

Chapter 1 Eight Days

Kalnar raised the crystal to his left ear and gave it a sharp crack. It felt like someone was stabbing a million daggers into his head. But a few seconds later, it transformed into a familiar rush of euphoria, as if the daggers had turned into bubbles and floated into his brain.

He leaned back in his chair, sighing in relief. A few precious minutes away from the pain inside his chest. Away from emotions and thought. Away from the one person in the universe he couldn't stand:

Himself.

They call the drug Crystalline Clatter. Why anyone would want to use it beats me; there are so many more pleasurable ones to do. Sonic Sap from the Clastnick Cluster. Harmonic Honey from the Lyrian Crossroads. And of course, sugar, from Earth--I can attest, this last one is particularly good.

Names Woid, how do you do? I'm a universe-traveling bard with godlike powers and a face that could make any woman jealous. Aye, you got to compliment yourself if no one else will.

Anyways, the whole godpowers thing gives me a pretty good idea of what people are feeling and thinking, including the real hero of our story, Kalnar. It's particularly helpful when you're telling

a story to a group of Earthlings, oh that must be you. So sit back, pop some popcorn or whatever other weird Earth shit you do, and listen to the story, it's a good one.

I'm playing my gaollin—check the space glossary at the end of the book, the Galaxy has its share of weird terms—in The Cosmic Cantina, the most famous bar at the heart of the Galactic Empire's living mothership. You heard that right, living ship. Cool, I know.

The space is organic, with furniture that seems to have grown naturally from the floor and ceiling. Plants with leaves and flowers provide a gentle, shifting illumination of bioluminescent red light. But the plants all sagged and seemed to give off less light than they should as if they were afflicted with something.

"The end," I said, playing a few low notes on my gaollin and dissipating the astral projection I used for my performance in front of me. Kalnar remained sitting in the back of the room at the interstellar conscious diminisher station, colloquially called, the bar. A gap-toothed block-headed man in the front made a loud grunt and cracked some clatter, tilting back suddenly in pain. No one clapped. Rude.

"Careful now, if you give me two grunts, I might actually think you liked it," I joked.

He gave another grunt. Then raised his clatter up to his ears, realized it was drained, and grunted again in annoyance.

"My heart, fills with your endless kindness." I exited the podium while whistling a soft tune and skipped over to the bar. The canisters radiated so many different colors it looked like they came out of a child's coloring book.

I sat next to Kalnar. He didn't acknowledge me or himself, which is just how he wanted it. He simply looked into space with a dreamy expression.

"Looking for something?" the barman asked.

"Mmm yes, do you have any water by chance?" The barman raised an eyebrow. "Hard to play with a muddled mind you know," I said, smiling.

The barman filled a glass of water and passed it over. I took a sip and surveyed the room. A massive window spanned the far end, showing a gorgeous view of space. Tiny stars dotted around like lanterns floating in a dark ocean. Some sort of jester was juggling balls up on the podium. Frowning, I noticed people were enjoying his performance much more than my own.

"I'm supposed to be the cynical one, what came over you," Kalnar said.

The clatter must already have worn off. It doesn't last as long when you use it as much as he does. I replaced my frown with a radiant smile. "Just adding a touch of low into life. You really wouldn't be able to appreciate the highs without them."

"Wise words," he grunted.

"I'm glad you think so. But if you want a wise word"—I said leaning forward—"there's truly nothing as universal as a good grunt. I've gotten four tonight, including from you, and they've all meant different things. It's a truly multifaceted sound."

Chuckling, he turned his neck to expose his ear and bop heads. Let me tell you, I've traveled a lot, but the Galactar Empires' way of greeting remains one of the oddest I've encountered.

After bopping heads, I looked more closely at him. He was square-faced with a rock-solid jaw and eyes that hid a more tender soul beneath. He had a nasty burn scar running up the right side of his face, and what looked like a long blade scar running from his left eye down into his shirt. He had on simple camo trousers, a thick black shirt that covered a muscular physique, a small bag where he must keep his clatter stores, and wore a silver pendant around his neck.

"Names, Kalnar, but I feel I've seen you before."

"You have. I was the entertainment at the Serenian delegation party."

"Oh," Kalnar said, his expression turning gloomy.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Names Woid. You have the look of someone"—I looked over to the jester who was, yup, juggling balls on his ass—"ahem, who has something they want to say."

Kalnar stared at me. He sighed. "You're like my brother, good at reading people." He gripped the pendant around his neck and then looked me in the eyes the way a trained soldier checks a room to make sure it's not booby-trapped. "I don't know what it is about you Woid, but I like you. You haven't lost your zest yet."

The funny thing is I was older than every person in that room combined, but to him, I looked like a twenty-year-old white-haired skinny bard. Kalnar brought another bit of clatter up to his ear, but I took his hand down. He slumped in defeat and opened up the pendant around his neck. A hologram appeared in front of us.

Her hair fell to her shoulders in glistening gold locks. Her eyes danced blue with the innocence of youth. She couldn't have been more than 8. "She was beautiful," I said.

A singular tear dropped from Kalnar to his cargo pants. We stared for a long time. A really long time. So long, I considered taking out this damned contraption from hell Earthlings call a Rubik's Cube. I've been working on it for hours and yet—

"Can you tell me a story Woid?" I feel like listening to someone else's problems.

I gasped.

Kalnar looked at me wide-eyed. "Did I do—"

“Almost no one ever asks that.” I sat up straighter, invigorated by the sharing of one of my tales.

"Once, on a distant asteroid in the Zepherad complex, I met a group of miners who toiled day in and day out, digging for precious minerals. For twelve hours a day and minimal breaks, they mined, backs aching with every swing. Twice daily, they were allowed the most incredible delicacy of the culinary world, oatmeal..."

“But, they endured the hard labor because each evening, they were able to gather around a small fire, share stories, and sing songs. They dreamed of the years when they could return to their families.”

“On one of these nights, they saw a shooting star glistening like a firecracker in the sky. One by one, they each made a wish. They laughed and cried for most of the night over their dreams. The connection and love they had for each other shined brighter than all the stars in the sky combined. When they finally went to sleep, they slept like baby Chagras. During the early morning, the same shooting star they wished on hit their meteor colony, killing all of them instantly."

For a while, there was silence, and Kalnar sat deep in thought.

“They all died?” He said.

“Yup.”

“Zentharon’s beard! What kind of story is that? Sounds like they were fools to me. Shouldn’t have put so much hope in a stupid star. What’s it supposed to mean?”

I had to suppress my laughter. I had always found the God of the Galactarian empire a humorous thing. I mean who swears on someone’s beard!?

“The more important question is what does the story mean to you Kalnar?”

Kalnar’s face ruffled in perplexion. Almost no one had ever asked *him* for thoughts on art. He was known as one of the best warriors in the system, not a “picture lover.”

“I’d need to think.”

I took a last sip of water and got up from my seat. I was glad to stand up--travelling the Universe doesn’t prepare you to sit on a living chair.

"It's been great seeing you again Kalnar, but I have a sneaking suspicion this won't be the last time. I've got something to handle. Bard stuff, you know. Don't clatter too much, or you won't be able to hear my amazing stories the next time we're together."

Kalnar grunted and turned his head for a goodbye bop. I'm never going to get used to that.

As I left The Cosmic Cantina, Kalnar's heart started to beat faster as his mind drifted to another matter—the meeting tomorrow with his brother and leader of the entire Galacticar Empire, Lord General Zolnar.

Chapter 2 Seven Days

Kalnar stood before the door to his brother, Zolnar's, war chamber. Void black, the door had two streaming lines of crimson red running down its height. They converged in the center on the statue of a Wurx head—like wolves but uglier and bigger and a bad case of “not seen a dentist” in a few years.

The door used to radiate with a majestic black and gold, but ever since what happened the ship itself had seemed to grow darker. It was sick.

Kalnar felt like his heart might start a mutiny on the rest of his body. He hadn't felt this much emotion in months.

He noticed his right hand was already up to his ear with a fistful of clatter, but he stopped himself before he could crunch. Zolnar would know.

Taking a deep breath, Kalnar opened the door. The room was colored the same void black as the door, and crimson lines danced around every which way. Living furniture, candles, and sagging

plants with glowing red bioluminescent light covered the room. A massive window to space showed a full view of the planet of Serenia (cliche name I know but I'm just the storyteller). It radiated green and blue against the black backdrop of space. In the middle of the room stood one of those obnoxiously large chess boards generals like to call the "strategic decisions station" to sound cool. There, Zolnar stood talking to a woman in white diplomatic robes Kalnar recognized as Serenian.

"This is outrageous! We couldn't possibly afford to pay this much tribute each year."

Zolnar looked down to the floor with a stern expression. "That is, unfortunate," he said, clenching his fists. "I fear there is nothing more to discuss. You may leave."

The woman got a stern look on her face. "But, but, surely the first agreement still—"

"No it doesn't, don't make me repeat myself." The woman opened her mouth but thought better and stormed out.

Zolnar stood contemplative. He had a leader's face—square with a curved solid jaw of impeccable attraction.

"A truly magnificent display of charm and elegance," said Kalnar. "What would mother think?"

