

HALCYON'S DAWN
A NOVEL BY GIACOMO CHARLES FINALI

*For Sofie Englehart,
My Dearest Friend.*

*Halcyon days, now wars are ending.
You shall find where-e'er you sail
Tritons all the while attending
With a kind and gentle gale.*

Thomas Shadwell, Halcyon Days, 1648.

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"Let the records show that I always opposed the deployment of Compound 46B, commonly known as Promethean Fire, by Captain Wolfe and Fleet Admiral Keppler aboard the CMSV Goliath, on the Ictu'l Vāar peoples of Demeter... I believe that this weapon is simply too ecologically and humanly destructive to local alien cultures to be used in such a haphazard and ultimately devastating manner"

– Lieutenant Mitsugi Yoshino, Ethics Enforcement Officer aboard the CMSV Goliath during the New Arcadia Trials, January 5th, 2257.

PROLOGUE

**CALLIOPE UNIVERSITY, PLANET DEMETER,
MONDAY, MAY 4TH, 2255.**

It was on a spring day on the planet Demeter, itself the jade gem of the Hestia-V solar system, that an 18-year-old Catherine Louise Hartinger learned she would be interning for the humanitarian organization known as the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid over the summer. Catherine was a first-year interstellar relations student at the prestigious Calliope University and had always imagined that her future would be helping refugees from conflicts and natural disasters, since she had immense kindness in her heart. She was a young lady with long brown hair, a pair of jade green eyes and upturned nose on a graceful oval face. Catherine's notable height and slender figure could all be explained by the fact that she had years of athletic experience, notably in the form of gymnastics that the student had done since the age of 6. However, even Catherine was quick to admit that one of the primary reasons she had landed this position to begin with was her adamant father's need to push her further, and especially the fact that her loving mother, Elizabeth Marie Hartinger, was once a representative for New Arcadia in the Parnassus Agrarian Republic's Chamber of Senators.

It was Elizabeth who, in the autumn of 2245, helped secure the ongoing federal aid for the Ha'ath Ciruūl peoples of the Agriarian Republic of Parnassus, who had been suffering due to the effects of industry on their tribal territory. It was also Catherine's mother who adamantly opposed the entry of Catherine's country into the Second Corporate War. Catherine and her fellow senators even went a step further by drawing up a budget, including 10% in restitution to the Irrām Ge'esh and the Na'rāal Frin peoples, who had been displaced from their homeland by the growth of New Arcadia and New Olympus. Catherine strongly commended her mother for carving out significant inroads into the humanitarian

world during her storied career on the left wing of the Frontier Socialist Party, forging connections with the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid. Furthermore, Elizabeth and Catherine shared the belief that any kind of armed conflict was little more than a disastrous enterprise, which left suffering in its wake.

The aftermath of the conflict, after the belligerents agreed upon a peace, was what her mother called 'The Wake of War': an elegiac notion appearing in this senator's speeches that Catherine proofread in her own way when she was a young girl. In fact, this saying was so prevalent in Elisabeth's public speeches that most of her constituents swore that 'The Wake of War' had always existed in common speech before Elizabeth's senatorship, specifically since it sounded like something that would have some kind of expressive purpose in language. Of course, the truth in this matter of linguistics remained that Elizabeth and, more specifically, her campaign assistant, Nicole Sueng-Yeuhn, had devised this turn of phrase reminiscent of the best poets and orators of Earth to evoke something powerful within her electorate, who would otherwise effectively write off armed conflict as a galactic-scale tragedy that they were powerless to stop. For her part, Elizabeth did not want such a melancholic apathy to reign over her backers and constituents amid the churn of the Second Corporate War. She was quick to make the urban populace of New Arcadia care about the war's fate.

Catherine's father, Thomas Lawrence Hartinger, was fundamentally and irremediably opposed to the horrors of corporate war because he was a New Arcadia-based lawyer who specialized in crimes against sentient beings. It was Thomas, working with his associates at the Center for Planetary Justice, who spearheaded the prosecution against Samson Private Contractors for using the highly corrosive petrochemical compound known as 'Promethean Fire' against civilian populations in the Republic of Parnassus, which had chosen narrowly to stay neutral during the struggles of the Second Corporate War. For his troubles, Catherine's exhausted father had also received a deluge of death threats against

himself and his family from Samson Private Contractors' employer, none other than Pegasus Petroleum. Of course, Thomas recognized that this formidable company manufactured the key components used to create 'Promethean Fire' in the Eastern Corporate Concession, as a byproduct of oil production.

It was Thomas who had made sure that Catherine had not a shadow of a doubt in her adolescent mind that conflict between anyone was an ultimately futile enterprise leading to more suffering on planet Demeter. Catherine's father had gone out of his way on the few days he had outside his legal career to bring both Jason and Catherine to the various sites of remembrance for the Corporate Wars, with the ultimate goal of cementing their mother's pacifism as a crucial aspect of their lived experience. For example, Catherine's mind was especially marked by the austere, astro-classicist architecture of the Tomb of the 205 Volunteer Battalion at the heart of Acanthus Park in the city of Damocles Falls, dominating its surroundings with its dark columnades and other features. She could still remember reading the names of the fallen soldiers who had laid down their lives to protect the neglected Ora'an Rei'ff peoples, having been surrounded by corporate-backed mercenaries that had yet to respond for their war crimes against the continuity of galactic peace. Jason was bored in front of this place of remembrance, not because her brother did not know what had happened, but because he adamantly believed the worst atrocities were in the past.

Catherine's father seemed to pay little mind to the death threats, which he summed up as merely the cost of bringing these heinous actors to justice. However, in private, Thomas contemplated moving his family to a different city or even off-world. In practice, it was Catherine who was partially entrusted with researching where the Hartinger family could move next, since she had always had a talent for presenting her findings to her family. Likewise, there were a few notable candidates for this upcoming decision, including the small forestry town of Eclipse Hill in the middle of the Republic of Parnassus, which proved to be the

most enticing prospect amongst other terrible options. Catherine was likewise not the first to oppose moving to the hostile conditions of Demeter's moon of Juno, or the planet Medea, for that matter. She was not one to be enticed by the heavenly names as well as the branding of these dead-end places.

Otherwise, Catherine's adoptive younger brother, Jason Robert Hartinger, remained the outcast of their family, having been sold on the lie of military glory by the colossal companies that still held much power on Demeter. Elizabeth and Thomas had known that their problematic son was being recruited as the next soldier of fortune ever since he was 11 or 12 years old. Jason waxed lyrical about subjects he knew very little about, especially military hardware, and Jason confused the primarily offensive role of gunships with the primarily support role of landers and dropships. Therefore, it was clear from that moment onwards that Catherine's younger brother would be instead destined for the career of a regular infantryman, never going above the rank of officer. The notion that all of Jason's struggles in basic training and his time spent fighting on the front lines could amount to nothing was a particular point of pain for Catherine's little brother and one he could not reconcile with his sister. She had even proposed some more peaceful lines of work as an orbital wreckage officer in the Galactic Salvage Corps or a rescue and extraction officer in the Space Rescue Corps, but the idea of helping the less fortunate never truly crossed his mind.

Jason was equally the first to downplay his parents' peacemaking efforts on Demeter as detrimental to a strong society, and to think that the past was more certain and more peaceful. For example, it was Jason who wished that the Second Corporate War was still ongoing well into 2255, so that the companies that had ostensibly started the conflict over a decades-long dispute over mining rights could show the world their might and fury. It was this line of reasoning, if one could even call it that, which was the most problematic within the idealistic Hartinger household and had even caused Elizabeth to almost disown her son,

that always found a way to insult her achievements. For example, Catherine's brother had a habit of outright blaming the Frontier Socialists for everything bad in Demeter, to his mother's ire, even though Elisabeth remained slow to anger. Still, she could be decisive in her wrath, as Jason would soon learn.

Catherine's parents could do little to stop this in its tracks and had long suspected that this breaking of their son's mind was another tactic used by the corporations against them. However, there was something human about all this indoctrination of Jason to the corporate cause in that he had always been a violent, problem-child, having cursed out a company ambassador from Pegasus Petroleum when Jason was about 11 years old. This shrewd representative took it as a prodigal sign that he could be a good corporate mercenary, as they often recruited the young. Indeed, there had been many scandals involving private military contractors recruiting among the lowest achievers at Jason's Galactic Commons Middle School, as well as at similar institutions, using the beauty of a young spokeswoman to lure them into the rigors of military school. "Join the corporate forces," they said, "for glory and good grades," they promised. Another slogan from the extensive involvement of corporations that helped partially fund Demeter's public middle and high schools proclaimed that "Girls love a man in uniform! Join the corporate forces today." These tactics were outlawed under regulations, especially the Gansevoort and Yamashina Acts, aimed at protecting young children from military service as well as corporate indoctrination.

Jason saw no issue with this, much to his mother's fury and his sister's fear, who warned him about his imminent fate. The truth was, once again, that Jason, unlike seemingly every member of his family, believed that overwhelming violence and strength of arms could solve all of Demeter's problems. Catherine even thought that they had lost the real Jason, if he even existed, before any of this began, in a reality that was difficult to live with. Catherine saw Jason go through the obstacle courses and mental drills of basic training and be yelled at

by drill sergeants every night before she went to sleep on the second floor of the Everley Dormitory, a thought that worried her, as Jason was no soldier. Catherine also discussed this with her university's student help counselor, Dr. Padamini Goyal-Charkavarti, regarding her fears about her brother's military training.

The solution that they had come up with was to try to think of the positive aspects of all of this, although there were not many, instead of letting the shadow of fear and dread take over Catherine's mind, which had done well to stave off depression. It was in this mindset that Catherine accepted the offer to intern in the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid for the summer of 2255, even though Catherine remained uncertain about which posting she would receive. Catherine was not afraid to travel far from the New Arcadia urban core, where Calliope University was located, which was not far from the Founder's Park neighborhood of this city, where Catherine had lived recently. What Catherine and her parents wanted was for her to leave the stifling embrace of the city she had long called home and be assigned to a posting amongst the nebula trees and arrow bushes of the wild and free Demeter that had been left behind by the regularities of Catherine's urban existence. Her shared room on the second floor of the Everly Dormitory embodied some of these aspirations, having been decorated by Calliope University in a neo-minimalist style. Catherine could see her bed, which she had made up early in the morning, along with a sleek chest of drawers and a slender wardrobe with simple geometric paneling. Moreover, the predominant colors in this space were the rather clinical white and grey, which Catherine's roommate, Pavlina Leonova, did not mind, specifically because she was a medical student currently interning at the trauma center of New Arcadia's Polyclinic. However, Catherine's mother was quick to disrupt the coldness and paleness of this room by giving in to her daughter's need for radiant colors, especially in the form of holographic posters. More specifically, there were posters for the techno-opera versions of 'Iphigenia' and 'Semele' from the New

Arcadia Concert Hall, and a poster for her mother's most recent re-election campaign on her otherwise blank walls. Catherine could still read her mother's election slogan of 'A Peace You Can Believe In', which had decisively won Elisabeth the fifth and final term of her senatorship. Catherine glanced out her window at the green area towards the back of her dormitory, adorned with a fountain mainly featuring an undulating, abstract sculpture in the middle of cascading water. There were equally lines of seasonal axiom and alpheus trees with writhing trunks around this fountain, which were in full bloom in this season, along with plenty of benches as well as other places for students to take a seat on this pleasant day. Further back, Catherine could see the more regular shapes of other university buildings, such as the Campbell and Whitmore dormitories, both of which had earned a reputation as places where residents partied hard, especially after major sporting events. There was the inebriated case of first-year chemistry student Lucien Gérard-Latour, who commandeered a Calliope University Police Force hover-bike after the university team won its hard-fought sky-ball championship. The student then drove his law enforcement vehicle in circles around the fountain for minutes, causing property damage, before being apprehended by exhausted university police officers.

Looking now up to the sky, Catherine carefully contemplated the radiant sun of Hestia, which gave the star system its name, along with the faint trace of Demeter's single and only moon, Juno. The sky above her was blue; however, it was always bounded by an ethereal white plane due to the excess of nitrogen and other compounds in the planet's saturated atmosphere. This reinforced the truly alien qualities of Demeter as a world thousands of light-years away from Earth, with plants that were mostly blue to green due to scientific factors that Catherine could not be bothered to look up at the present moment. She equally considered how the natural inhabitants of Demeter were well adapted for life on this unforgiving planet, with generally slender physiques, a pair of jet-black eyes,

and skin ranging from blue to grey. Just the same, there was something truly alien about coming face-to-face with one of these people, who collectively went by the name M'ehn Aln Tol, and who had been first contacted by the explorers of DSRV Sojourner towards the middle of the Twenty Second Century.

Returning to her reflections, this strong need to leave the urban world behind was true of Thomas' brother, Peter Edward Hartinger, who abandoned a comfortable job as an admissions officer at Calliope University's sister school, Urania University in Frontier City, to pursue a career as a wildlife artist. Nebula and nexus trees, as well as the animals that dwelled within them, were some of his favorite subjects to capture, and Peter had advocated for their immediate conservation. This was doubly true when this artist, living in the remote town of Townsend's Cove, was called in for a hearing about the protection of Demeter's ecosystems. Catherine recognized that this posting would not be a vacation and rather, the college student hoped this work alongside the poorest people in the world would contribute to the common good of sentient beings by helping those in desperate need, not even to mention the thousands of alien refugees who had crossed the militarized border from the Western Corporate Concession to the more peaceful nation of the Parnassus Republic in the hopes of finding work and schooling opportunities. What was worse was that Catherine knew exactly that this humanitarian crisis had been caused by large corporations, which had also sparked the recent war, so that these belligerents could show to all the inherent failures of elected and liberal styles of planetary government.

Before she knew it, Catherine had written a cordial enough, college-level message to the operations manager at the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid on her personal holo-screen, which was a little slow today. Once that was done, she turned off its blue-tinted display and took a deep breath while sitting back in her office chair. For now, Catherine had accomplished one of her lifelong goals of giving back to the planet that had raised her, despite all the troubles of her past

and the terrible aftermath of the Second Corporate War. Catherine was barely 14 when this system-spanning conflict had begun, and even then, she knew there was something insidious about colossal companies going to war over mining rights for palladium along with other rare-earth minerals in the Eastern Alecto Valley of Demeter. This all had taken 4 dreadful years, 3 of which were marked by active hostilities. In contrast, the last one involved the creation of a suitable treaty in response to a renewed atmosphere of corporate assassination and espionage. Likewise, Catherine and her classmates at the Leonard H. Campbell High School in Founder's Park remembered feeling anxious about their future on Demeter amid the dreadful, tragic churn of the Second Corporate War.

By and large, Catherine's friends engaged in pacifist demonstrations such as the 'March of the Children' during the winter of 2252 in sharp reaction against the increased violence of this struggle, which threatened to draw in their beloved Agrarian Republic of Parnassus. The memory of the creative slogans and signs her fellow students designed on extremely short notice still lingered in her mind, even as Catherine would otherwise have focused on the daily postwar realities of being a college student. For example, an otherwise quiet, artistically-minded student called Daniel Omura-Mihara came up with the sharp verbiage of 'You Can't Ignore this Cruel War' based on a short poem that his father, Charles, had written, which won him an Azimuth Prize in Contemporary Literature. Catherine was the first to recognize that Daniel's story was not a happy one, as he would go on to become partially deaf after police counter-offensives, which led to his father's unbounded fury and to his collaboration with Thomas to pursue legal action to hold local Founder's Park law enforcement accountable.

No one in Demeter knew what they could do to keep the fury of war away from the neutral lands of Parnassus, as non-intervention was a civic virtue at this point in their history. Catherine knew that dozens of her classmates, like Penelope Eloïse Lambert, frequently seen as the highly social head of female

activities at her high school, had lost their father in the Battle of Cobalt City. This was a wound that she rarely discussed with her friends, even though Penelope confided that Catherine would know exactly how to console her in her grief. War, with all of its untold tragedies, had the insidious capacity of turning children into adults and adults into monsters when matters of material wealth and colonial power were at hand. This was exactly why those in charge of their schooling unjustly vilified Catherine's class as part of the problems they were trying to oppose, as their conservative principals and superintendents did not have their backs when it came to the public tragedy of their protests, which drew in much media attention from news sources from all around planet Demeter. There were, of course, right-leaning holo-papers such as Demeter Weekly and Galaxy Today, which would do little more than question why Catherine was so riled up about what adult politicians and generals were doing. Therefore, Elisabeth had taught her not to pay them too much attention, but rather to gravitate towards the more reputable investigative journalism of the New Arcadia Times along with the New Olympia Dispatch, which would be far more empathetic to her cause. Elisabeth was not opposed to a piece of satire from the writers at The Astronaut, whose words seemed to always get at the heart of complex social issues.

Catherine noticed that, time and again, it was these same educational officials who would abuse their authority by calling in law enforcement on their students whenever a march took place. However, what they could not anticipate was that the Founder's Park Police Department was not fully deployed against unarmed, peaceful teenagers and their parents after the sixth or seventh time they were called in to snuff out such student activity, protected under the law. Catherine often cited legal code 437§36a, known as the Student Demonstration Law, outlawing excessive brutality against middle- and high-school protesters. Indeed, this kind of social action had occurred before in the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus, such as during the Settler's War and the First Corporate War, and

there were structures in place to ensure a degree of peace in wartime. These existing bureaucratic structures, collectively known as the Chains of Peace by members of the Parnassian Senate and Congress, were crucial to maintaining federal prosperity. For their part, even the New Conservative Party, under the leadership of Damian Westfield, knew better than to defund these highly popular measures for fear of being publicly considered atavistically bellicose. Catherine also knew of the struggles of her mother's poorer constituents to put food on the table and afford necessities during this war, which brought about massive inflation even within the Parnassus. In practice, Catherine could recall moments when essentials like water cost 5 to 10% more colonial credits than they would have in peacetime, even though Parnassus had not sent any troops or materiel to any front of the Second Corporate War, which still scared Demeter.

Jason imagined hunger as a lifestyle issue, and Elizabeth chastised him for this view, as rugged individualism was opposed to empathy. Indeed, this was no longer the generation of the people who had mapped the stars, when such qualities were deemed necessary; rather, it was a moment for reconciliation with Demeter's indigenous inhabitants. What truly frustrated Elizabeth was the extent to which Jason believed there were still places left to conquer, to put humanity first in the vast and perilous cosmos. The main issue with this kind of fighting on land, as in space, is that it only brought about more greed among companies, along with wrath from their private mercenary armies. In practice, these were the sins inherent within the Second Corporate War: the stifling sins of prosperity that Catherine was leading the struggle against. For her part, Catherine was by no means a spiritual person, particularly as the teachings of Galactic Syncretism were too complicated for her liking, because they sought to bring together all the religions of Earth under a single banner. However, Catherine hoped in her heart to alleviate some of the terrible suffering inflicted on the native populations of her vibrant homeworld by the disastrous Second Corporate War.

CHAPTER ONE

**CAMP AGAMEMNON, PLANET DEMETER
TUESDAY, JUNE 6TH, 2255.**

The joint military facility of Camp Agamemnon was one of the largest of its kind in the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus and was located somewhere in the vast forests and marshes between New Arcadia City and Damocles Falls, but where exactly this was Catherine could not say. It was considered to be a joint military facility because all recruits of the Demeter Releif Corps would have to go through Galactic Aid Operations Training with the help of the Demeter Planetary Defence Force possessing the equipment to do so. Likewise, most of Camp Agamemnon was little more than a low-lying sprawl of habitation blocks and other assorted buildings that were determined to be immediately useful for its battalions of soldiers who were now off on campaign helping evacuate more refugees from the grasp of the Western Corporate Concession. To be sure, this place of training was divided by high command into different sections and sub-sections which Catherine knew very little about, but which appeared to be all logical enough when the recruit looked at it from a dropship or on the various holo-maps of Camp Agamemnon which were available before the exit of every major building from the mess hall to the habitation blocks. And even with all of this preponderance of information Catherine had still managed to get lost and wander into the restricted refinery area on the first night she was there. It did not help that it was stormy as well if Catherine's memory served her correctly, but she did have the advantage of making a few friends of her colleagues.

Whatever the case, Catherine was firmly told by a battle armor wearing soldier that the refineries were not the barracks, and that the recruit should have taken a left instead of gone straight down the access road. After that, Catherine swiftly walked back and quickly found her habitation block during a night where the rain slashed through the golden beams of the outdoor light fixtures. More

specifically, the recruit knew that weapons training, psysical excercises and an education regarding the culure of the Ictu'l Vaar peoples would constitute the components of her preparation for humanitarian work, as all three were thought of as necessary aspects of any successful field operative. In practice, Catherine thought that what even would be the point of going to help the Ictu'l Vaar natives wherever they were if she did not have the strength within her to lift crates and other varied supplies around the camp where she would eventually be stationed which were needed to take care of the refugees of Demeter. On the one hand, the recruit equally considered how she may equally have to personally defend some wounded child against a corporate mercenary, although Catherine was not exactly anticipating this potential for violence against anyone. On the other hand, Catherine did not conceive of any other way out of such a predicament without the use of a firearm, specifically since any manner of negotiation would not work on the hardened members of corporate-backed militaries. With this in mind, she learned what she could in the limited time-frame available about the limited range of weapons approved for humanitarian use, in a notion appearing to be a paradox since her organization was one of peace and not of war.

Indeed, Caterine was not alone in prefering the sleek and compact Ajax-9 combat pistol above the more complicated larger carbines and rifles, because there seemed to be an element of reliability to its design. It also helped that it would be the Ajax-9 combat pistol that would be her proverbial loyal compagnon during her service with the Demeter Relief Corps, while other firearms would be essentially limited to being handled by their guards. However, it was determined that even the recruits should have first-hand experience of how their security forces would use their weapons in combat, while also leaving a potential of them being able to grab one from a body and be able to use it without question. Once again, Catherine succeeded in hiding her discomfort around killing anyone with her mother's gallows humor, which the recruit thought was not only useful in the hostile world of politics but also the equally austere one of peacekeeping.

This capacity to contemplate the darker side of humanity in the colonies got Catherine immediately noticed by her drill sergeant Terell Arthur Wallace, who equally was blessed with such a morbid sense of humor after years serving the Demeter Planetary Defence Force on this planet and on its surrounding worlds. It was apparent in this soldier's eyes that Terrell had witnessed the death of his fellow soldiers in a thousand forms, and wanted to ensure that this new year of recruits knew what they had signed up for. For his part, Terell was a short man seemingly around middle age whose round face featured a pair of peircing green eyes, and a broad nose through which he frequently snorted air. Otherwise, it was widley claimed amongst the people at the camp that his eyes, or any other part of him, must have been cybernetic, although the sergeant was likely the kind of person to boast about his robotic agmentations and he had yet to make a convincing case for having a replacement arm or leg. Thus, Catherine was not sure just how much of this person standing and pacing before her was a machine and how much of him was a man made up of flesh and bone. In this light, there was an uncanny, unyielding precision to many of Terrell's gestures almost as if they had been programmed into him by another party.

More importantly, Terell remained well aware of the fact that Catherine was not the only one of his trainees who hailed from a middle class background punctuated by sterile interiors and polite conversation which was spared from the shadow of death. How many of the people around him, Terrel reflected, had never truely seen a body scarred by struggle, and how many more of them were shielded from the daily life-or-death battles of the desperate poor. And there was no doubt in Catherine's mind that the native peoples that they would be some of the poorest individuals even in the prosperous Agrarian Republic of Parnassus, whose lowly social standing warranted immediate action. Statistics were overall not in their favor within the Western Corporate Concession, whose institutions ranging from the federal government to the department of eductation would try their hardest to undermine any possibility of alien civil rights on Demeter.

Terrel's goal as a drill sergeant of the Demeter Planetary Defence Force was not only to instruct people like Catherine in the immense physical rigors of the work ahead of them but also get them accustomed to the notion that the shadow of death would also be a necessary aspect of their lives this summer. Catherine did not know if she was one of the first people in her detachment to come to terms with this, and she did not think it mattered as long as her heart was in a place where life was more fragile than it had once had seemed. Just the same, Catherine would have to become comfortable with the idea that one of her trusted colleagues or even herself for that matter could be shot, stabbed or otherwise scarred in their attempts to provide much-needed aid to the Ictu'l Vaar peoples of Demeter. Therefore, it did not matter that they were not soldiers in the strict sense of such a word, because the Demeter Relief Corps would be equipped like members of the military and would likewise suffer comparably to any trooper in the craters of Juno or even the ravines of Medea. It was with this in mind that Catherine approached her responsibilities with a renewed sense of seriousness which was visible at the very least in her austere body language which betrayed the morbid levity of tone in much of her gallows humor. There were other recruits like a certain Zoryanna who came from a military family who adapted much better to these new realities of her planetary aid work.

Currently, Terrell turned to the dozen or so recruits standing at the ready in front of him and announced that "The Demeter Relief Corps needs your help this morning in offloading the heavy ordinance from a couple of PSL-35 Overseer Dropships which are landed on the runway over there. These Phatheon-6 bombs are very much active pieces of military hardware and therefore you will have to be especially careful in rolling them to the weapons storage further to the right. Have I made myself clear or do you have any questions?". At this, Catherine and the other recruits responded with a collective yes, and almost immediately got to work moving the Phatheon-6 bombs to their new shelter from the elements, after which they would eventually load up the dropships with food for the alien

refugees of the nearby Olympian Coast. More specifically, Catherine had been paired in this task by Zoryanna who's charm clearly enchanted this recruit by this point of her service with the Demeter Relief Corps. In practice, Zoryanna had a fair complexion with freckles beneath green eyes, an elegant nose, and auburn hair, all set on an oval face. Zoryanna was similar to Catherine in that she had an athletic build that had developed since childhood. However, Zoryanna's sport had been running and climbing, and all the while Catherine had done years of gymnastics which gracefully shaped her body into something different, so both girls met the physical requirements for their work ahead. Indeed, the many fruits of Catherine's countless years of gymnastics training could be seen in her agile footwork which had helped this college student get through the various obstacle courses in Fort Agamemnon without too much trouble, while Zoryanna's ability to keep a steady pace even over the long distances of their full equipment runs had helped her in this exercise. Thus, all trainees with backgrounds in running and other physical activities strived in the training at Fort Amagememnon where others who had sedentary lifestyles would notably falter and struggle.

Meanwhile, the work ahead of Catherine and Zoryanna was complicated, or at the very least sensitive because it essentially revolved around the careful offloading of the implements of war, before eventually replacing them with those of peace and prosperity. What was especially noteworthy about the ordinance in the cargo space of the PSL-35 Overseer Dropships was that they were organized in special holding racks, suggesting that these devastating weapons were not intended for the immediate use of these colossal yet fragile vehicles, which could deliver a range of much-needed supplies to frontline soldiers. For her part, this recruit recognized that both dropships and landers were indeed enticing targets for any well-armed foe of this combat force, who would be quick to shoot any support vessel down from cover. In particular, it was this uneasy thought as well which haunted Catherine's mind while she got to work this morning.

And so it was as Catherine and Zoryanna endlessly walked up and down the ramps of the PSL-35 Overseer Dropships each of which possessed their own markings typically referring to the local alien fauna along with their own signs of damage and repair in their thrusters. More specifically, a common design was a stylized flock of uncommon forest angels which was supposed to symbolize the ability of the dropship to stay in the air by evading heavy enemy fire. Just the same, Catherine thought that this allusion lined up because forest angels were rather small creatures that appeared to be no larger than a canary, renowned for their rather graceful flying abilities. Otherwise, Catherine remembered that these alien animals were called forest angels due to their white color, even if they bore little resemblance to earth avians and rather looked like gossamer sea creatures gliding through the air. Furthermore, the thrusters of other dropships had been painted with fraying images of other Demeter creatures, which revealed a more artistic side to some of the people in the Demeter Planetary Defence Force. Still, what these animals were remains harder to discern merely due to the distance between Catherine and the vehicles located further back on a misty day.

The recruit noticed that the prevailing weather around her this morning was little more than a chalky mist likely rolling in from the Tharsis Mountains to the west, which remained a common sight on Demeter. This was the kind of morning mist which was so opaque and dense that Catherine could only look at the faint outlines of the weapons storage hanger through it, lending a broadly haunting atmosphere to the empty landing zone around the recruits. In addition, Catherine was in a position of both knowing what lay beyond this veil of mist as this was hardly her first time at the landing strip of Fort Agamemnon, but also a state of wonder and horror over what new features of the base may be revealed with the coming of fairer weather. Furthermore, Catherine noticed that there was an eerie stillness and silence to this morning at the military base, as all flights of any gunships or dropships had been canceled due to local conditions.

Elsewhere, Catherine contemplated how this planet was one where every aspect of life from the petering of a distant alpine spring to the crashing of the waves on an ocean shore was punctuated by water, to such an extent that it was impossible to imagine this verdant planet without this life-giving substance. Likewise, the nitrate rich atmosphere of Demeter was good for the plants of this world, dominated by rich forests, which only gave way to swamps and plains where the soil could not support this growth. As a whole, it was an outright myth that Demeter was nothing but an endless grove of nexus and nebula trees basking in the sun as was often believed abroad, since it equally featured areas where these mossy giants of nature could not develop. For her part, Catherine could not consider the broader ecologies of her planet because her task today remained to painstakingly move the rows of ordnance out of the dropships through the prevailing mists of this summer morning. More specifically, the diligent recruit took a closer look at the canisters of the Phaetheon-6 bombs on which were written words like 'Danger: This is an Incendiary Weapon. Please Handle with Caution' in bold and legible yellow font. After this, Catherine took a step back from these carefully-arranged destructive weapons, which the recruit had previously assumed were merely explosive. Catherine muttered something to herself about how she was too young to die in a ball of flames, and how she wished that she had been given the correct protective gear for this. Furthermore, Catherine knew that this kind of equipment existed because this recruit had seen it before in foundries, and she was not one to accept the likely explanation that they were not available for immediate use for this delicate operation.

What was also surprising was that there was no real discussion emerging between Zoryanna and Catherine beyond introductions, explanation of certain family matters and contemplating the weather of planet Demeter. For now at least, the recruit thought that this daughter of a proud military family was simply too distant from her own urban background, even as Catherine tried to approach

every social situation with a high level of empathy. It appeared that Zoryanna too had arrived at exactly the same conclusion as Catherine that this detachment of recruits were in no way rightly equipped to handle incendiary ordinance, because this daughter of the military swore that she would report all of this to the ethics enforcement officer of Fort Agamemenon. That way, Terrell could hopefully be held accountable for putting the recruits at extreme risk of death or injury, and Zoryanna knew what kinds of evidence to bring in such a discussion. However, both Catherine and Zoryanna were more concerned with the immediate work in front of them which had a certain unyielding, at times monotonous quality to it, due to the sounds and sights of all of it kept on droning on today. For example, Catherine sensed the subtle difference between the segmented metal flooring inside the dropships which she compared against the more regular textures of the pavement of the landing zone and that of the weapons storage hanger. Of course, these subtle changes in texture were accompanied by changes in sight as well, specifically because the dropship's cargo hold was notoriously dark and cramped, where the other areas that they visited were much more open. And all of this was veiled in the sheer veils of mist which permeated this silent morning at Fort Agamememnon, and would only yield to the bright light of the sun.

Eventually, the offloading of military grade ordinance was exchanged for the onloading of dozens of metallic boxes designated with either a bold green band for normal food and an orange band for emergency food. This proved to be much easier than the moving of the weapons to their place of storage, and even then Catherine was pleased that all of her fellow recruits would be wearing technical exoskeletons throughout this delicate operation. These were pieces of equipment composed of interlocking struts which served to amplify the abilities of its user, in terms of toughness and strength. And yet, exoskeletons could not match human speed and agility due to their overall heaviness, especially on the back of a soldier. They were equally not armor by any stretch of the imagination, because an exeskeleton on its own left its user exposed to ballistic injuries. In

this light, Catherine considered the Hercules-6 exoskeleton which she was now wearing with its complex mirroring of human gestures through its own external system of interlocking joints to be the right tool for the job at hand in which they would not be vulnerable to heavy enemy fire. And yet, Catherine was also left with the worrying thought that this robust yet fragile piece of military equipment would be what she and her other fellow recruits would wear on the beaches of the Olympian coasts tomorrow, where they would bring these crates of rations to the still unknown North Falls Refugee Camp which was itself located nearby the city of Damocles Falls. As a result, it dawned upon Catherine that the members of the Demeter Relief Corps would be likewise susceptible to any attack from the well-armed corporate forces on that fateful day. And this is when something within Catherine's heart stopped her from proceeding any further in the task that had been assigned to her detachment, and instead curled up on herself within one of the colossal dropships away from the judgmental gaze of Terell.

At this, Zoryanna comforted Catherine by reminding her that "I perfectly understand your fear in front of facing your mortality as a member of the Demter Relief Corps throughout your service in planetary aid. However, you should just remember that if you are killed in action tomorrow that you would have laid down your life for an amazing cause of helping those in need. I've always found that it is useful to be selfless in times like these, and understand your place within the correcting of a historical crime against sapient life". It took Catherine a moment to process what Zoryanna was proposing, since this was one of the recruit's first glimpses of the caring and loving person that Zoryanna really was. For her part, Catherine was admittedly taken aback that a person whose parents had such profound empathy for those in need, however then again she recalled how even her own mother mostly reserved her comments for military command rather than the thousands of lowly soldiers under their command. Thus, Catherine opened her heart to the possibility of starting a friendship with someone from a vastly different background than her own, through a new kind of empathy.

In this light, Catherine got back up from the metallic floor of the dropship and returned once again to her delicate task of loading up these aircraft with the food needed for their operation. Just the same, the rest of this day advanced at a typical pace with much more preparations for the fateful day marking the start of Catherine's involvement within the planetary aid community. Eventually, the mist gave way to a clear and sunny day on planetary Demeter which helped raise the spirits of everyone at Fort Agamemnon. And so, the pace of life continued at this military installation, with the recruits going through a final briefing on what would exactly go on on Wednesday, June 7th, with Catherine taking extensive notes on her personal holo-sceen regarding the details of this intricate operation.

It was time the next morning for the newly minted Demeter Relief Corps Recruit to leave the modest comforts of Fort Agamenon and travel by dropship towards the uncertain future. For now, Catherine only had energy amongst the crushing dynamism of the base around her to hone in on what was immediately available to her in the form of strapping into her exoskeleton. In this light, the recruit dressed herself in her equipment with newfound confidence and zeal, which were perhaps learned from her recent friend Zoryanna. The last thing that Catherine noticed amongst her droves of fellow recruits was how they easily be divided into groups based on the bold highlights of their camouflaged outfits. For example, medics like Zoryanna wore a white stripe on their service helmet and had white highlights throughout their clothing, while sanitation workers had blue highlights and construction workers wore yellow highlights. However, there was also a strange unity in knowing that all of these individuals, who equally included adult veterans and seasonal volunteers, had the same basic equipment, such as a service helmet which was especially vulnerable to ballistic attacks. Thus, all seemed prepared for Catherine to change the world when she stepped onto her assigned dropship with the rest of her team, for the better of the native aliens of planet Demeter who had suffered much in recent, living memory.

"I will be the first to admit that no one knows where the killing of the native people began by our marines and the mercenaries of Samson Private Contractors. However, if I had to place a guess, as I would say that it started with the mass killing of scroungers and moss-walkers, which were their greatest food source"

– Captain Rajenda Chakarvarti of the CMSV Hanibal during the New Arcadia Trials, January 5th, 2257.

CHAPTER TWO

**OLYMPIAN COAST, PLANET DEMETER
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7TH, 2255.**

By this point, Catherine had become more of a soldier for peace than an idealistic college student, thanks primarily to the three-week intensive Galactic Aid Operations Training, or GAOT for short, which was a necessary step before she could obtain any front-line posting. Catherine had learned the essentials of survival, medical care, and weapons handling, to name only a few, through her time spent at Fort Agammemnon. More specifically, this military installation was run by the Demeter Planetary Defence Force, the closest thing the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus had to an army, and the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid, to ensure that recruits would not be swept up in the former. Still, Catherine noticed that relations between these parties were remarkably peaceful, as the colonial army helped the council find some of its identity through the chants, symbols, and rituals that formed the soul of any defense force. For example, it was an ensign in the Demeter Planetary Defence Force by the name of Mikhhaïl Nikitanovich, who helped the council come up with its professional anthem of 'The Elegy of the Planets', which doubled as a marching chant. Meanwhile, the council's symbol of interlocking hands in a ring had been devised by the medical officer Emanuele Magnelli, because they had no real symbol before 2230.

However, at this moment, Catherine could not think of all this successful shared history between the two organizations, especially as this recruit sat on the metallic grated floor of a PSL-35 Overseer Dropship. This was an operations support platform having ample space for food, medicine, and other perishable cargo, designed by the military department at Anderson Aeronautics. Its interior could best be described as a hollow compartment for storing goods, spanning from the edge of the aft ramp to the beginning of the cockpit. This particular

class of dropship was also typical of human military platforms in that its interior was mostly drab greys and blacks, while its exterior boasted a coat of similarly grey paint. Elsewhere, the food they carried in their cargo bay was not food in the traditional sense but rather immense quantities of rations that aid workers had to count individually the day before their departure, then estimate in bulk. In addition, shipments of infant food, along with simple food gels for malnourished people, were packed in special orange-marked boxes, while the typical food box was streaked with a bold green line. The existence of these specialized forms of nourishment served as proof of Parnassus's industrial capacity, showcasing the technology to harvest and process agricultural products for later consumption. Catherine was also not one to believe the widespread rumors that these rations contained trace amounts of insects along with other undesirable things.

Catherine and her colleagues could hear the overwhelming whir of the dropship's rotors during their flight to the Olympian Coast or the area between the metropolis of New Arcadia and the outskirts of Damocles Falls, defined as halfway along the River Thetys. Indeed, it was a shaking, turbulent flight to a lonely stretch of sand as well, especially because of the strong prevailing winds this summer morning on Demeter. Catherine was dressed not in the geometric designs of a more peaceful world but in the rugged tactical clothes of war, and had done well to remind herself that she was not a soldier but a logistics intern helping the council. This college student had brought with her all manner of necessary survival gear, ranging from water purification tablets to a compact, portable lamp, as well as a first aid kit contained within the dozens of pockets of her fatigues, not to mention her backpack in which heavier personal equipment and a change of clothes in case of inclement weather could be found. Her gear was completed by the struts of a military-grade Mark-5 Hercules Exoskeleton, conceived as a highly adaptable tool for heavy lifting of hardware rather than as battle armor, which would have covered her vital organs. In practice, Catherine

was trained to be yet another logistics officer preoccupied with various matters of supply chains of food and medicine, and this recruit possessed the schedules for dropships both in a digital form on a holo-tablet and on paper when it would be necessary. She also had the role of recording the location of her unit using coordinates and descriptors every hour, to be reported to people higher up in the chain of command. It was also true that Catherine had attempted to sign up for the coveted position of the liaison's assistant. This role would essentially help the political representative of the Demeter Relief Corps in looking over the tons of documentation associated with such an influential person. For now at least, Catherine had something of a fluctuating role, as she was first and foremost expected to help the North Falls refugee camp in any capacity which was chronically short-staffed as much as delve into her duties of managing incoming provisions and equipment. Meanwhile, the taciturn members of their security detail wore Achilles Mark-7 battle armors of protection, concealing any sense of identity behind hard glass and ceramic steel. Catherine thought that this would be Jason's fate if her parents could not intervene to stop his indoctrination, as their mercenaries also frequently wore Achilles Mark-7 battle armor.

In this light, Catherine felt even more determined to stop this process in its tracks by illustrating the human costs of warfare in the colonies. Catherine shuddered at the thought that she did not know what to do if it failed, especially given that Jason seemed hell-bent on becoming a corporate soldier. Therefore, Catherine did not know what it would take to convince Jason to stay in school rather than end up as an auxiliary member and then a frontline soldier for one of the large mercenary companies operating in this frequently bellicose world in the Proxima Centauri System. The truth in this highly complicated matter was that she was beginning to tediously unpack many of Jason's assumptions about the planet around him as she remained his older sister, even if she wished that Jason's therapist, a woman by the name of Dr. Madeleine Desmarais, would be

more transparent about what exactly was motivating him to follow this dark and self-destructive path. It also did not help that Jason frequently dodged sessions with her, and even when his parents forced him to be in the room with her, Jason would simply turn around and blatantly lie about abuse that never happened. For now, Catherine and her interns could breathe easy at the sight of large pelagic leapers breaching the turbulent blue-grey waters of the Olympian Ocean, lending a certain beauty to this bellicose scene. Indeed, scientists believed that pelagic leapers were among the most intelligent vertebrates in the ocean, possessing a rudimentary form of language along with complex social behavior. Especially rare in this regard was Foscarini's Pellagic Leaper, which was primarily white due to the prevalence of albinism in this species, in contrast to the darker blue-grey pigmentation that dominated the rest of its highly fascinating genus.

More specifically, it was commonly said that these animals had long-term memory and even mourned their dead: a gesture of grief that originally puzzled xenobiologists. This was not even to mention the manifold societal and cultural values of the Pellagic Leaper, also known as Ao'r Aqu'ux in the language of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples of Demeter, which was a symbol of the ocean's abundance and the knowledge of elders. Furthermore, Catherine had learned in elementary school that these native tribes held firmly to their traditional belief that Pellagic Leapers came not from the depths below but from the stars above. This added yet another layer of marvelous strangeness to these ocean creatures, whose presence was always felt on planet Demeter. And how deep was the ocean, Catherine thought to herself, and how wonderful were its lifeforms that could delight and surprise the inhabitants of the coast. She pondered how the abysses of the Oceans were even less known by humanity than the vast expanses of space, and could only imagine what kinds of utterly alien creatures resided in their depths. At the same time, these vast zones of life were not prepared to so easily reveal their best-kept secrets to scientists, as the waters of Demeter's

oceans were opaque. Above the water, the sky was a gradient of blue with the white trim above the horizon line, reminding Catherine just how alien this vibrant planet was. In addition, this pale fringe shifted to a greyer or blacker hue in the shadow of night, revealing how its opacity varied with the time of day.

At the same time, Catherine heard the constant clamor of the dropship's four powerful rotors, which drowned out her thoughts for a time, or at least until her detachment of aid workers landed on the sprawling black sand beaches of the Olympian Coast, hinting at the volcanic history of Demeter. This extensively documented scientific phenomenon went a long way in explaining the manifold geothermal pools marking the northern latitudes of this dynamic planet, which were seen as a miracle of nature by more spiritual individuals. Furthermore, Demeter experienced large tides due to the gravitational pull of its moon, Juno, which served as an immense mechanism dictating the pulse of life on the sands of the shifting shore. In particular, Catherine recalled the harsh warnings from her teachers and parents about swimming in the various coves and inlets of the Olympian Ocean and not going down to the water's edge when the tides were changing. Therefore, many of her childhood's beach days before the disastrous Second Corporate War were more defined by the gentle light of Hestia glowing white in the sky above than the cool embrace of the water, which was perfectly suitable for human life. It was also true that air masks would have to be worn at whenever people lingered outdoors on this planet, since Demeter's atmosphere was too rich in nitrates for human lungs to process. Catherine and her fellow interns wore masks covering their noses and mouths, and could only speak to one another via voice transmitters. By contrast, the three or four recruits on the dropship who hailed from Demeter did not need such technology, because their alien biology was well adapted to their homeworld's atmosphere.

At the same time, it was equally true that Catherine was a strange bird amongst her group of aid workers, as this college student valued getting up

early in the morning, much like her mother before her. In this regard, there was not much talking today on the dropship, whose shadow loomed over the striking rock arches, perilous promontories, along with the deep grottos of the rugged Olympian Coast. The dropship pilots let the passengers know that their fleet would soon be heading towards the ground, and the Drelones hummed loudly as they were engaged in this maneuver. After that, Catherine noticed they were now hovering near the volcanic beach, which remained widest at low tide. "Come on, recruits! Offload our perishables to the rovers waiting that way," commanded the head logistics officer Gha'n Temsa, who was part of Demeter's native peoples. This weathered galactic aid worker had experienced countless calamities during her loyal service with the council, specifically within the ranks of Demeter Relief Corps, which delivered food and other essentials to populations in need. More specifically, this logistics officer spoke in immense detail about how she helped the Aur Ge'lem peoples during the wildfires of the summer of 2245, with the assistance of the Demeter Relief Corps, and also how she aided both human and alien industrial laborers who were striking for better workers' protections in the Northern Corporate Concession in the winter of 2240. What Catherine and the other recruits enjoyed about Gha'n's stories was her boundless sense of humor and inherent kindness to all of those in need. This separated her from someone like Jason or some of the other soldiers Catherine had met in the past, who seemed to have empathy only for the human side of the conflict.

Another thing that was apparent in the life of this logistics officer was that the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid did not exist for the wants and needs of aliens, but instead aimed to serve the common good. Catherine was not at all surprised that this organization was run much like the military, specifically as Catherine and her colleagues were engaged in a battle against poverty and famine. As she saw it, these were foes that had been with humanity ever since the dawn of time, and could not so swiftly be defeated by riddling it with bullets.

Gha'n was a slender woman dressed in tactical clothing and an exoskeleton to help her lift the priceless cargo, with patches of lighter and darker skin marking her complexion, and her bulbous eyes appeared slightly opalescent. "Hartinger, you're strong enough... Show them how it's done!" the logistics officer continued, pointing at the cargo that needed to be moved from the back of the dropship to the handful of XC-22 Guardian rovers waiting higher up on the sandy expanse beneath them. Without a second thought, Catherine nodded at her with a swift "Yes, ma'am." At the same time, she coordinated the lifting of one of the boxes with her fellow recruit, Quil'vos An'dor, whose bluish complexion showed that he was one of Demeter's original inhabitants. The reliable exoskeletons worn by the council recruits made this task admittedly easy, although they remained by no means new technology. Still, it was just how fast they needed to do all this that complicated matters on this long summer's day. Catherine felt as if she were making her pacifist mother proud through her actions in the council, because she believed she could bring about change in the world. Indeed, she steadied her pulse and breath while she moved towards the downward-pitched ramp and jumped onto the sand, cushioned by inbuilt thrusters near her feet.

