivoted slowly, his expression still placid, his eye sparkled beneath the pale lights above. "And now, I know your story. Every chapter. Every misstep. Which means I already know how it ends." Arulieus soon addressed the group once more while clasping his hands behind his back. "You should consider it an honor, really. To be personally turned over by me." He added, "Now that you have been captured under my fleet, I'd say the Archivists will be quite pleased." His lips curled into a smirk of smug triumph. "Perhaps I'll even be remembered as the one who brought salvation to the Empire again."

Before he could indulge further in his self-glorification, the towering form of the Grand Huntsman soon hovered above him, while he was still holding. His voice, deep and uncompromising, cut through Arulieus's monologue like a blade. "Enough of your prideful banter," he said sternly, which made Arulieus become visibly stiffened. "Report to my chamber," the Grand Huntsman growled, "and contact the Archivists, by telling them we've secured the fugitives. Afterwards, stand by for orders. Do not waste our time with your vanity."

Arulieus's jaw tightened ever so slightly, though he maintained a neutral smile. "Of course... Grand Huntsman," he said with forced grace, bowing just slightly. He turned to leave, but the flicker of disdain behind his eyes spoke volumes—there was no love lost between them. A rivalry clearly simmered just beneath the surface of the formalities.

As he began to walk away, Luz muttered under her breath, just loud enough to be heard, "Wow, a high-ranking officer? and one who is still taking orders like a lapdog... damn."

King snorted. "Must be nice, being a glorified errand boy. Hah!"

Arulieus paused mid-step, lips pressed into a thin line, but said nothing. He merely clenched his fist and continued toward the far corridor, disappearing behind a pair of heavy obsidian quartz doors.

No sooner had he vanished than a low groan broke the silence. Vaileth stirred, her body twitching faintly as she regained consciousness, her head lolling slightly before she opened her eyes and squinted against the cold artificial lighting of the hangar. Her breath was ragged, her body ached but her spirit remained unbroken.

The Grand Huntsman turned at once, his chains retracting her body toward him like a captured prize. He narrowed his head as he looked upon her. Recognition sparked, then hardened into fury. "You," he hissed.

Vaileth lifted her head slowly, forcing a smirk despite the pain. "Miss me?"

The Grand Huntsman stood still for a long moment, his looming frame casting a jagged shadow across the floor, chains rattling faintly like metallic breath. The years had aged him into something monstrous—once a scholar, now a priest of punishment draped in armor and zeal. "I never thought the stars would suffer your shadow again," he said finally, voice cold and sanctified. "Vaileth Xar... Curator of the Old Star Empire. Herald of the Heresy. The woman whose discovery desecrated our divine lineage and collapsed a civilization of perfection. What a vile twist of fate that you still draw breath."

Vaileth groaned as she propped herself up on one elbow, the dry blood on her lip cracking as she grinned. "Oh come on, Huntsy~. That's how you greet an old colleague? Not even a 'nice to see you' or a fruit basket you can offer to me?"

He ignored her. "Your betrayal was the origin of our ruin. You unearthed the truth of the Titans, those abominations born outside celestial law, and proclaimed them worthy of study. You wielded the Celestine Compass not as a tool of usefulness, but as a torch to set fire to everything sacred. You turned your knowledge against our people."

Vaileth's smile grew, "Yeah, and what a bonfire it was! Shame you were too busy polishing relics to understand the difference between worship and wisdom!"

"You spit on history," he snapped, stepping forward, "You defiled the Archivists' covenant. You left us for dead as the Empire fell to discord and division. Your hands—your heretic hands—ripped apart what took eons to preserve!"

She tilted her head with mock curiosity. "Preserve what? An empire too scared to evolve? A literal pantheon built on selective memory and ritualistic ego? Spare me the sanctity speech—I wrote half those scriptures, remember?"

The Grand Huntsman's crescent emblem flared. "Blasphemy and arrogance! You speak like the cosmos owes you indulgence for your sins."

"No," Vaileth said, her voice sharpening. "I speak like someone who saw what you refused to see, the truth that scared you so much. You wrapped it in chains and called it divine. You didn't just lose faith, you lost your mind!"

The Grand Huntsman's expression darkened further. "You speak of mockery, but your crimes are not forgotten! When I report your survival to the Archivists and we begin our course back to Celestialopolis, you will answer for what you've done! You will be punished—not for betrayal alone, but for your sacrilege against all we stood for." He leaned down towards her. "You are beyond salvation..."

She let out a dramatic sigh. "Well, that's one way to avoid a reunion." Vaileth raised her chin. "And yet, despite all your crusades, here I am—still breathing and still spitting in your sermon soup."

He snarled at that, stepping just inches from her now.

"You've become everything you once despised," she added, voice dropping to a hush meant only for him. "You were curious. Kind, even. But now... you're just another zealot with a god complex. You want to talk about desecration? Look in a mirror."

The Grand Huntsman stared at her, visibly trembling. His fingers twitched with the urge to tighten his chains—but he held back. Then a faint voice cracked through the tension. From the sidelines, Atlas let out a shaky breath. He rushed forward, panic blooming in his young, desperate voice. "Please, don't hurt her!" he cried, stepping in front of Vaileth despite his smaller form.

The Grand Huntsman turned his gaze to the star child. "You... You were meant to bring balance. You had a sacred duty to uphold on your siblings' behalf. You had the power to end the Titans and wipe out their unholy bloodline out of existence. And instead—you

played with them. You Befriended them. Now here you are, keeping the very last member of their wretched heritage as a pet!"

He sneered, looking from Atlas to King. "You will suffer as she will... For your weakness. For your betrayal."

Luz stepped forward, fists clenched, eyes blazing with rage. "If you lay a single finger on him, I swear I will fight you until my last breath!" King stood beside her, "Me too!"

However, the Grand Huntsman only calmly responded with, "Not before I have any say about it!" He would soon retract his attached blades from The Donati and he would soon twirl his blades in a sipping motion before aiming them towards the group. With a swift motion, the twin crescent blades would wrap themselves around Luz, King, Atlas, Markus, Hesperos, and Starry tightly. They were now caught in the chains of the Grand Huntsman, unable to move or fight back. "H-hey! Let us go!" yelled Luz, which was followed by King, "Hey!". The Grand Huntsman didn't respond. He turned, dragging them all forward with his star-forged chains, their magic pulling them like leashes. As the group stumbled to follow, bound and powerless, he led them deeper into the Eclipse's metallic bowels—toward the same massive set of doors that General Arulieus had entered into, the doors loomed ahead like the mouth of a beast. Within seconds, the Grand Huntsman and his group of prisoners entered through the doors instantly. A loud thud was heard when the two doors were closed. In the process, several of the guards seized their weapons; they seized Luz's staff, Markus' Titan sword, and Hesperos' twin dual blasters.

As they entered, the air changed immediately. The atmosphere was cool, sterile, and heavy with a silence that felt curated. The hallway stretched on endlessly, swallowed in a veil of darkness, and framed by towering pillars of obsidian veined with gleaming threads of quartz. These pillars were not merely structural—they were ceremonial. Their immense bulk was bound together by sweeping arches, each carved with intricate designs that curled and spiraled like flame licking through the void. The patterns were neither purely infernal nor celestial; they blended the aesthetics of fire and stardust—molten geometry infused with cosmic elegance, forming an architecture that felt both ancient and alien. These flame-like motifs that shimmered with hues of violet and deep indigo. The artistry was ancient and meticulous, a twisted reverence for something both celestial and corrupted.

As the group was ushered deeper into the corridor, it became evident that this was no simple passageway, it was a sanctified tomb. A grim cathedral erected not in mourning, but in conquest. Within the wide gaps between each obsidian pillar were massive forms that, at first glance, they resembled stone sculptures but the truth became unmistakably clear with every step forward. They weren't sculptures, as they were the skeletal remains of Titans. Stripped of flesh, bleached and bound, the enormous bones had been suspended and affixed with grim precision. Some were mounted vertically, their ribcages cracked open like cathedral gates; others clung to the walls as if pinned mid-prayer. The sheer scale of the remains was staggering. One Titan's spine alone stretched the length of the corridor's midsection, suspended overhead like the skeleton of a great whale hung in a museum. Its skull, massive and fractured, loomed directly above them—its hollow sockets empty yet accusatory, as if watching each intruder with ancient, silent grief. What made the scene even more disturbing was the deliberate positioning of the bodies. These were not random displays. Each Titan had been arranged in poses that evoked ritualistic and devotional imagery—such poses had them kneeling, reaching skyward, and draped in chains fashioned from star-forged metal. Their bodies had been made into symbols, not of mourning, but of conquest and dominance.

As they moved deeper into the hallway, the atmosphere in the hallway thickened with a reverent sort of dread. More skeletal remains appeared—however some were reduced to partial torsos, others more intact, and some violently shattered as though their bones had been broken for dramatic effect. The remains became more numerous, less orderly, as though the Grand Huntsman had run out of space but refused to halt his gruesome collection.

Although it wasn't only the dead that adorned this corridor. Along the hallway walls, beneath the arches and flickering in the strange glow of otherworldly torchlight, were massive murals—each illuminated by sconces bearing cosmic flames that burned in hues not found in any natural spectrum. Blues like clear water, violets that pulsed like nebulae, and whites so pure they stung the eyes of those who looked upon it. The murals were not for the purposes of decoration but rather, they were of scripture. Each mural depicted in painstaking detail were scenes of the Grand Huntsman's endless campaigns. Though rendered in the iconography of reverence and divine purpose, their contents were unmistakably violent. In one, the Grand Huntsman towered over a Titan nearly three times his size, piercing its eye with a radiant spear as celestial figures looked on in adoration. In another, he was shown unleashing a wave of annihilation upon a Titan village carved into a mountainside, its inhabitants—colossal beings with frightened

expressions—were reduced to smoldering silhouettes. A third showed him draped in banners, standing atop a hill of Titan corpses, surrounded by followers who wore the remains of the Titans as if in the moment of canonization.

The murals functioned as myth and manifesto. They were equal parts propaganda and hagiography, portraying the Huntsman not merely as a warrior but as a chosen figure—divinely ordained to wipe the Titan lineage from existence. The style of the murals bore unmistakable parallels to religious frescoes: halos of starlight, sweeping lines that emphasized divine wrath, and eyes that followed you wherever you went.

The group moved in near silence, as their footsteps echoing softly against the polished floor, which was swallowed quickly by the oppressive quiet of the hallway. Each of them kept close together despite being in chains, yet no one dared speak. The vast skeletons looming above, suspended in midair or pinned to the walls like grotesque icons, cast shadows that danced across the floor with every flicker of the cosmic torches in the hallway. Their eyes shifted anxiously from one mural to the next, from one hollow Titan skull to another, and the weight of what they were seeing began to press down harder with every step. These were not mere remains, not forgotten relics of an ancient war. They had been arranged with intention—with reverence, even. This place wasn't just a memorial to the dead. It was a sanctum of triumph built atop a genocide and they were trespassers within it.

However, out of everyone in the group; it was Luz, King, Atlas, and Vaileth who were the most disturbed upon witnessing the sight of genocide.

Luz's stomach twisted as her eyes followed the grotesque art. She looked from mural to mural, each stroke of paint a brush dipped in madness. One mural had it where it depicted the Grand Huntsman driving his blade through the chest of a kneeling Titan, although the Titan is given the appearance as if it were begging for mercy from its hunter. Her breath caught in her throat, as her fists clenched angrily at her sides. It wasn't just the violence of the image that horrified her, but the pride in which it had been painted. She had fought monsters, she had seen evil but this wasn't just evil—it was delusion. A man convinced of his righteousness, rewriting history through blood and ritual. The Grand Huntsman didn't see himself as a killer but he saw himself as a saint. It was evident as there was a sacred glow surrounding the Huntsman's figure which had been painted on, as though he were some divine instrument rather than a murderer. The murals weren't tales of victories,

instead, they were executions made into holy scripture. And somehow, the Grand Huntsman truly believed in the righteousness of it all.

Meanwhile, King stayed close to Luz but his eyes were filled with fear, flicking from one twisted monument to the next. For him, the horror was personal. These bones—these fragmented, twisted remains weren't anonymous to him. They were the last remnants of his people. The way they were displayed, stripped of dignity and bent into ceremonial poses, filled him with a grief so sharp it bordered on panic. A numbness took root in his chest, but it was soon overtaken by something else—terror. What horrified him most wasn't just the massacre itself, but the dreadful question crawling through his mind: What would the Grand Huntsman do to his body if he died here?

Vaileth walked in silence, all she really could do was watch the sight of it all. With each new mural, every fossilized corpse, She had known what the Huntsman had become, but she hadn't imagined this level of obsession. The war between their people and the Titans had ended long ago, but clearly... for him, it never did. He had built a cathedral to his vendetta. She admittedly found herself rattled by the grotesque sanctity of the place. To see the remains of Titans—a species that had once stood toe to toe with the Star People—reduced to trophies and religious artifacts, felt like a bitter echo of an ancient war she had tried for centuries to forget.

Atlas, too, was visibly shaken. Their face had an expression heavy with disbelief and something darker—guilt. These murals, this entire corridor, represented everything he had abandoned. The ideology he had once been a part of. The legacy he had tried to sever himself from. And now, seeing the extent of what his people had done—the perverse pride they had taken in this systematic extermination—it made his skin crawl. Each depiction of the Huntsman, standing triumphant over broken Titans, was a mirror Atlas could barely bring himself to face. He turned his gaze downward with shame.

None of them spoke aloud what they were feeling. They didn't need to, as the silence between them said enough. It screamed. They were standing in the mausoleum of a forgotten war, staring into the face of genocide immortalized in art and bone. And the most terrifying part was not just what had been done... but how proudly it had been preserved.

The deeper they ventured, the more the horror compounded—as it was no longer confined to mounted skeletons or glorified murals, but spilled across the floor in

grotesque disarray. There were additional Titan remains, once monumental and whole, now lay scattered in chaotic fragments across the obsidian tiles. What had once been mighty limbs were now broken like discarded branches, some still bearing the faint scorched marks of battle or execution. Jagged femurs jutted out of shattered heaps, many snapped in half as though crushed under immense force or intentionally mutilated.

Skulls—some the size of small carriages—were tossed carelessly into mounds like discarded relics, their hollow eye sockets staring upward, wide and eternal in their final, silent screams. Some had been carved into, their craniums etched with symbols belonging to the Star People's culture, now defiled by this desecration. A few had iron hooks driven through the temples or jaws, as though they'd once hung from the ceiling like twisted chandeliers. One particularly massive skull had its jaw pried open and filled with melted wax and dimly glowing crystal shards, turning it into a grotesque makeshift lantern. Scattered ribs were piled like firewood against the walls, some splintered and still fused with dried sinew that clung to them like shredded silk. The torchlight flickered off the bone with an oily sheen, reflecting streaks of a darkened blue that had long dried into a rusted black—Titan blood, seeped into the very foundation of the corridor. At certain spots, the skeletal debris had been arranged into ceremonial patterns: ribcages bent into cages, spines wound around pedestals, and vertebrae laid like stepping stones leading to nowhere. These weren't random, they were instead deliberate and intentional.

The air was covered in the musty stench of age and old decay. It invaded the lungs of the group, it was both dry and suffocating. It carried a weight that pressed down on the mind, a whisper of pain and rage woven into the marrow of every bone.

King's steps faltered with increasing frequency. The more he saw, the more he seemed to shrink into himself, his claws trembling as he tried not to look but he couldn't help it. He had known he was the last of his kind, but this... this was too much. To see his ancestors' remains strewn about like scrap, used as canvas, décor, and twisted tribute—it wasn't just terrifying. It was a soul-crushing experience for the young Titan. With every crushed rib and cracked skull, he could feel the weight of extinction pressing down on his tiny frame like an anvil. His breathing grew shallow, erratic, each inhalation a struggle. His tail tucked and still the corridor stretched on, offering no reprieve.

And still, the bones kept coming.

Some pieces were so large that they leaned into the hallway like collapsed pillars. One leg bone reached from the floor nearly to the arched ceiling, its end sharpened as though once used as a makeshift monument or weapon. Another was a half-torn wing bone, the membrane on it was fossilized and torn. It had stretched across two mounted spears like a tapestry of ancient death. The deeper they went, the more surreal the horror became. Here, death wasn't just present, it was celebrated. And the Titans, once respected and feared, had been reduced to relics in a corridor of madness. None of them dared speak. The silence was too sacred or perhaps too cursed to break.

However, it was about to get much worse from here...

Soon, without a word, the Grand Huntsman came to a stop before another pair of towering doors—these forged from obsidian quartz, inscribed with concentric star patterns, he soon raised a single hand. With a dull rumble, the doors split open. As the obsidian quartz doors groaned open, the group was met with an oppressive wave of heat and the heavy stench of iron and rot. The chamber beyond was vast and cavernous, yet felt suffocatingly enclosed like a tomb sealed with madness. The air itself was humid and tainted with the faint, metallic tang of blood long dried and blood still warm. There were no windows, no natural light—only the eerie, artificial glow of crimson luminescence pulsing from the veins of the stone walls, as if the chamber itself were alive and bleeding.

The chamber's design was a disturbing contradiction; there were massive black monoliths jutting from the ground at irregular intervals, each one towering toward the shadowed ceiling like gravestones. They loomed over the chamber like sentinels, creating narrow corridors of space between them and casting long, crooked shadows that danced unnaturally in the crimson light. Though seemingly carved from obsidian or star-forged onyx, the monoliths shimmered faintly with hints of starlight, as if they had absorbed the remnants of celestial energy from an ancient age. Each monolith bore intricate carvings—symbols and glyphs etched deeply into their smooth surfaces. These symbols were unmistakably from the language of the Star People. However, unlike the radiant, harmonic inscriptions found in their sacred archives, these were twisted—distorted through a lens of militaristic obsession and religious fanaticism. Some were spiraling constellations, others depicted cosmic beasts torn apart, and many portrayed stylized representations of Titans being subjugated or annihilated. At a glance, they might have been dismissed as historical markings, but the detail and violent iconography revealed their true intent. As they were not records; they were sermons carved in stone.

Despite their religious weight, there was an unmistakable mechanical aspect to the chamber. Faint, rhythmic vibrations rumbled through the floor beneath their feet, as though something deep below the surface stirred in slumber. Some of the monoliths were inlaid with thin, glowing conduits—lines of glowing red energy that coursed through the stone like veins of living circuitry. They connected the structures like a network, feeding into larger mechanical nodes built directly into the walls and ceiling. The air occasionally hissed with the release of pressure or shifted with the hum of unseen machinery activating and idling down in sequence, giving the chamber an industrial undertone that clashed eerily with its temple-like layout.

At the far end, on a raised platform, sat the Grand Huntsman's throne—a towering abomination of jagged black crystal and weathered Titan bone. The skulls of long-slain Titans formed the backrest, fused together by dark energy that pulsed faintly with every step the Grand Huntsman took toward it. The armrests were sharpened femurs, and the seat itself appeared to be cushioned by folded hide—stitched from Titan flesh. It wasn't a seat of rule but it was an altar of conquest.

The floor within the chamber was polished obsidian, glossy like black ice, reflecting the chamber's crimson light in a distorted, dreamlike sheen. Although, the floor was also lined with rivulets leading toward the center. All of them fed into the pool, it was an accursed pool.

It stretched nearly half the length of the chamber, it was an enormous, rectangular basin of blackened stone carved directly into the floor. From a distance, it could be mistaken for still water under dark lighting, but as they were forced closer, the truth revealed itself. The surface was thick, sluggish, and dark blue in hue, swirling slightly with an unnatural viscosity... it was Titan's blood. It wasn't preserved nor was it fresh. The scent was overwhelming—it was raw and metallic, the stench was thick enough to have its taste be felt in the back of one's throat. It sloshed softly, even though nothing stirred it.

Luz staggered back, a choked gasp escaping her. The fluid shimmered darkly under the crimson light, its scent made her throat burn. The realization hit her and the group all at once. This was not symbolic, this was all too real. A reservoir filled with the life essence of slain Titans. King's knees buckled. He couldn't look nor couldn't breathe, as every instinct inside him screamed for him to run, but there was nowhere to go. Vaileth's lips parted in silent horror. She had seen war and atrocities but this? This was devotion to

madness. She stared at the pool, transfixed and revolted, as if it embodied everything wrong with their people's legacy.

The Grand Huntsman stood before the pool of Titan's blood like a prophet at the altar of a forgotten god. His presence was statuesque, like a relic given breath and command. Near the edge of the pool, General Arulieus stood with perfect posture, his hands clasped neatly behind his back. The mechanical hum of the chamber was almost a whisper now, allowing his voice to cut through the air with smooth, chilling precision.

"The Archivists have been contacted," Arulieus stated, his voice low and crisp, as though he were reciting the conclusion to a complex theorem. "Their transmission shall arrive within the next two minutes and fourteen seconds. They will be contacting you as soon as possible once the transmission has gone through." The Grand Huntsman nodded. "Make the preparations."

Arulieus gave a nod and left without another word.

He stepped toward the edge of the pool, where the surface of the Titan's blood reflected not just his image, but the twisted monoliths and their carvings behind him. With a wave of his hand, the Grand Huntsman summoned glowing chains from the ground, binding each of the group's ankles. They flinched as the restraints locked into place with an audible snap. As there was more star magic that had been used, it was another layer of control, there would be no escape. He soon spoke, "By the decree of our forefathers of our people, by the blood spilled in righteous purge, I bathe not in indulgence, but in revelation." Then, without hesitation, he stepped into the pool.

The Grand Huntsman submerged himself waist-deep in the thick, congealed blood of the Titans. The surface tension broke around his massive form with a sickening squelch. The blood clung to him like a second skin—it was viscous, black-blue, and gleaming faintly under the pale glow of the chamber's lights. He sank to his knees slowly, deliberately, with the weight of a penitent before a cruel and silent god. His armored hands dipped beneath the surface, drawing forth gouts of the sacred ichor. With methodical reverence, he began to anoint himself—splashing the blood across his chest, his shoulders, his face. Each movement was purposeful, precise, and almost tender. There was no hesitation in him, only conviction and devotion.

Then came the chanting, a low, guttural tongue spilled from his lips—it was a language unspoken by any living race. The chant vibrated in the air, resonating through the stone and metal walls, crawling beneath the skin of every soul present. The words weren't meant to be understood. They were meant to be felt. And they were—like knives carving unseen symbols into the air, like hooks dragging dread from the gut to the surface. His voice echoed off the obsidian monoliths around the chamber, rebounding in unnatural waves that seemed to double in volume with each pass. A death hymn not to mourn the dead, but to glorify their end. His tone was serene, almost blissful, as if bathing in the blood of his ancient prey was not only sacred but redemptive.

He whispered a phrase that rang out louder than the rest—an invocation that caused the torchlight to flicker and the chamber's temperature to drop by several degrees. "By the marrow of the god-beasts... by the silence of their extinction... I am made pure." he said.

The legends were true, he truly did bathe himself in the Blood of the Titans. Around him, the blood rippled—not from his movements, but from something deeper beneath, something ancient and slumbering that seemed to stir at his prayer. The ritual was far from symbolic, It was communion.

As the Grand Huntsman waded deeper into the pool of Titan blood, King instinctively turned his face away, his claws tightening into his palms. His breathing grew shallow. The sight of one of his kind's blood being desecrated like that—used in some kind of sanctimonious bathing rite—was more than grotesque. It was spiritual mutilation. "Stop looking," he whispered to himself, trying to blot it out but he could still feel it—feel them, the Titans, screaming from beyond. As Luz noticed her brother's emotional distress that had been culminating due to the horrific sight, though she couldn't do anything to comfort him due to the chains that held her. However, Luz gagged audibly once again, nearly doubling over as the wave of revulsion struck her like a gut punch. Her stomach felt nauseated and for a moment she thought she might vomit. She gritted her teeth, squeezing her eyes shut as if it would make the scene vanish but it obviously didn't. It burned into her memory like a scar being carved in real time. "What the hell is wrong with him..." she breathed, her voice shaking with a mixture of fury and horror.

Atlas stood frozen, his eyes locked on the pool, his lips parted in pure disbelief. Every fiber of his being screamed in protest, but his body wouldn't move. He trembled like a child caught in a waking nightmare. Vaileth's expression darkened like a thunderhead. Her narrowed eyes glowed faintly with restrained magic, her jaw tightening as her breath

became sharp and uneven. Grief warred with fury in her gaze. The Titans were once creatures of great capability and history, beings of ancient wonder and power—and now, their blood was defiled by this self-righteous butcher.

Hesperos feline features twitched with barely-contained disgust. "I've seen some monstrous things in my time," he muttered through clenched teeth, his ears flicking with unease, "but that—that— isn't even madness. It's worse." he added. Markus stared in silent revulsion, his eyes were wide and unblinking, jaw tight with tension. His usual stoicism cracked just enough to reveal the sickness rising in his throat. The alchemist in him—a man who understood the meaning of blood, of life—saw this not just as murder, but as desecration and mockery.

The room seemed to press in around them—cold, mechanical, silent witnesses to a ritual that felt ancient and wrong, as if the chamber itself was feeding off their horror. And in the center of it all stood the Grand Huntsman, bathed in Titan blood, basking in what he believed was purity. To the others, it was hell incarnate.

When he finally rose, slick and steaming in the eerie light, the blood poured from his armor like tar. He turned slowly, as the throne chamber fell silent again as he made his way to the communicator, preparing for his call with the Archivists. The ritual was over, though the scars of it still remained.

