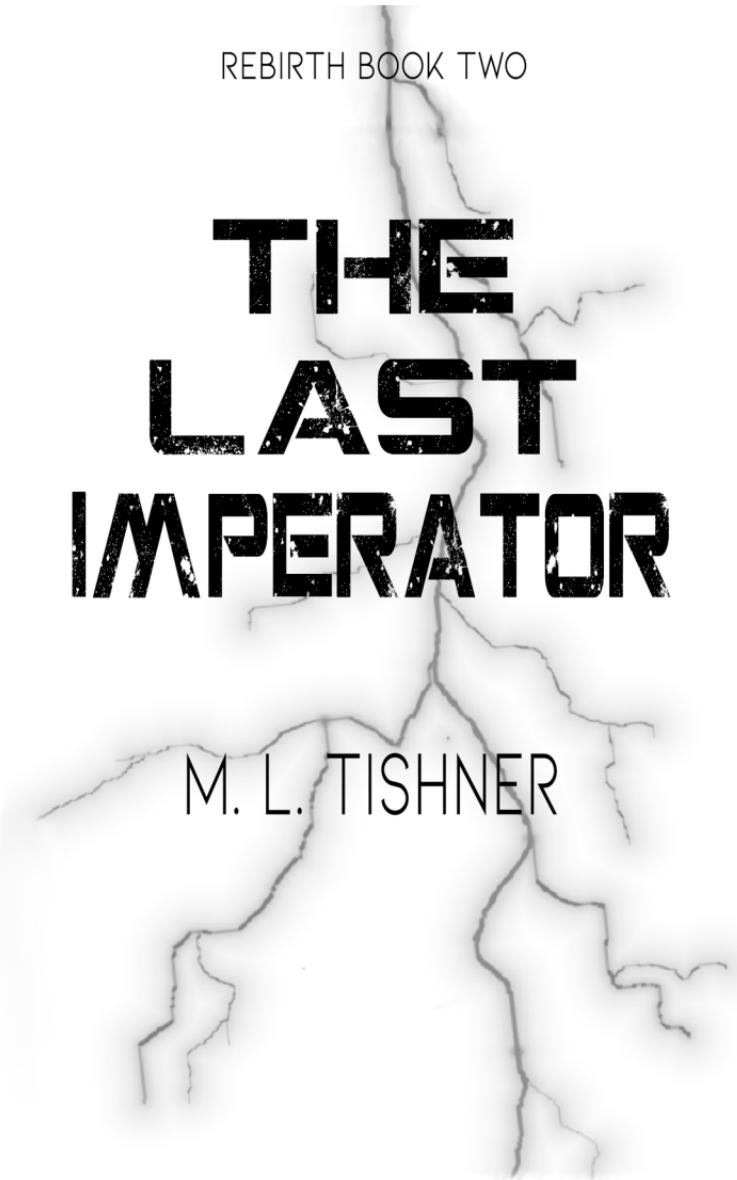


M. L. TISHNER



THE LAST IMPERATOR

REBIRTH BOOK TWO



REBIRTH BOOK TWO

THE LAST IMPERATOR

M. L. TISHNER

COPYRIGHT © 2021 BY MARISA SCHUMANN

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

THIS EDITION WAS PUBLISHED IN 2021

ISBN (EBOOK): 978-3-9821129-5-4

ISBN (PAPERBACK): 978-3-9821129-6-1

ISBN (HARDBACK): 978-3-9821129-7-8

THE RIGHT OF MARISA SCHUMANN TO BE IDENTIFIED AS THE
AUTHOR OF THIS WORK HAS BEEN ASSERTED BY HER IN ACCORDANCE
WITH THE COPYRIGHT DESIGNS AND PATENTS ACT 1988.

NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM OR BY ANY
ELECTRONIC OR MECHANICAL MEANS, INCLUDING INFORMATION
STORAGE AND RETRIEVAL SYSTEMS, WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION
FROM THE AUTHOR, EXCEPT FOR THE USE OF BRIEF QUOTATIONS IN A
BOOK REVIEW.

ALL CHARACTERS IN THIS PUBLICATION ARE FICTIONAL AND ANY
RESEMBLANCE TO REAL PEOPLE, ALIVE OR DEAD, IS PURELY
COINCIDENTAL.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON DISSOCIATIVE IDENTITY DISORDER,
CHECK OUT THE FOLLOWING YOUTUBERS FOR MORE INFORMATION:
DISSOCIAIDID, THE LABYRINTH SYSTEM, & THE ENTROPY SYSTEM

EDITED BY TIFFANY WHITE AT WRITERS UNTAPPED.



PART ONE

THE

PEACEMAKER

CHAPTER 1

R ei's heart hammered in her chest as she took her first steps onto the stage. The spotlight blinded her, yet the applause of the crowd reminded her she was not alone. She took a deep breath and wished giving speeches didn't make her so nervous.

"Good evening, people of the wonderful planet of Kapetyn II!" Manden's voice boomed next to her.

"It's a beautiful night for an election!" Rei followed.

She glanced up at the glass ceiling and the twinkling stars above. A deafening roar responded, and the stage shook beneath their feet. The crowded room smelled of sweat and sparkling wine.

Kapetyn II's polls predicted that Federation favorite Sariah Bray would win as representative of the planet, overthrowing the long-tenured Malachi Wayon of the Dominion. Inspired by Rei's actions back on Trappist V six months before, Sariah put down her Daer gladius and took up the mantle as a politician. Her credentials as a knight helped her rise in popularity over the last six months. It also didn't hurt that the media discovered she was the ex-girlfriend of the now famous Bronx Manca. They predicted tonight to go down in history: after over thirty years of Dominion majority, the star cluster would be in a deadlock. Sariah's win represented that change and was the very reason Urius sent the Volocio to make an appearance as the votes were counted.

"We are so happy to celebrate this evening with you!"

Aren't we?" Rei glanced behind her at Arram, Kaz, Crona, and Artema, who waved with enormous grins plastered on their faces. Bronx was the only one who didn't. His wide dark eyes and tall form shifted from side to side, his anxiety flickering around the edges of Rei's vision. It always presented itself over the last six months in the same golden yellow.

Ever since Bronx brought her back to life, she had been able to see his emotions as flickers of color. It still took some getting used to after all this time.

She wished Urius wouldn't force the reaper into the spotlight, but after the media released the video of him resurrecting Rei, suddenly the public wanted to see him. She interlaced her fingers with his and drew him to her side, giving a reassuring squeeze. His shoulders relaxed, he gave her a more genuine smile, and the color around the edges of her vision melted into bright green.

"Whatever happens tonight," Manden called, "just know that we have made it clear to the Dominion that the Federation is not a dead party—but alive and ready to return to glory." The crowd cheered.

"Sariah!" Rei said, looking back toward the large sign with the words *Sariah Bray for Kapetyn II: Change You Can Believe In*. "Come out and join the party. Your voters want to see you!"

The young politician appeared from behind the tall blue curtains. Her blue suit brought out the red in her strawberry blonde hair, and her light eyes glittered with excitement.

Sariah's fiancée followed closely behind with an impeccable smile. Elmessa Ettowa's dark skin glowed against the blue of her dress, and her darker eyes missed nothing as she took in the crowd.

Rei never forgot Arram's comment about their relatives when they first arrived in the Federation six months before. Ettowas literally filled every crevice of the star cluster, especially in politics. Elmesssa was one of many cousins they had met in the last several months, especially now that she was engaged to Sariah.

Sariah wasn't an innocent bystander either since her family, the Brays, had just as many entanglements as the Ettowas between the two political parties.

Rei, Bronx, and Manden drew back to allow the two their time in the spotlight and returned to the other Volocio upstage. Sariah and Elmesssa stood before the adoring crowd in their matching colors of blue and silver—Federation colors—and waved vigorously before reaching out to take hands from those in the crowd. The image reminded Rei of what she did the first time she spoke in front of Federation supporters.

“I hope we win,” whispered Crona.

“We will,” answered Kaz. “We have to believe people want change.”

“We should join the crowd,” said Artema.

“She's right.” Arram gently touched his sister's arm and led her to the steps of the stage. “People paid good money to shake our hands.”

Crona straightened her coat as she followed. “Good to know my handshakes are worth a lot of money.”

“The tickets for tonight cost over a hundred thousand prox a head,” Arram added.

“Some people just have too much money,” muttered Bronx at his sister's side.

The group split up and took their posts in various areas of the ballroom. Blue banners with the Federation star hung in several places between large screens currently showing

videos of Sariah and Elmessra from the campaign. That same star decorated the high tables that Rei and the others had to weave through to reach the guests. The smell of cologne and hairspray hung in the air. Soft violin music filled the space between the murmur of conversation while servers fluttered about with trays of hors d'oeuvres. Rei grabbed a few to nibble on.