Meanwhile, the beach around Catherine was typical of those on Demeter in how it sprawled out for miles to the east and west, while receding ever further towards the waterline. It was not purely black either, but instead contained multitudes of shades of this color and even verged on stony grey and a rosy tan in other parts of its sandy expanse, which gently rose towards the cliffs behind it. This lowest part of the coast was simply too battered by the changing tides to have developed dunes, such as those of the Andromeda Dunes Planetary Park near the city of Nessea. Instead, it was covered in slender strands of bloom-kelp and untold thousands of sea shells from the ever churning Olympic Ocean. In addition, there was life on this beach in the form of amphibious shore-hounds, which were scared away by the sudden arrival of dropships in their territory; all

the while, graceful, social flocks of cloud-rays circled above Catherine's head. These flying animals made playful clicking and whistling sounds, helping calm Catherine's heart, overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the operation ahead of her. The wind continued to blow in her face, bringing with it a maritime dampness and coolness, while the waves of the waxing Olympic Ocean crashed against the shore. Still, Catherine could not truly take in all of the outstanding natural beauty here, as she had to attend to the efficient offloading of cargo. Throughout this operation, she could hear the exoskeleton's smooth movements around her, matching her every gesture, as she carefully lifted her cargo with mechanical grippers. Then, the logistics intern carried the first of forty or so food boxes to the rovers at the crest of a hill, walking swiftly across the black sand. At the same time, the security detail spread out and stood ready for any corporate ambush in the gusts of maritime wind. It should also be noted that Catherine's dropship was not in the slightest sense alone on the Olympic Coast that fateful morning, as there were four other craft whose various recruits and workers were doing exactly this. At the same time, a JL-496 Warrior gunship operated by the friendly members of the Demeter Planetary Defence Force soared in the skies above this absolutely vital cargo dropoff, providing further deterrence to anyone from Samson Private Contractors wishing to attack this galactic aid mission. Catherine, therefore, got the immediate sense not only of the sheer scale of the task ahead of her but also the notion that her organization could be assaulted at any time for providing much-needed services to an oppressed population. The native peoples were especially loathed by the corporations of Demeter, who had essentially forced them into refugee camps on the Olympian Coast.

Indeed, it was these people who likewise divided themselves into five or six tribes and adamantly resisted efforts to turn them human, holding on to their traditional way of life, including their language in the vast forests and marshes to the south of Cobalt City in the Northern Corporate Concession. It was also

this resilience that made them a prime subject of many studies in publications, including in the *New Olympia Anthropological Review*, while also making them a major target of corporate offensives, as these large companies loathed all that wasn't theirs. Catherine was convinced that the Ictu'l Vāar peoples deserved the basic human empathy and, more importantly, material support in the turbulent times that followed the Second Corporate War. Indeed, this was at least how Gha'n explained things to her recruits when they were not otherwise involved in documenting cargo for the handful of dropships, or even in the offloading the military-grade ordnance that had once been in their storage compartment and would be of little use during what was an extensive humanitarian mission.

More specifically, Catherine and her fellow college-age recruits were each armed with a Ajax-9 combat pistol, which their superiors had told them to use only in self-defense. There would be severe punishments for deploying it in vain, let alone to provoke an unwarranted attack, ranging from barring the offending individual from having ready access to small arms to dishonorable discharge from the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid. In addition, Catherine had been studying adamantly for the Galactic Aid Worker Admissions Examination for the better part of her first year at Calliope University. She had taken a lighter course load to make time for her test preparations. Just the same, Catherine had placed sixth in her class on this necessary part of her training, which had been implicit in the message she received from the council. Meanwhile this college student had not neglected to stay physically fit, practicing running and climbing three times a week under a trainer's supervision. Catherine was encouraged to run 10 miles along the perimeter of Calliope University on weekdays. At the same time, she took the initiative to hone her climbing skills by enrolling in climbing and parkour classes within the world-class sports facilities of the Aristokos Student Athletics Center. It was here that Catherine made progress in the fundamentals of human movement, as she had a background in gymnastics

before her studies. By contrast, Grace had not been so lucky or even had the same kind of athletic rigor as Catherine, or even most of the other recruits to the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid. By contrast, the idealistic and slightly naive Grace had intentionally forgotten their small arm in their temporary room. She was thus reassigned to another role, managing the ebb and flow of planetary aid cargo from Fort Agamemnon, which she accepted with tears in her eyes. Indeed, the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid was a little more empathic to the needs of its members than the colonial military, which would have been far harsher to any shadow of dissent. However, both organizations prioritized efficiency above all else: the council helped sentient beings, while the military promised swift destruction to Parnassus' immediate political enemies. This was why both of these entities deployed fleets ranging from rovers and lifter-mechs on land to gunships, dropships, and landers in the skies to achieve their goals. This was also why it was especially important for Catherine and her aid workers to act swiftly to transport the perishable cargo to the Damocles Falls refugee camp, where the rest of their galactic aid personnel would be heading.

All of this manual labor made Catherine think of the various other native tribes that would need similar planetary aid, including those that were standing up for their own lives, land and liberties in the Tharsis Mountains. The names of those particular native groups escaped this recruit's crowded conscience today, primarily because of her prevailing concern not to call a broader group of people by the names of their staunchest insurgents. Although Catherine did not have this problem in the past, she had unintentionally picked up this prejudiced habit from her bellicose brother who did not make such a necessary distinction. More specifically, Jason had gotten in trouble by calling the Icthul Vāar by the name of Vi'n Faandi and Bala't Jaeth which were the names of some of their partisans who were actively and violently resisting the dark designs of the military forces within the Western Corporate Concession. In addition, Jason liberally called any

alien with a weapon a terrorist, much to his mother's chagrin, who wished that he could better differentiate between partisans and freedom fighters. Whatever the case, Catherine sensed that the weather on this planet was about to shift from overcast to rainy, as barometric pressure dropped and the winds picked up around her, brushing against her skin. Catherine headed back to the waiting dropship to get a second food crate and then a third after that, treading the same well-worn path through the ashen, volcanic sand. Eventually, the work of moving the crates to the back of the rovers was nearing completion.

At the same time, Catherine began to notice some of the first raindrops speckling the visor of her field operations helmet. This helmet was admittedly not as enclosed as those worn by members of her security detail; however, it offered excellent protection from the rain and the elements, as it was designed to. Indeed, it was a common practice to adhere additional ballistic plates to this model of helmet, which was ill-conceived to stop a bullet or grenade fragment. This issue was primarily due to budget cuts that affected the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid, leaving its members exposed to the worst battlefield injuries. And the most telling thing was that almost everyone within this organization knew that budget cuts were to blame for the recent uptick in aid worker deaths. Soon after that, there was a downpour of rain on the sandy expanse sprawling out to the Olympian Waterway, whose waves continued to crash on the dark coasts of Demeter, whose tides had started to change. It was time for Catherine and her detachment of workers to march farther inland through the mud to the refugee camp where they would be deployed for the rest of the summer.

CHAPTER THREE

**OLYMPIAN COAST, PLANET DEMETER
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7TH, 2255.**

Catherine noticed that, for some unknown reason, her planet looked more beautiful in the rain, bringing hope of verdant renewal. Everything around her seemed to be serene, from the smallest canopy grazer climbing in the treetops to the largest speckled scrounger roaming amidst the forest undergrowth. Of course, Catherine remained an interstellar relations student as opposed to one specializing in xenobiology – or, quite literally, the study of alien wildlife– so she could not discern if her assessment of Demeter’s fauna was accurate. For all she knew, life in the vast forests around her would also be described by some more cynical scientists as being dominated by the utterly Darwinian concerns of finding reliable nourishment and shelter. In practice, Catherine knew this attitude well enough, especially since her middle school biology teacher, Mr. Ethan Clark, would frequently go off topic from his course materials to discuss the manifold ecological pressures that animals on this planet faced. In this light, almost all students at her middle school considered Mr. Clark right-wing because of his stark view of life, with little room for any form of beauty, and were not surprised when he was revealed to be a voter for the New Conservative Party. “It serves Mr. Clark well, being a conservative and all that... Those are the only people that I know who have absolutely no grace or even basic human empathy,” Penelope Lambert explained to Catherine after his political stance had been leaked.

However, Catherine did not have time to give much thought to the people from her middle school past, as there were pressing matters to attend to today. For example, this galactic aid worker was worried about the potential negative effects the rain would have on her exoskeleton down the road, since she thought this technology surely was not all-weather. At the same time, Catherine was the

first to admit that this highly flexible invention, mimicking the human body, had existed in some form since at least the late Twentieth Century and was often cited as one of the first steps towards the Second Space Age. Just the same, the settlers of Demeter had plenty of experience in the Twenty-Third Century about the ins and outs of this kind of man-machine. They would likely know some basic maintenance protocol for this workman's living tool. Catherine could think about the industries where exoskeletons like hers are used, from sanitation to medicine, and felt relieved that they were ubiquitous in the colonies.

They were, without a doubt, a victory for the commoner and so would not be commonly seen above a certain income bracket. This invention was even called the lazy man's bones by the conservative chair Damian Westfield, who had always come off as little more than an insult to anyone making less money than him. This senator, hailing from the State of Northern Corinth in the Republic of Parnassus, called federal aid programs "the poor leeching off the rich people" and once described galactic aid as "the natives becoming so rich they should challenge me to an election". Returning to her surroundings, Catherine examined the vibrant ecosystem around her, punctuated by slender nebula and nexus trees that some botanists would describe as conifers, with needles ranging in color from blue to green. Moreover, Demeter's soil seemed black, but an altogether different shade of black than that of the volcanic beaches she had traversed. At the same time, it was equally hard to confirm this because of the prevalence of teal, blue, and green plants in the Olympian underbrush, which crowded her field of vision. These plants included a wide variety of fronds, mosses, and bushes with names that were not necessarily familiar to Catherine, who all too often felt she needed a native guide to this dynamic planet. This distinct shade of this forest world was already different from those of Earth, whose trees ranged from red and orange in the autumn to green in the spring and summer. It equally felt overall more vibrant than Earth, for reasons that Catherine did not know.

Just the same, Earth was a distant planet that Catherine knew from the visual archives of the Carole J. Goodman Foundation for Human Culture, which she would flip through to understand her origins on the so-called Blue Planet. Furthermore, Catherine had visited this imposing building of sleek concrete on the north side of Founder's Park within New Arcadia and had many cherished memories there as a young child. For example, its permanent exhibit was rather poetically entitled '100 Views of Planet Earth' as it featured monumental full color photographs of this place, ranging from a church service in rural Canada to a native Zulu burial in the South African Commonwealth. However, a sense of tragedy pervaded all these visits, since she had never traveled there and would never do so. At the same time, there were hundreds of examples of Demeter's dynamic fauna around her going about their daily existence, and paying little mind to the galactic aid workers and their complicated exoskeletons.

More specifically, there was an army of segmented nocturnal beetles sucking on the sap of a tree trunk in front of Catherine. At the same time, she also disturbed a minuscule school of uncommon forest angels that fluttered from tree to tree in a beautiful dance of alien life. Indeed, the solitary form of a ring-tailed canopy grazer slowly but surely advanced through the tree-tops above Catherine, munching on handfuls of Pelletier's sun-bloom. Catherine knew that these were keystone protected species on this planet. She remembered being awed by their endearing qualities when she had seen them in captivity at a galactic zoo. Indeed, the last thing this college student had rediscovered about their genus was that they were not all that sedentary and could indeed burst into sudden movement when they felt threatened by some menacing predator. Once again, one of the reasons Catherine knew which species were threatened was the extensive activism of her wildlife artist uncle, who found himself just as often in front of the Chamber of Senators as he was practicing his craft.

In practice, her uncle Peter had even reluctantly hired an aspiring intern, Florence Isabelle Toussaint, from Catherine's interstellar relations courses, to handle the advocacy for the animals of Demeter over holo-call. For example, one of Peter's primary causes was better ecological management policies after the so-called 'Corinthian Culling' or 'Great Culling' of 2245, in which 10,000 southern mottled scrounger and other species were cruelly put to death in the mainly urbanized state of Corinth by Parnassus government agents, during a season when their grazing species were supposed to be regenerating their numbers. What disturbed Peter the most about this governmental action was not only the fact that scroungers were peaceful animals, but also that it had been motivated by the Golden Harvest Agrarian Partners, who had contributed to the circulation of propaganda against these animals. One especially popular slogan read "Help us Cull a scrounger today! And we will surely pay!" while another slogan proudly announced that "The Balance of Nature requires human intervention".

A weekly stipend of 2,000 Quasars would remunerate Florence for having to put up with the outright evil Parnassus political machine, which was all too frequently ruthless to the young and idealistic. Indeed, Catherine recognized that Florence fit exactly the mold of those struggling most in this regard, as this college student was profoundly spiritual and believed that the essence of the divine was everywhere in nature. Catherine and many of her fellow galactic aid recruits seemed to follow some form of this pantheistic philosophy, since it was essential to the profound empathy required to care for those in desperate need of food and medical attention. It was Gha'n who was speaking with the recruit Marco Francesco Toscanini, hailing from the city of New Thebes, about the Demeter Relief Corps' procedures and practices regarding the essential needs of the Oraan Rie'ff peoples living in extreme poverty. However, it was clear that their planetary organization did not have many direct financial plans to help the locals of this world; however, they put them in contact with resources available

at the Emergency Wealth Fund. Likewise, this organization operated under the auspices of the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid, which had likewise suffered through the same budget cuts as the Demeter Relief Corps. Catherine had been left with a positive impression of the finance officers at the Emergency Wealth Fund, who always led their interactions with empathy. This was in contrast to the often disaffected bureaucrats of the much larger federal-level Commission for Economic Assistance, who felt less responsible for individual suffering. Catherine knew that Penelope's mother, Annemarie Pascale Lambert, was once a hard-working employee of this stifling federal organization before joining the Emergency Wealth Fund. Annemarie remained an optimist, and her team was efficient at developing creative funding solutions for complex issues. This much, at least, was apparent when Catherine overheard Penelope's mother working in the morning while Penelope enjoyed some teenage holo-drama. Catherine could rest easy in the knowledge that she was doing the maximum good possible for the people displaced by the Second Corporate War during her posting this summer, despite the adverse economic and societal factors she detested.

Eventually, the march of these aid workers through the inclement weather was brought to a grinding halt by the emergence of a herd of western speckled scroungers from the underbrush, seemingly just as lost as they were. In practice, these quadrupedal herbivores were roughly the size of a human adult, and for now at least seemed to be content to quietly eat their diet of common glistening glowberries and azure fairy-root from the forest floor. Of course, these animals were resplendent in the namesake horns of their species, which extended above their heads, and also contained four eyes whose color was as black as night. scroungers had a mottled coloration that made them harder to track by greater frilled stalkers. Likewise, these animals were known to emit fungal musk from what they readily devoured from the forest floor, which effectively confused their primary predators on planet Demeter. By contrast, Catherine recognized that this

secondary ability emerged only around adolescence in these creatures, and thus their younger offspring would remain vulnerable to predation. The scroungers, too, were considered sacred by the native peoples of Demeter and even by some human settlers, who strongly opposed the ecologically destructive elements of the Parnassus Senate's decades-long mass culling. "Let the scroungers eat in peace, recruits!" Gha'n reminded them. "They might seem docile, but they can be deadly when they have their young with them," she continued. Therefore, the recruits and their senior officers waited in the rain for these majestic animals to move along the beaten-earth path beneath their feet, which generally followed the A-59 service road to their left. Therefore, these workers from an organization that privileged efficiency above all were not genuinely in the middle of nowhere, specifically because this breathtaking section of the Olympian Coast vasculated between the call of the wilderness and the comforts of civilization.

Once again, the truth was that the wild Demeter existed only in Planetary Parks and could not be found by taking a walk through a random stretch of alien forest. And yet, these animals seemed to bask in their grace, not budging from the path in front of the recruits. Sometimes they moved their heads; but, it was only to bellow a droning call that served as a form of communication before returning to eat vegetation from the forest floor. Catherine and her galactic aid workers found themselves, therefore, at an impasse with the local fauna of the Olympian Coast, to such an extent that she wondered why they had not opted to take the main service road. Meanwhile, The rain continued to fall on the recruits, washing over their exoskeletons and seeping into their fatigues. Catherine felt her breath filtering through her oxygen mask, humming and buzzing with each inhale and exhale, and noticed it was a contraption that processed ambient air, with no long hoses or tubes to speak of. It was safer that way as no stray bullet could pierce the exposed airway, leaving the user to asphyxiate, which was a major risk on a planet with an atmosphere rich in nitrates like Demeter.

Furthermore, Catherine felt relieved that this summer's day was neither too hot nor too cold, a rarity on her planet, historically known for its variable temperatures. Indeed, there were times when the world's ecosystem appeared to hibernate during frigid polar winters, and other moments of the significantly shorter year when animals were overcome with heatstroke due to summers in which the forests also burned to ash. It was equally impossible to dress well for the transitional seasons of spring and fall, as one day could be mild and the next sweltering, or even freezing. However, Catherine would not leave this climate for any of the others on the moons or planets of the Hestia-V solar system, which were deadly to humans. Catherine would rather feel hot or cold on Demeter any day over perilously freezing, for example, on Demeter's moon of Juno. Catherine did not see the point in colonizing Juno, as there was a poetic beauty in leaving it as a remote, silvery goddess, rightfully inaccessible to all of humankind.

"With all due respect, ma'am, what even is the point of us being here? We should have taken the main road today to get to the refugee camp, riding on the rovers that we loaded up with food," Marco asked in an annoyed tone.

"We are here because this is specifically what our logistics officer wants us to do, and that is a good enough explanation for me. If you don't like that, maybe you should seek work elsewhere," An'dor suggested with a shrug.

"I perfectly understand that this is what Gha'n and Drelo want us to do, but that does not necessarily make it a good idea. What I am trying to tell you is that we would have been better off on the rovers..." Marco began to reply

"Recruits... We are on this forest path because it will eventually take us to the refugee camp, which is not exactly accessible by road. I am also not certain about the safety of this area, specifically because I have heard credible reports of mercenaries amassing their forces," Gha'n explained to Marco calmly.

"Yes.. But, can't we fight those mercenary bastards?" interrupted Marco

"That might be all well and good in theory; nevertheless, we are ruthlessly outnumbered in practice. We are, above all, an aid force and not a combat one, so we can only use our arms in self-defense." Drelo tensely elaborated

"Right... I forgot about that because we used military hardware to offload the food boxes on the beach. We had such an overwhelming force in that phase of our mission, so I wonder what has changed," Marco timidly admitted

"Let me help you out here, recruit. I believe that what has changed is that you have begun to realize that we are not exactly welcome here. You may have also heard from Parnassus finest politicians that the Second Corporate War is well and truly over, however that is not quite the case," illustrated Gha'n

"Thus, what you are telling me here is that this is an active warzone in a nation that should be at peace. I never realized that this was the case, and so you have given me a new perspective on such matters," Marco answered

"The war is ongoing, despite what you have heard," explained Drelo

At this, Marco collapsed into the arms of Gha'n with tears in his eyes, since he was exhausted from all the fighting and dying of a war that seemed to have no foreseeable end in sight. For her part, the older logistics officer knelt on the forest floor to comfort one of the recruits in her detachment, because she was tired of hearing news of another corporate massacre or war crime. It was all starting to become too much for Marco, who was rightfully exhausted.

"My family decided to leave Earth and move to this planet all those years ago in the hopes that something, anything, would be different.. It is now dawning upon me that it was naive to think we would be spared from warfare, but that is asking too much of humanity," Marco anxiously murmured between tears.

"We need to be strong to live in the wake of war, and to make it out on the other side with a more compassionate view of people as a whole. In addition, what we are asking you to do as a member of the Demeter Relief Corps is to take care of those displaced by carnage", Gha'n explained warmly.

"It is likewise important to show some level of emotion in this profession without becoming overwhelmed by the immense suffering observed all around you to such an extent that you cannot help those in need. The truth, once again, is that you have to be ready to empathize with victims who have been targeted with a terrible list of the worst atrocities imaginable," Drelo elaborated.

"Well, from now on, I will dedicate myself more than ever to this mission, especially since I have all the physical and emotional qualities to be of service to those who require further assistance. Also, I hope that there is a special place in hell for these corporations," Marco admitted with a hand on his heart

"That's the spirit! Now we should try to make our way down this rugged road to the refugee camp, as we cannot waste a second of our precious time. I just hope that these animals make way for us, as we have..." An'dor began

"I think that it is worth giving it a few more minutes, and then maybe we can try to get this herd of scroungers to get off the road for us. I was raised as a child of the Ha'ath Ciruul peoples, and we have an all-abiding respect for the fauna of this planet. In practice, it does not matter if it's scroungers, stalkers, or other animals, because it's all the same to me." Gha'n demonstrated

"Very well then, I can see where you are coming from. So, we wait... This should also give me the time to socialize with some of the recruits, as I don't think that Italians like myself are too common here," Marco concluded.

At that moment, the visibly relieved Marco pivoted to Catheri, who had remained mostly silent up to that point, specifically because she felt she had nothing substantial to add to the ongoing conversation. Marco had a mess of chestnut hair, a pair of blue-gray eyes, and a graceful nose on an oval face with a lively complexion. What set Marco apart from the rest of the recruits in this detachment of the Demeter Relief Corps was certainly his eyes, which seemed to be cybernetic, but Catherine could not yet discern why that would be the case without talking to him. Catherine remembered that implants were more readily

available in cities than in rural areas, and were rather expensive investments that demanded continual care from their sometimes grateful owners. "Before you ask, my father is a banker at Alpha Centauri Capital, and a founding investor in Renslaer Robotics Incorporated. My ocular implants were a gift after years of being blind as a child, and a life-saving investment at that". Marco told Catherine in a slightly hurried voice, as if it were his first time revealing this information to anyone outside his family and friends. Catherine took a step back as she needed to reconsider if someone whose parents belonged to a major corporation could be anti-corporation. All of a sudden, there was a large disturbance nearby before Catherine could think about what to do next. The dozen aid workers had been discovered in the Olympian underbrush by the mercenaries of Samson Private Contractors, who had taken the major service road to find them. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that these were hostile people, since their lion logo was prominently visible throughout their equipment, along with their company name. In addition, these soldiers wore higher-quality gear than the members of the Demeter Relief Corps were provided by their malicious corporate employer.

These soldiers were dressed in Achilles-5 battle armor and outgunned them because they possessed not only a range of small arms but also an LX-25 Harbinger Spider-Tank on their side, whose long barrel was aimed straight at the scroungers, quick to move away from this chaos. This war machine was called a spider-tank specifically because of its six robust legs which extended from its vehicle chassis, helping it traverse the terrain beneath it. However, it was equally true that this kind of crawling vehicle was not much use outside the major cities of Demeter whose flat concrete surfaces allowed for plenty of contact between the tank's shifting legs as well as its surrounding urban environment. It was also said that all models of spider-tank could climb the facades of buildings with a certain ease due to the magnetization of their pylons, in a manner that tracked vehicles like the LG-460 Bulwark Tank were never designed to do. Another thing

that remained remarkably consistent across all colonial military vehicles were their various markings ranging from numbers to words, along with their dense coverage of vents, exhaust ports and other industrial elements. Catherine also noticed that none of these well-armed vehicles seemed especially new for their mercenary forces, and instead could tell the story of a long and loyal service through the blemishes marking their armor-plated surface. For that matter, the recruit could have sworn that she had never before seen a brand new tank, since they all seemed rather dated by the standards of her bellicose age.

What happened next surprised Catherine, particularly since their logistics officers handed themselves over to these corporate forces, on the condition that they would not be tortured for confidential information, like the coordinates of the North Falls refugee camp, or how many civilians they were taking care of at that moment. The commander of this well-armed, corporate-backed detachment was the soldier Gerhart Boudwjin Schongauer, who seemed to be reasonable enough on the surface. More specifically, Gerhard was a slender individual with a great beard and otherwise minimal hair, a pair of blue eyes of which one was marked by a scar and a jagged face punctuated by prominent cheekbones and a sharp nose. Catherine recognized somewhere that this man could not be trusted in the slightest after looking at Gerhard through the Olympian underbrush, since this high-ranking mercenary looked like the kind of individual who was just barely holding back a psychotic break. Just the same, Catherine could see it in Gerhart's eyes that he seemed like the kind of person who had been broken by war and had nothing but the darkest rage towards the world around him. By contrast, it was agreed that the scattered and scared recruits could make their way to the Damocles Falls refugee camp, which was not far from their location, with no fear of retribution. Meanwhile, the rain continued to fall on Demeter, drenching everything in its path and bringing with it the fleeting hope that all this trauma would be washed away imminently into a better world.

"I have seen terrible things when I was embedded for three months as an investigative reporter in the Western Corporate Concessions military forces. I bore witness to the destruction of whole tracts of forest and the eradication of entire villages by these people who some call the heroes of the colonies."

– Francine Prudhomme, Investigative Journalist for the New Arcadia Times during the New Arcadia Trials, January 6th, 2257.

CHAPTER FOUR

**OLYMPIAN FOREST, PLANET DEMETER
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7TH, 2255.**

For the first time in a long time, Catherine was immensely scared at the thought of losing her life during her service with the Demeter Relief Force at the hands of some corporate-backed Samson mercenary. She could feel her heart racing along with the breath burning in her lungs as she ran for her life through the Olympian underbrush, only stopping to bend over and gasp for air. Catherine knew somewhere within her heart that the worst aspect of this fear of death was how she did not know where or how it would occur, and, to be honest, she would rather focus on the radiant glow of life than the dark abyss of death on the frontlines of the Second Corporate War. Catherine did not want to have to draw up a list of everything that could wound her in this violent world, since that would not be productive in confronting these harsh emotions. Just the same, Catherine looked back frantically over her shoulder to see if anyone from the mercenary force was following them through a forest that grew denser and more alien with every turn in the ground beneath her feet. Catherine was the first to remember that forests like the one Catherine was in were three-dimensional spaces, with hundreds of gullies and grottos, caves and crevices, beneath the underbrush, warranting a lifetime of exploration. With this in mind, Catherine knew that she was always one fatal step away from tumbling feet-first into one of these narrow casms where creatures like the fungiphage abysmal crawler dwelled, a kind of fauna one would not want to see under bright light.

In this light, the nexus and nebula trees, which had once lined the sides of this quiet path, eventually gave way to the far stranger species of helix and halcyon trees, which curved, bent, and warped in ways that defied any idea of common sense. But, then again, the college student needed to remind herself

that Demeter was distinctly not Earth and, likewise, brought with it its own kinds of established logic that she would do best to follow, to appreciate the true beauty of this place. Just the same, Catherine and many other people in her generation had learned about the futility about applying Earth-based logic to the frequently bizarre yet beautiful whims of Demeter thanks to the Azimuth Award winning holo-novel 'The First Generation' by Shanti Patel, which recounted in no uncertain amount of detail all of the discomforts of a life on the Frontier for a family of Indian origin, whose main couple, Varuni and Priya, were employed by one of the major timber companies of the planet. Catherine remembered how, in the final scene of this page-turner, Varuni finds himself trapped in a forest fire in the wilderness after a grueling fight with his corrupt foreman, Mr. Whitmore, and succumbs to smoke inhalation at the base of a helix tree. For her part, Catherine never understood why people, including her frequently bored fellow high school classmates, enjoyed 'The First Generation' so much, because Catherine believed that it was exploitative of the stories of real working-class people. Nevertheless, when she reread it as a college student over winter break due to a dare from her father, Catherine was the first to admit that this holo-novel's broadly sublime descriptions of flora and fauna were especially compelling, even if Catherine was not ready to part with the plot opinions she had made as an adolescent. Just the same, Catherine thought that the immersive movie that had been made of 'The First Generation' improved the plot of the rather long holo-novel into a more compact and understandable form, which she thoroughly enjoyed.

Likewise, the helix trees populating the forest all around her had trunks forming an ethereal webbing through which winds passed, rather than stopping them in their tracks. Meanwhile, halcyon trees had tightly coiled trunks and wide root networks that anchored them in place against even the mightiest storm. The rain continued to pour over the Olympian wilderness, dripping through the canopy and seeping into churning rivulets on the forest floor amid the verdant

layers of Thyssen's common broadleaf and western ancestral woodbine. It was equally true that these blue- and green-leaved plants had little in common with their Earth counterparts, and therefore these names emerged as a compromise among different branches of science within the Proxima Centauri System. By contrast, Catherine could not consider the nuances of this debate or even many of the more vibrant aspects of the forest around her, even while the college student moved desperately through fronds and plants up to her hips. She was joined in her life-or-death dash by many of her fellow recruits, some of whom she knew and some of whom she didn't, who now were facing the prospect of what to do without a commanding officer in the middle of the forest.

There were Marco and An'dor closely and swiftly following Catherine with a fearful look on their faces, along with Catherine's fellow New Arcadia native Zoryanna Teresa Kosobrucka, coming from a primarily military family. Moreover, it seemed that this college-aged girl had chosen this line of work to distance herself from the violence of combat, as she told Catherine. Zoryanna appeared also intensely religious and remained steadfast in her belief that any form of conflict and its large-scale violence was a crime against the divine. For her part, Catherine admired Zoryanna's outspoken confidence and boundless energy in these matters. She was surprised that Zoryanna had not taken the initiative to start this run through the writhing, hostile thicket. There were, of course, other Demeter Relief Corps recruits more distantly following Zoryanna and Catherine, whose names they did not know at the present moment. And so these scattered members of the middle class of the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus continued ever onwards through the driving rain. And yet, they dashed into the forest, trying to get to the North Falls refugee camp as soon as possible. Nevertheless, there was no saying for now where exactly this was, since the underbrush was a dizzying place. In this light, Catherine remembered when she had managed to lose her own parents at the heart of Aurora Moss Trail within the Tharsis Grottos

Planetary Park during a weeklong trip to visit her novelist aunt, Margaret Rosa Hartinger, who lived in the nearby Tharsis City. What occurred next was that the 6-year-old Catherine was kindly picked up by a family called the Gallaghers while the young girl was crying at the very split in the road where she had lost Thomas and Elizabeth. Catherine would be later reunited with her concerned parents at the park's entrance. For her part, Catherine's mother was relieved to see their daughter return so quickly, especially after Thomas had contacted local law enforcement and park rangers. Thomas was not ready to give up any shred of hope for Catherine, but this lawyer-turned-father showed some emotion when his daughter hugged him with all of her might. In general, her father always had a hard time expressing negative emotions such as fear and anger, at least in his professional work. That being said, he possessed a guiding sense of justice that valued what society deemed good actions over bad ones. However, Thomas also liked a good meal, so he was quick to invite the Gallaghers to Silver Comet Diner, where Thomas covered for everyone's meals one summer's night.

Another detail that Catherine remembered from the time was that she devoured a scrounger burger at the dinner, itself a bad cut of meat cooked to perfection. She was also not one to believe that all of her food-related memories were the most succulent experiences out there, and was always quick to ask what people's strangest meat they had eaten before was when Catherine was at an innocent age. However, Catherine did not have the time at this moment to reminisce so longingly about days of futures past, specifically because she was now running out of air from all the running simply due to the very human limits of her lungs, and not, since she was imagining due to some malfunction of her oxygen mask. In her winded state, Catherine hooked her foot on a gnarled root of a helix tree, which made her fall onto Demeter's black soil, which was itself rich in phosphides. The recruit felt a dull pain spreading throughout her body from her fall onto the forest floor, which was severe due to the incline of the land

beneath her feet, causing her to tumble down the hill before coming to rest on a bed of Gossler's western lilies. Catherine knew that the flowers were a cultural shorthand for death in many local cultures since they fermented organic matter on the forest floor. With this thought in her mind, Catherine was quick to want to walk away from them. And yet, this Demeter Relief Corps recruit simply did not feel like she had the strength at this moment to lift herself from the black earth, and so contented herself with a view of the insects she could manage to see on this rainy morning. For example, this college student observes the ribbon-like bodies of Elysian silver scuttlers and the bulbous, speckled shells of Tharsis forest beetles, both of which she thought would appeal to entomologists.

Zoryanna slowed her pace as she had heard Catherine stumble onto the forest floor, and eventually turned around to help her get back up and continue their advance in the wilderness. Zoryanna was quick to signal to the rushed recruits to slow down with a raised hand. She had seen at Fort Agamenon and at dozens of other military installations her parents, Kazimir and Jagiella, had served in. She made it over to Catherine's fallen body, scaring away some of the insects that kept Catherine company with heavy steps in the Olympian flora.

"Whoa there! Are you alright? This looked like quite the fall. Would you like me to check you for any severe injuries?" Zoryanna asked with a smile

"I'm perfectly fine, Zoryanna. And yes, this was a large fall, as you have noticed, specifically because a root and a hill were involved. I don't think that I have any broken bones or anything," Catherine breathlessly responded.

"I'll believe you, Catherine, although I am the assigned medical officer to this detachment. Is any of your gear broken?" Zoryanna calmly inquired

"No.. Not that I know of. All of my equipment is in working order. Are you equally a mechanic on top of being a medical officer?" Catherine explained

"I am thankfully just a medic, so any knowledge of how your exoskeleton works or doesn't work is beyond me" Zoryanna told her while laughing

"Well, that's good. We don't want you to have too many roles, since that would be tiring for you. This makes me think of all the times when my mother tried to take on creative projects outside of work," Catherine elaborated

"Wait just a minute... Isn't your mother the New Arcadia senator Elizabeth Marie Hartinger of the Frontier Socialist Party? I have always thought she was a galvanizing public speaker and an amazing politician," Zoryanna inquired

"Yes... I am that senator's daughter, and an outstanding child at that. For example, did you know that I got lost at the Tharsis Grottos planetary park when I was six years old? Do you have any similar memories?" Catherine asked

"I'll do you one better, Catherine. I remember hiding on a JD-114 Colossus lander, which I thought was out of service, while I was playing hide-and-seek with my mother, who was a lieutenant, when I was also six. Turns out it was an active platform, and I nearly ended up in orbit aboard a capital ship if not for the intervention of an officer. In fact, you should have seen his look of complete and utter confusion when he found me, as I bet you that no one is expecting to run into a carefree, energetic child in such a place," Zoryanna vigorously insisted

"That makes my memory seem like nothing," Catherine interjected

"Thankfully, my mother gladly gave me a more formal lesson on military hardware after this incident, especially the kinds of platforms that I was not to be allowed upon without extensive supervision." Zoryanna admitted

Both girls laughed at their shared childhood experiences of being lost and found again, bringing some levity to this serious morning. After that, Zoryanna helped Catherine onto her feet, before dusting off the dirt that had accumulated on her fatigues. They next headed out of the bed of flowers, which seemed to be as much of a place that really existed as one from a time of legend.

"Are you young ladies done gossiping? We need to continue heading out towards the refugee camp, although I'll be the first to admit that our unit may very well be lost without a logistics officer's guidance," Marco asked them.

"Yes, we're done talking about how gorgeous we think that we are, as well as how our beauty makes us better than all the normal girls. Next time, we will make sure to include you in our discussions..." Catherine began to respond

"That won't be necessary, Catherine. Moreover, Marco aren't you or one of your friends supposed to be the junior navigational officer of our detachment, with a plethora of holo-maps at your disposal?" Zoryanna interrogated

"Yes, Zoryanna. That is my responsibility after all, and I will gladly step up to fill this vacancy in our command structure until we get to the Damocles Falls Refugee Camp. I don't know why I wanted to deflect it." Marco illustrated

"Well then, Marco. All we need to do is pull up one of the holo-maps of this stretch of forest so that we don't end up getting lost in inclement weather in an area of wilderness which none of us know," Zoryanna instructed Marco.

"And there is the major issue glaring back at us. I don't have high-quality holo-maps of this area, so I've instead sent out a beacon to all local units, who will be given our coordinates to save us," Marco elaborated with a grin.

"That's thoughtful of you, Marco. What do we do now?" asked Zoryanna

"Well, we need to wait a couple of hours for the extract," Marco answered

So, the various Demeter Relief Corps recruits decided on the spot to take a seat on the scattered stones and tree trunks of this stretch of forest, as they waited for some ideally friendly dropship or gunship to descend from above and save them, following Marco's instructions. It became immediately clear who was on good terms with whom, with the unspoken politics of choosing someone to spend time with, which brought everyone in the detachment back to the rather recent days of middle school. More specifically, Zoryanna decided to get to know Catherine a little better during this moment in the heart of nature, and so adamantly told this fellow New Arcadia native everything about herself. For example, the junior medical officer told Catherine that she had been raised in a rather conservative household because of her parents' major involvement in the

galactic military. Yet, they still made time to have fun with their daughter as she grew up. Zoryanna vividly remembered feeling lonely when one of her parents was on campaign on Juno or even Medea, for that matter, and dreamt of visiting these breathtaking off-world places. Zoryanna then showed Catherine a handful of her expressionistic watercolors of Juno, which the medic kept at the bottom of her backpack, capturing this moon of Demeter in its transient beauty.

By contrast, Catherine was just as quick to discuss some of her stranger experiences with the group of thermies known as the Children of Stardu, a group that was strongly politically active on the left wing. One of their core beliefs was that humanity should eat meat and dairy only in moderation, while respecting nature and wearing little clothing. Some of Catherine's most formative childhood experiences were bathing, running, and living in the nude on summer weekends. At the same time, Zoryanna was quick to note that this was not how the locals of Demeter made their living, especially given the planet's immense temperature variability. Also, Catherine was the first to admit that she still wore an air mask even in her supposedly natural state, so her contact with the wilderness was mediated through technology. Of course, Catherine admitted that there was a cruel measure of irony to all of this, where she could never really be at home in Demeter: an alien world in a solar system far away from humanity's homeworld of Earth. And yet, Catherine also insisted that she had never been to Earth and likely would never end up there, specifically since her only extensive contact with this planet was through art and media, especially those conserved at New Arcadia's Goodman Center for Human Culture. At this point, Catherine and her new friend Zoryanna felt a painful, melancholic longing for Earth, evident in their gazes into the distance, which likewise brought them together in this poetic expression of societal grief. In this light, this vague kind of longing was more commonly known as "Earth-sickness" by a range of colonists and as "Planetary Depressive Disorder" by the leading psychologists of the New Olympia Institute

for the Mind. It was a major factor permeating life on Demeter. Likewise, the experimental medication known as Anticetam for the debilitating forms of this condition essentially gave its users a form of amnesia about the existence of planet Earth. Catherine did not know what to think about all of this, although the physicians in her life were quick to criticize Anticetam as an ethically dubious medication, doing little to resolve the grief of leaving the Earth behind them.

Whatever the case may be, the Demeter Relief Corps recruits were soon discovered in the middle of the wilderness by another dropship, this time sent by the operations manager at the Damocles Falls Refugee Camp. This craft was, by all means, an imposing hovering platform that announced its presence in the area with plenty of light and noise. In practice, their logistics officers had been in close contact with their operations managers, who acted quickly in dispatching a dropship to the location of the remaining recruits right after Gha'n and Drelo got abducted by Samson Private Contractors. Meanwhile, Zoryanna remained just as quick to direct the aid trainees to a nearby clearing from the dense tree coverage that one of them had found by using large and visible hand gestures. For his part, Marco stayed in close communication with the pilot of the dropship, who followed them to the glade where this multi-function craft was able to hover above ground for some time. Next, the director of aid operations at Damocles Falls, who was a highly ambitious native woman by the name ShelVāar Tardas, descended from this dropship, surrounded by heavily armed guards in battle armor. More than anything, this gesture was a show of force for the Demeter Relief Corps, who would not sit idly by. At the same time, the corporate-backed Samson mercenaries were abducting their officers. Eventually, Catherine and the recruits made it across the clearing to the waiting dropship, forming a single-file line as they had been taught to do in basic training. Meanwhile, the head of operations beckoned them in this direction before ensuring the dropship ramp was sealed in anticipation of their imminent departure from this place.

The rain continued to fall on planet Demeter from the stratosphere above and could be heard tapping on the fuselage of the dropship. Moreover, Catherine could hear the distant roll of thunder and felt relieved to be inside a sealed vehicle rather than out in the open. To be sure, Zoryanna and Catherine's fatigue from field operations was so severe that the platform crew provided them with thermal blankets. After this rescue, Shelvāar turned to them and said, "First and foremost, my apologies for how those corporate mercenaries took your logistics officers. I thought these bastards would respect the fact that you are young trainees, in line with an agreement our legal teams reached. However, I guess I was once again wrong, and that Samson just led us into a trap again." Then she took a breath and continued, claiming that "Anyway, now that you are safe and warm, we should be well underway to the North Falls Refugee Camp, which is only one of the five aid points that we operate around this city." The dropship flew out of the forest to the North Falls Refugee Camp, located only a couple of miles north of the clearing, while the rain continued to wash over their platform, itself produced by Anderson Aeronautics. In this light, Catherine and Zoryanna were relieved to be safe and sound in the dropship, and were certain they would find their own roles at the refugee camp, whose rugged, ready-made structures and hundreds of tents soon appeared on the horizon. The recruits were not at all shocked at the hardship of life in the North Falls refugee camp, and yet seemed determined to work their hardest to improve their living conditions.

CHAPTER FIVE

**NORTH FALLS CAMP, PLANET DEMETER
THURSDAY, JUNE 8TH, 2255.**

Catherine lay in her bunk at dawn after a predictably strange dream and spent some time reflecting upon all the beauty of Demeter, which was much more than just a forest world. For example, the college student considered for a moment that this planet had marshlands and swamps interspersed with more wooded areas, where the ground was darker than in a forest, and the flora was grey and purple as well. Furthermore, there were windswept plains and polar expanses as well on this vibrant and rather varied planet, with the former biome introducing vibrant shades of red, sometimes in the form of crimson and other times in the form of umber, to Demeter's wide-ranging color palette. Otherwise, various specialized animals lived and died in these places of natural beauty, which Catherine recognized more by shape than by name. For example, the young and argumentative Catherine became quick to distinguish between the scrounger and the moss-walker when their family watched documentaries, as these were species the girl knew well from her precocious childhood. Likewise, Catherine could tell everyone around the table fun facts about these creatures even late into the night, and once dreamed of becoming a xenobiologist.

By contrast, her brother Jason was not really moved by much of what the natural world had to offer on Demeter, and frequently thought of animals only as targets to be savagely killed, which he would describe in detail. For his part, her adopted brother was not even impressed by the sheer scale of gunships and dropships when a family friend suggested that maybe Jason was a good fit for the military, because the young child from a profoundly troubled household only found relief in potential slaughter. All of this worrying behavior was the cause of the first intervention by New Arcadia Child Services, and for a time, it seemed

that Jason was getting better and actually acting in an age-appropriate manner; however, he was quick to backslide just as suddenly into old tendencies once these support structures were eventually removed after a couple of years. It was under these same pressures that Jason sought out the teenagers whom Child Services' Intensive Recovery Program had failed, many of whom had been at Jason's previous Bridgeman Street Orphanage, to learn what he should do next. It was here that Jason encountered Charles Mason Westfield, the first son of the New Conservative Party Senator Damian Westfield, struggling with an addiction to the psychotropic substance known on the streets as Amaranth. It was unclear even to this day exactly what Charles told Jason, or the level of detail he used in his instructions; however, his words about becoming a hedonist against all odds seem to have stayed with Jason forever. And all of this was even more terrifying, especially since Jason had two loving parents in more recent memory, Thomas and Elizabeth, who slowed down their public careers to help their son.

As she saw it, her adoptive brother was determined to become more of a fighter of some kind than a soldier in the strict sense, specifically since he had violent tendencies originating from his troubled early childhood. Jason equally seemed to have no capacity at all for large-scale tactical thinking let alone any form of diplomacy beyond trying to overpower everything and everyone with his brute strength. For example, this child often got into fights even with supposed authority figures, only stopping or demonstrating a level of deference to anyone holding a weapon like an army or police officer. However, Catherine did not have the time to think right now about exactly where the healthcare systems had failed her younger brother, since such a thought simply required too much pain for her to endure this early in the morning. In addition, she found herself in the habitation quarters for the aid workers within the North Falls Refugee Camp, and so the college student looked forward to the day ahead. More specifically, she had no idea what the next day held for her fellow recruits, as it was her first

time in the refugee camp and she had little notion of the typical schedule of a hard-working member of the Demeter Relief Corps. And so, Catherine took a while to stare at the metallic plating and light fixtures on the ceiling of the aid worker's housing block, which felt like an eternity, especially since this college student had no one else to talk to. After that, Catherine drew up the curtain on her bedside window and took a look at her surroundings. Thankfully, the storm had cleared by this hour of the morning, and the air seemed clear at dawn. Catherine could observe slender sunshafts appearing between the buildings of the North Falls Refugee Camp, which were ready-made, modular structures that could be transported via dropship to any place with people in need.

What was significant in these buildings was that they were sealed against the nitrogen-saturated atmosphere of Demeter, and it would likewise be these recruits' weekly task to double-check the seals on all the buildings within the refugee camp, amongst other responsibilities. This was primarily because these modular buildings were known to be among the least secure places for humans to live, and their manufacturer, The Dynamic Homes Group, had gotten into legal trouble for producing houses with a lackluster overall oxygen levels. This was at least what Thomas had told Catherine when Dynamic Homes was put on trial in the summer of 2248, in what her father boldly considered to be a major legal case whose ramifications she had not really considered until now. Indeed, it took some living in less-than-optimal conditions like what she was currently doing at the North Falls Refugee Camp, for Catherine to understand the vulnerability of the people who relied daily on Dynamic Homes products which had a proven risk of air leakage. For example, this student spent much of the night's waking hours worrying about the risk of losing internal air, and was relieved to see a specialized notch for her mask on the wall near her building's airlock. Eventually, Catherine found it within herself to leave the comfort of her bunk bed and start her morning with a walk outside at one of the day's quietest moments so that

she could confront it head-on and reason with it. Therefore, Catherine got out of bed and accessed her backpack and a larger travel bag, which had been kept in a storage area below the bottom bunk. In particular, this second piece of luggage had been offloaded from the dropship on the beach alongside the food crates, but was given less priority when it came to the rovers. For her part, Catherine looked visibly relieved to be reunited with the meager remainder of her belongings, especially the clothes closest to her skin, which would have to be changed more often. At the present moment, Catherine was dressed in her technical underwear, whose design seemed not to have changed for centuries. At the same time, Catherine knew that even here her life was more comfortable than those of people in centuries past, and likewise had a hard time imagining the material conditions of say, the Twenty First Century. By and large, this student trusted Hyperborea Sportswear's products due to their comfort for an athletic girl like herself and because of their ability to absorb sweat after hours of work, even though she was not one to neglect her hygiene. For what it was worth, Catherine always showered in the morning after she had breakfast even when most of her colleagues washed off sometime in the evening.