A low hum resonated through the chamber, followed by light that converged on the far wall. Slowly, the static coalesced into a projection—a flat, luminescent hologram stretching from floor to ceiling, bearing the visages of the four Archivists: Orion, regal and composed in his cold detachment; Andromeda, veiled in faint melancholy beneath her mild expression; Aster Nova, with her piercing eyes radiating judgment and fire; and Badar Comet, ever calm and ever ambitious. Their arrival coincided with the heavy footfalls of General Arulieus, who entered the chamber once more accompanied by a squad of Archive Collective soldiers. Their armor reflected the dark red lighting that was all around them as they entered into the chamber. In their hands, they carried seized spoils—Luz's staff, Hesperos' twin blasters, held in sterilized clamps as though they were volatile relics; and Markus' Titan-forged sword, bound in stasis chains that dimmed its glow.

Soon, the Grand Huntsman would drag forward the prisoners—Luz, King, Atlas, Hesperos, Markus, Starry, and Vaileth—into the harsh light of the projection. His chains

were still bound to their wrists and ankles, though now he added magic-nullifying bands that glowed around their necks. They stood huddled together, surrounded on all sides, their expressions switched between exhaustion, panic, and quiet rebellion.

The Grand Huntsman raised his arm toward the projection, his voice echoing with ceremonial pride. "My Archivists, behold your fugitives! Recovered, subdued, and awaiting your righteous judgment!"

A cold silence followed.

Then, Orion stepped forward within the projection, his tone as sharp as starlight. "So... the last sparks of resistance finally gutter in the dark." His eyes fixed on Luz, King, and Atlas. "How poetic. You who stood against the inevitable—how fiercely you clung to your illusions. A shame that defiance is not the same as wisdom. You've hidden the Compass, yes... but only long enough to delay what must come. In the end, entropy claims all things. And your hope," he paused, his voice softening into contemptuous pity, "has collapsed under the weight of its own delusion."

Luz's breath hitched. Her heartbeat drummed louder than the words. Her fists curled, though she felt powerless. King dropped his gaze, though he shook with horror. And beside them, Atlas trembled—an open wound reliving a thousand old cuts.

"You," Orion continued, directing his words toward Atlas, "Have already served your purpose. Your magic was never yours to keep, only borrowed from the stars we once ruled because you misused it for your selfish purposes. Now since then, it has returned to the lattice from which it came." Orion added, "You are a symbol now, Atlas. You remind us all what becomes of those who defy order for the sake of sentiment."

Atlas's knees gave slightly but all he could only watch in horror as his brother concluded, Orion exhaled slowly, as if explaining the laws of nature to a child, "Befriending Titans, siding with mortals, refusing your design. These are not acts of rebellion... They are symptoms. Symptoms of a sickness that has long festered beneath the skin of our kind and every lifeform in existence. A sickness we call 'compassion.'" He added, "You think yourselves righteous but righteousness without order is chaos in noble disguise. The Convergence—our great alignment—is not a war, it is a cure."

His gaze swept again across the captives, impassive. "Mortals worship choice. They romanticize suffering. They praise the randomness of life as if entropy were a gift. But we were meant to protect them and ensure that they shall be saved from it. That is why we are here to correct every mistake and imperfection because of it."

His voice now held the steadiness of a doctrine long rehearsed, "You call it tyranny because you are too frightened to see the order in it. But the stars do not care if you are frightened. And neither do I." Silence fell again. There was no cruelty in his voice—and that made it all the more terrifying. The threat was not shouted, as it didn't need to be. It was delivered like a prophecy; inevitable, precise, and straightforward.

Suddenly, Orion's gaze shifted, his features hardening as he noticed Vaileth Xar standing among the captives. His expression twisted with a cold, restrained fury.

"Vaileth... I can't believe that you were still alive all of this time." Orion murmured before sighing and continuing, "You were more than a mentor, Vaileth. You were the blueprint upon which our generation built its understanding of destiny. And yet, in the end, you crumbled. You chose chaos over clarity. You chose them" He gestured subtly toward Luz, King, and Atlas as he spoke to her.

Aster Nova spoke with a tone that reflected her grievance against her former mentor, "You dare show your face here, Vaileth? After everything? After abandoning us—abandoning him?" which she gestured towards her brother, Orion.

Badar Comet clenched his fists, as he breathed heavily with suppressed rage "You speak of balance and compassion, but all you ever brought was doubt. You weakened our people with your teachings. Orion opened our eyes—he showed us the truth. Without purpose, without control, this universe spirals into chaos! The very thing you defend!" His expression is wild, fanatical. He's reciting doctrine as if it were burned into his brain.

Meanwhile, Andromeda was calm, cold, yet her voice had an edge of forced control when she spoke. "We were lost. He gave us direction. He gave me a reason to stay when all I had left was silence." She stepped forward, placing herself between her siblings and Vaileth, though not in a protective manner. More like a judge ready to deliver a sentence. However, when Andromeda glanced at Atlas for a brief second, she softened but barely. She added, "But even now... some part of me remembers your voice, Master. Whispering things I wish I hadn't forgotten." She quickly hardens again, her face sharpening like a

blade being re-tempered. "But those are dead thoughts. And the dead do not guide the living."

Aster hisses through clenched teeth, voice low and venomous. "Don't listen to her, Andromeda. She's the rot. The reason we all suffered!"

Orion spoke once again, "You should've perished with the rest who suffered. Instead, you vanished into exile—after stealing the Celestine Compass not as a martyr, but as a coward. You were too afraid to face the consequences of your discovery... Because of you, our souls have died since then!"

Vaileth, despite the weight of her chains and the grimness of the moment, arched a brow. "Look at you four..." she said with biting sarcasm and a smirk that barely masked her simmering disdain. "Still dressing your justification of injustices in grand speeches, I see?" Orion's jaw clenched.

Vaileth's tone shifted, her words dripping with mockery. "How quaint of you to play judge and jury. I'd be flattered if I wasn't so tired of hearing the same self-righteous monologue from every child I once mentored."

"You don't get to stand there and pretend you're innocent," Orion snapped. His voice, for the first time, cracked—just slightly. "I believed in you. I thought you understood what we were building. I once believed we shared a vision for our people's future!"

Vaileth's smirk vanished. Her eyes narrowed. "Then you were a fool, Orion. We were architects of genocide wrapped in a belief we thought it was for the greater good. I fled because I finally saw what we truly were, what we ultimately became."

Orion added in a tone of frustration, "You say we were architects of genocide... and perhaps you're right but at least we did not abandon the blueprints of prosperity! You ran from progress, while we became it's saviors."

Vaileth tilted her head, letting out a dry, mirthless laugh. "Savior?" she echoed. "Is that what you call it now? Slaughtering trillions, sterilizing realms, and turning children into fuel for your machine? I taught you to seek the stars, not to burn everything beneath them."

Her words lingered, but Orion pressed on, undeterred—his tone glacial and sermon-like. "You misunderstand, as always. The stars do not burn, they refine. Fire is not destruction, it is purification. We do not kill, Vaileth. We curate. We extract entropy and leave only equilibrium. The Wishing Star, the Compass, the convergence... all are pieces of a greater calculus, one you never had the patience to solve."

Vaileth's smirk faltered, giving way to something quieter. Her voice dropped a little, less venom now but with more weight instead. "I saw where that 'calculus' led. It led to many species in cages. It led to many worlds and realms turned into hollow husks. Finally, it led to us becoming parasites feeding off the cosmos while pretending we're its saviors!" She took a breath, chains clinking softly at her sides. "You want me to feel ashamed? I already do every day! But unlike you, I don't confuse shame with righteousness. I left because I couldn't stand what we had become anymore. You stayed because you couldn't admit it."

Orion remained perfectly still, but something beneath his expression wavered—like a crack spidering across a porcelain mask. "What you call shame," he said slowly, "I call weakness. And I do not mourn the weak, instead I mourn the wasted potential. You and Atlas could've been part of the Convergence with ease. Instead, your legacy will be a warning etched in regret."

He leaned slightly closer to the communicator. "You will not run again, Vaileth. Not from your guilt. Not from your crimes. And certainly not from me."

Vaileth looked up at him through half-lidded eyes. Her voice was low now, but razor-sharp. "Then finish it, Orion. Deliver your grand judgment. But know this—when your perfect order starts to crack, it won't be because of me. It'll be because deep down, even you knew... the universe was never meant to be caged. It is beyond your control!"

Then with that same calm grandeur that made his followers kneel, Orion replied, "Even stars must be contained, Vaileth. Lest they collapse into madness." Orion concluded with, "You abandoned us," he growled. "You ran, leaving me to bury the empire's dead while you disappeared into myth."

Vaileth would also conclude but with a retort, "And I'll keep running if it means outrunning you."

After Orion's final, piercing words to Vaileth, a stillness settled over the chamber—a silence so heavy it seemed to press against the skin. The projection of the four Archivists hovered silently on the far wall, their eyes cold and unyielding as they surveyed the broken, bound forms of Luz, King, Atlas, Hesperos, Markus, Starry, and Vaileth.

The Grand Huntsman stepped forward from the shadows of the chamber's center, his boots clicking softly against the polished obsidian floor. His voice rang out with disturbing calmness, "My Stars, since the fugitives stand before you, the Compass will be extracted shortly. Once it is in your divine possession..." He paused and lowered his head with calculated reverence. "...I humbly request the honor of being their executioner." His words hung in the air before adding, "I wish to be the final hand that sends these heretics into oblivion. Let their last sight be the blade of your will carried through me."

Aster Nova was the first to respond, "They've tried to disrupt our plans. They deserve no mercy."

Andromeda folded her arms slowly. Her eyes lingered on Atlas with something unreadable—regret, guilt perhaps, buried beneath layers of detachment. "Let them see what defiance births. Let the last light they know be the light of our restored dominion."

Badar Comet gave a slow nod, his ever-glistening, flame-like eyes narrowing. "The stars shall not grieve them! Their erasure will be a course correction! A necessity!"

Finally, Orion sat back on his throne and spoke. "Once the Celestine Compass is in our hands, and once these fugitives are delivered to the gates of Celestialopolis..." He extended one hand, palm up as if weighing the lives he now condemned. "...You will have full permission to carry out their sentence. Not in haste. Not in rage. But in balance. Justice will be administered not for revenge but to restore the symmetry of our cosmos and beyond it."

The Grand Huntsman bowed his head in grim satisfaction, letting those words settle into his bones. He dropped to one knee, then brought both crescent-shaped blades across his chest, the twin edges glinting faintly under the ambient glow of the chamber. The symbol of his devotion and submission. "I accept this charge with the deepest reverence. By your will, their fates shall be sealed. They will not see the dawn of another cycle."

The Archivists remained silent for a moment, as though absorbing the gravity of the pact. Then, without another word, the projection flickered—first dimming, then dissolving into radiant motes of light that faded into the chamber's darkness. The weight of their presence lingered even in absence.

A suffocating silence reclaimed the room. The only sounds were the rattle of chains, the low hum of the chamber's mechanisms, and the shallow, unsettled breaths of the prisoners. Luz watched as her staff was now in enemy hands. King's small frame trembled, his gaze glued to the spot where the Archivists had vanished, haunted by their voices. Atlas lowered his head, the shadow of shame and despair painting his face, the words "tool" and "constant" echoing in his mind like a curse. Vaileth, for all her bravado earlier, said nothing. She stared straight ahead, her expression cold, but not indifferent. Quiet fury simmered behind her eyes.

The Grand Huntsman stood. "Prepare the Eclipse for departure," he said, his voice now brisk, practical. "Celestialopolis awaits."

Arulieus, ever disciplined, turned on his heel and activated the comm-node embedded in the forearm of his armor. The device pulsed with a dim azure light as he spoke into it with crisp authority. "Command relay: Initiate Phase One launch protocol. Power the core. Prep star-threading engines. All hands, report to flight stations. The Eclipse moves now."

The echo of his voice vanished into the transmission stream, cascading through the vessel's systems like a wave of authority.

Far below, deep within The Eclipse's starcruiser underbelly, the command reached a massive chamber lit by soft, cold lights and humming circuitry. There, a group of Star Sprite engineers received the transmission with a synchronized flicker of their crystalline eyes. Their bodies shimmered like constellations in motion as they immediately sprang into coordinated action.

Panels slid open, as massive arc conduits rotated into alignment. Stabilization rings along the ship's spine pulsed once, then thrummed to life. The heart of the vessel began to stir. Blue-white light rippled through the chamber like water on glass as containment fields locked into place with thunderous metallic clinks.

The hangar groaned as The Eclipse came alive.

Hydraulic arms folded back, retracting massive scaffolds. Energy pulsed through kilometers of conduits, weaving intricate networks of light like veins. The ship's hull, sleek and obsidian with star-forged filigree, vibrated with a low-frequency hum. Deep within the vessel, atmospheric compressors cycled a final breath through its lungs. The Eclipse, once dormant, now stirred like a mighty beast awakened from centuries of sleep.

One of the engineers floated upward, using gravitic lifts, and slammed a glowing sigil into the master console. A singular note that was deep, resonant, and unmistakable rang through the launch hangar like a bell tolling fate.

Above, in the bridge chamber, screens flared to life. Navigation charts unfurled in three-dimensional space, celestial paths mapping out the spiral journey through the void. Locked at the apex of their route stood Celestialopolis—the Archivists' shining seat of power and judgment. The command deck adjusted its lighting as gravity stabilizers rotated the vessel into departure alignment. Through the main viewport, the stars began to shift. A corridor of space, pre-threaded with tachyon gates and arcane beacons, opened like a wound across the void.

Then came ignition, a shudder that ran the length of its hull. The Eclipse rose from its moorings. Engines blazed with radiant energy that was concentrated light burning in an artificial fusion of gravity and magic. The ship surged forward, leaving behind the cold vacuum of space itself. It didn't lurch or roar but it simply moved. The Eclipse began its journey, not just through space, but toward the final convergence of fate, fury, and reckoning. The stars would bear witness and no one aboard would return unchanged.

After a while, the Eclipse surged silently through the stars on its course for Celestialopolis, the air aboard its metallic corridors thickened with anticipation. The engines thrummed quietly but persistent—as an omen of what was to come.

In the heart of the ship, deep within the command chamber where the Grand Huntsman had spoken with the Archivists just hours earlier, the silence was broken only by the low groans of chains and the flicker of containment magic. Luz, Hesperos, King, Atlas, Vaileth, Starry, and Markus were still bound by the Grand Huntsman's enchanted star chains, suspended by gravitational anchors embedded in the floor. Though they had been

defiant during the long voyage, time and tension had worn them down. Yet even now, their eyes held a defiant fire.

The Grand Huntsman stood over the group, His crescent-shaped blades hung at his sides, the chains coiling behind him like the tails of a serpent. He said nothing at first, allowing the silence to draw its own line in the sand.

Then he spoke as he would soon lock his gaze upon both Atlas and Luz, "You could have stood beside me. You could have joined my cause for the final hunt, the last cleansing. Instead, you chose ignorance. And for what?" His tone carried no fury, only the cold edge of disappointment sharpened into something far more dangerous.

He paced slowly before them. "You don't understand what he is," the Huntsman said, gesturing toward King, who shrunk slightly under his gaze. "The last Titan. A living embodiment of imbalance. He is a mistake allowed to persist beyond its purpose. I offered you both a chance at justice—true justice. To help me rid the cosmos of the final aberration. We could've achieved the greater good! But alas, Orion is true to his words that lesser mortals aren't unable to fully understand the ideals for good and progression."

Luz raised her head, despite the burn of the restraints around her arms. Her eyes blazed. "Justice?" she spat, her voice echoing in the chamber. "Don't pretend you know the meaning of the word. You've razed planets and slaughtered innocents in the process. You hunted my brother like an animal and you expected me or Atlas to join you after what you've been doing?!!!"

She fought against her chains, the cuffs crackling with the strength she had in an attempt to stand, "You're not justice. You're just another hypocrite hiding behind a cause, using it to justify your obsession and cruelty! I've seen people like you before, people who think righteousness gives them permission to destroy everything in their path!"

The Huntsman's jaw tensed ever so slightly. "You are... hopelessly disillusioned," he said coolly. "Blinded by sentiment and ignorance. You mistake mercy for weakness. You mistake judgment for cruelty."

He stepped closer. His chains slithered across the floor like predatory vines. He lowered his voice. "Then allow me to make one final offer..." He straightened. "The Celestine Compass. Give it to me. Now." None of them spoke. A heavy silence fell that was dense

then, quietly, Vaileth let out a low whistle. "Fwee Mmm... still predictable after all these centuries," she muttered under her breath.

When no answer came, The Grand Huntsman raised his hands and spoke softly when he did so. "Very well." at an instance, a pulse of Star Magic surged from his gauntlets, coursing through the enchanted chains. The surges of magic soon went across the chamber in brilliant threads of radiant energy. The enchanted chains reacted instantly—flaring with tendrils as a current of raw, electrified agony pulsed through each of the prisoners.

The pain from the pulses struck like a lightning storm tearing through their nerves. Each of them convulsed instantly, backs arching, and their limbs thrashed against their restraints. Luz screamed first, as the magic seared through her like fire, "Aah—AAGH!" she cried, her voice breaking under the strain. "STOP!"

King howled beside her, small body twitching helplessly against the glowing shackles, "arrgggh!". Atlas let out a sharp, pitiful gasp as the energy coursed through his chest and spine, his eyes wide with terror and pain. Even Vaileth—stoic and proud —gritted her teeth and let out a shuddering grunt, her body trembling with effort as she tried not to scream. Markus writhed against the wall, biting down on his jaw very hard. Every pulse of magic felt like a hammer driving nails into his bones. Starry's glow faltered, the pain was so immense they cried out, "Ow! Ow! Ow! Owwww!!!"

"PLEASE—!" Atlas sobbed. "Please, stop it—!"

The Grand Huntsman said nothing as he stood at the center of it all like a priest before the altar—unmoved, while his fingers subtly adjusting the flow of energy as if tuning an instrument.

"This is what defiance earns you," he said coldly, his voice cutting through the chaos. "This is only a fraction of what the Titans brought upon the cosmos. Let this pain be your education." The torture continued.

Hesperos was next to scream, his hands twitching against the floor as he thrashed under the magical current. "Agh—!" he bellowed, "STOP IT!"

Still, the Huntsman watched in silence, however, that would all change when Luz screamed in surrender, "Stop it—!" she cried, as tears streaked down her face. "STOP! Please!" Hesperos roared out beside her. "We'll give it to you! Just—just STOP!"

At last, the Grand Huntsman lowered his arms and the surge halted immediately. The group's bodies slumped, as their chests heaved. The chains that held them hissed softly, as it was still smoldered with residual energy. The Grand Huntsman said nothing—he merely waited. "Now," he said, voice sharp as steel, "the Compass."

He didn't threaten, as he didn't need to because the memory of the pain was enough.

The group exchanged tired glances, while Hesperos, shaking with fury and shame, "You win," he growled. "Take the bloody thing...." he soon turned to his friend, Starry. "Starry, lad... give it to him..." He said.

Starry didn't speak. For a long moment, they only hovered, motionless. Then their eyes closed, soon a gentle shimmer of light began rippling through their body. Which was then followed by a low, harmonic chime emanated from within them. With an almost reverent slowness, Starry opened their mouth. From within their core, a radiant orb of light emerged, it was no larger than a fist, yet brimming with energy. It pulsed with a rhythmic glow. The room bathed in its glow, casting soft gold and light yellow across the cracked floor and battered faces.

The Grand Huntsman stepped forward with measured grace, his gaze fixed on the orb with predatory precision, he then raised his hand.

The orb trembled once, then drifted from Starry's mouth, levitating through the air like a delicate flame in zero gravity. It glided toward the Grand Huntsman, trailing luminous threads of light behind it like a comet's tail. There was a dreadful silence as the orb hovered before his outstretched palm, within seconds the orb began to unravel.

It came apart like a blooming flower, petals of radiance folding outward, rotating and shifting like the arms of a clock. Ribbons of gold and white light twisted in midair, gradually weaving into a singular, solid form.

At last—it was there, The Celestine Compass. The Grand Huntsman seized it instantly. His fingers wrapped around the artifact like a vice, pulling it into the crook of his arm as

if it belonged to him all along. The soft light of the Compass dimmed slightly in his grasp, as though recognizing the nature of the hand that now held it. He stared down at the object, silent and calculating. The chamber remained still, the group too exhausted to speak. Yet every eye was on him watching and breathing shallowly.

Then he broke the silence by turning slowly back to the group, while he clutched the compass in one hand and letting his chains slither with the other. "You've done more than deliver an artifact," he murmured, his voice almost reverent. "You've also handed me the privilege of a hunt that the stars themselves have long denied me. A hunt not felt in millennia."

He looked down at King, chains tightening around his neck. "The final Titan," he continued, his voice low and almost reverent. "Your extinction won't just be a trophy—it will be a restoration. A rebalancing of what your kind once shattered." He raised both blades, each one casting twin arcs of eerie starlight as he poised them to strike down with devastating precision. "Once I finally slay you, I shall finally rest once and for all."

The others cried out weakly—Luz's hoarse "No!" overlapping with Vaileth's desperate gasp and Atlas's trembling attempt to rise—but none could move fast enough. The chains still wrapped tightly around their limbs. While the pain still lanced through their nerves like fire.

King's body trembled beneath the weight of those words and the memory of everything that had brought them here with every loss, every chase, and every threat. The Grand Huntsman's blades gleamed above him, each second stretching into eternity. But then—

Something inside King snapped, not in fear but in resolve. A raw, rumbling breath drew into his chest as he forced himself upright, his legs were shaky but planted. His eyes were fiery with renewed determination and courage. He spoke with every fragile breath, "I..." he huffed, "I-I- won't let you hurt anyone else," King shouted, his voice cracking, tears stinging the corners of his eyes as energy surged through him. "Not my friends! Not my family! Not ME!"

And then, he unleashed it. "WEHHHHHHHHH!"

The sound exploded from him like a shattering scream across the stars—a Titan's roar of refusal, a sound so powerful that it resonated with the very fabric of creation. The

chamber trembled under the force. A massive shockwave erupted outward in all directions, rippling with pure Titan Magic. Before the Grand Huntsman could even brace himself, the sonic blast struck him square in the chest, launching him like a ragdoll across the chamber. He smashed into the far wall with a force that dented the metal and fractured the reinforced stone behind it. His twin crescent blades clattered across the floor, resulting in him becoming disarmed.

More importantly, the Star Magic-infused chains, crafted by celestial design to bind even the strongest beings, began to flicker and crackle as the raw Titan Magic ripped through them. Sparks of corrupted starlight burst apart, and one by one, each of the glowing links snapped, dissolved, and crumbled into dust.

Luz felt it first, her arms falling forward and free. Then Markus, Vaileth, Hesperos, Atlas, and Starry. As each one collapsed or gasped in stunned relief as the pain vanished and movement returned. The chamber went quiet for a breathless second, the only sound being King's heavy panting as he stood there, chest heaving, staring at the Grand Huntsman's motionless body across the room. For the first time in far too long, they were free, and King was no longer running.

Within seconds, the Guards in the room began to position their blaster rifles aimed towards the now freed group; Luz, Hesperos, and Markus surged to their feet, lunging toward the three guards stationed at the weapon lockers. The guards barely had time to react before their weapons were seized. Luz snatched her staff from one's belt and swung it hard against his temple. Hesperos grabbed his dual blasters and immediately opened fire—twin bursts of plasma taking down two more guards with merciless precision. Markus caught the hilt of his Titan Sword, igniting its edge in a brilliant arc of golden energy. The chamber erupted into a maelstrom of light, smoke, and violence.

Soon Luz ran towards the unconscious body of the Grand Huntsman at the spot where he had crashed, who had lost his grip on the Celestine Compass once King used his powers against him. No sooner had Luz wrapped her fingers around the Celestine Compass than a fresh wave of guards surged into the chamber—Archive Collective enforcers, their weapons humming with hostile energy. The temperature in the room felt like it dropped a few degrees, not from cold, but from sheer dread.

Clutching the compass tightly against her chest, Luz rolled onto her feet just as King bounded toward her, panting but determined. With a small grunt, he leapt up and clung to her back, arms looping around her shoulders as his claws dug in just enough for stability.

"I'm not letting you do this without me sister!" he cried, defiant despite the lingering pain in his voice.

Luz didn't respond with words, instead she gripped her staff with a confident smile. As her staff was still humming with its palisman, Stringbean. As she coiled protectively around it in her dormant state. With a flick of her wrist, the staff ignited with violet and black beams, and Luz launched herself into the fray. She became a blur—ducking, spinning, and striking with precise, practiced swings. Her staff whirled in circles of controlled fury, slamming against helmets and deflecting bolts of magic and plasma alike. Glyphs flared from its tip: fireballs exploded across the room, ice slicked the floor beneath advancing guards, and vines burst from thin air, ensnaring legs and yanking them off their feet.

King, nestled on her back, added his own power where he could, which were tiny bursts of sonic energy crackling from his mouth whenever enemies got too close.

Across the chamber, Markus moved like a storm unleashed. His Titan Sword, now fully energized, carved arcs of radiant light through the air. With each swing, the guards were thrown backwards as though struck by waves of divine force. The blade pulsed with the ancient might of Titan blood, and Markus wielded it not just with rage but with purpose. That purpose being, to protect those beside him, and those who couldn't fight.

Hesperos, already a blur of motion, darted between pillars and blast craters, his dual blasters unleashing a relentless salvo of energy. He dove, rolled, and vaulted off crumbling debris, taking down soldier after soldier with unnerving precision. His aim never wavered, and his jaw was clenched in barely restrained fury.

Meanwhile, Vaileth Xar had fallen back from the core of the battle. She cradled Atlas, the star child limp in her arms like a broken marionette. The bruises on his skin were deep, and his eyes fluttered with the lingering shadows of pain. Vaileth's arm cradled his back tightly as she ducked behind cover, using her free hand to erect protective barriers of magic that absorbed stray blasts. Her gaze never left him as she spoke to him, "You're safe now kid," she whispered under her breath.

Back in the chaos, Luz felt the battle shifting. They were outnumbered but no longer overwhelmed. The raw power of their reclaimed weapons, coupled with their shared desperation, had pushed them into something more united. Each blow landed with purpose. Each movement covered another. Still, more guards flooded in.