Zolnar leaned over the war table with his fists and sighed. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in weeks." Kalnar knew it was a test. When your brothers with the most powerful general in the galaxy, word about your whereabouts gets around.

"I've been... Thinking," said Kalnar.

"Clattering more like." Zolnar started rearranging pieces on the war table--a habit he'd developed when he felt out of control. "We'll arrive at Serenia in seven days. I need you ready to battle."

"So, no tribute," Kalnar responded.

"Nope. We would never have accepted what they offered anyway."

Kalnar held his pendant in his hand and looked down at the floor in shame. Damn, he would kill for some clatter right now. Anything to wash away his storm of emotions. He knew this would happen. That's why he'd been avoiding him for so long.

"You know I swore not to pick up the blade again."

Zolnar's eyes narrowed, but he took a deep breath and tried playing good cop. "Do you remember when you used to play with our dad's sword as a kid? You'd take it out of his sheath and almost buckle over from the weight of it."

Kalnar grinned in remembrance.

“I remember mom took one look at you when you first drew the sword and said, look, our sons trying to be a little Galactic Goliath. And the name stuck. I need the Galatic Goliath again. Serenia doesn’t stand a chance with you at the front. It would save millions of lives. Please.”

Kalnar could tell him right now. It would be so easy. Zentharon knows it’s what he had been psyching himself to do over the last few weeks. But as soon as he began speaking, different words came out of his mouth. "I... I can't use a sword right now."

Zolnar mushroomed in anger.

"What happened to the man who could freeze entire battalions with a stare!" He flung the war room pieces across the table with the sweep of his hand. "The legend who was a one-man army in himself!" He took one of the potted plants on the table and threw it crashing across the room. "The man who put his family first!" He took one of the candles and threw it at Kalnar forcing him to duck.

Kalnar stood stunned. Zolnar knew he was terrified of fire. Just a year before, he couldn't even remember seeing his brother angry. He was the paragon of charm, the treasured diplomat, the handsome general. Now, he was like a spoiled child who'd been refused their dessert of gooey ganymede.

Zolnar seemed to realize the same thing because he lowered his clenched fists and walked up to Kalnar, putting a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, I, I don't know what came over me."

"I miss them too, Zolnar. Mom. Dad. Vega. Luna. Nova. Atlas." Each of their names was a blade to the chest. The tears started pouring, and once they began, they wouldn't stop.

"Sometimes I imagine they're still here. Mom and Dad are entertaining guests over there. Mom with her characteristic charm, Dad just trying not to make a fool of himself." They both chuckled. "Luna and Vega are sitting together, watching the kids and laughing over a game of Galactic Chess. Nova and Atlas are playing on the war table, messing up all the pieces." With that they both got wide smiles on their face.

"But this," Kalnar gestured at the war room and the planet Serenia out the window. "It's not going to bring them back. No matter how much you try to change the future, it can't change the past or some shit like that."

Zolnar smirked. "You always were bad with words."

"Thanks," Kalnar grunted.

Zolnar's grin became serious again. "Maybe you have a point, but you're wrong about one thing. Controlling the future is valuable." Zolnar walked over to the war table and began setting up the

pieces he'd thrown earlier. "We can ensure nothing like that, ever, happens again. It starts by teaching this planet a lesson."

"I'll think about it, Kalnar said walking toward the exit."

"Inaction is in itself an action, Kalnar."

"We will see," he said, leaving the room.

Chapter 3 Seven Days

While Kalnar and Zolnar were having a truly adorable heart-to-heart, you're probably wondering what your favorite universe-traveling bard was doing. I was exploring the space rock, Zolnar wanted to do some "planetary persuasion" on, Serenia. It's truly a sight to behold.

The city's architecture is a symphony of shimmering crystal structures, reflecting and refracting light in a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors. Towering spires and delicate arches create a skyline that looks like it's been carved from gemstones, casting prismatic rainbows across the streets at different times of the day. At the core of this city center lies the staple of every ostentatious civilization, a fountain. Crafted from the same luminous crystal as the surrounding buildings, it erupts with water that seems to scream "admire my beauty."

Around the fountain, the city's market bustles with life and energy. The air is filled with the sounds of merchants and customers haggling over prices. Stalls and booths line the cobblestone streets, offering an array of exotic foods.

All in all, in the face of General Zolnars galactic fleet, the planet of Serenia was positively screwed.

I decided to stop at one of the stalls and enjoy some spiced Zephhrian curry. As soon as I took my first bite, I felt a tug on my pants. Looking under the table, I came face to face with a young boy who couldn't have been more than eight--in Earth years of course, never could shake the habit of using their numbering system. I'm still perplexed as to why one country on your planet rebels against the simple metric system and instead uses decimal-based devilry. Anyways, this kid looked at me the way a puppy Fenrix looks at a bowl of liquid splooge, absolutely entranced.

"You gonna eat all that?" he said pleadingly. "You gimme some, I promise double tomorrow. Meet same spot?"

I've experienced a lot of negotiations during my time as a Universe traveling bard, but this, was one of the best. Some meat now. Double tomorrow! I almost gave him some of my Zephyrian curry. Almost.

"I'll teach you how to use this sword--"

"Ahh!" I jumped in surprise as a little girl poked her head out from the side of the table. "You know it's impolite to spook someone like that."

"I'm reawllly good with the sword."

"Really! Really! Really!" The boy said with a beaming smile on his face.

Than they both looked at me like a puppy Fenrix looks at a bowl of splooge. Unfair. Remind me to ask God or whatever why they make kids so cute.

I reluctantly sacrificed the last half of my Zephyrian meat. They gobbled it down with fervor. It was only than I saw how skinny they were. The girl had a small, fast frame, and curved face, but you could just see a few ribs poking out under the skin. Also eight, probably twins.

She had a sword belt and sword that were much too large for her strapped around her waist. The boy was larger and framed with a strong curved face, but he, too had a few ribs poking out of his tattered shirt.

By now, they had finished eating and were both looking at the plate as if they were considering eating it too. "What are your names?"

"Aether," said the boy.

"Nemeria," said the girl.

They both had large smiles on their face, clearly grateful to have something to eat. Did anything bring these kids down? "And where are your parents?" Their cheerful demeanors turned dark.

"Oh," I said. "And where do you live?"

Aether moved aside the tarp under the table, revealing two bundles of straw you might call a "bed."

"Double oh," I said. Then I got an idea. I get those sometimes. Most of the time, they're pretty bad. Like the time I tried to wrestle with a Bug Bear. Don't ask. But I felt this might be one of the best I ever had.

Chapter 4 Six Days

"You brought kids to a bar." Kalnar choaked.

"Yup," I said.

"But, it's a bar..."

"And this is my left pinky toe, but I don't see a need to elaborate on the fact."

Before Kalnar could respond, the kids were on him. "Can you teach me how to use a sword?" Nemeria beamed. "I'll tell you a story if you give us the rest of that," Aether said, pointing to Kalnar's crystal meat curry.

"Take it," Kalnar said, face in his palms. "I'm not hungry anymore."

Aether split the dish in two for him and Nemeria, and they began gobbling it down. Kalnar looked at me with disdain. "Please, explain."

"I found them on Serenia while visiting the market. Both their parents are gone, and they were living under a table, so I brought them here."

"Serenia, what, how did you? You have to bring them back."

"Why?"

Kalnar reached into his pocket, thought better after realizing the company he was with, and sighed. "Because we can't just take care of two children."

"Are you saying you don't have the time?" I said playfully, bumping my elbow against his.

Kalnar's face turned serious and he came closer to me whispering. "Every time I do something, it goes wrong... I can't even be a clatter addict well. You got to bring them back."

"Tell that to their face," I said.

Kalnar turned to see Nemeria inches from his face with a huge smile. She seemed completely unperturbed by either the nasty burn scar on Kalnar's face or the blade scar running from his left eye. Instead, she pointed at them and said, "Where did you get those? Was it with one of these?" She pulled out her sword and practically buckled over from its weight.

"Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." Kalnar looked at me in desperation. I just nodded smiling. He turned back towards Nemeria. "It's a battle scar."

Her eyes went wide. "Ohhhhhhh, coooooooooool. I want to battle someday. So I can stop all the bad guys. I don't like bad guys. Cause they're bad. Maybe I'll have a scar like yours someday."

Aether jumped in next to her. "I wanna fight to, but with words. I got some Zephyrian meat from the songy man over there by promising double today. Sorry, don't think I can anymore. Where are we?"

Aether and Nymeria turned and as if for the first time realized they were floating, in space, on a spaceship. They saw the large window showing Serenia at the back of the bar. "No way!" Aether said running and placing his hands over the window. Just three seconds later, he spotted one of the living ships' bioluminescent plants and ran over to it. It seemed to droop in sadness.

“I think it needs water,” Aether said in awe.

“Water won’t do anything,” Kalnar responded. “The ships... Sick. It’s always responded to the emotions of our family. We raised it.”

Aether continued to look at it for a few seconds. “Think singing would do anything?”

“What?” Kalnar gaped.

And with that Aether began singing to the plant. It wasn’t half bald, albeit in his eight year old high pitched voice. Kalnar swore the plant seemed to rise a little higher.