Another thing came to Catherine's mind in that she was raised in a family which privileged spending a plethora of intimate moments together and it was not uncommon for her mother or father or some friend from school, even if they were a boy, to ease her concerns while she was getting clean by being there and talking to her at length. In other words, Catherine grew up in a time and place in which she could liberally choose to be alone whenever she wanted rather than having solitude thrust upon her when she needed more human connection. Or perhaps the thought that so weighed upon her conscience today was how the shower in all of its stainless steel glory had not significantly changed ever since the beginnings of the millennium. To this end, Catherine had seen photographic proof of this, because she had gotten bored one day when she was young and

decided to proverbially annoy Calliope University's research librarian, a woman by the name of Stephanie Lewis-Maddox, who was something of a family friend, through Peter. "Ask me anything, your little heart desires" Stephanie claimed "as we will certainly have a book for it in the holo-stacks". For her part, Catherine took her up on her offer specifically because the girl had been given no further instructions about what was on and off the proverbial table. Thus, showers it was, and Stephanie more than delivered on her end of the deal, by confirming what Catherine had suspected: they had not evolved in about 300 years.

Catherine was quick to find her fatigues, which she was surprised to see had been diligently folded by an unknown person. Thankfully, a handwritten note fell gracefully from her clothes when she unfolded them, so Catherine eagerly picked it up and scanned it for important contents. "Catherine, you were so tired yesterday when you took off your fatigues, so I took care to fold them up again for your convenience – Love, Zoryanna," it read. At this, the student smiled warmly at the thought that someone, anyone, had the idea of doing something so cosmically insignificant yet intensely important at an interpersonal level. After this, Catherine dressed in her fatigues and put on boots that this student had recently broken in. Then, Catherine looked towards the upper bunk where Zoryanna was sleeping and tacitly thanked the medic for folding up her clothes, perhaps out of some nascent respect for the younger Catherine. Zoryanna was well into her graduate-level studies in trauma medicine, around the age of 27, when she was selected for this role. At the same time, Catherine was only a first-year student at Calliope University. Nevertheless, Zoryanna was charmed by the energetic Catherine, whose personality complemented hers and who wanted to be on the frontlines of galactic aid. This was Zoryanna's second time serving with the corps, as she had previously fallen in love with someone not cut out for this job. Indeed, Zoryanna wanted to make absolutely sure that this scenario would not happen again and so guarded her heart against misery.

Once this was done, Catherine decided to take in her surroundings and get a proverbial breath of fresh air, even if she would, of course, be wearing an oxygen mask throughout her walk. Catherine put on this piece of equipment and made sure that it was still working before the student walked out. Of course, this oxygen mask, proudly produced by Epsolon General Company, made its typical humming and clicking noises, which were in step with her breathing. Catherine then walked out of the housing block and eventually found herself on the ridge of a hill, overlooking a black asphalt road. And yet, the sides of the road were resplendent in all kinds of flora, such as Ithacan thorn-stem along with Cytheran spindle-grass, that some people would characterize as little better than weeds. For her part, Catherine never liked when anything was called a bramble or weed, because she found that it effectivley nullified any public interest in plants that were simply remarkable at survival in crowded, dynamic ecosystems.

Just the same, one of the flowers that she loved in her formative years was called the Tharsean nettle-flower, whose ivory color seemed rare in nature, despite the fact that it was one of the most common flowers in existence. Moreover, Catherine could observe the sprawling expanse of the refugee camp beneath the hill, at least until a concrete retaining wall encircled this hopefully temporary settlement. Catherine could see some forests of what she thought were nebula and nexus trees, a torrent in the middle ground, and the slender, shimmering towers of the metropolis of Damocles Falls, at her back. Meanwhile, the sky above Catherine appeared to be punctuated by a gradient from white near the ground to blue higher up, due to Demeter's nitrate-rich atmosphere. Eventually, she heard footsteps behind her and turned to see Zoryanna, also dressed in fatigues and an oxygen mask, rapidly approaching Catherine, and it was clear that Zoryanna was also someone who got up early in the day.

"Good morning, Catherine! How are you doing? How did you sleep? Did you have any dreams? Please tell me everything," Zoryanna asked.

"Thank you for asking. I believe that I slept well enough last night, due to the pouring rain. I probably had a strange dream; however, I don't ever remember them after they happen. What about yourself?" Catherine questioned

"Likely the same here... However, my dreams frequently take on strongly Slavic undertones, due to my personal origins. My parents may have been strict, but they always made sure that I knew I was Polish," Zoryanna responded.

"That is very interesting; however, I don't see the same thing going on in my dreams, which are not specifically German in their expression. Of course, my family is from that region of Europe, but they never seemed to extensively bring it up to me in my formative years in New Arcadia," Catherine elaborated.

"That is fascinating, Catherine. I could have never thought of growing up without the cultural teachings passed down from my parents' generation, which were beautiful in a way I can't really put into words," Zoryanna explained.

"Could you give me an example of this?" Catherine requested

"Of course... Let me think.... There's this traditional Polish dance called the marzuka, which my mom insisted I learn from an early age, and I can tell you it was absolutely worth it. The reason for this is that I felt very connected to other people I had never truly known, as they are dead and gone, but who shared the same struggles I did. Does that answer your question?" Zoryanna clarified

"That's an absolutely wonderful example and answers my question. I feel like any idea of Germaness remained distant from my household, other than the knowledge that we come from the city of Goslar." Catherine illustrated.

"I never thought of it that way... However, there certainly might be some examples of your origins transpiring in everyday life?" Zoryanna asked

"Not really. Maybe we should change topics," Catherine admitted

At this, there was a timely pause in their conversation, where they each caught their breath after talking for a moment. Soon after, the idea occurred to Catherine to ask Zoryanna about the structure of a day in a refugee camp, as

Zoryanna had more experience in this area. Zoryanna was more than happy to provide this information to her new friend, who calmly awaited her answer.

"Tell me more about a standard day here, because I am still trying to wrap my head around what it is that we do as aid workers in an alien refugee camp. For example, how much of the time are we on-call versus off-call here, or what exactly happens when we have a family emergency" Catherine questioned

"So, it usually goes a little like this... We get up early in the morning, have breakfast, get briefed, take care of refugees, have a quick lunch, take more care of refugees, get debriefed, go to dinner, have some recreation time, go to sleep, and then wake up once more to do it all over again," Zoryanna expounded

"That sounds rigorous, but I think that I can manage it specifically since I am a student who enjoys routine. That said, are there any breaks to what seems to me like grueling work? What about meetings?" Catherine inquired

"Yes... The moment for meetings with higher-ranking members of staff is often before the morning care period for the refugees, where you are basically roaming around the camp, attending to their needs," Zoryanna elaborated

"I see. That's good... What about rest days?" Catherine asked

"Yes... We are assigned two rest days per week, during which we are free to do anything within the general area of the posting. For example, we can travel all we want to the wonderful city of Damocles Falls, but not necessarily return home unless this is approved by our officers" Zoryanna warned

"That seems perfectly expected..." Catherine interjected

"Oh.... And another thing, before I forget... These rest days can be taken away in case of negligent behavior, or, more importantly, if a pandemic or other disaster arises within the population of the camp," Zoryanna insisted

"I've definitely read all of this before on their holo-site, but it's definitely been a while. So, thank you for reiterating it... I can only imagine that this kind of work only strengthens your connection to the refugees" Catherine stated

"My pleasure! Anything to help out a recruit? Oh. Lastly, you will see a lot of violence in this line of work. So, you can always come to another medical officer or me to discuss the psychological ramifications of this. Just because on paper we are here for the refugees and not for ourselves, does not mean that the aid worker has no refuge from the horrors of war" Zoryanna clarified

"Thank you for all this information that will likely be repeated to us once more at breakfast before our first round as planetary aid workers. I believe that this is a structured role much like the military, complete with extensive physical and psychological testing, so of course this is..." Catherine wondered

"Yes, in my experience, being an aid worker is much like being a soldier for peace and prosperity. That's exactly why my parents allowed me to take on this role for a second time over the summer. But, anyway, I'm sure that you've had enough of me and that breakfast will be soon," Zoryanna concluded.

Eventually, Zoryanna left Catherine, particularly since she wanted to look around their part of the camp for something to eat this morning. For her part, Catherine contemplated the droning melodies of the band Bhodisatva, founded by the Hindi Electronic Revival artist and husband of the novelist Shanti Patel of 'The First Generation' fame, Rajendra Nabyar, which always inspired a profound meditative state for Catherine. This transcendental state remained all the more remarkable in that this student considered herself not particularly spiritual; however, she enjoyed good music, and Bhodisatva was great music. In practice, Bodhisattva's most recent project was proposing a musical transcription of the Hindi epic 'Ramayana' into a more futuristic language. Catherine was always one to enjoy blending the ancient and the modern in a single work of art, a taste she had inherited from her father. Just the same, the sensible Catherine thought that she would enjoy Nabyar's Ramayana 2255 in the afternoon, even if she were the first to admit that she did not know its original language. This was true despite the ethically dubious existence of 'unilangs' on the fringes of society,

which promised to make all barriers to international trade obsolete. However, Thomas was swift to caution his colleagues from using it in the legal profession, as he respected language as a beautiful form of culture. Nevertheless, Catherine remained too famished to consider the ins and outs of language in the Proxima Centauri Solar System, let alone how to resolve the complex development of unilangs by powerful companies, including Trinity Technologies and Renslaer Robotics, to name only a few. What Catherine needed now more than anything was a nice, warm meal from the nearby mess hall, which offered both human and non-human cuisines. For example, both chicken and common gallia eggs were provided in the mess hall at no cost to Demeter Relief Corps recruits, who delighted in their taste and texture. At the same time, the violet color of the latter foodstuff could take some getting used to. Just the same, another favorite of the range of people who worked within the Damocles Falls Refugee Camp was spotted porcine bacon, which represented this world's equivalent to a pig and arguably tasted twice as good. Traditionally, this would be accompanied by mostly earth-based juices, which the aliens thought tasted too sweet for their more temperate palette. For their part, the locals of Demeter had learned to make juice from the Elysian grapes, which had little to do with Earth grapes, and Parnasian Apples, which once again had little to do with Earth apples.

In a broader sense, Catherine could not help but notice just how fragile Earth foodstuffs were, and how buying anything made from even locally sourced wheat or other crops came with a steep premium, as she decided to finally walk over to the mess hall to treat herself to a meal. The primary reason that only the most affluent people could afford Earth food, was that Earth food was grown in large greenhouses operated by companies such as Golden Harvest Agararian Partners and Verdant Tomorrow Solutions, offering their products to individual elites and to collective organizations. All of this was to say that the existence of earthly foods on the recruit's plates brought with it the aura of something rare

and mysterious, even though these particular products were sourced from the network of greenhouses situated around the back of the mess hall. With all of this in mind, Catherine found a place to sit within this cramped structure made of interlocking prefabricated elements by the precise teams of builders, known as the Buildings and Facilities Maintenance Corps, before the eventual arrival of the Demeter Relief Corps in this area of the planet. That being said, Catherine had learned not to engage in too many tiresome diatribes at the breakfast table, specifically because she understood that these were normally reserved for when she could talk with people face-to-face. Thus, the recruit enjoyed the first meal of the day in the company of her friends from this posting, making noise in this building with terrible acoustics. For her part, Catherine managed to talk to her neighbors, even though this student usually stayed silent at breakfast.

Later, it was time to form pairs of aid workers to attend to the needs of the Ictu'l Vāar people, who equally enjoyed a semblance of breakfast and dinner in the form of freshly prepared meals. In this light, Catherine was the first to admit that this food service was perhaps one of the only riches in the life of a refugee, whose existence was frequently filled with all manner of deprivation. It was a favorite New Conservative talking point that it was costing their taxpayers millions of quasars to feed and clothe the displaced native peoples of Demeter. So they would be better off not providing these services to a group of individuals they broadly perceived as inferior. For her part, Catherine rightfully laughed at their rather outrageous, not to mention utterly maniacal, political ideas skewered in satirical holo-papers including *The Astronaut*. Instead, the recruit headed now into the camp with an open heart, and in the company of Zoryanna, who would serve as Catherine's virgillian guide to the circles of sentient suffering.

"The genocide did not at all happen at all quickly for it's victims, and it was the product of a longer history, that we are just beginning to acknowledge today. One thing is clear, however, the further you go back all the more egregious and might I add tragic the crimes being investigated seem to any sensible person"

Hwang So-Hyun, General attorney for the Genocide & Attroticities Investigation Bureau at the New Arcadia Trials, January 10th, 2257.

CHAPTER SIX

**NORTH FALLS CAMP, PLANET DEMETER
THURSDAY, JUNE 8TH, 2255.**

There was no doubt in Catherine's mind that what she alongside the other various Demeter Relief Corps recruits were about to do today would be one of the most harrowing experiences in their lives. These planetary aid workers were now going to walk through the North Falls refugee camp, assisting to any of the needs of the peoples of their planet displaced by the Second Corporate War. They were specifically given the instructions that there was no need too small that they could not meet, even if naturally priority would be given to the more grievous cases of psychological and physical injuries. These recruits were also reminded that they should practice a philosophy of opposite attraction, where they should become absorbed in everything that would make them otherwise feel disgust and want to look away to save face. An example that was frequently evoked within the Demeter Relief Corps was that of a thankfully fictional Cim Naath who was a kind of universal Jane Doe figure. In the example, this young woman had suffered chemical burns from Promethean Fire or some other war crime against her people, while primarily human recruits were subtly directed to engage with her and treat her like any other individual. This experiment was one of the last steps to becoming an aid worker and had been designed by a panel of psychologists in order to help mitigate anti-alien bias. Likewise, this test of will seemed to work ever since it was implemented decades previously, and so had become standard practice by the time Catherine joined the Corps.

Catherine figured that the Demeter Relief Corps could likewise continue in their calling to show empathy towards those in need, as opposed to turning them away for personal reasons. At least, this was the essence of their motto which announced that they were 'Always in Front' to signify their position on

helping the wounded and the dead. Currently, Catherine and Zoryanna scanned the makeshift streets of the refugee camp for the signs of anyone in need especially after the storm which had tried its hardest to test the structural integrity of their habitation blocks with its strong gusts of wind and its endless downpours of rain. These habitation blocks designed by Dynamic Homes came in three varieties based on size and the needs of their inhabitants. The small blocks were given to groups of 3 to 5 individuals while the medium blocks were allocated for families of 5 and above and had their own separate section of the refugee camp. Still, they all seemed like the same type of structure despite their variation in size, as these shelters were, by and large, drab in color and simple in function which could be easily transported in by dropship. And yet, the refugees from the vibrant Or'aan Re'iff culture were not in the slightest content by the austerity of their living conditions, and so always found a way to decorate their interiors with mementos from their home. The Demeter Relief Corps approved of this kind of decoration within reason, and even had a contest to see whose housing block was the most beautiful. However, they quickly retracted this event specifically because it annoyed their refugees who likewise reminded them of the collective values of their culture. It was, therefore, insulting to try and give any reward, no matter how small, to an individual without the approval of their elders, known as the Rhal Drāna for men and Rhāl Side'l for women.

There were plenty of persistent myths around the ancient matrons of the Rhāl Side'l in particular, whose timeless religion found itself frequently at odds with the overwhelming secular futurism of the human colonies. For some, this order of women were primarily composed of clones of their founding members from many generations ago, while for others, the Rhāl Side'l were functionally immortal due to their uncanny abilities to steal other beings' lifeforce. For their part, the Rhāl Side'l had far better things to do with their time than to endlessly dispel these myths, bringing about a mysterious aura around these individuals.

By contrast, it seemed that the prerogative of aid workers including Catherine and Zoryanna was essentially to allieve the struggles of the most destitute members of Parnassus society by fighting the elements to a certain extent, which could be notably cruel to a population that was reduced to a sedentary lifestyle by the Second Corporate War. It seemed that the prevailing emotion within the refugee camp was boredom for a primarily tribal people now forced to live in a way that was alien to them, paired with the additional sentiments of suffering from their injuries and longing to return to their native forests.

Moreover, it became apparent for both Catherine and Zoryanna that the indigenous Ictu'l Vāar peoples wished above all to return to their traditional area located to the south of the rising city of Port Pegasus in the Eastern Corporate Concession. At the same time, there was a notably a generational divide in how this emotion expressed itself, with the younger Oran Reiff wanting to return to their homeland as it appeared today, while tribal elders wished to go back to some idyllic previous state of the woodlands and marshes that they had once called home. Just the same, Catherine was already susceptible to this second perspective, specifically since she was also interested in seeing what the wild Demeter looked like. However, Zoryanna was quick to remind Catherine that this wild Demeter was a human idea emerging from their colonial past, rather than one native to the planet. In this light, this older recruit could easily point to the marketing campaigns of the various Planetary Parks under the direction of the Bureau of the Parnassian Interior, whose subtext was that the common galactic citizen could discover a beautiful place untouched by anyone. Catherine knew that slogans like 'Tharisis Grottos – Discover the Depths' and 'Cytheran Lakes – Jump In!' were little more than effective invitations towards tourism, which her mother likened to a new form of exploitative colonialism. At the same time, both Zoryanna and especially Catherine realized that their middle class families had participated in this system which was hard to escape from, specifically because

tourism in the colonies supposedly offered comforts beyond belief. Returning to her thoughts, Zoryanna brought up whether the ecological damage done by Promethean Fire could be reversed within a lifetime, primarily out of a need to be grounded in reality rather than succumbing to depression. What made this chemical agent's damage especially scarring was how it laid bare the flora and fauna around it and was prone to starting forest fires due to its release of terribly caustic fumes. In the past, statesmen and scientists of the generation before Elizabeth was born had passed legislation outright banning the use of Promethean Fire in the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus, even if a similar tipping point had still not been reached in the other parts of the planet which were controlled by colossal corporations. As a result, the Ictu'l Vāar suffered in a federal state that grievously did not care for them, and in fact wanted to see all native peoples of planet Demeter submitted to their domination. "Humanity First" was their philosophy motivating all of this untold ecological and societal destruction, in a line of reasoning that put all of mankind above those who had long dwelled on this vibrant planet. Whatever the case, Catherine and Zoryanna were now approaching their first case of an Ictu'l Vāar woman in serious need which would be duly noted down in their field journals which would be collected at the end of each round to be added to the health records of the individuals involved by the Records and Archives branch of their organization.

For her part, Catherine was surprised by just how quickly this admittedly complex process happened, particularly because she could not say the same thing about similar aspects of her Calliope University education which struggled with all matters digital. Whatever the case, the young woman in front of them appeared to be not much older than Zoryanna, with opalescent eyes, a gentle nose along with small pointed ears set upon a blue grey complexion. It would, however, be a disservice to describe her skin as a matte unchanging surface as it was instead marked by a thousand nuances of color, ranging from shades of

white to grey which significantly brought this surface to life. This refugee had short dark hair that shimmered in the light, and was dressed in the clothes and adornments of her tribe. However, this stranger looked above all forlorn at the state of the world around her, and especially the plight of her people.

"Hello, there, ma'am. How are you doing this morning? We are Catherine and Zoryanna, recruits within the Demeter Relief Corps, and we would absolutely love to help you with anything that you require" Zoryanna announced

"Huh, go figure... I didn't know that your organization recruited at such a young age, and it is nice to see new faces around here. However, what do I know about all of that? I'm just a refugee seeking asylum" the woman responded

"I don't think we've met before. What is your name?" Zoryanna asked

"Now, that is a complicated question, and yet the short answer is that my name is Yeth Lena'luk, and I was once a celebrated artisan in the Vorāath tribe of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples. The reason why I said that it was complicated is that some person in your records office misspelled my beautiful name as Yith which means 'womb' instead of Yeth which means small" Yeth explained

"I see... Please accept our most profound apologies for this issue. We will get that error changed as soon as possible" Catherine elaborated

"I don't take too much offense to human errors as they are bound to take place when there are hundreds of us in this wretched place. However, the elders would be much happier if that gets resolved" Yeth illustrated

"That should never have happened..." Zoryanna insisted

"Is there anything that you need at the current moment? Any food? Any water? Any repairs to your habitation block?" Catherine inquired

"I am not in need of any food or water, as I have finished breakfast. My habitation block is perfectly fine despite last night's storm, which terrified Id'ris and Ic'ran who hid like helpless cowards under the bed" Yeth recounted

"And I am assuming that these are your pets?" Catherine asked

"Yes, my dearest Catherine... These two cowards are what you may know as common nocturnal ban'dars. I also have been told that they are just like a cat from Earth, although I have never seen such a creature." Yeth stated

Eventually, Yeth got up from where this refugee was seated and walked to the back of the room to collect something rare and valuable from under her bed, which was pristinely made. When Yeth came back, this refugee was holding two small creatures which were the ban'dars she had previously mentioned.

"Behold! My earthly treasures in the form of these two little rascals who are never available when I want them and make quite a lot of noise for being as small and lovable as they are. However, I need to ask you humans if you have even handled a ban'dar before, because they can hurt you." Yeth announced

"I'm guessing that by their coloration and the relative shortness of their quills that they must be two or three years old. Am I right?" Zoyranna asked

"You would be correct.. Also, you need to be very careful while handling this most dangerous predator, specifically their poison is strong enough to kill a fully grown person like yourselves in a matter of minutes" Yeth warned

"Really... Then why do you keep them as pets?" Catherine inquired

"I got you there, didn't I! Well, domesticated nocturnal ban'dars have been selectively bred to not be as poisonous as their wild counterparts. The thing that you should look out for is their quills, and likewise to always pet my little rascals wherever they don't have these natural defenses." Yeth elaborated

"I see... They are not that dangerous after all. In particular, a long time ago my parents had one of these lovable rascals who we called Commet due to how she would run at incredible speeds at night. However, we had to give Commet away after my younger brother tormented it" Catherine admitted

"Your brother tormented it how, may I ask" Yeth questioned

"Well, if you really need to know, my troubled younger brother decided it was a good idea to try and pull out Commet's quills one by one to assert control

over her. And yet, quite predictably, Jason was scratched by Commet after the first one and punished by my parents for even thinking about doing that. Let me also add that my dad is a galactic rights lawyer” Catherine illustrated

“Well that serves Jason right for abusing a domestic animal like that. I would say that I am horrified, however I have seen much worse from humanity during the course of our genocide. And yes, it was a genocide, unlike what your greatest statesmen will tell you, lying from ivory towers” Yeth advised

At this, Yeth quickly gave her small pets to Catherine and Zoryanna, who immediately knew what to do with them. For example, the younger recruit was aware that ban'dars, like many felines on the planet Demeter, enjoyed scratches on their head where the quills covering the area from their back all the way down to their tails gave way to their underlying dark coat of tufted fur. Furthermore, Yeth continued to sit on the threshold of her habitation block with a drink in her hand, taking advantage of how she could breathe on her native planet.

“You know what I will never understand? I don't get the point of all those humans who end their lives over nothing. Now, Perhaps it's just me, or perhaps it's because our people can live long lives, however I really don't get what is their motivation to take such a drastic, life-altering decision” Yeth interjected

“I get where you are coming from, specifically because I feel the same way about this topic. Would you like me to elaborate?” Catherine asked

“I don't think that this is an appropriate topic...” Zoryanna started

“Please elaborate, my dear. There is no one that is stopping you... I would love to hear the human perspective on such a topic” Yeth elaborated

“Well, now that you ask me... The way that I see things is that the person who kills themselves does so in a desperate cry for help, because all previous measures have not helped. I am equally convinced that don't think that we don't need to judge them any further for what they are doing, and rather provide them with the most empathetic, hollistic help imaginable” Catherine clarified

"That's my girl! I believe that you've touched upon so many major issues in your response alone, that you should be applauded. The way that I understand things is that any member of our peoples that ends their boundlessly precious life by whatever means is just completing the genocide. Shouldn't these people be glad that they made it out alive where others didn't?" Yeth insisted

"We are not really equipped to answer your questions, but we are happy that you are doing well. We have to move on..." Zoryanna admitted

"Move along then... I won't keep you waiting, especially because there are other refugees who need more help than my sorry self. Also, Please return my beloved ban'dars back to me, as they are my pets after all" Yeth stated

"Of course, here they are, since we would not leave your habitation block without them. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you need anything, or if you would like someone to talk to. I am serious about this last part, as we are here for your assistance, even if we are few in numbers" Zoryanna described

"Very well then... I will contact you only if my life is in mortal peril, as if not you will have to endure more of my strange and bizarre stories. Oh.. And please don't hesitate and let me know if you like any of my traditional woven artworks seen throughout my room, as most of them are for sale." Yeth illustrated

"We will, but we need to head out now." Zoryanna explained

"Have a wonderful rest of your day, then" Yeth announced

"Thank you for everything that you do..." Catherine began

At this, Zoryanna strongly beckoned her verbose colleague to come out from Yeth's rather cramped habitation block as Zoryanna was already waiting for Catherine on the road below. For her part, Catherine discovered that the most longer term struggle for some refugees was the immense boredom of what to do with themselves at the North Falls Refugee Camp. This is what followed after the more pressing matters of food, water and housing, and was not a natural habit for many of the members of this tribal group. Instead, the manifold forms

of boredom emerged from their extensive contact with human populations, and was the kind of habit that would not leave easily from their minds. This became apparent in the behavior of their youngest children carrying themselves in a way that some would describe as individualistic and attention-seeking. Catherine did not want to judge these children too harshly for their personalities, given that the Or'aan Re'iff peoples had survived extensive efforts to exterminate them, which culminated in their genocide by corporate forces in more recent years.

Meanwhile, Catherine made her way down the dusty road in between the scattered habitation blocks of the North Falls Refugee Camp, closely following Zoryanna who carried herself with confidence in her evrey gesture. Likewise, this was apparent in how Zoryanna walked in between the habitation blocks with her shoulders slightly back all the while her steps remained cautious as there were still plenty of children running across the road. Zoryanna did not want to run into them but their swiftness made this potentially impossible. However, the refugee camp remained a surprisingly orderly place because Catherine and her recruits were only directly taking care of merely a fraction of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples, whose population once united were divided in the five refugee camps. Catherine knew that these camps were those of North Falls, South Falls, East Bend, West Bend, and Red Creek which this recruit remembered by how many of these alien peoples they took care of, from largest to smallest. Another thing was clear too, the plight of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples was nothing new either in their homeland where their genocide began and the Damocles Falls where they were waiting for the uncertain future of their people. Within months, more than half of the Ora'an Re'iff would find employment within the nearby urban area of Damocles Falls, while others would become homeless and only a few would return home.

Meanwhile, Catherine could hear the calming song of a distant flock of avian creatures known as Olympian Cloud Hoppers, because of their ability to stay afloat for long periods of time This capacity to remain airborne was due to

their primarily curvilinear form which seemed to be more related to the creatures of the ocean than anything seen in the skies of Demeter. It was a common belief amongst the various people of this planet that cloud hoppers of all sorts were close to the divine creator spirits because of their seemingly magical capacity to hover in the skies above this planet. Furthermore, some ancient stories claimed that they were some of the oldest beings on this world, much like the pelagic breaches of the deep oceans, who were likewise capable of communicating with a hidden language of whistles. Otherwise, the planet's sky retained its white halo closer to the ground which seemed to give this vast world a certain beauty while reminding everyone on this decidedly alien world that they were not on Earth. Closer to the ground, Catherine noticed a rugged Demeter Relief Corps rover attending to the needs of the various refugees, primarily in the realm of conflict resolution since another fight had broken out over food rations.

All of a sudden, Zoryanna noticed that someone coming closer to her at the present moment turned around to find that it was another recruit from the Demeter Relief Corps, called Johannes Elklund. More specifically he had short blonde hair, piercing blue eyes along with a sharp nose on a round and slightly sunburnt face. Johannes was one of the top performers in their year of Demeter Relief Corps recruits as he was once again an athlete, much like Zoryanna and Catherine, yet seemed to use his high-performing background to drive a wedge between him and the rest of those involved in the program. Whatever the case, Johannes announced that: "These aliens used a kind of psychic newt or lizard to make Marco feel some the pain of the genocide against them, and Marco is now lying on the ground further back an immense amount of agony, Come with me if you would like to see him and bring along a medical team". At this, Catherine and Zoryanna followed Johannes to where Marco was convalescing, since they were concerned about his health and even if this recruit was still alive.

CHAPTER SEVEN

**NORTH FALLS CAMP, PLANET DEMETER
THURSDAY, JUNE 8TH, 2255.**

Currently, the three recruits of the Demeter Relief Corps walked swiftly yet efficiently through the rest of the North Falls Refugee Camp to the place where Marco was writhing in psychic pain. For now at least, all the habitation blocks and other secondary details of this place faded into the background, due to the emotional weight of the situation at hand. This was especially true of Catherine who began to heavily breathe into her air mask to such an extent that it burned in her lungs, all the while her joints began to hurt as well. Catherine believed that this discomfort was purely due to the emotional state that she found herself in, and not due to the rigors of movement, specifically because the recruit had done gymnastics and other similar activities ever since Catherine could walk. Still, she could not really think about her extensive athletics background due to the gravity of Marco's fate, who was waiting for some response from his friends.

That being said, Catherine could admit that technology had of course changed certain expressive aspects of gymnastics, although the foundations of this discipline remained the same since the beginning of the milleneum. There was much emphasis in Catherine's courses on various aspects of agility and flexibility, and even more discussion around the form of the leotard which some concerned adults imagined as too revealing for children. This discourse which emerged right as Catherine was learning the balance beam had negative effects on the overall performance of her colleagues who saw themselves performing for a male gaze, while Catherine's mother let her concerned daughter know that many of those clutching their pearls were conservatives. Of course, they blamed the Galactic Liberals and the Frontier Socialists for their supposed degeneracy, while remaining a menace to children's safety behind locked doors.

Whatever the case, Catherine could not really process these thoughts at this time of the day or in these emotional conditions, especially given that the rest of her mind was worried about Marco or what exactly happened to him. It was an unsettling thought that there was some kind of lizard that could cause visual hallucinations and psychosomatic pain, as she had never heard of such a species despite the fact that Catherine was a native of this planet. However, she had heard about a case from her roommate Pavlina Leonova's general trauma clinic of a hiker that had painfully encountered an Arcadian scarlet spotted lizard at the heart of the Galatean Springs Planetary Park a while ago. Just the same, the way that Pavlina described it was that the patient whose name she could not disclose was sweating profusely, hallucinating visually and found themselves at the border of delirium, before passing out from extreme loss of fluids. Therefore, Catherine realized with a certain pressing horror that Marco would likely be in a similar state when the recruits found him, however it was necessary for Marco to be seen by a medic like Zoryanna in order to begin the triage process.

There were similar thoughts going through Zoryanna's mind as the medic of this most recent batch of recruits, and had to contend with the added burden of potentially having to explain her interventions to her superiors, chief amongst which the director of operations of the North Falls Refugee Camp. She had also heard about the scarlet spotted lizard from a previous course on hallucogens at the New Arcadia University's school of medicine. Zoryanna remembered how this lecture on typically illicit substances was taught by one of her most beloved professors, Dr. Narl'a Thuul, who insisted that there was no human medical cure for the toxin contained in the skin of the scarlett spotted lizard. Instead, doctors would have to trust in the native knowledge that common glistening glowberries, much adored by canopy crawlers, could alleviate the symptoms associated with exposure to this substance. Canopy crawlers could at times indulge themselves in a meal of these toxic lizards, and so often needed such an antidote.

Eventually, the recruits arrived at a tent composed of traditional fabrics that had been pitched between some habitation blocks serving as a makeshift shrine for their animistic, traditional religion. Catherine noted that this desperate kind of structure was not a normal sight in Ictu'l Vāar villages which revolved around living in and around the trees of their forest homeland. Catherine knew this because of her distant youth spent amongst the immersive displays of the Parnassian Museum of Planetary History. Catherine distinctly remembered how this major collection put an emphasis on the various ways that peoples settled the biomes of Demeter, in a curatorial decision which she did not understand as a child until this was clearly explained to her by an adult. For better or worse, Thomas' younger brother Peter had connections to the Parnassian Museum of Planetary History, whose curator of zoological collections was once in love with this weathered wildlife artist. Catherine equally recalled how this great collection relied upon taxidermied animals, skeletons along with a few models to explain the sheer scale of Demeter's wildlife, where a lesser museum would have used holograms to convey such information to a veritable range of audiences.

Thus, Catherine knew that there was something fundamentally wrong in seeing these proud people in this kind of habitation, and felt concerned that they had fallen on hard times. And then, such a notion was an understatement for the profoundly empathetic Catherine, whose family had supported aid causes even before she was born. Johannes pointed to this as the place where the female elders had performed one of their rituals on Marco, who did not believe their genocide. Furthermore, Johannes informed Catherine that did not know where Marco had such delusions from, especially in front of some of these most wise matriarchs and who was quick to confront him about his perspective. Catherine immediately knew that Marco's detached attitude emerged from this recruit's origins within an affluent family strongly involved in private equity, owning much more assets than all of Catherine's family members combined. Just the same,

Catherine believed that wealth was related to a range of negative psychological outcomes as well, from boredom through to drug use through to sociopathic tendencies. Marco's droning cries for help rang out in all of the refugee camp which suggested that this prodigal son of the corporate world was experiencing intense hallucinations at the present moment despite his cybernetic eyes. Just the same, the Rhāl Side'l loomed over Marco's body, as they were dressed in dark veils and robes contrasting with the paleness of Marco's complexion.

"I have seen things that you would not even believe... I have experienced the past, the present, and the future of these people! I have seen armies march, massive fleets deployed, and galaxies burn to ash" Marco proclaimed

"Marco! It's me, Zoryanna, the medic from your detachment. Are you with us? How are you feeling? We're going to get you help..." Zoryanna inquired

"It's no use talking to your friend as he is in another world, between time and space. We induced this transcendental state through a Gami Wieva, what you may know as a scarlet speckled lizard." a Rhāl Side'l matron interjected

"The fate of the Ichtul Vāar was written in the stars, and thus, it was only a matter of time when their people were left behind by the Yaga'tāan Hegemony. There will be no peace in the stars for the Chōs Vro'l " Marco exclaimed

"I need to administer medical care first, since that is my role as a medic. Still, I have questions to ask you later about what Marco is talking about, due to my lack of familiarity to what he is talking about" Zorayana disclosed

"All of what your friend is saying is true about the shameful fate of our peoples many eons ago, where we were forced to be the zealous warriors of the Yaga'tāan Hegemony. Countless worlds in space from planets Faruuth to Uldaan were conquered in our shameful wars of conquest in the name of this empire. However, the Yaga'tāan Hegemony, which you may equally know as the Great Yaga'tāan Empire of the Thousand Stars after crumbled from various plagues, debts and infighting, which serves them well" a Rhāl Side'l matron clarified

"I had no idea about any of this, so I thank you dearly for this information which must have been agonizing to recount. But, what then about your people? How did you go from swords to ploughshares?" Zoryanna admitted

"Well, that is an interesting question, and one which we can easily answer presently, yet even you will need to see the sites where it happened in order so that this remains true in your heart." a Rhāl Side'l matron elaborated

"I understand... So, please tell me more if you want me to continue taking care of Marco, who remains my dearest friend" Zoryanna responded

"After all of our conquests, our people, once known as the Chōs Vro'l , were never brought any higher in the imperial hierarchy. We narrowly chose a peaceful way of life where we would honor nature instead of taking from it once it was apparent the Yaga'tāan had declined. This is how we went from swords to ploughshares, to answer your question" a Rhāl Side'l matron recounted

"I am in pain, in pain because of this history of shame, since Chōs Vro'l caused the deaths of hundereds of thousands of souls in places that have been lost to history. None can resist that tyrant time" Marco proclaimed

At this, Zoryanna took a short breath from her basic medical work before noticing that predictably Marco's vitals were abnormal, which the recruit noted down in her holo-journal. But, the medic received nothing but looks of confusion for doing her job, specifically since Marco had not believed the tribal elders who told him in no uncertain terms about the suffering of their people.

"So, I have been taught by one of your people many years ago that there is a typical antidote to Marco's psychic suffering comes in the form of common glowberries, which have been used for centuries" Zoryanna began

"Do what you want with your ailing friend, it makes little difference to us, since we are not going to start a fight over such matters. However, what we will insist upon is that you and your colleagues waiting for you bear witness to the monuments of our shamefull past." a Rhāl Side'l matron advocated

"That is fair enough. I will always make time to learn more about the past of your people on this planet. I will not hesitate and tell my friends about what I encountered today, and yet I don't know about my superiors as they are intensely practical people founded in the here and now" Zoryanna claimed

"We can deal with your superiors for you, since they may not know about our boundless centuries of shame. I believe that it is public knowledge, however it has not been approved by our elders" a Rhāl Side'l matron disclosed

"Van'dara Sig'hala Dur Dale Ha! Van'dara Sig'hala Dur'Dale Ha! Van'dara Sig'hala Dur Dale Ha! Don't you hear out there that the stars shall rejoice in their conquest! The stars shall rejoice in their conquest!" yelled Marco

"This is the warchant of our peoples from the time that we blotted out the stars in blood with our ardent zeal for victory! It is true that no Faruuthi or Uldani could stand in our way when we were in our prime. And yet, what of that ancient glory remains? What of those hundred battles fought in foreign worlds? What of those millions dead and gone? Nothing. Now is the time to return to a moment of peace to cultivate our land for our own" a Rhāl Side'l matron reminisced

"So what you are trying to tell me is that your people once known as the Chōs Vro'l were once the foremost warriors in the galaxy, however you would be eventually left behind by the very empire that you once served. Now, all that is left for your people is to return to farming the black earth of Demeter, almost as if nothing had happened. Where is the justice in that?" Zoryanna insisted

"The justice in this return to nature is that we have left the aliens that we once conquered to their own peace. It would be too shameful to return to these very places and to apologize to them in person... And aren't our peoples going through atrocities of our own presently?" A Rhāl Side'l matron questioned

"I see... And what is your view on the more recent genocide? What are you doing to guide your people through these trying times?" Zoryanna asked

"It is an abomination! It had almost nothing to do with any of the zealous warriors of our past who are all dead and gone. Rather, it is a punitive measure from powerful peoples punishing us for that history that our own tribes have already reconciled with and mourned" A Rhāl Side'l matron explained

"I will stop asking questions about such sensitive topics, despite the fact that you seem to know about atrocities beyond my imagination. I will leave now with Marco and take him to the medical center" Zoryanna concluded

Eventually, Zoryanna retrieved Marco's twitching and writhing body from the tent and carried him outside where Catherine and Johannes were patiently waiting for any news about their friend. Likewise, Marco seemed on the verge of losing consciousness as the recruit was sweating profusely to such an extent that his clothes were drenched in it, all the while he continued to murmur past and future prophecies under his breath. Just the same, Zoryanna knew that time was of the essence in alleviating Marco's grievous symptoms and so insisted that Catherine and Johannes carry him to the medical centre and insist that they administer no care to him, because the normal anti-epileptics of Olmetrace and Calcivital would have no effect on Marco. By contrast, the medic dashed to the agrarian botanist on the base who was a middle aged woman by the name of Valentina Beatrice Rosetti, and was essentially there to oversee the cultivation of foodstuffs for the mess hall. For her part, Valentina knew what Zoryanna was talking about and directed this medic towards the hydroponic biodome where she was cultivating common glowberries, and other mosses and herbs to give to rendhorns when these grazing animals would show up on base.

Meanwhile, Catherine and Johannes had rushed their friend to the North Falls Refugee Camp's medical center, which was a large enclosed space like the mess hall. However, unlike the mess hall, this area was mostly divided into four rows of cots, some which were surrounded by a range of medical equipment, while others were left vacant for new patients. More specifically, Catherine and

Johannes were surprised to see that the medical center was not overrun with people seeking care, and instead was mostly empty on this summer's day. Just the same, Catherine was not one to believe the narrative proposed by countless New Conservative politicians ranging from Damian Westfeild to Benjamin Travis who said that refugees were a drug-addicted sort of people who should be dealt with violently by their constituents. Catherine knew that this was not the case, since her lived experience proved that exactly the opposite was true.

It appeared as if Catherine's rather limited lived experience in this domain had informed her that the Ictu'l Vāar peoples were perfectly worthy of the best compassion she had to offer, and so the recruit would carry herself in a way to make this into a reality. Meanwhile, Catherine also remembered how her need to care for the daily struggles of migrant workers was reignited by the powerfully written holo-novel 'The Thousand Tears of Velli D'hen' by the indigenous author Rais Trasandi, which she had read in her ninth-grade literature course at the Leonard H. Campbell High School in Founder's Park. In this book, the migrant agrarian worker Velli D'hen begins to sell her body for money, after she can't find work during the Great Parnassian Recession of 2215. For her part, Catherine especially remembered the end of this bestseller where Velli D'hen finds love in the form of the native heavy aeronautics worker Jhas Nedat, and looks towards her future with hope while it begins to rain on her refugee camp. All of this was to say that Catherine, unlike Marco, had been raised by her politically engaged parents and her school to profoundly respect the people of this planet.

Regardless, Catherine and Johannes were able to find an empty cot on which to lay Marco down to rest, whose symptoms of delirium continued to worsen ever since this recruit had left the tent. Marco was quickly admitted to the medical center specifically because the triage nurse in a room before this one took one look at Marco and decided that he was in too poor condition to be left out on his own. Currently, the recruits waited for Zoryanna to arrive with the

common glowberries, and were hardly surprised when the medic walked in with a fistfull of these biolumenscent fruits in her hand which she made sure to wash before she even thought of giving them to Marco. For their part, Catherine and Johannes continued their long patrol through the refugee camp, tending to the needs of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples, which seemed to be much more serious than what Catherine had experienced an hour before. Meanwhile, Zoryanna did what any good medic would do, and stayed back with Marco as he got better. More specifically, Catherine observed some of the horrendous physical side-effects of those exposed to Promethean Fire, from skin burns and lesions through to blindness, and other more severe symptoms. In addition, the worst thing about being exposed to Promethean Fire was that this chemical compound would only kill plants, while leaving animals and humans to die a lingering death. Catherine wondered if there existed any weapon of war which had no victim, and decided that this could not be the case after witnessing the atrocities before her. She was equally not one to be so easily moved by the commercially savvy names of much military hardware, which frequently derived from world mythologies, and instead was much more interested in the impact of such technology.

In addition, Catherine had learned this kind of selective attention from her father, who was all too often confronted with the breadth and width of military nomenclature, however he felt even more called to action by the consequences of using such weapons on civilian populations. Indeed, Thomas answered “the army can call it voluntary relocation but I see it as mass migration, the army can call it orbital bombardment but I see it as the complete obliteration of urban and rural spaces by an occupying force” when her father was asked what he thought about the power of words in a court of law. With this in mind, Catherine pledged in her heart that she would bring justice to those that had been affected by the horrendous deployment of Promethean Fire during the Second Corporate War as it visibly made her sick to see all of its victims trying to go about their daily lives

despite their injuries. Just the same, Johnanes was also moved to tears by the sight of children made blind by this weapon, which simply destroyed all in its path, which reminded him of his two twin daughters Esther and Astrid who were around their age in his home of Tharsis City. Catherine had been meaning to ask Johannes how it was like to grow up in a place like Tharsis City which she had always thought was beautiful. Still, such matters were null and void in front of the victims of Promethean Fire, who suffered dearly in the genocide.

More specifically, Catherine knew that Liberty Laboratories along with the other significant companies had the pernicious prerogative to design all manner of weapons within their research and development departments. Of course, these most destructive ideas ranged in their size and impact but one thing remained clear throughout this process in that all that what they were proposing would be subsequently outlawed by planetary politicians. And yet, this was no matter for any of these foreign companies who would constantly seek to challenge what was morally acceptable within the human controlled territory. So it always was and so it always would be, especially since there was little hope in holding these companies accountable for the undeniable evil they caused in the cosmos. And this was not only an issue on Demeter as offworld companies like Rheingold Mining Group on Demeter's moon of Juno had gotten prosecuted in court for developing illegal forms of ordinance in the spring of 2250. With all of this in mind, Catherine and Johannes continued their patrol through the North Falls Refugee camp, with admittedly less banter between them than had been the case when Zoryanna was around. For her part, Catherine had learned about the sordid and violent past of the Ictu'l Vāar along with the other peoples of Demeter from the medic who was quick to disclose this information to her close friend specifically because Zoryanna could not believe what she had just heard and seen in the tent in front of the Rhāl Side'l . Just the same, Catherine did not want to fall prey to a cyclical and ultimately conservative conception of history,

which had been widespread in the popular culture of Demeter. The primary problem Catherine saw with this stifling perception of the past was how it did not allow any visible escape from eras of violence and famine and pestillence, all the while remaining vigilant of any kind of progress towards a better world. By contrast, Johannes was far more practical in his concerns today as this recruit aimed to reassure the various victims of Promethean Fire who went about their lives in front of him, by offering the Ictu'l Vāar peoples a range of physical and psychological treatments courtesy of the medical centre. What was startling to Johannes was the willingness with which the refugees declined his offers for help, as if these victims of war were condemning themselves to suffer the consequences of their exposure to Promethean Fire. Nevertheless, neither Catherine nor Johannes for that matter pressed their case in front of the refugees, since it was ultimately up to them to accept their care program.

Of course, there would be exceptions made for life and death situations, however, for many of these cases in front of Catherine were not nearly grievous enough to warrant further action from the Demeter Relief Corps. And perhaps this was the greatest tragedy of a people getting exposed to Promethean Fire as was the case with the Ictu'l Vāar, was how this caustic chemical compound had an uncanny ability to wound and maim its victims without making those wounds immediately deadly enough to get them the medical care that they needed. And so, Catherine and Johannes continued their patrol down one of the main arteries of the North Falls Refugee Camp, while they attended to the wounded to the best of their abilities. As a result, this gave Catherine the sense of the scale of this tragedy, due to not only the number of victims but also the sheer number of Ictu'l Vāar impacted by this violence inflicted on them by corporations. And this was Catherine's conclusion from this sight of suffering was that companies like Pegasus Petroleum which operated their own militaries needed to be brought to justice, or else all of this would happen once more on planet Demeter.

"There was not a singular operation where the command of the corporate militaries decided to exterminate the Ictu'l Vāar Peoples. Rather, the council will see that our involvement in the area happened over many years, involving dozens of incidents of unequal warfare resulting in the deaths of thousands"

Commander Joseph Lauterbach of the Western Concescion Defense Force at the New Arcadia Trials, January 10th, 2257.