Luz clutched the Celestine Compass tighter as she spun in place, knocking back a soldier that had lunged with a spear of starlight. The artifact pulsed in her hands, reacting to the chaos, as if sensing the tug of destiny. She wasn't sure how long they could hold out but right now, they weren't running. They were fighting and together, they were surviving.

The battle raged on, but something shifted in the air—something colder, darker. Amid the clash of metal and bursts of magic, Hesperos Holmes became a force unto himself.

His dual blasters lit up the chamber in staccato flashes, and with each blast came a cry of rage—raw and unfiltered. He had broken formation, separating slightly from Luz and Markus as if driven by something deeper than survival. As another Archive soldier charged at him, Hesperos sidestepped, raised his arm, and fired point-blank into their chest. The soldier crumpled without a sound.

Then another came—he shot them down without hesitation.

And another.

Then he saw them, a lone guard that had broken from the fray, sprinting across the battle as if they were being chased by ghosts. For a heartbeat, Hesperos froze. It wasn't the cowardice that caught his eye, but the insignia burned into the guard's shoulder plating. A sharp pulse of fury cracked through Hesperos's chest. His pupils dilated, his heart pounding like war drums in his ears. Without a word, without a second thought, Hesperos launched forward.

He closed the distance in seconds, his shoulders slamming into the fleeing guard with the full weight of his momentum. The two of them crashed to the ground in a storm of limbs, the guard gasping as Hesperos pinned him down with a snarl lodged in his throat.

"You don't get to run!" he hissed, voice trembling with rage. "Not after what you did!"

The first strike came from his blaster's hilt—metal smashing against armor with a brutal clang. The guard let out a muffled grunt, trying to block the next blow with a trembling arm, but Hesperos was relentless. He struck again, and again, alternating between his weapons until cracks webbed across the visor's surface.

And then, without thinking, he dropped his blasters. As his hands became fists now.

The first punch knocked the guard's helmet sideways. The second shattered the visor, glass and composite shards to scatter. The third blow struck bare flesh—an audible crunch of cartilage and bone beneath his knuckles. He stared intensely at the guard below him. He growled as tears began to form and sting his eyes as he brought his fist down again.

Another punch.

And another...

He couldn't stop himself from continuously punching him. His arms trembled from the effort, from the weight of everything he had held back since that day. Since Illustria was turned into a tomb beneath a sky that no longer sang.

The guard didn't fight back anymore—blood mixing with shattered glass beneath his chin, his breath coming in broken gasps. Hesperos hovered over him with his fist raised, while his heart remained beating in a silent rhythm of grief and rage. His breathing was ragged, his shoulders tight, and his teeth clenched so hard it began to hurt. Before he could hit them once more, a firm hand gripped his shoulder. He turned, half-expecting another enemy, only to find Luz, her face stern. "That's enough!" she said, her voice sharp but laced with compassion. "Hesperos, we need to go. We all need to get out of here now!" which revealed that Luz and Markus had been watching the entire time when Hesperos mercilessly beat the guard.

Hesperos looked at her, still breathing hard. Markus stepped in beside her, sword still dripping with energy. "I can understand your pain," he added, more softly. "But this isn't justice anymore. It's vengeance and it's costing us time we don't have."

Hesperos stood frozen, his body trembled not with rage now, but something more fragile. Slowly, he lowered his weapons. "I'm sorry..." he muttered, barely audible.

Luz nodded, her expression softening. "It's okay." For a brief moment, the chaos around them felt distant—like the eye of a storm. Then a tremor rocked the chamber, and reality snapped back. "Come on!" Luz shouted. "We have to move—now!"

Together, the group rallied. Vaileth, still cradling Atlas, pushed forward, eyes scanning for an exit. King clung to Luz's back, silent but alert. With the Celestine Compass secured, they began a desperate sprint toward the corridor at the far end of the chamber. The heavy doors that once imprisoned them now stood partially open—sparks flying from broken hinges, debris littering the threshold.

They had survived the impossible, and now they ran—bleeding, exhausted, but together—through the cold, winding passageways of The Eclipse, chasing whatever sliver of freedom still remained.

The winding corridors of The Eclipse seemed endless, each hallway identical in its sterile, metallic design. The Donati crew moved swiftly, though every step carried the weight of exhaustion, of pain, of decisions made in the heat of battle. The air was tense, heavy with the knowledge that their window for escape was narrowing with each passing second.

Luz led the group, her staff glowing faintly in the dim lighting, with King still clinging tightly to her back. His small claws gripped her shoulder with a desperate familiarity—he didn't speak, but his silence said more than words ever could. Behind them, Vaileth carried a conscious but tired Atlas, his body limp from the brutal torture inflicted earlier, his breathing shallow but steady. Markus trailed near the rear, flanked by Starry and Hesperos, his steps slower, wearier now, after the emotional unraveling in the battle chamber.

"There," Markus breathed, relief washing over his sweat-soaked face. "We can get out through those."

At the end of a descending corridor, a pair of reinforced blast doors flickered and hissed open with a tired groan. What lay beyond felt like a miracle: an escape pod station. Six sleek, silver pods, latched into launch tubes, awaited activation. The lighting in the chamber was brighter, sterile, almost calm. As its light reflected over the shiny and clear surfaces of each of the pods.

Luz turned to the others and nodded. "We may need to split up—smaller numbers in each pod means less of a trace," she said, breathless but firm. She looked to King, who gave a small, tired nod. Luz soon stepped forward, clutching the Celestine Compass tightly in one hand and adjusting the grip on her staff. "Come on, buddy," she whispered to King. "We're almost out of this." With careful urgency, Luz opened one of the pods, its hatch hissing as the interior powered on. She gently helped King off her back and into the seat, then climbed in beside him. As the hatch began to close, she caught sight of the others preparing their own departures.

A short distance away, Vaileth helped a still-weakened Atlas into another pod. His limbs dangled and his eyes were heavy with exhaustion. Despite it, Vaileth supported him, as she guided them into the seat and secured the safety harness across his chest. For a brief second, she placed a hand against their cheek—it was tender and maternal. It was a feeling she hadn't felt for so long yet it was one where she vowed to embrace. Especially her promise to protect Atlas after the pain he endured and still carries. Atlas meanwhile, leaned into her hand just slightly.

In the final pod, Hesperos Holmes, Starry, and Markus Star loaded in. Hesperos lingered for a moment near the hatch, taking one last glance down the corridor they'd come from. There was blood on his coat. Ash on his gloves. The weight of everything he had done—everything he had remembered—still clung to his shoulders like armor he couldn't shed. But he said nothing. He only looked ahead and nodded to Starry, who hovered silently beside him.

Markus looked to Hesperos as they sat down. "You alright?" he asked quietly. Hesperos hesitated. His hands hovered over his blasters. "No," he replied honestly, voice hollow. "But I will be... once we're out of here."

One by one, each of the pods launch signals lit up.

Three...

Inside Luz's pod, she gripped King's hand. "Hold on," she whispered.

Two...

Vaileth glanced down at Atlas, brushing a lock of hair from his forehead. Her other hand hovered near the ignition.

One.

With a thunderous boom and a jolt of force, each pod ejected from The Eclipse, launched into the dark void of space. The violent shift pressed them into their seats, their viewports glowing with the afterburn of the launch tubes.

And then—

Silence.

Each pod drifted like a silver seed into the great expanse. The warship behind them grew smaller in the distance, a monstrous silhouette swallowed by the stars. For the first time in what felt like hours, the crew allowed themselves to breathe. They had escaped.

For now...

Meanwhile, back in the battle-scarred chamber, smoke wafted through the air, curling through the shattered remnants of consoles and fractured light fixtures. A few Archive guards stirred weakly amidst the wreckage, but most lay motionless—either unconscious or worse.

Then, with a sudden, agonizing grunt, the Grand Huntsman stirred. His body twitched, broken by King's sonic magic yet far from defeated. Cracks lined his armor where the Titan's energy had struck true, and his breath rasped through clenched teeth. Pain radiated from his ribs and shoulder, but his fury burned hotter than any wound. He pushed himself upright with a trembling hand, the metal floor groaning beneath the weight of his armored gauntlet. His cloak, tattered and singed, dragged behind him as he rose, casting a long shadow through the wrecked chamber.

His eyes scanned the room, cold and calculating. Guards—his guards—were downed all around him. The prisoners... gone.

Just as the realization set in, a holographic transmission flared to life beside him, casting a pale blue light across his face. General Arulieus' image appeared, his expression urgent.

"Grand Huntsman," Arulieus said, his voice tense, "the prisoners have escaped. We traced three pods launched from Sector Eight. They've broken away from The Eclipse's perimeter. I recommend we dispatch my fleet immediately. We can intercept them before they're unreachable."

There was a pause—thick and heavy.

The Grand Huntsman's gaze didn't waver, his breath slow and measured despite the pain that rippled through every joint in his body. "No," he growled, his voice raw with rage but disturbingly controlled. "Call off your fleet."

Arulieus blinked, visibly startled. "With all due respect, if we wait too long—"

"I said no." The Huntsman's voice cut like a blade. "This is my hunt. Mine alone." His fists tightened at his sides. "I will not share it with your warships. I will not risk them ruining what I intend to finish myself."

"But... sir, you're injured—"

"Pain is fuel," the Huntsman snarled. "Let it sharpen the blade. They humiliated me. It humiliated me." His expression twisted, haunted by the memory of King's sonic roar, the moment his power was shattered and his pride wounded deeper than flesh. "The last Titan will die by my hands. And I will not be denied that glory!"

Without waiting for a reply, the Grand Huntsman terminated the transmission with a flick of his fingers. The hologram collapsed in a swirl of light.

He turned toward the massive breach in the chamber's wall—an exit carved through destruction. The cold expanse of space loomed beyond, vast and eternal. With a guttural breath, he summoned what remained of his star-forged power. The broken chains around his wrists sparked as he reformed his crescent blades, the shimmering weapons flickering with unstable energy.

His armor buckled, and he winced, but he stepped forward regardless. One step, then another and then he leapt.

His body rocketed from the chamber, hurtling into the cold abyss. A blazing trail of blue and silver burst from beneath his feet as his magic propelled him through the void, his silhouette cutting through the stars like a spear. Far ahead, the glint of the escape pods flickered like fireflies against the black canvas of space. He pursued them—silent, relentless, and consumed by a single, violent purpose.

The hunt had begun anew.

Chapter Fourteen: Crash Landing.

The escape pods blazed through the atmosphere of a nearby planet, trailing streaks of fire as they descended upon the world below: Mierus. As the escape pods plummeted further toward the planet's surface, the full scope of Mierus revealed itself in haunting majesty.

The atmosphere parted in waves of red and gold, the planet exuded an ancient, untouched grandeur. It was a place that felt like it had existed long before the stars themselves, a world shaped by cataclysm and silence.

As the pods ventured further onto the planet, the terrain sprawled in chaotic elegance. Massive plateaus jutted out like the bones of titans, their edges sheer and jagged, plunging into chasms that glowed faintly from beneath with geothermal light. The red sun bathed everything in a sickly crimson hue, casting long and dark shadows that slithered across the ridges like ribbons. Amidst this rugged chaos, the rivers and waterfalls became brief oases of movement and sound. The rivers did not flow gently but rather they surged, they were wild and relentless, as their currents carved through rock like liquid blades. The waterfalls plunged from high ridges in irregular torrents, spraying fine mist into the air. Which caught the sunlight and refracted it into fleeting, fiery rainbows.

There were also black pine-like trees that lined the canyons and slopes. Their trunks were wide and twisted, bark ridged like scales, and their branches reached upward like grasping fingers. The trees neither swayed nor bent; they remained unnervingly still, as if they're watching. Their thick, soot-colored needles clumped like thorns, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. Combined with the sky's burning palette, the forest gave the appearance of a landscape set aflame—except the flames never moved nor consumed anything around it. These trees simply only existed, they were all eternal and ominous. Above it all, strange shapes drifted through the orange-crimson skies—winged silhouettes that moved with slow, deliberate motion. Massive avian beasts gilded between mountain peaks and the clouds that coexisted with it. These beats let out distant calls that sounded like low chimes rung across a quiet landscape, they echoed across the vastness of it. There was life on Mierus but it was neither comforting nor welcoming. The planet harbored a subtle menace, an untamed, unyielding force of nature that had not been tamed by civilization.

Yet, for all its wildness, there was a sublime beauty to it. It was not a beauty born of gentleness or serenity but of awe. Specifically a raw, humbling awe that reminded any who stood upon its surface that they were small, and the world around them had endured countless epochs before their arrival. This was not a place of safety but it was a place of truth, where survival meant understanding the rhythm of the land, and daring to move forward anyway.

One by one, the pods smashed into different sectors of the terrain with violent impact, kicking up clouds of dust, rock, and steam. The first pod cracked open on a shallow slope where jagged stones tore through the lower plating. The hatch of the pod creaked as it pried open with a hiss, releasing a thin plume of vapor into the air. Vaileth stepped out slowly, her eyes squinted against the harsh crimson light that bathed the wilderness of Mierus. A dry wind swept across the ridge, carrying with it the scent of scorched bark and mineral dust. The landscape sprawled before her in grim majesty—as she caught the view of jagged cliffs looming over a forest in a valley down below, towering mountains cutting through the blood-orange sky, and its black pine-like trees clinging to the edges of every ledge and valley. The rivers in the distance rushed through the canyons they were situated in. She heard the different yet distinct calls of the many avian lifeforms on the planet, such species such as the Nimari Windshroud. They were Dove-like beings of a soft yellow-white color with semi-transparent wings and silver eyes. There were also the species of Cawkriths, Raven-like bipedal birds with deep violet feathers and many-eyed masks of blue, yellow, and green. Finally, she also heard the cries of Shrikeens, which were Owl-like beings with luminous feathers that change color depending on their emotions. They were also known for their four wings and a feature where they lacked a visible mouth. These were just several examples of the various avian lifeforms of the planet.

Besides the ambience of bird calls, there was also the distinct buzzing and clicking of its insect inhabitants. There was the Virex Beetle, known for their iridescent emerald shell with glowing yellow spots and stripe patterns on their backs. It is also known for having the ability to emit calming pheromones that soothed nearby creatures. It can also digest almost any plant matter. Part of the ecosystem was the Glowfrill Moth, known for having a wingspan up to one point five feet. Their appearance is that they have soft, velvet-like wings that glow in pinks and blues. They had antennae that trailed with sparkles like spores. For a final example, there were Slitgrubs, which were thick, slug-like lifeforms that measured over two feet long. Their skin color was a pale yellow with rows of pustule-like feelers, yet they had a slimy texture. They're known for feeding on rotting vegetation and releasing spores that cause rapid plant decay. These were once again, examples to reflect on the diverse biology of the planet Mierus.

She took a steadying breath. This planet, for all its haunting beauty, felt as though it was holding its breath and watching them.

Behind her, a faint groan stirred her to action. Vaileth turned on her heel and returned to the pod, where Atlas struggled weakly to sit up. His face was pale, slick with sweat, and his limbs trembled as he tried to push himself upright. "Easy," she said softly, kneeling beside him. Her hand found his, "Let me help you." With a firm yet gentle grip, she wrapped his arm around her shoulders and guided him out of the pod. His weight sagged against her, but she bore it without complaint. She planted one foot firmly after the next as they stepped onto the alien soil. The wind tugged at the ends of her cloak, but she stood tall, as a quiet force of calmness against the very chaos from their landing.

Once she was sure Atlas could stand, at least with her support, Vaileth extended her free hand. Star magic began to pulse at her fingertips in thin gold strands, which danced like light caught in the breeze. Her eyes closed and the magic soon flared outward in silent waves. It swept across the twisted forest and rocky plateaus like a net of radiant energy, brushing against every lifeform it encountered. She felt the pull of unfamiliar wildlife—creatures slumbering beneath roots, others stalking in the distance—but her focus cut through the noise like a blade through fog.

A flicker.

Then a pod resting on the ground silently had been spotted.

Her brow furrowed as the signals sharpened—as they were distinct and familiar. Their magical auras glowed like beacons in the dark. Vaileth inhaled and exhaled slowly, as she opened her eyes. The gold light faded from her palm.

"There," she said, pointing toward a steep ridge northeast of their crash site. "I found one of the pods. It's far but we can still make it."

Atlas managed a tired smile, one hand gripping the edge of the pod for support. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Vaileth didn't reply with words as she adjusted her hold on him, ensured he was steady, and turned toward the forest edge. The trees swayed under the sky as they began their trek into the heart of Mierus.

Elsewhere, smoke hissed from another pod, embedded halfway into a cliffside. A hatch blew open with a metallic clang, and Hesperos Holmes leapt out first, scanning the

horizon with his blasters drawn. Starry stumbled behind him, their eyes wide with awe at the foreign beauty of Mierus. Markus emerged last, quickly checking the surrounding terrain and with his Titan Sword sheathed across his back.

"Everyone alright?" Markus asked, prompting a response from Hesperos, "Never better."

"Starry, how about you mate?" Hesperos asked, however his friend would only reveal how they truly felt, "I-I'm okay- just uh kinda still shocked with the whole crash landing thing.. Oh boy.." Hesperos responded, "I understand no worries, just stay with us. We need to find the others quickly!"

Starry soon turned around, they squinted at the skyline of the very mountains that stretched along the landscape. They were blinking exaggeratedly with much wonder and enjoyment. "Whoa-hoho! I didn't expect to crash land here! This place is gorgeous! I don't think we've been to this Star system before Captain but I'm glad we have now! I mean WOAH!"

Hesperos chuckled under his breath, keeping his blasters up as he scanned the nearby ridges. "Appreciate the commentary, Starry, but please still remain close. We don't know what kind of bloody lifeforms call this place home, lad."

Before another step could be taken, a low, bone-chilling growl echoed from the nearby ridge causing the trio to freeze with fear.

From the shadows emerged a pack of snarling quadrupeds—sleek, sinewy creatures with dark fur and faint, bioluminescent streaks of blue running along their spines. Their eyes glowed with a predatory amber hue, and sharp tendrils—like whisker-thin antennae—twitched from the sides of their snouts. Each creature bore long, blade-like claws and narrow heads lined with rows of jagged teeth. These were Nyrekh Hounds—native predators of Mierus, known for their ferocity and pack instincts.

Starry's voice trembled. "Uh... g-g-guys? Do you think this is the best time where we should definitely run?!"

One of the Nyrekh Hounds snarled and lunged forward, straight for Hesperos.

"Nope!" Hesperos barked, opening fire. Twin bursts of plasma seared through the air, striking the beast mid-air and blasting it backward into the dirt with a shriek.

The pack shrieked and roared in response. Dozens surged forward from the rocks, charging with terrifying speed.

"Hold the line!" Markus shouted as he drew his Titan Sword, its gleaming blade humming with latent energy. He sprang into motion with fluid precision, intercepting the nearest hound with a wide, arcing slash. Another came from behind but he pivoted, using the sword's flat to knock it aside before driving the edge down in a swift, brutal strike.

Hesperos fought beside him, strafing the creatures with his blasters, each shot aimed with surgical accuracy. One hound darted toward Starry but Hesperos pivoted and took it out with a clean shot to the skull before it could reach them. "Stay behind us, Starry!" he shouted. "Hide behind the pod now!"

"I am!" Starry yelped, hovering quickly behind the escape pod the trio escaped him, he watched with wide eyes.

As the battle raged, dust and heat swirled in the air. Markus moved like a tempest, combining brute force with precise cuts that kept the hounds at bay. Hesperos, in contrast, was like wildfire—darting, dodging, and unloading round after round. His face instantly became a mask of pain and fury.

Finally, after several brutal minutes, the pack began to falter. With half their number down and the remaining pack members having become wounded. The remaining Nyrekh Hounds yelped and snarled retreat, disappearing back into the jagged terrain from which they came. Silence returned but now it was laced with tension.

Markus sheathed his blade with a heavy breath. "That was too close. You alright Starry?"

Starry peeked from behind the pod, trembling. "Is it safe? Are we alive? Am I still pretty?!"

Hesperos chuckled despite himself. "Yes. Yes. And... debatably."

"Rude!" Starry gasped, dramatically flopping to the ground.

As the laughter faded, a soft gust blew over the ridge—and a familiar voice called out from the distance. "Markus! Hesperos!"

Just then, from the crest of a nearby hill, a familiar figure emerged—Vaileth Xar, her cloak fluttering in the breeze, while she held onto Atlas's hand with her's. Her eyes, weary but focused, while Atlas limped forward, supported partially by her hand but walking on his own.

"Vaileth!" Markus called, rushing up to the incline of where she and Atlas were coming from.

She nodded solemnly. "I was able to spot you," she said, her voice filled with exhausted relief. Her eyes lingered briefly on the dirt and singed fur clinging to Hesperos and Markus's uniform. "I assume you've already encountered the wildlife, I see." she softly chuckled.

"Just a welcoming party," Hesperos muttered, dusting off his coat. "What about Luz and King?"

Vaileth's eyes briefly flashed with violet light as her hand hovered over the ground. A shimmer of clairvoyant energy rippled through her fingertips, and she closed her eyes. "I see them. They're not far. They landed at a valley eastward of where we are at the moment."

"Then that's where we go," Markus said firmly. "Hurry!"

Without hesitation, the group began their trek across the wildlands of Mierus—toward their friends, toward danger, and toward the next chapter of the war that had brought them all together.

The descent toward the valley had been steep, the winds of Mierus whipping at their uniforms, but the moment they entered at the valley floor and spotted the wreckage of the final escape pod nestled in a crater below, relief flooded through each of them like a crashing tide. Smoke curled from the twisted hull, but no flames or debris, which was an encouraging sign. As they descended carefully through the underbrush, Vaileth led the group with unwavering focus, her eyes flitting between the terrain and her internal vision.

At last, just beyond a ring of alien trees with bark like cracked amethyst, they found them. From within the escape pod, Luz emerged as she carefully helped King out as he clung to her back, groaning softly. Her staff—Stringbean—shifted beside her in serpent-like form, though she was alert and ready for whatever came their way. "Luz! King!" Atlas called, his voice breaking with equal parts hope and exhaustion.

Luz whirled from where she had been tending to King near the pod. Her face lit up with astonishment and overwhelming relief. "Atlas! Vaileth! Guys!" She didn't hesitate—she sprinted across the clearing, nearly tackling them both into a hug. King let out a joyful yip, bounding over to greet the others.

"Oh thank goodness," Luz breathed, eyes darting from one familiar face to the next—Hesperos, Starry, Markus—all alive and here. "You're all okay!" Luz exclaimed with joy and relief, while Starry flung their arms around Luz with a dramatic gasp. "Group hug!"

Hesperos smirked. "Touching reunion and all, but we're still on a foreign planet in the middle of far space. We need cover—fast."

Luz nodded, pulling away and becoming serious once more. "Agreed. We need somewhere to hide out and figure out a plan to get off to Astralis Prime. The Huntsman isn't going to stay off our trail for long."

Meanwhile, Markus slightly squinted his eyes as he began to scan the surrounding landscape. Something about the shape of the mountains, the position of a crooked stone arch above a plateau, and the spiraling ridges in the nearby cliffs stirred a memory inside of him. He strode forward, stepping toward a towering rock structure protruding from the ground like a dagger. As he brushed away the moss, his eyes widened—the faint outline of an ancient symbol etched deep into the stone surface revealed itself, which was a stylized, nine-branch tree surrounded by three stars: the emblem of the Order of Arbora.

"I know where we are," he said, exhaling slowly. The group gathered around him, curiosity and hope swelling in their chests.

"This is Mierus," Markus confirmed, brushing more of the moss away. "There's a monastery not far from here. It serves as an outpost for my order. If we can reach it..." He

turned toward them, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "They might be able to help us, since I do believe they might have a way to get us to Astralis Prime."

The moment of reprieve was short-lived.

Just as hope began to bloom in their chests, a piercing sound split the sky—a low hum that quickly crescendoed into the thunderous roar of the sound barrier being broken through. The group froze, as their instincts honed by survival instantly took over. High above the mountain peaks, a dark shape emerged through the crimson sky and hovered in it... The Grand Huntsman had arrived.

"Run!" Luz shouted, already pulling King close to her side.

The group scattered down the slope, their feet pounding over loose gravel and twisted roots. Each footstep was an act of desperation, behind them, the Grand Huntsman gave chase. The gust from his speed caused shockwaves that made several of the trees uproot and it would also cause the ground beneath them to crack. A blast of wind struck close behind, sending a shower of debris hurling past their heads like knives. One tree snapped clean in half, crashing down with a thunderous crack just seconds after they cleared the path.

"Move, move!" shouted Hesperos, dragging Markus along as the warrior stumbled briefly over an exposed root. Starry, glowing dimly from overexertion, hovered close to Hesperos's shoulder. As their usually cheerful tone now reduced to terrified silence.

Thinking quickly, Vaileth skidded to a halt on the slope, as she planted her feet firmly into the ground. The others surged past her but she didn't flinch. Her arms rose and hands became outstretched, she unleashed a brilliant burst of starlight. The very air shimmered with celestial magic as the light warped and bent, forming dazzling constructs that served as illusionary doppelgängers of the entire group. They mimicked every breath, every ragged motion, down to the flicker of light in Starry's glow. The illusions darted away in perfect synchronization, breaking into multiple directions along the ridgeline. The Grand Huntsman, pausing in midair to recalibrate. His sharp, hawk-like gaze swept across the sudden chaos, then locked onto the largest cluster of duplicates bolting toward the east.

"Go!" Vaileth barked, voice strained with effort. "The illusions will draw him off!"

Luz hesitated just long enough to catch the tension in Vaileth's jaw—how much effort it took to sustain the magic under such pressure. She grabbed her hand for a second, her eyes locking on, before urging the others forward. "Come on!"