Bronx never ventured far from her as Crona's words remained ever present in both their minds:

He cannot hurt you as long as you're together.

Bronx took the warning more to heart since the last time they were separated Rei had died. He feared what would happen if he left Rei's side again. Fortunately, most patrons wanted to see them together, anyway. The heat from Bronx's hand warmed the small of her back.

"You make such a handsome couple," said one woman in a gold-sequined dress. The fluorescent lights in the room hit a sequin just right, sending a beam of blinding light into Rei's eyes.

Rei smiled as she took Bronx's arm. "Thank you. That's very kind of you to say so."

"I had hoped that Bernadette would also join you tonight."

"Her presence was required elsewhere." Rei gave the woman a tight smile.

"She has such a relaxing aura about her. Perhaps I will see her at another event."

"Perhaps."

"I have been meaning to ask," said a man in a suit that appeared a little too tight. Rei hoped the last button on his jacket would make it through the night. He pointed his half empty wine glass in Bronx's direction. "Are you related to

Yuri Manca? He was an air commodore in the early days of the rebellion against the Dominion. He has seemed to enjoy stepping back into the spotlight after that complete disaster on Wolf X.”

“The Federation still won that election,” the woman retorted.

Bronx gave the man a tight smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “He’s my half brother.”

Rei raised an eyebrow. Bronx rarely acknowledged his relationship to the air commodore. She was shocked when Bronx first told her a few months before, but he and his brother had a strained relationship because Yuri blamed Bronx for their father’s death. It wasn’t a surprise the younger Manca refrained from acknowledging their relationship. But ever since the elections on Wolf X, Yuri had come back into the spotlight, and suddenly people all over the Tyre Star Cluster were interested in the connection between the air commodore and Bronx.

The man furrowed his eyebrows. “Brother? But surely Yuri is old enough to be your father.”

“Don’t tell him that.”

“I thought Crona was your half sister.” The woman pointed at his sister, whose laughter was easy to pick out in the crowd.

“Crona and I share the same mother. Yuri and I have the same father.”

Bronx’s posture went rigid, and the yellow aura returned. Rei’s hand ran down Bronx’s arm and took his hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“How complicated. Your parents never married?”

Bronx shook his head and met Rei’s eyes.

“I see Sariah waving us over,” Rei said, giving the

couple an enormous smile. “I am sure she needs us for something. Will you excuse us?”

“Of course,” said the woman.

Bronx pulled Rei away before she could reply. “Thank you,” he whispered after they disappeared into the crowd.

“You looked like you wanted to slink into the darkness and never come out.”

“Only when people poke around my background. The media would love to know I am the product of an affair. I would much rather talk about what a handsome couple we make.” He pulled Rei’s hands to his lips.

“And we both know you’re the prettiest of the two of us,” Rei said with a smirk.

“I am so damned pretty.”

They chuckled. Rei caught her breath as Bronx brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. His eyes softened. She loved the way he looked at her; it made her forget anyone else was in the room.

“Ugh, young love,” said Manden with two glasses of sparkling wine, handing them to the couple. “Smile for the media, children, our faces need to stay the highest ranking on the Nexus.” The redhead put an arm around Rei and Bronx, and they smiled as a few journalists scurried around behind flashes of light.

“And by the way,” said Manden, letting them go, “I am the prettiest.” He gave them a wink before shaking hands with more patrons. Rei and Bronx laughed, then continued their own salutations as more people gathered around them. The champagne tickled Rei’s nose when she took a sip.

The peal of bells pierced through the raucous of the room. A hush fell over the crowd as eyes moved to the largest of the screens above them.

There were 497 districts along the La Silla archipelago of Kapetyn II, the only habitable part of the planet. Depending on the popular vote of the district, the winner got a point. The first to reach 249 points was then deemed the winner.

The screen displayed a topographical map image of the archipelago with each district in gray. The first of the final votes appeared, and a wash of blues and reds spread across the map.

Rei refused to look at the numbers. She watched as more silver-starred blue banners took over the islands. Pride bloomed in her chest—the Volocio helped the campaign where they could during the last few months, and they had really gotten through the otherwise staunch Dominion planet.

Rei caught Arram beaming out of the corner of her eye. He had been the one who organized most of their appearances and speeches. It was the first time Urius let Arram take the lead after her brother begged for an opportunity, and it appeared to be paying off. His violet eyes sparkled with delight.

A gasp escaped the crowd, bringing Rei's attention back to the screen. Red-flowered black banners bled across the islands, even a few that were previously blue.

“Did you see that?” she asked Bronx.

“Those were just blue. It’s Wolf X all over again,” he responded.

The Dominion votes had quickly reached and surpassed the stars, just barely reaching the 249 goal. Just like that it was over. Malachi was reelected.

Rei’s stomach clenched, followed by a wave of nausea. She barely noticed that she let go of her empty glass as it clattered to the ground. Her other hand never let go of

Bronx's, and she squeezed it as a hush fell throughout the room.

"Well, shit," muttered the reaper as the people booed around them.

Rei rubbed her face, no longer caring that she smeared her heavy makeup. Sariah was sure to win, and Malachi was a known corrupt politician who had been lining his pockets from the coffer for years. Rei shouldn't have been surprised that such corruption could buy ballots. Roiling heat pooled in her belly as her blood pressure rose.

The image on the screen changed to the open-mouthed shocked faces of Sariah and Elmessia. The word "live" blinked above the image, indicating they were being broadcasted across the Nexus. Everyone quickly composed themselves, but their carefree smiles were long gone.

"This has been a disappointing turn of events," began Sariah, her voice shaking ever so slightly. "I must congratulate Malachi on his win." A half-hearted applause rolled across the room.

"Our god queen spoke true," Elmessia said. "Tonight we still made history. We may have lost, but by one district. That is a number the Dominion cannot ignore!" The crowd murmured in agreement.

"The Dominion will not ignore us," shouted Rei from her place in the audience. Several people turned to her. She knew she should let Sariah and Elmessia have their moment, but the rage humming in her veins gave her the push. "We may still be a technical minority, but we are closing in. Tonight we give to Malachi, but tomorrow we ensure the Dominion does not forget that even though they won, it was by a tiny margin. Soon Anekris Praymer will no longer enjoy the power he once wielded—and neither will his followers."

The crowd roared in agreement.

The Dominion sovereign deserved to be stripped of everything. He had already taken so much from Rei: her parents and her grandparents were murdered by either him or his Negander knights. Then she had discovered that he had captured her brother Niklaryn, allowing her to believe that he was dead for a decade. Since then she had thought of nothing else than making Prayer pay.

“Thank you, Sariah and Elmessia.” Malachi’s voice blared over the speakers. His face took up the large screen above the stage as he gave his acceptance speech. Apparently it was his turn to accept his win as the word “live” blinked across the top corner of the screen. “I want to thank my opponent for accepting her loss with grace. Sariah has campaigned well, and I recognize that if we are to continue to live in peace, we should work together. I do sorely wish our god queen was not so bloodthirsty. Perhaps if she had the grace you possess and tried to talk to our beloved sovereign, they may find common ground and end this squabble before it becomes a full out—” His head burst into a shower of red, splattering across the screen.

Rei let out a gasp and her chest tightened. Several people screamed, but all eyes remained on the screen as a gloved hand wiped some blood away from the lens and a new face appeared: a woman in blazing orange robes, a band across her forehead with the huge embroidered golden gryphon.

Over the last few months, as Rei’s popularity as the god queen increased, a new group rose from the ashes of the attack on Kepler IV—where Bronx brought Rei back to life. There were people who grew tired of both parties and wanted something new, an alternative path. Under the sigil of the gryphon, the Path had been attacking the major

players of both the Federation and Dominion since. So far, they had spared the Volocio, but it was only a matter of time before that changed.

“We are tired of the Dominion tampering with votes just as we are tired of the Federation’s unwillingness to compromise. The time of the two parties is over. Even the god queen is not all powerful to stop what’s coming.” The woman’s dark eyes stared into the camera, Malachi’s blood still dripping from her chin. “Better run, Feds.” Then the screen winked out.

Rei turned to Bronx, heart thrashing in her ears. The Volocio weren’t safe from the Path; they were probably on the planet already. He pulled her close and dragged her through the surging crowd. People screamed and ran in several directions. Rei was grateful for Bronx’s towering figure pushing against the tide. The crowd could have easily swept her away.

They joined the others on stage. Sariah yelled, directing nearby soldiers and Daer to usher people out of the building and hopefully to safety.