CHAPTER EIGHT

**NORTH FALLS CAMP, PLANET DEMETER
SATURDAY, JUNE 10TH, 2255.**

The office of the director of aid operations, Shelvāar Detri, was in the kind of mess that betrayed this native woman's higher standing within the Demeter Relief Corps, however, it was one she was determined to work on whenever she had the time to do so. For her part, ShelVāar was not the most powerful person within this organization, let alone in the whole Galactic Council for Planetary Aid, as she was outranked by more authoritative individuals in these large entities. At the same time, ShelVāar was for all intents and purposes the most immediate supervisor for many of the operations of her hundreds of recruits and officers, especially when capable individuals like their respective logistics officers Gha'n Temsa and Drello Gorlas had been abducted by outside hostile mercenaries. More specifically, the director of aid operations was diligently working day and night to organize a military rescue operation for Gha'n and Drell'o in order to save these officers from the excruciating torture that they suffered through daily at the Samson Private Contractors headquarters of Camp Jericho, whose black legend had become infamous amongst the recruits of the refugee camp. It was therefore difficult to determine where facts ended and myth began with Camp Jericho, especially because so many of the worst imaginable tortures were later corroborated to be startlingly true by their exhausted prisoners of war.

Just the same, the director of aid operations at the North Falls Refugee Camp was one to believe all of the worrying reports that were coming out of that especially wild sector of the Parnassus Agrairian Republic, because ShelVāar had faith that her subordinates were telling the truth. This absolute confidence was due to the fact that ShelVāar had once been tortured by corporate forces in ways that still weighed on her conscience. For her part, Zoryanna was one of the

only recruits to know that ShelVāar would sometimes conceal the lingering signs of her captivity beneath her director's uniform, such as the manifold bruises on her back and limbs. More specifically, Zoryanna had discovered these common symptoms of torture when the medic had helped transfer a slightly inebriated ShelVāar from the Eclipse Bar near the mess hall back to her sleeping quarters the summer before Catherine arrived at the North Falls Refugee Camp. "Take a moment and look at my body, Zoryanna, and at all my bruises and all my scars. I do not want to terrify you, recruit, but please understand that all of this can happen to you too if you come into contact with those sadistic bastards that call themselves 'private contractors' or even 'corporate military forces'" ShelVāar once explained to a younger Zoryanna in a tone of voice verging upon tears. Zoryanna had kept the director's secret during her time serving as a recruit at the North Falls Refugee Camp, which had been a place of planetary aid around for some time before Catherine was trained to join their ranks. Furthermore, the medic equally recognized the signs with a certain horror that someone had tried to force themselves upon ShelVāar, but Zoryanna did not mention it at the time, in the case that this was too sensitive of a trauma to be openly discussed.

Thus, Catherine was confronted with a woman who had survived some of the worst treatment imaginable at the hands of corporate forces, when she was invited to debrief what exactly happened to Marco the day before. Meanwhile, the contents of the directors office were an outright byzantine combination of various objects with personal significance and those that were necessary to run a large-scale planetary aid operation. The personal category of object was best exemplified by the shopworn memorabilia from ShelVāar's days at New Arcadia University, such as a holo-banner from the Maropolous Sorority hanging over her office chair which was a student organization known for its efforts to help the urban poor at food-banks within this metropolis. There were equally a range of trinkets such as a bobble-head of their school mascot Peter the Prowler, which

Catherine recognized as a highly reclusive predator occupying the polar regions of Planet Demeter, along with various signed holo-pictures of ShelVāar with her distinguished professors from the Agostini School of Interstellar Relations. In addition, a stack of boxes populated the far corner of ShelVāar's large office, which suggested to Catherine that the director had yet to finish moving in even after these months of service. Elsewhere, Catherine observed that holographic display generators had been built into the directors desk, and that they projected relevant information in a visual language of cyan tabs and pages. For example, Catherine could see floating pages dedicated to foodstuffs and other incoming aid shipments, as well as staff positions on the base, which appeared mirrored from her perspective specifically since Catherine was not at the director's chair. These hardlight screens floating in the ether flickered ever so slightly in the dusty air which pervaded this room of the North Falls Refugee Camp, and which no amount of air filters, no matter how powerful, could seem to get rid of.

Furthermore, the metallic floor of this space was covered in a range of power cables going to and fro, posing a tripping hazard for any visitor, while the ceiling was an intricate relief of air ducts and water pipes coursing their way from one extremity of her office to the other, stopping abruptly whenever they ran into a large piece of equipment, like a fan or a vent, or a sharp corner. This equally conferred a kind of unfinished quality to the directors workspace, almost as if the entire ceiling was missing if it ever existed in the first place. Elsewhere, one of the last details of note in the director's office were the floor-to-ceiling bay windows leading to a balcony overlooking the North Falls Refugee Camp which punctuated the east side of this space, which could be tinted at a moment's notice, along with both exits of this room which led to other parts of this base. For her part, Catherine knew that one of these mechanical doors connected to a hallway leading to more workspaces, while the other one linked to an escape route in case of a hostile takeover or other life-or-death emergency.

For her part, ShelVāar paced awkwardly in front of the imposing desk of her office that seemed to be almost too big for its own good, while she thought of something to say to Catherine. More specifically, the director wore the typical off-white uniform of someone in her position, which seemed to complement the greyness of her alien complexion. In practice, Catherine noticed that ShelVāar's uniform possessed fewer pockets and pouches than her fatigues, and had been adorned with insignia and symbols that the recruit had a hard time deciphering, specifically as Catherine had a lowly rank in this organization. For example, the recruit immediately recognized the symbol for director on her left shoulder, and that she was awarded the Violet Merit for Civilian Aid due to her outstanding coordination of planetary aid efforts during the Second Corporate War, however the remainder of this language was opaque to Catherine. Eventually, ShelVāar found something to say, and glanced at Catherine with a determined gaze.

"So, Catherine. I finished debriefing your fellow recruit, Johannes Elklund thirty minutes ago, and he described to me in no uncertain detail the scene of Marco being given a hallucogenic scarlet speckled lizard by the matrons of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples. Johannes illustrated how Marco spoke with uncanny clarity about the past and the future of their tribes in space, including their servitude as the foremost warriors of the Yaga'tāan Supremacy. Johannes then elaborated on how Marco lost consciousness after these hallucinations, which left Marco writhing and frothing on the floor. Now it is your turn to speak, because you too witnessed yesterday's happenings. Do you corroborate Johannes' narrative? Or was there something different that took place?" ShelVāar explained

"I would like to corroborate and develop Johannes' account of what took place yesterday. My fellow recruit restituted all of the significant details of the incident with the Rhāl Side'l , which happened yesterday during morning patrol. I was present to witness the hallucinogenic effects of the scarlet speckled lizard on Marco, which align with his description" Catherine responded

“Still, you previously mentioned that you wanted to add something more to Johannes' narrative of yesterday's happenings so that we can have a differing perspective on the evidence at hand. You can speak freely, as we are gathering information to decide if this is worth looking into any further, with the support of the Genocide & Atrocities Investigation Bureau” ShelVāar disclosed

“In that case... I would like to claim that Marco was not the kind of person to naturally believe the suffering of others, however I don't have enough concrete evidence to prove this matter in a court of law. All I have is a feeling that the Rhāl Side'l used the lizard to make Marco comprehend the suffering of their peoples, even beyond the bounds of the current genocide. However, once again, I feel the need to stress that my conjecture is the product of a perspective on a nuanced individual that I do not know that well.” Catherine elaborated

“We need more than conjecture to stand up in a court of law, especially one callibrated with the daily operations of aid workers. I would like you to take a moment and reflect upon if you have any more substantial evidence that Marco could not understand the grief of the people he has been entrusted to take care of, proving that he is unfit for this sensitive position” ShelVāar indicated

At this, there was a pause in their discourse as Catherine thought of all the more objective evidence the recruit could summon to corroborate Johannes' perspective that Marco was not fit for his work. Catherine recalled what Thomas had told her many years ago that it was significantly harder to prove someone's innocence than their guilt. With this in mind, the recruit closed her eyes, took a deep breath and eventually discovered something resembling evidence.

“Let the records show that before our detachment dropped off the food on the Olympian coast last Sunday, Marco was joking about his political views upon this aid mission, which is not permitted under Demeter Relief Corps rules and regulations. This was all to the annoyance of our logistics officer reminding him that politics have no place when we are at work” Catherine revealed

"Now that evidence, if it is true and faithful, can be admissible in a court of law, Catherine. Please tell me more about Marco's remarks, which stand in defiance of the urgent need for our organization to be apolitical when it comes to the treatment of those displaced by a genocide" ShelVāar admitted

"Marco's ill-informed banter revolved around how he should not have to care what becomes of the Oran Reiff after these trying times, and that he was sent on this planetary aid mission so that his father's company, Midas Capital Investments, could try to save face in the court of public opinion. Marco seemed generally detached from the suffering of the natives of Planet Demeter, perhaps as an aspect of him being raised in stifling affluence" Catherine insisted

"Catherine, these are concerning words originating from one of the most publicly visible aspects of planetary aid work. We are taught to have nothing but the most profound empathy towards those in our care, who must be treated with the respect We thank you for reporting these matters to the relevant authorities, and appropriate disciplinary measures will be taken" ShelVāar described

Catherine breathed a deep sigh of relief which helped bring a newfound serenity to her nervous posture. The recruit equally observed a stenographer seated on a desk behind her, keeping diligent notes about the proceedings in the directors office. Meanwhile, Catherine could feel in her body that it was raining once again on Planet Demeter because she could hear gusts of wind around the command building along with a drumming downpour of rain on its roof.

"Thank you once more for your testimony, Catherine, which will be used as a crucial element of our investigation into Marco's corporate ties. You may not know this but Samson Private Contractors and Valkyrie Military Company who have been repeatedly known to collaborate with the large corporations we think perpetuated the genocide handle their financial operations through Midas Capital Investment. No wonder then that Marco has a hostile attitude towards the prospect of helping any of their countless victims" ShelVāar suggested

"I do have a question for you, before I hopefully resume my patrol taking care of the individuals affected by this horrendous and calculated genocide. Does it matter that the Ictu'l Vāar, and indeed most of the peoples of Demeter, once served a foreign invading power in the form of the Yaga'tāan Hegemony? Does it not disqualify them from receiving aid?" Catherine inquired

"It is quite the opposite, recruit. Our understanding at the Demeter Relief Corps and the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid at large, was that the peoples of Demeter were cruelly and maliciously enslaved to do the bidding of a cosmic superpower, instead to them being mere mercenaries for the Yaga'tāan, which implies a more equal balance of powers. Thus, the Ictu'l Vāar were victims of someone with more ships and more men than they had at their disposal, even in their past which they imagine as being valiant" ShelVāar revealed

"I see, am I free to return to my posting?" Catherine asked

"Yes. That's all the questioning done." ShelVāar concluded

After this, Catherine saluted her superior before turning on a dime and briskly leaving the directors office, to return to her morning patrol with Johannes under the rain. For his part, Johannes had been recently catching up with some of his family over holo-call in the otherwise empty recreation room, and so was surprised when his fellow recruit showed up a little earlier than expected. The two members of the Demeter Relief Corps next exchanged some pleasantries about the frequently mercurial weather of their planet, before finally stepping out into the elements. Catherine recognized how the rain felt just as heavy and the humidity just as oppressive as it was the stormy day they were rescued from the Olympian underbrush. However, this time around the recruits had made sure to equip their standard issue lightweight rain slickers, which did a somewhat good job at keeping them dry in the inclement weather. What was more problematic was how the black earth around them had turned to banks of mud, in terrain conditions which tested the resilience of their standard issue field boots.

In this light, Catherine heard the distinct sloshing of her footwear through the densely packed mud while this recruit headed with Johannes onto the more certain pavement of the main road. Once she had found her footing, Catherine took a moment to turn her head up to the sky and to take a breath under the rain, which went a long way to help connect herself to the wild firmament of nature. And, for an instant, Catherine wondered just how many rendhorns and canopy crawlers and other docile forest creatures had the capacity to contemplate the rain as she was doing today, which naturally brought with it a nascent sense of beauty in her heart. It was a moment that strangely felt like an eternity in front of all that was and ever will be, but, at the same time, a moment that was eerily normal and pedestrian in the grand and terrible scheme of the cosmos. And, just as suddenly as it began, Catherine's metaphysical moment came to a close and she could return to the more pressing, practical matters of planetary aid. For his part, Johannes squarely found himself rooted in this most practical of worlds ruled over by the unyielding tyrants of struggle and strife, and likewise he rarely spent the time or the energy to meditate on nature's sheer vastness.

However, now, it was time more than ever to turn to the more immediate matters of how to best help the struggling peoples of Demeter, and it felt almost as if they could be doing more than merely asking if they needed the necessities of food and water or improvements of shelter, for that matter. Johannes thought that what was truly missing at the North Falls Refugee Camp were the kinds of professional and academic development courses that were all too common in the cities of Demeter, and which could most importantly provide a proven and not even to mention dignified way out of poverty for these tribes. However, any attempt at further discussing this sensitive matter with his superiors like the director of internal programs, Maxime Gustave Dumont, got him answers about the feasibility of such an idea. The truth was that the Demeter Relief Corps was not the organization it used to be as it had suffered budget cuts as of late.

Meanwhile, Catherine noticed how the reactions to the inclement weather effectively divided the North Falls Refugee Camp into two prevailing attitudes, which were diametrically opposed to one another. On the one hand, the young children of the Ictu'l Vāar tribes appeared to worship the rain by playing in it, on a day that was rather warm and humid to begin with. They stomped in puddles, ran with the churning rivulets and especially cupped their hands to the heavens to drink from the purest water nature had to offer. The children laughed with the most sublime innocence while they performed this joyous ritual that honored the ancient, timeless spirits of the sky and the earth in their cosmic dance. On the other hand, a glacial indifference and even boredom reigned over the lives of adolescents through to adults, specifically because these jaded individuals saw the rain as a bringer of change for the worst. As they saw it, this rain perilously dancing at the threshold of their temporary homes was a harbinger of terrible floods and natural destruction at large. It was equally a weather of particular discomfort for the Ictu'l Vāar peoples, remembering all too well their forced marches away from their homes through the harshest elements. Therefore, rain was an ambiguous force in their primarily oral traditions capable of inciting both childish joy and a longing for a homeland left in the mists of memory.

For his part, Johannes felt sympathetic to this social manifestation of the idea of a lost homeland specifically as he was not only an excellent athlete but also an anthropology student learning under some of the greatest scholars of his generation at Tharsis City College. It was from these introductory courses alongside interviews with the living, breathing Ictu'l Vāar people, that he hoped to construct a kind of cultural schema for their tribes, outlining what motivated them to keep their traditions alive despite the harsh world around them. At the same time, this bridge towards a mutually beneficial understanding was seen as another form of control by the very individuals Johannes was most interested in, leaving him generally quiet at the failure of one of his hopes and dreams.

Whatever the case, Catherine, Johannes and the other dozen recruits of the Demeter Relief Corps had to contend with the glacial indifference of many native adults towards their personal needs or even their societal needs under a rain that simply would not go away. It was all too common to get responses like 'I don't know', 'I'm not sure' and even 'Ask me later' across the breadth and width of the refugee population due to the simple change in inclement weather. Just the same, Catherine found it especially hard to discern the underlying needs of the women within their cramped habitation blocks, where this recruit believed she was previously insightful in this regard. This was primarily due to the fact that the matrons of the Rhāl Side'l had made a bold statement the night before to be wary of the various human planetary aid workers, specifically because they wrongly assumed that all of them were as uncaring as Marco. Consequently, Marco was increasingly seen by Catherine and the other recruits as a liability to the good name of the Demeter Relief Corps, since he had effectively poisoned the well that would otherwise provide good sustenance for all involved.

It was in this dismal spirit that Catherine and Johannes continued their patrol through the rain, which had seemingly washed away their ambition to do this much needed work in the brutal wake of a genocide. For the first time in a long time, Catherine felt like she was a miserable member of an occupying force imposing its draconian beliefs onto the people of planet Demeter, instead of a part of a planetary aid detachment whose presence was supposed to benefit the natives of this vibrant world. It was as if a terrible melancholy had taken hold of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples today, who were beginning to feel reluctant towards any possibility of bettering their living conditions. In other words, it was not merely a matter of being scarred by Promethean Fire or other torturous weapons of war, or even made to trudge away from their homeland whilst they wept that weighed upon their minds, but rather the inevitable sense that somehow, somewhere they were destined to this dark road towards the end of their lively culture.

Suddenly, Catherine got a report from one of her beleaguered colleagues that a corporate gunship had arrived on the west landing pad, only for Gha'n and Drello to be unceremoniously left on the slick pavement without a word from any Samson Private Contractors commanding officer. More specifically, these once proud logistics officers of the Demeter Relief Corps seemed to be little more than husks of their former selves draped in dirty rags, and were quickly rushed to the medical center for further clinical attention. In addition, there was little life left in their oily black pupils, which seemed to reveal the ultimate nothingness of what the worst of humanity wanted to achieve on this planet. Likewise, their skin appeared visibly paler than ever before, suggesting something of the physical toll of torture done as much for pleasure as to extract information. Whatever the case, the fate of these logistics officers, themselves members of other peoples and other tribes, demonstrated the cosmic malice of the forces that Catherine and her recruits were up against. What they would do as a response still needed to be determined, as it was now time for Catherine to write her own fate.

CHAPTER TEN

**NORTH FALLS CAMP, PLANET DEMETER
SATURDAY, JUNE 11TH, 2255.**

The decision to look more methodically into the harsh treatment of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples had begun way before Catherine had set foot in the North Falls Refugee Camp, primarily due to the efforts of the Genocide and Attrocities Investigation Bureau currently headed by the notably fierce commissioner Simone Fédérique Lambert. This name was familiar to Catherine as she was the aunt of her old schoolmate Penelope, who had become renowned in their family for her hard work on sensitive matters. More specifically, it was Simone and her bureau who uncovered the extensive deployment of Promethean Fire by armed forces in the Western Corporate Concession only a year prior, specifically because of the evidence in the form of hundreds of aerially dropped ordinance canisters which now littered the homeland of these tribes. This older woman, who was about the same age as ShelVāar, was genuinely loathed by anyone seeking to do wrong against the native tribes of Demeter, since she was their strongest champion. For their part, Samson Private Contractors had a hard time insulting Simone in a way that would downplay her achievements within the planetary aid community, and so they merely referred to Simone as the 'bitch from New Arcadia'.

With this in mind, Catherine felt as prepared as she would ever be to meet this outstanding woman sometime during her work hours. At the same time, there remained certain myths about why it had taken this commissioner so long to arrive at the North Falls Refugee Camp, which Catherine wished to dispel. The truth about Simone's profession, and especially the method of the Genocide and Attrocities Investigation Bureau was that it was a systematic process which was slowed down significantly by the abundance of worrying evidence reinforcing what had happened to the Ictu'l Vāar peoples over the course of many years.

However, Catherine was surprised to learn that Simone's department had not suffered to the same extent under the pressure of the prevailing budget cuts, as they always somewhere knew that they would be next on the chopping block in moments of financial insecurity. In addition, it was commonly believed by the various recruits of the Demeter Relief Corps that their sister organization was more publicly funded than they were, in a process that was said to have gone back to the inception of the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau. Still, no recruit could prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was the case, since their financial records remained notably a nuisance to comb through, despite how available they appeared to be on the holo-net. Whatever the case, Catherine felt relieved that someone cared about what had happened to the native peoples of Demeter, and so welcomed Simone's organization with open arms.

There was equally nothing too opulent or imperious about the manner in which the bureau decided to arrive at the North Falls Refugee Camp, because instead there was only a regular procession of run-of-the-mill dropships which offloaded valuable personnel and equipment onto the East Landing Pad. Just the same, these Anderson Aeronautics PSL-35 Overseer dropships remained the veritable workhorses of this efficient arrival, accompanied by a couple of very well armed JL-496 Warrior gunships which hovered in the skies above the base. There were no grand speeches, no nocturnal revelries and very little in terms of gestures of universal friendship between the corps and the bureau, which had been often aligned in matters of correcting the injustices of the world. In this light, planet Demeter's notoriously turbulent weather had decided to clear up for once to let this transfer of people and knowledge happen without too many worries from either of the parties involved, and Catherine noticed that the skies above the North Falls Refugee Camp were overcast today. As a whole, Catherine witnessed how friendly relations were between the corps and the bureau, with both of these parties working in symbiosis today for the common good.

Nevertheless, there remained the uncanny fear somewhere in Catherine's heart that this graceful transfer of equipment and personnel could just as easily devolve into a scene of carnage, since she was expecting that corporate forces had somehow managed to plant explosives on one of the platforms. Therefore, it was only a matter of minutes, Catherine thought, until something tragic would occur, since she increasingly watched the dropships with fear for their crews. This shadow of terror may have been in part due to Catherine's exposure to the kinds of military content that Jason was avidly watching day in and day out on his devices, where dropships were frequently the first to go up in flames due to their absolutely vital role to play in military operations. More specifically, an army could not occupy a sector in a time of conflict without these vehicles, or landers for that matter, which provided a necessary logistical liaison between the hulls of warships and the needs of the common infantryman. Jason's older sister was amongst the first people to recognize how Jason's early watching patterns of calmer videos explaining what the military was, along with its various ranks and branches, had almost inevitably given way to more active media where he could feel more immersed like never before in what exactly the military did.

For his part, Jason commonly watched and rewatched all the media he could gather about the various engagements of the First Corporate War, which were well documented given that they had not happened that long ago. Jason also read countless holo-novels about this conflict in his free time, but seemed to have a hard time discerning the truly tactical mindset needed to become a leader of men. Once again, Catherine's younger brother from an abusive home conceived of warfare as a large exercise in might makes right, preferring the carnage of combat to higher level studies in matters of logistics, tactics and the ever important question of troop morale. Whatever the case, Zoryanna was swift to alleviate Catherine's unease in front of this scene by holding her hand and reminding her that Samson Private Contractors would likely not be as bold as to

try and disrupt this rather routine logistical operation. It was here that Catherine remembered once again that this medic, for better or for worse, hailed from a military family much involved in the defense of planet Demeter and so had some valuable insight into what was going on in front of them. But, Zoryanna equally explained that she could easily estimate the amount of active duty soldiers that the Demeter Relief Corps had at their disposal, however could not do the same for Samson Private Contractors because the medic had not been around them that much in the last days. All Zoryanna had was some rough numbers from her previous posting with the Demeter Relief Corps which were done more out of the love of estimation than a genuine need to measure up to a foe. Zoryanna was also the first to admit that the situation on the ground had changed around the North Falls Refugee Camp specifically because of the dwindling number of mercenaries due to the measures limiting their troop size due to the Chamber of Senators legislation. As such, the medic concluded that these corporate forces could do anything to attack the Demeter Relief Corps like a wild animal caught in a trap. Failing that, Samson Private Contractors could equally stoke fear in the hearts and minds of this sedentary population, who were vulnerable to such tactics by virtue of the Ictu'l Vāar staying in a static refugee camp.

For her part, Zoryanna had run into this form of psychological warfare in the dense woodlands surrounding the camp, and felt as if they revealed a kind of hopelessness on the part of these mercenaries to be taken seriously. There were for example skulls of their people with a crude sign meant to read 'you'll be next' in poorly translated language. Just the same, Zoryanna quickly discerned that what it actually said was 'we'll follow you' which incited some much needed laughter on her end in front of what should have been a ghastly memorial. The medic hoped that the Ictu'l Vāar could find the same humor in this, since it was not the only attempt at psychological warfare too reliant on text, which had not been read by any native of the planet Demeter. "These mercenaries would have

done such a good job at terrifying me if it weren't for their insistence on labelling everything much like a satirical cartoon from *The Astronaut*" the medic explained to her fellow recruit. "Now, all these skulls and other signs of woe just look like a bad joke, and one that ultimately undercuts their intended function as harbingers of death and struggle" Zoryanna continued with a visible grin. For her part, Catherine took Zoryanna at her word, specifically since this medic was her friend and thus had no incentive to fabricate realities. Zoryanna also explained what she had seen to her various superiors who expected hamfisted attempts to be perceived as a menace from Samson Private Contractors. In a broader sense, it seemed that these mercenaries were at their most fierce when they were not so present in the lives of the people within the refugee camp, as only then could their menace inflame the minds of those who truly feared them. In other words, these armed forces may have outnumbered the Demeter Relief force two-to-one, however they apparently knew little about the psychology of warfare.

Elsewhere, Catherine felt much closer to Zoryanna than ever before, who seemed to be more than just a friend. What made this so certain in Catherine's mind was that Zoryanna shared her same driving conviction that conflict of any kind remained a disastrous enterprise, however, equally knew how to comfort her when Catherine was unsure about the future. This kind of grace is what made this medic stand out from the rest of the Demeter Relief Corps recruits this year, who seemed to have a more practical conception of empathy. There was nothing wrong with their belief system which still respected the natives that they were taking care of, but, there was nothing moving or inspiring in it either. In this light, Zoryanna appeared to dedicate herself to the cause at hand through an almost spiritual calling to do right in the world, which Catherine admired since she felt that it was something truly genuine for Zoryanna. For purposes of noting, the medic of this detachment had always been more meditative and spiritual in her approach to her work, in an attitude that was rubbing off on Catherine.

Catherine was also comfortable in getting more intimate with Zoryanna because the student had had an extensive education in such matters through her long conversations with a knowledgeable sex worker called Juno Love. In this light, Juno had been hired by Catherine's family to supplement everything that Thomas and Elizabeth could not show her how to do, at least ever since the time when she first noticed her body changing. Juno naturally excelled at this, since Catherine was a receptive student in all aspects of life, and would frequently ask Juno questions that felt personal to her. It was Juno as much as Elizabeth who gave Catherine lessons in how to look mystically feminine, but also reminded her to treat everyone who deserved it with a level of radical empathy. This was equally why the young Catherine never felt the adolescent abjection to boys that so many of her fellow friends went through, specifically because Catherine was always one to listen and validate the struggles of her classmates. And all of this happened in the brutal years of the Second Corporate War which more or less aligned with those of her adolescence and where it especially appeared that the entire world was ending to many of the sensible students around her. No matter then Catherine felt a drive towards planetary aid work, especially as this manner of unyielding kindness had been engrained within her early in her life.

This sentiment of not wanting to be surprised by any teenage behaviors primarily originated from Thomas who time and again confided in Catherine that this lawyer would do anything and everything possible for his sweetest child to have an informed transition into adulthood. It was his idea to get his daughter someone she could be honest with about things she would not bring up at the dinner table, and Elizabeth was quick to agree to this plan of action. Likewise, it had only been a couple of months since Catherine had last met with Juno on the eve of her eighteenth birthday who was happy to see her grow into a confident adult. Whatever the case, Catherine felt as if there was nothing missing in her life today, and so glanced once more at Zoryanna with a warm smile.

Regardless, Catherine and Zoryanna looked at the carefully coordinated movements of the dropships while they landed in the distance, before taking off just as suddenly to fly somewhere else. Their grey silhouettes glided across the overcast skies of planet Demeter, and would sometimes light up with the lurid glow of their afterburners as they approached the East Landing Pad. They also made an audible buzzing sound while they flew overhead, resembling nothing in nature specifically since it was produced by the dropship's internal components. Just the same, Catherine knew that this discernable, droning hum was always a liability for this kind of vehicle which was not intended for stealth missions, and whose colossal size betrayed a weakness to anti-aircraft measures. They were not that maneuverable either, and only had a limited complement of weaponry, which helped explain why dropships needed gunships to protect their valuable equipment and personnel. In addition, landers which did not appear today in the skies of Demeter were even worse off than dropships, since their primary goal was to move cargo from larger vessels to awaiting ground troops, while relying even more on gunships because of their limited armament. All of this was to say that Catherine and especially Zoryanna felt grateful to the men and women who proudly flew often outdated dropships for a range of organizations.

Eventually, the friends heard the sound of a rapidly approaching engine, and soon Catherine and Zoryanna were joined on the crest of a hill by a rugged Demeter Relief Corps rover, where Johannes was waiting for them. "Come on, ladies! What on earth are you doing so far away from the action today? Let's see the arrival of these fascinating new people at our base!" the recruit announced to them. After this, Catherine and Zoryanna looked at Johannes with a knowing look on their faces, specifically because they did not have that many moments to develop their personal relationship due to the rigors of aid work. However, the two friends obliged to Johannes' request, since they did not see any problem with observing the coming and going of cargo vessels at their base.

Soon after, Catherine and Zoryanna were hurtling down the asphalt roads of the North Falls Refugee Camp, with the rover rocking and shaking over every crack in the pavement beneath its wheels. Thus, the recruits who were already buckled in had to hold onto some handlebars above them for dear life, while the driver of this vehicle doubled down by pressing hard on the acceleration pedal. As such, Catherine and Zoryanna were especially tossed around by his careless steering, while desperately hoping between bursts of laughter that they would arrive at the East Landing Pad sooner rather than later. Indeed, the recruits were relieved that they had gone through the trouble of tying their hair every day that they were working in planetary aid, much as would be done in the armed forces. Thus, their long hair was out of their eyes while they were thrown around in the Demeter Relief Corps rover, whose engine hummed audibly especially given that they were heading swiftly down the roads of the refugee camp. These recruits felt every swerve and turn of the vehicle too, leading them to ask that the driver to slow down specifically because rovers were known to keel over if pushed to their limits. Soon after, the driver did not respond, leading to an awkward laugh from their various passengers just wishing for the bumpy ride to end.

Suddenly, their rover ride skreeched to a halt on the far corner of the East Landing Pad whose asphalt surface was resplendent in all manner of yellow and white markings delineating where dropships and other assorted vessels were supposed to land. Catherine looked intently at the driver of the vehicle who was none other than the refugee camp's director of internal programming, Maxime Gustave Dumont, who was known to be reckless behind the wheel. For example, Maxime had consistently gotten in trouble with the base's security who had tried their hardest to ban him from getting in the seat of any Demeter Relief Force ground vehicle, but nothing seemed to stick to him for that matter. This would all come to a head when he carelessly smashed into one of Valentina's prized scroungers, leading Gustave's driving licence to be revoked by authorities.

However, the recruits from the rover had other more important matters to attend to at this present moment, especially going over to the place where the dropships were landing to get to know who exactly had been invited into the bustling refugee camp by its exhausted director. What Catherine discovered was that the various operatives and executives of the bureau were dressed not that differently than they were, as would be expected in a large aid organization which possessed exacting standards of dress across its branches. For example, the bureau equally had college-aged recruits in tactical exo-suits and drab fatigues carrying heavy objects for their superiors, all the while wearing the same Epsilon General Company air masks as everyone in the refugee camp. Of course, they had some different bureau-specific markings on their military-grade clothing, even as these recruits still used quite the same ranking system as the rest of the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid. Meanwhile, the executives of the bureau wore all manner of sleek office clothes that revealed that their position was behind a desk rather than in the front lines of investigating horrendous war crimes. The slender figure of Simone in her own fatigues stood out from this commotion of light and noise, while she energetically directed her subordinates. For her part, Zoryanna took notes on exactly what Simone was doing so that she could later appropriate it into this medic's essentially military body language.

Furthermore, Simone had a cybernetic left forearm and hand produced by some subsidiary of Renslaer Robotics, which especially moved Catherine as she was left handed. Likewise, Catherine could only imagine the struggles particular to this kind of handicap, although it seemed that Simone was managing her life rather well in spite of her major injury. Also, the recruit admitted to herself that it was not her place to question how Simone had lost an arm, and so she thought nothing more or less of her because of this implant. Eventually, the dull light of day slowly but surely gave way to the dark veil of night on planet Demeter, which brought with it a predictable forecast of more rain and thunderstorms rolling in

from the distant mountains. What was more concerning were the increasing reports of a Samson mercenary assault on the refugee camp, specifically since their clients were furious that their war crimes against the Ictu'l Vāar peoples of Demeter were being seriously investigated by the relevant authorities. Indeed, the attack on the refugee camp led by Captain Gerhart Boudwijn Schongauer and perpetuated by his closest soldiers happened at blinding speed with the clear objective of striking fear again in the hearts of the peoples of Demeter, which was especially easy given the grim reputation of the foreign corporate forces that were illegally embedded within the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus. More specifically, Gerhard was the leader of a platoon of dreadful mercenaries commonly known as the Night Fiends which divided itself into four well-armed squads scouring the refugee camp looking for defenseless victims. A particular predilection of these frequently terrible and outright sadistic men were their colonial long-knives, which they used to cut digits and slit throats, with the later being especially reserved for the people of the camp. Words could also not do justice to just how much the men of the Night Fiends loathed aliens or any of their supporters, as such an unspoken but always palpable hatred had been instilled in them from the youngest age in their corporate hometowns.

Their attack was only repelled thanks to a joint effort of the bureau and the corps with the bureau being far more heavily armed than their counterparts in the corps, specifically as they had the legal right to carry all manner automatic weapons. Still, the command base was scared by the Promethean Fire charges deployed by the Night Fiends, whose caustic chemicals churned through the population of the North Falls Refugee Camp much to Catherine's horror. The nightmare of defending a population in need was coming to fruition, and that the aid organizations would have to work doubly hard to protect them. This was important as the evidence of the Ictu'l Vāar genocide was about to be released to the public, which most corporate clients could not allow to happen.

"What I believe was the most haunting about the killings of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples was how the perpetrators of the genocide followed agreed upon rules of bloodshed. The worst of these so called rules was that women, children and the elderly should especially be slaughtered by corporate forces"

Umberto Capeletti, General Attorney for the Genocide and Attrocities Investigation Bureau at the New Arcadia Trials, January 12th, 2257.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

**NORTH FALLS REFUGEE CAMP, PLANET
DEMETER SATURDAY, JUNE 10TH, 2255.**

There was still much to do after the well-coordinated midnight attack of Samson Private Contractors, including the immediate burying of the respective bodies of both sides of this operation. More specifically, the handful of planetary aid guards who had fallen protecting the refugees from further harm, would be either sent back to their awaiting families or were laid to rest in the graveyard that was constructed on the far side of the North Falls Refugee Camp. Likewise, the mercenaries who had attempted to strike terror in the hearts of the most desperate members of Demeter's migrant population would be returned to their bellicose corporation, after which Catherine had no notion in the slightest what became of them. One theory suggested that even the bodies of these soldiers who had once been so fierce as they lived would be returned to their respective families after all the fighting was done. Another theory posited that their earthly remains were simply cremated by Samson Private Contractors, who effectively owned their mercenaries' bodies as much in life as in death. Beyond that, there were extensive efforts to save the wounded from an early demise, especially in the Demeter Relief Corps where medics like Zoryanna were quick to help heal a variety of combat injuries from midnight into the early morning. Just the same, Zoryanna was rightfully fast asleep when it was Catherine's turn to get up to help those who needed it as yet another member of a planetary aid force.

Whatever the case, it became immediately apparent to Catherine that her responsibilities were not those of a logistics recruit, even as she wore the typical orange-banded outfit of this role. Instead, Catherine was now comfortable with the idea that her posting in the Demeter Relief Corps would involve collaboration across the various departments of this planetary aid organization, specifically

because this recruit in all of her flexibility could just as easily become a cultural interpreter like Johannes or a medic like her beloved friend Zoryanna. Moreover, Catherine was also not beyond picking up a spade and getting dirty by joining the construction corps who were now in the middle of the painstaking process of reinforcing the refugee camp's defenses. In this light, it was true that this place sometimes employed the same kinds of towers, walls and gates as those that could be seen in many active military installations throughout Demeter, so these were not the source of grief for the construction corps. Instead, Catherine would later learn through one of her friends who was part of a team in charge of implementing better defense strategies that North Falls had historically lacked a secure perimeter around it. Therefore, Samson Private Contractors was able to approach the walls of the camp under the cover of the local forests, whose trees shielded them from direct observation. For her part, Catherine was surprised to observe that it had taken this long for the relevant authorities to come up with this solution after a year of almost weekly mercenary attacks. The primary issue seems to have been with getting this basic notion approved for Shelvaar by the high command of her planetary aid organization, which was traditionally slow to respond to threats to the wellbeing of those in most need of help.

Nevertheless, Catherine had to attend to other matters on this clear and sunny day after the bloodshed of the previous night, and therefore was rapidly assigned by her commanding officers to help out the medical corps. This was merely due to how this component of planetary aid operations remained notably understaffed for as long as anyone could remember, bringing about a pressing need for more willing people who could pitch in to their operations. For her part, Catherine was paired with Marie-Claude Prudhomme, herself one of Zoryanna's closest friends. Likewise, Catherine thought that this lack of contact between her and Marie-Claude was because of how Zoryanna and Marie-Claude were veterans of a previous posting with the Demeter Relief Corps, and likewise spent

much time talking amongst themselves. It was equally widely rumored that it was Marie-Claude who had once fallen in love with Zoryanna during a previous summer, although it was apparent to Catherine that Marie-Claude had mostly gotten over her emotions about Zoryanna as this medic primarily focused on the tasks ahead of them. In this light, it was Marie-Claude who introduced Catherine to the bandages, antiseptic products and the other first aid equipment that they would be using today, all located in a metallic first aid kit whose exact contents seemed not to have changed in centuries. To be sure, there was always popular chatter of the medical breakthroughs ranging from gene therapy to regenerating lost limbs that seemed just over the horizon at places including the New Arcadia General Clinic's research and development department. And yet, Catherine had learned to be suspicious of the most far-fetched of these ideas which generally did not produce much in the realm of practical developments. This vigilance was primarily inherited from Catherine's father, who had learned throughout his career as a lawyer to doubt those promising such outlandish progress.

What was more certain was that Marie-Claude was a young woman with short brown hair and blue-grey eyes on a face marked by a defined jawline. had broad shoulders and robust limbs revealing something of her strength, in an attribute that was certainly useful in this line of work. At the same time, there was an undeniable sense of sadness that was apparent in her posture and gaze, especially when Marie-Claude was not explaining something to Catherine, which originated from her extensive experience seeing so many grievous injuries in her role within the planetary aid community. As a result, any potential work involving Catherine's fellow Demeter Relief Corps recruit would be veiled in melancholy in the manner that was less apparent when Catherine collaborated with people like Johannes or Zoryanna for that matter. Marie-Claude's prevailing melancholy was frequently broken up by fleeting instances of gallows humor, which made light of the sentiments of loss and all the pain she had witnessed in the past.

Whatever the case, Marie-Claude and Catherine were eventually walking rather briskly through the lesser known parts of the North Falls Refugee Camp on the warm summer's day which followed the horrors of the previous night. In this light, Catherine quickly realized that Marie-Claude had discovered a shortcut to this camp's medical center which took them from the habitation blocks to this crucial building without taking a longer path winding its way past the mess hall and its associated biodomes. After that, Catherine found herself in the cooler and drier air of the medical center which attempted to replicate the conditions determined to be the best for recovery from severe injury or sickness. It dawned upon Catherine that nothing much had changed from the harsh lighting to the narrow cots which populated this place of healing ever since she had last been there with Marco and Johannes, which was admittedly reassuring within a world whose essence seemed to be inevitably sliding into darkness. Likewise, the truth was that Catherine had definitely heard about the malicious and outright violent actions of Samson Private Contractors before this college student applied for her position within the Demeter Relief Corps. It was no secret that Catherine had already somewhere internalized the fact that she may perish during her posting as it had been thoroughly communicated in the last couple of months.

And yet, here Catherine was, still very much alive as she tried to take care of the guards of the North Falls Refugee Camp, who were mostly convalescing from ballistics related injuries. Catherine would be the first to admit that she had not much thought about the security detail of this planetary aid installation, who were frequently taciturn when they were patrolling the checkpoints of the North Falls Refugee Camp. Still, this recruit kept an open mind towards their manifold attempts at conversation which primarily reflected their current injuries, along with a desperate pressure to remind their families that they were still alive. This concern over their life helped Catherine humanize these vulnerable individuals which some imagined as a nameless, faceless instrument of violent force. More

specifically, one of the guards was a rather young man by the name of Akachi Jelani who immediately returned to an ancient story of a child from his native land walking home through the desert, except he never made it to this location because all he did was walk and walk and walk. What made this parable funny was Akachi's insistence on the word walking and no other details of how the desert looked or what the child felt to such an extent that reaching any feasible objective seemed comically pointless. For her part, Catherine understood this guard's parable as being a source of humor as it played on the utter absurdity of being lost in the wastes of some distant desert by emphasizing the recurring mechanics of walking over and over again. Meanwhile, Marie-Claude was more concerned with the physical wellness of this member of the security team who had been grazed in the arm by one of the mercenary's piercing bullets.

More specifically, Marie-Claude was intently focused on the particularities of this wound before her, while this medic in training changed the bandages and other elements of Ackachi's wound dressing. This young woman made sure to name and at times point out directly to what Catherine needed to bring to her from the rather limited contents of the medical kit, since Marie-Claude quickly recognized in her sympathetic gaze that Catherine remained still rather new to the particular responsibilities of treating wounds and other associated tasks. All of Marie-Claude's various orders were all given in order so that these trainees could correctly attend to this patient who propped themselves up on their other shoulder while their legs were under a heavy blanket. Just the same, Akachi and indeed most of his colleagues from the security detail were visibly at ease that someone qualified from the medical team was now taking care of the physical trauma these guards had suffered the previous night, in a process that of course demanded a large amount of time and attention. Catherine recognized that this much needed time and attention was as necessary for their own staff members as it was for any alien refugee threatened by colossal corporate powers.

Nevertheless, Catherine equally acknowledged how the wounding of even some of the North Falls Refugee Camp's security detail put pressure on their still standing colleagues, who would now have to overlook a far larger perimeter with less available security officials. Just the same, Catherine and many of her fellow recruits had noticed the presence of these armed yet ultimately friendly people within the checkpoints of the North Falls Refugee Camp, diligently looking over the incoming supply shipments with weary eyes, in always tense locations that might as well become the next flashpoint for the next corporate mercenary raid against the suffering the Ictu'l Vaar refugees. To be sure, the people of Demeter were mostly spared from any further injury outside of the regular miseries of thier lives in this place of settlement due to the willingness of the guards to lay down their lives to protect their continued existence. At times, it appeared that these soldiers for peace believed in the cause of the Demeter Relief Corps even more than its staunchest administrators, who were often lost in their ambitions amidst all the unyielding paperwork required for their profession. By contrast, Catherine recognized that even her more empathetic work in whatever capacity was equally necessary to the success of her planetary aid mission.

Whatever the case, Catherine soon continued her medical round under the guidance of Marie-Claude, encountering the rest of the wounded guards on their cots that had been employed by the Demeter Relief Corps. It was currently dawning upon her that Catherine did not know who was replacing her particular role in the logistics branch of the Demeter Relief Corps, however she hoped that whoever it was had the same capacity of thinking outside the box. Meanwhile, Marie-Claude momentarily observed her planetary aid colleagues visible worry drawn onto her face and reminded her that "I would not be too concerned about the coming and going of supplies from the North Falls Refugee Camp, since the head of this installation has ordered a slowing down this aspect of our current operations to what is strictly necessary to the survival of the refugees". At this,

Catherine thanked Marie-Claude for this new information that she had not quite been able to process over breakfast earlier this morning, and which would thus help Catherine stay focussed on the life-or-death intricacies of the task at hand. For example, there were some members of the security detail who appeared to be in far worse state than Achacki with his bullet grazes, since the mercenaries who had attacked them the previous night were trained in the use of deadly force, even if Catherine would not exactly describe them as marksmen. Indeed, this recruit imagined that the constant need for these illegally embedded soldiers to strike terror in the hearts and minds of the refugees without outright taking over the North Falls Refugee Camp suggested a certain weakness in their forces who could do little better than engage in this kind of warfare. Just the same, the members of Samson Private Contractors within the immediate vicinity of the North Falls Refugee Camp never mastered the psychological aspects of combat outside of physically showing up and terrorizing the aliens, and so their outright comical efforts at creating an environment of fear continued unabated.

For her part, Catherine had even recently heard from one of her friends that Samson Private Contractor's failure at truly stirring panic within the locals of Demeter was being privately reprimanded by their corporate clients, who felt like the detachment under the command of Gerhard Boudjwin Schongauer that had made an outright mockery of themselves in trying to stoke fear in a people who had far more common sense than they originally hoped. It was useless for now for Catherine to go over a mental list of everything the various soldiers of Samson Private Contractors had tried in this domain, specifically because she was assured that it was too long to properly account for. The primary problem in this regard was that Gerhard's combat units seemingly did not have any cultural interpreters on their side of military operations and so had essentially destined themselves to be exhausted after every single week on campaign to perform the same kinds of raids and strikes against the refugee camps that were operated

by the Demeter Relief Corps in the immediate vicinity of Damocles Falls. In other words, this meant that whatever terror they could muster within this seemingly broken and desperate population was only as good as their weakest soldier, in an apparent shortcoming that permeated their chain of command. Another thing became self-evident in that Catherine and her fellow recruits suspected that most of the time in their previous assaults against innocents the Samson Private Contractors operated within the legal bounds of the Western Corporate Concession where they had the full backing of a federal state, which was just as corrupt as Pegassus Petroleum or any corporation for that matter. And yet, what had changed in recent years was that Gerhard's fighting force were now at the heart of a republic whose people would not let themselves be easily governed by the worst impulses, which was to the mercenaries' detriment. Therefore, the soldiers of Samson Private Contractors were now effectively trapped in a nation that loathed them for abetting the genocide of a peaceful local people, where it seemed not apparent how they would get further support or supplies.

However, Catherine did not shed any tears for these utterly incompetent and outright malicious corporate-backed troops, who she thought represented only the most base desires of the human race, especially wrath and greed when this recruit eventually headed over to the mess hall for a late lunch. For now at least, Catherine was indifferent to the fact that many of these same soldiers on the opposing side of this shadow conflict had their own network of families and friends back wherever they had come from, because this recruit judged them harshly for having chosen to take part in the coercive intimidation tactics which she suspected were a mainstay of corporate warfare. And indeed no company on planet Demeter from Anderson Aeronautics to Pegasus Petroleum was free from the allure of threatening the locals of their world with strength of arms. Of course, Catherine knew in her heart that all of this was fundamentally opposed to democracy, however she seemed unsure if it would be duly punished.

It was with this rebuke of the corporate-backed enemy operating without end in sight within the territories of a republic in mind that Catherine ended her medical round with Marie-Claude. In practice, this recruit was surprised that it had taken her this much time to foster some loathing for people who could bring untold destruction to the lives of refugees, but was relieved that this moment had finally happened for her. Just the same, it dawned upon her that it was this enmity towards Samson Private Contractors which so defined every aspect of the lives of the older, so-called 'veteran' recruits at North Falls Refugee Camp, along with an accompanying empathy for the tribes they had wronged. Indeed, Catherine felt herself maturing in her view of the world in a way that was only possible when a person was confronted with the sight of suffering, and thus she wished above all that Johannes along with her other fellow first-year recruits would have a similar life-altering epiphany. Meanwhile, the lunch that Catherine had in the mess hall was nothing so profound as the sentiments of her mind, as it was a rather typical dish for the recruits that had been decently cooked. She carefully observed that there was none of the extravagance of breakfast within the space of the mess hall, which had long since departed this room.