With a mechanical growl and a pulse of blue energy, the Huntsman took the bait. His body became a blur across the sky, soaring after the decoys with terrifying velocity. Trees snapped in its wake like brittle bones, and a thunderclap followed its departure, echoing through the ravine like an explosion.

The real group ducked low and veered into the dense thicket of black-needed trees below. The branches clawed at their clothing and faces, but no one dared slow down. Every breath they took was laced with the bitter, smoky air of Mierus. Their boots sank into the damp, mossy earth, and their eyes darted in every direction, fearing at any moment the Huntsman might realize the deception. The group continued on foot until they heard the sound of rushing water. Following the sound, they came upon a narrow creek that cut through a shallow ravine. There, tucked behind the curtain of a wide, cascading waterfall, was a cave carved by erosion over time.

The moment they spotted it, a silent understanding passed through the group. No one needed to say anything, so instead they simply moved. They scrambled down the bank of the creek, their boots splashing into the frigid water, they stumbled with exhaustion and urgency. The waterfall was louder up close, its relentless roar drowning out everything else. Mist clung to their faces and clothes, chilling them further as they approached the cascade.

Luz was the first to reach it, he turned back to glance at the others. Her expression revealed her fatigue but it was laced with hope. Without hesitation, she pushed through the waterfall's curtain. The coldness slammed into her like a wall, stealing her breath for a moment as the water poured over her shoulders and head. The cave was narrow at first, just wide enough for one person to squeeze through. However, as Luz stepped further inside, it opened into a wider chamber. Stalactites hung from the ceiling like frozen daggers. The walls shimmered with mineral crystals, which faintly glowed with a soft azure hue that bathed the chamber in an otherworldly light.

One by one, the others emerged through the waterfall and joined her. King, shivering but silent. Vaileth, leaning heavily against the wall. Atlas, wide-eyed and jittery, clutching his side where he'd scraped himself during the run. Hesperos Holmes, breathing heavily,

while his sharp eyes looked at every corner of the cave out of habit. Markus and Starry came last, the former helping the latter float more steadily.

Everyone collapsed in different corners of the cave, their bodies sinking against the stone with varying degrees of exhaustion. No words were exchanged—just the sounds of breathing, the dripping of water from soaked clothes, and the faint, far-off roar of the waterfall outside. The air was damp and smelled of earth and minerals but it was safe or at least, safer than where they'd been minutes before.

Markus let out a shaky breath and pressed the side of his face to the cool stone, whispering, "We're alive."

"Barely," muttered King, slumping against the wall and flicking some water from his fur. "But I'll take it."

Eventually, Vaileth lifted her gaze and spoke softly, "We'll rest here. Just for a while." Everyone nodded. No one argued.

One by one, they eased themselves into the cool cave floor or leaned back against the walls. The adrenaline began to fade, replaced by the dull ache of fatigue. King curled up near a smooth corner of the stone wall, slowly falling asleep. Starry hovered low beside him, falling asleep alongside him. Hesperos leaned against the wall with a grunt, removing his blasters to check their charge levels. Markus sat down without a word, his Titan-forged sword resting across his lap, the blade stained with the blood of the alien beasts that attacked him earlier. Atlas rested his head on Vaileth's arm and drifted off to sleep. As Vaileth noticed this, she stood with her hands braced on her knees, some of her hair plastered to her face, her magic drained from the illusions. Luz, standing not far from her, looked down at her own hands as if they weren't hers.

Luz remained sitting near the edge of the cave, she watched the droplets of water slide down the moss-covered stone. Her arms wrapped around her knees, her eyes revealed her expression to be both distant and haunted. Vaileth sat beside her, quiet and still, respecting the silence between each other until Luz finally spoke. "Uh, hey.."

Vaileth turned to notice her, "Hm? What's up, you alright?"

Luz answered, "Yeah, it's just that I keep thinking..." her voice cracked slightly, "If I had just... y'know, done something different... maybe King wouldn't have been in danger. Maybe Atlas wouldn't have lost everything... Maybe none of this would've happened."

"I'm gonna go out on a limb here and be honest with something... I don't know how to stop blaming myself." Luz murmured, her voice soft, almost afraid of its own admission. Vaileth watched with curiosity in what Luz could reveal to her, "Oh?" she replied simply but she was willing to listen regardless.

Luz's words trembled out of her, like brittle leaves in the wind. "I keep telling myself I'm trying, but it doesn't feel like enough. I was supposed to protect them but I failed them." She added, "Every time I close my eyes, I still hear Atlas crying out for help. Then I see the look in King's eyes when Orion threatened him. I just—" Her breath hitched, and she pressed her hand to her mouth to keep the sob from escaping too loudly.

She concluded with, "I feel like I broke something in them," Luz continued. "In Atlas... in King... maybe even in myself. And I can't fix it. I don't even know how to begin."

Vaileth didn't respond right away. She looked at Luz with quiet empathy, her expression softening with understanding. Then, gently, she placed a hand on Luz's shoulder. "I know how that feels," she said, voice low and steady. "You think I haven't felt that?" she said. "That unbearable ache of knowing you've wounded the ones you love most, even if you meant to protect them? That helpless spiral of asking yourself, over and over, 'What if I'd just done more?'" She closed her eyes for a moment, as though gathering the strength to voice what had long remained buried. "I wasted centuries letting that guilt rot me from the inside. I thought if I just punished myself enough and kept replaying the same regrets, maybe I'd earn redemption. But all I earned was silence and emptiness."

Luz turned to her, her eyes glassy and watery from the tears that had formed in her eyes, and Vaileth continued. "There was a time I could've stood up to the Archivists. There were moments where I could've made a difference but I hesitated. I watched them grow stronger. I watched them manipulate and conquer, and I told myself it wasn't my place. That I couldn't stop them alone." She paused, her gaze heavy with memories that still bled. "And when I finally spoke out... they exiled me. I've lived with the weight of what I didn't do ever since."

"Luz, I hope you know that ever since I've met you, I see so much of myself in you," Vaileth added, her voice barely above a whisper. "That fire, that devotion, that fierce belief that it's your job to hold the world together and to protect others at all costs... even if it destroys you. But Luz... you gotta understand that you don't have to bleed yourself dry trying to fix every broken piece. Sometimes the most courageous thing you can do is allow yourself to hurt and still move forward, becoming stronger over time..."

A silence followed, but it wasn't hollow, as it was whole and warm. As though something unspoken had been shared—something neither of them had realized they desperately needed. Luz sat in the quiet that followed Vaileth's words, her arms folded loosely over her knees. Vaileth's voice seemed to linger longer than it should've—as if the universe itself had wanted to make sure Luz truly heard it and felt it.

"I..." Luz swallowed, and her voice cracked, forcing her to pause. She reached up and rubbed her sleeve against her eyes. "I didn't think anyone noticed at first. Not how much I've been trying to carry all of this like it's mine. Like if I just hold on tight enough... maybe no one else will have to feel what I've felt. Though, it did get to a point where everyone began noticing and I've been ignoring their attempts to reach out for me..."

Her voice trembled on the last word. She took a deep breath, shaky but genuine, grounding herself in the silence Vaileth had left for her.

"I guess I thought... if I let myself fall apart, even just for a second, everything would come crashing down again. Like it did before..." She bit her lip and looked away for a moment, voice softer now.

She turned her gaze back to Vaileth, and there was something in her eyes that hadn't been there before, not just pain but in understanding.

"I thought that being strong meant never stopping and never letting it get to me. But maybe... maybe I've just been scared that if I do let it in, I'll never come back from it." Luz's voice quieted, her fingers twisting into the fabric of her shirt, grounding herself. "But hearing you say that... it's like something in my chest finally... exhaled."

Her shoulders sagged slightly, not in defeat but in release.

"Honestly, I don't know how I'm going to stop trying to fix everything. I don't even know if I can. But maybe... maybe I can try to stop doing it all alone."

A gentle breath left her lungs, it was fragile but it felt like freedom. She looked at Vaileth again—really looked at her. She didn't see just the cosmic mentor or the powerful warrior she'd always seen, but a scarred woman who was still healing, who had once made the same mistakes Luz was starting to make now.

"I see so much of myself in you too," Luz said softly. "And maybe that's why it means so much to hear this from you." She added, "So, thank you. I think... I think I really needed this more than I even knew."

For a while, there was no need for more words. Just the soft ambience of the cavern and the quiet, shared strength between two wounded souls still learning how to stand in the wake of everything they'd lost and everything they still had left to fight for.

Luz looked down, her chest rising and falling slowly. There was a long pause. Then, a small, tired smile tugged at her lips. Her smile alone reflected her gratitude towards Vaileth's words of advice, which comforted her a bit. While not entirely fixing the various emotional and mental toll she had been experiencing since then, it made her feel relaxed and at ease at the moment.

Luz soon spoke which broke the silence between them, "Soooo," she said, chuckling softly through the emotion in her throat, "Heh, I guess... once this is all over... you and I are going to need a lot of therapy, that's for sure!"

"Pffft!" Vaileth let out a light, dry laugh. "Please, I need at least a few thousand years' worth. Maybe then I'll be moderately functional... hopefully."

The two women smiled at one another—truly smiled—for the first time in days. It was a fragile moment but it was real and sincere. It was something warm in the middle of all the cold chaos. At that moment, the cave didn't feel cold. It felt like a shelter, not just from the Grand Huntsman, or the Archivists of the stars beyond—but from the guilt, the sorrow, and the crushing expectations they had placed on themselves.

Wrapped in that silence, surrounded by sleeping allies and the pulse of the waterfall beyond, Luz and Vaileth allowed themselves to rest—not just physically, but spiritually.

Together, they began to mend. Not all at once, not completely, but just enough. It was enough to wake up tomorrow and try again.

After a while, the others were still asleep beneath the quiet hush of the cave. King's breathing was slow, his body still, but behind his closed eyes, his mind stirred as it still remained asleep.

However... The gentle trickle of the waterfall outside was replaced by an unnatural silence within his subconsciousness. The moment was subtle at first: the air grew colder, too still, like the breath of some great beast had been drawn in and held. In it, he stood alone in a pale, endless field shrouded in fog. The sky above him was starless, black, yet somehow oppressive, pressing down as if the heavens themselves were watching. King looked around, confused, his claws curling inwards instinctively.

Then he felt it—an ancient presence that was slow and seething. A low rumble echoed through the fog, followed by the heavy sound of metal dragging against stone. When the Grand Huntsman emerged from the mist, he did not walk—he stalked. His blades scraped across the landscape, while each step was impossibly loud against the silence. His yellow crescent emblem glowed like a dying sun, fixed directly on King.

King yelled, "Ah!" which made him take a step back. "This is a dream... this is all just a dream," he said aloud, voice shaking. "You're not real! You j-just can't be!"

The Huntsman's lips twisted into a grotesque sneer. "Oh, little titan... even here, you cannot run forever."

Suddenly, the mist peeled away in jagged swirls, revealing a twisted landscape beneath their feet: warped versions of places King knew. The Bonesborough marketplace, rotted and ash-streaked. The Owl House, crumbling into a pit of darkness. Luz's smile flickering into static.

King bolted. He didn't know where to, but the terror in his chest told him to move. The Grand Huntsman gave chase—not sprinting, but gliding, as if reality bent around him. The air warped with each of his strides. The world stretched unnaturally, twisting corridors appearing and vanishing like a nightmare kaleidoscope. King ran down a stone hallway that immediately melted into a burning forest, only to blink and find himself atop a crumbling bridge with no end in sight.

"I will find you," the Huntsman's voice echoed from nowhere and everywhere. "Even if you escape a thousand times... I will always be behind you."

King tripped, tumbling down a slope of broken memories—images of the Titan Trappers and another of Luz shielding him from Orion. The vision cracked apart like glass, and he found himself on all fours, face to face with the Huntsman once more.

The Huntsman leaned in, so close that King could see the cracks in his mask. "You're alone now," he whispered. "And you can't protect anyone."

King's body shook, fear gnawing at the edges of his soul—but something inside him pushed back. His pupils narrowed and his claws clenched. "No," King rasped. "You're in my dream and I WANT YOU TO. GET. OUT!"

A low growl escaped him as his Titan magic surged. With one word, one syllable from deep in his chest, King unleashed it.

"WEH!"

A shockwave of pure Titan force erupted from him, tearing through the fog like a tidal wave of sound and will. The Grand Huntsman was blasted back, his form distorting, cracking, screaming as he was hurled into the void.

Then silence.

The dream began to collapse—colors bleeding together, the nightmare retreating into the shadows. King gasped as the weight of it all pressed in one last time—then vanished.

He awoke with a start, his body lurching upright, his eyes filled with primal fear. His fur stood on end, his breathing ragged. For a moment, the cave was unfamiliar, as it had been too dark and too quiet. Then he heard the muffled splash of the waterfall and the rise and fall of Luz's chest as she lay curled beside her.

King rubbed at his eyes and sat upright again—this time fully awake—while his eyes were wide with dread. "Guys! He's coming," he urged, "The Grand Huntsman... he found us! Please wake up! I'm not kidding, he's coming! Hurry!"

The others stirred quickly, alarmed by the urgency in King's voice. Luz immediately reached for her staff, while Hesperos rolled onto his feet, his twin blasters humming faintly to life. Markus, disoriented but alert, was already checking the path behind them. Starry shifted in place, their luminescent body dimming slightly in apprehension. Atlas rubbed his eyes and glanced toward Vaileth with concern.

Before anyone could speak, a bone-chilling rumble echoed through the cavern—metal grinding against stone, sharp and unmistakable. Then came the heavy, rhythmic clang of armored boots approaching from the far end of the cave. The Grand Huntsman had arrived once more, the decoys had failed, and now he was inches away from retrieving his prey. A shower of pebbles rained from the ceiling as the cavern trembled from the sheer force of his presence. With a crackle of dark energy, his yellow crescent emblem glowed so instantly that a long shadow was seen across the water-slicked walls.

"Run!" Vaileth shouted, already stepping forward, star magic flaring across her arms. "Go! I'll hold him off—find the monastery!"

"But—Vaileth!" Atlas cried out, his voice caught between terror and heartbreak. "You can't fight him alone! He'll—he'll hurt you!"

Vaileth turned to him briefly, her expression softening amid the turmoil. "I've faced worse, Atlas," she said, forcing a calmness into her voice that betrayed the storm inside her. "I promise I'll come back. But right now, you have to trust me kiddo."

He didn't want to move, neither did Luz but they knew they had no choice.

King grabbed Atlas' hand and tugged hard. "We have to go!"

With one final glance at Vaileth, the group turned and bolted toward the waterfall's curtain, crashing through it and plunging into the cold waters of the creek. Night had fully settled in, shrouding the world in shadows and moonlight. The forest beyond the shoreline loomed vast and ominous but Markus didn't hesitate.

"This way!" he called, pointing toward a narrow trail carved between moss-covered trees. "The monastery's west from here—just keep running!"

Feet splashed through the creek before thudding against damp earth. The forest consumed them as they ran—branches whipping past, breath catching in lungs, the adrenaline of pursuit gnawing at their nerves. Hesperos stayed at the rear, eyes darting for threats, while Luz and King took the lead, pushing forward with everything they had.

Meanwhile, deep within the cavern, the confrontation had already begun. The Grand Huntsman stepped forward, his chained twin crescent blades slithering into his grip. "Stay out of my way, Vaileth Xar!" he growled. "You're nothing but a traitor!"

Vaileth's reply came with a smirk. "I'm better off as a traitor to tyrants than being a slave to them!"

"Since it's obvious you won't get out of my way, I will only tell you that you won't be able to protect them." the Huntsman said, he added further. "And you won't be able to keep the Celestine Compass from me either! I will claim it, and I will break everything you've chosen to stand for!"

"Then come and try!" Vaileth hissed. With that, both her and the Grand Huntsman charged towards each other at high speeds, causing the cavern to explode with starfire upon impact.

Their duel was nothing short of cataclysmic. Vaileth surged forward with twin gauntlets forged of shimmering starlight that she made with her own Star Magic. Each strike cracked with volatile force, illuminating the cavern in bursts of purple-blue brilliance. Her movement was almost too fast to track—fluid, balletic—an elegant dance honed through centuries of war and pain. She flipped through the air like a falling meteor, each spin and twist purposeful, her fists tracing glowing arcs as they lashed out.

The Grand Huntsman met her advance with chilling calm, his massive form moving with unnerving grace. His twin crescent blades, bound by chains, sliced through the air with mechanical precision. Sparks flew as metal kissed stone, and the hiss of his weapons reverberated like ghostly howls through the cavern. The chains coiled and snapped with serpentine fluidity, striking and recoiling as if alive, eager to taste her blood.

They clashed again and again, light against shadow, purpose against cruelty. Their magic collided in explosive bursts, shaking the walls of the cave with shockwaves that cracked

the stone. Every step was a gamble, every strike a war between philosophies that had long since fractured.

Vaileth broke the rhythm with a sudden flurry of strikes to his abdomen, each punch landing with concussive force. The Huntsman staggered under the barrage, grunting as she followed up with a sweeping roundhouse, her boot catching his shoulder and forcing him to retreat several paces. She didn't hesitate, twisting on her heel, she extended both palms and unleashed a concentrated beam of star magic. The searing column of light shrieked through the air.

The Huntsman raised a blade in defense, deflecting the beam with an angled swipe that sent it crashing into the cavern wall, where it detonated in a dazzling burst of cosmic light. "You're slow and lacking... How pathetic!" he taunted, circling her with the cold confidence of a hunter who knew the terrain.

Vaileth narrowed her eyes, sweat tracing down her brow, her chest heaving. "I'm just getting started!" she spat back, then pivoted sharply. Her left fist feinted high while her body corkscrewed into the air. Magic flared behind her as she rocketed upward, her form catching the light like a spinning supernova. Then, with a roar, she came crashing down—both fists primed with starlight. She landed a devastating blow across his chest, the sheer force knocking him back with a thunderous crunch as he skidded across the cave floor, gouging a trail of stone in his wake.

For a moment, silence fell.

For a moment, it seemed as if she had the upper hand.

Vaileth's breath hitched—whether from exhaustion or emotion, she wasn't sure—but she stood tall. She whispered a final incantation beneath her breath, voice trembling not with fear, but with the weight of what she was willing to risk. Light surged along her gauntlets, wrapping around her arms like living filaments of power. The glow intensified, flaring like a second dawn inside the cavern. "This ends now!" she shouted and leapt.

Her form was a comet, burning white-hot as she hurtled toward him. She poured everything into that strike—her fury, her hope, and her desperation to protect the ones she loved.

But in that all-or-nothing moment, she overcommitted.

The Grand Huntsman watched with cruel delight. At the final second, he twisted his body, allowing her momentum to carry her past him. With surgical precision, his chained blades lashed around her midsection like a trap sprung in silence. The force of his counterattack was brutal. The chains yanked her mid-flight and slammed her to the ground with a gut-wrenching crack.

The wind left her lungs in a painful wheeze, her limbs twitching as she tried to recover. However, he was already moving, he closed the distance in a blink. With a guttural chant in an ancient tongue, he raised his arms and the star-magic chains flared with malevolent light. They slithered around her wrists and ankles like serpents made of anguish, locking her to the cold forest floor just outside the cavern's mouth. She writhed against them, teeth gritted, but they sapped her strength with every breath—draining not just her magic, but her will to fight.

The Grand Huntsman stood above her, casting a long shadow over her restrained form. "You should've stayed hidden," he muttered, his voice a low rumble, void of empathy. "Now they'll watch you fall. And I will watch the light leave your eyes when I tear the compass from your allies' broken hands. Especially when I slay the Titan!"

Vaileth looked up at him, defiant even in defeat, her eyes still burning like dying stars. "Then you'd better hope you kill me first," she whispered.

He didn't answer as he turned and vanished into the trees, leaving her bound in the darkness as the hunt began anew.

Meanwhile, back to the group, The night was cold and breathless, the moonlight peeking through the swaying forest ahead of them as they were still situated in the clearing. They had to act quickly considering the clearing had them exposed.

"Markus!" Luz barked as she tightened her grip on her staff, eyes darting between the overgrown trees ahead of her and her allies. "Which way?!"

"I—I'm trying to remember!" Markus shouted over his shoulder, frantic. He spun in a slow circle, searching for landmarks. "It's been years since I last came this way. The outpost should be near... just past—wait!"

He pointed down a narrow path lined with more additional mossy stones and crooked trees but it had been covered with years of overgrown foliage which made it much more difficult to be seen during the darkness of the night. "There! That way—I'm sure of it now!"

Before they could make a single step, a chilling gust cut through the trees. The air turned heavy—unnaturally heavy—as if the very forest held its breath. Then, from the shadows, a familiar figure emerged, The Grand Huntsman. Towering in his dark armor, he stepped into the moonlight like a specter of death, the chained twin crescent blades dragging behind him with a metallic hiss. "Vaileth..." Luz whispered, her heart sinking, realizing that her friend had lost the battle. King looked up in horror, while Atlas's breath hitched audibly.

"Well," the Huntsman purred, voice like rusted silk, "I didn't expect the quarry to come running to me. How convenient." His cruel smile widened. "This chase grows more entertaining by the hour!"

Luz immediately stepped in front of King and Atlas, planting her feet firmly into the dirt, staff glowing faintly. "Stay behind me," she ordered, voice low and protective. "I'll hold him off." She would soon be joined with Hesperos who drew out his dual blasters and steadily aimed at the Grand Huntsman. While Markus stood his ground as he entered into a combative position with his titan sword drawn out. "I'll make you pay for what you did to my friend!" Markus yelled.

However, just as Luz, Hesperos, Markus, and Starry were about to battle The Grand Huntsman, King stepped forward towards them and said, "No." It was a simple statement but when he said it, his voice was trembling but firm at the same time. Luz and the others turned to notice King. Luz was especially the most shocked of all, as she had become too stunned to speak hearing her brother's desire to assist her in the battle. King added, "I'm helping you."

While Luz had remained stunned, she finally got the courage to reply to him by refusing his request. "King, no—"

"I mean it!" he snapped, chest rising and falling with determination. "I'm not letting my big sister fight him alone. You allowed me to make Markus' sword earlier! It wouldn't be fair if you don't allow me to fight and help you!"

The words hit Luz like a jolt to the heart. Her eyes softened, the fire in them briefly flickering. "King..."

"I'm scared," he admitted, his voice small now. "But... I'd be even more scared if something happened to you. I have to help."

She kneeled in front of him, eyes glimmering with fear and love. "Are you sure about this?"

King nodded. "Yeah. We have to, Luz. It's the only way we're getting out of this. Together."

She exhaled shakily. "Okay. Then let's do this!"

Luz smirked with confidence, "Should we finally do the 'thing' you and I have been practicing so long for?" King wagged his tail with pride and joy, "Of course! I can finally unleash our power together!!"

Soon Luz would reach her hand out to King, which he softly accepted. As Luz and King's hands interlocked, they both closed their eyes, while a sudden warmth spread through Luz's fingertips—not just warmth, but a pulse. The pulse started gently, a soft, familiar glow crept up King's arm. His arm began illuminating the new Titan glyphs etched into his fur. The same glyphs he had spent so much time teaching her.

Within seconds, Luz felt it as well. Soon a spark ignited along her arm, the same glyphs as King's began flaring to life. They were reacting to King's magic, which had become evident that a connection—a synchronization—had begun. The glow intensified, as it wrapped around her arm, then spreading upward, outward, encasing her entire body in an amber-colored blinding, swirling ball of energy.

Markus stepped back, his eyes widening. "Luz—?"

Hesperos narrowed his eyes, watching the transformation unfold with fascination. "Oh, now this is interesting."

"Something's happening! Ohohohoho!" Starry exclaimed.

Then—it happened.

A surge of magic erupted from their connected hands, and Luz felt her entire being shift. The magic wrapped around her, molding her, reshaping her into something more—something both familiar and new.

A powerful wind rushed through the bridge as the transformation completed itself.

And when the light finally dimmed, Luz stood there, transformed.

Luz was now fused with King's Titan magic as a whole. The very cloak of her uniform had now become furry black covering with rings of bone on the outside and purple on the inside of it. There was a glowing glyph combination on her chest, one that clearly reflected King's Titan powers. Her hat turned black with a tail-like feature with a gray tip on top and purple on the inside of it too. She also gained a pair of horns on the sides of her hat, which were similar to King and his late father. Her eyes turned black with yellow pupils, and her hands and lower legs turned skeleton-like while wearing gray pants. Her hair turned into a deep, dark purple. While it was curly yet bushy and wide, giving it the appearance of a mighty mane.

She lifted a hand, flexing her clawed fingers, feeling the power hum beneath her skin.

"Haha! It worked! I'm surprised it worked!" King said as he was proud of himself for how the transformation went. Meanwhile, Luz blinked, adjusting to the sensation, before looking down at King—who, despite his usual sass, was staring at her with something that looked like pure admiration.

She grinned and she simply stated, "Oh, how much I've missed this!"

Markus was the first to speak, his eyes flickering over Luz's transformed form with awe and academic curiosity. "Incredible..." he murmured, stepping forward. "The

transformation is far more refined than before—your body has fully attuned itself to the Titan's magic. This level of synchronization—why, it's practically seamless!"

Starry, on the other hand, wiggled enthusiastically from mid-air. "Luz, you look so cool! Like a Titan-Warrior-Moon-Goddess-Protector-Lady!"

Hesperos smirked, he crossed his arms as he gave Luz an appreciative nod. "Gotta say, mate, you're really selling the whole 'otherworldly powerhouse' thing!"

Soon the group returned their attention back to the Grand Huntsman, watching them as his tall form loomed over them. He stared intently now having the full scope of what exactly Luz transformed into. "Oh..." the Grand Huntsman breathed, savoring the sight. "Two Titans... This will make the hunt so much sweeter..."

"You'll regret what you've done!" Luz growled.

The clearing immediately erupted into a massive battle.