“Now that’s a kid I respect,” I said.

“Bards,” Kalnar grunted. I noticed he was getting teary.

Like Aether, Nymeria's gaze darted around the room, her eyes alight with fascination at the organic curves of the furniture, which seemed to grow from the ship itself. "It's like we're inside a giant space creature!" she exclaimed, her voice a mixture of thrill and disbelief. She tentatively reached out to touch a chair, half-expecting it to move. When it morphed slightly to fit her hand, she giggled.

Even the menu, a holographic display that floated above the bar, entranced both Aether and Nymeria. They poked at the projections, marveling as the options danced under their fingertips, images of exotic dishes and drinks from across the galaxy spinning in a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes. "Do you think they have ice cream made from comets here?"

Kalnar marveled at their curiosity. To him the bar was, well a bar. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen such wonder or awe. Actually, he could, but he didn't want to.

"What's in that?" Nemeria pointed to the pendant around Kalnar's neck.

It was too much.

He began to cry. He cried for the parents of these children. He cried for his dead parents, his wife, Zolnar's wife, Zolnar's son. But most of all he cried for his daughter Nova, and the child in front of him who was her spitting image. The same nimble frame and curved face. The same childlike wonder and innocence for the world. The same will to make the world a better place. The will he once had.

For the first time since it happened, he let himself remember.

Chapter 5 One Month Earlier

In the lush Nebula Garden Mansion complex of the Galacticar estate, under a sky painted with the soft hues of a setting sun, the scene was set for a historic moment of peace between the Galacticar Empire and the distant, planet of Serenia.

I, your favorite Universe traveling bard, found myself the party's entertainment. Why and how? To be honest, I don't know. I find whenever I question what I'm doing in the Universe too hard, things go bad. It just felt right to be there.

Right after playing The Ballad of the Quantum Quokka--truly immaculate, you must listen to it sometime--I stopped for refreshments at the dining table. Everything was set with the Galacticar Empire's staple black and gold colorings but in honor of the peace gathering Serenian white table cloths were used. I twinkled with amusement as Galacticar's finest and Serenia's delegates exchanged pleasantries as packed as a smuggler's cargo hold all around me.

Zolnar walked with his wife Vega by his side. His laughter, rich and warm, filled the air, smoothing over any lingering tensions. Vega, conversed with a Serenian artist, her genuine interest bridging the cultural differences.

Kalnar was... A different story. He was like a Starfang Viper in a group of singing Melodine Swans. He still wore his armored plate and a hulking sword. Passing partygoers gave him odd glances, which he responded to with glares. Luna, his wife, and beacon of calm, whispered words of encouragement, her hand finding his in a silent vow of support.

From Kalnar's perspective, the grand peace summit was more than a diplomatic endeavor; it was an expert attempt to make him as bored as possible. He longed to feel the wind in his hair out fighting some battle. Thankfully, he had Luna at his side to make things bearable.

“Kalnar, if you looked any less excited, you’ll be mistaken for part of the furniture,” Luna teased jabbing him in the ribs.

“Ow, is it really that bad?”

Luna raised her eyebrows. “I’ve seen rocks show more enthusiasm. I told you not to wear your armor to the party.”

“It’s comfy.”

Luna chuckled. “I know you can be charismatic when you want to be. Here, watch.” With that, stood on her toes, and booped him on the nose. She booped the Galactic Goliath on the nose...

A few Serenian partygoers couldn’t help laughing as they walked by. Kalnar’s face flushed red, but he smiled thumbs up. “What would I do without you?”

“I don’t know, probably lug rocks from one spot to another spot or whatever else you men think is a fun way to pass time.”

Chuckling, Kalnar noticed he wasn't the only one struggling. His gaze fell upon his father Xenon, standing awkwardly on the outskirts of a lively group. His father, ever the enigma, seemed lost in thought, his brilliant mind always on the brink of a new discovery yet struggling to explain it to others.

"Yes! So, this new invention I've been working on, this doohickey, it's quiet the showstopper."

Kalnar chuckled as the Serenian delegates awed and buffooned as if he had just blessed them with the meaning of life. He was the ruler of the most powerful empire in the system after all. Kalnar made a mental note to spend some time with him later. He always did, but battle seemed to get in the way.

He saw his daughter Nova playing with a few Serenian children, and his sullen expression turned to a beaming smile as he walked over. Seeing him, Nova jumped up in excitement.

"Da da, I promised the other kids you would show us how to fight. Can you show us that one sword trick, please, please." The kids looked up at Kalnar mouths open as if he was some story from the hero books. He was in a way. A good contender for the best fighter in all of the system, The Galactic Goliath.

Luna gave him an amused smile that said--great job, only you could turn a peace gathering into a sparring lesson. Kalnar chuckled. "Tell you what, after I go check on your Uncle Zolnar, I'll give you all a demonstration you won't believe."

"Bop head promise," she said.

"Bop head promise," he returned. And they bopped heads.

From Zolnar's perspective, the grand peace summit was more than just a diplomatic event; it was a testament to the empire's strength, unity, and most importantly, a wonderful game of charisma.

Zolnar had ingrained something most people never fully accept—even I am still navigating it—every person is different. One a tempest to be tempered. Another a clock to be unwound. And one more a flame to grow. The charisma game was in figuring out how every person clicked.

Zolnar walked through and conversed with various partygoers. With Vega at his side, the two moved with a grace that seemed to draw the very stars closer. After a while Zolnar's gaze found his son Atlas in the midst of a spirited exchange with a group of children, both Galacticar and Serenian. Even at only eight years old, he was starting to mirror his father and grandmothers charm.

He watched as Atlas recounted tales of his brother Kalnar's feats in battle and didn't fail to notice when he added in a few climactic flourishes. Not even Kalnar could beat twenty men with his shaving blade. But none of the kids seemed to notice. They stared at him as if he was holding all the star pops on the planet.

"He's going to have to learn to be more subtle," Vega chuckled.

"Ehh, I kind of like the blatancy. It's enduring," Zolnar responded, leaning his head against his wife.

Just in case you wondered whether your favorite universe-traveling bard had the audacity to punch up this story, yes. Yes I did. But mostly just to make my galloin playing sound better. It had been a while since I'd played.

"You want to see how the party is doing in the mansion?" Vega came closer and whispered in his ear. "I believe there are some empty rooms upstairs."

Zolnar nearly choked on his wine. "I think someone else could use more subtly too." Vega beamed at him. Gods that smile. "Then let's 'explore' the mansion, and afterward I'll go get Atlas his gift. But first, let's check on mother."

Seraphon was engaged in what appeared to be a delicate negotiation with a group of Serenian delegates. She made Atlas's storytelling seem like child's play, literally. The delegates stared at

her as if she were a plate of Zephyrian curry. Zolnar felt a swell of admiration for the woman who had taught him so much about leadership and the art of diplomacy.

Seeing she was okay, he started walking with Vega toward the mansion. But as they did, he couldn't help but notice a group of Serenian delegates huddled in the back towards the refreshment table. Something felt off, so he walked closer. Spotting Vega and him approaching, their conversation halted for the slightest of moments.

A moment too long.

Just as soon, smiles returned to their faces, and they came forth with overly enthusiastic greetings. After a few minutes discussing the beauty of the Nebula Gardens, Zolnar and Vega excused themselves.

"What was that?" Vega said.

"Zentharon knows," Zolnar responded.

Suddenly, two hands that could be none other than Kalnar engulfed Zolnar in a bear hug. He hoped the crack he heard was Kalnar's knuckles and not his ribs breaking.

"How are you fairing brother? Wouldn't be surprised if you've been elected unofficial mayor of the party knowing you."

Zolnar turned and couldn't help barking a laugh seeing him with his full armored plate and sword. His uneasiness quickly turned into cheer.

"I was actually about to collect the ballots, though I don't think it's necessary. I already know I'm going to win." He winked at Vega who was rolling her eyes.

"How's everyone else fairing?" Kalnar asked.

"Oh you know, dads about as graceful in conversation as you are at the dining table. Atlas is claiming you took out 20 men with your shaving blade this time instead of 15. And mother, is overshadowing my popularity contest for mayor by making a valiant stand for grand empress."

Kalnar chuckled. "I wouldn't want it any different."

But Zolnar wasn't listening. He was looking behind Kalnar's at the group of delegates Vega, and him had spoken to moments before. He considered telling him, but decided not to spoil his time at the party. It was a miracle he even showed up in the first place. Besides, he was probably just imagining it anyways.

He looked back at Kalnar. "Meet us in the mansion soon. Wouldn't want to miss the peace treaty signing. Try not to cut someone with that sword will you?"

Kalnar smiled as he watched Zolnar walk away, Vega teasing him as they approached the mansion.

"Kalnar right, could we have a word alone?"

Kalnar turned to see a young woman in Serenian garbs smiling radiantly at him. She was gorgeous. Golden locks that shown vibrant like the sun and eyes blue as lapis lazuli. He turned to Luna and gave a smirk that said--don't worry you're the only woman for me. Tenderly, she released her hand on his. It was the last touch they would ever have.

"Yes?"

"I know parties like these aren't your favorite setting."

He grunted. "You're right about that."