Eventually, Catherine ran into a rather well-rested looking Zoryanna who was repairing the disparate components of her air mask on one of the tables of the mess hall, because this much needed piece of technology on a planet with a nitrate rich atmosphere seemed to be overwhelming her with oxygen. Eventually, Zoryanna decided to give a holo-call to the help line of Epsilon General Company who would explain to her that Zoryanna had simply activated the surplus oxygen mode of her air mask, which was intended for combat or sports. Catherine could not help but laugh a little with her trusted friend, because both of these recruits knew that this was widely known to be one of the first mistakes many users of air masks would make. Next, Zoryanna fixed her air mask by flicking a switch on the back of this contraption and was able to breathe more easily again. And yet,

Zoryanna was not quite done with seeing Catherine today specifically because this slightly older recruit wanted to show her younger colleague something that was close to her heart. Therefore, Zoryanna and Catherine quietly returned to their habitation block as the day around them turned from clear to overcast, with a gentle breeze blowing in from the east. What the medic ended up showing her close friend was a projection of something rather hazy with distorted sound on her hologram device which had seen better days. Next, Zoryanna carefully tuned this lightweight piece of technology that was commonplace in the cosmos, so that Catherine could begin to discern a semblance of a scene unfolding before her gaze. "You seem to be rather unsure what you're looking at. It's a recording of the traditional dance of the Polish people, known as a marsuka, which my mother gave to me as a memento" Zoryanna described with a smile.

Catherine smiled as well under the glow of this holographic device as she knew how much the culture of distant Poland mattered for her older colleague even as she engaged in helping the Ictu'l Vaar peoples of Demeter. In this light, Zoryanna frequently imagined the continuation of popular phenomena including the marsuka with all of its complicated steps as a loving manifestation of some essence of humanity persisting in the hostile stars. As a result, Zoryanna was compelled to offer Catherine to dance following the sentiments of her soul just like the people in the hologram who perhaps were no longer with them. The two recruits of the Demeter Relief Corps found a little space away from the rows of bunks in the habitation block but before the massive door to the airlock to act out their dance which involved plenty of steps. However, Catherine was perhaps the first to admit to herself that it was not necessarily the steps of their very own marsuka that mattered but rather the overwhelming love of humanity that was behind it which now burned in Zoryanna's eyes. After that, the odd pair of friends would in time exhaust themselves, and therefore they both decided in their own manners to slow down their once swift steps to a more moderate pace.

It was only then that Catherine and Zoryanna noticed Marie-Claude was watching them near the metallic door to the airlock with a look of melancholic longing on her face for a love that had once passed. Nevertheless, there was no hostility in this older recruit's eyes while her gentle posture remained open and limbs relaxed throughout the ensuing interaction. "I remember when Zoryanna used to dance with me like that and just how passionately we were in love last summer when we were serving the Demeter Relief Corps together" Marie-Claude began to explain to Catherine. "My dearest recruit, I really hope that Zoryanna loves you as much as she used to love me in a way that is tender and sweet and cannot be exactly put to words." Marie-Claude continued with a nascent smile now apparent on her face. At this, Zoryanna gently nodded to what her previous lover was proposing in an expression that revealed a certain longing too within the medic's heart for the warm embrace of love. For her part, Catherine seemed taken aback that someone had watched this quintessentially human moment between them, and so took a few steps away from the airlock door.

After that, Marie-Claude silently put on her own air mask with tears in her eyes and slowly but surely walked outside to see where she was needed next. Meanwhile, Zoryanna did everything in her power to comfort Catherine whose entire body language suggested this recruit was uneasy in front of someone who had once been the light of Zoryanna's life. And so, the two recruits from different walks of life hugged closely for a moment, all of which seemed like an eternity, and looked at one another with tenderness in their eyes. For the first time in a long time, Catherine felt like she had found some refuge from this cold and unfeeling universe in someone else's empathetic embrace, however was not yet ready to admit it to herself because this would mean renouncing on some of her ambition that seemed to make her who she was today. Catherine still admitted to herself that somewhere in the cosmos a burden had been lifted, and her heart could finally find itself anew through acts of loving service.

CHAPTER TWELVE

**NORTH FALLS CAMP, PLANET DEMETER
SUNDAY, JUNE 11TH, 2255.**

The midnight assault of the Samson Private Contractors upon the North Falls Refugee Camp was perfectly expected for the members of the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau, who rapidly set out to discover the location of Camp Jericho to avoid future conflict. This level of efficiency and competency was not in the slightest surprising to Catherine, who wished above all that the Demeter Relief Corps displayed this same kind of initiative. Consequently, this recruit's immediate organization had essentially condemned themselves to be forever the victim to the corporate forces that had been illegally imbedded in the pacifist Agrairian Republic of Parnassus in what was known as the Powell-White Affair, or more widely the Damocles Affair given where it happened on the map of planet Demeter. More specifically, Catherine's mother Elizabeth along with the rest of the sensible and rightfully outraged members of the Frontier Socialist Party had worked to find conditions for peace with the powers of the Corporate Concessions governing these mercenaries' actions. However, these neighboring countries ruled by a private government controlled by colossal companies were not the kinds of people to negotiate fairly with Catherine's nation, and constantly asked for outrageous items on their settlement proposal, especially in the form of territorial gains of entire cities and their surrounding countryside.

For her part, Catherine was well aware of all of these happenings within the halls of the Parnassian Chamber of Senators due to how this recruit avidly read about the politically savvy news channels of planet Demeter. She could always rely upon the writing of the investigative journalist Francine Prudhomme and her colleagues for the New Arcadia Times, as this woman always seemed to shine a light on the internal malfeasance within the colonial political machine.

In practice, Catherine fondly remembered the especially damning conclusion to Prudhomme's well recieved article 'Another Day on Planet Demeter – Corporate Corruption and Parnassian Governance Today' which gave credence to concerns that Catherine's state was not as functional and scandal-free as was commonly believed in the years after the Second Corporate War. Just the same, Catherine all too often murmured to herself some semblance of Prudhomme's conclusion whenever she was confronted with a conflict of interest, which read 'The issue with the extensive corporate involvement in the running of the Parnassian state is not an issue of if this is indeed happening – which it absolutely is; look around you, plebeians – but rather when it will come to an end'. For her part, this recruit especially insisted on the end of this now famous journalistic quote, specifically because she too wished to see an end to such corporate involvement.

These were the thoughts that had begun to dwell in Catherine's mind as she stared once again at the intricate relief of water pipes and air vents making their way across the ceiling of the recruit's housing unit, in a daily activity that was strangely relaxing for her. It was true that sometimes Catherine imagined all of these technical components to be the veins and arteries of some large entity, and indeed was the first to remark that the most successful buildings followed principles of construction found in the human or alien body. This way Catherine could effectively make sense of this labyrinth of pipes, valves and ducts which reminded her of the nuances of her own human anatomy instead of seeing them as somehow distinct from her mortal vessel. In general, Catherine was taught this philosophy by her loving grandfather, Nicholas Peter Hartinger, who was a known architect in his own right. In this light, Nicholas was a proponent of the Neo Utilitarian style of building that promised to alleviate the struggles of the masses via a return to simple, habitable spaces. Just the same, Nicholas would live to see the day where this once experimental aesthetic became the norm across the buildings of Demeter, which was a point of pride for him.

Catherine currently felt the urgent need to get up out of her bunk bed and begin her day with this new lease on life inspired by the best minds her family had to offer, which stood out against the nihilistic destruction wrought by the corporate attack on the North Falls Refugee Camp. More specifically, Catherine went through the typically quiet rituals of her morning while her fellow recruits were still sleeping or even in the early phases of getting up themselves, such as selecting new underwear for her patrol today specifically since the recruit could not feasibly change her well-worn external fatigues. Then it was time to shower in a moment that Catherine both loved and dreaded, since this ritual allowed her to wash off all the sweat and other assorted filth from yesterday. Once again, she found herself wondering how the shower in all of its stainless steel glory had not changed much ever since the Twentieth Century, to such an extent that Catherine had a hard time imagining what people did before it, since there was always a need to clean oneself in previous generations. Furthermore, the fact that she had to strip down to make the shower worth it was equally a point of reflection for Catherine since she wondered just how many people of all origins had done this exact same strange ritual before washing themselves off.

When she was done, Catherine was stunned to run into a young alien girl by the name of Vaas Chaldova who looked to be around ten or eleven years old, and who had gained access to this private space. Vaas' reason for this is that she felt like her body was being critiqued by her fellow refugee children making disparaging comments about herself when she showered and got dressed. For her part, Catherine allowed her to clean off within the recruits' bathrooms, on the condition that this kind of breaking and showering into a space that was larger and cleaner than the refugees' filthy facilities was not a recurring habit. At this, Vaas laughed a little at the prospect of her doing this every day of the year until her family of artisans moved onto better horizons. And Catherine also gave Vaas the common decency of some privacy, specifically because the aid worker

had no reason to look at her body which she assumed looked no different than that of a human girl of a comparable age and stature. Of course, there had been scandals of previous aid workers getting too close to desperate refugee children even in Catherine's organization, which were almost always middle-class men of European or American descent. Catherine ardently did not want a similar thing to happen between her and Vaa's, despite that they were both of the fairer sex, because the power imbalance was simply too great. However, the young alien girl requested help combing her hair once she had finished showering as she pointedly commented that Catherine looked like she was rather alone. For her part, Catherine merely smiled at Vaa's and encouraged her from a distance as to once again give some space to grow, following the lessons of Juno Love. In this light, this recruit's guide through her adolescent years was a strong advocate for providing her clients with correct information about a range of sensitive topics, however she gave them the time needed to apply it in their desperate lives.

After that, Catherine received the notice on her sleek holo-bracelet that there had been a whistleblower within the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau who had leaked information about the killings of the Ictu'l Vāar tribes to anyone who would believe them in the liberal-leaning New Arcadia press. This news potentially changed everything in Catherine's immediate future, since now her organization would inevitably need someone to step into the ruthless world of politics in order to better explain to various senators and other lawmakers of Parnassus what had actually occurred. For now at least, Catherine's posting as a recruit in the North Falls Refugee Camp seemed utterly insignificant compared to this newly released information, and she hoped that her superiors would also see it this way. The truth was that Catherine hailed from a senatorial family, and so had some political sense engrained into her from the youngest age, where Catherine also read the writings of past and present philosophers who debated how the state could ideally govern their all too frequently unruly citizens.

More specifically, Catherine was particularly supportive of the notions of good governance and the state as guarantor of public stability described by one of her Calliope University professors, Dr. Lucy Moses, which contrasted against the utilitarian and conservative writings of respected theorists including Declan Martin and Jeremiah Arthur Newman. The problem with many other theories of governance, Catherine reflected, was their broad tendency to blame every crisis on individual politicians and citizens as opposed to coming up with a systematic reading of government operations at large. Likewise, Moses openly loathed the recent traditionalist turn within academia, and spoke liberally in her compelling lectures about how it was once easier to get one's point across in the literature without worrying about upsetting people guided more by blind emotion than by the results of extensive, apolitical research. At the same time, Moses did not fall into the pitfalls of nostalgia for a mythical past, and would all too often undercut her elegaic speeches by saying that some things never truly change. In short, Catherine decidedly respected Moses' theory of political justice along with good governance, which would influence her engagement with the state.

Regardless, Catherine needed to move on from her musings about the state of the world, and currently walk over to the mess hall which was just about to open for breakfast. In addition, Catherine noticed that there was a crowded soup kitchen outside this eating establishment, which was operated by some of her fellow Demeter Relief Corps recruits. This bustling scene generally aligned with the popular image that was circulated in culture at large about the corps, specifically as merely an organization that provided food to the needy as well as houses for the destitute. This equally went a long way to demonstrate how Vaas snuck into the recruits showers as she was rapidly reunited with her admittedly worried parents. Once again, this tender moment made Catherine reconsider the time where she lost herself in the Tharsis Grottos planetary park at a similar age and could not hold back her motherly relief that Vaas was not truly lost.

Instead, it came to light that Vaas was effectively dared to do this by her older friend Lesh Efrava, who wanted to see her try to explain her way out of this situation to some official. Catherine originally wanted to sincerely talk to Lesh about what was socially acceptable within the strict bounds of the alien refugee camp and how much trouble Vaas could have gotten into. However, Lesh quickly responded that their own cramped showers had been destroyed wholesale by Promethean Fire the night before, which gave this recruit a new perspective on her position of privilege in this planetary aid operation. This recruit then walked along to the mess hall as Catherine was starting to get hungry, and did not want to spend the necessary minutes to disentangle all of this prepubescent drama. And yet, the existence of this situation indicated that at least the children of the Ictu'l Vāar had the time to be children despite the ravages of the world around them which promised to turn them into melancholic, indifferent adults. In this light, Catherine smiled gently at Vaas, Lesh and the rest of their clique, who did not appreciate how this adult thought that she was one of their tribe.

After that, Catherine entered the mess hall and made sure to take off her standard issue air mask before she enjoyed breakfast with her colleagues, by putting this device at its pre-appointed space. Catherine also reflected at length about how she could continue her service to the Demeter Relief Corps though getting involved as an envoy from this organization in galactic politics. Indeed, the recruit ultimately concluded that she could try to work reduced hours with the Demeter Relief Corps, while also spending a couple of days in New Arcadia debating senators and other lawmakers who were too old for their good. And yet, it was Johannes who tentatively vetoed Catherine's idea as being too tiring for her health, which further contrived Catherine into picking a singular calling this summer. By contrast, Johannes remained sad at the prospect of Catherine leaving this frontline organization for the backrooms of politics, in a discomfort apparent in the recruit staring intently at her while picking at his food.

Eventually, Catherine mustered the courage to speak to the director of aid operations about what was on her mind, especially since she was unsure about how to proceed now that there were politics in play. The truth about this matter was that Catherine sincerely wanted to maintain her posting with the Demeter Relief Corps which the college student had trained the whole academic year to do, and even then it was hardly a sure thing. What would the previous Catherine say about this sudden change of course in her career, where she would be more distant from the people in desperate need of help. And what would the future Catherine say about her inability to escape the gravitational pull of the Chamber of Senators and all of its proceedings and infighting which would perhaps lead to the younger Catherine burning up in orbit. And that was only if she was lucky, especially because she had no elaborate plan to convince the various senators of Parnassus about the systematic slaughter of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples. With all of this on her mind, the clearly worried recruit reluctantly approached ShelVāar and Simone who seemed interested in what she had to say this morning.

"Good morning, Shelvāar and Simone. I'm certain that you have heard that there is a whistleblower from the bureau illegally revealing to the New Arcadia press about the genocide of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples. This will inevitably end up as a matter to be widely discussed in the Chamber of Senators, which is where I can help as someone with some political training" Catherine proposed

"Good morning, recruit. I have definitely heard of that worrying news that was reported this morning in various sources. I can tell you who likely did this, as they were a disaffected person by the name of Isaac Warren Brooks, who had ties with the radical activist group Galactic Citizens Against Warfare. He is still frustrated about the fact that I got promoted to commissioner of the bureau while he didn't. Of course, please have the common courtesy of saying that I told you exactly none of this volatile information..." Simone elaborated

"Certainly, ma'am, I completely understand" Catherine disclosed

"Where was I, recruit? Oh yes. I believe it is an absolutely wonderful idea that you want to valiantly stand up for the bureau, only if you have a background in politics which should be a necessity before you even thinking about entering the pearly gates of the Chamber of Senators" Simone admitted

"And, that's where you're in luck, ma'am... I am the daughter of the senator Elizabeth Hartinger, who you might know as a tough woman who actually helped secure funding for operations like your own. My mother also fought for the civil rights of Demeter's native people, on issues ranging from school integration to voting rights, since she is an ambitious member of the Frontier Socialist Party. I could go on, however, I think you get my idea here" Catherine explained

"Aha! You know that I have voted for your mother in every election where she presented herself, specifically due to the fact that Elizabeth is a candidate that best aligns with my values. At the same time, you likely also recognize that Elizabeth is not without her scandals, like when she embezzled military funds to go towards civic repair projects and natural preservation in what was known as the Green Future Scandal. That being said, if you had to pick a politician to act as your guide in these trying times, you could do far worse than a woman whose only significant crime was caring about nature" Simone illustrated

"Thank you for your insight, ma'am! I'm glad that I have somehow gained the blessing of the bureau in the matters of politics. I will therefore get involved with the Chamber of Senators hopefully with the backing of your organization, which should give legitimacy to what I am saying..." Catherine started

"With all due respect, Catherine. I know that you have barely begun your posting with the corps, and that you are a rather promising operative who aced the physical and mental tests to become one of us this summer. I hope that you can see where I am coming from, and I would like you to reconsider your choice before getting involved in the Chamber of Senators" ShelVāar warned

"Yes, ma'am... I will reconsider my choice" Catherine muttered

"Please stop being such a complete and utter killjoy, ShelVāar. Let the girl dream a little and act in a politically savvy manner in order to serve both of our organizations. I will make personally sure that she doesn't say anything stupid about the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid, which is, after all our most glorious mother organization, but she likely already knows that" Simone argued

"Well, listen here. It is not your place to make decisions about my recruits, you good-for-nothing bitch. Catherine remains under my command as a member of the corps and you cannot do anything about it" Shelvar insisted

"I have not finished yet... All I need to do in order to change your mind is to reveal to the attorneys of the council that you have scandals of your own, like how you signed off on faulty refugee housing built by Dynamic Homes. Oh, let us not forget how you have done absolutely nothing to significantly contend with Samson Private Contractors, who year after year sell between 1000 to 2500 girls into domestic slavery. So, don't you come at me with your righteous indignation, because it seems that I have come here for a fight" Simone announced

"Fine... You can work with Catherine, if and only if we can agree that the crisis with Samson Private Contractors happened differently than you claimed, as I am well aware of their penchant for torture and their ability to make native girls and boys disappear from our records. If not, we are at an impasse and I will cordially disinvite you from this refugee camp" ShelVāar replied

"Ladies and gentlemen! We have a deal. I will get to collaborate with the wonderful Catherine and you get a pass on retelling the past. However, don't you for an instant think that the corps is out of hot water, since after I'm done with these corporate bastards you may be next" Simone affirmed

"So, am I free to leave, ma'am? Let me then pack up my belongings and at least say goodbye to some of the friends that I have made over the summer, with the notable exception of Marco. One of my fellow recruits is aligned with corporate interests, through Midas Capital" Catherine whispered

At this, Catherine and Simone left the breakfast table because they had had enough of the endless stipulations from the director of the Demeter Relief Corps, who may have been a quite corrupt individual. The next hours passed like a whirlwind as the college student prepared her belongings and said farewell to her colleagues, especially Zoryanna and Johannes who would miss her dearly. Catherine next boarded a dropship on the West Landing Pad that was bound for the promising horizon of New Arcadia, which promised to heal all wounds that were caused by the genocide of the Ichtul Vāar peoples. Catherine observed the burnt out shells of buildings of the base that were scarred by Promethean Fire from the open door of this hovering platform. For her part, Simone smiled at Catherine warmly in a way that looked genuine enough, and the recruit thought that without Simone she would not be able to survive the turmoil of politics. Just the same, the wild expanse of the forests of Demeter eventually gave way to the urban sprawl of New Arcadia which was gleaming with the hope of its countless citizens. New Arcadia was located to the south of the city of Damocles Falls as this second metropolis was perched in between the Olympian Waterway, which was more readily known as the Olympian Bay, and the Arcadian Sea.

From what Catherine could see, her hometown had plenty of tall buildings which were known as strato-scrapers, as their spires seemed to pierce the very stratosphere of the planet. There were of course the different landmarks named after the major companies of Demeter not just in the form of strato-scrapers but also in the form of sports arenas and even public green spaces which broke up the dominant gridlock of this growing metropolis. Just the same, Catherine did not know how there were many people on Demeter, however she figured that it was a combination of the fact that this planet was generally habitable and a population boom that had only tapered off with the Second Corporate War. In this light, Catherine was overjoyed to be finally home again, although she knew that there was still a significant fight left to ensure justice for all aliens.

"It is now clear to me that the reason why our genocide took so long to be investigated was that it was first of all something that only really happened in the countryside. It took only a few months, however, for that violence to take place in the streets of Pegasus City, which drew international condemnation"

Menaert van der Broekman, Commander of 56th Batalion of the United Corporate Land Forces the New Arcadia Trials, January 8th, 2257.

CHAPTER TWELVE

**NEW ARCADIA, PLANET DEMETER
MONDAY, JUNE 12TH, 2255.**

Catherine was the first to admit that she needed a significant makeover if she would successfully thrive in colonial politics, which was where her longtime friend Penelope Lambert would come in. For her part, Penelope had become a fashion designer extraordinaire for major brands like Casa Ippolita Fiorentini and Gautheir et Fils which were much appreciated by urban plutocrats. Nevertheless, today her old school friend was not looking to make absurd amounts of money designing for the wealthy as much as she would be looking to give Catherine a better starting position in the often tough world of statecraft. Just the same, Catherine was not necessarily a delicate hyperfeminine person, but her mom was quick to point out that Catherine would need to be extremely pliable in such personal matters in order to make an impact where she was hoping to. In fact, Elizabeth had worked closely with none other than the living legend Artemesia Baumgartner when it came time to dress the part for fundraising events, which she adamantly loathed as emetic symptoms of capitalism gone awry. However, her mother was equally one to humbly stay the course during events including the Planetary Relief Gala in her glistening silks and pearls which happened every year on June 20th at 516 Nebula Plaza in New Arcadia. Legend had it that it was at one of these stifling galas that a younger Elisabeth met Thomas due to their mutual friend Artemesia, which sparked a fruitful, lifelong relationship.

Nevertheless, it was too early in the morning for Catherine to be thinking about graceful silhouettes and luxurious materials, specifically since the college student was still in her bedroom at this time of day. The sun had yet to begin its arduous journey across the celestial vault today, and likewise the ever-astute Catherine needed to content herself with a sight of her planet's moon of Juno. In

practice, this college student wondered how much more different, but also how much more ethereal life must be in the haunting world of Juno with its lack of atmosphere and any sense of gravity, at places such as the ever-famous mining outpost Eternity's Gate or even other primarily French and Italian populated lunar colonies reminiscent of an earlier age of space exploration. She equally thought for a minute about Zoryanna's vivid watercolors of this moon, which seemed to be concordant with an almost universal fascination with the silvery, shimmering Juno, which appeared like a veritable heaven compared against the problems that many citizens rich and poor alike had to face on Demeter. Regardless, the college student was also staunch in her belief that it was too early in the day to be philosophical about such matters, and so tried to go back to sleep. The truth in this matter was that Demeter had longer days and nights than Earth, so there were typically enough hours in a night for not one but two or even three shorter rests, especially during the endless hours of summer. However, Catherine only knew of her distant homeworld of Earth through existing popular culture, which all too frequently seemed to look back to the origins of humanity. For example, this college student could name at least a dozen holo-shows covering this exact subject off the top of her head, although they were not all so convincing in their portrayal of a planet that most people had never travelled to before.

One of the best holo-shows in this regard was the ecological thriller 'Into the Dust' by the showrunners Vlassis Rodikanos which attempted to recall how extreme weather consumed much of civilization on Earth. Just the same, it was widely apparent that Rodikanos and his team had done their homework on what may have caused the fall of Earth, through extensive research onto the climate of the planet before and during these times of woe. It was also the type of holo-show that everyone knew about even if its viewership had slightly dwindled in recent memory, specifically because it was a well-concieved cultural event. By contrast, Catherine shuttered at the thought that there were hundreds of less

graceful forms of media ranging from books to films that most notably did not know what to do with the human homeworld. However, she was also accepting of the fact that the creator of 'Into the Dust' was driven to see his project have a lasting impact on the fabric of colonial society, and that not all people needed to be so overwhelmingly convinced of their own incalculable genius. Whatever the case, Catherine eventually got herself out of bed in her warmly light bedroom at 47 Halcyon Road in the New Arcadia suburb of West Orchard. It was true that Catherine had once lived at 56 East Nebula Street near Founders Park, however her thoughtful parents had been quick to retire to a more quiet place away from the all consuming hustle and bustle of New Arcadia the moment Catherine got into Calliope University for a four year interstellar studies program.

However, even Elizabeth and Thomas were smart enough to live close to the robust system called MATS which was short for Metropolitan Area Transit System, which was divided into multiple lines. More specifically, Catherine knew to take the Orange Line approximately 30 minutes from Orchard Station to North Cobalt Street if she wanted to access the urban core of New Arcadia. Moreover, the act of owning a glide-car was seen as the height of ostentatious luxury that most people did not want to take part in, specifically as MATS remained much beloved as an overground way to see the city, not even to mention a swift means of getting to and from work for everyone from the loftiest executive working at a major company to the lowliest cleaning person toiling at a school. Indeed, the only people who fearmongered about the overall safety of MATS were the New Conservative Party, who used it as a wedge issue in their electorate. As they saw things, only immigrants and other assorted criminals used this public service, which they simply could not defund for fear of being ousted from power. This ridiculous language also went a long way in explaining why there had never been a New Conservative mayor of New Arcadia even during the Second Corporate War as this metropolis remained a beacon for liberty in worrying times.

Whatever the case, Catherine's room was dominated quite predictably by a bed decorated with muted colored pillows and blankets, and yet this was by no means the only piece of furniture in this most personal area of the house. For example, Catherine noticed that there was a slender sofa along with a robust chair opposite the bed, at the foot of windows looking onto a small back garden, accessed through a door. In addition, a nightstand, a miniscule table as well as a carpet completed the furnishings of the room, whose dynamic lighting system had been built into the walls and ceiling around Catherine. In practice, there was nothing overtly futuristic about this section of her home, which followed a time honored philosophy of comfort above all else. Just the same, this was the idea of her grandfather when he helped design this home, reflecting a return towards progressions of traditional materials in middle class buildings. It seemed that this notion was well enough executed in the space around her, even if Catherine was also quick to note that she was no great student of architecture.

Currently, Catherine walked through a door leading to the living room and kitchen of this suburban house, passing by two other bedrooms as she did with the first belonging to her parents and the second being that of her brother. For now at least, the ever troublesome Jason had been sent not to the military as he was hoping but to a camp called the New Hope Recovery Camp in the town of Hope Falls some distance away from the city. This was a place that had been avidly recommended by his beleaguered therapist as an intensive experience for violent and worrying children, where they would be immersed in a rigorous world of psychological instruction along with daily physical activities. What Catherine liked about this program is how it took boys and girls from a range of origins out of their self made echo chambers through a return to nature. For his part, Jason loathed any attempts to help him in such a manner just short of him becoming a trainee for the corporate forces who he so admired. However, this ludicrous idea was out of the question for his parents who wanted a child, not a soldier.

The last thing that Catherine remembered was that Jason would often cry during the meager holo-calls he was given back to his home, and that for a very first time the previous week this melancholy felt genuine. This was in stark contrast to the preceding four or five weeks where Jason had tried and failed to manipulate his way out of getting better with the kinds of tears that Elisabeth had only seen from the eyes of amateur politicians. Therefore, it seemed that the fever was finally breaking and that Catherine hoped that she would have a normal little brother who she could roughhouse with in no time. Catherine also admitted as she was walking to the kitchen that her only childhood had not been that normal since she was given a plethora of opportunities to not just to merely be empathetic but to transcend empathy following the much loved philosophy of the child psychologist, Hayato Kando. In his words, the children of tomorrow needed to be immersed in caring for their fellow friends by actively discussing sensitive topics with the help of a responsible adult and validating any trauma that was felt with acts of affirmation. That way, the overarching hope was that children would learn to use their minds within reason to attempt to get to the bottom of the sources of pain and anger, in an almost spiritual way.

Nevertheless, Catherine did not have the energy at this very moment to consider the manner in which she was raised or even the quiet luxuries of her purpose-built suburban home, specifically since breakfast was calling. What she was able to make for the first meal of the day was very much reminiscent of the food that she had at the North Falls Refugee Camp. More specifically, it was a simple dish of gallia scrambled eggs which were rather common on her planet as gallia were roughly the equivalent to Earth chickens. Once again, the intense violet color of the whole could take some getting used to, so Catherine imagined it as digesting an amethyst geode without the resulting health complications. Just the same, the alien juices at her disposal were especially refreshing, since they did not have the same added sugars as orange and apple drinks.

Then, Catherine happily waited for what seemed like an eternity for her fashionista friend to arrive, and decided to step out of her tranquil house to the front garden to breathe in the dawning day. At the same time, Catherine was also not one to forget her oxygen mask which was not where it was supposed to be this morning, as the atmosphere of Demeter was rich in nitrates. After a while of looking, Catherine eventually found this compact device produced by Epsilon General Company on top of a neatly folded pile of clothes, which was the doing of her mother with exacting standards for cleanliness. Catherine was surprised therefore that this New Arcadian senator had chosen to marry her father of all people, who did not possess this sense of being neat and orderly. What Thomas did possess though was an immense need for intentionality and, quite frankly, honesty in his way of living, as he felt like his own father could have been more present during moments of his youth, instead of withdrawing into projects. For his part, Catherine's grandfather more than made up the difference in how he was undeniably present in this child's life, much to Thomas' delight.

Eventually, the gentle rain of dawn slowly gave way to the bright radiance of morning, suggesting that it would be a clear and fair day on planet Demeter. It did not really matter since Catherine would be trying on clothes indoors, but this change in weather made this student feel like something was right in the world. Indeed, Catherine had barely finished having this thought when all of a sudden she heard the mechanical flapping of parts and looked up to observe Penelope descending from the sky in a six-wing flyer. Catherine was not too certain about the make and model of this vehicle of consummate luxury, but she recognized that Anderson Aeronautics as well as Synergy Starliners produced them under various names that she could not be bothered to remember. What she could see was that this aircraft was modeled off of a dragonfly as could be seen in its main method of propulsion. It was certainly graceful, however Catherine, ever the pragmatist, wondered if it was at all necessary given rising fuel costs.

What she did not expect was that Penelope had come down to her home on the quiet fringe of New Arcadia with an entire team of people, who followed her wherever she went. Penelope herself was dressed exuberantly in a pantsuit with a dynamic print, in an admittedly perplexing look that blended together the expectations for male and female fashion. At her feet, there was a pet juvenile prowler on a golden chained leash with tufted ears and recurved tail whose name was Constantine, she believed. Indeed, Penelope quickly exchanged some brief pleasantries with her old school friend who was tacitly appalled at this display of opulence beyond any practical purpose. For her part, this fashion designer at least had the courtesy of being amenable to Catherine where she would have otherwise been detached in her daily business dealings. Once again, the reason behind this was that Catherine had helped her through the loss of her father in the Second Corporate War, something that she would not forget.

Consequently, Penelope and her team vigorously strolled into Catherine's suburban home once the pleasantries were done, and set up their belongings in her living room without as much as asking Catherine if that was feasible. Just the same, Penelope's luxury aircraft, which was revealed to be a ZX-15 Viceroy flyer, stayed awkwardly positioned on the black asphalt road in a manner that blocked any potential traffic. Nevertheless, Catherine could not worry about this issue due to the ungodly commotion in her home, which woke up her admittedly confused parents who were not expecting such rowdy company. "I see that you are already in a state of undress, which is good since this is clearly not your first time getting clothes fitted. I always don't like working with my younger clients, since they are so touchy about their bodies" Penelope disclosed. This comment made Catherine visibly uneasy since she knew that Penelope had once been a sensitive child too; however she gave up any discretion for the manners and style of a young model. Catherine didn't think she really knew Penelope despite their shared schooling, even when she was in a state of undress.

There had always been something impassable in her fair and glossy skin, something that Catherine was not so burdened with when she gently opened her mind and body to others when she felt it was appropriate. Likewise, no amount of glances at Penelope's growing and frequently starved body could change the ephemeral unreality of this girl-turned-woman, who would frequently dare this student to touch her body in what Catherine suspected was a desperate cry for some form of physical intimacy. By contrast, Catherine never saw any of this concerning behavior originating from her beloved medic Zoryanna, who clearly had been held enough as a child in spite of her military background. Alas, it was not so with Penelope whose entire soul remained closed to any efforts to get to know it, because she remained a woman who was all surface and no depth. This was also what worked in the fashion world of New Arcadia, where clients were only interested in personal anecdotes insofar as they proved profitable.

Before she knew it, this college student stepped onto a flat and circular hologram projector in her bedroom, which helped Penelope see what potential clothes would look like on her distant friend's body. As the designer saw it, this kind of technology represented a major time over traditional modes of tailoring where physical fabric was used, if and when it wanted to work. Catherine tried to stay grounded in the physical bounds of her body while this happened, which felt overall as if the codes of fashion in this very moment were being imposed onto her. Of course, Catherine was no longer an adolescent by a long shot, but she certainly felt like one of the girls from the North Falls Refugee Camp since her body appeared no longer to be her own. This was a worrying thought within the heart of her quiet home, and was something she needed to address with her friend who seemed to be immersed in her luxurious work. Indeed, the only thing that the two women could agree upon was that Penelope's designs were at the very cutting edge of fashion in the galactic year 2255, however, Catherine did not know if all of this was worth it due to Penelope's lack of human graces.

With regards to fashion, Penelope and her team were truly unmatched and the designer disclosed that they had helped Casa Ipolita Fiorentini win the highly coveted Andromeda Prize for best dressed model at the conclusion of last year's summer fashion week. In this light, the proof of this high quality work was definitely apparent in the luxurious materials that were being used to clothe and reclothe Catherine, which remained closely guarded industry secrets. More specifically, the college student felt especially attached to the chromasilk color changing fabrics which could change from day to night when exposed to light, which seemed like the height of exuberance in fashion. For example, Penelope proposed that Catherine wear a flaming red and amber gown composed of the gauziest chromasilk to the Planetary Relief Gala, which could easily transform into a more subdued blue and black piece over the span of a half hour. This is what Catherine loved about fashion today, and, even then, this student could not and would not excuse Penelope's utter lack of personal growth. Indeed, she had always been that best dressed girl in class, and seemed to not have advanced past her adolescent years where she claimed to be the talk of the town.

Even Catherine's parents appeared slightly taken aback by how decidedly artificial the very essence of Penelope had become, since there was nothing of that little girl who once loved to play dress-up for what seemed to be hours and hours with their daughter, in the woman she was today. Thomas even thought that Penelope might as well be one of those androids like the Andromeda V.2 which were once produced by Renslaer Robotics. Androids had gotten to such a level of verisimilitude to humanity that it was hard to tell them apart from living, breathing people. And wasn't it androids just like the Galatea V.3 too which once helped humanity navigate the vast expanse of the stars away from the ruins of the now desolate earth all those decades ago. Of course, Catherine knew that the androids reward for their hard work in helping us find a home in the stars was to end up literally and metaphorically in the trash heap of history.

Thomas remembered how it was extensive legislation protecting the very essence of human identity that ultimately stopped the worrying emergence of this kind of technology. The technology of virtual reality that had so dominated the Twenty First century was now perceived as being woefully out-of-date to life in the stars by the people of the Parnassian Republic. It was only really used by the worst corporations on the planet in order to calm the nerves of their lowly employees who often found themselves dreaming of revolution. And at times, some company or another would try to sell virtual reality to the general public, who would inevitably resist their attempts for the reasons that it was seen as a way to overpower and corrupt human will. All of this was to say that androids and their associated artificial intelligence were not the only form of once praised technological development that had fallen out of favor in this student's world, where not all potential advancements were treated with equal praise.

Android or not, Penelope was efficient in her meticulous fashion work, primarily due to her assistants who time and again did the task of measuring every conceivable dimension of Catherine's body. After that, the two women of New Arcadia argued back and forth over the price for the chromasilk dress. Then, Penelope was pulled aside by Thomas who stipulated that she should give the lion's share of these quasars to her aides, who this lawyer gathered were underpaid through talking to one of them in his bedroom. Catherine's friend was incensed by even the thought of someone revealing her real business practices, which were on the verge of being outlawed by the Bloemfeld Law. However, her love of money blotted out her sharp emotional reaction, and so Penelope left in frustration in her aircraft that was now blocking traffic. Catherine was surprised at all of these developments, allowing Catherine to gain a splendid dress for a reasonable price in a manner that was much desired in politics. Now, all the student needed to do was to not blunder her entry into this notoriously ruthless world, however this would happen in time at the start of the next week.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**NEW ARCADIA, PLANET DEMETER
TUESDAY, JUNE 13TH, 2255.**

The Federal Galactic Library was a much-loathed austere building at the very heart of New Arcadia, specifically because it was mostly composed of slabs of concrete punctuated by dozens of tinted windows. The tessellated facade of this structure in the aptly named Federal Core neighborhood of the city had been designed by Yorgos Sperakos, who was Nicholas Peter Hartinger's mentor in the intricate discipline of architecture. For his part, Yorgos appeared to reject any elements of the past in his intensely masculine style instead preferring to work with a plethora of modern materials, and Nicholas' predecessor got notoriously in trouble for how apparently he would remove green spaces without thinking about adding them in later. This meant that the Federal Galactic Library and his other buildings were extremely reliant on artificial heat and cooling as opposed to more nuanced natural solutions to such an issue. For her part, Catherine truly wanted to ask Yorgos if he could explain himself, but Nicholas warned her that it would be of no use since his mentor had passed away a couple of years ago, in a funeral that was widely publicized and even protested by citizens.

For purposes of noting, the main protesters were a controversial group called the Future is Female, who were rightfully outraged at Yorgo's countless sexual abuse scandals that would drive a wedge between him, his clientele and his trainees. It was also from this cosmic disappointment and underlying rage that Nicholas insisted that any young daughter of Thomas' would need to be more than adequately educated in matters of the body, to hopefully avoid this happening in the future. Whatever the case, Catherine enjoyed her overground transit through the various suburbs and outskirts of the thriving metropolis of New Arcadia, and was always amazed at just how swiftly the countryside gave

way to the city. In this light, Catherine could not place an exact moment, maybe it was Demeter Avenue in the suburb of Five Parks or even Nebula Street in West Orchard on this endlessly subtle gradient that countryside became city, along the sprawling Orange Line of the MART. There were a plethora of factories from Anderson Aeronautics or Renslaer Robotics further out on the fringe of the city, not even to mention the Despereaux Spaceport which she could not see today, because this admidely dated interstellar travel hub was accessed by the Blue Line from the Federal Core Station. There was equally University Hill where the ever famous Calliope University was located, along with the other finest schools in the cosmos for subjects ranging from interstellar studies to art history. And then, finally Catherine arrived amongst the soaring spires and limited spaces of the Fedral Core, contrasting against most of the low-lying urban sprawl of other areas of this truely metropolitan city located on the Halcyon River. For the first time in a long time, Catherine quietly understood the very essence of the urban fabric that she so loved for all of her life, and gladly took a look out of the ion-powered train at the rapidly unfurling city landscapes around her. And that was the other important thing about the MART, that it was a decidedly overground network of five primary color-coded lines, which never burrowed deep under the earth due to the prohibitive costs of doing so over long distances. Instead, what Catherine saw more times than not on this world-renowned transit system was an endless succession of short galleries and long straightaways, which helped emphasize the changing dimensions and density of the urban world.

Another more or less constant matter in Catherines brief journey to the urban heart of New Arcadia was how she was dressed in a look emphasizing bold geometric patterns along with the dominant lines of her body. And yet, this all-loving student of the world noticed that she was not the best nor the worst dressed individual on this swiftly moving ion-powered train, although she also throught that she would not be winning any major fashion prizes. This made her

think how the New Arcadia Transit Authority once ran a 'Metro Fashion Week' as a kind of leaked internal joke that took a wild stab at that colossal institution of the Demeter fashion world where the main idea was that people could submit pictures of themselves to be judged by some loose criteria. Likewise, everyone was surprised when the champion of this unofficially official happening was not some corporate executive or member of the educated classes, but instead a humble 26 year old Anderson Aeronautics technician by the name of Dominic Samuel Wallace donning little less than their workware. Just the same, there were shrines to this man of the people in every nook and cranny of the MART, as his victory was seen as a symbolic blow against the corporations.

Otherwise, Catherine could intently study the far more strict dresscodes of the various people dressed for stifling desk jobs this early in the day, along with the far looser garments preferred by the lower classes. And there were children too in her ion-powered train who primarily kept to themselves on this warm summer morning dressed in their own patterns and textures that had changed much since the time she was a young, starry-eyed girl. And Catherine also knew that the more prosperous, and non-judgmental people of New Arcadia were equally actively enjoying some communal undress and even a little nudity when the opportunity clearly presented itself. To be fair, the more public spaces of New Arcadia were dressed ones with more or less strict penalties enforced for public indescency, and no large corporation or federal body would officially get behind nakedness or nudity as a way of life. Nevertheless, Catherine also recognized that certain spaces where people were already undressed, especially pools and spas, had clearly demarcated times usually in the early evening to let people return to their natural state, despite being all citizens of the cosmos who had progressed into a so-called more sterile and prudish futuristic age. For her part, Catherine remembered how her mother would chain together multiple of these free swims together, much to the joy of the young Catherine.

Moreover, all of these diligently planned and publicly posted free-swims which contrasted against the stifling majority of life in New Arcadia happened despite the fact that Elizabeth was a well-known politician. Furthermore, when her mother was accused of stripping her child against her will by a politician of the New Conservative party, Elizabeth responded with her mythically scathing answers regarding the rights of young citizens. More importantly, the student remembered that exactly one day later her mother's avid accuser by the name of Antony Quentin Harper was revealed to have extensively abused his twin daughters, and was just as suddenly ousted from colonial politics. It was even imagined that free-swims for all of their controversies were a kind of rough litmus test that liberal statesmen used to identify anyone who had hurt a child, and Catherine was surprised that it had not somehow failed them yet. What was less surprising today was that the highly diverse people of New Arcadia took their rights to be dressed and even undressed very seriously, and had always found the time and the place to do both appropriately. And, once again, it bore repeating that the public, corporate dressed world far outweighed the undressed world in the city, which was rigidly regulated in order to provide some freedom to its citizens without condoning however all desires of the body politic.

The last thing that Catherine wanted to note about attitudes towards the body in the galactic year 2255 before she entered the decidedly dressed world of the Federal Library was that it was never seen as just naked per se, and rather someone would comment that they were dressed in a necklace when they were otherwise undressed. More specifically, this turn of phrase may be coined by a self-righteous fashionista, often encouraging Catherine to draw her friend's eyes to the artifice adorning the blank plane of her body, in a way that emphasized their subtle color and gradient and texture. For example, the young Catherine wore her birth stone on a necklace during free swims, whose speckled splendor entranced the gem-like eyes of even her most unshakable friends. And she also

took part in this childish ritual of beholding with the various boys and girls from her high school, in a way that respectfully interfaced with the very real people in front of her as time seemed to crawl to a halt. By contrast, it was a commonly called out mistake to use a momentary childish beholding as a way to single out and comment on a physical feature of someone's body, and it was disrespectful to draw attention to a scar or other blemish. And this one of the thousands of moments where Penelope and her teenage clique in their privilege, had terribly gone awry, as they flagrantly broke some of the few social norms of this event. Catherine frankly did not get the point to this bullying of the human body, and was not surprised when they were outright banned from all locations of the Andromeda Pool and Spa for making a five year old daughter of one of their rivals weep for the scars she had gained from a severe childhood illness. At the same time, these mean girls seemed to be little better than androids of old, because they could have the blackest rage towards the failings of the flesh.

The truth in all this was that the development of advanced robotics by major corporations or even the discovery of sentient alien life on planet Demeter necessitated uncomfortable yet necessary societal discussions about the body, so that it would never become outpaced by hostile forces inimical to it. Still, this was hardly surprising to Catherine who changed what was on her mind entirely as soon as she entered the cool atmosphere of the Galactic Federal Library on the aptly named Library Crescent in New Arcadia. Catherine was there to meet her new ally in her political cause for the civil rights of the aliens, Simone, with more pressing matters to discuss than the rather naive ideas of the body. And yet, the great and terrible image of the physiologies maimed by Promethean Fire haunted Catherine's mind today, since she became aware of her own privilege in never having to confront bodies touched by death. In this light, Catherine was eventually able to find the soberly dressed Simone reading some documents in a rented-out room, before the student began her sensitive conversation.

"First of all, thank you for showing up here and supposedly reading all the documents that I sent you on such short notice. And I know too that they must have been especially harrowing for a recruit like yourself, however, it's necessary work to hold the malicious actors of the world accountable. What did you think about the paperwork that you had to look at?" Simone interrogated

"Harrowing is the right word for it, ma'am. I felt moved to tears when I read about the burning of all of those forests in the Ictu'l Vāar homeland by gallons of Promethean Fire, which is truly a most heinous crime. I wanted to thank you for giving me access to all this confidential information, without which we would be hard pressed to prove any wrongdoing" Catherine disclosed

"I'm glad that you and I seem to be on the same page about this, and yet the question naturally arises of how our team can shed light on crimes done by mercenaries at an inhuman scale. You also seem rather fading in your voice, as if your mind has simultaneously wandered elsewhere." Simone explained

"That may be the case because I am rightfully tired of these companies and their soldiers getting away with anything they desire, including the genocide of a proud and ancient people. I am equally thinking about the strange rituals of this sprawling city where I grew up, and how we seem to place as much care in being dressed then being undressed. I am being transparent with you in a way that I will not be in front of the senate tomorrow" Catherine elaborated

"What a strange and utterly cosmopolitan concept which you need to tell me much more about after we are done developing some talking points for our session next morning. I will say that I have heard of cities where dressing well is important, but you need to explain the other half to me" Simone pondered

"The way that I view it is that every adornment is worth contemplating, from the most complete corporate suit to even the most miniscule necklace. So, all citizens have a right to show off these secondary details of their appearance in approved places of communal undress" Catherine illustrated

"Hmmmmmm... I see. Thus, this becomes an idea about styling the human body correctly and perhaps celebrating what we have in common. Once again, what an utterly fascinating idea, that must be very difficult to execute especially given how eroticized our bodies are in popular culture. However, I'll need to see this in action before I give it my stamp of approval." Simone wondered

"The last thing I will say is that it will seem especially strange to outsiders but we need to remember that by and large most activities are performed with the expected level of clothing. It is only a minority of days and hours that are designated as undressed, and even then no one is forced to strip down, it is just an option that is available for those who want it" Catherine elaborated

"You'll definitely need to bring me to one of these events, once all of this talk of killing and genocides blows over. Likewise, it is now up to us to make that peaceful future a possibility for all of our children, as it is only through the churn of politics that we can return to golden halcyon days" Simone asserted

"Yes... I guess the only reason that I was thinking about these so-called free swims is specifically since they seem like an idealistic notion from a better age of mankind, but now we are in a time of strife" Catherine murmured

For a while, there was a moment of silence between the two women who tactily seemed to admit that violence was the only constant in the universe, in particular the kind of violence inflicted onto the native peoples of Demeter from large corporations and their faceless armies. Therefore, the quiet in this dusty room was infused with a profound note of melancholy for the collective loss of innocence for the entirety of mankind from the dawn of history itself.