Markus drew his Titan forged blade and charged, the floor trembling beneath his heavy footfalls. With a sharp pivot, he brought his blade across in a low arc, the sound of steel grinding against enchanted chains echoing through the area of combat. Sparks burst outward as the Grand Huntsman twisted, parrying the blow with one crescent blade and swinging the other toward Markus's midsection. Markus was no amateur, with a swift backward step and a flourish, he deflected the attack and countered with a brutal overhead slash. The Huntsman grunted, shifting his stance to absorb the impact as the two weapons clashed again and again in a blur of motion. Markus's grip tightened with every exchange, his muscles burning with strain but his eyes never wavered.

"You fight with the resolve of a dying star," the Grand Huntsman sneered, his dual chained blades snapping forward like striking serpents. "But that won't be enough to sever the fate we've written!"

Markus narrowed his eyes, parrying each strike with practiced determination. "You never wrote anything, Arbora has!"

He twisted his stance, using the Grand Huntsman's own momentum against him. With a sudden flare of energy, Markus lunged, his Titan Sword arcing through the air with a roar

of ancestral magic. The blade found its mark—cutting across the Huntsman's shoulder, penetrating through his armor and slicing his flesh.

The Grand Huntsman staggered back, one knee hitting the ground as his chained blades recoiled in the dust. For the first time in the entire war-torn battle, he wasn't standing tall.

Markus held his sword steady, panting, and watching. Soon Hesperos, Luz, King, and Starry all stood silently in their battle positions. While Atlas stood close to both Luz and King.

A slow hiss escaped the Grand Huntsman's voice. He reached up and touched his shoulder, drawing his fingers back to inspect the ichor that now stained them—a glowing, shimmering blood not seen by mortal eyes in eons. He stared at it as though it were an impossibility. "This..." he muttered under his breath, confusion bleeding into something far more dangerous: disbelief. "This isn't possible!"

His voice was no longer filled with theatrical arrogance but shaken curiosity. "No mortal blade has ever breached my flesh. Not even the most sacred relics of the Archivists... What treachery is this?"

Markus said nothing at first, but his eyes betrayed the flicker of sorrow and pride—he knew what it meant. That their alliance with King, and the forgotten powers of the Titans, were reshaping the very rules of this war.

The Grand Huntsman's expression darkened, as a subtle pulse of energy radiated from the wound. His senses flared as he began to feel Titan essence within him, which caused his body to stiffen.

"...Titan magic." he whispered. The words were bitter in his mouth. Realization passed through the Huntsman like a jolt of lightning. King, The last of the Titans, His essence was now weaponized and wielded by Markus, a mortal.

Markus tightened his grip. "The Titans may have fallen long ago but their will lives on—through King... and through all of us. Under Arbora's guidance!"

The Huntsman's jaw clenched, the revelation hitting him with the weight of a crumbling cosmos. He stood slowly, more solemn now, the air around him thinning as his chained

blades floated at his sides like restless ghosts. "So the last Titan has chosen to share its gift... To meddle with things best left untouched. How foolish..."

He looked toward the distance for a heartbeat—toward the silhouettes of Luz, King, Hesperos, Starry, and Atlas. The pieces were aligning, faster than he expected. This wasn't just rebellion, it was a reclamation.

"I see now..." he muttered. "You're not just pests in Orion's greater plans. You've become the axis of resistance... the very spark that would trigger such rebellion..." he concluded with, "You've all grown far too dangerous..."

He raised his chained blades again, their crescents crackling with renewed fervor—no longer just a tool of conquest, but a necessity of survival. His voice grew colder. "Which means I can no longer afford restraint."

However before he could act, Luz surged in next, with a tornado of Titan glyphs spiraling beneath her feet as she launched herself high into the air. Her staff, now pulsing with crimson energy drawn from King's connection, transformed mid-flight—splintering into twin whips of magical light that cracked through the air like lightning. With a guttural shout, she lashed them forward, striking the Huntsman across the chest and forcing him to stumble backward. His armor sizzled where the Titan-charged magic struck, but he didn't falter for long.

From the rear, King dug his claws into the dirt, his tiny form radiating immense power as glyphs encircled his horns like orbiting moons. He raised his arms and shouted, "BACK OFF!" unleashing a sonic Titan pulse shortly after that shattered a row of trees behind the Huntsman. The wave of energy sent rocks flying and briefly knocked the Huntsman off balance, allowing Luz to rush in and land a crushing strike to his gut.

The Grand Huntsman snarled, teeth bared in wild satisfaction. "Delightful!" he growled, chains flaring as they writhed. "You are your father's spawn. But I wonder—how long before your courage cracks beneath my chains?"

Hesperos Holmes darted through the underbrush like a shadow, his feline form low and agile. "Don't count on it!" he shouted, twin blasters spinning in his hands with practiced precision. He somersaulted over a swinging crescent blade, landing behind the Huntsman

and firing a barrage of energy bolts into his exposed back. The blasts sparked across the armor's weaker joints, forcing the Huntsman to momentarily shift his defense.

"That armor of yours looks a bit overheated!" Hesperos taunted, leaping away just as one of the chains lashed out and barely missed his tail.

Floating above them, Starry glowed like a tiny sun. Their soft golden light pulsed as they spun in place, little arms extending with a pop. "Deploying starlight barrier!" They sang. A translucent shield of prismatic energy encased King and Hesperos just in time to block another volley of whip-like chains. "I gotcha, sparklebuds!" Starry chirped, wiggling in midair. "And don't worry, I also come with offensive features!" A beam of concentrated starlight fired from their center, striking one of the Huntsman's crescent blades and heating it red-hot. The weapon hissed with sudden magical pressure, forcing the Huntsman to adjust his grip.

Luz's feet skidded against the dirt as she landed. She glanced back at King, her expression equal parts proud and terrified. "Nice shot, buddy!"

King offered a small grin, his voice trembling with energy. "I'm just buying you some time, big sis! Let's finish this!"

Markus rejoined the fray, spinning his sword in one hand and slicing through one of the animated chains that came too close. "He's starting to falter!" he shouted. "Keep hitting him hard—don't give him room to recover!"

"Arrgggh!" The Huntsman roared and retaliated with a vicious swipe from both blades, his chains spiraling outward like centrifugal weapons. Luz spun her staff and created a Titan shield, barely deflecting the blow as she stumbled back. Then—without warning—one of the chains snaked toward King.

"King, move!" Luz shouted, already rushing toward him.

Before the chain could strike, Starry zipped down and expanded into a glowing starburst, intercepting the attack with a dazzling pop! "You leave King alone, you edge lord!" King panted, "Thanks, Starry!"

The magical explosion from Starry's intervention sent the Grand Huntsman crashing hard against the ground, his chained blades scattering to either side of him. Dust kicked up around his crumpled form, curling through the moonlit clearing. For a moment, the air was still—taut with uncertainty. The group remained frozen in place, eyes wide and breaths ragged, caught between instinct and disbelief.

And then, something shifted.

As the Grand Huntsman stirred, the edge of his tattered hood snagged on a low-hanging branch behind him—pulled back fully from his head by the momentum of his fall. The glowing yellow crescent emblem that had glimmered over his face like a spectral mask flickered violently before fizzling out with a crackle of dying magic, vanishing into the night like smoke in wind.

The group gasped.

The man beneath the hood was not the ageless phantom they had imagined. His face bore the weathered, dignified features of someone in late adulthood—perhaps in his fifties or sixties, although the idea that he was many centuries old still remained with the group. His skin was a deep, dark gray, almost stone-like, textured with various scars of different sizes carved by time and conflict, especially during his days when he had hunted the titans. His ears were pointy, however his right ear had a piece of it missing as it was covered in large scars. Which was likely due to an encounter he had with a titan many years prior. From his scalp flowed a mass of long, bushy olive-dark hair, streaked with lighter grays like vines touched by age, cascading down his shoulders in tangled waves. His eyebrows were thick and slightly unkempt, matching the hue of his hair. His nose was sharp and pointed upward at the tip, lending a severity to his expression. However, it was the blotch on his face that truly stood out: a luminous yellow crescent-shaped marking stretched across the center of his face. His eyes—bright orange with irises that burned a red-magenta hue—glowed with fury and power.

The Grand Huntsman slowly rose to his feet, the air around him trembling with magic barely restrained. His chest heaved with fury, his lip curled in disdain. The mask was gone now that his true face was exposed, and his rage burned hotter than before. "You..." he growled, his voice low and guttural, like gravel dragged across steel. "You dare unmask me?"

He rose to his feet slowly, power thrumming around him in spiraling waves of darkened star magic. The floor cracked beneath his boots, and the crescent-shaped mark on his face pulsed, glowing brighter than before—as if revealing him had only awakened something worse. His twin crescent blades returned to his hands in a sharp flash of light, now buzzing with unstable energy. With a venomous glare, his eyes scanned the group—no longer a hunter watching prey, but a wrathful storm ready to devour everything in its path. "I'll flay the sky to find you all again if I must. None of you will see the light of another moon!"

Luz raised her staff again, her Titan form reigniting with renewed fire. "Everyone—stay together! We're not done yet!"

King stepped forward beside her, teeth bared and Titan magic crackling at his fingertips. "Then you're gonna have to try a lot harder, buddy!"

Hesperos steadied his blasters, nodding grimly. "Looks like round two just started."

Starry, buzzed fiercely with frustration. "Oh, come on! You were supposed to stay down! I literally star-bombed you!"

Markus took a defense position near the rear. "So much for dramatic unmasking ending the fight..."

And as the Grand Huntsman let out a bellowing roar that split the night air, the group—tired, bruised, but still standing—prepared themselves once more. The fight for survival wasn't over. But now, they had seen the face behind the nightmare... and that made it all the more personal.

Meanwhile the entire time, Atlas stood just behind the tree line, half-shielded by the twisted roots and glowing foliage of the battle-scarred grove. His knees trembled. His chest heaved. The entire clearing seemed to pulse with the clash of powers ahead—every blast, every clang of steel, every cry of defiance echoing in his ears like thunder. He clutched his hands tightly against his chest, his fingers balled into pale quivering fists.

He could see everything.

Luz soared across the battlefield in her Titan-hybrid form, her staff blazing with glyph-magic as she parried the Grand Huntsman's blades—each strike a burst of multi-colored energy. King fired beams of Titan magic from his mouth, bracing beside her with all his might. Markus fought with unwavering focus, his Titan-forged sword clashing against the Grand Huntsman's twin crescent blades, even as sparks and raw kinetic magic flared violently between them. Hesperos darted across the field in swift, calculated lunges. His dual blasters fired with rapid, coordinated bursts. Which helped to buy time and space for Luz and King. Meanwhile, Starry zipped overhead, shooting star beams in chaotic, zigzagging arcs. Which threw the Huntsman's rhythm off—though even their stellar energy was beginning to dim from overuse. Despite their efforts, it was clear they were being pushed to their limit.

Luz's breathing had grown heavier, her glyph magic beginning to stutter between castings. King had taken a grazing hit to the shoulder and was now shielding Luz more than attacking. Markus's swordarm wavered—his parries became slower and his stance loosened as a result. And Hesperos... he was moving slower now in mid-air, one blaster misfiring from being partially melted.

They were all still standing but they were breaking formation.

Atlas felt the fear swell in his throat. That same fear he'd carried for so long—the fear of being powerless, of being a burden. He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering as if cold, even though his heart burned like wildfire. He wanted to move, to run in and help—but his body resisted, frozen by the crushing weight of panic. They were going to die and he was just standing there.

Then his eyes flicked to Luz—her form faltering as she barely deflected a downward strike meant for King. He saw her mouth move—calling King's name. King screamed her name in return.

Atlas's chest tightened while he thought of every moment they stood up for him. Luz and her friends protected him when General Arulieus had invaded Bonesborough when they were pursuing him. When King rescued him from the star magic draining machine at the Archive Tower. Then the thought of Vaileth came into his mind. He thought that she had every reason to give up on him. Every reason to walk away but she didn't. Even with the scars she bore—her haunted eyes and hollow voice—she stood between him and the world like a living shield. She fought for him and she believed in him.

Her words echoed in his mind like a distant melody:

"You're stronger than any of your siblings, even without your powers. Because strength isn't in how bright you shine—it's in how long you keep shining, even when someone tries to snuff you out."

A small breath escaped from Atlas's mouth. His eyes widened—not from fear, but from understanding. They were fighting to protect him, as they were really putting everything into stopping the Grand Huntsman and ensuring his safety. However, if he didn't step in now—if he let that fear rule him—he would lose them all.

A spark lit behind his eyes.

His body surged forward before he could even think. He sprinted toward the chaos. "LUZ!!" he shouted, voice cracking but determined.

Luz's head whipped toward the sound. "Atlas?! Wait—!"

But he didn't stop.

The Grand Huntsman turned in time to see the boy barreling toward him, and scoffed. "You think another child will make a difference?" he sneered.

"I'm not just another anything!" Atlas shouted, and with a furious cry, he leapt off a chunk of scorched rock and slammed his fists into the ground beside the Huntsman. The impact cracked the earth, launching a burst of raw force that staggered the masked warrior.

The Grand Huntsman stumbled back, surprised—and angry.

"Nice of you to join us," Hesperos grunted through a smirk, sliding behind Atlas and unleashing a flurry of blaster fire.

"About time!" King added a gleam of pride in his eyes as he blasted a shockwave from his paws that Atlas rolled with and amplified using his own brute strength, sending the Huntsman sliding further back.

Luz's gaze locked on Atlas—her expression a mix of disbelief, awe, and fierce pride. "Atlas... are you sure about this?"

Atlas took a shaky step forward, heart pounding against his ribs like a drum. His voice was barely audible—cracked and small amidst the distant echoes of combat. "I've never felt this afraid..." he whispered, his eyes locked on Luz as she turned to him. His throat tightened, but he forced himself to keep speaking. "But I can't just stand here and watch you suffer for me."

Luz paused, her eyes softened, she reached out and placed a hand gently on his arm. "You're not alone, Atlas," she said, her voice thick with emotion. Her eyes shimmered—not with fear but with belief in him. "We're stronger when we stand together." she added.

For a moment, the world seemed to still. Her hand on his arm grounded him, and her words pierced through the thick fog of doubt that had haunted him for so long. He glanced past her—he saw Hesperos recharging his blasters, Markus tightening his grip on his sword, Starry zipping in frantic loops above their heads, glowing faintly with concern.

Atlas stepped forward beside her—while their fear was still there but it no longer controlled him. Together, they turned back to face the battlefield.

Meanwhile, back at the cavern, Vaileth Xar lay still on the moss-covered stone floor of the cavern. Her limbs were still bound by the star-woven chains that glowed with a dim golden light. The Grand Huntsman's magic had been precise, cruelly so—crafted from his own mastery of celestial bindings. Her muscles ached, her body bruised and drained from the earlier battle. As the moments dragged on and the faint sounds of her allies' distant fight filtered through the heavy stone, causing a spark within her to be ignited.

Her fingers twitched. "No," she whispered through clenched teeth, her voice ragged. "I won't let it end like this... I can do more..."

The faces of her allies—Luz, King, Atlas, Hesperos, Markus, and even the peculiar Starry—flashed through her mind like starlight cutting through fog. However it was Atlas's face that lingered the longest. His wide, frightened eyes. The small tremble in his form upon witnessing what her former students had done to him. She remembered the

promise she had made to him, to protect him and be there for him. She wasn't going to allow him to get hurt by the very being that tormented him for so long. This was enough to fuel her motivation in freeing herself.

Her body shook as she summoned the last reserves of her strength. Magic hummed in her, buried beneath pain and exhaustion. Her fingertips sparked. Slowly, tendrils of her violet-hued Star Magic began to crackle against the celestial bindings, pressing, burning, and unraveling. The chains resisted, flaring brightly, but her fury only grew. A wordless cry tore from her throat, and in one final surge of effort, her magic burst outward in a concussive wave, shattering the golden bindings into fragments of fading light. She collapsed briefly to her knees, panting, steam rising from her gauntlets.

But she didn't stay down for long.

With a determined grunt, Vaileth rose to her feet as the fierce glow of her eyes returned. Without wasting a second, she pushed off the cavern floor with a powerful leap, as she shot through the waterfall like a comet bursting from the earth.

The frigid cascade washed over her as she broke into the night sky. Her gaze scanned the forest canopy, ears alert to the sounds of battle—clashing metal, surging magic, cries of struggle. Her heart pounded as she locked onto a flicker of Titan energy pulsing in the distance.

That was where they were. That was where he was; The Grand Huntsman.

With grim focus, she soared through the darkness, streaking between trees and mountain ridges like a shooting star hell-bent on its destination. The winds howled around her, but her mind was sharp and clear. She had been delayed but now she was coming and this time, she would finish it.

Meanwhile, the battlefield had long since lost its clarity. Dirt, magic, and sweat clung to the air like fog, swirling around the battered forms of Luz, King, Starry, Atlas, Hesperos, and Markus Star. The vibrant greens of the forest clearing had been blackened and scarred by stray blasts, arcane sigils scorched into the earth, and tree trunks split from the impacts of weapons and spells.

Luz stumbled backward, sweat dripping from her brow as she used her staff to steady herself. Her Titan magic pulsed weakly now, flickering at her fingertips. While King panted beside her, a reflection of his depleted energy and power. Starry floated in staggered circles overhead, their radiant glow flickering with exhaustion. Markus Star leaned heavily on his Titan-forged sword, his chest rising and falling in labored heaves of fatigue. Even Atlas, still flushed with the adrenaline of his earlier breakthrough, now knelt with one hand on the ground, shaking from the toll the battle had taken. While Hesperos Holmes knelt behind a shattered rock, one of his dual blasters sparking from overuse. His once-cocky grin was gone, replaced by a clenched jaw and sweat-soaked fur.

The group watched as The Grand Huntsman, though battered and bleeding from countless wounds, remained standing. He swayed slightly but his presence was as commanding and cold as ever. The moonlight reflected off his crescent-moon facial marking, now twisted with fury and satisfaction. The very cruelty that reflected in his eyes had deepened further and further with every step he made towards the group. Eventually he came to a halt, as he spoke once more, "You fought hard, especially for lesser beings," he rasped, though the sharpness in his tone still remained through the pain he had dealt with. He concluded with, "But you're all running on fumes."

Then, in one swift, brutal motion, he lunged forward—and before anyone could react—he seized King in his clawed gauntlet, wrapping the enchanted chains around him. They hissed and glowed as they latched into place, tightening mercilessly. However, these chains weren't of the Grand Huntsman's own magic but instead they were made out of the bones of the titans he had hunted before. He knew that King would easily free himself, as his powers would cancel his chains and the magic they relied on. The Grand Huntsman is always a prepared hunter, he knew of the countermeasures to take to ensure that his prey would always fall into his traps.

"Agh—Luz!" King cried out, thrashing helplessly as the Titan-forged chains suppressed his powers entirely, locking him mid-air in the Huntsman's grasp.

"King!" Luz's scream tore through the battlefield. She surged forward, but faltered after just a step, breath hitching in her chest as she raised her staff. Its magic sputtered uselessly, as her palisman was also beginning to feel a degree of fatigue. "No—!" Atlas cried, instinctively reaching out but his limbs were too heavy and slow. Markus gritted his teeth and gripped his sword, but his arms trembled too much to raise it.

The Grand Huntsman held King aloft, a cruel grin spreading across his weathered face. "These chains are forged from the remains of the Titans I've hunted! Which serves the purpose of containing such vile beasts such as you!" the Huntsman sneered. "Forged to suppress what should never have existed!" His gaze sharpened. "Now... the Celestine Compass. Hand it over! Then perhaps I might be merciful..."

"Luz, don't!" King shouted while he struggled. "You can't trust him!"

"I'm not letting you die, King!" Luz cried, her fingers trembling as she reached into her satchel. She clutched the compass tightly—its surface glowed. Her chest clenched, as she knew that handing over the compass will result in very severe consequences, especially having the knowledge about it being the very map of the various star pieces. However, she also knew that there will also be other consequences that will be attributed if she doesn't do anything to save her brother in time.

"No... we can't," Atlas muttered, eyes darting between Luz and King. "There has to be another way—"

"There isn't!" Luz snapped, voice cracked with desperation. She turned to the others. "We don't have a choice!"

Markus narrowed his eyes. "We can't give him the Compass, Luz! That's what he wants!"

King's eyes were wide with panic, but he still managed to shake his head. "Don't... don't give it to him, Luz! He's lying! He's—he's gonna—"

The Huntsman soon closed King's jaw with a muzzle that was also made with the remains of Titan bones, "Oh shut up!" he exclaimed with annoyance.

Luz watched in horror as she witnessed the Grand Huntsman place the muzzle onto King, she closed her eyes as she held onto the compass tightly on her chest, knowing about the consequences that would take root but at this very moment none of it mattered as her brother had mattered more in the situation. She soon walked forward and stared directly at the Grand Huntsman with much fury, "Fine," she said aloud. "You want it? Take it. Just.. please... let him go."

She tossed the Compass forward. The Grand Huntsman released one hand from the chains and caught it midair, while smiling grimly. Then just as Luz's worst fears came true—he began to raise his other arm, the one that held King, the chains glowing brighter. "No—!" Luz's eyes widened. She didn't wait for a plan, she just couldn't. Every instinct in her screamed to act now. Behind her, Markus, Atlas, Hesperos, and Starry moved in unison, bound not by strategy but by desperation. They surged toward the Grand Huntsman together—a flurry of determination, fury, and fear. Markus's Titan Sword crackled with raw celestial energy as he charged. Hesperos, his blasters blazing, darted to the flank, trying to draw the Huntsman's attention. Starry conjured a shimmering star shield, weaving them into a protective net as she followed close behind. Atlas, his magic flickering unstable but wild, hovered beside Luz, his eyes locked on King's chained figure with trembling resolve.

However, just as their combined momentum brought them within reach, the Grand Huntsman moved. With terrifying grace, he tightened his hold on the chain binding King and spun. The motion was fluid, like a comet slinging through space, his entire frame rotating with the sheer force of the swing. The chain, now a bladed crescent of destructive force, whipped through the air and slammed into them with an explosive shockwave.

Luz barely had time to register the impact before she was airborne. The ground vanished beneath her feet. Her body hurled backwards, causing pain to bloom in her shoulder where the chain had clipped her. Markus was flung higher and spun uncontrollably, while his Titan Sword slipped from his grip mid-flight. The blade tumbled end over end, disappearing somewhere into the maelstrom of battle.

Atlas let out a ragged gasp as he collided with Starry, both of them crashing hard into a broken ledge. Hesperos landed with a grunt several yards away, coughing from the dust cloud kicked up by the impact, one of his blasters skidding beside him.

For a moment, the battlefield went still in their immediate vicinity. A deep, uneven groan came from Luz as she pushed herself onto her elbows, grit clinging to her bloodied knuckles. Her eyes blurred from the impact, but one sight pierced through it all like lightning.

"No... no, no..." Luz whispered, staggering upright. Her limbs felt like they were filled with sand, heavy and slow.

Markus sat up slowly, his eyes wide, dazed, disoriented. His fingers grasped at air instinctively, searching for the sword that was no longer in reach. His breathing quickened when he realized it—the blade was gone. "My sword... I—I lost it!"

Atlas stared across the chasm with wide, horrified eyes. "He's still got him..." His voice cracked as panic surged in his chest. "He's not letting go—he's not letting go!"

The Grand Huntsman exclaimed with pride yet it had a hint of psychoticness attached to it. "Finally! I can slay the harbinger of chaos and destruction once and for all!" He soon lifted up one of his blades and began to position himself to strike while King was still bound in his chains. He soon swung his blade before—

A sharp whir pierced the air, which was then followed by a blinding column of violet light that crashed down from above.

BOOM!

"Argh!" The Grand Huntsman shouted as he was hurled backward by the force of the blast, the Celestine Compass clattering from his grip and landing hard in the dirt.

Hovering just overhead, her form ablaze with celestial light, Vaileth Xar landed between them like a meteor. Her cloak billowed behind her, and her eyes gleamed with barely-contained rage. "You're not laying a finger on that kid!" she snarled, her voice echoing like thunder.

"Vaileth!" Atlas exclaimed, a look of stunned relief on his face.

Markus didn't wait. He scrambled forward and slashed through the glowing chains around King with a precise slice from his sword, while Luz rushed over and soon collapsed to her knees as she caught him in her arms.

"Gotcha," she whispered shakily, hugging him close. "You okay?" King nodded slowly, eyes wide. "Y-Yeah... thanks to her."

The Huntsman groaned, slowly rising from the crater she had made. Smoke curled off his armor, his jaw clenched in rage—but in the chaos of the impact, he had managed to

snatch the Compass again. The group reoriented and noticed what the Grand Huntsman had done, Markus suddenly shouted, "The Compass—!"

The Grand Huntsman held it tightly in his gloved hand—singed, but intact. "Fools," he spat, "I may have not been able to slay that unholy spawn but at least I've completed my main objective after all this time!" He added furthermore, "Especially in time before the convergence!" He then spoke in a softer tone but nonetheless it was laced with the intention of mockery, "However, I can't take all of the credit, which is why I give all of my thanks to you."

"No!" Luz shouted, raising her staff—but it was too late.

A beam of light blue engulfed the Grand Huntsman's form, instantly turning him into a silhouette. He vanished in a flash, taking the compass with him. Silence fell again as the wind rustled through the ruined clearing as the group remained still, staring at the empty space where he once stood.

The clearing was scorched, the trees reduced to smoldering stumps, and the earth itself cracked beneath their feet. Though the true weight that hung over them wasn't from the smoke or the broken land. It was the crushing realization of what had just happened: they had lost.

The group stood in silence, their eyes locked on the empty space the Grand Huntsman had vanished from, as if still expecting him to return. The stillness was overwhelming.