“We have to get off the planet now,” Rei said to Sariah, pulling the politician away from the crowd.

“Do you think they’ll attack this time?” Sariah asked.

Rei nodded.

The group ducked behind the curtain and to their shuttle parked outside. Kaz had made the group invisible, but it was all for naught: the hallway filled with more orange-robed warriors, guns ready.

There was no way they would have passed them unnoticed. Kaz dropped the illusion just as Rei and her brother came forward to face them.

“Stay back, Arram,” Rei said. “I can handle them myself.” Adrenaline flowed through her veins as she drew

closer, electricity from her lightning fluttering about her hands. The hallway was too narrow for all of them to fight, but plenty of room for her alone. She had hoped to have at least one election day without running into them. But it wasn't meant to be.

CHAPTER 2

“**T**he Path demands the god queen and her fake gods surrender,” said the man in the front. “Come quietly and no one will get hurt.”

Arram rolled his eyes. “That line is old. We would’ve taken you seriously if you didn’t pull the same stunt on Wolf X. People died there.”

Arram stretched out his fingers and called the particles in the surrounding air to charge. His sister could handle them alone, but he was going to help anyway. He was so grateful for all the training he and Rei had been doing the last six months.

Rei surged forward and threw her lightning; the first group of orange-robed fighters were thrown back in a flurry of smoke and sparks.

Arram followed close behind. He threw his hands forward and let the sparks fly, and the two of them worked together, pushing the group toward a room where the other Volocio had more space to fight.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Bronx with his gladius in hand to take care of stray bullets while Arram and Rei called their powers. No one yelled “Fire!” but the rain of bullets started. Bronx swung his weapon, and the bullets ricocheted off with little sparks.

The rest of the Volocio soon joined the attack. A gust of wind to surged by Arram, throwing several orange-clad figures about, banging them hard against the metal walls, followed by Artema who flicked her wrist and threw more about.

Arram pressed forward, calling more lightning. His hands shook as the energy fought his control. His heart raced as he willed the lightning to bend, and then he threw it at a group of three Path members. Two shuddered as lightning danced across their bodies before falling to the ground, yet one remained standing. Arram gritted his teeth as he called more lightning. A flurry of steel and vines shot past him, followed by Manden, who took the last Path member down.

“I had it!” Arram shouted.

“Come on!” Manden said, pulling the younger man down the hall.

Kaz and Crona flickered in and out of view as Kaz used an illusion to make him and Crona disappear before beginning their own attacks. Several of those in orange robes cried out in pain as some mystical force tore through their group, cutting and slicing.

Arram and Manden joined Rei and Bronx, who fought side by side. Together they surrounded Sariah, who had a hand on her gladius and another around Elmessā’s shoulders as the Volocio forged their path to the exit.

Once through, they scrambled into the shuttle where Manden took control and flew them away. Tiny dinks of bullets hit the side of their vehicle as they increased in altitude. The shuttle lurched under their feet and Arram landed on the railing. The force pushed the air from his lungs and he spent several moments gasping. He always hated it when they had to make a quick getaway.

REI WAS GRATEFUL SHE SAT IN A CHAIR. HER LEGS turned to jelly upon hearing the news. She had been looking

forward to a party with her family, but now—in a few precious hours—she had to rub elbows with the man who hunted her most of her life. Rei was the reincarnation of Praymer’s wife, and his determination in finding her suggested that he wanted Micaela back. Her hatred of him was more than his being a danger to her family, but also the threat to her safety.

The man had to ruin everything.

“This is why I hate having family in Dominion,” growled Elmesssa. “It’s bad enough my parents voted for that man.”

“You and me both, darling,” Sariah said, running a hand through her strawberry blonde hair.

Elmesssa placed her head in her hands. “Why did I allow my parents to have control over the guest list?”

Manden shook his head. “We should never have agreed to attend this wedding.” His green eyes met Rei’s. “We have to make our excuses. It’s ridiculous that you should be put into danger like that. Hotara wouldn’t want that for you.”

Dread pooled in Rei’s belly. She wanted to see her family, she wanted a night where she could be a normal person. She had dreamed of dancing with Bronx on the dance floor, of drinking with her cousins, of hugging her grandmother. All of those dreams came to a crashing halt at the thought of being in the same room as that monster.

Her gaze turned to Elmesssa, whose lips had turned down into a frown. “We understand if you don’t come, Rei. Unlike my parents, I do care what harm Praymer has done to our family.”

Rei scanned the room as she contemplated her next move. It would be easy to simply not go to the wedding, despite how much it would break her heart. But Arram always reminded her to make sure her actions showed

strength. If she refused to go because of a wedding, the sovereign would technically win. She never backed down from a fight.

“I’m going.”

“So you’ll talk to him?” Arram asked.

“I didn’t say that.” She stared daggers at her brother, and Arram’s gaze returned to his coffee.

“Despite Anekris Praymer’s political history, I am sure it won’t hurt to play nice at the wedding,” Canale said. “Urius, you said many times before that you and Praymer were friends before the split between the Dominion and Federation. Maybe these first talks can help heal the rift between the two parties and perhaps give us answers that we need.”

Rei knew what answer Canale wanted: the location of her daughter, Camila.

Bronx told her of the rumors surrounding Praymer’s appetite for women sharing Rei’s looks: dark hair and green eyes. Frankly, Rei didn’t want to know what happened to the young woman, especially if she was still alive. She hoped Camila wasn’t—better dead than a toy for a monster’s whims and appetite. The pounding in her ears was louder than her own thoughts.

“Anekris Praymer was a different man thirty years ago. I don’t know what to expect of him. I didn’t think he was a Volocio who could live as long as Manden.” Urius said, stroking his chin.

“He’s not a Volocio,” Rei said. The word “abomination” echoed in her mind. That’s what Artema called him. He wasn’t one of them, but something unnatural, but Artema never elaborated further.

“Fine,” Urius said. “I didn’t know he was a . . . whatever

he is. Manden, you claimed to have known Praymer. What do you think?"

The redhead shrugged. "I knew him when he was a child. I know he has a kind soul—or at least had. He wasn't someone who could murder people then, but a lot can change in a few thousand years." Manden steepled his fingers. "He has shown himself to be a powerful ally when needed in the past."

"I understand Rei's concern for her safety," Urius said. "But at least it's a public event. She won't be alone."

"We will all be there," Arram agreed, reaching out to take her hand, but Rei pulled away. She was still angry with him for the very idea of talking to that monster. His face fell. "But if it makes Rei feel any better, I can talk to Praymer in her stead."

Urius shook his head. "No. The star cluster will want to see Rei and Praymer together. They are the two figure-heads. Rei will look weak otherwise."

Rei gritted her teeth. She hated people calling her weak because of what other people thought. She was anything but. She squeezed her hands into tight fists until her nails cut deep grooves into her palms. She didn't hear Urius ending the meeting but returned to the present as the screen flickered off.

"Arram and I will join you in a second," Rei said as the group made their way to the door. She stayed in her seat and watched the others share a glance with her brother before leaving the room.

"What the fuck, Arram?" she asked once the door was closed and they were alone. "Why would I ever want to speak to that man? Or did you forget all those years you spent on the run because of him or what he did to our brother? To our parents?"

“I didn’t forget. But unlike you, I didn’t know Niklaryn or our parents. Call me heartless, but it’s hard to dredge up feelings over murders of people I never knew.” He rubbed his face. “I mean, you never cared who murdered our parents before. You only truly hate Praymer now because he killed them *and* enslaved Niklaryn. Admit it, you really only care because of Niklaryn.” Arram sighed. “I know I should hate Praymer more for what he did, but my focus is on fighting the Path and then the Dominion. I am willing to put aside my personal feelings. You should too.”

Rei shook her head but dared not meet him in the eye. “Praymer has hunted us our entire lives, Arram. He murdered our grandparents to get to us.” She rose from her chair and tugged at the opened collar of her god queen uniform.

“And yet he doesn’t hunt us now.” He moved into her line of sight, forcing her to look at him. “We are out in the open, and he does nothing to us. The Federation may still be a minority, but that’s a technicality. The Dominion is resorting to rigging elections now because Praymer knows that you have started something. You were right: we’re winning. We don’t need the Volocio army.” He took her hands and gave them a squeeze. “Democracy is on our side. People are voting because of the god queen. We should approach Praymer and show him and the rest of the Tyre Star Cluster how little we fear him. Even after everything he did to us. And maybe we’ll gain an ally to get rid of the Path. He has just as much to gain from their removal as we do.”

Rei held his gaze but pulled away and clenched her fists. She agreed but was determined to hold on to her anger. Arram reminded her that he wished she would try to think

of the big picture like he always did, but revenge had always been her primary drive.