"So, now that we have that interesting chapter out of the way, the issue remains of how we convince conservatives including Senator Damian Westfield about the unspeakable suffering of aliens that they could not care less about. I think that the bureau can't use universalizing language from the get go, but start at the individual level before upping the ante" Simone described

"That is a remarkably sensible idea... Another strategy we could employ is to emphasize the sheer numbers of this genocide perpetuated by the entities that give the New Conservatives much of their personal funding. They clearly are sensitive to ungobly amounts of money, and so why wouldn't it work to say the utterly ghastly numbers of the dead and wounded..." Catherine proposed

"With all due respect, I'll have to stop you right there specifically because this is not my first genocide hearing with the bureau. It is equally not my first time grappling with the professional credulous idiots that we currently call the New Conservative Party, which has a history of downplaying violence when it does not suit the narrative of the world. So, what do we do if they contest our numbers or even worse propose their own?" Simone insisted

"We do what my mother always did, by calmly but firmly claiming that we are not here to discuss the facts and figures, but come up with interpretations of the data in front of us today. If they continue on attacking the very foundation and firmament of the truth, we must absolutely not engage in their mind games which will outright consume our valuable time" Catherine replied

"I'll be the first to admit that your proposal seems sensible enough and reminds me of some of what my own mentor told me when I was a younger face in the bureau. However, I'll also stipulate that shedding any light on the genocide will remain an uphill battle, and that we will rapidly need to make allies who can believe the atrocious truth that we are proposing" Simone illustrated

"It does not help our case tomorrow that the ill-advised actions of that goddamn whistleblower, whatever his name is, have effectively given the New Conservatives valuable time to come up with a response. However, I am less concerned about the Green Future Party, the Galactic Liberals and the Frontier Socialists who all may prove to be more empathetic towards the suffering of the native peoples of planet Demeter, specifically since their respective ideologies require some level of common ground with others" Catherine stated

At this, there was another short but painful silence in their conversation, since Simone felt the need to weep a little for the people they had lost due to the senseless killings perpetuated by Samson Private Contractors for their cruel and spiteful clientele. More specifically, the exhausted leader of the bureau covered her face with her hands, however the concerned Catherine could hear her cry out for a more civilized time. And yet, Simone returned to her senses once she was done expressing her frustrations at the world, with tears in her eyes.

"As you likely know, we currently dwell in a violent time and place in our cosmic history where we have become so distant from the agony of the aliens that call this place home that we are willing to slaughter them all. However, I am here to assure you that the night is always darkest before dawn, and that we must seek justice for those affected by the killings... This is how it has always worked, and this is how we will do it tomorrow" Simone asserted

"Also, it has dawned upon me that the Galactic Liberals equally have an infamous history of folding to conservative talking points, especially in terms of the multiple genocides perpetuated by colonists ever since the discovery of this vibrant planet. The bureau would equally do well to avoid too much contact with the Green Future party specifically since their members often make promises that they cannot hope to deliver upon in any future" Catherine described

"So, if I'm following you correctly, we can say no to the Green Future Party and definitely to the New Conservatives. That sounds all well and good to me, even if I'm sorry that I can't provide more input about these matters. It's dawning upon me that we will have to fight hard until the truth is revealed regarding the genocide, and that we should not settle for anything less" Simone hoped

"I honestly don't know what to do with the kind of authority that I have just been given as not even my plans are perfect for tomorrow. Please don't leave your posting as I really need you to stay the course" Catherine developed

"I will do this for all those who are dead and gone" Simone intjected

Eventually, there was a little more discussion between the two women about the specifics of a genocide hearing within the Parnassian federal system, which sounded like a procedure ripped straight out of the depths of Hell. Just the same, Simone equally mentioned how the Scientific Republic of Laconia, which was a slightly smaller federal state to the south of the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus was having its sovereignty constantly tested by the conglomerates of the Western Corporate Concessions. In practice, the commissioner talked at some length about how there had been a medical crisis within this otherwise prosperous nation for reasons related to some coordinated sabotage of their major pharmaceutical laboratories located in the industrial east of the country. For her part, Catherine had heard about all this not only from the premier news sources of Laconia, but also from her diligent roommate Pavlina Leonova who had been sent by her clinic to serve as a frontline medical worker through the services provided by the Demeter Emergency Doctors Association.

After that, Simone fixed and fine tuned the digits of her Renslaer Robotics cybernetic arm that was notoriously tricky to repair. However, the commissioner approached this task with a measure of grace specifically since she had been living with this technology for about a decade. Simone even asked Catherine to get her one of her miniscule tools before remembering that she had misplaced it in one of her pockets. This appeared to be a sign of trust between these two women from drastically different walks of life, and was perhaps indicative of a nascent professional friendship. Catherine thanked Simone for her resources and attention to the suffering of the native peoples which helped bolster her morale. The truth in all this was that it was exhausting to prosecute the worst people imaginable on this wretched planet which always seemed quick to invent new ways to torture its range of indigenous peoples. Perhaps Catherine thought some kind of relief from the crushing misery of the world around them could help their case, however she did not know what form this would take.

"The active involvement of corporations from Pegasus Petroleum to Verdant Tomorrow Solutions to Midas Capital Investments in this terrible historical event is what made it indeed a genocide. The federal state alone could not have wrought that same absolute level destruction onto its victims"

Camille Rousselot, Assistant Prosecutor for the Genocide & Atrocities Investigation Bureau at the New Arcadia Trials, January 7th, 2257.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**NEW ARCADIA, PLANET DEMETER
TUESDAY, JUNE 13TH, 2255.**

Catherine thought that one of the few silver linings of this first attempt at shedding light on the ghastly war crimes perpetuated by Pegasus Petroleum along with other corporations against the native peoples of Demeter were the great opportunities to meet people of conviction within her side of affairs. For example, there were the power couple of the weathered attorneys Umberto Capelleti and Camille Rousellot who constantly bickered amongst themselves outside of hearings, however were a force to be reckoned with in the sphere of political affairs since they never buckled under pressure. What was especially noteworthy about their relationship was that it worked specifically because at no point was there any power imbalance between them, since they were both assistant attorneys for the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Beaureau. It also helped that they both hailed from the eastern city of Corinth Sound, even if they had ultimately gone to different universities within this place. However, the vast majority of the individuals in the Special Hearings Room of the Chamber of Senators in the urban core of New Arcadia were either indifferent or even hostile to the case being presented before them. In particular, Catherine could observe through the tinted windows of the witness room there were going to be five hardened politicians representing the primary Parnassian parties, who had all paradoxically promised to be impartial and apolitical in all matters.

These people were Senator Nicole Sueng-Yeuh of the Frontier Socialist Party, Senator Damian Westfield of the New Conservative Party, Senator Patricia Kwieciński of the Galactic Liberal Party along with Senator Genevieve Dawson of the Green Future Party, who was the oldest person seated in front of them. For her part, Catherine honed on the mannerisms and countenance of Damian and

Nicole specifically because she knew something about these rising stars of the Parnassian political sphere. It also helped that these two statesmen could not be more opposed in issues of immigration, welfare and technological progress, with Nicole being the staunchly left-wing associate of her mother's, and Damian remaining her frequently right-wing opponent whose skills had been trained by the infamous conservative legend of Anthony Quentin Harper. At the same time, Catherine did not know as well the voting records of Genevieve and Patricia, as they found themselves on neither extreme of the political compass, so likewise had done well to avoid making any radical statements about anything. This was decidedly worse than having individuals with hardline beliefs about the changing world around them, since they had yet to be swayed by the evidence. However, Simone, Catherine and the remainder of the bureau expected at the very least a degree of fairness from these career politicians from the countryside, especially when Damian and Nicole would naturally be at eachothers throats. Therefore, the composition of the defendant's side of this genocide trial appeared to be fair enough for our student, who would be a primary witness going forward.

Another thing that Catherine quickly remarked was that evryone in the Special Hearings Room was dressed to their best, with no lack of austere lines and muted materials in their sense of fashion. In practice, Simone commented that these garments made by the finest companies in New Arcadia were like the armor that soldiers wore on the front lines of some distant conflict, as it served as a values statement for these nuanced individuals. For her part, Nicole was humbly dressed in a rigid pantsuit from Primrose Clothes which was a middle class outfitter in this city, but this representative equally styled a necklace that had once been a birthday gift from Elizabeth. By contrast, there was not even a semblance of honesty in how Senator Westfeild was dressed on this admittedly rainy morning, since this corporate acolyte contented himself with an ensemble designed by the luxury brand Taddeo Lotto while he slouched in his seat. There

were equally a handful of severe looking officers originating from the Parnassian Federal Police Force, stationed in the Special Hearings Room essentially to keep the peace for the duration of these highly volatile proceedings. They wore tactical outfits that were typical of this force, along with their own kind of exo-suit which would help them overpower anyone in a physical altercation. Nevertheless, this equipment produced by Renslaer Robotics was by no means armor, specifically because it lacked ballistic plating between its primary struts. Another element of note in the Special Hearings Room was the presence of various members of the press seated towards the back of this rather drab room representing more or less trusted sources from the liberal New Arcadia Times to the conservative Satesman to the conspiratorial Demeter Dispatch. Regardless, these reporters had all sworn to follow the expected proceedings of this trial, specifically by leaving the questioning to the politicians seated in front of them.

A final element in this space were the flags of New Arcadia, The Agrarian Republic of Parnassus and the Federal Government of Parnassus hanging down from a concrete wall. It was no secret that any other vexilological adornments of any kind would be widely perceived as being too partisan for a centralized state like that of Parnassus which time and again put on the facade of being a truly fair and balanced government for its various constituents. More specifically, the flag of New Arcadia had recently been changed from a far simpler design which Catherine knew well to a one comprising three white wavy lines along its length and an almost interlocking kind of fish-lion, the flag for Parnassus was a bold one with a gold flower in a blue triangle on the hoist side intersecting sections of green, which some were pointed was fitting for a supposedly peaceful nation. Just the same, citizens could witness the waving of either the New Arcadian or more rarely Parnassian flags at a range of civic events from everyday weddings to peace demonstrations to the swearing in of politicians to office, and could often tell what was the intention behind this display of vexology. For example, a

display of national pride during the Parnassian national day on August 6th, to the more political intentions regarding a New Conservative political campaign. The last flag appended from the back wall of the Special Hearings Room was not one Catherine originally recognized because of its rather crowded concept which seemed to have been designed to suit everyone and thus no one at all. In practice, this symbolic bolt of fabric was dominated by a highly-detailed version of the federal seal with a radiant sun and attributes of nature on a blue field, even if somewhere it felt incomplete by the same metric. Whatever the case, Catherine did not have the time to think about flags at the present moment from her place in the witness room specifically because it was currently the first day of nobody knew how many days of this extremely mediatized event.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the public, we are gathered here presently to investigate the genocide of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples of Demeter by the Samson Private Contractors who acting at the time on behalf of the company Pegasus Petroleum. The plaintiffs in this legal matter are the attornies of the Genocide and Attrocities investigation Bureau, which acts a branch of the Galactic Council for Planertary Aid are seated to my left. The defendants of today's case are the attorneys of Pegasus Petroleum, speaking for the actions taken by their military contractors beginning two years ago and are seated to my right. Defendants the floor is yours for any opening statements. Furthermore, be sure to state your full legal name for the record before you eventually speak" Nicole pronounced

"Thank you for your patience in all these matters, madame senator. I am William Edward Saunders, a long term attorney for Pegasus Petroleum, and to my right is my associate in my profession Veronica Bailey-Mitchells. We are here to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that there indeed was no genocide of alien peoples perpetrated by our combat associates between January 5th, 2254 and February 9th, 2254. Of course, we hope to demonstrate this claim with a range of relevant evidence. Can we proceed, madame Senator" William claimed

"Point of order, Mister Saunders. These were not aliens in your broadest sense but the Ictu'l Vāar peoples, themselves divided into multiple tribes, who have lived in the vast forests and marshlands surrounding Pegasus City in the Western Corporate Concession. We call them the Ictu'l Vāar due to the fact that this is the name they have chosen for themselves" Camille explained

"Point of order taken... Let me in turn reiterate our current aims then. My colleague and I will hope to prove that there could have been no genocide of the Oraan Rief peoples, if that is indeed how it's pronounced, between the dates of January 5th 2254 and February 9th 2245. The evidence backing our claim is the conflicting reports of how the massacre happened." William proposed

"Once again, point of order, Mister Saunders. We are dealing here with a genocide of a proud and ancient people which some rightfully consider to be one of the worst crimes fathomable. I believe, madam Senator, that the mere word massacre is insufficient in common parlance to describe what I have seen and read in the documentation surrounding this event" Camille insisted

"That is correct. But, this court would like you to first state your name for the records so that we may proceed accordingly." Genevive responded

"Point taken, Madame senator. I am Camille Margueritte Rousillion and this is my colleague Umberto Cappelletti, and we are attorneys of the Genocide & Atrocities Investigation Bureau on behalf of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples, who were systematically eradicated by the actors employed by the defendants. The main evidence we bring to the table are the visual and written accounts of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples themselves as you will soon discover" Camille illustrated

"Madame Roussillon, point of order. We have yet to prove the notion of systematic eradication that you are presently proposing within this highest court of justice. This will naturally come later in the trial, as you likely know, since you seem adept in matters of the law. However, if you do not refrain from using said language you will be ejected from this hearing" Damian warned

"Point of order taken, Mister Senator. I hope that you and your gathered colleagues will find that the evidence reveals that this military action happened as we have proposed, and nothing more or less" Camille responded

"We will begin this process by calling the defendant's first witness to the stand. Her name is Lieutenant Mitsugi Yoshino, the Ethics Enforcement Officer aboard the CMSV Goliath. In particular, Mitsugi oversaw the deployment of the weapon Promethean Fire aboard this vessel" Genevive announced

At this, there was a brief yet tense silence since the federal police brought in the first witness from the room next to Catherine's. For her part, Mitsugi was a slender person with a pair of blue eyes, dark hair along with a sharp nose all on an oval face. More specifically, Catherine noticed that this high-ranking person did not get that much sleep the night before, readily seen in her wandering eyes and her dower manner of walking to the witness stand. Likewise, Catherine was intrigued in hearing what she had to say about the alien genocide.

"Please state your name for the record, so that we can verify that you are indeed the person we intended to call into the Special Hearings Room. It is true that mistakes can happen, and thus we demand clarity" Nicole stated

"I am Lieutenant Mitsugi Kamei Yoshino of the CMSV Goliath, which is a capital ship serving in orbit above our planet in the area immediately around Pegasus City in the Western Corporate Concession. I can gladly confirm that I have witnessed not only the sheer destruction of the Ictu'l Vāar homeland at the hands of my navy but also the detached attitude of my naval superiors when it came to using such a weapon against civilians" Mitsugi announced

"Thank you for verifying this...The floor is yours" Genevive replied

"I have chosen to begin my testimony upon the fateful day of Monday January 10th when our fleet was first given orders to deploy 3000 canisters of Promethean Fire to force the then resisting Ictu'l Vāar peoples to head towards pre-determined areas where they could be surveilled" Mitsugi commenced

"For purposes of noting, we have decided to bring in a thankfully empty ordinance canister for deploying this substance which is chemically similar to many exfoliating agents used by Golden Harvest Agrairan Company. What I'm trying to tell the gathered members of the court today, is that Promethean Fire cannot hurt or kill anyone that is a sentient person" William explained

"Please define a sentient person for me." Umberto interjected

"Well, Mister Capiletti, if you insist... I define sentience as the ability to perceive one's immediate surroundings, thereby feeling emotions of pleasure and pain, which likewise serves as the very bedrock of consciousness. What my colleague and I will show is that none of the native people of Demeter unlike us are sapient, and thus cannot be victims of a genocide" William illustrated

"With all due respect, Mister Saunders. The sapience of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples has been already proven ever since we first landed on this planet, which is rightfully something that is worth celebrating. And do not think for an instant that the science is somehow wrong on this account." Umberto responded

"The court hereby agrees with Mister Capelleti and Madam Rousillion that the sentience and therefore sapience of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples is no longer up for debate, and we will not condone any arguments of that sort presently. Let us recall as a point of order that we are here at the current moment to prove if there was a genocide perpetuated against the Ictu'l Vāar peoples. Failing that, you will be asked to leave this special hearing. " Genevieve elaborated

"Understood... Let us equally continue with the testimony advanced by Lieutenant Mitsugi, because time is of the essence" William stated

"Very well then, the floor is yours Lieutenant" Nicole admitted

"Thank you very much, Madam Senator. I distinctly remember providing an ethical appeal to Comander George Edmund Wolfe along with Fleet Admiral Hans Ludwig Keppler, however both seemed indifferent or actively hostile to my pleas to spare the Ictu'l Vāar peoples from this violence" Mitsugi disclosed

"What happened then? After your failed attempt at stopping the violence against the Ictu'l Vāar peoples that fateful morning? What I am asking for you here is to describe for us the effects of Promethean Fire" Camille asked

"Well, what else can I say to the gathered members of the court. I was powerless to stop the dozens of dropships from deploying their caustic payload onto the forests of this planet. What happened next is what always happens in matters of heavy ordinance... There were hundreds of people burned, villages incinerated along with entire forests reduced to ash. I know all of this as I saw it during my service with the corporate backed forces" Mitsugi recounted

"However, couldn't the Ictu'l Vāar have done this to themselves? We have known for a while that they practice a form of cultivation reliant on fire to enrich the black soil of Demeter for future verdant harvests" Veronica enquired

"I find the very essence of your question to be ludicrous as you cannot go around blaming individuals for the heinous actions that were inflicted on them by a corporate backed military which is ultimately hostile to them. And all of this is nothing new as this belicose relationship with local tribes has persisted in one form or another ever since we landed on Demeter" Mitsugi illustrated

"Yet, I rest my case that at times individuals are rightfully to be blamed for large-scale societal happenings, especially in the case of those in positions of authority within the affected tribes. What then is the position of the singular person in your view of this supposed alien genocide?" William contended

"Yes... There are individuals that have a great measure culpability for the kinds of asymmetrical chemical warfare that I saw perpetuated multiple times during my service with the corporate forces. However, we cannot point the finger at the still suffering victims of these destructive attacks signed and approved by Captain Wolfe as well as Fleet Commander Kessler" Mitsugi advocated

"I do not like how you see the Oran Reiff as somehow blameless for their own destruction and that this is somehow our problem" William stated

"Point of order. This court does not tolerate this attack on the character of the person in front of you, or directions on how either side should or should not have acted. This is considered an ad hominem fallacy, and it is illegal in this hearing, so you will have to retract your comment" Genevieve stipulated

"I will gladly retract my comment, Madam Senator." William asserted

"Very well, Mister Saunders. Your comments against Lieutenant Mitsugi Kamei Yoshino have been retracted. However, please find it in your conscience to carry yourself in a manner dictated by the law." Nicole contended

"I will do such things, Madame Senator. I will currently proceed with the examination of said lieutenant, as I have a few more matters to approach with her. Does this court allow this line of reasoning?" William inquired

"Yes, Mr. Saunderson's. The floor is yours" Nicole responded

"Thank you, Madam Senator. The ultimate question that I would like you to respond to, Lieutenant Yoshino, is to go into how and why you decided to betray your position in the corporate navy. You gave the confidential information of the use of Promethan Fire against the Ictu'l Vāar peoples to someone who should have never known about it in the first place?" William demanded

"Well, I had already tried for many months to sound the alarm about the rising calls for the complete eradication of the native through official channels such as the Council Against Excessive Military Violence, however I only received generic responses about the valiance of service along with the need to protect civilians in any combat engagement. My question is why the corporate forces did not consider the Ictu'l Vāar to be civilians." Mitsugi elaborated

"This is due to the fact they were hostile from the very beginning of the so-called Second Corporate War. More specifically, I could point to the attack on the oil refineries outside of Red Beach in the fall of 2253 as well as the bombing of the mag-lev line connecting the city of Tungsten Point to Pegasus City as only two examples of alien terrorism against our assets" Veronica listed

"And that is the significant issue with any corporate-backed military, in that you efficitvely place the limited value of a company's assets over the infinite value of a sapient life. Don't you hear what you are saying?" Mitsugi pleaded

"Surely you could not have been as naive as to consider that we would do anything less than protect our assets and our personnel on the planet Demeter, because that is what we have been made to do from our very inception. If you don't like that, might I ask that you seek work elsewhere " Veronica scolded

"Point of order, Madam Bailey-Mitchells. You once more cannot use an approach to one of your witnesses, or any witness for that matter as a moment to talk down to them. Do we make ourselves clear?" Nicole interjected

"My apologies. Let me retract that comment" Veronica commented

"And another thing, Madam Bailey-Mitchells. You do not possess power in this court of law to retract your comments without further oversight. This is only something that we can do as arbiters of this case" Genevive added

"Yes. I understand. Can you retract my comments?" Veronica asked

"Certainly, however please do not tempt this court with the fallicious lies inherent in such personal attacks against your witness" Nicole asserted

At this, there was another awkward pause in the proceedings of the court as the corporate backed lawyers representing Pegasus Petroleum tried to find a less aggressive line of reasoning that would be more amenable to the people arbitrating this sensitive case. Meanwhile, Mitsugi was eventually returned from the witness stand to the waiting room as she had proven to be more combative then amicable to the concerns of colossal companies who much detested any person with a conscience. As a result, Catherine currently observed some of the greed that her legal team would be grappling against in order to prove once and for all the innocence of the Ichtul Vāar peoples on planet Demeter.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

**NEW ARCADIA, PLANET DEMETER
THURSDAY, JUNE 15TH, 2255.**

Catherine had come to the conclusion very early on in the legal case that this trial was not really about her, but rather about the native peoples who had been systematically exterminated by mercenaries acting on behalf of powerful business entities in the Western Corporate Concession. Their companies were, in no particular order, Pegasus Petroleum, Terra Nova Mining, Golden Harvest Agrarian Company all supported militarily by Samson Private Contractors and financially by Midas Capital Investments and Proxima Centauri Private Equity. All of these names, listed off again and again in an almost religious manner within Catherine's mind, made this student feel insignificant in the great and terrible scheme of the universe along with the fathomless greed of mankind. So, she decided to follow some advice given to her many weeks ago by her counsellor by turning her mind away at least for a moment from this litany against evil, and instead studying the faces and postures of her fellow witnesses today in order to better ground her in the immediate realities of this waiting room.

The first witness was equally the one that would prove to be the most controversial as it was the whistleblower Isaac Warren Brooks who appeared to be a slightly white-haired person approaching 50 years old. The common logic went that people would have a mid-life crisis around that time, so perhaps his act of exposing the wrongdoings of the companies was a major component of this era of his otherwise unknown existence. Of course, this idea as appealing as it seemed to Catherine, would not stand up in a court of law, where it would instead likely be picked apart viciously by Pegasus Petroleum's attorneys. Thus, the expression of Isaac was one that was profoundly ashamed of what he had managed to accomplish, with his face more often than not in his palms.

There was also another witness in the room today that would not have to be flown in from the North Falls Refugee Camp for this hearing, by the name of Jean-Michel Toussaint who was a hard-working photographer for the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation bureau. Jean-Michel was a younger individual in his 30s if Catherine had to say, and was the often beleaguered father of Isabelle Toussaint who was closely working with Catherine's uncle at the time. It equally was apparent that Jean-Michel felt much more confident about the power of his images of the killings of individuals and the destruction of nature to inspire the highest sympathy in even the coldest hearts, as if not, what would have even been the point of taking them in the first place. Jean-Michel had a visibly darker complexion than most people presiding over the court, because his family was one of the relatively few that hailed from Africa, and more specifically the distant country of the Senegalese Republic. This photographer and once colleague of her uncles at the Demeter School for the Arts equally had black hair, a pair of green eyes and a little stubble on his cheeks all on an angular face. Catherine thought that there was always something slightly mask-like to his appearance, however when she brought it up, Jean-Michel laughed warmly and told her that maybe his face was a mask or maybe it was not. At the same time, this student was also the first one to admit that there was nothing wrong with his face being a mask as there was nothing evil or foreign behind it, and instead seemed to manifest a certain authenticity that was sorely lacking in New Arcadia.

In practice, Jean-Michel was a strong believer in what the art historian and part-time philosopher at Calliope University Ndulu Chidi-Ekene called 'The Mind's Eye' where the most compelling pictures of suffering had an undeniable staying power within the conscience of the open-minded viewer. For his part, this photographer took Chidi-Ekene's philosophy one step further by claiming that there could also be moments when the picture in front of a beholder was a little too real, bringing about a level of rejection on their part. More specifically,

Jean-Michel had experienced this at nearly every trial that his organization was involved in, where his pictures did not really seem to connect with the attorneys representing corporations, who had their own agendas clouding their judgment. Consequently, Catherine agreed with this artist's philosophy, even though she was equally the first to admit that this equally hard-working student had never heard Professor Chidi-Ekene speak at her university specifically because she was busy with her interstellar relations courses and getting her body ready for the rigors of planetary aid work. Otherwise, Catherine had heard from Zoryanna that the list of recruits wanting to take a stab at the large corporations was now dozens of people long, but this was primarily due to a desire to be at the center of history rather than people wanting to follow Catherine's direct example. What was more certain is that the director of the Demeter Relief Corps along with some of her subordinates would be speaking at this hearing. Furthermore, they had somehow managed to make peace with the female matrons of the Ictu'l Vāar who would be participating in the legal proceedings, acting as witnesses who seemed primed to speak the truth about their people. Indeed, their sadness had turned into a pressing need for immediate action, since it seemed that the Rhāl Side'l wanted to reflect the profound sense of loss within their tribes.

Just the same, Simone was present in the witness waiting room despite the fact that this official was more important in the planetary aid world, however, she was equally one to keep to her word with the younger Catherine. In this light, Simone had agreed to stay the course of the legal proceedings in New Arcadia no matter what it would involve both out of a respect for Catherine and also an inherent need to support her organization's frequently exhausted attorneys. Still, Simone looked especially dejected at the prospects of this trial which was now turning in the favor of the large corporations due to their tendency to wear down her legal team through a deluge of personal attacks and, more importantly, an inability to compromise on even the most essential of arguments. Whatever the

case, Isaac was suddenly called to the witness stand by the attorneys of the Genocide & Atrocities Investigation Bureau who wanted to hear his perspective to corroborate the promises made in their opening statements in front of the Pegasus Petroleum legal team who were not giving them any leeway at all on this tense morning. "Wish me good luck, as I know by the tone of things that I will get eaten alive by those bastards representing Pegasus Petroleum." Isaac disclosed before leaving the waiting room. "What have I done?" he added in a slightly lower voice, revealing something of how poorly prepared Isaac was for the consequences of his actions taken only a few weeks prior. After that, Isaac walked stoically to his awaiting fate, like a man destined for annihilation. Simone was perhaps the first to feel a level of guilt and even shame for Isaac who had once been her colleague who she knew rather well, despite the fact that he had eventually become a loathed whistleblower because it compromised the level of secrecy in which the bureau had been operating. More specifically, Simone talked at length about many of Isaac's prized childhood memories such as the time spent with his pets as well as his closest friends at school which she had discovered across the countless years of collaborating with him.

Isaac was not just a random whistleblower, but rather someone whose decision to prematurely tell the truth had personally wounded her. "Yeah. There's really no two ways about it... He's going to get verbally slaughtered out there by those bastards on that corporate legal team. And the worst thing is that I can't do anything to stop it in its tracks" Simone admitted with some tears in her eyes and a tone of resignation in her shaking voice. Then, the older woman began to furiously pace about the rather small witness waiting room to attempt to walk out her anxious energy, before eventually coming to a rest in the chair in which Simone had previously sat. The commissioner of the Genocide and Atrocities Investigations Bureau then let out a deep sigh and sprawled her body across the chair, before eventually returning to consulting some documents.

For her part, Catherine thought about how all of collective human history seemed to be leading up to humanity making peace with sapient lifeforms in the stars as the student had grown weary of hearing about war or the other conflicts of interest that seemed to permeate all aspects of human life. More specifically, Catherine tried to list off to herself all the pointless wars there had been in the last century, but she abruptly stopped after five or six items not out of lack of knowledge but rather the stifling emotional weight of all this suffering. Just the same, Catherine remembered the ultimate moral of getting exposed to a scarlet speckled lizard which would have her experience the collective guilt and pain of the traditional inhabitants of Demeter, and as a result decided that there were better uses of her time than endlessly pondering human conflict. Meanwhile, the innocent yet powerful idea of a golden halcyon age before any significant strife flooded into her mind in this otherwise drab waiting room, which she entertained as a hopeful remedy to the problems she perceived in the world. This was also what had been promised by all those people who went weekly to pools to enjoy communal undress together, as Catherine also wanted to do, even if they never clarified by what means and ends this great utopia would be achieved.

That being said, Catherine was equally quick to note how about half of the sensible citizens that took part in this ritual promising a return to the youth and innocence of humanity seemed to have other ideas in mind. For example, Catherine noticed that so many of these people appeared to be more interested in adorning their bodies in a variety of manners including the graceful cascading chains of jewellery rather than discussing the more nuanced philosophical points about returning to a more peaceful age. However, now was not the moment to discuss the topics that were closest to Catherine's heart as informed by her life experience, because this would come off as detached and privileged today. At the present moment, Isaac was about to confront the court to discuss his view of the events leading up to the genocide of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples.

What happened next in the courtroom was nothing short of a drawn-out defeat of Isaac enticed by the rival attorneys to give more and more about how exactly this once proud member of the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau had received confidential information from Lieutenant Mitsugi Yoshino regarding the deployment of Promethean Fire. And Isaac liberally described all of the particulars of this situation despite the better judgement of the attorneys essentially behind him, leaving both Camille and Umberto rather worried about the future of the case for the native peoples of Demeter. The primary problem was once again that their opponents resisted any attempts by the politicians at stopping the development of their own reality where they were right and facts had little bearing on the truth. Another problem remained that Isaac wanted to be a truth teller despite advice to the contrary, so he did not know when to evade the questions imposed upon him and when to remain quiet. And thus, Camille and Umberto truly had an uphill battle ahead of them if they wanted to prove the validity of Isaac's claims about these corporations, which started reasonably enough before eventually veering into conspiratorial territory. It was no matter then that the Demeter Dispatch loving anything with the aura of the supernatural and the occult was interested in talking to Isaac after what was an undeniably satisfactory legal performance in front of hostile corporate attorneys.

For her part, Catherine recognized immediately how William and Veronica both seemed to be able to gather a read on a witness in order to better exploit their weaknesses and make them say things that they otherwise would not. Just the same, Simone frequently insisted that the key to stumping a corporate legal team is to not give into their requests for further information especially at the beginning of an interaction, specifically because this was when the attorneys would be gathering the necessary insight into how to leverage most people's common empathy for sapient beings against them. The surprisingly calculated nature behind every one of their words and gestures is what gave this legal team

the impression of being soulless, specifically because decades of defending the worst excesses imaginable of one of the largest companies on planet Demeter meant there was little humanity left behind their fine clothing. Instead, Catherine was confronted once again with the kinds of people who had been swallowed wholesale by their work to such an extent that they seemed to take pleasure in deconstructing any logic against them piece by piece. Furthermore, William even went as far as to argue that “there can be no prosperous world without corporations like ourselves” all the while Veronica seemed to reiterate the logic through which “the corporation can be considered an individual as valid as any citizen as we too have our own wants and hopes and dreams”. Just the same, Jean-Michel's pictures of the suffering Oran Reiff peoples and the destruction of their surrounding ecosystems notably failed to make the desired impact upon the Pegasus Petroleum legal team, who claimed this agony was essentially all a facade intended to manipulate the viewer into caring about them. Likewise, the corporate attorneys had somewhere discovered about the violent past of the Ictu'l Vāar centuries ago under the banner of the Yaga'tāan Hegemony, and so utilized this against Jean-Michel's attempts to build genuine empathy.

As they saw it, most of the politicians overseeing these proceedings at the heart of the Agriarian Republic of Parnassus seemed increasingly concerned regarding the tactics deployed again and again by the Pegassus Petroleum legal team and had to litigate against William to give the Genocide and Atrocities Investigations Bureau time to breathe from the barrage of rhetorical stratagems. Once again, it bears repeating that it was not for any lack of education that the plaintiffs were failing to impress the politicians but rather that the defendants side was more cuthroat to the point of being sociopathic and underhanded to the point of verging upon the machiavellian that there was a struggle to connect with the arbiters of their fate. Likewise, Senator Westfield enjoyed watching this strife and looked at the proceedings with an admittedly relaxed posture.

It came time for Simone to face the Pegasus Petroleum legal team after the Special Hearings Room had taken a break for lunch, and the once confident commissioner presiding over the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau was muttering 'don't give in', 'don't break' under her breath while she confidently approached with broad shoulders and large steps to the witness stand located on the left side of the politicians. It was true that Simone had wanted to tell her own attorneys to work harder for the good of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples who were in desperate need of their assistance. In this light, the mercenary attacks on places like the North Falls Refugee Camp continued on a regular basis, which effectively struck fear into the alien refugees and even led to the woundings or worse death of a few of them. More importantly, the federal funding for their operations promised months ago had not truly arrived, leaving many branches of the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid operating in serious levels of debt. It was with all of this on her mind that Simone proudly took a stand for the rights of the aliens against those that wanted to see them outright eradicated.

"Please state your full legal name before proceeding to any arguments or questions. Also, be sure to talk loud and clearly in order that the court reporter can transcribe what you said for future reference as all of these proceedings will be available to the public as soon as this trial is over" Genevieve stated

"Well then, Madame Senator. I am Simone Federique Lambert, and I have been the the commissioner of the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau ever since I was appointed to this role by my predecessor, Gianpietro Palmieri, in the spring of 2253. My role is that of directing the vast efforts of looking into the abuses of a range of entities for a variety of reasons ranging from organized crime to sentient species trafficking to even genocide" Simone elaborated

"Thank you for this efficient description of the functions expected of your position within the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau. I will now open up the floor to examination from the defendants" Genevieve responded

"It should also be noted that this court does not tolerate the amount of personal offenses advanced by the Pegasus Petroleum legal team vis-a-vis the witnesses before you. Please refrain from such tactics and find a suitable and legal alternative or else you will be removed from court" Nicole insisted

"Thank you, Madame Senator, I will begin by asking for an overview of your tenure as commissioner of the bureau, which has proven to be scandalous within the court of public opinion. I want to more specifically hear the way in which you navigated these complex situations and the personal entanglements in this position of authority over the lives of the many" William enquired

"With all due respect, Mister Saunders. This kind of ad-hoc performance review by an unfit party not only abuses the authority inherent in the role of an attorney but also has little bearing on the genocide of the aliens are discussing at the current moment. In practice, a corrupt person is not always corrupt, and neither is an ethical actor always so ethical" Cammille interjected

"Thank you. Madame Rousillon. I will retract this statement, if this court will sustain it. I just would like to know if your client before me had any other agendas than to help the people of this planet who have suffered dearly during the years Madame Lambert has held that position" William responded

"You will actually see that Madame Lambert has been a rather capable commissioner since Ictu'l Vāar starvation rates have gone down from 1 in 10 aliens to 1 in 8 under her time in office, while their literacy rates have gone from 1 in 5 to under past leadership to 3 in 5 in recent years. Certainly any sensible person would see these numbers as an improvement" Umberto described

"Well, if you allow me to speak honestly, you're telling me that your client has been far from perfect. Now, we all know that that lack of success can be explained by one thing: corruption of the highest order" William accused

"Mister Saunders, you don't know that at all. With all due respect, you are merely extrapolating your views from a limited data set" Camille revealed

"My response to all of you wretched humanitarian types, or whatever you call yourselves these days, is to try harder. Meanwhile, Madame Senator I hope that you will find form the documents that we have provided that corporations are better equipped to take on the poverty of the world" William disclosed

"Again, with all due respect Mister Saunders, what does any of this have to do with the genocide of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples that we are litigating today. I don't see any connection between these disparate topics, and find your affront to Madame Lambert to be unbefitting of an attorney" Umberto claimed

"What I am trying to say is that if the genocide happened, which, again, we have no significant proof for, we would naturally expect both sides, corporate and otherwise, to have some equal responsibility in perpetuating it. Do I make myself clear or must I repeat it in simpler terms?" William demanded

"Point of order. This court will not tolerate such an outsized and not even to mention personal assault on the character of Madame Lambert. It is apparent that the data has shown that her organization does some measure of good for all sapient life on this planet, so please respect that possibility in your reasoning. Otherwise, we will have to eject you from this court" Nicole announced

Then, the attorneys of the different sides of the legal case continued their spirited litigation regarding the record of Simone, who had steered clear of the perennial corruption permeating much of planetary aid. Meanwhile, Simone did not get much of an opportunity to speak what was one her mind about any of the specific topics that were pertinent to the Ictu'l Vāar genocide, which the commissioner had extensive personal experience. Simone was soon called back to the witness room without much of a legal performance at all, and she could rest easy that she had given nothing to her rivals. This was also the sentiment that dominated Catherine's mind when she heard about the litigation, perhaps a turning point in the treatment of this crime against sapient peoples.

"We immediately prepared evacuation routes and protocol as soon as we heard the worrying reports of the genocide in the Western Corporate Concession. There are of course many people that we saved, especially women and children, however I have been haunted by the notion that we could not save them all"

Axel Marcus Lindgren, Chief Logistics Officer for the Demeter Relief Corps at the New Arcadia Trials, January 10th, 2257.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**CHOS VRO'L, PLANET DEMETER
SATURDAY, JUNE 16TH, 2255.**

For their part, the Rhāl Side'l insisted that everyone who was defending them had a greater understanding of their history, just in the very likely case it came up in court that they had once been servants of an empire. This was by no means an easy decision for the matrons of the Ictu'l Vāar as outsiders were not allowed into their places of memory, however, this ancient group of women were also the kind of people to understand that anything could come up in a such a setting, and indeed they frequently presided over legal disputes of all sorts within their people groups. As a result, the Rhāl Side'l partly out of wisdom but also partly because of desperation for the continued wellbeing of their peoples extended a rare and surprising opportunity for mutual understanding founded upon a comprehension of what had once taken place at Chōs Vro'l that was the remote mountain citadel where the Yaga'tāan selected their warriors. Likewise, Simone made both Camille and Umberto who were originally reluctant to do this join her, Catherine and the members of the Rhāl Side'l as they confronted the very palpable history of the 'Century of Sorrow' where the various peoples of Demeter were forced to serve in cruel cosmic wars against their will.

And so, this admittedly strange group of travelers loaded onto a dropship in order to travel the short distance into the rugged Greater Tharsis Mountains, which were located due south of the glistening metropolis of New Arcadia. In this light, the pilots of the dropship knew exactly how to get their aircraft to the Greater Tharsis Mountains which had been put on the map again due to recent tension between Terra Nova Mining and the local Ishin Chol peoples who had long believed that their summit and indeed all the peaks in the Greater Tharsis Mountains were profoundly sacred and so should stay unexploited. Of course,

the corporations could not disagree more with this cultural and religious belief and so were likewise quick to send illegal prospectors from the already existing settlement of Three Lakes to get a better sense of the rare earth minerals that were located under the truly labyrinthine fortress complex of Chōs Vro'l . For purposes of noting, this place of sublime sorrow was historically a major site of pilgrimage for all of those wanting to make peace with the violent history of the peoples of Demeter. At the same time, this was hard to truly atone for given the cosmic scale of the suffering they inflicted upon other worlds under the once zealous banner of the Yaga'tāan, which were now nothing but stardust.

In this light, the sleek, dark ruins of Chōs Vro'l I apared around a bend in the mountains where the nexus and nebula trees eventually gave way to barren rock and stone which much resembled the surface of Demeter's moon of Juno. Moreover, the unfurling, shattered shape of a glacier of the same name, which humans called the Campbell Glacier, was located a little ways south of this dark fortress which had been built through exploitative means by the once powerful Yaga'tāan Hegemony at the cost of countless local lives. Therefore, Chōs Vro'l I was already a sight of sublime suffering for the people of Demeter even before the foreign Yaga'tāan slavers demanded their first tithe of warriors, who were themselves especially trained in the deadly ways of the blade. Likewise, even the knowledge of how to forge and craft these long knives known as Chos'saar made of meteoric iron was broadly considered to be a lost art, yet not one that wanted to be recovered by any local people for their immediate use. The issue, once again, was that such weapons reminded their wielders about the sorrowful history of conquest under the austere command of an outside power. They also extracted a more regular tithe of minerals and timber from Demeter, which was then known as Dera'daath, which once represented the furthest bounds of this star system spanning empire. In practice, any good that the Yaga'tāan achieved was limited to their imperial core, and had no place on Dera'daath.

With this in mind, the dropship arrived in one of the landing pads of this fortress which had once been connected to the bloodshed against other sapient peoples in other planets, in a mission that was forced upon them. Likewise, the Rhāl Side'ī had spent the entire flight into the Greater Tharsis Mountains deeply meditating on how many centuries of war could give way to many more eons of peace if the affected parties were correctly guided to become stewards of this serenity which threatened to conquer or subjugate no one. This was equally the hardest option that many clan elders were confronted with, however it was one that would change the soul of many of their tribes. Moreover, Simone and Catherine were discussing how long it would supposedly take for a people to go from swords to ploughshares in the aftermath of gruesome galactic conflicts, and if they should attempt to make peace with the people they once conquered. Meanwhile, Camille and Umberto tried to break the melancholic atmosphere on the dropship by quietly talking over some details of their upcoming wedding, which would happen only once the trial had concluded. What Catherine could gather is that these lovers wanted a simple yet memorable ceremony that would happen in nature, and wished she could chime in with some suggestions.

Whatever the case, the travelers would soon be confronted with the dark and sleek architecture of this fortress turned pilgrimage site, which looked like nothing that had been constructed by human hands. In particular, everything in this built area emphasized the roundness of surfaces and seemed to undulate like the waves of the ocean across space and time as well. The outside of this austere structure was punctuated by light gridded textures broken up by shallow gutters that seemed to lend a distinctly personal touch to this otherwise aesthetic fortress built in a rugged alpine world. The last element of note on the outside of this structure was that the facades were broken up by colonnades forming a kind of partially shielded walkway which formed a circle around some equally stark interior courtyard where nothing of nature was allowed to grow. Of course,

there were some lonely alien monks in flowing robes along with other caretakers looking over the wellbeing of this site of memory and suffering, which no longer produced the bloodiest warriors of the galaxy. Indeed, the age of the blade and time of sorrow had long since passed, and all that was left to do was to mourn the innocence of an age long forgotten that would never return again. Therefore, the monks in particular seemed especially melancholic in their body language, and yet were equally surprised at the appearance of matrons here as it remained uncommon to see individuals of such renown in the rugged mountains. Just the same, they discussed some specific rules along with the traditional formalities of this place of worship, which highlighted the responsibility of the individual within the cosmos or the opposite philosophy to many corporations. They also let the matrons know to interact gently but not to feed any of the alpine wildlife including the common Tharsean stonehoof which sometimes roamed around this ancient fortress, because they were already cared for and loved.

With all of this in mind, the matrons in their flowing veils and robes led their human visitors up a shallow flight of stairs, past the open walkway and into an interior courtyard as sleet began to fall from the sky. For their part, Catherine and Simone had actively dressed for the mild alpine cold with multiple layers, so they remained warm throughout the day. Meanwhile, Simone had taken a more active role than usual in determining what Umberto and Camille wore, since she quickly turned down some of their more summery outfits. Even if she could not deny that they were in the summer of their love, Simone was also the first to turn down anything that would lead the finest members of her legal team to get sick at a higher altitude and likewise went out of her way to go shopping with them at Galactic Outdoors Company to make sure that they were dressed in a suitable manner for this slight change in climate. Just the same, this was all the better for the required level of modesty in this space of cosmic cruelty, whose pilgrims were all dressed in clothes which did not reveal much of their bodies.

The inner courtyard was dominated by a statue of one of their Yaga'tāan conquerors who generally seemed humanoid enough, even if they hailed from a star system that was even further away. However, Catherine could gather that there remained something undeniably inhuman in the detachment from sapient suffering with which they had once carried themselves especially with regards to the people they enslaved, and this student was amongst the first to recognize that there was more to being mortal than mere appearances. More specifically, Catherine shuttered at the thought of what schemes and plans would motivate such a foreign conquering force to turn the local population from the pursuit of peace to the worship of warfare, and assured herself that this was something calculated over the span of decades rather than an act of desperation. It was apparent that the Yaga'tāan were never desperate, or knew best how to hide their desperation behind religious conviction, even if she would also be the first to recognize that she knew nothing about the alien empires of the past.

More importantly, the once stoic Rhāl Side'l got down on their knees and wept loudly before the unyielding statue not out of any nascent respect for the figure represented within it, but rather out of a conscience for all of those who had suffered because of their bellicose actions during the Century of Sorrow. Likewise, Simone quickly told the humans around her to join them in this ritual of torment for the wars of generations dead and gone, which these foreign visitors did without a second thought because they too were sensible to peace. Then, the members of the Rhāl Side'l just as suddenly got up from the cold and barren ground to proceed to other parts of this fortress complex to begin to witness the sheer folly of fighting wars in the galaxy. Meanwhile, these religious authorities muttered a litany of names of the people they had once put to the sword, asking them for forgiveness for actions that were also forced upon them. In practice, it seemed that nobody definitively won in the conflicts of the past, certainly not its immediate warriors let alone the empires which were now all gone.