Luz stared ahead, clutching King's hand tightly in hers, though the tears that had been formed mixed with the sweat on her face. Her breath came in uneven gasps, and her chest rose and fell in a rhythm that betrayed more than just physical exhaustion. She looked hollow. "We gave it to him," she thought. "We let him win." Her hand instinctively went to the pouch at her hip—only to remember it was now empty. The Celestine Compass, the very artifact they had sworn to protect with everything they had, was gone.

King, usually quick to speak, was unusually silent. His small form sat slumped against Luz's side, his head resting against her arm. His expression furrowed not in confusion, but deep, silent anguish.

Hesperos kneeled, while his two blasters slipped out of his hand as their strength had finally diminished due to the crushing revelation that laid before them now. "We all failed," he said bitterly. "And the worst part? That might've been our only shot."

"No," Luz said abruptly, shaking her head, though her voice wavered. "Don't say that. We're not giving up. We can't. But—" She looked to the sky, her voice tightening. "Orion's going to use the Compass, at some point. He has what he needs now."

Atlas stood slowly, his expression dark. "And we gave it to the Grand Huntsman. Even if we didn't mean to. It still happened."

A heavy silence returned, pressing down on all of them. The fatigue from the battle, the burns on their skin, the bruises along their limbs—it all felt insignificant compared to the dread swelling in their chests. Disbelief began to twist into horror. The Archivists were now about to have the compass. The very key to navigating towards the locations of each star piece across each realm.

Markus was the first to break the silence, his voice sharp, even as it trembled. "C'mon. We can't stay here."

Everyone turned to look at him. He stood upright, as he ventured off to recover his sword, which his hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword as he was able to locate it. "We still have to go to Astralis Prime, especially how things turned out." Markus said again, more urgently this time. "With the Celestine Compass gone, the Council must be informed about the failure and how the mission had gone awry. Especially before the Archivists make their next move." He added, "They'll want answers, but more than that—they'll need the opportunity to prepare. Orion will strike soon. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not the day after. But it's coming. And if we wait, they'll catch us all off-guard."

Vaileth slowly levitated down towards the group, when she landed, she finally turned toward them. Her expression reflected her own exhaustion but the grief that the group was experiencing, her voice was calm and steady, "He's right. As much as it hurts, we don't have any more time to waste."

Luz stood, slowly helping King to his feet. "Then we move. We warn everyone and we get ahead of this!"

Without another word, Markus turned and started walking down the path leading toward the monastery hidden within the ravine beyond the forest. The flaps of his tunic fluttered behind him, catching the last rays of the waning moonlight. One by one, the others followed—Luz with King by her side, Atlas at her back, Vaileth walking near Atlas, Starry gliding wearily above them, and Hesperos walking behind the group.

They didn't look back, as there was no time for grief. The mission had failed but the war was far from over.

After a while, the group would finally reach their destination. The monastery loomed ahead, it was a towering structure carved from shimmering, pale stone that was nestled at the edge of a hill overlooking the valley below. It had elegant, ancient spires that reached upward like frozen branches. A soft wind drifted across the path, carrying with it the faint scent of incense and the low hum of chanting from within. For a moment, despite the urgency in their steps, the group slowed at the sight of the sanctuary. After everything they'd endured, the monastery looked like a mirage due to how sacred it was.

The entire monastery seemed to blossom from the hillside like a living organism, its structure organically woven into the natural landscape. From a distance, the silhouette of the building evoked the image of a tree in bloom—a grand and reverent homage to Arbora, the Tree of All Magic. The main tower at the heart of the monastery was shaped like an immense trunk, wide and imposing, its surface etched with intricate carvings of roots spiraling downward and branches curling skyward. These carvings shimmered faintly, glowing with threads of gold that pulsed with a quiet rhythm, as though the monastery itself were alive, breathing in tune with the cosmos. Its branch-like extensions jutted out from the central tower in sweeping arcs, forming cathedral-like wings that stretched over the landscape like protective limbs. Each wing held tall, stained-glass windows shaped like elongated leaves, their panes tinted in warm greens, earthy browns, and glowing ambers. When the light passed through them, the interior floors were dappled in soft hues that mimicked the sun breaking through a forest canopy. Above these windows, elegant buttresses bent outward like tree limbs supporting the weight of the heavens. The arched doors were massive and wooden but not carved from any earthly tree. The wood was a deep, reddish-brown, almost black in the dim light but veined with golden streaks. Symbols of the Nine Realms and the three stars of celestial unity were engraved into the arch above, forming a living chronicle of Arbora's legacy.

Along the outer walls, vines—some real, some carved into the stone—wove upward in gentle spirals, blending seamlessly into the architecture. The design gave the impression that the building had not been constructed, but grown into existence, coaxed by ancient hands with reverence for the natural order. Luminous flowers bloomed in delicate clusters along the balconies and high ledges, their petals fluttering softly in the breeze, as if whispering prayers to the stars.

A circular courtyard stretched out before the entrance, its center marked by a vast mosaic of Arbora herself—depicted as a colossal tree whose roots sprawled outward into the Nine Realms, while her crown of branches touched the stars. The courtyard's floor was made of smooth, ivory tiles veined with sapphire and emerald, forming the shape of a spiraling galaxy when seen from above.

Above all, the atmosphere of the monastery was steeped in peace. The wind was calm here, hushed as if in silent awe. The air carried a faint trace of sacred herbs and old books. Every inch of the structure, every line carved into its surface, every glowing pane of glass, seemed to hum with memory and meaning—testaments to an age-old order that revered life, balance, and the divine essence of Arbora herself. Even in the face of growing catastrophe, this sanctuary stood as a quiet beacon—an echo of hope rooted deep in the heart of the cosmos.

As they approached the front gate, two tall guards in white armor stepped forward. Their spears gleamed beneath the glow of the monastery's lanterns. "Halt," one of them said firmly. "This ground is protected by the Order of Arbora. State your business."

Markus stepped forward, his breathing still labored from their journey. He reached into his tunic and pulled forth a pendant that glinted softly with a polished silver hue. The guards' eyes immediately locked onto it. One of the guards' expressions shifted from guarded to stunned. "Wait... that's..." The second guard leaned in. "That's an official sigil."

But it wasn't the pendant alone that silenced them.

Their gazes drifted past Markus and landed on Vaileth Xar, whose long cloak swayed in the wind like trailing starlight. The Star Person stood tall and composed, her presence more commanding than any weapon. One of the guards gasped. "Grand Master Vaileth

Xar!" the second guard exclaimed, eyes wide with recognition. Both guards dropped to one knee, lowering their weapons in reverence. "We had no idea..."

Vaileth nodded solemnly with a smirk, her voice gentle. "There's no need for formality guys. They're with me and we need to get inside, immediately."

"Of course, Lady Vaileth," the first guard replied quickly, rising to open the ornate gates with a reverent bow. "You and your companions are welcome."

The group entered in silence, the cool interior of the monastery washing over them like a wave. High vaulted ceilings that were embedded with mosaics, stretched above them. Light filtered in through translucent panels in the walls, casting the floors in a shifting dance of colors. The air was warm and quiet—eerily so, after the chaos of battle.

As they passed through the main corridor, a fellow Knight of Arbora emerged—a tall, Ondothian figure with silver-blue skin and bioluminescent yellow markings along their arms. They donned a uniform similar to Markus, as it was the staple for the order to wear. "Knight Stellan," Markus addressed him with a respectful nod. Their eyes met Markus and recognition sparked. "Knight Star?" the knight asked, stopping in his tracks. "I didn't expect you to be at this monastery. How can I be of service to my dear friend?"

"I need to speak with the Head Monk of this monastery. It's urgent," Markus said, his voice tight.

Stellan frowned slightly. "I'm afraid the Head Monk is in seclusion for his evening meditation. He's not seeing visitors at the moment."

At that, Vaileth stepped beside him, her tone sharp with authority. "Knight Stellan, I demand you take us to the Head Monk immediately. The future of the realms is at stake."

Stellan's eyes widened at the sight of her, and he quickly bowed. "I... Grand Master Vaileth Xar! My deepest apologies. I did not realize you were among them. I will take you to him at once." With brisk steps, Stellan guided them down a spiral staircase wrapped in cascading ivy. As they approached the entrance to the living quarters, two more guards stood at attention. Upon seeing Vaileth, they bowed deeply and opened the heavy wooden doors without question.

Inside the chamber, incense curled in the air. The Head Monk—a serene figure draped in blue and gold robes and wore a necklace that had the emblem of the order—sat cross-legged upon a raised platform, surrounded by gentle candlelight. He opened his eyes slowly as the group entered, his calm demeanor cracking just slightly at the sight of Markus' haggard face.

"Markus... My boy! You look exhausted," he said, concern rising in his tone. "What happened? And these—who are these companions of yours? Are they—" He stopped mid-sentence as his eyes drifted away from the group momentarily and soon locked onto Vaileth.

For a moment, he looked as if the breath had been knocked from his chest. "Grand Master Vaileth Xar," he whispered. "The founder of the Order... I... this is truly an honor!"

Vaileth allowed herself a small, gracious smile, though her eyes were heavy with purpose. "Thank you. But I'm afraid we don't have time for pleasantries. Markus was sent directly by the Council to retrieve the Celestine Compass but..." She paused before continuing, "It had been stolen in the process when we were retrieving it... everything is now about to be in danger."

The Head Monk's face fell, the weight of the words settling instantly into his shoulders. "That's why we need passage or anything to take us to Astralis Prime," Vaileth added, her voice urgent now. "The Council must be warned, as there's no time to waste further!"

The monk didn't hesitate. "We have a transport cruiser prepped for the pilgrimage routes. It departs within minutes. You may take it, as it will get you to Astralis Prime faster than any standard vessel."

Markus stepped forward, placing a hand over his chest. "We're in your debt. Thank you Head Monk."

The Head Monk nodded once, his expression solemn. "The fate of all realms may soon rest in the decisions made on that world. Go and may Arbora guide your path."

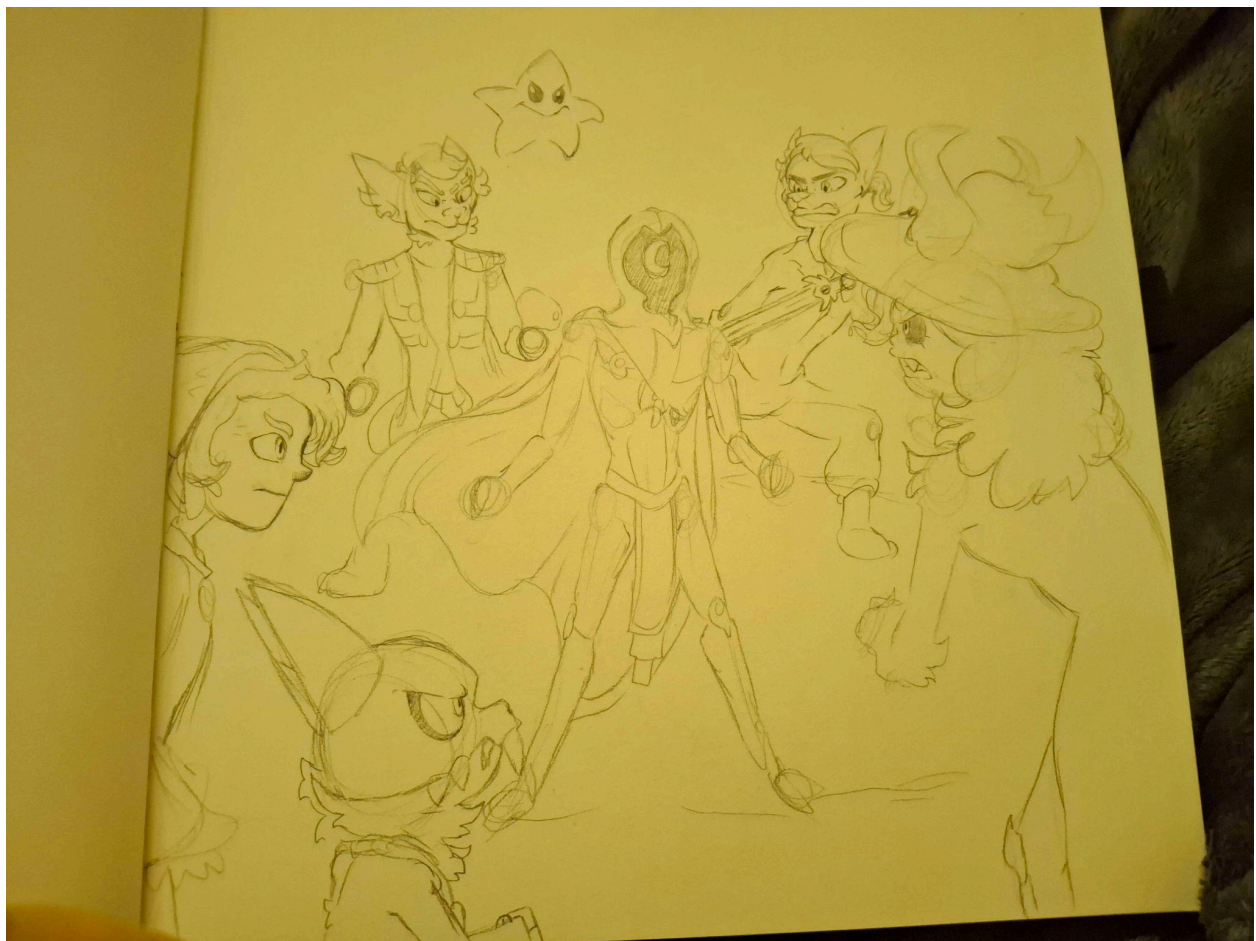
Moments later, the group exited the monastery, stepping out onto a sleek platform that hovered above the cliffs. A fleet of elegant ships waited, their hulls polished with radiant sigils of Arbora. Monks, travelers, and knights moved in orderly lines, boarding ships

bound for far-off worlds. Their cruiser stood near the center—a crescent-winged vessel with shimmering thrusters. As they approached, crew members of the Order nodded in acknowledgment, already preparing for departure.

The group boarded quickly, filing into the vessel's interior where glowing starlight lit the chamber with a soft blue hue. The seats were arranged in a circular fashion, symbolic of unity—a staple design of Arbora vessels. "Everyone strapped in?" Markus asked, casting a look to each of them. Luz gave a nod. "As ready as we'll ever be."

Atlas glanced out the window, where the monastery was growing distant. "Let's just hope we're not too late." The cruiser hummed louder as the engines ignited. Starry curled up in a beam of light, watching the stars as they aligned. King clutched Luz's arm, a flicker of anxiety in his eyes.

And with a final burst of light, the ship shot forward—vanishing into warp, carrying its weary passengers toward the most important confrontation of their lives.



Epilogue.

As the stars glimmered faintly in the backdrop of deep space, the massive transport cruiser cut through the void with elegance, its sleek hull reflecting the distant light of the singular sun around which Astralis Prime revolved. Inside the viewing deck, Luz stood near a curved window, wide-eyed as the glowing sphere of Astralis Prime came into full view. Astralis Prime stood as a celestial gem adrift in the dark. It was a world alive with color and light, glowing with an almost sacred vibrancy that distinguished it from the quiet, cold stars beyond. From orbit, the planet's surface was a breathtaking mosaic—its oceans stretched endlessly in rich shades of cobalt and sapphire. Clusters of islands and wide continents sprawled across its surface. Some of them were covered in a dynamic blend of forested green, desert tan, and the deep earthen brown of rugged highlands and vast mountain ranges.

Winding through the landmasses were gleaming blue rivers, their serpentine paths stretched and curved like strands of ribbons. Its surface also had lakes dotted the terrain, some hidden among valleys, others nestled at the feet of towering peaks. Overhead, the planet's swirling white clouds drifted in slow, graceful motions—forming intricate spirals and rolling sheets of mist that veiled and revealed the world beneath like a living canvas. These atmospheric formations shimmered faintly with subtle hues of gold and pale violet, reflecting the unique light of the system's single golden sun.

The interplay of light and shadow cast by Astralis Prime's two moons further enhanced its ethereal beauty. The first moon, larger and closer in orbit, was smooth and ivory-toned. Its cratered surface glowing like a lamp of light against the stars. The second, more distant moon carried a softer hue—a lavender sheen that made it seem almost translucent, like a shard of gemstone suspended in the heavens.

As the ship descended closer, other delicate details became clear. Flecks of iridescent green could be seen near the equator—great jungles and groves perhaps—while the poles shimmered with bluish-white ice caps. And faintly, just below the clouds, hints of civilization sparkled like small fireflies attached to a specific location in a large mass. As a result, it gave the appearance of the large cluster as a large ball of light.

Soon the transport cruiser further pierced through the remaining layers of Astralis Prime's atmosphere, the view through the observation windows gradually transformed from supernal vastness to awe-inspiring terrain. The clouds parted like curtains, revealing the

jewel of the continent nestled among the plains and its rivers—Arbora City. The city before them radiated a majestic harmony between nature and civilization—between the spiritual and the material. Its towering golden spires reached toward the skies like great trees of massive heights, each of these spires were crowned with crystal-like structures that glimmered in the sunlight. These spires weren't simply buildings—they were monuments, etched with sacred symbols and intricate yet detailed carvings that told the history of the Order of Arbora and their devotion to the Great Tree of Magic.

Nestled around the base of the tallest towers were iridescent domes that were glorious, layered like petals upon the city's heart. The buildings themselves varied in size and function, yet every single one shared the same organic curvature and artistry. They reassembled the growth of trees, flowers, and vines. The architecture's walls are shaped like woven roots, its archways adorned with stone leaves, and its bridges looked grown from the ground up rather than being built. There were waterfalls that cascaded from terraces, they flowed into channels that meandered through the city. Wisps of mist curled along the city's avenues, giving the impression that the entire metropolis was hovering just above the land. The city rose from a lush, green basin, surrounded by thick forests that shimmered with unnatural hues—trees with violet bark and silver-green leaves swayed gently under the wind. A protective wall, made from alabaster stone, encircled the city's borders. The wall wasn't harsh or militaristic but ceremonial in nature, inscribed with the nine tenets of the Order and embedded with sacredness. Between the wall's elegant battlements, sentries in silver robes and crystalline armor stood watch. These were the Knights of Arbora who bore not weapons, but staves tipped with glowing blossoms of energy.

"Whoa..." King's voice was a whisper as his paw pressed against the window. His eyes widened, reflecting the gleam of the city.

"It's beautiful..." Luz murmured, stunned into a rare silence. Her heart swelled with a strange mix of awe and guilt—specifically the guilt for the danger they carried, awe for the sanctity of what they were about to disturb.

Atlas, sitting beside her, leaned forward with a bittersweet smile. "It's more than beautiful," he said softly. "It's... safe. It feels like what the stars used to feel like before my siblings twisted them."

Markus, however, remained quietly focused. His fingers tightened on the armrest, his gaze not of wonder, but duty. "This is sacred ground," he said solemnly. "Arbora City isn't just a capital. It's where all of us come for pilgrimage, so when we land, be sure to respect our customs and traditions here."

"We will mate." Hesperos interjected gently, though his usual levity was absent.

The cruiser descended in a slow, graceful arc toward the gleaming platform that jutted out from one of Arbora City's mid-tier terraces—its surface a polished disc of alabaster and gold, adorned with a circular sigil of the Great Tree etched into its center. As the landing struts extended with a gentle hum, a warm wind swept across the pad, carrying with it the scent of foreign blossoms and faint pulses of magical energy that thrummed from the surrounding towers. The moment the hatch hissed open, sunlight flooded into the cabin, cascading over the group with a soft radiance that felt almost cleansing.

Standing at the base of the ramp was a lone Scirqroin, garbed in ceremonial armor—woven plates of silversilk and crystal, trimmed with delicate emeralds that gleamed beneath his shoulder mantle. His helmet, leaf-shaped and polished to a mirror shine, obscured his face. However, as the group began to disembark, he immediately lowered to one knee, planting the base of his staff firmly to the ground in salute.

"Grand Master Vaileth Xar," the guard declared, his voice resonant and clear despite the soft city winds. "We're honored by your return."

Vaileth stepped down with quiet authority, though her expression remained poised, there was a flicker of fondness behind her eyes. She placed a hand on her hip, cocked a brow, and gave a small, sardonic smile. "I was starting to think the city forgot what punctuality looked like," she quipped, voice laced with her usual sardonic charm. "It's good to see the place hasn't lost its drama."

The guard's tone softened slightly, though he remained in posture. "You've been missed, Grand Master. Truly."

Vaileth's expression shifted—just subtly. A shadow of emotion touched her gaze before she reined it in with the grace of someone who had worn titles for far too long. "I'd like you to notify the Council of Arbora," she said, her voice now firm with command.

"Inform them of my return, and that I request an audience immediately. This is no ceremonial visit."

The guard rose, tapping his communicator embedded in his vambrace. "Understood," he replied. "Contacting them now." His voice, now tinged with urgency, echoed faintly as he relayed the message to a distant recipient. "Council Command, this is Knight Thalos at Landing Pad Aegis-6. Grand Master Vaileth Xar has returned to Astralis Prime. She requests immediate council audience. Accompanied by Knight Markus and five guests... confirm readiness." A crackling pause followed, then a brief affirmation came through. "Acknowledged. The Council is being assembled."

With a nod, Thalos gestured to a sleek transport vehicle stationed just off to the side—a vessel of polished wood steel and woven crystal, its form curving like the branch of a tree grown into shape rather than forged. The side opened like a blooming petal, revealing cushioned seating and softly glowing interior modules. "Your transport awaits," Thalos said, bowing once more. "The Council Chamber has been informed. I'll escort you to the Grand Hall myself."

Markus stepped forward first, ever the protector, glancing over the city with a cautious eye before motioning for the others to follow. "Stay close," he muttered, his voice low and guarded. "Until we know how they'll take the news."

Hesperos clapped a hand on Luz's shoulder as she hesitated at the base of the ramp. "Try not to trip over the political pressure," he said with a wink, though his tone was still laced with quiet tension. "Remember, you've faced worse."

"I don't know if cosmic judgment in a sacred tree city is worse or better than the Archivists," Luz muttered nervously, clutching her satchel. "But okay, Let's go make a great first impression."

King padded next to her, his tail flicking in anxiety. "Let's hope that we get on the council's good side..."

The group climbed into the transport, the interior humming softly as the vehicle lifted from the platform. As it began to hover across the sprawling breadth of Arbora City, the skyline unfolded around them like an unfolding epic—terraced sanctuaries, glowing prayer gardens, and towers that refracted light. Every street they passed pulsed faintly

with magical life; bridges that shimmered like moonlight threads, walkways lined with meditating monks and slow-moving creatures adorned with symbiotic plant life. Musical chimes rang from the towers, their notes woven into the air itself, carried by soft enchantments. Within the silence of the transport, each of them felt the weight of what was coming. This was not simply a visit—it was a reckoning. And though Arbora City welcomed them with open beauty, the storm they brought was only just beginning.

The transport glided gently to a halt at the base of the Grand Hall of the Arbora Council, and as it did, the view through the crystalline canopy of the vehicle shifted to reveal a structure unlike anything Luz or her companions had seen before.

The hall was colossal, rooted deep into the city's verdant heart like a living monument. Its wide trunk-like base was constructed from a deep umber stone that shimmered subtly with golden veins of magic, and it stretched upward into tiered levels that branched like limbs of a massive, ancient tree. Each "branch" supported balconies, chambers, and luminous chambers that floated around the trunk like orbiting petals. They were connected by translucent bridges of energy. Bioluminescent vines and celestial moss crept along its surface, glimmering in slow pulses. At the crown, a radiant crystal canopy shimmered in harmony with the planet's sunlight—serving as both roof and spiritual beacon. It was part architecture, part living organism, It was regal, timeless, and divine.

A tremendous crowd had gathered in reverence around the perimeter of the hall, their robes flowing, their many forms watching in hushed awe. Some hovered off the ground on disks of light; others stood in cloaks of woven bark and stardust, their faces partially hidden behind ceremonial masks. A hush fell over them as the transport hissed open, and from either side of the grand walkway, rows of Arboran Knights snapped into attention. Their armor glinted like moonlit bark, with elegant helms shaped like leaves, antlers, or flowering branches. Their formation was perfect, it was full of discipline and reverence. This was more than a welcome, It was a formal procession.

Vaileth stepped out first, her cloak fluttered slightly as a soft breeze swirled around her, catching her blue hair like mist. One of the knights slammed the butt of his glaive into the platform with a resonant clang, and all the others followed. Then they bowed—deeply.

"She still gets a hero's welcome," Markus muttered, half-impressed and half-amused but overall proud for his master.

"She deserves it," Atlas said quietly beside him, his voice filled with admiration, though there was an edge of sadness in his gaze.

Luz followed close behind, her breath catching in her throat at the sight. "Whoa," she whispered, tightening her grip on her satchel. "Okay, this is pretty cool honestly!"

Vaileth offered no theatrical gestures, only a graceful nod to the crowd—composed, elegant, and tempered by experience. The others followed in her footsteps, emerging one by one under the watchful eyes of the assembled order.

At the foot of the Grand Hall's entryway, standing just beyond the last row of knights, awaited the figure who had responded to the Thalos' call. He was a member of the Thakallian species from the Thakall System. His frame was elongated and slender, covered in iridescent skin that shimmered from violet to deep green in the light. His face was smooth and elongated, with wide, jet-black eyes that blinked vertically. Four subtle ridges curved along his scalp, resembling the petals of a closed bloom. He wore flowing robes of translucent silk, embroidered with fractal patterns that echoed stellar constellations.

"Grand Master Vaileth," the Thakallian spoke, his voice a smooth baritone that resonated faintly in the mind more than the ear. "The Council has been notified of your arrival and they are expecting you."