"Exactly. That's why I thought we could make things a little more fun. Something a warrior would appreciate it. Walk with me."

In the back of Kalnar's mind, he knew he shouldn't. But there's something about a beautiful woman telling you to do something fun that is irresistible, especially while bored. Trust me, I

know from experience. What? I'm older than you can imagine, you think I just solve Rubik's cubes all day?

Kalnar and the woman entered the Nebula Garden at the back of the estate. The garden should have taken his breath away, but Kalnar wasn't one much for art, and he had seen it a million times already. To an outside observer, however, floating platforms guide guests through a mesmerizing physical simulation of a nebula, where clouds of vibrant, colored gases swirl around in an endless dance. Above, a canopy of artificial stars twinkles in orchestrated harmony, mimicking the natural light of distant galaxies.

No one else was there, so the woman's soft voice sounded loud amidst the backdrop. "Have you ever tried Crystalline Clatter?"

Kalnar frowned. "No."

"I'm not surprised. It's more common on our side of the system. She took a crystal block out of her pocket and held it to the light. It looked like any normal white crystal to Kalnar. "It's better than any drug you've tried. Just put it up to your ear, and give it a little crack. It hurts at first, but it's known for providing a thrill like no other, something I'd think a warrior of your renown would appreciate."

She split the crystal in half and gave one to Kalnar. "It's not just any high—it's a warrior's challenge. It's said only the strongest can withstand it and still stand tall."

Kalnar's eyebrows rose. "A warrior's challenge, you say?"

She looked at him expectantly. He'd just checked on Zolnar and Nymeria. They wouldn't miss him for a few moments, would they? But most of all, he was bored. And it's amazing what boredom can make you do.

"All right, give it to me."

The woman jumped in glee and handed Kalnar a piece of clatter. It was a sizable chunk taking up the entire of Kalnar's palm. He questioned if that was too big, but he did like a challenge.

"You won't regret it. Ready, we'll do it together." They both raised the clatter to their ears. "3, 2, 1." Kalnar cracked the crystal. The pain was unbearable. It felt like someone was smashing stones inside of his ear. He slouched, just resisting the need to black out.

Between gasps for air he could see the woman hadn't cracked her chunk. She bent down, and put her clatter next to Kalnar's other ear. "I'm sorry," she said, and cracked it.

Kalnar awoke to the sounds of screaming and smell of fire.

Chapter 6 Six Days

"Kalnar, Kalnar, you okay?"

"Hung." Kalnar came out of his trance and looked down at Nymeria.

"Uhhh, never been better."

"You've been staring into space for five minutes."

"Oh. Huh." Kalnar stumbled over to the bar, and it looked like he was going to throw up all over the floor before the barman expertly placed a bucket under him, using skills only someone constantly around people willingly ingesting poison into their body could do. I'll spare you the details, so you can save your own lunch.

"Ahhh, better," Kalnar said, jabbing his finger into the air with the triumph of a man who'd just conquered a mountain—albeit a mountain of pillows.

Suddenly, a pillar jutted from the spaceship ground, scaring the living daylights out of Kalnar and the children.

"God damn, I'll never get used to that," Kalnar said.

"No swearing," Nymeria responded.

There was a blue orb attached to the top of the pillar, and Kalnar pressed it. A real-time hologram of Zolnar coalesced next to him. He was in the Galacticar military uniform—a sleek black jumpsuit with a golden line encircling the torso area and the lustrous silver emblem of a ringed planet on the left torso—something was serious.

"Kalnar, we need to speak, now."

"Wait outside," Kalnar said behind the black door of the war room. Nymeria and Aether stood and saluted as if commanded. Kalnar grimaced but turned his head so it didn't show--it reminded him too much of Nova, and his heart was beating fast enough already. He walked inside.

Zolnar stood by the window at the far side of the room, hands clasped behind his back. Kalnar walked and stood by him. No words were needed.

A massive legion of ships blocked the view to the planet of Serenia, sitting like tigers waiting for their prey. Each ship glowed blue luminescent from the lithium generators that must be inside. The smaller ships numbered in the hundreds like little hornets swarming around a nest. The biggest ship in the center was like a Leviathan sporting a massive particle accelerator pointed straight at The Galacticar mothership.

"The Starborne Legion," Kalnar said reverently.

Zolnar looked at Kalnar with a stern expression. "It looks like Serenian bought them. Zentharon knows where they got the money. We still outnumber them, but an all-out battle would have lots of casualties. We both know Valerian Skye is one for settling things with duels.

It was almost too perfect. Instead of an all-out battle, Kalnar could settle the dispute one on one. But, he could settle it even easier if he just told Zolnar. Valerian didn't deserve to die. He had known Zolnar and Kalnar when they were both children and was the most honorable mercenary in the system.

Then Kalnar remembered, Valerian was known for fighting with his sword literally on fire. He shuttered and his hands started to sweat. Damn, he could use some clatter. Once again, the words didn't come out as he wanted them to.

"We talked about this."

Zolnar scowled. "Tens of thousands of Galacticarians, dead. Because of your pride. We'll be on them in six days, Kalnar. I need your decision by then."

Kalnar touched Zolnar's chest, right above the Galacticar emblem. "I didn't decide to attack Serenia Zolnar." No, he was watching Zolnar get his petty revenge, which he figured wasn't the same.

Zolnar looked deep into Kalnar's eyes. "I know what you're thinking Kalnar. This is vengeance; it's going too far. But you're wrong. This, this is justice. Out of everyone I thought you would understand. It's one thing to do it in the open. But to make such a betrayal at a party, the falseness of it! What we're doing is the truth."

"I like parties." Aether stood with a smile that could turn mountains upside down.

Zolnar stared at him. Kalnar groaned and clasped his hands over his head. "I told you to wait outside."

"Ya, but you never defined if outside was in here or out there. So technically, I could be outside right now, and the place you told us to stay in was inside."

Kalnar didn't know what to say to that impeccable logic, so he responded with a characteristic grunt. "Kalnar, explain." Zolnar's eyes were so red and bulging Kalnar half-thought they were going to jump out of his head and make a run for it.

Kalnar sighed. "These are some orphaned kids I found on the ship. They won't stop following me around."

Aether opened his mouth to respond, but Kalnar gave him a gaze of daggers. As if prepared beforehand, Nymeria jumped onto the war room table, sword unsheathed.

"Fear me, for they call me Nym Shadowfast." With that to the horror of Zolnar and admittedly amusement of Kalnar, she ran across the war table, knocking figurines back and forth. Each crash seemed to make Zolnar's face redder and redder. When she was done Nymeria looked at Zolnar and Kalnar with the smile of someone who had just finished a grand art project.

"I, didn't tell her to do that..." Aether said.

Chapter 7 Three Days

Aether and Nymeria continued to be incessant pricks--ahem, flowers in Kalnar's and Zolnar's sides. But they were hard to dislike.

"What happens if I drink this?" Nymeria pointed to a glass of purple bubbly liquid sitting on the bar room table.

"That's... Adult liquid," Kalnar said, snatching the glass away.

"Can I have it?"

"No. Listen to Woid play music. It's not half bad."

Nymeria glanced over at my Gaollin playing on stage. I chose one of my favorite songs, the story of--"Boring," said Nymeria. Rude (yes I could hear her, comes with the whole god powers

thing). Kalnar chuckled. The bar was turning into Nymeria's and Aether's playground. They liked it because Kalnar was there a lot. At first, the regular customers were annoyed. But they warmed up after a few days.

Every few hours Kalnar would mysteriously excuse himself to go to the bathroom, and come back dazed. The kids being kids assumed it was because he had trouble going potty—which of course they teased him on.

The ship itself seemed happier. The living doors of the Cosmic Cantina opened with a skip instead of a slog. The chairs adapted more to the individual sitting in them. The bioluminescent lights shined brighter creating a homelier vibe.

Even Zolnar started visiting through the day. His black military garb stood out among the casually dressed bargoers—but no one dared say anything. He smiled as he taught Aether how to talk to someone with confidence. It was the first time Kalnar had seen him smile in months.

"The golden rule to being more charismatic Aether, is smiling," said Zolnar. He gave a smile that could splash sunshine and Aether followed suit with a gap-toothed one of his own. "Great, the second rule of—" Aether got up and began walking to every bar goer smiling. Most of the more respectable people smiled back, but some scowled. After about a minute Aether returned and continued to smile at Zolnar. And continued to smile at Zolnar. And continued to—"Great job, really, but let's change the second rule of being more charismatic to don't smile too much."

Kalnar laughed as he watched. It felt good, to laugh. He'd practically forgotten how to do it. I'll let you in on a little secret. People will go to the ends of the system to find all sorts of drugs, Crystalline Clatter, sugar, battle, sex. But no drug comes even close to laughter.

Kalnar's eyes drifted to the window at the far side of the Cosmic Cantina. The Starborne Legion was a tidal wave of blue that filled the Sky. How much time did they have left? Four days? Even He still suffered under the veil of his laughter, eaten up by what he wanted to tell Zolnar.

I knew I needed to do something to bring them closer together—the whole crew, Zolnar, Kalnar, Nymeria, and Aether. That's the only way my plan would work out. So I did what I do best, I told a story.