"Forgive us, O Forgive us Obi'n of planet Olbar! We were your conquerors bringing nothing but death to your honorable people! Please accept our apology for all acts that we inflicted upon you!" a Rhāl Side'l matron prayed

"Forgive us, O Forgive us Ja'ti of planet Jamud! We were your conquerors bringing nothing but death to your honorable people! Please accept our apology for all acts that we inflicted upon you!" a Rhāl Side'l matron pleaded

"Most Venerable Mothers of the Rhāl Side'l If I may. Do you think that all this prayer and ritual works to bring back the balance of the cosmos? Or is there a direct manner to present your apologies to them?" Catherine asked

"Thank you for the question, my dearest child. The function of all of these prayers and rituals is to emphasize in our souls the of sorrow our wars, which remain the greatest shame for our people" a Rhāl Side'l matron responded

"The greatest shame! The greatest shame!" the matrons repeated

"Most Venerable Mother, I recognize that these wars of the past waged against these innocent aliens were the greatest shame. But, once again, is there no way for you to meet your victims in person..." Catherine proposed

"My dearest child it is strictly forbidden for us to travel across the stars as we once did under the empire, since our place is to tend to the earth and to return to our most natural, peaceful state" a Rhāl Side'l matron described

"Please forgive my ignorance in the matters of your faith, Most Venerable Mother, however, in human culture, you must come face to face with all of your victims in order for you to truly applogize to them." Catherine contended

"This is an outrage! A most sublime outrage!" the matrons muttered

"My dearest child. There is sadly no use to any of what you are proposing, specifically because it would be too shameful to do this. We also currently lack the technology to travel to these worlds" A Rhāl Side'l matron advocated

"Just leave them to their ancestral rituals of woe, Catherine. Also, you can talk to me about almost anything you would like" Simone interjected

"But, I would like to know more about the purpose of all of this display of grief and woe without the necessary step of physically going to the planets and presenting these prayers to their previous victims" Catherine admitted

"Some things are just not for us to know. I could not tell you anything of why most ceremonies really happen even within our own faiths and creeds, and I expect that it is much the same with alien religions" Simone elaborated

"Of course, Simone. I understand that not everything can be necessarily understood within matters of belief, but that still does not answer my question with all of this. Why not go to the victims directly?" Catherine demanded

"My answer remains the same. Religion in any form is there to comfort the masses through repeated ceremony and ritual. This is why they are making such a show of their grief and woe in the hopes of returning balance of the cosmos, after I believe what where two centuries of bloodshed" Simone responded

"This conversation is going nowhere useful" Catherine muttered

"Maybe this conversation would be more useful to you if you considered the fact that grief has always been a complicated emotion, especially when it is expressed for masses of people put to the sword" Simone described

"I get that, Simone... But, I never did any of this when my grandfather or grandmother passed away. What makes this different?" Catherine stated

"Well, Catherine... That is because you are a human, gifted with a likewise human mind and human expressions of loss. You are simply not Ictu'l Vāar so you cannot speak for Ictu'l Vāar. Do you get it now?" Simone proposed

"I guess so, Simone... I just need to see where all this grief and woe leads to before I pass harsh judgment on this suffering people" Catherine admitted

"It is simply tolerant to leave the aliens to their creed" Simone claimed

"Forgive us, O Forgive us Nūhr of planet Nucsū! We were your conquerors bringing nothing but death to your honorable people! Please accept our apology for all acts that we inflicted upon you!" a Rhāl Side'l matron prayed

Then, the various human visitors to this imposing fortress and place of pilgrimage continued to gently follow the Rhāl Side'l matrons from a respectful distance, as they ceremonially proceeded their way through a sacred space of woe whose layout they knew already. There were of course many enclosed and outdoor spaces on their chosen route today that were all built in a similar alien architectural style, which Catherine was starting to get used to. In particular, this student could hear the droning and slightly meditative buzzing and clicking of her air mask at the present moment, which seemed to calm her down from her rather tense conversation. Meanwhile, the sleet continued to fall from the sky onto the various surfaces of Chōs Vro'l, before eventually turning into gossamer snow as the ambient weather had noticeably changed. For her part, Catherine was hardly surprised by the paradoxical arrival of summer snow in this place of collective grief, specifically because she had heard of similar things happening in the lives of her university friends hailing from the rugged mountains.

Eventually, the religious procession within this space of societal remorse culminated in a venerated ossuary chamber, where there were arranged some examples of the skulls and bones of all the aliens they had once slaughtered in their wars of conquest under a zealous banner. In particular, Catherine noticed some notable variations between these alien remains, however this recruit could not make out what the conquered peoples would have looked like in their prime without more scientifically relevant evidence. For example, she was especially taken aback by a skull furthest to the back of this venerated space possessing three evenly-spaced ocular cavities because of the fact that Catherine had never seen anything quite like it before. At the same time she could not determine the physiognomy of people who appeared even alien to the Rhāl Side'l, without more information at her disposal. For all Catherine knew, these could have been a bipedal species with four arms and a tail, in a question which did not appear to concern the joined members of the religious order in front of her very eyes.

More specifically, the Rhāl Side'l contemplated these alien remains with immense tenderness, before once again crying and wailing to the cosmos that their wars were cruel and unjust. After that, they meditated for a while on the nature of life and death in the universe, and especially prayed for the continued prosperity of their victims. Consequently, Catherine overheard that these ancient litanies were even more hostile towards the people of Demeter, claiming that they would rather be poor and downtrodden if the rest of the cosmos became rich and prosperous at their expense. Then, once all of this profoundly personal ritual was done, the Rhāl Side'l got back up on their feet, and returned to the travelers, announcing that it was time to leave this place of great mourning for the countless dead and to return to the clamorous world of the living.

In particular, Catherine was surprised that this entire ritual which seemed so profoundly personal did not last any longer, especially given the cosmic scale of the suffering that was once inflicted by the slave-soldiers of Demeter under the zealous banner of a foreign empire. The Rhāl Side'l responded simply that every day for them was a day of immense suffering and torment and loss for the victims of centuries ago, and that visiting Chōs Vro'l merely helped to reinforce their personal devotion to this lifelong mission. For her part, Catherine began to understand that religion in her century was more than a collection of places and people but instead resembled more of an overwhelming sentiment to do right in the world around them, and to bring balance to the cosmos through the correct observance of rituals and cultural norms. Once all of this was over, the visitors returned back to their dropship which had remained in the area for what felt like hours to them, but only mere minutes to Catherine and her colleagues. There might have been some ancient miracle to distort the perception of time in the austere fortress, which Catherine did not know what to think about. The visitors to Chōs Vro'l returned to New Arcadia around dusk where they learned of the concerning development that Elisabeth's acolyte Senator Nicole Sueng-Yeuh had

been murdered in her apartment by a member of Samson Private Contractors. Catherine discovered that the reason for this politically-motivated violence was that their employer Pegasus Petroleum could not tolerate any investigation against them, and so found it necessary to remove the senator who had been most avid about it in the months preceding the trial. Another brilliant politician and visionary for a better, tolerant planet could now no longer contribute to the proceedings leveled against a company that had done heinous things to the locals of Demeter. Instead, Nicole was now sitting in a lotus position dressed in the pale robes of death as white as snow within her crowded apartment, for a hard-working woman who only wanted to make the world a better place.

The seemingly calculated murder of one of the senators presiding over the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau's legal case, would naturally make any convincing of the court of any corporate war crimes much harder, as it had lost its beating heart and soul. Just the same, the next days of the hearings droned along without much progress being made on either side, specifically as Nicole's replacement was less adept than she had been in matters of civil rights and common sense for that matter. Furthermore, Catherine was also called to the witness stand multiple times during these days of intense litigation, however could not seem to get a word in about her experience of the genocide. This was especially a shame as she had personally observed the effects of Promethean Fire on the suffering people of Demeter. As she saw it, Catherine thought that the corporations could not handle the truth of what they had done to the native tribes of this planet, which was simply not in their favor. And so, the genocide trial and the fate of the Ictu'l Vāar was elaborated over the next days where it was clear that there was a long road to justice ahead of Catherine.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**NEW ARCADIA, PLANET DEMETER
MONDAY, JUNE 18TH, 2255.**

The genocide hearing rambled on into another week of procedures, with both legal teams showing signs of exhaustion. More specifically, Umberto and Camille representing the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau did not know what to think about Saturday's revelation that the people of Demeter had once been the brutal slave soldiers for a star-system spanning empire likely aiding and abetting galactic genocide on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, both Catherine and especially Simone insisted that the mere notion of slave-soldiers, or Chōs Vro'l as they were more commonly known, is also what made the tribes of Demeter victims as much as they had been perpetrators of untold violence against sapient biengs in other solar systems. Likewise, William and Veronica of the corporate legal team had felt pretty confident in their ability to stave back the claims that their company had in any manner been involved in the worrying systematic genocide of native Ictu'l Vāar peoples well into Friday evening.

However, Veronica discovered that William was cheating the last weeks on his loyal wife with that of Senator Damian Westfield, a spokesperson for the conspiratorial and thus ultra-conservative newspaper the Demeter Dispatch. For example, it was the Demeter Dispatch that advanced verbal and written assaults on the civic bedrock of the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus at the heart of their corporate-backed newsrooms, which were mostly funded by Pegasus Petroleum along with other colossal businesses. To be sure, the highly sensitive revelation that William had been having extramarital relations with the decades younger Delilah Beatrice Westfield instead of his chronically ailing wife Eleanor Meredith Saunders was enough to make Veronica question William's loyalties. However, William's responded that he was a man and thus should liberally be able to get a

new lover if his wife got sick, in a response that did not satisfy Veronica who stayed cold towards him. This was especially apparent in the courtroom where this attorney increasingly found himself all on his own without the rhetorical support of his colleague. Just the same, Veronica's daughter had been caught shoplifting with her friends from a rather high end Casa Ippolita Fiorentini store in Pegasus City, which left her concerned mother furious as what she saw as lower-class behavior that was unbefitting of the child of a corporate lawyer. For his part, William had tried to attack her for her terrible parenting in the minutes preceding the opening of the Special Hearings Room, however he had little success in that regard as this was not Veronica's first time being accused of being a bad mother. However, both sides of the hearing made sure that none of their doubts were not revealed to one another, as that could spell disaster for the austerity of a case involving one of the worst crimes imaginable.

The last element of note before Catherine entered the Special Hearings Room was the ever-present role of the galactic press in reporting any scrap of information they could from the witnesses. For her part, Catherine knew that this activity was illegal but the kind of illegality that was hard to enforce given that sources like the New Arcadia Times were at every major legal proceeding hoping to be the first to report on some insider information. Just the same, this student was able to make a temporary peace with her favorite reporter, Francine Prudhomme hailing from the New Arcadia Times, who was impressed by just how much Catherine enjoyed her investigative work. Consequently, if Catherine were to talk to anyone naturally after the trial it would be Francine, specifically because Catherine trusted in this amazing journalist's abilities to tell the truth. Meanwhile, this student had a harder time fending off the journalists from the Demeter Dispatch and the Statesman who she had little common ground with, and so would not talk to. This is when William of all people stepped in to help her by reminding them of the rules and regulations of a legal hearing.

After this, the Special Hearings room opened its doors to the gathered members of the legal teams and their various witnesses who were led into the waiting room by exo-suit clad federal police officers. It was true that there were increasingly protests outside the building from Citizens Against Warfare, who showed up in droves chanting slogans like 'The Corps must Face the Truth' as well as 'Land, Life and Liberty' in reference to the rights supposedly promised by humans after the first landing on planet Demeter in the spring of 2151. For her part, Catherine wanted more than anything to join these protests specifically because that was what she had always done when she was younger, however was reminded not to do that by Simone wanting to maintain some semblance of the neutrality of the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau, who always felt like they found themselves on the loosing side of the law.

Moreover, the unexpected death of Nicole the other night had led her posting to be quickly replaced by the often dithering Christina Powell-White. This senator was surely experienced and therefore tenured however seemed to have lost some of her ardor with time as often happened with politicians detached from their voters. Elizabeth was nothing short of frustrated with Christina who had once been her mentor in fighting for civil rights, and was now just another politician. Regardless, the trial officially opened when both legal teams and the politicians overseeing them took their seats within the Special Hearings Room, where they proceeded onwards with opening remarks. Meanwhile, Camille and Umberto had planned that today would be the prime opportunity to hear from the Rhāl Side'l themselves, who could speak about their atonement for the years of sorrow they inflicted on the galaxy. However, this was easier said than done for the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau, who did not account for the secrecy of this ancestral order of wise-women. And yet, they proceeded with respect to these zealous individuals until eventually they were able to get the high matron of this order, Mother Iesh'e Pelwa, to speak at the trial.

Just the same, Camille and Umberto could not believe their luck in having such a prestigious individual on their side, and were quick to thank Mother Pelwa for her testimony. At the same time, the intervention of the Rhāl Side'l if they acted within the traditional rules of a legal hearing did not assure victory for the plaintiffs who still had to argue the validity of her perspective representing untold eons of grief and bliss within a hostile courtroom focused on the here and now. The alien peoples of Demeter always ran into the issue of making their much longer view of life frequently measured in decades and centuries more palatable to a short-sighted human audience when they represented themselves in court, as they thought in terms of centuries where humans only cared about minutes, hours and days. To be sure, Camille and Umberto absolutely did not want to repeat the scandal that had happened when the hard-working Rhenn Talva had been falsely accused of killing his daughters in cold blood many years previously. More specifically, this hard-working engineer originating from Epsilon General Company stumbled again and again even with the help of his lawyer hired from the circuit of public defenders who did not understand how to make the alien conception of events matter to a frequently hostile court.

It was this collective memory of the losses of civil rights suffered by the native peoples of Demeter that firmly convinced the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau to do better overall, where they found that politicians often did not know or did not care about these peoples civil rights. This was especially the case with Senetor Damian Westfield who was known to be backed by mining interests on Demeter and its moon of Juno, as he began to show his true colors during the course of the day's lengthy proceedings. For example, this corrupt statesman increasingly seemed to side with the Pegasus Petroleum legal team specifically as this company had made a deal called the 'Mineral Pact' with Terra Nova Mining to let them know of any precious diamonds they came across while ostensibly searching for oil. This was seen as corporate collusion that was

outlawed at least in Parnassus under the Sturkenboom Act, although the court felt powerless to prosecute all of the people involved in this scandal. There were reports that Patricia and Genevieve had staunchly refused funding from Golden Horizons Agrarian Company, which frequently presented itself as merely the humble plowmen of the land. Nevertheless, both of these politicians knew better than to believe their branding, and recognized that it was none other than this same business that first developed Promethean Fire, as a powerful defoliant for the use of farmers around the planet. Nevertheless, Golden Horizons were even quicker to market their invention to the broadest range of military executives specifically because of its well-known disfiguring and scaring effects on the local alien population, as seen in the First Corporate War. It was for all of these reasons that both of these politicians who were frequently seen as corrupt could not in good conscience accept this deal with the devil, despite the promises of Golden Horizons Agrarian Company of a better future with their chemicals used by workers of this planet they hoped to civilize. There could be no wilderness left for this business who wanted desperately to bring the entirety of this world under the plough, no matter the ecological costs of such a mission.

With all of this in mind, the genocide trial proceeded in its typical manner with plenty of approaches from the lawyers and various more or less successful attempts to convince the various politicians gathered in front of them. However, it seemed that Umberto and Camille were finally gaining ground where William and Veronica were increasingly unable to formulate coherent legal arguments, much to the surprise of Simone who did not expect this sudden turn of events. To be sure, it appeared that her dedicated legal team had finally stopped being naive to the court in their attempts to stand up for the Ictu'l Vāar, and were processing everything that was at stake if they did not defend them. It seemed that these attorneys had taken an unsanctioned trip to the places in the Western Corporate Concession when they should have been moving into the North Falls

Refugee Camp, and witnessed the sheer ecological destruction in the form of forests turned to ash wrought by the liberal use of Promethean Fire. Eventually, the High Mother was called to the witness stand in order to testify not only about the use of Promethean Fire against the tribes of the Ictu'l Vāar as some of her tribe members had done before her, but also to reflect upon the centuries of slaughter that the people of Demeter had been forced to take part in by the Yaga'tāan Hegemony. This later point was especially important to convince the corporate attorneys that the various natives of this planet were not hostile in an excessive manner, and were instead contrived to go against their better nature and known history by external forces. Whatever the case, this argument seemed especially lost on the Pegasus Petroleum legal team who once again viewed the entire universe as an unruly collection of violent individuals who needed a state, or as they argued a corporation to keep their desires in check. Rather predictably the Rhāl Side'l had a completely different view of society which emphasized all the good that an individual could achieve through collaboration with others, who were seen as their equal peers instead of another form of natural rival.

However, this religious figure surprised the whole court by unveiling most of the top half of her scarred and broken body, at least up to her clavicles, where up to that point most humans believed that the Rhāl Side'l insisted on covering themselves up in dark veils and robes because of what was broadly assumed to be oppressive dogma. Regardless, the gathered members of the court beheld a woman whose emaciated body due to the starvation of their people was marked with the blemishes of Promethean Fire. She had become blind because of these chemicals due to the whiteness of her eyes which should have been dark and opalescent. Her skin was now a patchwork of lighter and darker spots, some of which would go on to develop cancer. The list of symptoms seemed endless when the attorneys glanced at the High Mother, whose look was one profoundly distraught by the violence of mankind almost wiping her people out.

"My name is High Mother Ish'e Triell Pelwa, and I am the spiritual leader of the order of wise-women known as the Rhāl Side'l who help guide the Ictu'l Vāar through this life and the next. However, what you behold before your very eyes are the effects of Promethean Fire, which have caused me and my people great agony as of late. I may very well recover from this attack, however I am not so certain about many of my followers" the High Mother explained

"First and foremost, Umberto and I want to thank you for your presence in this life and the next, High Mother. We would equally like you to explain to the gathered members of the court how the substance known as Promethean Fire gave you these scars that you have showed us" Camille inquired

"To be fair, it is the same terrible story as the rest of the members of my people whose accounts you have heard this morning. What more is there to say when you are confronted with suffering" the High Mother responded

"High Mother, what you are saying is that you too have experienced the caustic and cancerous effect of that chemical compound just like we can readily observe on your body before us today. I would like to present my most sincere apologies that you have had to endure this" Camille elaborated

"Point of order, Madame Lambert.... Your team can only apologize when the court has found the opposition to be liable for the genocide of the natives of Demeter and the destruction of their ecosystem" Damien insisted

"I do not retract my comment because it represents a basic human grace independent of what the court deems to be fit." Camille advocated

"Point retracted. Please excuse the interruption of Mister Westfield. You can continue pursuing your examination" Genevieve announced

"Very well then, Madam Dawson... Now, High Mother, you have affirmed to us that these scars that on your body are the result of exposure to Promethean Fire. How can that be the case when Mister Saunders has clearly sustained that Promethean Fire should be harmless to her?" Camille disclosed

"Madame Lambert, you are putting words in my mouth, words that I did not ever say during the length of these proceedings. What I merely said was that Agent 46B, or Promethean Fire as it is more widely known, has been proven to be more harmful to plants than it is to sapient life." William postulated

"With all due respect, your present claims seems to be nothing short of a white lie Mister Saunders as you once said that Promethean Fire is harmless to the locals of Demeter and would only affect their plants. Please be aware that your statements carry weight in a court of law" Camille advocated

"Madame Lambert, what even is the meaning of any of this? What is your ultimate goal by following your line of reasoning?" William inquired

"My goal is simple. I wish to prove in front of this court of law that your company intended to harm at least one individual from the Ictu'l Vāar people group, which we can expand to the potential of harming other individuals from this same group. Indeed, a genocide acts as the logical conclusion of wanting to wound and maim and kill the most people possible." Camille argued

"Are you saying that such killings are necessary? Could you please tell the court how exactly you came up with that notion?" William pleaded

"This is not my argument in the slightest, Mister Saunders. In that case, let me rephrase my reasoning so that you may better understand it. What I am asking is that if a genocide is a large-scale glut of violence or not, at least when it is compared with a murder of a singular individual" Camille illustrated

"Madam Lambert, I think that all violence is bad..." William murmured

"Please answer my question, don't try to equivocate" Camille insisted

"To tell you the truth, our forces were there to protect our personnel and assets that were being relentlessly assaulted by local alien insurgents causing millions of quasars in damage. Our soldiers were essentially around to keep the peace for a worried populace fearing another attack from the rebel groups... I cannot speak for the violent actions of our mercenaries" William claimed

"Very well then, I feel like we are making progress here. So, you say that corporate soldiers and their mercenary associates were basically peacekeepers against alien insurgents. I will grant you this point if you answer this next step of my logic, Mr. Saunders. Why were they all so deadly?" Camille demanded

"What is your definition of the word deadly" William questioned

"What we mean by deadly is simply that which is prone to kill. Likewise, the numbers are on our side here since your troops, which you claim to have no control over, managed to put 100 or so people per day into the grave. Moreover, this is not to mention the insidious and purposeful establishment of internment camps, or as you call them 'Settlements' in the documents. What peacekeeping force exterminates people that they are defending?" Umberto contended

"As the saying goes, anything goes in times of war.... Our corporate troops on the ground were outnumbered and outgunned by the rebels, so we did what we had to do to keep the peace. That is my answer" William responded

"These Settlements are not the actions of a desperate army but those of an overwhelming occupying power which is intent on the outright eradication of a civilian population. In particular, that is one of the criteria for a genocide that were established in the New Cythera Accords..." Umberto described

"What you are forgetting is that the Western Corporate Concession never signed those accords or whatever you call them. Our companies are ultimately free to do with our civilians and hostiles as we wish" William advocated

"So, you're calling yourselves a rogue nation?" Umberto emphasized

"It is none of your business who we are as our nation has provided wealth to the galaxy in terms of planetary trade and investment opportunities. Do you think that we could have killed the Ictu'l Vāar peoples?" William replied

"You would have had every reason imaginable to do what I am proposing as money is a great motivator for evil. And, it is frequently the wealthiest states that have the most capacity to do these horrors" Umberto described

At this, the politicians seated in front of them intervened on behalf of the corporations and politely asked Umberto to end his aggressive line of reasoning, despite the fact it had been successful. For her part, Catherine observed all of these happenings from the tinted windows of the witness room, and was visibly terrified at the extent of the killings of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples. The student had no idea about how this internal war in the Western Corporate Concession had brought about the terrible want for alien internment camps, or Settlements as they were euphemistically known all around the area affected by the genocide. However, there seemed to be little room in the court for the light of truth, and Catherine could see that this trial which she was once so confident in would turn out to be a tragic miscalculation on the part of her side. It appeared more than ever that the corporations had enticed and befriended the foreign governments that could keep them accountable, in a rather predictable stratagem.

Therefore, defeat was in the air when the High Mother was called back to the witness room as it seemed that the time for justice would be in some distant future. Just the same, Simone had to eventually excuse herself from the witness room and head straight to the cybernetics division of the New Arcadia General Clinic, since her robotic left arm and hand were not cooperating with her today. This all meant that Simone was not around in the witness room to comfort the utterly distraught High Mother after this legal case which appeared to be more prompted by politics than what was ethically just. As a whole, the case for the peoples of Demeter appeared to be all the more fragile, almost as if it were built on shifting sand, when Catherine returned home, where she had no energy to talk to her senator mother who was tacitly at a loss for words tonight. For her part, Elizabeth had heard of the tragic news through the various media channels who gave different perspectives on the happenings earlier. Instead, the senator eventually rested her tired eyes from her holoscreen, and opted to spend some time with her heartbroken daughter, reminiscing about halcyon days.

"The Ictu'l Vāar rapidly formed into a dozen or so insurgent groups, whose names I do not remember. What I will say is that they did not meekly acquiesce to their extermination by corporate forces but rather resisted oblivion violently, as I am certain any of us would do if we found ourselves in such dire circumstances"

Simone Lambert, Commissioner for the Genocide and Attrocities Investigation Bureau at the New Arcadia Trials, January 12th, 2026.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**LANDLOW SETTLEMENT SCHOOL, PLANET
DEMETER, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 20TH, 2255.**

It was Simone who on sometime during the evening of Monday June 19th had decided to take Catherine along with her overworked legal team to the now infamous West Landlow Settlement School. This was mainly to see if this illegal reeducation camp was still in operation despite the fact that it was illegal to do so after the treaties that officially concluded the Second Corporate War, but also to show Catherine yet another facet of the struggle of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples to maintain their language and overall culture. Catherine immediately recognized that witnessing this not at all surprising atrocity against a proud alien people like many which had been laid low by the miseries of warfare, was more important than any rest she could gather today. In practice, the Special Hearings Chamber would remain empty until at least Thursday morning and it became increasingly apparent that their various legal teams might as well be meeting on an ad hoc basis, which Catherine and Simone understood given the sensitivity of addressing any of the atrocities of conflict during a supposedly more peaceful time. Just the same, many were the constituents who wondered if now was truly the right historical moment for such painstaking deliberations, in an attitude that strayed towards the more conservative side of the political spectrum. Another mission that drew them towards the West Landlow Settlement School was the hope of reuniting the artisan Yeth Lena'luk with her twin children Eid'ol and Ru'q, who had been forcibly taken from her by corporate forces the previous summer.

With all of this in mind, Catherine along with her close associates pierced the airspace of the Western Corporate Concession to head to the reeducation camps around West Landlow sometime past noon on a dropship leased from their close allies in the Demeter Relief Corps. For her part, Catherine noticed an

unspeakable melancholy to many of the writhing wooden thickets that covered the vast territory of the Western Corporate Concession, which Catherine now contrasted against the verdant groves of the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus, where, at least in theory, nature was simply more abundant. Furthermore, their dropship equally overflowed the capital of Port Pegasus for a couple of minutes, itself appearing as a primarily dull grey sprawl of habitation blocks and factories possessing none of the discreet charm of somewhere like New Arcadia. To be sure, New Arcadia had its industrial zones around both of its spaceports but what made them different was how they appeared to be much better integrated into the urban fabric than whatever was being done in Port Pegasus. Meanwhile, it was no secret that no one from the lowliest workman through to the highest executive wanted to permanently live in Port Pegasus as this planned capital lacked much of the urban identity of a city in the Twenty Third Century, in which such matters were considered something close to a sacred science. However, the dizzying urban sprawl of Port Pegasus inevitably gave way once again to the wilder areas of wilderness around this center of human activity, which appeared as a very affront to the planet which bore its scars to this very day.

It was now time for Catherine to reflect on the mass of sentient life which had been churned up in the malicious, corporate-backed system of settlement schools, that were no better than the harrowing settlement camps to which they were invariably tied. How many hundreds of boys and girls had passed through places of great cosmic evil like Landlow Settlement School, only to be broken by a government which cared not for the survival of their vibrant culture. Indeed, it was commonly rummored that the punishments for even speaking their native language ranged from a severe beating for the first infraction, to isolation from the rest of the student body on the second infraction, to being worked to death on the third infraction at least according to the New Arcadia Times investigative reporting, whose ramifications had yet to be processed in the free world. At this

moment, Catherine could observe the expanse of the West Landlow Settlement School composed of various dormitories and other assorted buildings all built in the same utterly dreary manner. In particular, it appeared that some of this place of woe looked like the North Falls Refugee Camp as both had been conceived by the same more or less reliable construction firms, who had gotten rich working for both sides of an armed planetary conflict. Likewise, Catherine sighed deeply at the symptoms of the unmistakable greed of humanity in the cosmos, because this student of the world expected nothing less of the admittedly profit-driven colonists of planet Demeter and the rest of the Hesta-V solar system. Therefore, it came as no surprise that none other than an associate of Dynamic Homes had participated in the fabrication of built components for the East Landlow Settlement School, granting them millions of quasars in income. And this entire operation was managed through a branch of Midas Capital Investments, which was the same company offering banking services to Samson mercenaries. All of this was to say that the same malefactors as usual were involved in inflicting suffering on the native peoples of Demeter, who were mostly powerless outside of violent armed rebellion to stop these colossal companies in their wake.

Whatever the case, Catherine now descended from the dropship dressed in some of her more sober civilian clothes, trailing in the footsteps of Simone who wore her field uniform as well as Yeth in who was dressed in her traditional Ictu'l Vāar robes. For her part, Catherine was followed by the loving couple of Umberto and Camille looking professional in their business attire all the while remaining speechless at the horror around them. They also made sure to bring the same lightweight rain jackets as they had brought to Cho's Vol, which was especially fortunate since today was proving to be a cold and damp day. One of the main sensations was that of the mud against their boots, to such an extent that they had to secure their footing in order not to slip and fall over. Catherine could also feel wet from all the raindrops falling from the sky today, and wanted

to look for some kind of cover from the elements. However, there was seemingly nothing in terms of temporary tents or even more permanent forms of shelter set aside for human use on this miserable day. All that remained therefore were the feelings of the weather against their bodies, as well as the menacing noises of the wind picking up and a sight of distant rolling fog. Catherine could not help but think about the miserable lives of the aliens within this place of torment, and hoped more than anything to see them come to an immediate end. At the same time, there was something also unnatural about the inclement weather, because there were no signs of the traditional creatures of Demeter over this location in the middle of the wilderness, unlike what could be often seen at the North Falls Refugee Camp which was seemingly overrun by such animals. This once again reinforced the sense that the East Landlow Settlement School existed purley to spite nature, where North Falls lived in harmony with planet Demeter.

Regardless, Catherine's group of people was at all times surrounded by the well-armed members of their security detail who carried weapons as good as anything weilded by the taciturm guards of this internment complex, although their rugged battle armor left something to be desired. As a whole, this group of more than a dozen people were drenched by the rain while they headed towards the office of the camp's director, a man by the name of Armand Lucas Lemaitre wanting to hear them out. It was decided that Simone was the best equipped to attempt to shut down this director's thriving operation in corporate held territory which was outlawed under existing peace accords on Planet Demeter. At the same time, Simone made sure to bring half of her own armed guards from the Genocide and Attrocities Investigation Bureau with her as a form of security, specifically because this commissioner was not sure of what exactly would unfold in the meeting with Armand Lemaitre. In general, it appeared as if these corporate types were always quick to back up their utterly brash claims with muscle, and so Simone did not want to find herself on the losing side of one of

these tense arguments. Moreover, Simone ensured that her own security detail carried their weapons on safety mode, although this was alleviated by the fact they had to check in their weapons in a designated location. After that, they proceeded upwards to the directors office which overlooked this place of human suffering much like Shelvāar's did in the North Falls Refugee Camp.

This left the rest of the group with the secondary prerogative of locating and hopefully extracting Yeth's children by walking through the camp, who were likely miserable under these weather conditions. However, even here, Catherine's group was accompanied by austere representatives of the Landlow Settlement School dressed in corporate uniforms. For their part, these individuals who were expected to act out the cultural genocide of the Ictu'l Vāar tribes seemed just as quick to snuff out any attempts to call for the names of the twins, much to the fury of Yeth who was not one to be shut down so easily. It was then revealed under the rain of this melancholic afternoon almost by accident that her beloved children had been taken from this world by curable sickness. At this point, Yeth's grief turned to anger, as she demanded that she may mourn their bodies which were cremated so as to leave no discernable trace of their existence. Eventually, Catherine's group was swiftly escorted away from the various habitation blocks of this place of misery by nameless and faceless members of the Landlow security team. This equally ensured that the attorneys with Catherine would not witness the worst of the many violations against the Ictu'l Vāar peoples in their reeducation camp, which was essentially there to strip them of their long- held cultural identity in order to make them more human. More specifically, this recruit was thankfully not alone in seeing the gruesome inhumanity in all of this process, supposed to make the utmost dedicated corporate citizens out of the youngest members of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples. Furthermore, it logically followed in Catherine's mind that at this very instant the Ictu'l Vāar peoples had no future since their brilliant children were being held hostage in conditions that were only

described as sufficient by corporations and their adamant partisans. Even here, there was not even a slight attempt at being humane in the wildest designs of these colossal companies holding sway over dissenting voices in their nation. And therefore, Catherine's group patiently waited in the dropship for Simone to return from her righteous indignation for the better treatment of aliens.

It was equally at this moment that Catherine decided to change into the splendid chromasilk dress that she would wear at the upcoming Demeter Releif Gala which would be happening later on tonight in New Arcadia. In particular, there was nothing too drastic in the sight of Catherine's undressing or dressing for that matter, and she would soon join the finest socialites at this evening event once Simone came back to the dropship after firmly standing her ground against the utterly ludicrous proposals of the director of the Landlow Settlement School who seemed to respond to no laws on the entirety of planet Demeter. After this, the visitors returned to the Despereaux Spaceport where Catherine's friend Penelope had been waiting in her flyer. It was later that the recruit rapidly saw that Penelope's boyfriend was none other than the highly affluent James Victor Price, the eldest child to Phillip Leon Price, the head of Midas Capital Investments. This company, as dominant as Pegassus Petroleum or even Terra Nova Mining was once known as Trinity Investment Group and had a more varied portfolio before their assets were seized by Midas Partners. As of then, they invested in the most ethically dubious entities in the market, and even had offered banking services for Samsom Private Contractors. It was these same mercenaries who were now essentially in court for perpetrating the Ictu'l Vāar genocide. Just the same, James and Penelope were having a kind of atrocious conversation about how these native peoples had caused their own genocide through how violent they were to their corporate oppressors. It should equally be noted that their talk together was not founded on any complex geopolitical readings of this situation but rather on stereotypes of the native aliens being a

quintessentially backwards people whose way of life needed to be totally eradicated. To be sure, James and Penelope did not say the quiet part out loud and instead tried to escape any criticism by fundamentally downplaying the severity of their views. For example, Catherine was taken aback when Penelope was in favor of the Settlement School System, in which aliens as young as 4 years old were forcibly taken from their parents and put in educational centers around the Western Corporate Concession. In particular, Catherine now knew about the abuses of places including the Landlow Settlement School located outside of the city of Tungsten Point within the Western Corporate Concession, where none of their members were allowed to speak their language.

It was at this point that James and Penelope realized with a little shame that there was another person with them in the flyer and thus rather awkwardly tried to change the topic and make small talk for the rest of the flight. However, it was more of a proposal than an actual feasible idea since they were rapidly approaching the location of the Galactic Relief Gala which historically took place at the soaring spire of 516 Nebula Plaza. Catherine noticed that this highrise was one of the tallest buildings in New Arcadia alongside 140 Garden Row, more known as the Galaxy Tower and the 470 Cosmos Avenue, more known as the Midas Investment Building. Nevertheless, 516 Nebula Plaza stood out from its competition tonight because of just how angular it appeared and how much of its surface was covered in glass. This had been the wish of its hard-working polymath architect Matthias Augustin Volland, who was yet another astonishing contemporary of Catherine's beloved grandfather. Whatever the case, Catherine rapidly found herself in the illustrious and certainly boisterous company of some of the highest elites of New Arcadian life, which included everyone from actors and artists to upper echelon businessmen and corporate executives. To be sure, Catherine did not even know all of their names or personalities for that matter, however this student felt as if this event allowed them to showcase zenith of

their detachment from the rest of society, despite the fact that all the money that was raised was essentially going to help all of those displaced by warfare. Just the same, Catherine imagined that all of these varied socialites in their sleek suits and glistening gowns imagined themselves as being against armed conflict, so at least they could agree on something. It was also worth noting that there were a plethora of protestors this evening from Citizens Against Warfare vigorously chanting outside of the large atrium of 516 Nebula Plaza about the need to reign in justice for the genocide. Indeed, their presence at every major somewhat political event was to be expected in these corrupt and trying times, and Catherine therefore agreed with their broadly pacifist sentiment.

Just the same, Catherine was the first to notice that this was one of the first times she had attended the Galactic Relief Gala without the assistance of her mother who was resting tonight to prepare for a medical procedure. It was true that in the past it was Elizabeth who had helped her identify safe adults to talk to and places to go at an event where children were generally a rare sight, and still this senator was always pleasantly surprised when Catherine found somehow somewhere a person who was age appropriate to talk to. Nevertheless, this sudden conversation eventually gave way to the gentle embrace of rest, and Elisabeth was less surprised when Catherine was very involved in this activity. It was no secret that this senator had raised her brilliant daughter to be emotional in general and little physical when she needed to be, in ways that were perfectly expected for her age at the time. And the best thing about this was that it was not forced onto Catherine but rather felt perfectly natural to this citizen. And yet this still did not answer the question in Catherine's mind of why on earth James and Penelope would be in attendance to this event that represented some of the basic human empathy for people impacted by conflict that these socialites seemed to be opposed to in their bellicose century. In this light, Catherine's response to this inquiry came once again from her mother who would remind

her that about half of the people who attended these galas were doing so not because they genuinely cared about the aliens but merely because they wanted to save face in the court of public opinion. For example, Catherine remembered how Elizabeth used a dose of sarcasm and a little dark humor to confront the head of Pegasus Petroleum, whose name was Athanasios Vlassos-Kallelis about the untold destruction that his colossal company wrought on the the Golma Fadaa peoples of Demeter. For his part, Athanasios had no idea that he was being made a mockery of until the very end of the conversation, due to his lack of human graces and difficulty at reading people's intentions. However, this executive was quick to leave this heated dialogue with Catherine's mother who knew how to make malicious actors squirm in personal discussions. What ultimately made the ever loathed Anathasios leave this talk was the sight of the young Catherine barely retaining her laughter at him, which made this cutthroat businessman think about his own daughters, Demetra and Andromeda.

And yet, the moment was now for immediate action in the present and not to reminisce too much about the galas of the past, especially given just how pressing the genocide was for Catherine. For her part, this student rapidly lost contact with James and Penelope who almost immediately went to the drinks bar to order themselves a cocktail known as the Amber Dream, which was composed of a mixture of vodka and Cytheran oranges. These vibrant fruits once again had little to do with earth oranges other than their appearance, even if their inside was complex like that of a pomegranate. And yet, Catherine was not one to like Amber Dreams or other cocktails, which were too alcoholic for her. Soon after, Catherine ran into the conservative darling superstar Delilah Beatrice Westfield wearing yet another dress, which did this beautiful woman a disservice as it seemed too tacky for its own good. Indeed, It was true that this spokesperson frequently surrounded herself with her three or four children in press materials, as this a picture aligned with traditionalist values. Nevertheless,

these younger individuals were nowhere to be seen tonight as they were in their family home of 95 Garden Row, leaving Catherine with an unprecedented chance to approach Damian's just as ambitious wife. For her part, Delilah had liberally dated many upper echelon businessmen at Renslaer Robotics, Liberty Labs as well as other mid-level corporate entities before settling down with the younger Damian, and effectively repenting for her previous seductive ways. Just the same, Delilah did not know how to have a meaningful conversation with many of her fellow women specifically as she so often saw them as competition. In this light, Catherine did not know if she should feel bad for this stifled spouse who clearly was able to do much more than being a glorified housewife, especially within the striving city of New Arcadia where anything was possible.

Therefore, Delilah tried her damnest to seduce Catherine trying to draw attention to her body and her prowess in bed, in a gesture that would be funny if Delilah was not so desperate for someone to truly love her. It was this student's theory that Delilah may have once been bisexual but Catherine felt profoundly unsafe around this older woman who remained far more powerful than her. In addition, Catherine did not do with Delilah what she would typically have done when she was approached by some girl in her youth, in offering an olive branch for them to become closer if they wanted to come to her house. Nevertheless, it was far too dangerous to bring Delilah any closer than she already was, much to this spokesperson's chagrin. Nevertheless, even here, Delilah's tears seemed to be preformative not due to any failure of women as a whole, but specifically to the limitations of Delilah's limited conception of her own gender role. And so, the evening continued onwards without any further incident, and Catherine was even able to donate some of her mother's hard earned money to the cause of improving the lives of aliens on Demeter which were all too often filled with all manner of deprivation and poverty. Likewise, the recruit would learn through holo-message that her first year roommate's service with the Demeter Emergency

Doctors Association was coming to an end after some of their immediate goals had been met in the Scientific Republic of Laconia. For example, Pavlina and her organization was able to provide months worth of life saving medication to many medical centers in New Sagan City. Everything considered, this was great news especially given the fact that the hospitals of the Laconian capital had all too frequently suffered from the actions of foreign corporations who aimed to make the life of their everyday citizens as terrible as humanly possible.

Another thought lingering in Catherine's mind tonight was the change in attitudes around the use of androids in the world, and how there was no singular condemnation by a high priest of their need to be replaced. Instead, this 'Return to Humanity' was a decades-long process involving fraught cultural discussions before turning to sudden violent action against them. Catherine would also learn after the fact that around 500,000 quasars were raised from the charitable gala to the benefit of the native people of this planet, which was much to the joy of her mother who commended Catherine for her political sense. At the same time, Catherine missed the honesty of people like Zoryanna who were working hard to take care of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples at the North Falls Refugee Camp itself, a location which Catherine hoped to return to soon. Still, there remained one last thing in her way which was the genocide hearing which would continue into the future, as it would determine the final fate of the Ictu'l Vāar on planet Demeter. It was here that the most substantial action would take place under the auspices of rival legal teams now primed to dispute one another like never before.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

**NEW ARCADIA, PLANET DEMETER
THURSDAY, JUNE 21ST, 2255.**

The genocide hearing continued for another day in the Special Hearings Room of the Parnassian Chamber of Senators and by this time in the trial, all the arguments that could have been done were done and even the evidence seemed to be getting old for the different legal teams. More specifically, this aspect of this complex procedure mostly involved a range of documents that would have been especially damaging to the corporations if William and Veronica did not keep on doubting their foundation in a shared body of facts. To be sure, this particular tactic had become something of a mainstay of their legal strategy, so much so that they had not even gone through all of their witnesses by the time they started constantly litigating the validity of these internal communications. For example, William went on an unprompted monologue about how Camille and Umberto were ready to believe anything about the world regarding texts that clearly displayed the corporations intent to fully eradicate the Ictu'l Vāar with the bloody assistance of their mercenaries. These associates left even more of a significant paper-trail than the corporations, frequently featuring far harsher language towards individuals they saw as less than human. "Kill all the adults" read a letter by Captain Aelbert Coen Laurens of Samson Private Contractors "and save the children, so that we can extinguish their culture with all of those settlement schools that were so nicely set up by Pegasus Petroleum".

Another letter from a Lieutenant Alphonse Estienne Barthélémy of this same company read "We need to take matters into our own hands, by forcefully erasing any trace of the Ictu'l Vāar from history. Demeter is our planet, let's fucking act like it". For their part, both of these criminals and countless others had escaped off-world to the dark side of Juno where supposedly anything goes

and were now being hunted by the relevant colonial authorities, which could not let them live without consequences for their most heinous actions. In practice, it had come to light as an accident during one of William's increasingly long and repetitive diatribes that the lunar city of Valkyrie's Terminal had become friendly to the worst people that Demeter had to offer, bringing about nothing short of a political standoff between Juno and Demeter, known as 'The Juno Crisis'. This crisis would last far longer than the trials themselves and thus would not be fully investigated let alone prosecuted until the later half of the Twenty Third Century primarily due to the ultraconservative and even nationalistic sympathies of the Junovian government. This outrage was naturally beyond the scope of the current hearings, which could barely scratch the surface of crimes on Demeter, committed by corporations and their military associates against native populations.

In this light, there seemed to be increasingly little use for Umberto and Camille to comb over the countless amount of documents that they had at their disposal, since nothing on this planet or the next seemed to be landing with the opposition who were increasingly blundering their way to an early victory. This was all the better for the politicians supervising the hearing who were reminded that they had other matters to deal with, and so were less and less empathetic towards anything that even thought of challenging the pro-corporate status quo. Likewise, this prevailing attitude that this trial that had barely just begun to really go into the nuance of the facts presented before the legal teams needed to just as suddenly come to an end was equally reflected in how it was being reported by the galactic press to the public. "Ictu'l Vāar Genocide Hearings Come to a Close in New Arcadia's Chamber of Senators" alerted a headline drawn from the left-leaning New Arcadia Times, while another from the right-leaning Statesman proclaimed "Pegasus Petroleum triumphs over Parnassian Government Bodies in War Crimes Hearings". It even got to such a point that the politicians overseeing the proceedings had to eventually banish the press from them wholesale.

Likewise, this desperate peace-keeping gesture was in part spurred by the politicians lack of interest in the palpable and sensitive proceedings in front of them, forming a vicious cycle of people blaming people in which neither the press nor the politicians for that matter won. Furthermore, it also did not help that senatorial elections were coming up in early July, in a period of time that was widely known as NOFK or 'No One Fucking Knows' July due to the fact that political upsets were bound to happen. In this light, Senator Genevieve Dawson had gone through a grueling cycle of losing then winning her seat representing the city of Corinth Sound, from the now loathed conservative senator Anthony Quentin Harper who had done almost nothing for his constituents. She could not help but think that one of Harper's spiritual successors, John Caleb Rhodes, was coming for her seat once again which preoccupied her wandering mind during the genocide hearings. The same could more or less be said for everyone that was presiding over this politically sensitive matter, who were now exhausted from having to campaign half the week and have this stifling judicial position for the other half of the week. This was all for except the notorious Senator Damian Westfield who represented Tharsis Mountain voters who tended conservative despite requiring millions of quasars in government assistance. This unopposed position allowed Damian to double down on his traditionalist beliefs, where the other presiding senators were too exhausted to do anything to stop him.

Electoral politics aside, the only way for Camille and Umberto to win this case was to make the most convincing argument possible in the time allotted that Pegasus Petroleum had attempted to eradicate the Ictu'l Vāar peoples with from the face of Demeter with the explicit assistance of Samson Private Corporations which was increasingly looking like a pipe-dream. For example, the attorneys from the Genocide and Attrocities Investigation Bureau increasingly doubled down on the entire existence of Settlements such as the West Landlow Internment Camp along with their associated re-education facilities in nearby

towns like Farnsworth Ridge, Romsey Bay, and East Landlow constituted an act of outright cultural erasure of the Ictu'l Vāar in a way that would be atrocious to any civilized person, with the natives of Demeter likewise violently resisting these efforts to make them more human. By contrast, Veronica and especially William who found himself increasingly on his own for the duration of the legal proceedings emphasized the violence of armed resistance without considering the underlying causes of any of this, which proved to be more palatable to the seasoned politicians seated in the austere room in front of them. For their part, Catherine and Simone were especially distraught at how they were inevitably losing this case on behalf of the entire planetary aid community. Just the same, their legal team's claims that Promethean Fire was a likewise atrocious abuse of military force backed by atrociously powerful corporations fared worse than their well-researched claims about the Settlement system, specifically because it was seen by many of the politicians as being too politically motivated. It was also repeated that the Western Corporate Concession where all of this violence had taken place was not a signatory of the New Cythera Accords which sought to curtail the use of excessive violence against a range of civilian populations by wartime governments. Veronica argued that the Western Corporate Concession was free to do with its peoples as it deemed fit, since no law or treaty or accord for that matter should ever get in the way of the galactic free market.