Vaileth gave a curt nod. "We thank you, Council Envoy. Time is thinner than you think." The envoy turned smoothly, motioning for them to follow as he led them beneath the massive root-arches. The interior was a cathedral of nature and magic—walls made of living bark, vaulted ceilings glowing with embedded star crystals, and corridors filled with floating bioluminescent spores that drifted lazily in the air like motes of hope. Whispering chants echoed faintly from unseen rooms, carried through the hallways on gentle breezes.

As they walked, Markus stepped closer to Luz, keeping his voice low and measured. "Listen... once we reach the chamber, there's a chance the council might want to hear from all of us, not just me. Especially about the Celestine Compass." He added, "They may want to hear from you especially." Luz blinked. "Me?"

"You were there. You saw what Orion's planning. They need to hear that from someone who experienced it," Markus replied.

Luz blinked and tensed, her hand instinctively tightening around the strap of her satchel. "What if I say the wrong thing? Or they ask something I can't answer?"

Markus offered a reassuring look. "Just speak honestly. That's all they'll need. The truth matters more than perfection." Luz then took a breath, let her shoulders square, and nodded. "Okay."

The Envoy soon led them to an immense pair of doors, covered in carved iconography of realms and constellations. The vast doors of the Council Chamber opened with a solemn groan, revealing a chamber unlike any other on Astralis Prime. Every inch of it radiated the divine philosophy of the Order. The architecture itself appeared to be grown rather than built, formed from the living marrow of the Great Tree that housed it. The walls curved organically, lined with twisting root-veins that glowed with a soft, ever-pulsing light—amber, emerald, and violet hues. Towering columns, shaped from coiled branches and embedded with crystal blossoms, stretched from floor to ceiling like sacred pillars of a forest cathedral. Each column bore ancient sigils and runes written in an ancient Arboran script. Their meanings layered and profound, visible only to those trained in the mystic arts. Between these columns, immense murals of woven vine and colored bark depicted the celestial history of Arbora: scenes of the Starborn Tree birthing the Nine Realms, the forging of the Wishing Star, and the earliest gatherings of the Council of Ten.

Above, the ceiling stretched impossibly high, fading into a woven lattice of crystalline leaves. These leaves shifted and shimmered with ambient energy, reflecting the golden light that trickled down from skylight canopies that mimicked constellations in slow motion. Occasionally, a flicker of light would dance across the canopy—tiny glimmers like shooting stars—silent omens carried by the windless breath of the chamber.

The air inside was pure and cool, tinged faintly with the scent of blossomwood and spicebark, a naturally calming aroma that settled the heart. Though the space was vast, it did not feel cold or empty. There was a warmth to it as though the Great Tree itself watched quietly. At the edges of the chamber, gentle waterfalls trickled from unseen heights into narrow streambeds that wound their way along the perimeter like silver veins. These waters were said to be drawn directly from the various rivers that the city was located nearby, and their sound was the only music in this place of quiet purpose.

Together, all of this created a space that transcended architecture. It was not just a place to speak or govern. It was a living heart, a sacred convergence where logic met spirit, where power bowed before wisdom. For those who entered it, especially outsiders like Luz and her friends, the chamber impressed not just grandeur, but a reminder that they stood not before a political council, but in the presence of something older and sacred.

The group encountered rows upon rows of Arboran monks, as they sat in quiet contemplation. Their hoods were drawn, their expressions serene, hands resting in meditative poses across their laps. The chamber was utterly silent, not from discomfort but from deep spiritual anticipation. At the far end, elevated on a crescent-shaped dais, sat the Council of Ten—the ruling voices of Arbora. Each council member hailed from a different world within the known star cluster, and their appearances reflected the vast diversity of the galaxy's sentient life; Towards the far left sat Councilor Jyrex Vhal, a reptilian Drakkari from the world of Vexis IX. His scales shimmered like glass, and he wore robes lined with volcanic ash patterns. Beside him was Councilor Amelessa Vonn, a feathered Aurelian avian humanoid from the Cirella System. Her robe resembled plumage, and her long neck bobbed gracefully with each breath. Councilor Brann Thol, a thickset Grovanite from the marshy moon of Molorr, had moss-covered skin and small insects living symbiotically on him. Councilor Niira Xel, a Quori from the Thalynae star system, shimmered between physical and translucent form, her eyes glowing softly. Councilor Drom Ulmar, a towering Shantar of crystalline origin, refracted the golden light like a living prism. Whenever he spoke, his voice had an echoey, reverb effect that made it sound angelic in a way. In the center sat Councilor Telmorin, a stoic Zalta elder with bark-textured skin and a mane of silver-white tendrils. He presided as first among equals and bore the traditional staff of Arbora's authority. To his right sat Councilor Zephi Rahn, a Zenthari energy being in a containment exosuit of floating golden rings and flowing fabric. The faint crackle of his core

As Vaileth Xar entered, cloaked in the regality of her long absence and the weight of what she carried, all eyes turned toward her. Without a word, the monks and the Council rose in silent reverence. The room didn't erupt into applause, nor did it need to. The solemnity of their rising said more than words ever could. As Vaileth approached the throne, she paused, inhaled deeply, and gave a graceful nod to the Council. She then took her seat, her posture poised, yet touched with weariness only those closest to her would notice. The Council Envoy turned and guided the rest of the group to their seats positioned to the right of the throne in a semicircular arrangement, facing the Council.

Luz, King, Atlas, Markus, Starry, and Hesperos each took their place, the gravity of the moment settling on their shoulders like a tangible mantle.

The Council of Ten remained standing a moment longer before reclaiming their seats, one by one, in practiced unity. A solemn hush descended upon the great chamber as the final murmurs from the gathered monks tapered off into silence. The atmosphere shifted subtly—less like a room quieting, and more like the stillness that settles over a forest before a storm. From his seat, Councilor Telmorin stood, raising a hand in a gesture of an ancient greeting.

"Friends of Arbora." He declared, his voice rich and deliberate, which echoed gently throughout the chamber like a note sustained in the quiet of a sacred hall. He soon turned to notice Luz, King, Atlas, Hesperos, and Starry, "Strangers from distant worlds." He soon added, "We have gathered here to address the matter of grave importance, the Celestine Compass. The very situation that has made our order in disarray for a while now."

Gasps and murmurs stirred again from the monks seated in tight rows beneath the arched ceiling. The very mention of the artifact stirred unease—its name carried weight, not just legend but prophecy.

Councilor Telmorin turned toward the central dais where Vaileth sat, framed by the gentle glow of the roots behind her. "We welcome Grand Master Vaileth Xar, as she returned to us at last. We also welcome her accompanying emissaries from far worlds and the return of fellow Knight Star, who had been tasked in retrieving the artifact."

A soft rustle passed through the assembly—nods of acknowledgement, but also nervous glances. Some council members wore composed expressions; others betrayed concern. Vaileth nodded subtly but remained silent. Telmorin continued, his tone steady. "Let the session of the Council of Arbora commence, as we will now hear the testimony from Knight Star, son of Cassian Star and sworn defender of the Order of Arbora. You were assigned to secure the Celestine Compass when it had been stolen. Step forth and truthfully tell us the progress of your mission."

Markus rose slowly, as he approached the podium, his face was calm but the weight of the moment hung heavily across his shoulders. The chamber was watching him—ten

council members, dozens of monks, and his friends, who sat behind him. He paused, then placed both gloved hands on the curved edge of the podium.

He took in a steady breath. "Members of the Council of Arbora," he said quietly. "I stand here to testify about the progress of the mission to retrieve the Celestine Compass..." He stood quietly as he prepared himself to reveal the overall outcome and the impact it would bring. He soon spoke further, "The mission... was a failure". The words fell like a dropped stone into still water. The silence that followed was absolute. Dozens of monks straightened in their seats. Several council members leaned forward in disbelief. One of the councilors, Amelessa Vonn, placed a slender hand over her heart, her eyes wide with dismay.

Markus continued, voice steadier now. "However, I was able to find the culprits behind the break in on Alkanos."

A tense silence gripped the chamber, the kind that pressed down on the lungs and sharpened the senses. The monks leaned in slightly, and several of the councilors exchanged glances that ranged from concern to curiosity. Markus took a breath, his gaze shifting to Luz, Atlas, and the others seated behind him before returning to the council. "But let me be clear," he added, his tone firm and deliberate. "Those who took the Celestine Compass were not the true masterminds of the theft. They were manipulated and used as pawns by a far greater threat. At the time of the incident, they believed they were retrieving the artifact for a simple bounty. Though instead, they had no idea they were playing directly into the hands of something far worse."

Markus hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "And... I believe it's only the beginning. There are powers at play greater than any of us feared. And the Compass was only their first move."

Councilor Jyrex Vhal, narrowed his gaze. "Then who has the artifact now, Knight Star?"

Markus clenched his jaw, then slowly turned his head, glancing once more at Luz and the others behind him. The moment hung in stillness, the chamber heavy with anticipation. "I believe my companions can help explain the rest," Markus said. "They were there. They played just as vital a role, and their testimonies... are necessary if you are to understand the truth. I request that they be granted an audience."

There was a pause.

Councilor Telmorin looked among the other nine members, the others gave quiet nods for approval, which Telmorin sighed before speaking again, "Very well. The Council grants the request. Please, friends of Markus and Vaileth, rise and speak."

Markus turned back and stepped down, his shoulders visibly heavier now. Luz stood with her confidence growing, while glancing at King beside her. "Well, here we go," she whispered.

King offered a crooked grin. "Don't worry Luz, you're gonna do great, you've got this!"

Hesperos leaned in from the other side. "And if not, I'll cause a distraction with a smoke bomb. Classic misdirection mate." He winked afterwards.

Luz let out a small, tense laugh. "Thanks, guys..."

Soon Luz approached the podium and cleared her throat before giving a big breath. She soon spoke, "I... I won't lie," she began, her voice quiet but growing firmer with each word. "What Markus said about finding out who really stole the compass was true. The culprits... were us. It was me, King, Atlas, and Hesperos who broke into the vault on Alkanos."

The words echoed throughout the vast chamber, hanging in the air like a blade suspended over glass. At first, there was only stunned silence—then a tidal wave of gasps and murmurs rippled across the room, the robed monks exchanging alarmed glances and hushed accusations.

A tall, fur-collared monk with branching antlers rose sharply from his seat, his voice booming with indignation. "They admit it? Thieves standing among us in a sacred hall? This is sacrilege!" His amber eyes burned with fury as he gestured broadly to Luz and the others. "Outrageous!" exclaimed another monk.

Atlas lowered his gaze, jaw clenched, while King sat still beside him, his form began faltering due to his unease. Hesperos exhaled through his nose, his arms crossed tightly, as he's prepared to take any verbal blow. Luz continued despite the rising tension. "We didn't know what we were doing—honest! Hesperos was misled and we thought we were

retrieving an artifact as part of a bounty he was tasked with! We didn't know what was the compass's origins or what it was involved with!"

The words echoed throughout the vast chamber, punctuated by the shocked gasps and outraged mutters of the assembled monks. A few council members visibly stiffened once more, their expressions hardening. One monk even stood from his bench, pointing an accusing claw in their direction before a fellow monk urged him to sit. The sense of betrayal hung heavy in the air, like an unexpected fracture in sacred glass.

At that moment, Vaileth Xar stood. The chamber calmed instantly as her presence commanded the room, while her gaze moved over the crowd, both stern and measured.

"Everyone, please listen!" She said with practiced authority, "I've spent time with them and I can say that they were indeed tricked by forces that even now pull the strings of this crisis. These four had no knowledge of what the Compass truly was, nor of its ties to the Star Pieces, a while after the heist."

Several councilors exchanged murmurs, their expressions easing just slightly. "I personally vouch for them," Vaileth added, stepping forward with conviction. "I listened to their stories. And I have seen firsthand the lengths to which they have gone to make this right. If the Order of Arbora values truth, wisdom, and redemption, then let them speak. Let them be heard." The monks quieted, unsure, but the outrage softened to uneasy contemplation.

Councilor Telmorin glanced around the chamber, gauging the mood. Then he gave a slow, respectful nod. "Very well," he said gravely. "You may continue. Let the truth be spoken fully."

Vaileth turned back toward Luz and gave her a small, encouraging smile. Hesperos was the next to speak. He stepped forward with a confident but respectful stride, his feline tail flicking once behind his coat. The pirate's usual swagger was replaced by a composed, deliberate seriousness, shaped by the gravity of the moment. "The real masterminds behind the heist were the Archivists," he said. "They're being led by someone far worse—his name is Orion." Luz said softly, stepping beside Hesperos. Her hands were clenched at her sides, her gaze steady but weighed with fatigue.

The murmurs began again—low, worried, swirling around the chamber like wind stirring leaves.

She looked to Vaileth, who gave a single nod of reassurance. That was all she needed. Luz turned back to the council. "Orion plans to use the Celestine Compass to track down the Nine Star Pieces scattered across the realms. If he gets all of them, he plans to assemble the Wishing Star." Luz added, "Okay, so... not only does Orion just want the Star Pieces to make the Wishing Star. That's already a huge deal, yeah, but he's planning something way worse." Her voice cracked slightly—not from fear, but from the weight of what she knew. "He's waiting for something called the convergence. It's gonna be this big cosmic event where these specific nine stars will align altogether."

There was a stir among the monks—murmurs of alarm, confusion, and realization threading through them. She swallowed and pressed on. "He's got this device—his Travelscope—so when the stars line up, he's gonna extract their energy and when he does, he'll open doorways to every realm. From there... that's when he'll use the Wishing Star."

Luz's voice tightened, her eyes dark with concern. "And what we've seen is what Orion's willing to do. If we let him go through with this... nothing will be safe."

King, stepping beside Luz with an uncharacteristic solemnity. "We spent weeks trying to hide the Compass, we went to multiple planets just to avoid The Archivists and their army. Then we were hunted down by..." King stood silently with fear of just thinking about the Grand Huntsman, though Luz supported him by placing her hand on his back. Which was enough to give him the courage to speak further, "The Grand Huntsman. We did everything we could but he.. He eventually caught up to us. He was too strong and too fast... we couldn't fully stop him from taking it!"

Atlas stepped forward at last. His smaller figure, it trembled slightly but his voice was firm. "We didn't mean to cause all this. We were trying to stop something bigger than any of us. The Archivists, The Archive Collective, the Huntsman... they aren't just threats to one world. They're threats to all of them."

A long silence followed. A monk murmured a prayer beneath their breath, another rubbed their temples. Some of the council members exchanged hushed words, while others simply stared, processing the terrifying scale of what had just been revealed.

It was Starry who finally broke the silence, hovering forward with a hesitant smile. "We know how crazy it all sounds. Believe me, I didn't sign up to be hunted across planets by a perfectionist murder-maniac!"

The group soon stood silently once more, marking the end of their testimonies. They then returned back to their seats and sat down. However, Vaileth would soon step forward towards the group before changing her direction of vision, her eyes swept across the rows of monks across the vast chamber, her expression grave yet resolute. "There is no more room for delay," she began, her voice strong and unwavering. "The testimonies we've heard today, from Luz, King, Atlas, and Hesperos, make it painfully clear that Orion and the Archive Collective will not rest until they reshape reality to fit their own design."

A low murmur rippled through the gathering. Vaileth pressed forward, lifting her hand for silence. "The Celestine Compass, despite our best efforts, is no longer secure. It will fall into their hands—if it hasn't already. Once that happens, Orion's hunt for the Nine Star Pieces will begin quickly."

Councilor Brann Thol stirred uneasily in their seat. "Are you certain the Compass will lead him here first?"

"No," Vaileth said bluntly. "But if he has even a sliver of strategy, he'll come for the most accessible Star Piece first. The one closest to his doorstep."

Councilor Drom Ulmar's crystalline form dimmed, the colors shifting into a pale lavender hue. "Then what are you suggesting?"

She turned to face the council directly now. "We must mobilize every available Knight of the Order—not only those here on Astralis Prime, but also the ones across our outposts and monasteries in the neighboring star systems. We form a defensive perimeter around the planet, as well with every major city and the Star Piece itself."

A beat passed before Markus stepped forward to support her claim. "We'll organize the deployment immediately. Our orbital guard patrols will be doubled. Interstellar beacons will alert all systems harboring our members. I'll see to it personally."

Vaileth nodded approvingly, then turned toward the seated youths below the dais. Her gaze softened, though the urgency in her words did not waver. "As for Luz, King, and Atlas... their part in this is far from over." Luz instinctively straightened in her seat, nerves flaring.

"There's no doubt now that Orion will plan to retrieve the Star Piece hidden within their home realm." Vaileth said. "If he finds it before they do, their chances of stopping him will shrink dramatically. That is why it is important for us to send them back to the Demon Realm."

Luz, seated on the bench beside her friends, swallowed the lump rising in her throat. "We'll do whatever it takes," she said, quiet but firm. "We won't let him win."

Atlas, though quiet, gave a slow nod. "I know what's at stake now. I'm not running anymore."

Vaileth let the silence breathe. Then she drew a deep breath herself and spoke again, "However, before we can act, there is... one more truth you must all hear. One where I ask for you to listen not with fear, but with the open mind Arbora herself teaches us to hold sacred." Her voice carried easily in the stillness, reaching every ear in the chamber. "Among us stands a descendant of the Chosen Line. A child of beings whose very existence was once thought lost to time."

A hush fell like a weighted veil. Gasps scattered among the monks. Several councilors leaned forward. One elder monk clutched the staff in his hands as his mouth parted in astonishment and shock.

"You mean..." one younger monk whispered, his voice tight with awe, "...a Titan?"

Immediately, murmurs returned—this time not of skepticism but of confusion and disbelief. A few monks exchanged incredulous looks, shaking their heads.

"That is impossible!" said a stern voice near the front. A high-ranking monk with a braided green sash stood from his cushion. "The Titans vanished centuries ago. Not even the Ancients documented a surviving heir."

"Indeed," another monk added, her tone cool and composed. "The extinction of the Titan lineage has long been accepted as truth."

"I once believed the same," Vaileth replied, her voice steady. "Until I met him."

She soon motioned her hand, where King noticed and soon made his way up to the podium. His small, clawed feet padded softly on the polished floor, the light catching on the bone-white skull atop his head. For a heartbeat, no one moved. The room seemed to hold its breath along with them.

King looked up, slightly unsure, his mismatched eyes scanning the faces before him. He shifted awkwardly, his tail twitching nervously behind him. "Uh... hi," he muttered, scratching the back of his head. "So... yeah. That's me."

The disbelief hung stubbornly in the air but only for a moment. Then came a sudden, shivering stillness, like the drop of a pin in the quietest of forests. A low gasp rang out—not of shock but of spiritual realization.

"I feel it..." one monk whispered, her voice trembling.

"So do I," murmured another. "The resonance... it's him."

Some monks dropped to their knees in reverence. Others pressed their hands over their hearts in stunned recognition. One elderly monk wept openly, shaking as he stared at King like one beholding a living miracle.

King flinched slightly at the reaction. "Okay, I didn't mean for, uh... all this," he said, shrinking back a little, uncertain.

The council now leaned in as one. Their stern, impassive faces softened, their gazes fixed on King with expressions of profound attention. Even those who had voiced the strongest doubts moments before now regarded him with humbled silence.

A monk in the back spoke, voice hoarse with wonder. "The Last Titan walks among us... and he is but a child..."

King shifted again, eyes darting toward Vaileth. She gave him a gentle nod, her hand placed over her chest in a sign of deep respect and faith.

"He may be young," Vaileth said, turning back to the council, "but he carries the wisdom and power of his lineage. And more importantly, he carries the heart of someone who still believes in hope, even after everything that's been taken from him." Her words settled gently over the assembly, like a leaf landing upon still water.

Markus joined in, "He has great potential everyone! He helped me forge my sword with his own power! If he was able to make it, then he is destined for a greater purpose!"

Councilor Telmorin finally stood, his robe trailing behind him like a living vine. He approached slowly, eyes never leaving King. "If what we sense is true," he began, his voice grave and yet tinged with awe, "then Arbora has not forsaken us. She has sent us a reminder... that even in our darkest hour, the roots of the world still endure."

He turned to address the entire chamber. "Let it be known to the Order, to all gathered here—our faith was not misplaced. The Titan lives!"

A great rustling filled the chamber of voices rising in reverent harmony. A chant began softly, an ancient prayer in Arborean tongue, spreading from monk to monk like wildfire through the woodlands.

In the center of the great chamber, King remained motionless. The monks' eyes were all on him without any fear or disdain, but with awe and hope, as they had seen what he was. It should've been a triumphant moment but instead, it stirred something far more complex within King. As this wasn't the first time King had learned who he really was.

Years ago, back in the Demon Realm, when the truth had first crept into the quiet spaces of his life—that he was the son of the Titan, he hadn't felt powerful but rather lost and disoriented. He remembered thinking about how the world might see him now. Would they fear him? Would they use him? Would they ever see him—just King, just the kid who loved his friends and family, who made stupid jokes and wanted hugs and warm meals and a place to belong?

He never wanted to be just a symbol. He didn't want to be just the legacy of something vast and frightening. Yet, here he stood, surrounded by monks who didn't fear him. They

looked at him not as a monster, not as a threat, but as something sacred. A hope reborn and a being tied to the balance of all magic.

Now, knowing what they truly represented... he felt that. He understood that. And it filled him with something close to gratitude. They didn't just see the Titan in him. They saw what Titans meant—not destruction but rather protection. He wasn't a harbinger of chaos to them. He was important and necessary, it was the sign that the weave of magic still had a guiding hand.

It made something warm bloom quietly in his chest. However, alongside that warmth was fear as well because now the truth was undeniable. This was no longer some distant fact about his heritage, this was his reality. The Order knew and with that knowing came expectation, Destiny.

He didn't know what that path would look like. Would he have to lead others? Defend magic itself? Would he be forced to make impossible decisions, the kind only someone with a Titan's power could bear?

He wasn't sure if he was ready. He wasn't even sure what "ready" looked like. Although he was sure of one thing, he wouldn't run from it.

Maybe he was scared. Maybe the idea of destiny made his claws tremble and his stomach twist. But he had friends beside him. He had people who saw him—not just as a Titan, but as King.

Maybe, just maybe, being both didn't have to be a burden. Maybe it could be a beginning. As the chants rose around him, as the monks began to sing of rebirth and balance, King breathed in the sacred air of the chamber.

He didn't know where this path would take him but for the first time, he wanted to find out.

A sudden tone echoed across the chamber—a chime that marked the official end of the meeting. Each of the councilors rose to their feet, followed by the various monks in the audience. "This session is now concluded. Go and may Arbora guide our paths."

The monks and councilors bowed in unison, their movements graceful and synchronized as they began to file out of the chamber, Some spoke in hushed tones to their peers, still digesting the urgency of the moment; others remained silent, expressions etched with concern. Even among the most composed, there was a shared weight in their steps, as if the future had grown tangibly heavier.

Luz sat quietly on the edge of her seat, her hands folded tensely in her lap whilst her staff was in both of her hands. Every word spoken still rang in her head—Orion, the Wishing Star, and the Demon Realm's Star Piece. She wasn't afraid exactly... but she felt the burden of it all press down on her shoulders like a cloak soaked through with rain.

King nestled closer beside her, "So... we're not going anywhere just yet, huh?"

Before Luz could respond, the click of Vaileth's boots across the smooth marble floor broke the silence. Though her posture remained regal, there was a flicker of weariness behind her eyes. Not just exhaustion, but something deeper: a quiet grief that she refused to show fully.

"Well, basically yeah. You three aren't going anywhere yet." Vaileth announced, halting a few steps in front of them. She added, "Until the council ensures proper protection for your departure and when we finalize your arrangements to return back to the Demon Realm, as it's too dangerous for you to travel alone at the moment." She placed a hand on her hip, raising a brow with a smirk that cut through the tension. "In other words... Congratulations! You're all officially Arbora City's most important houseguests! Just uh... try not to destroy anything, m'kay?"

Hesperos gave an exaggerated bow, giving courtesy with the flaps of his coat. "Madam Vaileth, I promise to only destroy things by accident and in the name of fashion."

King chuckled softly under his breath. "You might want to start with your wardrobe, then." Hesperos turned, a dramatic gasp appeared on his face, "H-hey now you little child!"

Starry spoke while slowly hovering up and down while they glowed. "Okay, but do we at least get rooms with views and not some forgotten guest closet next to a broom cupboard?"

Vaileth chuckled, and for a fleeting moment, the burden she carried seemed lighter. "You'll be staying at the Inner Gardens, near the Heartroot Sanctuary. And I can assure you, it's relatively free of broom closets!"

Luz nodded, grateful but still clearly tense. "Thanks, Vaileth. I mean it."

Vaileth looked at her with something more maternal—gentler, even proud. "You've all done more than most ever would in your place. Especially proving that you're willing to do what it takes."

King stood up on the bench, placing a tiny paw on his chest. "Then let it be known that King Clawthorne of the Demon Realm will officially cherish this temporary luxurious living! Especially the snacks we will be given!"

His declaration hung in the air for a beat before a soft snort of amusement escaped Vaileth's lips. Her arms crossed, while her yellow eyes narrowed with an amused glint. "Oh, is that so?" she said, a grin tugging at the corner of her mouth. "Because while you're basking in the buffet of complimentary fruit platters, you'll also be attending lessons with me."

King blinked. "Wait... what now?"

Vaileth's expression shifted, just slightly, into something more earnest. While at the same time, kneeling slightly so she was eye level with him, "I figured since you'll be on Astralis Prime for the next few days," she began, "I might as well use the time to teach you what I know about the Titans—your people."

King's eyes widened. His form perked up with sudden curiosity and a dash of reverence. "You mean there's... more Titan stuff I don't know about? Like, not just screaming people into oblivion?"

"Oh, much more," Vaileth said with a knowing smile. "The roar is just the start. Titan magic is old—older than any realm's recorded history." She added, "I spent decades gathering it while working under the Archivists. Although at first when I fled into exile, I really didn't think all of my collected knowledge could be useful... but now that's clearly changed, as there's someone worthy to inherit that knowledge."