“I hate that I have to speak to him. I don’t want an opportunity to humanize him. I may not want a war, but I wish violence on him, and cutting off the head of the Dominion may be our next course of action.”

She walked toward the door to leave.

“And what about Niko?” Arram asked.

Rei stopped and slowly turned, her green eyes wide as she met her brother’s gaze. “What about him?” she snarled. She didn’t think Arram would bring Niko into this.

“We haven’t heard from Nik in months. Infieren has been hiding since he accidentally killed you on Kepler IV, and the only other person who knows about our darling brother is Praymer. Maybe you don’t have to talk about peace with the sovereign, but you know you want to find out about Niklaryn.” He approached Rei and held her gaze. “Talking to Praymer can work for you twofold. You might find out about our brother and appear to talk peace with him. It will weaken the argument that you’re craving war if you start the conversation. Show the star cluster that you want to avoid violence.”

Rei bit her lip, and she broke eye contact by staring at her hands. Arram was right. If she wanted to end this squabble between the two factions, eventually she would have to be in the same room as Praymer. She wished Urius would let Arram talk to the sovereign and spare her the grief. But no one wanted that. Try as Arram might, the Federation only seemed to care about certain Ettowas. Niklaryn, Kaz, and Rei were always in the spotlight, while they forced Arram into the shadows.

“I’ll start the conversation,” she muttered.

“I can talk to him afterwards.”

Rei shook her head. “I’ll handle him myself. But thank you for offering. I don’t care what Urius says. I will do the minimum to make the Federation look good, but only that. As much as I want to ask about Niko, it’s not entirely enough to convince me to talk to him.”

Arram’s shoulders hunched. “You know I want to help you.”

“I know you do.” She gave her brother’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I’m sorry Urius was an ass.”

Arram shrugged, but he wouldn’t meet her eyes. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault. He’s right, you’re the more famous of us. Of course they would rather see you. I guess I need to come up with something to make me stand out. Maybe then people will want to hear what I have to say.”

“They should have been listening to you to begin with.”

Arram finally met her gaze. “We should get some sleep. If there’s one thing I know, Crona will want a drinking buddy, and I am going to need some shut-eye if I am to keep up with her.”

Rei chuckled, and the pressure in her chest lessened. “Good luck with that.”

CHAPTER 3

Rei was grateful she sat in a chair. Her legs turned to jelly upon hearing the news. She had been looking forward to a party with her family, but now—in a few precious hours—she had to rub elbows with the man who hunted her most of her life. Rei was the reincarnation of Praymer's wife, and his determination in finding her suggested that he wanted Micaela back. Her hatred of him was more than his actions towards their family, but also her safety.

The man had to ruin everything.

"This is why I hate having family in Dominion," growled Elmesssa. "It's bad enough my parents voted for that man."

"You and me both, darling," said Sariah, running a hand through her strawberry blond hair.

Elmesssa ground before placing her head in her hands. "Why did I allow my parents to have control over the guests list?"

Manden shook his head. "We should never have agreed to attend this wedding." His green eyes met Rei's. "We have to make our excuses. It's ridiculous that you should be put into danger like that. Hotara wouldn't want that for you."

Dread pooled in Rei's belly. She wanted to see her family, she wanted a night where she could be a normal person. She had dreamed of dancing with Bronx on the dance floor, of drinking with her cousins, of hugging her grandmother. All of those dreams came to a crashing halt at the thought of being in the same room as that monster.

Her gaze turned to Elmessaa, whose lips had turned down into a frown. “We understand if you don’t come, Rei. Unlike my parents, I do care what harm Praymer has done to our family.”

Rei scanned the room as she contemplated her next move. It would be easy to simply not go to the wedding, despite how much it would break her heart to do so. But Arram always reminded her about making sure her actions were always a show in strength. She knew that if she refused to go because of wedding, the sovereign would technically win. She never backed down from a fight.

“I’m going.”

“So you’ll talk to him?” asked Arram.

“I didn’t say that,” she stared dagger at her brother and Arram’s gaze returned to his coffee he had been sipping throughout the meeting.

“Despite Anekris Praymer’s political history, I am sure it won’t hurt to play nice at the wedding,” said Canale. “Urius, you said many times before that you and Praymer were friends before the split between the Dominion and Federation. Maybe these first talks can help heal the rift between the two parties and perhaps give us answers that we need.”

Rei knew what answer Canale wanted: the location of her daughter, Camila.

Bronx told her of the rumors surrounding Praymer’s appetite for women sharing Rei’s looks, mainly dark hair and green eyes. Frankly, Rei didn’t want to know what happened to the young woman, especially if she was still alive. She hoped Camila wasn’t—better dead than a toy for a monster’s whims and appetite. The pounding in her ears was louder than her own thoughts.

“Anekris Praymer was a different man thirty years ago. I

don't know what to expect of him. I didn't think he was a Volocio who could live as long as Manden."

"He's not a Volocio," said Rei. The word "abomination" echoed in her mind. That's what Artema called him. He wasn't one of them, but something unnatural, but Artema never elaborated further.

"Fine," said Urius. "I didn't know he was a ... whatever he is. Manden, you claimed to have known Praymer. What do you think?"

The redhead shrugged. "I knew him when he was a child. I know he has a kind soul—or at least had. He wasn't someone who could murder people then, but a lot can change in a few thousand years. But he has shown himself to be a powerful ally when needed in the past."

"I understand Rei's concern for her safety," said Urius. "But at least it's a public event. She won't be alone."

"We will all be there," said Arram, reaching out to take her hand, but Rei pulled away. She was still angry with him for the very idea of talking to that monster. His face fell. "But if it makes Rei feel any better, I can talk to Praymer in her stead."

Urius shook his head. "No. The star cluster will want to see Rei and Praymer together. They are the two figure-heads. Rei will look weak otherwise."

Rei gritted her teeth. She hated people calling her weak because of what other people thought. She was anything but. She squeezed her hands into tight fists until her nails cut deep grooves into her palms. She didn't hear Urius ending the meeting, but returned to the present as the screen flickered off.

"Arram and I will join you in a second," said Rei as the group made their way to the door. Rei stayed in her seat and

watched the others share a glance with her brother before leaving the room.

“What the fuck, Arram?” she asked once the door was closed, and they were alone. “Why would I ever want to speak to that man? Or did you forget all those years you spent on the run because of him or what he did to our brother? To our parents?”

Arram sighed. “I didn’t forget. But unlike you, I didn’t know Niklaryn or our parents. Call me heartless, but it’s hard to dredge up feelings over murders of people I never knew.” He rubbed his face. “I mean, you never cared who murdered our parents before. You only truly hate Praymer now because he killed them *and* enslaved Niklaryn. Admit it, you really care because of Niklaryn. I know I should hate Praymer more for what he did, but my focus is more on fighting The Path and then the Dominion. I am willing to put aside my personal feelings. You should, too.”

Rei shook her head but dared not meet him in the eye. “Praymer has hunted us our entire lives, Arram. He murdered our grandparents to get to us.”

“And yet he doesn’t hunt us now.” He moved into her line of sight, forcing her to look at him. “We are out in the open, and he does nothing to us. The Federation may still be a minority, but that’s a technicality. The Dominion is resorting to rigging elections now, because Praymer knows that you have started something. You were right: we’re winning. We don’t need the Volocio army. Democracy is on our side. People are voting because of the god queen. But I think we should approach Praymer and show him and the rest of the Tyre Star Cluster how little we fear him. Even after everything he did to us. And maybe gain an ally to get rid of The Path—at least long enough to get rid of them. He has just as much to gain from their removal as we do.”

Rei held his gaze, but clenched her fists. She agreed, but determined to hold on to her anger. Arram reminded her he wished she would try to think of the big picture like he always did, but revenge has always been her primary drive.

“I hate that I have to speak to him. I don’t want an opportunity to humanize him. I may not want a war, but I wish violence on him and cutting off the head of the Dominion may be our next course of action.”

She walked towards the door to leave.

“And what about Niko?” Arram asked.

Rei stopped and slowly turned around. Her green eyes wide and she met her brother’s gaze. “What about him?” she snarled. She didn’t think Arram would bring Niko into this.

“Infiernen has been hiding since he accidentally killed you on Kepler IV, and the only other person who knows about our darling brother is Praymer. Maybe you don’t have to talk about peace with the sovereign, but you know you want to find out about Niklaryn.” He approached Rei and took her hand. “Talking to Praymer can work for you twofold. You might find out about our brother and appear to talk peace with him. It will weaken the argument that you’re craving war if you start the conversation. Show the star cluster that you want to avoid violence.”