Therefore, this left the Genocide and Atrocities Investigation Bureau with a final feasible line of reasoning, but one that would be the hardest to succinctly prove within a court of law: a fact that Camille and Umberto were well aware of. This particular line of reasoning explained that private entities such as Midas Capital Investments should have no role in funding the killings of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples since they were supposed to be neutral in such sensitive matters as per the Kiesling-Reiter Act. It was thus that the court found themselves in the company of Phillip Leon Price, the chief executive of Midas Capital. For his part,

Philip wore the typical attire of someone in his elevated social position with a sleek suit blending a base grey fabric with subtle geometric print, which seemed to be poorly tailored to his sheer height. This piece that had been sourced from the luxury brand Fabiano Frescobaldi was naturally accompanied by a polished pair of leather shoes along with a dress shirt underneath this ensemble. His look for court was completed by a finely tuned watch by Windgeier Bruder, which had no practical purpose other than being a luxurious status symbol. It was true that Catherine's family had bought a Windgeier Bruder watch from when they were slightly more affordable in a previous generation, and Thomas even wore one in his own planetary rights hearings. Nevertheless, even Catherine's father knew better than to wear his watch as insignificant as it might have seemed with an outfit that was more suited for a techno-opera than for court. In a broader sense, the entirety of Phillip's look was one of a sordid womanizer and career gambler who drank heavily and swore liberally. Even Damien who was the first to lick the boots of any captain of industry rapidly averted his jade green eyes away from the consummate hedonist who seemed to have drunkenly wandered onto the witness stand after yet another night of cosmo-poker and Blue Velours. Phillip would have reeked of this alcoholic drink if it had not been for the mandatory pre-court bath and outrageous amount of cologne he was wearing.

"First and foremost, I want to tell the court or whatever the fuck you call yourselves these days that all of you have a lot of fucking nerve getting me to talk at this hearing. I should be putting the final touches on my memoir "The Life of a Whoreson" or spending some time with some fine ladies, like Kelli Fierce or Alexa Fawn, who are good at pretty much everything" Phillip announced

"Point of order, Mr. Price. We know that you are a famous individual, but, you still need to introduce yourself for the purpose of the public record which is made in cases like these. In fact, every previous person in this room has had to do so, and we are not imposing anything onto you." Genevieve admitted

"Well then... Where do I begin? I am Mister Phillip Leon Price, the proud proprietor of Midas Capital Investments, less proud husband to Madam Rachel Evelyn Vance, and father to my deadbeat son James Victor Price, along with a few other daughters that I have never cared about. Let me just tell you this, I am one of the most successful businessmen of them all, a gambler without equal, and have never made a deal that I would go onto regret." Philip explained

"That is very impressive, Mr. Price, and more than enough information for the court to identify you as who you are claiming to be. I know this would sound preposterous to you, but it is just a measure of security" Veronica stated

"This is all some major league fuckery right over there, and not the kind of fuckery that I can get behind such as counting cards. Who else on this wretched planet would want to be me? I know a few morons..." Philip continued

"Point of Order, Mr. Price. Please employ appropriate language for a court setting or else you shall be removed without question from the Special Hearings Rooms, and most likely from future trials as well" Christina warned

"You have a problem with my language? You either have me talking to you bastards at my worst or you won't have much of a testimony at all. And also, if you wanted to hear nice words might I suggest talking to my personal secretary or corporate attorney, who is one really stand-up guy" Philip admitted

"You may want to know that we've talked extensively to your personal attorney, Mister George Andrew Dawson, who claimed that there were corporate decisions taken by your company during the course of the Ictu'l Vāar genocide which took place in the Western Corporate Concession that can be corroborated by your personal testimony. We could contact Mister Dawson for comment if you don't want to disclose any of this to this court" Geneveive disclosed

"You know what, you government bastards? All of a sudden I really don't trust Lying George to tell the truth, but I absolutely will. Throw any questions you want at me, and I'll give you evreything you need to know" Philip offered

"Very well then... Could you please describe for the members of this court broadly if and when your own company helped fund the activities of Samson Private Contractors in the early months of 2255?" Patricia inquired

"So, the founder of Samson and I, a guy by the name of Malcolm Logan Campbell, are the best friends imaginable. Anything he would ask of me I would do for their fucking amazing soldiers, who serve the families of this planet. This included running banking operations between their back offices and Athanasios Vlassos-Kallelis of Pegasus Petroleum. Of course, you should have seen his wild parties with all the hookers and drugs and gambling..." Phillip began

"Very well then. You don't need to go into that detail for the purposes of this current hearing, focused on the genocide of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples in the first months of this year by forces financed by you." Veronica stated

"Well, fuck... None of you in this hearing are as fun as either Malcolm or Anasthasios, and it really fucking shows. Also, I want to put on the record that I fucking hate, loathe and despise all those alien bastards, and would have gladly funded for anything that would have gotten rid of them." Phillip admitted

"And why do you have that view, Mister Price?" Camille prodded

"My so-called view or perspective if you will on this fucking mess of a situation is that nothing good has ever come from those alien bastards, who spend their entire lives from the moment they are miserably born to when they die asking for assistance. Our companies are not there to provide that help to them specifically because they need to find it themselves" Philip claimed

"Thus, would the use of Promethean Fire against indigenous populations, the culling of their natural food sources, along with their subsequent forced migration to Settlements be justified for your company?" Camille asked

"I would have fucking gladly funded that and more if even it meant getting rid of those thugs and criminals. You cannot prosecute me by your laws as I am a proud citizen of the Western Corporate Concession." Phillip responded

"So, you have just admitted to the gathered court to having supported a heinous genocide against the native inhabitants of this planet, by providing the necessary funding for such activities to take place. This is all despite the fact that this kind of atrocity remains illegal under the galactic axioms that were put in place after previous wars by the New Cythera Accords" Umberto added

"With all due respect, neither our client nor our nation is subject to these attempts to snuff out the bright light of industry that were agreed upon after the wars that we fought against the Yaga'tāan Hegemony heavily featuring the use of androids and artificial intelligence. Likewise, I believe that you should all be ashamed of yourselves attacking Mr. Price like that" Veronica contended

"Point of Order. The Agrarian Republic of Parnassus never fought in any open hostilities against this power, specifically since we had yet to explore the stars in the earlier timespan that you are proposing" Genieveive admitted

"My response to your outrageous point of order, Madam Senator, is that the corporations were first to make planetfall on Demeter way before any idea of independent settlement and so had to fight back the local empire whatever the cost in order to assure a free market for all. We are the saviors of the people of Demeter and they should be thankful to us for that" Veronica elaborated

"Historical point retracted but the moral point still stands. No one should be eternally grateful to their mighty conquerors for liberating them from what they determine to constitute a greater galactic evil." Patricia contended

"Well, it should be that way... The Ictu'l Vāar and the rest of the aliens of this planet should show deference towards corporations, especially after the carnage of the so-called War for Proxima Centauri" Veronica articulated

"But, what if these liberators commit atrocities?" Umberto posited

"Then all the better. It is up to the victims to mourn their wounded and their dead alongside the perpetrators of a conflict, Mister Capelleti. There is simply no other equitable way forward in this case" Veronica argued

At this, the long simmering tensions in the courtroom erupted into a back and forth of different increasingly outlandish claims about the opposing sides of this highly nuanced legal case. For his part, Phillip was enjoying every second of these arguments as he thought that no one would notice the wrongdoings of the corporations if they were fighting amongst themselves. Of course, this business leader was at least superficial friends with similar executives within the largest companies the colonies had seen, and so Phillip was glad to defend their wealth acquisition strategies as the leader of a mid-sized corporate entity. Therefore, he smiled a little during the dispute between the two legal teams as he recognized that the hammer of justice was not coming for him at this very moment. For his part, Phillip even tried to leave the Special Hearings Room but his cowardice was stopped by Genevieve and Patricia whose eyes shot daggers at him. Just the same, Damian seemed to be remarkably relaxed around all of this anger and loathing and even got the malicious idea of forever postponing these hearings that could threaten his reelection chances in the Tharsis Mountains. Indeed, this senator could always use the shadow of an election to shut down any likewise meaningful discussion which is exactly what happened in the evening.

And so, the hearings seemed to be abruptly over almost as soon as they had begun, even if the particulars still needed to be voted upon by the broader members of the assembled political parties the following morning. On the one hand, Camille and Umberto strongly felt like this machiavellian decision taken against them was nothing short of a historical injustice for the Ictu'l Vāar, in a sentiment that reflected in Catherine's own intense emotions. For her part, this once hopeful student was now in tears at the inherent cruelty of politics even within a supposedly neutral nation like the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus. Just the same, she had continuously followed and even at a few selected moments participated in the legal proceedings of the genocide hearings, as she often took a seat in the witness chamber above the Special Hearings Room.

On the other hand, Veronica and William were absolutely jubilant at their apparent victory and celebrated this fact with their assorted corporate clients and immediate witnesses. As they saw it, this was another triumph for the free market over the will of the state to restrain and control it, for which they were absolutely thankful to Senetaor Westfield that he brought these volatile hearings to a close. Likewise, Damian had heard appealing rumors from one of his close friends about the unassuming creature widely known as the scarlet speckled lizard which supposedly had beneficial psychotropic effects. This would be the perfect crowning gesture to a night filled with all manner of urban debauchery, despite the warnings of his drug-experienced son that this politician had no idea as usual what he was talking about. And so, Damian let the lizard bite him within the confort of his apartment only to wake up the next morning muttering some prophecies about the endless collective suffering of the universe. For once, it seemed that even Senator Westfield accidentally grew a conscience about the very violence he was trying to plaster over, even if many of his assistants did not know if this experience would make him more psychotic or empathetic.

In practice, the next morning Delilah and his son called to the Harmony Waterfront Pyschological Care Center which was known for the thoroughness of its available care to pick up their mentally fragile loved one. The irony in all of this was that this senator had told his constituents to avoid the indoctrination apparent in any secular medical practice instead prefering personal solutions to complex health problems, all the while benefiting himself extensively from the former option. Whatever the case, Damian appeared like a profoundly psychotic individual unable to distinguish between the figments of his imagination and the concrete realities in front of him. This is not even to mention the fiery look in his eyes, the frothing of his mouth and his pale complexion, which were all signs that something had gone terribly and irremidably wrong in the life of one of the most loathed and prominent senators in the metropolis of New Arcadia.

"Some days we moved 1000 aliens into the East Landlow Internment Camp, other days we moved close to 10 000, it really depended. At the time, it felt exactly like herding cattle across the vast plains of planet Demeter, however looking back it was an act of consummate evil against a sapient population"

Gerhart Boudwjin Schongauer, Captain of Samson Private Contractors at the New Arcadia Trials, January 10th, 2257.

CHAPTER TWENTY

**NEW ARCADIA, PLANET DEMETER
FRIDAY, JUNE 22ND, 2255.**

The news that Jason had been abducted by a team of Samson soldiers in order to eventually join their ranks was especially devastating for the Hartinger household, who mourned the loss of their adoptive son. The motivation behind this was to punish Catherine's involvement in the genocide hearings, although she had no idea who had pulled the strings behind this sudden attack. Instead, Catherine could only imagine with a certain horror the sounds and sights of this act of revenge, along with the look of consummate terror on the members of the Hope Falls Rehabilitation Camp. It seemed apparent that they had some training in de-escalating tense situations where an untrained child had gotten hold of a weapon with intention to use it against themselves or others. What was a less expected scenario was the forcible seizure of a child by a mercenary squad, who would likely be pointing rifles and shouting at them. Regardless, Catherine could rest easy in the knowledge that Jason would not be a soldier actively training for the anvil of war until he turned 16, and would likely not be deployed to any zone of conflict before he was 18. And yet, this all felt as if the Hartinger household had lost a limb with the kidnapping of Jason, and Elizabeth found it right to host a kind of wake for this young child after this was all said and done. For his part, Jason may have been problematic for Elizabeth and Thomas however this had not stopped him from being endearing in his emotions from time to time. This was especially the case late at night or early in the morning when Jason did not have the energy to be machiavellian or manipulative for that matter.

More specifically, the caring people who showed up to his spiritual wake were somewhat expected as they included Catherine's uncle and aunt, who had both given up their creative endeavors to be there. There were equally some of

the young staff from the Hope Falls Rehabilitation Camp who had given Jason over to the soldiers under duress who were seen as victims of a different kind by this problematic child's adoptive family. It warrants repeating that there was no enmity between them, since the respectful members of the Hartinger household understood the nuances of human loss which could be felt by multiple people for different reasons. Just the same, a handful of Jason's school teachers were in attendance at this celebration of a life taken from them by malicious forces, and urged Thomas in particular to seek out aggressive legal action against the mercenaries of Samson Private Contractors. For his part, Catherine's exhausted father acquiesced to their idea, and would make sure that his son was rightfully returned to his loving family instead of being turned into a soldier. In particular, it was a certain Ryan Emerson who was a fifth grade teacher who recounted the horrors of having some of his students forcibly abducted in the corporate war machine, and how he would always remember their empty seats. This was not even to mention the fact that Ryan had personally looked into the legality of all this abduction to find that it was flagrantly illegal behavior. However, this teacher was dissuaded from taking any further action by the cruel superintendent of his school, and even threatened to fire him if he talked about this to anyone.

The truth in this matter was that school officials were either indifferent to the lives of their students or simply did not know what to do when faced with individuals who especially had no moral restrictions about employing violence to achieve their goals. Whatever the case, the sentiment of grief seemed to be heavy above the living room of the Hartinger home and lingered much like some unwanted spirit long after the guests left this place to continue onwards with their careers or other aspects of their varied lives in New Arcadia. Some time after the guests left, Elizabeth more than anything wanted to go to the Carole J. Goodman Foundation for Human Culture in order to visually meditate in front of the pictures of the distant earth and all the humanity they had lost. For her part,

Catherine felt the need to accompany her mother on this journey not unlike what the Rhāl Side'l had done at Chōs Vro'l , which would involve both women going into the urban core of their sprawling metropolis on the Orange Line of transit. Still, Catherine and Elizabeth cast down the dark colors of death in their own ways to instead embrace those of a life still worth living before they could head to this museum which had always found a way to comfort them whenever they found themselves in dire straits. Soon after, Elizabeth and Catherine were rapidly moving across the urban landscape towards the stop labeled Calliope University, as it was true that the Carole J. Goodman Foundation was located right across a park from this prestigious center for learning. More specifically, Catherine knew of a handful of art history majors with highly coveted summer internships in this prestigious institution which preserved something of Earth in the stars. Indeed, this much was true about their mission statement which the young Catherine had memorized by heart, much to the apparent delight of their staff.

When they arrived, Elizabeth and Catherine were greeted by someone that she distantly knew from her dormitory by the name of Gabriel Malashowski, who was one of the hardest working people in the entire building. Likewise, Gabriel immediately recognized the signs of grief on Catherine's face and so tried his best to validate the loss of her younger adoptive brother. In this light, Catherine was thankful to him for taking the time to recognize her fraught emotions, which the student hoped would be further be appeased by the monumental pictures of this mostly empty cultural institution on a Friday morning. There were of course the two famous images of a church service in the rural Canadian Federation and native Zulu burial in the South African Commonwealth, but this was neither the beginning nor the end of what this monument to humanity had to offer. More specifically, there was happiness and sadness, jubilation and melancholy in the human scenes captured before their eyes, to such an extent that they must have stayed for hours in this place of memory of a planet forgotten to time.

However, it would be a disservice to the fine people working at the Carole J. Goodman Foundation to describe their museum as merely one recounting the visual record of humanity as they also had audio and film archives dating as far back as to 1950 and even 1900 in some cases. These more ephemeral kinds of media were showcased within the new and controversial Rajendra Nabyar Wing of this institution, specifically since this electronic artist had come into contact with many authentic recordings of human music of all genres. These included hundreds of examples of the local agrarian folk music that interested human anthropologists, which were given to the Carole J. Goodman Foundation when a distraught Rajendra learned about the coming Second Corporate War. Therefore, it was not just Indian music contained within this section of the museum but also that of the Polish Union and other smaller nations too which had in the past tried to be assimilated by colossal surrounding powers. In practice, Catherine could not help but reflect upon the Ictu'l Vāar and their increasingly desperate cultural situation specifically since this had happened to them as well.

Throughout this experience, Elizabeth and Catherine were joined by some silent members of Paladin Security Services, who Elizabeth swore must have been twins as these privately-hired officers all looked more or less the same. They were equipped with their own variant of the Mark-5 Hercules Exoskeleton, which had been marketed as being better for combat. Also, these individuals carried small arms with them which could hopefully deal with minor threats and knew to call for backup from their more heavily armed and armored colleagues who circled the Carole J. Goodman Foundation on this overcast day. Indeed, it was these guards who Elizabeth could not thank enough for their service who got wise to the fact that there was an incoming threat in the form of a group of Samson Private Contract troops led by a certain captain who they could not yet distinguish from his surrounding soldiers. This soldier was clearly sent here as a sign of corporate strength yet it remained unclear who he was working for.

At this, Elizabeth's security detail sprang into action as they alerted the senator of the risk and swiftly found an alternate route to get to safety this time in the shadow of this museum to human culture. Then, this handful of officers ensured that both the senator and her daughter had made it out of this building, which were the primary people they were being paid to protect. Soon after, they asked Elizabeth how they should proceed, and this stateswoman, never afraid of a good fight, wanted to confront this kind of violence head on. Elizabeth wanted to know which opposing senator or hostile executive in their right mind was behind this illegal deployment of mercenary soldiers onto the soil of a neutral power in the heart of its largest urban area, and what they had against her. In this light, there were a few names that raced through her mind and the problem was that many of the more conservative voices in the Chamber of Senators who would have thought of this all equally wanted her removed from power. This is also what had been the perennial problem behind Senator Nicole Song-Yeuhn's innovative leadership since she had never procured a security detail for herself, despite Elizabeth's pleading that her senatorial ally do exactly that. Now, Nicole was dead while her family had been terrorized into silence after her assassination at the very height of the genocide hearings, which Elizabeth wanted to use as a fitting test of loyalty for this rising star of the Frontier Socialist Party.

For an instant, the worrying thought that Catherine's mother could end up just like her follower crossed her mind, however it never settled into the deeper recesses of her conscience due to the fact that Elizabeth in particular had faced this fear before on the campaign trail. By contrast, these two women of New Arcadia learned to swallow their pride and face the essence of their fear which was right now embodied by the mercenary soldiers standing at the ready on the other side of the Carole J. Goodman Foundation, who had very little reservations about using violence to achieve their ends, if their infamous actions taken along the course of the recent Oraan Rei'ff Genocide were any indication. With this in

mind, Elizabeth, Catherine and their own security detail moved forward to the front courtyard of the Carole J. Goodman Foundation which was punctuated by a range of local trees, some scattered slabs which served as benches and even a water feature beginning right in front of this prestigious museum in one of the largest cities within the Proxima Centauri solar system. For purposes of noting, there were also some DX-50 Maverick flyers from a range of news sources who were broadcasting this confrontation to every bar and home and store within the city that Catherine could possibly imagine. These airborne vehicles represented something of the free press that had been suppressed during the happenings of the Ictu'l Vāar genocide, however they had returned in full force today since no one could tell them to keep quiet and look away this afternoon. Indeed, they had been following the mercenary soldiers ever since they had first appeared around North Galaxy Avenue, thanks to the tip of a covert embedded reporter.

By contrast, the local law enforcement was not much use in stopping this rising menace walking down their city streets particularly because some of them had sympathies with these mercenary forces. Meanwhile, the hostile forces in front of them were mostly composed of an imposing LX-25 Harbinger Spider-Tank with a long barrel that was pointed slightly above the heads of Catherine and Elizabeth, along with a handful of LX-45 Bastion mechsuits with their own forms of imposing heavy weaponry. It was true that these LX-45 mechsuits were a rather common sight on the battlefield, especially within urban environments, and Catherine knew that they had been adapted from similar models extensively used for construction and recovery. Regardless, all of this heavy machinery was surrounded by a detachment of soldiers armed with what looked like ML-03 Cerberus Carbines and MR-40 Hades Assault Rifles. Catherine was not the first to notice that there was nothing too distinctive in the individual loadouts of the members of the Samson Private Contractors, while their captain had clearly more personality in his manner of dressing. In this light, Catherine immediately

recognized Captain Gerhard Boudwijn Schongauer as the acting commander of this force, as Catherine was not one to forget his scragly beard ever since his attack on the North Falls Refugee Camp. Of course, she let her mother know about this when she approached this private military captain, who looked as utterly deranged as the day Catherine first met the imposing Gerhard.

"Captain Gerhard Schongauer, I presume". Well, I believe that you should be in a cell somewhere off-world for having done the dirty work of corporations from Pegasus Petroleum to Terra Nova Mining. However, here you are standing here as if none of those crimes had ever happened. And don't you think for one moment that I am meekly going to give up to you" Elizabeth stated

"Senator Elizabeth Hartinger, I presume. You and your kind have been the greatest rival to the continued safety of corporate operations on this wretched planet which would have been all the more productive if your socialist backed partisans had not attacked corporate extraction sites" Gerhard accused

"So, what are you going to do now, Captain? Crush me with that walking war machine whose cannon is pointed menacingly at me? But, then again, you forgot that we are in a city with public news outlets" Elizabeth explained

"And what are you insinuating, Madam Senator" Gerhard demanded

"Well, look around you Captian.... There are flyers from New Arcadia First News Team as well as plenty of the other elements of the galactic free press that you seem to be so opposed to. Surely, you won't kill an older woman in front of the eyes of spectators in this city and elsewhere" Elizabeth illustrated

"I am glad to let you know that it is not my position to worry about those people watching me on their holo-screens. There are other people in some dusty back office who can handle all of that for me. Meanwhile, if you have'nt noticed, I am the hammer of vengeance of Samson Private Contractors, and therefore my only position is to smash through their foes. I have been their foremost soldier for the last decade, and I want to keep it that way. " Gerhard proclaimed

"That whole speech which you give to all of your victims likely sounded much more threatening in your mind. However, here's the thing that you forgot, Captain. You now find yourself in one of the only truly independent republics of the Proxima Centaurii System thus we are not afraid of any of your powerful corporate clients. We will transform your calls to war into cries for peace, and one day too all your swords will turn to plowshares" Elizabeth retorted

"I am also familiar with that line, and I would like to see you try to do that, Madam Senator. However, at the present moment, I am the one with the tank on my side, so therefore I should lead the negotiations" Gerhard disclosed

"Yet, I hate to tell you that this is not how anything works in our republic, Captain... Please pay attention just this once before I lose interest in any of what you are proposing. Are you ready to take notes?" Elizabeth demanded

"And what if I don't want to take part in this failed experiment. And just in case you have forgotten I have a fucking spider-tank" Gerhard threatened

"And I wield a weapon more powerful than any that you have currently at your disposal: the will of the people. And it is not just in this city or nation but at the very least across the planet as well. And we will even return to your heinous genocide once again whenever the time is right..." Elizabeth advocated

"Well, now I'm really afraid of you! The way I see it, these are a deluge of empty threats coming from a woman who is just about to get shot in front of so many spectators. Furthermore, this is not my first time killing a politician and it certainly won't be the last, so I have to ask you if what you are proposing to me really worth your time, in front of your daughter" Gerhard remarked

"The way that I answer that is to once again remind you that you are now invading a republic where such bellicose language should be rightfully banished from the sphere of public discourse. Therefore, Captain, I would like you to give a much more peaceful activity and more serene discourse to enjoy the freedoms of our republic. Do I make myself absolutely clear?" Elizabeth demanded

"And, what exactly is it that you are insinuating?" Gerhard inquired

"I believe that you can always start by going to the Carole J. Goodman Foundation to discover the very soul of humanity even in the cosmos, whenever you get a chance to wear something more formal. That way, you can meditate in front of some powerful images of war and peace" Elizabeth clarified

"You know what? You make a convincing case for an old woman, which is one of the only things that I like about you. I will do that sooner or later as it seems pointless to keep on arguing about specifics" Gerhard revealed

"That being said, I equally need to know which senator or executive sent you and your assorted soldiers marching towards me. Damian Westfield would likely do this, and it is not the first time that this ultraconservative senator used mercenaries exactly for intimidation purposes " Elizabeth disclosed

"I am afraid that I cannot disclose this information, Madame Senator, as it should be private between an employer and I. That is how it has always worked, and that's how it will work going into the future" Gerhard explained

"Well, I can afford to keep it that way and to do my own research about who sent you and why, if you drop this whole military act for a single day in order to experience what a republic can provide you" Elizabeth admitted

"Alright then... Ladies and gentlemen, I think that we have a deal. I will go ahead and turn around this whole bellicose operation trampling over your city streets specifically since you have made some rather good points about what I should be doing instead. However, I will also be the first to remind you that you got a little lucky with me, and that my other fellow captains would likely not be as kind to you or to your compelling rhetoric" Gerhard demonstrated

"Yes... You go ahead and stop this inevitable march towards war in front of all the assembled members of the galactic press. This moment of kindness does not however absolve you or any of your fellow mercenaries of any criminal wrongdoings committed during the heinous genocide" Elizabeth clarified

"I perfectly understand, Madame Senator. I need to find other means to seek some peace after all that I have willingly done to the people of this planet, who I treated like the most lowly form of human cattle imaginable. However, this is testimony for a future trial and right now the best thing that I can do with the liberty that I have left is to do what you proposed" Gerhard reflected

At this, Gerhard turned around on a dime and vigorously gestured to his assembled soldiers and heavy war machinery to return to where they had come from which was discovered to be an abandoned Renslear Robotics warehouse located in an alleyway just off of North Galaxy Avenue. It was from here that the troops of Samson Private Contractors had free reign to intimidate and otherwise harass the generally left-leaning people from the pacifist organization Citizens Against Warfare, in an act of street violence that would eventually be prosecuted at the more successful second New Arcadia trials. For their part, the news flyers still followed these hardened men of war like the shadow of their collective guilt, which they could do nothing about for fear of immediate retribution. The urban police might have been utterly useless at their jobs, but Catherine noticed that these cowards were hardly the be all and end all of Parnassian law. There were for example more powerful organizations such as the Federal Civilian Protection Agency and the Terrorism Investigation Agency that were far more responsive in cases where local law enforcement had proven to be unresponsive.

Otherwise, Elizabeth's daughter cathartically embraced her mother not only for saving both of their lives from the looming specter of death but also for stopping the advance of terrible war on their city streets. For the first time in a long time, Catherine wept burning tears of joy for the preservation of a certain semblance of urban serenity within this truly cosmopolitan city and wished for a tender moment that the entire universe could be as peaceful as this. Indeed, it was through the actions of statesmen and politicians of all kinds as much as any belicose general or admiral that any sense of liberty was protected, in a way

that aligned with the most essential human decency. Elizabeth too appeared to be overjoyed that she had staved back her seemingly imminent death, even if she frequently joked with a certain dark humor about just how many times some faction had tried to assassinate her. Even Elizabeth's security detail was relieved that they did not have to fight today, and celebrated in their own way.

Eventually, the senator and her daughter headed over to a Commet Diner not unlike the one they had visited after the young Catherine had gotten lost in the Tharsis Grottos Planetary Park. More specifically, this brilliant daughter now ordered the same kind of burger she had always loved while her mother enjoyed a salad, and the staff of this restaurant could not believe their story. After that, Elizabeth felt the need to go to Nicole's apartment on Aurora Avenue in the east of the city, in order to formally apologize to this younger senator or at least her assembled family, as this politician's entire career was cut short by her murder. It was later revealed that the ever infamous Senator Damian Westfield was behind this act of political violence in an attempted coup whose strategy appeared to be too complicated for Catherine to reason with. Furthermore, Gerhard had been this ambitious statesmen's favorite hireling, and thus it was only natural that he was arrested for this politically motivated assassination on the way out of the Carole J. Goodman Foundation. Whatever the case, all seemed to be well in the cosmos for once, however Catherine would be quick to learn that that was not necessarily true with regards to the North Falls Refugee Camp, which had been suffering through an outright escalation of violence in recent weeks.

EPILOGUE

**OLYMPIAN COAST, PLANET DEMETER
MONDAY, JULY 4TH, 2255.**

The situation at the North Falls Refugee Camp had severely deteriorated by the time that Catherine returned there, specifically since corporate forces had wanted to send a message to the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus by obliterating this place from orbit. Likewise, any attempts to get any form of interstellar aid through the tightening blockade were repulsed by the corporate navy sponsored by Pegasus Petroleum, to such a cruel extent that the surrounding forests were littered with the various wrecks of space-haulers and super-freighters. Catherine reflected on just how tragic it was for these peaceful vehicles, some of which had come in from the distant worlds of Hercules and Atlas, to have been shot down from orbit when they were so close to doing what needed to be done in this worrying political crisis, which would have been a sign of imminent war in a better century. However, local forces could do little to stop corporate vengeance from raining down upon the North Falls Refugee Camp, and more importantly the nearby city of Damocles Falls with a population of 3.96 million people. With this in mind, Catherine gazed down from a dropship upon what remained of a colossal space-hauler called *FWRC Resolute* that had been once operated by the Fronteir Worlds Relief Corps which acted as a smaller planetary aid organization than anything available on Demeter. And yet, many of the other vessels that had tried to assist the Ictu'l Vāar peoples were from fellow off-world corporations, which did not approve of the actions taken by Pegasus Petroleum.

Just the same, there was a hopeful message of 'Life, Land, Liberty' that had been scrawled in massive red letters on the now warped and twisted hull of the *FWRC Resolute*, and it remained unclear to Catherine if this had happened before or after this behemoth vessel had so violently collided with the surface of

planet Demeter. Regardless, it was a harrowing sight to say the least, since it embodied an escalation in corporate violence against the beleaguered citizens of Demeter, who had not wanted any of this to begin with. Eventually, Catherine turned her gaze towards the imposing hovering command vessel of the *CMSV Providence* itself, only one of the countless ships with ellegaic names involved in the blockade of the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus. Once again, this student could not see the point in this excessive deployment of the corporate-backed military against a power essentially wanting to help the locals of their planet, as opposed to submitting them to infernal deprivation and misery. In particular, it was broadly rumored that it was the *CMSV Providence* that would deliver the killing blow to the North Falls Refugee Camp through a weapon far worse than even the most destructive Promethean Fire. This particular system's name was Jupiter's Thunder, and it was extensively developed off-world due to restrictions on its components which were imported from Juno. When deployed, Jupiter's thunder could annihilate a target on a planet's surface, just short of breaking the mantle of Demeter which was deemed to be too tactically dangerous.

Regardless, Catherine's dropship soon descended through the air with an audible hum of its ion thruster engines, in a place where the dense trees of the forest gave way to a brief coastal verdant ridge before transitioning once again to a black sand beach. Meanwhile, frothy waves originating from the nearby Olympian Waterway crashed on this barren volcanic expanse, while Catherine could hear the gentle sound of the rain pattering against the sturdy fuselage of this aircraft and could feel the whistling maritime wind on her face. Eventually, the dropship hovered above the section of this dark expanse that was allocated for the use of the Demeter Relief Corps who staged a week-long evacuation of the North Falls Refugee Camp, which had been threatened with destruction. There were equally a half a dozen BX-46 Rubicon barges waiting at the edge of the sea with metallic ramps deployed for their precious human occupants. Next,

Catherine jumped the short distance from the dropship to the black volcanic sands that covered this narrow region of the planet's surface, and thanked the group of soldiers that she had been riding with for their offer of transport. In this light, it was the cutthroat Thomas who had found one of the few dropships that were heading into the corporate exclusion zone, specifically since most aircrafts would not come here or would have been involved in the airlift of supplies into the now struggling city of Damocles Falls. Just the same, there seemed to be a certain respect between the members of the Demeter Planetary Defence Force crowded into this dropship and Catherine, who they imagined as serving the just cause of peace instead of the bleak violence of war. "You're doing a good thing, recruit, serving the Corps like that... I would do it but my military family would yell at me the second that they heard that I left the force" one sergeant by the name of Matthew Peterson explained to her. Meanwhile, a corporal by the name of John Logan Marshall described how "They always tell us in the force that we are bringing peace to the galaxy, and however I have severe doubts about that when I take a look at what you are doing within the Demeter Relief Corps".

Whatever the case, Catherine now dashed down the beach in all of her equipment from her fatigues which she owned to her helmet to her exo-suit with the latter two items being leased from the force. Currently, she was desperately looking for Zoryanna who she was certain was at this evacuation site, however asking any of the volunteers originating from all around their country proved to be worse than useless. Likewise, Catherine was about to give into doubt when the recruit nearly stumbled over a crouching Zoryanna who was helping an alien girl who had fallen on a round rock while her pleading family awaited her on a barge departing soon for lands unknown to them. "Not now, recruit... I'm helping this child back on their feet so that they can be reunited with their kin" the medic coldly stated. It was only when Zoryanna turned around that her demeanor went from austere to warmly loving and she could not help but embrace her.

"Catherine! Is that really you? I am so glad that you've returned from the sphere of politics to now help all of those that despartely need our assistancel promise that I will never raise my voice at you like that" Zoryanna proclaimed. At this, the two recruits lovingly held eachother while looking into each other's eyes with a mixture of momentary surprise along with profound admiration. For now at least, they were the closest of friends both serving the native peoples of this planet together but there was no doubt in Zoryanna's mind that she would have warmly kissed her if she could. The significant problem with this rather sapphic notion remained that both of them were wearing standard issue Epsilon General Company air masks, which had the nasty habit of postponing kisses and other immediate signs of bodily affection. For her part, Catherine deeply respected the slightly older medic, however the age difference between them was not so vast that there was no feasible hope of a romance naturally blooming. Indeed, it was Zoryanna who despite herself had always seemed so unshakably confident in moments of civil strife, especially in front of the children of the camp. And thus, it was only natural that this child of the colonial military would eventually serve in peacekeeping forces and fall in love with the ever honest Catherine.

In this light, the tree of their passion would only bear fruit when they did not actively have refugees or other destitute people to serve, even though they eventually learned to truely love one another and the planet as a whole through acts of service. One of those moments for this more transcendental form of love was now, where there was still much cargo and many people to move from a high ridge to the massive yet vulnerable barges at the water's edge. With this in mind, Catherine and Zoryanna pushed themselves through the driving rain like never before carrying all manner of crates and other kinds of supplies to those vessels that had been determined by the logistics officers to be suitable for the transportation of cargo towards another refugee camp. Catherine did not have the slightest idea where this would be however she kept her hopes high.

Eventually, the hardened aid workers and their volunteers would board the BX-46 Rubicon barges, and even then their tasks were only just beginning since there remained many families that had wounds that needed tending to. Just the same, the broader anxiety of not knowing where they were headed and a deep melancholy for their lost homeland was equally prevalent within the refugees on these boats whose designs seemed indeleibly stuck in the Twenty First Century as opposed to the Twenty Third Century. More specifically, a recurring point of tension was whether these refugees would be attacked from above by passing gunships from the command vessels that loomed on the horizon. Catherine had no good response to calm this terror of combat which seemed to rise to a fever pitch on these cramped watercraft. Nevertheless, one of the distraught mothers of this group of rag-and-bone survivors began to faintly sing a traditional Ictu'l Vāar children's song about the coming of a better age, in a way that soon spread throughout the transport vessel. The aid workers were moved by this display of resilience by a still alien people who had yet to doom themselves to the grave of civilizations, and were instead resisting oblivion for a stirring moment. And yet, they did not join into the alien's anthem partially out of deference to those who had suffered more than they had, but also because their main prerogative today was to make sure that none of them slipped away from the light of life.

And then, when all in the world seemed like it was going even better than they could have possibly expected, the aid workers beheld the great and terrible sight of the *CMSV Providence* deploying its superweapon to annihilate the North Falls Refugee Camp as they had promised to do so many times before. There was a fluorescent column of destructive light growling like thunder and flashing before their teary eyes like lightning, which razed everything that was beneath the corporate command vessel, reducing it to shards of glass. This was not by any means a blinding light, but Catherine thought that this was the only positive aspect of a situation which had actively turned for the worst. Furthermore, the

use of such an unfeeling, uncaring weapon within the orbit of planet Demeter constituted nothing short of a war crime that would be prosecuted in the highest courts of the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus, who eventually concluded that the corporate militaries acted in clear violation of the New Cythera Accords. And yet, none of this future justice could remedy the fact that Catherine thought that they must have lost someone in the fray, and so she counted all the souls again and again on this rugged watercraft which was rocking in the waves. Eventually, the childrens song intended above all to alieve the fears of the Ictu'l Vāar peoples from earlier in the evacuation regained its strength, and was this time started by the girl who had tripped on the beach, whose name was Shōn'e La'ath. It was her voice, tender and fragile as it may first have seemed, that reunited her disparate people around a common goal for there to be a better world tomorrow. And this gesture was neither the beginning nor the ending of any improvised music on the vessels, and the transit to New Arcadia was interspersed with song, which ensured that all the various people evacuated stayed in high spirits.

After that, the watercraft organized themselves into a slender convoy that was soon protected by the air power of the Demeter Planetary Defence Force in the form of a fleet of gunships. It became apparent that the military did not want to risk a battle against the most powerful corporations on Demeter, especially when the companies possessed a larger number of gunships to counter their own attempts at gaining air superiority. This was how Zoryanna explained it to Catherine when she asked this daughter of military parents why the Demeter Planetary Defence Force had not attempted to do this any earlier on this tragic day. Thankfully, it soon became apparent that all the refugees had made it to the watercraft, and that all that was left at the North Falls Refugee Camp remained the derelict buildings which had been stripped for parts. This meant that the damages of the *CMSV Providence* were in the realm of the manageable even if they were not negligible in the slightest for the Demeter Relief Corps.

Nevertheless, there was a miracle when the watercraft arrived at the Port Poseidon district of New Arcadia, where the alien refugees were supposed to be transferred to a range of habitation camps on the outskirts of this capital. There were civilians, not just a few of them, but in their hundreds to such an extent that the exhausted Demeter Relief Corps could not identify any group or faction they could have been all associated with. To be sure, a minority of these individuals were here because of the advertising campaign of Citizens Against Warfare, and so wanted more than anything to adopt alien children and sponsor their parents in their attempts to make a new life for themselves within this diverse city. And this urban mass carried with them all manner of blankets and warm drinks so that these foreigners displaced by war would immediately feel at home. At this point, the corps decided to mediate a passing over of the shaken but not broken survivors of one of the worst war crimes imaginable onto the citizens of New Arcadia, forever grateful for these new members of their community. And all of this happened despite the fact that there was a storm brewing on the horizon, with all the associated change in environmental conditions. Therefore, Catherine thought that this happening whose profound kindness she could not yet explain was one of the best possible outcomes of this complex situation. Of course, this amazing event later known as 'The Miracle at Port Poseidon' never happened for the New Conservative Party who quickly downplayed just how empathetic the populace of New Arcadia had been in their actions. Instead, they insisted that there were still roving immigrant gangs pillaging and murdering defenseless civilians as they pleased, even if no one in their right mind believed them.

Consequently, Catherine's story turned to a new chapter since she would eventually return to Calliope University with a renewed lease on life along with a perspective on the practical dimensions to her chosen field. It seemed like, none of what she had previously learned in her courses to interstellar studies had quite prepared her for the profoundly caring response of New Arcadia's citizens

to one of the crises of their century, through a gesture of resounding empathy that would be studied well into Catherine's adult years. Somewhere implicit in this was an understanding that their Agrarian Republic of Parnassus was a state worth standing up for by all of its people in a great and terrible galaxy where fair and balanced governance was hardly the norm. More specifically, it was widely reported that both Eastern and Western Corporate Concessions which bordered the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus had little more than figurehead governments that never failed or questioned the largest businesses on the planet. Likewise, Catherine knew that off-world governments were more of a matter of colony states, some prosperous and yet most bellicose making a living on the frontier. Thus, it was likewise hard for this student of the cosmos to generalize about places on Juno let alone on Perseus or Andromeda, which eluded her. One thing that was more certain in Catherine's heart was the lasting presence of Zoryanna within it who would become her lover. And yes, this medic loved Catherine more than the moon and stars themselves, finally kissing her tenderly as soon as the student returned to her home later that night. Nevertheless, these young lovers decided it was best if they stayed friends after an iridescent whirlwind of a year where both the young Catherine and Zoryanna grew and thrived together.

By contrast, Catherine's younger brother Jason found little love in his life of menial drudgery and he lashed out often at his superiors within the various adolescent training programs in Samson Private Contractors. On one occasion Catherine had even tried to save him from this psychological prison of his own making, where he was simply too violent for any form of organized warfare. And yet, even Catherine was not able to convince her younger adoptive brother that his impressionable mind was sold on a lie by master manipulators far better at withholding information to their recruits than Jason would ever be. This was not something that Jason was ready to hear at this moment, and so responded in the only way he knew how to: minorly harming his sister in a fight. Eventually,

Jason would subsequently be expelled from the corporate forces that had been training him to become a future soldier at the start of his adolescence, only to end up wandering the streets of New Arcadia after he decided that he would be better off as an urban drifter than as a loving son of the Hartinger household. This self-imposed exile from anything resembling a normal teenage life all came to a head after weeks when the ragged Jason was rescued from this decision by his adoptive uncle Peter, and eventually his sanity stabilized and he became an artistic assistant and soon artist in his own right. This was probably best for him as Jason could now not imagine his life without art, despite his multiple stays in psychological facilities whenever Peter's nephew would have a crisis. Otherwise, Elizabeth and Thomas lived well into old age together, with Catherine's mother writing a memoir despite her opinion that a memoir was a pointless genre of proselytizing political propaganda. In practice, this holo-book punctuated by her signature gallows humor was entitled 'Demeter's Most Beloved' which became something of a bestseller across the Proxima Centauri Solar System.

Meanwhile, Thomas would go on to become a force of change for the better in the cosmos, by helping to mentor many of the Genocide and Atrocities Investigations Bureau attorneys until his passing in the fall of 2275. This would include one of his last acts as a member of his legal firm by starting the process of diffusing the major tensions between the warring parties of what would later become the Third Corporate War which would begin in the spring of 2260. For their part, the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus did well to maintain a policy of armed neutrality throughout this conflict, thereby sparing their citizens from some of the horrors of warfare in the Twenty Third Century. In this light, the Demeter Relief Corps continued their planetary aid work under their usual leadership and would merge with other branches of the Galactic Council for Planetary Aid. For example, these organizations brought much-needed food and medicine to the suffering citizens of the corporate holdings in the winter of 2260-2261. A parallel

civilian experience of the Second Corporate War and one that was often thought of in the bounds of the Agrarian Republic of Parnassus appeared to be that of their allied neutral nation of the Scientific Republic of Laconia, whose idealistic government based out of New Sagan City in the south had been severely misled by the conglomerates running the Western Corporate Concession. This foreign hostile nation wanted to use the research facilities within the Scientific Republic to help develop new weapons with which to commit atrocities against native peoples. The covert workers from Liberty Laboratories and other companies started to slowly but surely sabotage crucial medical plants especially within the western areas of Laconia to concoct the reviled chemistry of war, bringing about untold deaths due to otherwise preventable diseases. That being said, it would take years for any of the malefactors to be given justice, due to the fact that the Western Corporate Concession was only tediously held accountable.

The most surprising development came from the ancient temple of Chōs Vro'l where some monk or another found a centuries-old Yaga'tāan warp- chaser, itself a kind of nimble spaceship fit for travel across galaxies. Just the same, the Rhāl Side'l were summoned to operate it, and they were able to do so, which was a miracle to evryone's astonishment. And so, there was a pilgrimage that was organized by the members of the Rhāl Side'l called The Mēn An T'ol or the Journey into Sorrow on an centuries-old starship entitled the Silāan'dih, although most humans would go on to call it 'The Halcyon'. This was because the Rhāl Side'l's hope was that there would be a new time of peace, or litterally a halcyon age, in the universe as a whole. Now more than ever came a prime moment for penitance in the great and hostile cosmos through the nascent ambition of seeing the victims of their warring days on their scattered homeworlds.

EXTRASOLAR REPORTS

“Arrived on Planet Jamūd in the Kul’hān (Zeta Orionis) System today after warp travel. An Equatorial, jungle planet with a thick poisonous atmosphere. Local Ja’athi people are receptive to the message of atonement. Currently, ruled by plethora of tribal kingdoms, divided on religious and cultural matters”
– **Mother Ele’sh Erji of the Silaan’dih, Standard Star Date 120843208**

“Arrived on Planet Olbār in the Kul’hān (Zeta Orionis) System today after local travel. A vast ocean planet with a breathable atmosphere. Local Ol’ban and Von’das people remain apathetic to the message of atonement. Currently, ruled by a great empire which seems in an imminent state of decline”
– **Mother Ele’sh Erji of the Silāan’dih, Standard Star Date 120843214.**

“Arrived on Planet Farūuth in the Hux’driil (Canis Major) System today after warp travel. A frozen planet possessing a thin yet breathable atmosphere. Local Farūuthi and Laū’biith people are divided on the message of atonement. Currently, ruled by a fragmented collection of countless city states”
– **Mother Arzāl Triin of the Silāan’dih, Standard Solar Date 120843220.**

“Arrived on Planet Uldann in the Vāasu’tro (Delta Pavonis) System today after warp travel. A windswept desert planet with a thin yet breathable atmosphere. Local Uldānni people are divided on the message of atonement. Currently, ruled by a planet-spanning theocratic empire worshipping their twin suns”
– **Mother Gisha Zel’lec of the Silāan’dih, Standard Solar Date 120843225.**

“Arrived on Planet Yanshir of the Yaga’tāan (Ursa Minor) System today after warp travel. A desolate waste of a planet ruined by centuries of war and plague. Local Yaga’tāan people are hostile to the message of atonement. Currently, ruled by a crumbling empire worshipping their fallen heros”
– **Mother Gisha Zel’lec of the Silāan’dih, Standard Solar Date 120843230.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giacomo Charles Finali is a New York City-based author and art historian, who studied this later subject at the University of Saint Andrews, New York University's Institute of Fine Arts and Sotheby's Institute of Art in London. He is a current member of Gotham Writers based out of New York, and grew up working with Writopia, The Writers Rock and Gotham Writers. Giacomo especially likes to create projects of fantasy, science fiction and historical fiction and 'Halcyon's Dawn' is his debut novel. You can find more of his various creative writing and worldbuilding projects at www.giacomocharlesfinali.com/