“Attention everyone!” I exclaimed. Nobody turned. But I certainly wasn't going to juggle balls on my ass so I just made a cool blue explosion thingy on the platform. Everyone turned for the cool explosion thingy, figures.

“In honor of both our esteemed leaders visiting us at the Cosmic Cantina, I wanted to tell a story.”

Zolnar perked up in his chair. “This should be interesting.”

Aether and Nymeria sat with Zolnar and Kalnar, respectively. And I told the same story I had told Kalnar just a few days ago about the miners. But this time, I added more spunk, more flare,

more pizzazz! It was longer with a heavier narrative. I created visuals of black, white, blue, pink, and more that danced on the podium along with the story. I played music while I talked. It was, if I dare say, one of my better performances.

Just like before, the story ended with all the miners dying from the very same meteor they had wished upon. Once I was finished, the room was silent for a few seconds. Then everyone burst into chatter.

Zolnar folded his arms. “Stupid. If they had spent their time organizing a revolt instead of wishing on a flying rock, they would have gotten off the asteroid and never been killed by the meteor in the first place.” Despite his reaction, even Kalnar could see a glimmer of sadness in Zolnar’s words.

“But they were happy,” Aether said. Zolnar turned to face him. “At least...”

“At least they what,” asked Zolnar.

“At least they had a family.”

Aether and Nymeria broke into tears.

Kalnar and Zolnar watched in stunned silence. Before he knew it what he was doing, Kalnar wrapped his arms around Nymeria in a big bear hug. He saw Zolnar hesitate and then do the

same with Aether. For the first time in a while, Kalnar realized he didn't want to take any clutter. He didn't want to forget this.

Nymeria used the bottom of her shirt to wipe the tears from her eyes. "Can you teach me a sword twick Kalnar?"

"How do you both do it?" Kalnar responded. Nymeria looked at him puzzled.

"Do what?"

"Stay so positive. I mean I know you're kids, but, damn."

"No swearing."

Kalnar grunted. Zolnar transfixed on Nymeria as her smile turned darker. This was a question they both had wanted the answer to ever since first meeting the kids.

"When I smile, I jump, it's lighter. Makes me forget for a bit. When I stop, the room gets, darker."

Kalnar remained silent. What could you say to that?

Chapter 8 One Day

“All right, all right, the sword trick.” Zolnar, the kids, and Kalnar were in the war room. Where was I?—taking a leisurely stroll through the Serenian markets, trying to get some Zephyrian curry. This time, with no one to scam me out of my food thank you very much.

Kalnar got up and picked up his broadsword. It was so big he might as well be lugging a tree on his back. Nevertheless, Kalnar wielded it like it was merely a toothpick and got into a battle stance.

“The most important thing you must do during a fight Nymeria, is clear your mind. Many a battle has been lost from letting it get over run by fear, doubt, or if you can believe it, what you are going to have for dinner.” I could believe it, personally I take pride in 50% of my thoughts being food related. Kalnar continued as Nymeria looked on entranced. “In battle you become one with the moment. You are your blade and armor as your blade and armor are you. You forget your past.”

Zolnar clapped. “Bravo, bravo, if only you could speak that eloquently about literally anything else,” he joked.

“Very funny,” responded Kalnar. He looked back at Nymeria. I think our friend Zolnar is just jealous he can’t do anything like this. And then you can do cool stuff like this

Kalnar lunged forward and attacked the air in a flurry of strikes with a speed no man should be capable of holding a broadsword like that. He danced, he sidestepped, he, he was a god. My goodness—how had he forgotten this feeling. Kalnar stopped dead.

In the corner of the room a flame started to flicker. It danced, taunting, as if it knew it was too small to do damage. Then it started to grow.

The flicker grew into a flame, the flame grew into a fire, the fire grew into a torrent. Pretty soon, the entire half of the bar was ablaze. No. Not again. Not again, thought Kalnar.

He got up abruptly from his seat. Fire! Fire! He exclaimed it like some mad prophet. He had to get out. He looked toward the exit, but the fire had reached there to.

There was only one other means of escape. Kalnar reached into his bag, desperate to find his secret clatter stores. He'd do more than ever. Better to die unconscious than to act and make things worse.

"Kalnar are you okay?" Zolnar said, putting his hand on his shoulder.

Kalnar looked around. Just like that, the flames had disappeared.

"It's nothing. I, nevermind."

"It didn't look like nothing, you said fire so loud half the Galaxy probably thinks the Universe is in flames. Here drink this, it will make you feel better." He handed him a glass of water and he drank it up eagerly.

"It's getting late, let's try to get some rest tonight all right little bro?"

Kalnar grunted and turned toward Nymeria. A part of him found it odd Zolnar was treating him so nice the day before arriving on the Legion. Kalnar's decision was final, he'd tell Zolnar after the kids were asleep.

"Looks like it's time to go to bed." Nymeria looked as if she was just told she could never have candy again.

"Waaaaaa, not fair."

"Great, first rule of life. Life ain't fair. You're learning."

"What's the second rule of life?" She said.

"If you don't sleep you die," Kalnar responded. "And the third is no amount of questions will stop you from doing so."

Nymeria sighed and allowed herself to be brought to bed. There were plenty of open sleep chambers but the kids had insisted on sleeping with Zolnar and Kalnar in their private chambers next to the war room.

Kalnar laid down in his bed. It was hard as he liked it. He used to sleep on a soft cushiony bed. But since a few months he had transferred to something which felt more like it came from Galacticar's version of hell--The Infernox Abyss.

Kalnar heard the soft sounds of sleep from Nymeria and Aether to his right. He almost laughed thinking it to himself. Here they were. Two scarred brothers, on the way to fight one of the most powerful mercenary groups in the galaxy. One of them a unmoving drug addict, the other a domineering war general. And out of everyone in the world, two children had decided to latch on to them.

The thing Kalnar didn't realize was children are some of the best judges of character in the system. They know little: candy tastes good, making others angry is fun, and the world is interesting. But one thing they do know--even if they can't explain it--is someone's heart. And they had judged Zolnar's and Kalnar's positively massive.

Kalnar sighed. He would likely have hours before he fell asleep. But for some reason, he drifted off after 5 minutes just like that. Figures. Cause he woke up in a prison cell.

Chapter 1 Zero Days

The prison cell of the Galacticar Empire's living ship was unlike any other confinement known to the galaxy. Its walls gently pulsed intermittently from the beating of a heart hidden deep within the ship's bowels. The surface was smooth and warm to the touch, resembling the inner lining of some colossal creature, with veins of bioluminescent light coursing through it, casting shadows that danced across the floor.

But most importantly, it was impossible to get out of. Any attempt at escape could easily be stopped by the living ship itself. Knowing this, Kalnar simply sat against the wall as he awoke. He had so many questions.

Luckily, he didn't need to search for answers because a few moments later, Zolnar appeared behind the bioluminescent prison cell bars. His eyes drooped from lack of sleep and he wore his black military uniform but with a golden ribbon tied around the waste. The ribbon was only worn the day of a battle.

Zolnar sighed. "I'm sorry it had to be this way Kalnar, but you put such a push against fighting I can't risk you getting in the way when the battle starts. Zentharon knows you might accidentally attack our own troops while in some clatter drugged state."

Zolnar's voice betrayed a genuine sadness. His shoulders drooping and his head hanging low.

Kalnar would have been angry, but he'd been too tired for anger lately. Instead he was just ashamed. And embarrassingly, he found himself craving clatter.

No, he had something to tell his brother. Two things actually.

He into Zolnar's eyes. "Zolnar, I... I have something to tell you."

Kalnar wanted to tell him. Both things. He really did. But telling the truth can be hard, like trying to sip nebula nectar through a black hole straw--ambitious but messy. Don't ask. This was the type of truth that once told, could never be untold. Truth was, Kalnar didn't even know if he believed what had happened.

Sometimes the truth is the lie we tell ourselves so we can sleep at night.

He decided to tell the easier of the two truths first. "Aether and Nymeria, aren't ship orphans. They're from Serenia. Woid brought them after he saw them sniffing around for his Zephyrian curry." Hey, not cool. Snitch.

Zolnar's journeyed through emotions like a comet traversing through space—first brightening with the surprise of sudden illumination, then dimming into the shadow of sadness as it passes into the dark, and finally igniting into the fiery tail of anger, leaving a trail of heated energy in its wake."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?!"

"As if you would have given them a passing thought had you known," Kalnar responded.

"As we should--"

"Look me in the eyes and tell me they're bad kids."

Zolnar and Kalnar stared at each other intensely before Zolnar looked down.

"Every black hole has its few resilient sparks. You can sit here and sulk Kalnar. I'm going to go avenge our family. Once everything is over, you'll thank me for taking the initiative. In fact, you should be glad I put you here. Now you can do your usual nothing without feeling bad. I might even get someone to bring you some clatter to really make the experience."

Kalnar winced. Ouch. People often assume it's strangers who pose the most danger to your wellbeing. But from my experience, the closer someone is to you, the harder their dagger can pierce, and the greater their rainbows can shine through.

"I still have one more thing to say Zolnar. You'll want to hear this."

Zolnar sighed. "Yes."