Rei bit her lip, and she pulled her hand away from him. Arram was right. If Rei wanted to end this squabble between the two factions, eventually she would have to be in the same room as Praymer. But she wished Urius would let Arram talk to the sovereign and spare her the grief. But no one wanted that. Try as Arram might, the Federation only seemed to care about certain Ettowas. Niklaryn, Kaz, and Rei were always in the spotlight, while they forced Arram into the shadows.

“I’ll start the conversation,” she muttered.

“I can talk to him afterwards.”

Rei shook her head. “I’ll handle him myself. But thank you for offering. I don’t care what Urius says. I will do the minimum to make the Federation look good, but only that. As much as I want to ask about Niko, it’s not entirely enough to convince me to talk to him.”

Arram’s shoulders hunched. “You know I want to help you.”

“I know you do.” She gave her brother’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I am sorry Urius was an ass.”

Arram shrugged, but he wouldn’t meet her eyes. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault. He’s right, you’re the more famous of us. Of course, they would rather see you. I guess I need to come up with something to make me stand out. Maybe then people will want to hear what I have to say.”

“They should have been listening to you to begin with.”

Arram finally met her gaze. “We should get some sleep. If there’s one thing I know, Crona will want a drinking buddy and I am going to need some shut eye if I am to keep up with her.”

Rei chuckled, and the pressure in her chest lessened. “Good luck with that.”

CHAPTER 4

Bronx watched Kapetyn II grow smaller as their shuttle floated away. The silver sofa squeaked as he shifted his weight to get more comfortable, not that it was possible—the sofa was too soft and his tall frame sank too deeply into the cushions.

His eyes kept flitting to the doors of the conference room, where Rei and the others still met with Urius. He had grown more anxious in the last months whenever Rei was not near him. He could never forgive himself for letting her leave him at that theater on Kepler IV, only to die alone in the snow afterwards. He knew she was just behind that door, yet his heart raced.

Crona offered him an apple from the basket of fruit from the small table in front of him, but he couldn't eat. Something was happening inside. He felt Rei's anger earlier as a fire in his chest, but a cooler pressure had replaced it. It was still disorienting knowing each other's feelings, but it was a small price to pay when he gave Rei a piece of his soul to bring her back to life.

Eventually the door opened, but only Elmessia, Sariah, and Manden left. Sariah snarled the name "Praymer," followed by other very colorful adjectives. It gave Bronx an idea of the root of Rei's anger earlier, but it was Manden who confirmed it: Anekris Praymer would also attend the wedding.

Bronx's veins went cold.

"Fuck," muttered Crona, voicing his own thoughts. She

sank into the sofa opposite Bronx and stared at the half eaten apple in her hand.

“We must be on high alert,” Manden said from his post leaning against the wall next to Kaz, a half empty water bottle in his hands. The god king’s green eyes met with Artema’s dark one from her position near the bar. “Hotara spent most of Rei’s life making sure he wouldn’t find her, only to have that dumbass of a brother suggest they ‘talk it out.’” The redhead shook his head.

“Arram suggested they meet?” Bronx asked.

“He did. I know it’s not Arram’s fault that Praymer happens to be a guest. I know he would rather talk to Praymer and leave Rei out of it, but Urius always wants Rei front and center, as if to show how he can command a god.” He chewed on his thumbnail. “The whole situation is just shit.”

Artema twirled a strand of her black hair. “I can imagine that’s why Rei and Arram are still in the room.”

“Arram will know what to say to calm her down.” The coolness in Bronx’s chest told him that. “Arram always knows what to say to his sister.” Whether it was to piss her off or calm her down. He had to admit, he always felt wary of the youngest Ettowa and the influence he wielded over Rei. When Rei first discovered it was Praymer who had murdered her parents, she was ready to call for war and take on the whole Dominion herself, but Arram managed to calm her wrath and convince her otherwise.

Bronx had enough close calls with Praymer over the years to know that peace was never going to be an option, and yet Rei couldn’t be convinced. The Ettowas were blindly loyal to each other. Such luxuries were never afforded him, especially where Yuri was concerned. But he

stopped seeing Yuri as a brother a long time ago; Niklaryn was his only true brother.

He and Yuri had parted on bad terms when Bronx's powers manifested and his father became his first victim. Neither of them knew what Bronx was at the time, and Yuri threw the younger Manca out of the family home as a user of dark magic. But now that Bronx was a recognized Volocio, a reincarnated god, he had hoped Yuri would finally reach out and they could talk about what happened. Disappointment burned in his core when he realized that Yuri had only reached out to Rei and not him.

The door opened with a whoosh and both Rei and Arram returned to the common room. Arram gave his sister one last smile before heading down the hall, presumably to his room. Rei hardly seemed to notice. She stared at the wall in front of her.

Bronx touched her arm, and she flinched slightly as she came out of her reverie. She blinked a few times as her green eyes grew clear when they met his.

"I was so looking forward to the wedding," she whispered.

"I know." He gently cupped her face. He envied Rei's connection with her family. Over the last six months, several helped with the campaign, yet there was one member Rei had yet to meet: Aurelia Ettowa, her paternal grandmother. She was going to be at the wedding, and Rei had been looking forward to meeting the matriarch, but now . . .

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I am still trying to wrap my head around how I feel about all of this." She removed the band holding her hair in the braid, and the waves came undone. He wanted to tug the rest of her locks free, but he had to wait until they were

alone. “I thought I could have a break from being the god queen for an evening. I wanted to enjoy time with the family and then deal with Praymer. Not at the same time.”

The wedding was only hours away.

Bronx didn’t know what to do, and he hated not being able to help her. “You know I will be at your side the whole time. You won’t have to face him alone.”

She smirked. “I better not.”

The two turned to the others still in the room. Lines of worry covered Kaz’s face.

“I don’t understand why it’s a good idea to talk to Praymer,” he muttered, pulling away from the wall and drawing closer to his cousin. He offered her an understanding nod.

“Arram made a good point,” Rei said. “I have to at least make the first move, to help weaken the argument that I am desperate for war. Arram also thinks it’s time we joined forces with the sovereign against the Path. They attacked the holy father on Wolf X.”

Kaz took a step back, his hand pressed against his lips. “Is he all right?”

Rei nodded. “But now something has to be done, and we may need the Dominion to get rid of this mutual threat.” She made a face.

“Do you want me to talk to Praymer?” Kaz asked. “I have spoken with him before.”

“I can do it,” she said. “Everyone expects me to play nice.” She rolled her eyes.

“We will all have to work with him.”

“Yet Praymer has only been interested in working with me,” Rei countered.

“We must be careful.” Artema rummaged through a nearby bar and produced a few empty glasses and a bottle of

water. She filled a glass and handed it to Rei. “He was an excellent ally to Micaela when she needed an army, but his help always comes with a price.”

“And what price was that?” Bronx asked. He couldn’t imagine what deal could be sweet enough to entice someone to work with Praymer.

“Marriage.”

Bronx swore he felt Rei’s heart stop. At least now they knew why Micaela had hitched herself to that monster.

Manden held a finger in the air. “But to be fair, they were also good friends for several years before that.”

“They were,” Artema said. “I am sure she was happy with the arrangement in the beginning, but it always felt wrong to me. Then again, I wasn’t the one who needed the army.”

“What did she need an army for?” Rei held the empty glass tightly between her hands.

“Don’t worry about that bit of history.” Artema waved a hand dismissively. “It was a long time ago. That threat is long gone.”

“I don’t know about you, but I think it’s time we get some sleep,” Manden said. “Big day in a few hours.”

Bronx put an arm around Rei’s shoulders and with a quick “Good night,” the two left and headed to a room on the ship.

The other Volocio were faster in claiming their rooms, but Bronx didn’t care as long as there was a bed that could fit both him and Rei. The last remaining room was small, with another outrageously large window that filtered starlight into the dark room. There was barely space between the sides of the bed, but there was just enough room for the two of them to move around.

“You are too tall for this room,” Rei muttered with a giggle.

He touched the ceiling, just a few inches above his head. She was right, and the thought made him smile.

Once inside, Bronx edged toward the large window at the surrounding stars. Somewhere out there was the super-secret wedding location. The threat of attack was always present as powerful political figures of both parties were also going to be in attendance. Because of this, the brides only gave the guests the location a few hours before their planned departure. The fewer who knew, the better chances of not being found by this organization. Even though it was the event of the year among the elite, both families decided to not allow over two hundred guests. Bronx was impressed. The last time a Bray got married, the guest list was over a thousand. He had attended it with Sariah back when they were still together. It felt like a lifetime ago.