The gravity of her offer settled on King like a warm, unfamiliar breeze. He slowly stepped down from the bench, staring up at her with wide, gleaming eyes. His tail swished once behind him, then curled excitedly around his leg. "I... I don't know what to say," he mumbled, his voice noticeably quieter now. "No one's ever really... offered to teach me before. Not about that side of me, anyway but yeah, I wanna learn!"

Luz placed a gentle hand on his back, smiling down at him with warmth. "You're gonna do great, King. And if Vaileth's the one teaching, you better be ready for homework."

"And lectures," Hesperos added dramatically. "Long ones. With metaphorical riddles."

Vaileth smirked. "Only for those who misbehave. But don't worry," she said, turning her gaze back to King, "I'll show you how to wield your power—not just as a weapon, but as a truth. There's more to your magic than roars. Your connection to Arbora... to life itself... runs deeper than even the Archivists understand."

King's tail wagged once, then twice, then uncontrollably. "YES! I am ready! I am so ready! I mean, I don't even know what half that meant, but it sounded super cool! I'm gonna become King of Learning!"

"Technically, you're already King," Markus quipped from the back, arms folded, "but go off."

King puffed out his chest again. "Then let it be doubly known: I, King Clawthorne, Royal Titan of the Demon Realm, am now also the King of Titan Lore!"

Atlas chuckled, adjusting the star pendant around his neck. "Add that to your list of titles—right under 'Master of Snack Acquisitions, buddy!'"

Vaileth chuckled along with the others, but there was a flicker of something more somber in her eyes—a flicker only Luz caught as she watched the older woman. Beneath the humor, there was determination and a quiet vow.

Atlas, who had been fiddling absentmindedly with the strand of his pendant, noticed her gaze. He tilted his head in quiet curiosity. His smile from moments ago still lingered on his face, but it wavered slightly beneath her thoughtful stare. He blinked once, his expression folding into something cautious yet open.

Vaileth took a step toward him. "And you," she said gently, her voice dipping into a quieter register that silenced even King's triumphant tail-wagging for a moment. "You're not excluded from this either, Atlas."

His hands paused, frozen around the charm that shimmered faintly in his grasp. He didn't say anything, just watched her with a growing intensity. "I've seen what the loss of your magic has done to you," she continued, the warmth in her tone carefully measured but unmistakable. "While, I can't promise we'll get it all back overnight... but I can help you learn to get it nonetheless."

Atlas swallowed, his throat bobbing slightly. The room, though still softly lit and full of the buzz of recent laughter, suddenly felt quieter, closer.

"I plan to teach you," Vaileth said. "Not just how to regain what you've lost, but how to master it. Spells your siblings never showed you. Magic and abilities even they were too prideful to understand." She leaned in just slightly, her expression kind but unwavering. "You deserve that chance, Atlas. You deserve to know your own strength. Not as something you borrow... but something that's yours."

There was a long pause as Atlas didn't speak. He just stared at her, eyes wide—not with fear or doubt, but something deeper. For a moment, he looked like a boy who'd been walking in darkness for years, only to realize someone had been holding out the light all along.

Then, without saying a word, he moved. He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Vaileth. The motion was sudden but not abrupt nor hesitant but real with emotion.

Vaileth stiffened for the briefest second, caught entirely off guard. At first, she didn't know how to react because she hadn't expected it. However, when her senses returned, she let out a breath, quiet and steady, and slowly curled her arms around him in return.

Luz watched the moment in stillness, her chest tightening just slightly. King stopped bouncing at the sight and looked up, his tail slowly coming to a calm sway. Even Hesperos, usually the first to crack a joke, remained respectfully silent.

Atlas buried his face into Vaileth. She could feel how tightly he held on—not desperately, but with purpose and gratitude. When he finally pulled back just enough to speak, his voice was low, choked with something close to awe.

"Thank you," he whispered. Two words. Words that weren't loud nor extravagant but they carried weight. Years of silence, loneliness, loss, and the acquired fear of never being whole again.

Vaileth looked at him, her arms still loosely encircling his back, and gave a small but sincere nod. "I understand," she said, her voice almost a whisper, brushing past the stars that hung in the air between them. "You don't have to say anything else."

Atlas blinked rapidly, trying and failing to keep his composure. His fingers tightened just slightly around the fabric of her sleeve before he finally stepped back, wiping at one eye with the back of his hand in what he tried to make look casual.

King sniffled. "Okay, but now I feel like I need another hug."

Luz chuckled softly and pulled him into her arms. "You'll get plenty."

Hesperos cleared his throat theatrically. "Should we all hug? Or are we reserving those for emotionally transformative training invitations only?"

Vaileth rolled her eyes but smirked. "I think we can survive without a group hug for now, pirate."

Vaileth looked at the two boys in front of her—King, tail wagging again as Luz ruffled his head affectionately, and Atlas, who still hadn't let go of the star pendant around his neck.

A Titan reclaiming his roots and a Collector finding his light again.

In her chest, somewhere between the quiet ache of regret and the fierce spark of determination, Vaileth Xar allowed herself a small, hopeful thought: Maybe redemption didn't always come through victory. Maybe it started with the willingness to teach... and the courage to be loved back.

"I'll see you two at sunrise," Vaileth spoke once more, placing a gentle hand atop King's skull-like head and Atlas's hood-cap. "And bring that excitement. You'll need it." she concluded.

King looked up at her, his voice quieter now, but no less full of heart. "Thanks, Vaileth. For, you know... wanting me to learn more. About who I really am."

She crouched slightly so their eyes met, her voice low but clear. "You're more than what the Archivists labeled. You're legacy, King. And it's time you remembered what that means."

He nodded solemnly, his childish excitement tempered by a dawning sense of purpose. "I'll be ready."

"Good." Vaileth said softly, "Now come on," Vaileth added, gesturing for them to follow. "We've wasted enough time in the council chambers for one day!"

With that, the group began their walk toward the location of the sanctuary, where they will be staying at their quarters—King at the center, already peppering Vaileth with questions, Luz smiling quietly at his side, and the others following close behind, they soon exited the chamber and the doors behind them closed with a reverberated thud.

After a while, the group eventually reached their designated quarters. The warm golden hue of sun dipped low behind the crystalline spires of Arbora City, casting soft amber light across the sprawling Inner Gardens. The breeze carried a fragrant mix of star-flower pollen and lavender dusk blossoms, which shimmered as their petals closed for the evening. Near the towering, vine-wrapped Heartroot Sanctuary—its bark pulsing faintly with magic—life moved with a rare kind of peace. As time had passed, each of them began doing their own separate and different actions since then; In the quarters which both King and Atlas shared, the two had clearly made their room their own. King had piled pillows into a miniature fortress in one corner while Atlas lined the walls with softly pulsing star lanterns and pinned up his own constellation charts. Now, they stood back, surveying their work—King bouncing with satisfaction, Atlas folding his arms and giving a rare, contented smile. The room became a place they shaped together, a symbol of safety in a time of rising tension. Meanwhile, beyond the sanctuary, Starry had found an audience in a cluster of curious civilians young and old alike. With exaggerated flair and a few sparkles of harmless magic, they juggled glowing pebbles and spun tales of

cosmic nonsense and half-truths, drawing laughter from the crowd. For a moment, the looming threat of war felt distant. Ahead towards the very wall that protected the city, Markus Star stood beside a portable holomap table, surrounded by other knights. His brow furrowed in concentration as they plotted strategic defense points and outlined formations. He moved with purpose, occasionally issuing quiet commands or nodding solemnly as messages crackled in from other star systems. Despite the exhaustion lining his eyes, he did not waver and couldn't afford to. Finally, away from the bustle and back at the sanctuary, Luz sat on a stone bench shaped like an unfurled petal. Her palisman, Stringbean, rested curled beside her on the seat, nuzzling against her hand. Luz's gaze was fixed on the horizon, where the suns dipped lower, painting the skies in soft pink and amber hues. Her expression was hard to read—somewhere between contemplation and weariness, her shoulders a touch slumped but her eyes still focused.

Footsteps approached from behind, light yet certain. Luz glanced sideways just as Vaileth Xar came into view, hands folded behind her back, her blue hair trailing like comet smoke in the breeze. "I thought I'd find you here," Vaileth said softly, taking a seat beside her. She gazed out at the horizon for a moment before speaking again. "You did well today. More than well. Although, you've been quiet for a while."

Luz turned, offering a faint smile. "Guess I just needed a minute. Things have been... a lot."

Vaileth walked forward and sat beside her, her gaze followed Luz's, settling on the horizon with a slow exhale. "I wanted to let you know," Vaileth began gently, "the council does believe you. All of you. There was some hesitation, sure—but your words carried the truth they needed to hear. Even the most stubborn among them couldn't deny it."

Luz blinked, turning her head slightly. "Really?"

Vaileth nodded, watching a pair of dragon-winged moths flutter between the glowing trees. "In recent years, we've clashed with them more openly," she continued. "Skirmishes specifically in the outer sectors. Our monasteries are built in those regions, which aren't completely under Archivist control—by design. But... those places live in fear every day, Luz. They fear that one day, they too will be under their oppression."

Luz looked down at her hands. "I've seen what they've done. No one deserves to live like that."

Vaileth continued. "Many don't get the choice. That's why we've turned Astralis Prime into a refuge. Over the last few decades, it's become home to species who lost everything during the annual Archivists' Play of Tributes."

She turned her head toward Luz, her eyes shimmering with starlit grief. "Entire worlds were reduced to nothing because they didn't offer 'enough.' or anything at all. And we, those of us who remain, live on to carry those memories."

Luz looked away, throat tightening.

Not far from them, Hesperos Holmes knelt beneath a tall crystal-leafed tree, surrounded by several fellow Illustrians. Their ears twitched as they listened to him speak, his voice soft and unguarded. He was telling them of his escape, of his regrets, of the world they all lost. For a moment, Hesperos didn't seem like the playful rogue he often portrayed—but simply a man clinging to the last pieces of his people.

Vaileth glanced down at them, her voice barely above a whisper. "Although, despite losing everything, there's one thing they haven't lost... That being their ability to remain together through it all."

Luz let out a soft breath. "Yeah.. Just like us."

A silence followed, a breeze carried the scent of flowering starnettle from the lower gardens, rustling the branches overhead in a quiet chorus. Then, after a few beats, Vaileth's voice broke the silence once more—gentler this time. "So, Luz..." she began. "Yes Vaileth?" Luz replied which Vaileth further continued by asking her question, "What's the Demon Realm like nowadays?"

The question came so suddenly, so out of left field, that Luz turned her head in surprise, blinking at her. "Huh?" she let out instinctively, caught completely off guard.

Vaileth simply offered a small, amused shrug, her eyes tracing the stars that were just beginning to prick through the twilight. There was no judgment nor pressure, just a quiet curiosity born from longing.

Luz tilted her head, trying to gather her thoughts. "Well," she began slowly, "I haven't lived nearly as long as you have—so I probably can't give you a full history recap or anything like that."

A smile crept onto Vaileth's face, and Luz grinned faintly in return.

"But," Luz continued, "I can tell you that it's... changed. A lot. For the better, mostly. Sure, things aren't a hundred percent perfect—but it's become this place where people actually try to take care of each other. Where weirdness is kind of the norm. And... honestly?" She paused, reaching up to stroke Stringbean's wooden scales. "It gave me my best friends and second family. I would've never made it through life so far without them."

Vaileth turned her head slightly, her expression softening. Luz glanced sideways at her, narrowing her eyes with curiosity. "Why do you ask?"

For a moment, Vaileth didn't answer. Her eyes returned to the skyline, watching as the first of the planet's twin moons began its slow ascent between the spires. "If the opportunity ever came," she said finally, "I think I'd like to go back. Just once. To the Demon Realm."

Luz's eyebrows lifted, and she gave her full attention.

"I spent centuries locked in orbit around things that never really mattered," Vaileth continued, her voice carrying an edge of old regret beneath its calm surface. "Archives. Orders. Expectations. I was so focused on what I was supposed to be that I never really thought about what I could've been. And then I met you and your friends. I saw who you became. Who you helped Atlas become."

She exhaled, and her gaze turned inward for a second. "I'd like to meet the people who made that possible. Maybe even thank them."

Luz felt her throat tighten, the weight of Vaileth's words grounding her in the moment. A thousand memories flitted behind her eyes—Eda's lessons, Amity's arms around her, Gus and Willow's determination. She thought of her mother, Camila, waiting with patience and quiet strength. Her sister Vee, Hunter, All the threads that had kept her going.

"I promise," Luz said, her voice steadier than she expected, "once we stop Orion... I'll make sure you get to see it all. My friends, my family—everyone. And I know they'd really love you."

Vaileth arched a brow with her usual amused skepticism. "You sure about that?"

Luz smirked. "Positive. You're a walking library with attitude. Eda's gonna adore you, mostly for the attitude part. Lilith most definitely 'cause she's a fellow historian herself."

That earned a genuine laugh from Vaileth, one that made her eyes glint with something younger and freer. "Then I guess I've got something to look forward to," she said.

Above them, the moons continued their slow, radiant rise. Below, the lights of Arbora City shimmered like stardust across the land. And for that moment, surrounded by loss, hope, and the weight of what was to come, the promise of a visit to a distant realm became something more—a quiet vow that not all good things had been lost. Some were still waiting to be found.

Meanwhile, far from Astralis Prime, high above the quiet curve of the cosmos, where the stars bled pale against the void, the crown jewel of the Archivist Empire loomed—Celestialopolis. Its shining spires glistened like blades of starlight, each crafted from large crystalline constructs. Suspended upon a veil of gravitational equilibrium and raw magic, the city floated like a celestial cathedral—beautiful, timeless, and utterly devoid of mercy.

At the center of this astral kingdom stood the Archive Tower, its structure resembling a column of white crystal and steel, twisting impossibly toward the heavens. The tower pulsed faintly with the ancient power of the Collective, humming like a heartbeat—slow, calculating, and patient.

Within its labyrinthine halls, two imposing figures marched through the quartz corridors—the Grand Huntsman and General Arulieus. The silence between them was reverent. Neither dared speak as they approached the throne room—its grand doors slowly creaking open at their arrival, groaning like the breath of a dying beast.

The chamber was vast, domed with transparent crystal, giving a view of nebulae swirling in agonized color beyond. At its heart, four thrones encircled a radiant altar, each shaped

differently to match the seat's occupant. Shadows clung to the far edges of the room, but the four Archivists sat shrouded in none—only illuminated by the solemn glow of the cosmos behind them.

The Grand Huntsman and General Arulieus halted at the threshold, then slowly dropped to one knee, heads bowed in silence. From beneath his heavy cloak, the Huntsman lifted a weathered satchel and carefully withdrew the Celestine Compass, presenting it upward, his arms stretched in offering.

Orion stood from his throne—tall, serene, terrifying. Clad in flowing robes of radiant star silk, his skin shimmered like cooled marble, and his expression was unreadable, cold with purpose. He extended one hand, fingers elegantly curled, and accepted the Compass without a word.

The room held its breath as he turned the relic in his palm, then pressed a single finger to its surface. The Compass bloomed open like a lotus, and above its exposed core, the same image Luz had seen earlier shimmered to life.

A vision of the white tree—Arbora—unfolded, its celestial branches reaching across the void, each veined with swirling, color-shifting nebulae. Nine golden stars spun slowly above it.

The Grand Huntsman lowered his gaze, his voice tinged with regret. "I have failed to eliminate the last Titan..." he confessed. "The spawn of chaos still lives..."

Orion's eyes narrowed further. A flicker of dim starlight rippled across the chamber, distorting the constellation sigils in the air but he said nothing.

The Grand Huntsman continued, lifting his gaze now, his voice deep and resolute—still steeped in the conviction of his cause, even as it cracked beneath the gravity of what he must reveal. "However, that is not the only transgression, My Star. The mortal girl... she has forged a bond with the Titan. A bond not born of mere affection... but of resonance." He added, "Through this connection, she has been transformed. A hybrid. A vessel of Titan-kind, imbued with their accursed resilience and power. The very blood of the ancient scourge pulses within her now."

Gasps stirred from the Archivists gathered at the edge of the room. Murmurs broke out like the flickering of distant stars about to implode. Aster Nova shifted with growing unease, her face tightening into a scowl.

Badar muttered, "Impossible... Titan corruption should have rejected her form—"

"And yet it did not," the Huntsman said sharply, his tone unwavering. "She stands as a bridge between realms. Flesh of the Human Realm and her soul tethered to a Titan. She now channels its magic freely as though she had been born to it."

He turned his eyes fully to Orion then, the intensity of his words bolstered by the fire of zeal, not shame. "This... defilement is not the only affront. During my quest to obtain your great compass, I encountered one of the knights of the heretic Order of Arbora. However, in his grasp was a blade... unlike any I have seen. It bore Titan essence, I believe it was forged by the last Titan. As it managed to pierce through my flesh and from there I was able to feel the Titan magic poison me!"

Orion's posture stiffened but his expression remained placid.

The Grand Huntsman stood now, tall and imposing despite his wounds, eyes aglow with a fervor that bordered on fanatical. "The fugitives grow bolder and stronger, My Star! They do not simply evade us now—they rise to challenge your Will of the Cosmos! What was once rebellion has now become insurrection! They threaten not just your plans, but the divine symmetry you strive to restore!"

He stepped forward, casting a long shadow before Orion's dais. "They are dangerous and corrupted. And worse still—they believe in one another!"

Orion's expression remained inscrutable, his eyes fixed on the celestial display. After a moment, he spoke, his tone calm yet imbued with an unsettling conviction. "The death of the Titan is necessary, yet you come before me... in failure. You allowed her to become what should never exist. A Titan reborn by human hands."

The Grand Huntsman did not flinch. "I allowed nothing, My Star. I underestimated the strength of their will. And for that... I take full responsibility but I vow to rectify it. I will cleanse this aberration from existence. I will sever their bond and shatter the Titan's last

hope." He knelt again, one gauntleted fist to his chest. "Grant me your will once more, and I shall not falter."

Orion looked past him, eyes unfocused, distant. "The girl... Luz... her connection with the Titan changes everything..." He spoke once more, "She was once an anomaly. A curiosity. A fragment of misplaced fate clinging to borrowed strength. But now? She has transcended her station. She is no longer just the girl who defied us long ago... she is becoming something dangerous and unbound."

He stopped, his eyes now meeting the Grand Huntsman's without flinching. "With the girl now infused with Titan essence, and that knight wielding a blade steeped in their ancestral force, and Vaileth Xar... our disgraced mentor, most likely now guiding the Titan child with knowledge we never should have let her keep. We are not dealing with mere rebels anymore... We are facing the second coming of a war that nearly unmade the stars during the first time we fought."

"However, despite it all..." he lowered his head to look directly at the Celestine Compass, "...we have what they don't anymore."

The Compass floated gracefully into his palm, its crystalline plates shifting and folding, its light resonating with ancient power. "The Celestine Compass—the key not just to navigation, but to ascension. We now possess the map to the Star Pieces. With them, we shall forge a power surpassing any kind of magic."

Orion's tone shifted slightly, measured and commanding, "But we must not allow arrogance to blind us. This Compass is not a guarantee—it is only a step and each step must be precise. We will make the preparations... every rune, every equation, every alignment. The ritual must not falter." He added, "While we now hold the guiding star in our hands, they still possess the fire of desperation. And desperation... has undone empires."

He looked to each of his loyal followers, his voice now like tempered steel. "They will strike again. The magic user. The weapon-bearer. The traitor. The beast. And the broken ones. They will come—not for glory, but to protect and to save others in their own chaotic way. And that, my kin, is what makes them dangerous."

Orion observed the compass for a long, long moment. His face remained impassive, but his eyes burned with quiet, endless calculation. "At last," he said, his voice low, smooth, each syllable delivered with deliberate weight. "The path reveals itself. As it did to the Titans in the dark before time... so now it calls to us. We will act swiftly. But not carelessly. We shall rise through method, purpose, and through the inevitable."

He stepped forward, the image of Arbora still floating between them. "This... is the moment we have long awaited. The day of the Convergence is nearly upon us. When it arrives, the realms shall align—not in chaos, but in perfect harmony. And that harmony shall be ours to restore."

His gaze turned downward to the kneeling figures, his expression calm yet terrible. "We have wandered too long in exile. Watched our legacy distorted, our purpose profaned. But no longer." Orion turned the Compass slightly, and the projection shifted, highlighting one of the golden stars. The nebula surrounding it shimmered in hues of deep indigo. "Astralis Prime," he said. "Our first destination."

A tense ripple spread through the chamber. He looked toward the three other Archivists—Badar Comet, arms crossed with stormy silence; Andromeda, expression unreadable but eyes narrowed with thought; and Aster Nova, whose gaze simmered with anticipation.

"You will gather the leaders of our fleets," Orion ordered. "Every commander loyal to the Archive Collective that will answer. We shall use every starship, every construct, every soul pledged to our creed for this holy quest."

Then he turned his gaze back to the Grand Huntsman and Arulieus, each still bowed. "You two will remind the ignorant of what it means to resist inevitability," he continued, voice silk and steel. "Let the Realms tremble before our coming."

The Huntsman, ever loyal, did not raise his head. "As you command, My Star."

Orion raised the Compass once more, letting its glow wash over his pale features. His voice, though measured, now brimmed with something more ancient—something colder than any winter star. "The War for the Wishing Star begins not out of vengeance... but necessity. We will not burn the Realms for wrath. We will free them from the very tyranny of the Titans—for order, for balance, and for remembrance."

The chamber fell into silence once more. Orion's words lingered like starlight across the void, reverberating through the crystalline dome as though the cosmos themselves had heard the decree. He turned the Compass in his hand one final time, then closed it with a resonant click.

Slowly, deliberately, he raised his head to address his gathered kin.

"My siblings... Huntsman... General Arulieus. You have heard what must be heard. Now, leave me. I would be alone with thought."

The Huntsman bowed once more, his gauntlet pressed to his chest. "Your will be done, My Star."

One by one, the Archivists rose from their thrones, their silken garments rustling like whispers of ancient storms. Arulieus gave a sharp nod, expression unreadable behind his polished helm. The doors of the throne room parted once more, and together they departed, their shadows vanishing into the radiant corridors beyond.

Orion remained for a moment, silent, statuesque. Only when the chamber was completely void of presence did he exhale softly—a sound like the long-forgotten sigh of a dying constellation.

Then, with the faintest gesture of his hand, a circular platform of crystal emerged from the dais. Orion stepped onto it, robes trailing behind him like threads of twilight. The platform rose soundlessly, carrying him through shafts of refracted starlight, past the crystalline veins of the Archive Tower, until it reached a vast corridor bathed in ethereal glow.

The Hall of Knowledge.

Its enormity defied reason. The ceiling stretched beyond sight, and its walls were lined with shelves, constructs, and stasis-crystals—each holding relics, tomes, and echoes of entire civilizations long conquered or erased. Holographic constellations floated in the air like drifting lanterns, each a silent testimony to a people now absorbed into the Archivists' dominion. Orion's steps did not falter as he glided through the hall. His hand trailed briefly across a suspended shard of memory, glowing faintly at his touch. He

ignored it, moving deeper, until he reached a section of the wall that seemed plain, unadorned. With a mere press of his palm, the crystal shifted, unlocking with a sound like fractured glass.

The wall peeled away to reveal a hidden chamber—his personal sanctum.

Inside was no throne, no grandeur. Instead, it was a place of austere design. A single desk carved from starstone. Charts and fragments of forgotten runes etched across the walls. Suspended globes of planets long extinct, slowly orbiting one another in silent gravity. And at the very center, an array of parchments and relics—his true arsenal.

Here, Orion allowed his mask to falter. He placed the Compass carefully upon the desk, its glow casting cold light across his sharp features. His fingers lingered on it, and for the first time, a whisper escaped his lips—soft, weary, edged with a sorrow only solitude could hear. "This mission must succeed," he murmured. "If we falter now... if the Titans are allowed to poison creation once more... then my people's exile shall have been for nothing. We will fade into dust; forgotten among the stars we once shepherded."

His hand curled tightly over the Compass. His voice hardened. "I will not let that be our fate."

He straightened, eyes gleaming with the fire of cold conviction. "Yet even with the Compass, I cannot wield the Wishing Star alone. Its magic requires a vessel for it to work. A vessel strong enough to endure and harness its unlimited energy... pliant enough to obey."

For a moment, his tone softened—almost wistful, almost mournful. But then it shifted, curling into something darker. A note of sadistic delight rang in his voice, a crack of joy splintering through the calm. "Fortunately... I already have one." His lips curled into the faintest smile. "And it will serve me best of all."

The air shimmered. A soft flutter echoed through the chamber. A small, bird-like lifeform—its feathers pale and shimmering like fractured glass—descended from the shadows. But its eyes glowed with a hollow light, its movements unnatural. Assimilation clung to its every feature. It landed gently upon his desk, clutching a rolled scroll in its claws.

With cold grace, Orion accepted the offering. He unrolled it, eyes scanning the contents. A soft, bitter chuckle escaped him. "Ah... the key to it all. Just what I've been searching for..." he said, almost fondly, though venom laced each syllable. "Even after many centuries, such vital truths have still remained carelessly guarded." He added, "Oh Vaileth... you can get away with taking your research, the compass, this very scroll I wield in my hand, and even our own Star Piece the day you decided to betray us... yet you failed in the end. Typical."

He folded the scroll and set it aside.

Then, with a casual flick of his hand, the bird-construct twisted upon itself, shattering into a cloud of dying light. Its cry was silent, its body dissolving into the nothingness from which it had been made. Orion did not look away.

He turned back to the Compass, his voice now iron and fire, ringing with the authority of a god.

"Let it be known across the void..." he whispered, his words gathering power, resonating against the crystalline walls. "The Age of Chaos ends. The War to liberate this universe from the Titans shall begin very soon."

To Be Continued...