Suddenly the ship itself gave a low thrumming below, which could only mean one thing: the Starborne Legion was coming.

Zolnar cursed under his breath. “I thought we would have more time. It’ll have to wait Kalnar.”

“Wait, no!” But he Zolnar was already gone, off to get ready for battle.

Kalnar leaned back against the living walls to the prison cell. He needed to think. Zenthariens beard, why was telling some simple words harder than an actual battle. He was supposed to be The Galactic Goliath! Right now, he felt more like the Galactic Waste Of Oxygen.

He found himself wondering where Aether and Nymeria were, where I was--still trying to solve this dammed contraption from hell Earthlings call a Rubiks Cube--he could use some positive energy right now.

Instead, he found his mind drifting back to that night.

Chapter 10 One Month Earlier

Kalnar awoke to the sounds of screaming and the smell of fire.

The world around him was a blur, his senses dulled by the Crystalline Clatter. Stumbling to his feet, he saw the family mansion was a nightmarish inferno before his eyes.

His family. He had to find his family. In a stupor, he made his way to the mansion. Damn this clatter he thought. He would never take it again. How could anyone fight feeling like this?

Kalnar reached the mansion and started ascending the grand staircase. Each step was a mountain. Each breath felt like he was being choked.

Kalnar stopped as he overheard conversation above. "Where are Kalnar and Zolnar?" an unfamiliar Serenian voice said. Kalnar recognized the responder's voice as the woman who had given him the clatter. "No matter, Zolnar's as harmless as a baby Fenrix, and as for Kalnar, the clatter trick worked like a charm. We'll find him in the gardens."

Gritting his teeth in anger, Kalnar ascended the rest of the staircase and his worst fears were realized. Through his blurry eyesight he could vaguely make out his family--Xenon, Seraphon, Vega, Luna, Atlas, And Nova--all tied up and muffled. A group of Serenian's were leading them toward the staircase and out of the mansion.

The woman who had given him the clatter gave a jolt of surprise as she saw him. "What, I gave you two entire crystals." But she was in for an even deeper surprise. "He arrives just on time." A third Serenian male came out from behind the woman, took a dagger from his coat and stabbed

her in the throat like she was a fly in his dinner. The other Serenian male looked in horror. "What are you doin--" he cut off as he was gutted by the man's dagger.

"I've been waiting a long time for this." Looking Kalnar directly in the eyes he walked up to Nymeria who was quivering in fear. "Da--" the man slit her throat and she toppled to the floor.

Kalnar's world imploded. The world started spinning. From the clatter, the fire, or the death of his daughter he couldn't tell.

If it means anything, I didn't know this would happen. I still don't. Not even Kalnar knows.

Perhaps the assassin was the son of some general killed on one of the Galacticar Empires wars.

Perhaps he was from a particularly poor area of the empire and spiteful. Or perhaps he just liked conflict. Like many things in life we will never know.

It wasn't Kalnar who met the assassin's smiling eyes. It was The Galactic Goliath.

The world became crystal clear. It always did during battle. That's why he loved it. No need to make hard choices. Just one thing to do. Kill.

Letting out a bloodcurdling roar and unsheathing his sword, he ran at the man. "Finally," the man said smiling.

Kalnar's footsteps thundered through the opulent corridors as he gave chase. Each room passed in a whirlwind of destruction, priceless heirlooms and symbols of his family's heritage reduced to debris from his fury. He destroyed walls like they were styrofoam. In his heart, a tempest raged, fueled by the dual fires of love and vengeance.

He became so reckless he tripped and fell over his own blade falling with the right side of his face on a burning door. He knew he had been badly burned but felt nothing instead getting back up as fast as he could.

The assassin continued to dance away from every blow which only seemed to make The Galactic Goliath angrier. He doubled his efforts turning from a wave into a tempest. As soon as it seemed like the man would escape, he turned around and surrendered to the last of The Goliaths sweeping strokes. The Goliath dropped his sword, finally allowing himself to catch his breath.

Then he turned around.

The mansion lay in ruins, the entire thing completely aflame. His family was in the mansion. His family, was dead. And it was all his fault.

Disbelief petrified his limbs, anchoring him as the flames grew closer and closer to him. They could take him, he almost wished they would. He could join his family in the conflagration, escape the excruciating weight of his guilt. The right side of his face began to burn with a pain so raw, so all consuming, he almost lost consciousness. The burn would mark the day for eternity.

The air became thick with the scent of ruin and choked him, yet he found it hard to breathe for entirely different reasons. Each breath was a betrayal, a reminder that he lived while they did not.

Looking to the right he saw Zolnar, standing aghast at the edge of another part of the destruction. He was holding a Quantum GiftSphere--a holographic gift much like a traditionally wrapped present but cooler. He had likely gone in secret to get it for Atlas which is why he wasn't with the rest of the family.

Zolnar's normal cheer was absent from his face. Instead, it was etched with horror and disbelief. Walking up to Zolnar, Kalnar could hear his whispering voice barely carrying over the embers, "What have they done?" He didn't know.

His question was a dagger to Kalnar's chest. He couldn't bear it. He needed something. Something to take the pain away.

Kalnar broke.

Then he realized. There might still be some Crystalline Clatter in the Nebula Gardens. He ran with the desperation of a space pirate exiting with his booty from a galactic trade center. Arriving at the Garden clearing from before, he scoured around. Where was it?!

The shame was immeasurable. It felt like a thousand stars were going supernova inside his heart. The right side of his face continued to burn with raw pain. It could all go away if only... He saw

a glimmer in his peripheral vision. Yes. There it was. He clawed it up, put it up to his ear, and cracked the entire thing in one go. Everything went black.

Chapter 11 Zero Days

Kalnar had never felt so depressed in his life. If you want to know what it feels like, just imagine the world without kittens and times by ten. Despite the normal gravity conditions of the ship, his legs felt like rocks beneath him. An untouched meal of Zephyrian Curry sat on the other side of the cell.

Sitting against the prison wall, Kalnar's mind felt like a battle ground, questions waging a war in his head. Had the Starborne Legion boarded yet? Would Zolnar, Aether, and Nymeria be all right? Why was he so useless?

The Galactic Goliath. Kalnar scoffed. The Galactic Goof more like. He reached down to grab a non-existent piece of clatter.

"Finally, damn Earth contraptions always take forever to complete."

Kalnar jumped as he spotted me sitting across the cell from him. How the hell did he get in here, he thought. He pinched himself. Nope, wasn't dreaming.

I threw the colored cube square over to Kalnar. "It's a Rubik's cube. You mix it up, and than try and get every color on its own for all six sides. Devilishly difficult."

Kalnar didn't know whether to grunt, laugh, or cry at the absurdity of the situation. Here he was sulking, and I, a quirky Universe Travelling bard somehow teleported into his prison cell and was trying to get him to solve a Rubik's cube.

"This... Isn't, what I thought you were going to say," Kalnar said.

"Ahhh, were you expecting some words of wisdom, some stupendous speech, a bolstering ballad?" I said smiling.

"Yes actually."

"From my experience Kalnar, the people who could use some wisdom are rarely willing to hear it, and those who are, already have the wisdom inside of themselves; they just have to look harder."

Kalnar grunted, "doesn't that kind of defeat your whole stick as a storyteller?"

I gasped as if Kalnar had just compared me to a Glarbnax--positively repulsive creatures.

"Kalnar, stories are the deepest forms of self-exploration. They aren't owned by the storyteller or

the listener, but created from the relationship between both. The best stories make you find their own advice through getting you to dive into the deepest depths of yourself.”

I smiled. “So don’t discount what’s going on in here.” I tapped Kalnar on the heart. “You may find there’s much more to it than you think.”

"How do you do it?" Kalnar said.

"Do what?"

"Stay positive and doing. When the worlds so..." Kalnar choked on the beginning of tears.

"Hard. What if you make things worse?"

I coughed. There's something deeply humanizing about seeing a man everyone else calls The Galactic Goliath cry.

"How do Nymeria and Aether do it Kalnar?"

"They're kids."

"Are we not all kids in our own way? I'm old Kalnar. Older than you could imagine. I've seen empires rise and fall, eras come and go, I was around when the dinosaurs got meteored--"

"The dino what nows?"

"Nevermind, point is I'll die before I stop acting like toddler with ADHD."

I could see Kalnar was close. He just needed a little push.

"How did you feel before your family died Kalnar?"

His face brightened, if only slightly.

"Do you think your family would want you to feel like you are now?"

"I... I... They're dead..."

"Was that ever not a danger? You were the most powerful family in the system. If we could act without any risk of consequences what would be the point in acting at all?"

Kalnar sat and thought for a while. He had stopped crying. His face became more stern, determined. The room felt warmer, even though nothing had changed.

After a few minutes, he broke the silence. "The miners that died from the shooting star. I changed my mind. They weren't foolish. They had every reason to hate their lives. They spent their days backs aching from endless mining and uncomfortable sleeping. They didn't know if

they would ever see their families again. They wished on a star that killed them. But that's not the point. The point is they died with hope, with a love for life, for each other, until the very end."

I smiled at Kalnar without saying anything. What needed to be said?

Kalnar's eyes went wide. "Oh my god. My family needs me."