He watched Rei get ready for bed and thought about what awaited them at the wedding destination. Meeting Prayer now felt real. In a few hours, they would be in the same room with the man who hunted the woman he loved. All because she was Prayer’s wife in a previous life. The idea should sound preposterous, yet Bronx and Rei were lovers in that same lifetime, and the universe ensured their paths would cross again. He couldn’t silence the little voice in his head that reminded him that something drew Micaela to Prayer to begin with. Manden’s voice rang in his head. *Good friends.* Good enough to get married, apparently. What if it drew Rei to him now?

“You don’t have to worry about him,” Rei said, coming to his side.

“Excuse me?”

“Praymer.”

“How do you know what I was thinking about?” He raised an eyebrow.

“The look on your face. Your mask is back up whenever something is troubling you, and I can’t imagine what would trouble that pretty head of yours.” She drew close and cupped his cheek. Her scent of vanilla and sandalwood washed over him.

“Ah, yet there’s a lot going on in my pretty head.”

“But I’m not wrong.”

“No.” He smiled. He knew he could no longer hide his feelings or thoughts from her; he and Rei had grown more in-sync with each other in recent months. “Are you okay with a public meeting?”

“There’s not much of a choice.” She sighed. “I didn’t want to say in front of the others, but Arram made another good point. We have heard nothing from Infierenen since Kepler IV, and if I am going to help Niko, I have to get more information. Maybe I can get it from Praymer or something.”

Bronx’s heart skipped a beat at the mention of his mentor’s name. He had hoped with the Negander missing, Rei would focus on defeating Praymer. But it was a fool’s wish. She loved Niklaryn and would do anything for him. But there were things she didn’t know, things he didn’t want her to know. A secret that needed to remain between him, Urius, Skylar, and Artema—the only ones who knew the truth. A secret Niklaryn made him promise to keep the last time they spoke on Kepler IV. No one could know the connection between Niklaryn and Infierenen. Not yet.

“Be careful,” he said. “Infierenen is probably hiding for a reason, and saying something to Praymer could jeopardize

that. Maybe Praymer figured out that *Infieren* was a double agent.”

She tapped a finger to her lips as she thought. “You’re right, but I don’t plan on asking him directly.” Her fingers moved to a strand of hair and she gave it a gentle tug. “I don’t know how to go about it. But I have to do something.”

Bronx wished she didn’t. He was sure that Praymer also knew the truth about her brother. He could tell Rei, and the thought scared him. Of all people, she should hear it from Nik. Bronx wanted to tell her, but he had sworn not to, and honestly, he wasn’t ready for her to know either. It meant admitting how much he had lied to her about her brother in the first place.

“Talk to Skylar at the wedding.” He took her hands and rubbed her knuckles with his thumb. “*Infieren* will probably communicate with her first.” The two had been working together for years to feed Dominion information to the Federation. “Maybe you won’t need to talk to Praymer for more than a quick photo.”

She absentmindedly squeezed his hands before pulling away from him. “I have messaged her many times on the subject. She has heard nothing from him either.” She growled with frustration. “I’ll just wing it when we get there. I don’t want to dwell on it more than I have to.”

Bronx’s shoulders relaxed. He joined her at their closet, where someone had already unpacked their things. This was something he was still trying to get used to.

“What would you rather talk about?” Bronx asked, folding a pair of trousers. It wasn’t necessary, but he felt restless.

“Something your brother wrote in his recent message.”

“Oh?”

“He wanted to know what I planned to do about the

Dominion's attempt at rigging the election. I think he expected me to smite his foes or something." She chuckled.

"Yuri wants war," Bronx said. "He knows what the Dominion is capable of. He is ready to fight again if he needs to."

"And what do you think?"

"I agree with him. There's a lot of pressure coming from all sides: Federation, Dominion, the Path. War is coming, and Urius is a fool to think we can do it alone. Manden is right. Eventually you may have to plead our case on Tas'und'eash."

Rei rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't plea." She opened the outer jacket of her god-queen costume. "Manden thinks I need the Dinay crown, Micaela's crown. Apparently the Volocio will only go to war if a seer sees it, and they see Micaela returned to her throne." She pulled off the outer layer of her costume and let it fall to the floor. "Being the reincarnation of her is one thing, but I am no leader. What would I do with an empire?"

Bronx shrugged. "I don't know. But there's good you could do with power like that."

"I don't want it." She eyed him suspiciously. "What about you? You hate being in the public eye. My being empress would put you in the spotlight as well."

He thought for a moment before answering. "I was only thinking about the money. With you as empress, you can finally support me and the lavish lifestyle I've always wanted."

She snorted. "If we survive all of this."

"We will. And if not, our fates are sealed together anyway." He tried to smile, but it felt hollow. They rarely spoke about what happened in the Land of the Dead. They

weren't entirely sure of the ramifications of Bronx breaking his soul into two in order to bring Rei back to life. However, Bronx had a sinking suspicion that if Rei were to die again, he could likely be snuffed out at the same time—a detail neither had acknowledged. He still wasn't sure if he enjoyed being so entwined with Rei, but if it meant her being alive, then so be it.

"We don't know if that's true, Bronx." She tugged on his Daer robes. "One of us could die and the other could still survive."

"I know. But I couldn't bear it if I lost you again." He kissed both her hands, inhaling the perfume she wore on her wrists: vanilla and sandalwood.

"And I you." She pulled him closer. "Watching Atrius die in a dream was hard enough. I don't think I could survive watching it happen for real."

"Then I guess we make sure we don't die then."

"It's as easy as that." She smirked. Her green eyes sparkled as they met his. She leaned in and brushed her lips against his, sending a current down his spine.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her close until their bodies were flush. His eyes settled on the small scar on her collarbone, on the implant she had placed to keep from getting pregnant. As much as they had traveled over the last six months, it was the best way to keep their extra-curricular activities from producing more than pleasured exhaustion.

He never admitted out loud that he hoped to have a more of a normal life with her when this was all over: children, marriage, a house, and a garden. He never thought such a future was possible when his powers were out of control. Even now, he still wasn't sure if such a future was feasible. But he clung to it like he clung to Rei. He

welcomed any future as long as she was in it, in whatever capacity she wanted it.

His heart hammered in his chest. He needed her, he always needed her. He returned the kiss and grabbed a fistful of her hair, enjoying how soft it felt between his fingers.

Her hands slid down his chest, and she opened the first layer of his Daer uniform, peeling it off him, letting it fall to the floor with a loud rustle.

“Shouldn’t we get some sleep?” he whispered against her lips, knowing he would not stop anyway. “We’ll have plenty of time to play later.”

She nipped his lip and his knees grew weak. “We can play again too.” She gave him a gentle push, and he sat on the bed. “But I still want you now. Is that a problem?” She crawled onto his lap.

He chuckled and shook his head. “Never.”

“Then let’s dance,” she whispered before claiming his mouth again.

CHAPTER 5

Bronx couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts and concerns ran through his head. Nightmares. Reliving Rei's death every night was the worst of it.

Rei snored softly next to him. She ran herself ragged with the campaign, and now she slept in a dreamless sleep. He was grateful to see her at peace. The exhaustion on her face became more visible each day. Although she and Praymer would meet in a few precious hours, she was out. Or perhaps she slept so soundly because he held all her worry through their bond.

If that were the case, then this sharing souls business was very inconvenient.

He slipped out of bed and pulled on a shirt and pants. The dim lights in the hallway kept too much light from spilling in and possibly waking Rei as Bronx slipped out. Once the door closed behind him, the corridor grew brighter. He followed the path before him until he ended up back in the common room. Stars flew by the large window and on one couch sat Artema.

"You too, eh?" he asked, taking a seat on the other couch. He sank into the plush of the cushions, silently cursing and wondering how he was going to get back out again.

"I'm just nervous seeing Anekris." She pulled at one of the loose threads on her nightgown. "The last time I saw him was when Mica, Atrius, and I fought him. I helped Atrius cut off his arm, and I am sure he hasn't forgiven that."

"I always wondered where he got that mechanical arm."

Bronx leaned back and rested his head on his hand. His gaze remained at the window as a cloudy nebula encapsulated the Alcubierre-Krasnikov tunnel that they traveled through. Wherever the wedding was taking place, it was far enough to require a tunnel that allowed them to travel faster than light.

His thoughts returned to Praymer's infamous arm. The metal appendage was a recognizable trait of the Dominion sovereign. It comforted Bronx to know that it was his previous self with Artema who had done the deed. Praymer deserved more than just losing an arm. Hopefully next time it would be Rei or Nik dealing the killing blow. Then his thoughts settled on his primary worry: Nik.

“What about you?” Artema asked.

“Arram almost had Rei convinced that she should talk to Praymer about Niklaryn—or at least Infiernen.”

Artema watched him, her dark eyes trying to find his, but he refused to meet her gaze. “You still haven’t told her the truth, have you?”

He continued staring out the window.

She wiped her face. “Bronx, I didn’t think you would be this stupid. Does she at least know you’ve been in contact with him?”

He remained silent.

Artema let out an exasperated breath and leaned forward. “I have respected the fact that you want to let Nik tell her, but it will only hurt her more the longer we wait. She deserves to know the truth.”

“I know,” Bronx said, turning to face her. “I want to tell her. But Nik made me promise not to say anything. Not to her, not to anyone.”

Artema closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her

nose with her thumb and forefinger. “He made me promise too.”

“See? You know it’s more than just that. Infieren has a part in all this. He needs to do more than pretend to play both teams to prove he’s worth redeeming. Until then, Rei’s not ready to learn the truth.”

Artema rolled her eyes. “Bronx, this is getting out of hand. You know Infieren has always been on our side. He has always been on Nik’s side.”

“Are we sure?” Bronx rubbed his face. “None of us know. Infieren has done so many terrible things over the years in the name of being a double agent. That truth is hard enough to understand in the first place. But Rei can’t know what Niklaryn did for the Dominion all these years, or worse, what he did to Arram—”

“You know it’s more complicated than that.”

“But that’s all they’re going to see.” Bronx sighed and rested his head against the back of the couch. “As far as how it looks, Niklaryn has done some questionable things in the last decade—”

“Niklaryn is innocent.” Artema’s voice was dangerously low. “Infieren made him do those things.”

“I know, Artema,” Bronx said. “But no one will buy it. I had lost hope for years. I thought Niklaryn had betrayed us too. You weren’t there on the battlefield that day. Nik walked off that battlefield, and the Negander followed him like he was their leader and then he—”

“Infieren attacked me.” Artema’s dark eyes challenged Bronx’s. She dared him to utter the truth he didn’t want to utter. “Not Niklaryn.”

Bronx sighed. “Even if we can convince the others, they will ask why Nik didn’t fight back all these years? Why did it take Rei’s death for him to come back?”

Artema took Bronx's hand and gave it a tight squeeze. "You know it doesn't work that way."

Bronx shook his head and sighed. "I know." Niklaryn had suffered so much trauma as a child, his brain adapted in the only way it could to move on. Bronx understood on some level. When he was a combat medic, he helped other officers who suffered from PTSD. But his training didn't prepare him for Niklaryn. He wouldn't know how to help someone whose pain ran so deep and so far back in his history.

"I have experience in these matters." Artema's voice was low. "The fact that Niklaryn has made himself visible for the first time in almost a decade is proof enough that he is stronger now. It just frustrates me he is determined to fight alone and wants to keep Rei in the dark. She needs to learn the truth. What if Praymer tells her? How do you think that's going to look when she finds out that you also knew and didn't tell her? This man—this abomination—who will do anything to claim her could use this truth to drive a wedge between the two of you."

Bronx's attention returned to the stars. Artema was right. After Kepler IV, he finally felt hope for his mentor, but having to maintain this secret meant he was damned either way. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt Rei. Learning the truth about Niklaryn could go horribly wrong, but knowing that Bronx had kept the truth from her could be equally devastating. He should have told her months ago, but every time he came close, he remembered his promise to Nik. He cursed his mentor for putting him in this position.

"I have not made it a secret that my brother and I don't get along," Bronx said after a time. "When I was a child, I was desperate for his acceptance. I didn't meet Crona until I was an adult, and Yuri was all I had besides our father. But

Yuri was cruel. Father sent me to the Daer Academy as soon as possible to protect me from Yuri. I told myself for years that I didn't need him because I had my own brothers and sisters in the knighthood. But then I met Nik." Bronx whispered the last sentence. "He was the first to call me brother, he stood by me, he protected me. One time, I had done something incredibly stupid when I was his apprentice because I wanted Nik to like to me. I fell into the same trap when I wanted Yuri's approval, and it could have cost me the knighthood. Had it been Yuri, he would have turned his back on me, but not Nik. He stood by me and even took the blame so I could stay in the program. I can't betray that kind of loyalty, even for Rei." Bronx tugged at one of the plants next to the sofa. He pressed the waxy leaf between his fingers as he remembered the day Niklaryn became his brother.

"I can't betray Nik's trust. Only he can explain his choices, his relationship with Infieren, and explain how he's been playing both sides all these years. It's not my story to tell, Artema. It's not yours either. I want to tell Rei, and I hate lying by omission, but I only know a small sliver of Nik's story. He has to come clean with his sister about his illness."

Infieren had done atrocious things in the name of the Dominion, including taking part in kidnapping all those women so that the Dominion would continue to believe that he was on their side; Niklaryn played a part as well, even if indirectly. Bronx told himself that his mentor could have stopped Infieren, yet he didn't. It made Nik look just as culpable.

It also didn't help that no one had seen neither Infieren nor Niklaryn in the last six months, which left Bronx in doubt that Niklaryn was still in control. The fact

that his mentor only ever responded with a cryptic message that ended with “trust me” did little to sway Bronx’s opinion.

“Have you heard from him?” Bronx asked. “Has he contacted you?”

Artema’s dark eyes watched a shooting star that flew by faster than their shuttle. “I did. He wrote to me shortly after Kepler IV. He was sorry for not being there for me all these years. He said he still loved me but needed to finish what he started. Only then could we be together again.” She closed her eyes, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

Bronx knew in that moment how much Nik hurt her by pulling away. He wished he could shake some sense into Nik, but he was just as stubborn as his other siblings.

“Self-righteous ass,” Bronx muttered, making Artema let out a soft chuckle. “He is so determined to take on Praymer himself.”

“You can say that again.”

“Self-righteous—”

“I didn’t mean literally, smartass.” Artema laughed a little louder. “But thank you. I hope we can get an idea of what his plans are. We all have the same goal. I hate not being able to help him.”

“Me too.” Bronx stood, groaning as he pulled himself out of the deep cushions. He should probably try to sleep again. He needed to be sharp when Praymer arrived. “If you could, what would you do for Nik?” he asked. “To help him?”

“I would drag him to Tas’und’eah myself. At least there, I know how to get him the help he needs.”

Bronx chuckled. “I hope you get a chance to. I want to see the two of you together. For now, just let Rei believe Nik is the hero of the narrative.”

“And Infiernen?”

“I won’t throw Infiernen into the mix until we know more.” Bronx gestured between them. “Until then, we keep it between us.”

Artema pressed her lips together until there was nothing more than a line. “I hate this.”

“Me too.”

CHAPTER 6

Arram had seen nothing more beautiful in his life. The wedding venue was on the most famous ship of the Ettowa Starline, the *Queen's Pearl*. It floated in the middle of the stars, just outside their ship, with the perfect view of Orion Nebula.

The common room housed the biggest window, and the swirl of colors reached well beyond the edges of the glass.

Arram had fancied himself an amateur astronomer when he was younger. He didn't have many friends since they moved so much, but he had an array of hobbies. When he lived in Ballarat and had a decent enough camera, he obsessively took photos of the Orion Nebula. Even when zoomed in all the way, the nebula looked so small in photographs, but Arram couldn't get enough of the pinks and purples and the vibrant green in the center.

Now the nebula filled the window, its edges reaching beyond the limits of the thick glass that protected him from the openness of space. Even though there was no sound outside, the colors swirled in a way that made Arram swear he heard music.

Crona joined him at the window, dressed in a blue gown so pale it appeared silver. He had opted for a suit in a similar color. Neither wanted to go alone, and they figured since they were regular drinking buddies, they'd opt for matching outfits.

"Wow," she whispered. "The photos don't do it justice."

Arram nodded, his eyes never leaving the surrounding kaleidoscope. The swirl of gas and dust shone like a light-

house, calling him home. He had to give his family credit; Ettowas knew the perfect place for a party.

A beep from the door brought Arram out of his head. It was Kaz, wearing a tunic in royal blue that he usually wore in his official role as a Volocio.

“We’ll be docking in an hour and then heading to the champagne reception. Apparently, Nana Lia is champing at the bit to meet both you and Rei.” Kaz winked.

“Nana Lia?” Arram asked. “Do we really call our grandmother that?”

“Not to her face.” His cousin’s smile widened. “She prefers Grandmamá Aurelia. I’m going to check if the others are ready.” He disappeared down the hall.

A pain pinched in Arram’s chest as he thought about the woman who raised him. He wished Virga could have seen him now. She always had impeccable taste. He still couldn’t bring himself to forgive her and Sagitan for not telling him that Rei was his sister or that he was the younger brother of the famous Niklaryn Ettowa. But he still missed them dearly. He never had to compete for their attention; he was raised an only child, his grandparents’ whole world. Despite that, he couldn’t understand the love that pushed people to lie, or a justification strong enough to value a lie over the truth.