Truth is, I could have teleported us both out of the prison cell with the snap of my fingers. But that wouldn't have been *nearly* as entertaining nor storyworthy as what happened next.

Kalnar ran to the living prison bars and started banging. "Please someone! Let me out! Anyone!"

No one came.

But Kalnar didn't give up. He clenched his hands on his head and began thinking. What could he do? All the guards were likely out battling the Starborne Legion. The prison cell was impenetrable and could mold to any damage he tried to do to it since it was literally alive--he got an idea. It was a stupid idea. An insane idea. But the best ones (or funniest ones) usually are.

Ever since the tragedy at the Serenian delegation party the ship had been sick. It was as if it was literally responding to the emotions of its leaders, Kalnar and Zolnar as well as the crew itself.

But after the kids had come on board and lightened things up, the ship itself had seemed to lighten too.

Kalnar put his head against the living prison wall. He could feel the slow thump thump of the ship's living heart against his head.

Then he spoke to the ship.

"I don't know if you can hear me. I don't even know if you have a consciousness. But if you do, please listen closely. If I don't get out of here, people are going to die. Innocent people. My brother, Nymeria, Aether, Galacticarians. The Stareborne Legion. Serenians. All deaths that could have been stopped if you let me out."

Kalnar. Blunt as always.

For a few seconds nothing happened. Kalnar sighed. It was worth a shot. Then he heard the screeching of the prison bars opening. He was free.

Chapter 12 Zero Days

Kalnar's heart hammered as he ran from the prison cell. He was never much of a runner--neither was I mind you, it's literally every other sports *punishment*--but today—or I guess at this moment cause he was in space—he ran faster than any sprinter.

He could hear shouting all around. A group of Galacticar soldiers in black uniform and gold embroidery ran past him holding plasma guns. Another group ran in the opposite direction behind him. Where the heck was he supposed to go?

Kalnar gasped in awe as the ship molded a tunnel in front of him. It was a long tunnel. He couldn't even see where the end went. There was no way he could run the whole thing in time. Then a bioluminescent minecart and rails formed before his eyes.

"Oh, you're kidding me."

The path behind him closed off from "bio ship stuff" and started edging its way forward. Kalnar hadn't ever learned ship speak--a elegant language I must say--but he figured this was the closest he was going to get to a "nope."

“And what am I supposed to use to fight?” Kalnar asked. His regular suit of armor and broadsword were in the war room. The ship created a glistening set of bioluminescent armor and a massive broadsword. They were both neon pink.

"Very funny." Kalnar grudgingly put on the armor and took the sword. Beggars can't be choosers. Then he awkwardly got in the minecart, his bulky frame overstuffing it like a rocket trying to fit into a toaster. "Okay, I'm in--"

The minecart shot forward and Kalnar had to stop himself from screaming like a little girl. Yes, they were breaking the spaceships speed limit, I checked.

Zolnar and a small troop of Galacticarian Honor Guard were siphoning plasma guns from underneath the Cosmic Cantinna for the rest of the army. You might ask, why hide a massive amount of plasma guns underneath a bar? The better question is, why not?

Zolnar felt a pit in his stomach. He grabbed each of the plasma guns and handed them to his troops in a slight daze despite having had nothing to drink but water over the last few days. The Galacticarians outnumbered the Starborne Legion ten to one and yet he couldn't help feeling overwhelmed.

Was locking him up the right choice? Yes, a rogue planet has to be brought into line. Zolnar couldn't trust him not to do something stupid while high on clatter. He would probably start attacking their side in confusion for all he knew.

And yet, there was a tightness in his chest. The air felt heavy even though the ship was pressurized. He had locked up his brother, Zentharon's beard he had locked up his brother. He gritted his teeth in anger. He couldn't doubt his decisions while his people's lives were on the line. His people needed him.

Turning around, he saw his honor guard watching him in anticipation. They needed the old Zolnar, the charismatic leader. Taking a deep breath, he puffed his chest and stood taller.

"Comrades, today we stand at the precipice of a moment that will be etched in the annals of our history. Before us lies Serenia, a world that not one month ago was going to be our ally. Until they betrayed our trust. They must be punished."

Thoughts of Aether and Nymeria came to Zolnar and for a moment he looked down in shame. But he quickly covered it up.

"We go not out of vengeance but out of justice. While we fight on foreign land, it's *our* values we are fighting for."

It was working. His honor guard seemed to stand straighter heads taller.

Suddenly, Zolnar heard a clamping noise behind him, as if something had attached itself to the Cantina window. Turning around his worst fears were realized. A group of small blue luminescent ships had connected themselves outside the long window at the end of the Cantina.

Their angular shape and aggressive lines cut through the vacuum of space like a blade. One ship in the center was radiating white, akin to a neutron star in its prime. The Starborne Legion.

As soon as they appeared they burned through the windows with plasma swords and troops in luminescent blue battle uniforms stormed out making a semi-circle around Zolnar and his honor guard.

Zolnar cursed under his breath. How did they know he was here? He didn't have enough troops. Slyly, he clicked a button underneath his left arm sleeve with his middle finger. It would send a help request to the ship. Now he just had to stall for time.

Zolnar didn't think there was anyone as big and intimidating as Kalnar, but from the glowing blue troops stepped a competitor. His uniform was identical to everyone except for a few lines on his uniform which glowed white instead of blue. On his back he carried a massive white broadsword.

The Leader of The Starborne Legion, Valerian Skye.

Valerian was legendary in the system for his fighting prowess--a contender against Kalnar. But it wasn't just his fighting prowess that marked him. He was honorable, just, and merciful. He was known for settling fights through one on one duels instead of all out war so less blood would be shed. It's the reason he was such a popular mercenary in the system, less to clean up. Zolnar had hoped Kalnar would be his champion, but it didn't look like that was going to happen.

"Zolnar, you're all grown up now. I remember when you were just this high." Valerian put his right hand around his knees. That's the funny thing about people six foot six inches, even their knees are decently high off the ground.

Zolnar forced a smile to hide his fear. "I remember, my parents talked about your star-shredding skills when you were just a blip on the radar. But your reputation now makes all you did back then look like a cakewalk. Who have you been sending on spacewalks without a suit lately?"

Valerian laughed. A good hard belly laugh. Zolnar grimaced when he heard it. It reminded him of Kalnar's laugh--when he used to laugh all the time at least. They would probably have been friends, in another path.

"I'd love to catch up Zolnar. But I know what you're doing. You were always a charismatic bastard." His laugh turned into a stern expression. "Either you give me someone to duel now, or we end this the hard way. Way I see it, taking you and everyone in this room out right now would save a lot of death for everyone."

Zolnar gulped. "Can I have a moment to think?"

"You have twenty seconds," Valerian said.

“How about twenty-five?” Valerian narrowed his eyes. “Right, twenty is plenty.” Zolnar turned and clenched his knuckles on the table. Could this situation get any worse? Then he heard a whimpering. Looking down, he saw Nymeria and Aether under the barroom table, holding each other tight. Zolnar groaned.

"I thought I told you to stay in the war room," he hissed.

"We didn't want to leave you alone," Aether said, trying not to cry.

"Ya, we can help," Nymeria said, drawing out her dinky sword.

Zolnar took a deep breath. He would have to lead his Honor Guard away from the bar when the fight started. If he could just stall until the rest of his troops arrived, he could defeat Valerian and get revenge on Serenia for what they did to his family.

But, Aether and Nymeria were Serenian... He cursed under his breath again. When did things get so complicated? Zolnar turned around and smiled at Valerian.

"I've made my decision." He started slowly walking away from the bar and toward the performance platform of the Cantina.

"Great, so who will I be dueling?"

"Right about that. I don't think you'll be dueling anybody." Zolnar started reaching behind his back to grab his plasma rifle. Suddenly a group of Galacticarian troops stormed from the entrance of the Cantina. Valerian cursed then lunged at Zolnar with his sword.

Kalnar reached the end of the tunnel and was thrown out of the minecart onto his ass. So much for the epic entrance. He had been dropped right onto the podium of the Crystalline Cantina.

Valerian was just beginning to make a lunge for Zolnar. Kalnar disappeared, and The Galactic Goliath stepped forward to parry Valerian's glowing white sword right before it would have struck Zolnar in the chest.

Valerian blinked, then smiled. "Now we're talking."

The Goliath advanced, slicing through silence, each motion marrying might and meticulous mastery. Valerian countered with equal intensity. Their steel sang together, scattering sparks that created echoes across the cantina's corners.

No one else moved. A circle had formed around the two fighters watching in awe. Most fights aren't anything like you see in movies--trust me, your friendly neighborhood bard has gotten into a few tussles. In most fights you're more focused on staying alive than looking cool. But something rare happens when two experts come together to fight.

The Goliath and Valerian didn't fight; they danced. They found a rhythm in the chaos, their aggressive styles balancing each other to create harmony. It only gave the battle even more of a disco flare considering The Goliath wore full neon pink while Valerian glowed white and blue.

As the battle raged, the Goliath's eyes caught a glint of metal behind the bar—the alcohol canisters, potent and flammable. With a strategic move, he feinted, drawing Valerian's fiery sword closer, then kicked a purple canister towards him. It erupted in a purple blaze more majestic than any firework display knocking Valerian and his sword to the ground.