“Are you all right?” Crona asked.

He nodded. “Just nostalgic. I used to show photos of this nebula to my grandmother when I was younger. She had promised me one day we would see it together.” His eyes pricked at the memory.

Crona linked arms with him and gave him a gentle squeeze.

“At least we can all see it together.” Rei’s voice rang out.

His sister entered with Bronx. She opted for a violet

dress that shimmered blue from a certain angle. Bronx wore a black-fitted jacket with a high neck, the button and border matching the shade of Rei's dress. She had spent most of the last six months wearing the same shade of god-queen-green, and she complained about it often. Arram understood the sentiment behind her fashion choice. Tonight she was not going as a Volocio on state business but as Rei attending her cousin's wedding.

Manden, Kaz, and Artema also joined, and the group watched as the ship crept closer to the hangar attached underneath the domed ship.

Sariah was the last to arrive.

"Elmessaa?" Kaz asked.

"She's getting ready. Her parents will meet us at the hangar so they can bring her down the aisle later," Sariah said as she inspected her dress that was dark as night.

The ship shifted under their feet as they landed. They then made their way to the main hatch, which opened with a hiss. An older couple and a familiar face met them; the latter beamed as they walked down the ramp.

"Hello, everyone," Skylar said, pulling Rei in for a hug. "It's good to see you all again."

Arram couldn't help but notice the dark bags under his cousin's eyes as the knight continued her round of hugs.

"He's not here yet," Sky muttered loud enough for the group to hear, and Arram's shoulders relaxed. They didn't have to deal with Praymer yet.

The couple approached the group warily, but it was obvious who they were: Elmessaa's parents, Jenson and Ildana Ettowa—or, technically, Arram's aunt and uncle. Even the words felt weird to say in his head since they were strangers to him.

"You even look like your father." The man extended a

hand to Arram, and he took it, yet his mouth hung open. Arram was about to say the same thing to Jenson. There were photos of his father, Jeanh Ettowa, all over the Nexus, and the man in front of him with the dark hair and sparkling blue eyes was a carbon copy.

“You’re his twin,” Crona blurted out from her position on Arram’s arm.

Jenson smiled at both Arram and Crona. “Correct. And you are?”

“Crona Sandern.”

“Sandern? Are you Riker Sandern’s daughter? From Wolf X?”

Crona stood a little straighter. “I am.”

“It’s so wonderful to meet you both finally.” Ildana towered over them, her midnight skin contrasted against a silvery gown that only further lent to her aura of authority.

“You have no idea how happy I am to finally meet you,” Rei said, taking their aunt’s hand. Ildana squeezed back and gave Rei a big smile.

“We miss your parents dearly,” Ildana said, cupping Rei’s face, and Arram swore his sister’s heart was about to burst. “But we are together again and that’s important.”

“I agree,” Rei whispered.

“Good. After the wedding, we should really talk about you finding a nice Dominion boy and not . . .” Ildana’s dark eyes glanced in Bronx’s direction. “A Manca.” Ildana and Jenson then continued their way to the shuttle where their daughter waited.

Arram held back a laugh at the woman’s gusto. But he had to use more strength to hold Crona back.

“That bi—” Arram cut Crona’s comment off, holding a hand over her mouth. Luckily, he lifted her with ease and

pulled her away from the ship. Arram's eyes met Kaz's and his cousin took the hint.

“Where's Nana Lia?” asked Kaz.

“This way.” Sky's eyes were wide but refrained from saying anything more as she pointed down the hallway before heading in that direction.

Arram looked at his sister. Her eyebrows furrowed and her lips turned down into a frown. Bronx chuckled. At least he found it as amusing as Arram did.

“Don't be disappointed, sis,” Arram said. “I told you the Ettowas only care about position and power. She's just upset because she can't manipulate you into a position that will benefit her.”

Rei sighed. “It's just . . . I think I know which 'good Dominion boy' she's referring to.”

Praymer.

Arram made a face. “Fair enough.”

The group followed Skylar down the first hallway of many. Most of the ship comprised of rooms for all the guests along the outer rim, with an enormous hall and a glass-domed ceiling in the center where the ceremony would take place. A ring of Daer Knights stood at attention around the ballroom. Sariah and Bronx waved to a few of them.

The nebula filled every visible inch of the glass ceiling. The view was even more glorious than on their little shuttle. Arram could have stopped where he stood to admire the view, but Crona pulled him, and his attention immediately drew to the straight-backed older woman who stood among a group of people. All eyes were on her.

Arram didn't know what to expect, but once her eyes caught him and his sister, her lips upturned into something resembling a smile. The woman was likely out of practice.

He had a hard time imagining any of her grandchildren calling her “Nana Lia.”

The older woman reached out to both Rei and Arram. He took her hand, but the gesture felt hollow. Just like his feelings for her. Her hands were dry, but her grip was firm. “It’s a pity Niklaryn is no longer with us. It would have been lovely to have the three of you together with me.” She tapped Rei lightly on the arm. “Sit up straighter, dear. You have the posture of a barmaid.”

“Well, until six months ago, that’s what I did for a living, and I enjoyed it,” his sister responded with an equal bite, and Arram held in a smile.

“Oh, how middle class.”

Rei glanced in Arram’s direction. Aurelia patted Rei’s hand again. “I apologize, Rei. I am not putting my best foot forward. I am sure you lived a lovely life in Ballarat. I simply wish that Niki had said something about where you were. It would have been nice to watch you both grow up.” The older woman then turned to Arram. “You look so much like your father.” She cupped his cheek. “Perhaps tomorrow, after the festivities have died down, we can sit and get to know each other. But until then, please come and let me show you off.”

Arram had no idea how many people belonged to the Ettowa clan. He thought there would be under two hundred guests, and yet he stood in a throng of at least a thousand—and a good percentage were relatives. Arram had a sinking suspicion that his aunt and uncle had invited more guests to share in this exclusive event. More and more people arrived. Too many people. Arram wondered if their secret location was, in fact, a secret at all.

Bronx and the others had disappeared at some point, but the reaper returned with bottles of Black Phoenix, the

popular beer on his home planet Wolf X. It was hard to find outside of the planet, and the joy on the reaper's face was infectious.

Eventually a herald announced that the wedding would begin shortly and that the guests should find their seats.

Rei, Arram, and Kaz took their seats in the front row next to the Ettowa matriarch. Manden also sat down next to them—the god king should sit near the queen. Aurelia's dry hands continued to hold Rei's and Arram's. Rei sniffled softly. His sister had waited for this moment for so long, but Arram had mixed feelings. Try as he might, he could not relate to these people. Rei was his sister, and that was enough for him. He didn't need the others, and he didn't need some old lady's hand. But the way she squeezed reminded him of Virga and how much he wished she and Sagitan were at his side. He told himself that for now he would close his eyes and pretend it was so. He could dream for a few moments that they were still alive and could almost hear his grandmother's laugh and the smell of the cedar wood cologne his grandfather wore.

The murmur of the crowd crescendoed as something new occurred further back, bringing him out of his head and out of his fantasy. Aurelia sighed. "Of course he had to make an entrance."

Arram twisted to get a better look. Several Negander knights with their blood red cloaks entered the room and lined up along the outside of the pews. He couldn't see, but Arram knew who it was.

Anekris Praymer walked down the aisle. His suit was a midnight blue that brought out the sapphire shade of his eyes.

His golden hair was slicked back in waves. His right hand was no longer flesh, but mechanical. He brushed back

a stray lock in a motion that looked almost human. Arram knew it was all a facade; Praymer had the look of a man who could have a family slaughtered without a second thought.

Aurelia patted Rei's hand. "Don't worry, darling. You are safe with us." Their grandmother meant well, but Arram knew his sister didn't feel safe. Praymer's eyes scanned the aisle until he met Rei's, and he gave her a grin that reminded Arram of a hawk finally about to capture its prey.

*Newsletter subscribers
get Niklaryn's short
story for free*

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

M. L. TISHNER



THE KNIGHT AND THE GODDESS

A REBIRTH STORY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mari, a native Hoosier, currently lives in southern Germany where she entertains people with her adventures as an American expat in the Land of Beer and Pretzels on her blog and YouTube channel Adventures of La Mari.com as well as the adventures of her pugs, Abner and Roxy. When she's not writing, Mari cooks, snowboards, dances to the beat of her own drum, reads late into the night, and binge watches Netflix with her husband. *Go to mltishner.com to learn more about the world of the Rebirth Saga.*



Author Photo © **Tobias Vogt**