The Goliath reached for another cannister when his heart froze. Nymeria and Aether were hiding underneath the bar, their wide eyes reflecting the inferno behind him. Time slowed as Kalnar crept back in. He remembered the burning mansion falling apart in front of his eyes. His family going down with it.

Behind him Valerian stood back up. “Enough.” He touched his sword and it ignited into white flames, casting a light that danced across the walls. He knew. The whole galaxy had probably heard the story.

It was going to happen again. The fire was coming to take the rest of those he loved. And he wasn't strong enough to fight it.

Valerian launched at him and Kalnar parried so late that he got a nasty cut on his left arm. Yup, that would leave a burn. Kalnar desperately blocked, sidestepped, and parried but Valerian was

too much for him. Slowly but surely he was led further and further back until he hit the bar itself and onto his knees.

Valerian was relentless, swinging over and over. Kalnar could feel his arm getting weaker with every block until finally, Valerian took one last swing at his head and he barely parried it out of line, be-helming him instead of beheading. Kalnar's hair was drenched in sweat, and he breathed so heavily he practically choked with each inhale.

Valerian looked down with sorrow at Kalnar. "Any last words?"

Kalnar looked behind him to Aether and Nymeria, who were poking their heads out from under the bar table. He looked over at Zolnar, still holding his plasma rifle, mouth agape. He looked over at me—I'd snuck my way in right next to Zolnar—and I gave him a big thumbs up, then pointed at my shoes (I was trying to tell him to say Valerian's shoes were untied but he didn't get the memo).

Kalnar looked back at Valerian. This time would be different. This time, he wasn't high on clatter. This time, he wouldn't let his emotions overtake him. This time, he would fight out of love rather than out of revenge.

Instead of saying any words, Kalnar just grunted. He launched himself into a series of moves that were as much about combat as they were about shielding the children from harm. Each swing of

his sword not only parried Valerian's attacks but also controlled the direction of the fight, steering it away from the bar.

Valerian fought with beautiful expertise, but he was missing something. He wasn't fighting for family. He was fighting for honor and money. Every one of Kalnar's swings was fueled with passion.

With a deft motion, he sidestepped Valerian's next strike, found an opening, and struck, not to kill, but to disarm. Valerian's fiery sword clattered to the ground, extinguished. The crowd stood in silence.

Kalnar had won the first battle. Now, it was time for the next. He had never been as good with words as his brother. But he supposed bluntness would likely work better here.

Walking up to Valerian, he sheathed his sword and reached out his hand.

"We aren't enemies, Valerian. Serenia never killed our family." Taking his hand, Valerian stood up, confused.

Kalnar sighed, turning to Zolnar. His heart was beating faster than during the battle. "That day, when the mansion tumbled down with our family inside. It was because of me. I was chasing an assassin who killed Nymeria and the other Serenian delegates for reasons I still don't know. I was high on clatter and full of rage. I could barely see a few feet ahead of me.

The Serenian's didn't kill our family Zolnar--they just wanted to take them for ransom. I caused their deaths by collapsing the mansion in my fury.”

That last sentence seemed to ring again and again in the chamber. The room sounded not unlike the void between stars, as if the walls themselves were holding their breath. They might literally be, considering the ship was alive.

Kalnar suddenly felt very tired, as if his body knew he had finished what he set out to do. But simultaneously, he had never felt more light. A massive weight lifted from his shoulders.

Zolnar was stuck in a freeze frame, like a wind-up toy that had lost all its energy. Some truths make you angry. Some truths make you sad. Some truths are so painful, they break you; this was one of those.

Kalnar broke the silence by talking to Valerian. "I think you can leave. We won't be attacking the Serenians anymore."

Valerian nodded, looking Kalnar in the eyes with a combination of respect and sorrow no words could describe. The Starborne Legion walked back into their ships and flew away. Kalnar watched them leave the entire way.

What happened now, he didn't know.

He felt tiny hands clasp around his leg. Looking down, he saw Nymeria wrapped around him. She was crying. Kalnar was embarrassed to realize it was only the second time he had seen her cry. He had cried more than two eight year old children over the last week combined.

“Aren’t you scared?” Kalnar said.

Nymeria looked up at him with watery eyes. “No.”

Kalnar made the crying score even more uneven as he began to cry. It feels good, you should try it some time. Kalnar took off his pendent and put it around Nymeria's neck. "I want you to have this. This is your home now." Nymeria's eyes widened and she started to jump with glee like a cat on catnip.

Aether ran from the bar and gave a still aghast Zolnar the biggest bear hug a kid can give. That seemed to snap Zolnar from his trance. Zolnar gave Aether a bewildered hug back. How could you say no to a kid like that?

Epilogue

The war room, once a stark bastion of strategy and somber decisions, now vibrated with a different kind of energy—unbridled joy and the innocent sounds of play. Nymeria and Aether had transformed the space into a playground. Amidst holographic displays of galaxies and

models of ships that had once plotted courses through enemy lines, the children waged their own battles. Toy soldiers clashed. Laughter echoed.

Zolnar and Kalnar watched from two living chairs. The ship itself was more alive. The chairs fit more comfortably. Doors opened faster. The plants surrounding the room stood tall and proud, radiating bioluminescent golden light.

It was Zolnar who broke the uncomfortable silence. "Think we'll find wives as fierce as these two on Serenia?"

Kalnar, caught off guard by the question, let out a short, surprised laugh. He had known Zolnar's ambivalences toward Serenia had waned, but he didn't realize it was by this much. "If they're half as stubborn, we might stand a chance at survival."

He reached out, placing a hand on Zolnar's shoulder, but felt a tension in his brother's frame. The flinch spoke louder than any words. The moment hung between them.

Zolnar hadn't spoken to him for two weeks after the battle. Thankfully, now that a month had passed, he was more open. But Kalnar knew it would be a long time before things were the same between them if he could ever trust him in the same way again.

The thought darkened Kalnar's mood. But as he looked back toward the children, it was impossible not to lighten up.

Walking out of the war room, Kalnar caught me with my things packed—my clothes and gaullin.

What? A universe-traveling bard can't move with much.

"Looking to leave Woid?"

"Was it that obvious?" I responded.

"I'll have you know, your last song was almost good." Kalnar continued coming to the Cosmic Cantina, but not for clatter. He had sworn away from the stuff ever since adopting Aether and Nymeria. He had come to watch me play.

"Very funny." I said, but I couldn't help but smile. Just a few weeks ago, getting Kalnar to joke was like getting a black hole to spit out light.

"What do you plan on doing?" Kalnar asked.

"Ahhhh, there's the question. I tend to make it up as I go. I find it's more fun that way. But I do have one thing in mind."

"I've asked a lot from you, I know. But the tally is so large, what's one more thing? Do you think you could... Tell people what happened here. So it doesn't happen again?"

"Ten steps ahead of you friend. Where do you think I get all my stories from?"

Kalnar beamed. I had to stifle a laugh. It was hard to take him seriously in that neon pick armor.

But the ship had eaten his old set as a sick joke.

"Do you have a place in mind?"

I smiled back. "Ever heard of Earth?"

Space Glossary

Chagras: a positively adorable animal reminiscent of a komodo dragon here on earth but covered in soft fur and about as dangerous as a kitten. Beware, they are known for eating way too much food and then finding the nearest living creature to fall asleep on. Once in your lap, you'll feel bad getting up.

Crystal meat curry: the famous dish of the Cosmic Cantina. Nobody knows what's in it. It just tastes good. You just hope it doesn't actually have crystals inside it.

Fenrix: like a dog but fluffier and with bigger eyes. So they can give you the puppy dog eyes, times 1,000.

Galactic Chess: like normal chess but instead of a Queen, it's a battleship, instead of bishops, it's fighter jets, and instead of horses, it's spacefish. Much better than regular chess if you ask me.

Gaollin: a mix between a guitar and a violin.

Glarbnax: a positively repulsive creature similar in complexion to the Blobfish here on Earth. But at the same time, there is a certain cuteness that comes from being so incredibly ugly.

Gooley ganymede: similar to a chocolate lava cake on earth, but instead of a chocolate lava interior, it has the goo of the wasplike ganymede bee. Tastes like honey but with a touch of pizzazz.

Liquid splooge: it sounds like gunk, but splooge is actually really good. Think of it like a solid bowl of oatmeal with some raisins, almonds, and honey. Except, sploogier.

Melodine Swan: majestic big white birds known to break into song together. About as dangerous as a piece of paper.

Star pop: no it doesn't have a star on it. I can't believe I'm saying this, but that would kill you. It's just a ring with a bit of crystallized gooey ganymede.

Starfang Viper: don't want to be caught by one of these. Won't lie, I'm scared of regular snakes. So the thought of a snake that drifts THROUGH SPACE, eats dying star essence—and the occasional living creature—is absolutely terrifying. No thank you.

Wurx: like wolves but uglier and bigger. They have two massive fangs like Sabertooth Tigers and a bad case of “not seen a dentist” in a few years.

Zephyrian Curry: a mix of Wurx meat and some spices sautéed in liquid splooge.