

Arcaia, Baran
Planet Dekka
Nellex
JS.VC.NS.795.697

Chapter One

Sato

My own choking coughs wake me up with a start. I quickly shove this being's arm — Lora? Loa? — from where it was slung across my chest and shoot up from kur bed. For a few agonising moments, all I can do is sit there, seized by the splutters tightening my lungs.

I have really got to find a cleaner city to indulge in my habits, for star's sake. At this point, I'm purposely trying to suffocate to death. With a grunt, I clear phlegm, spitting the yellowy mush out on the dirty floor before remembering Lora doesn't have a minibot to clean up after kur. Oh, well. Blinking away the gound in my eyes, I check the holographic clock projected on the bedside table: mark 0910. Frig, I need to get back home before Gobi finds out I've been out all night. Again.

Crumpled clothes lay strewn across the bed and I grab my vest top from between the pile. I strain as I lean, regretting not taking up Gamble's dare for a bio-arm fitting. Pulling the vest over my head, my eyes dart to the torn curtains. Light from the Salon's sign below us casts Lora's room in a neon red glow. It's smoky, and still dark outside. But barely. The sun will start rising soon.

As I shimmy into my trousers, Lora's low wheezing halts suddenly. Ki sits up and gasps for air, gulping as much as ki can like it's cool water in a desert.

'You're leaving already?' ki asks when the coughing subsides, kur dark brown curls a tousled mane.

'Yep.' *Where the frig are my boots? I came up from the Salon with them, right?*

I find them tucked underneath the bed and yank them on, wondering how they got wedged between the wooden blocks supporting Lora's sunken mattress.

'Stay a little longer.' Lora traces a slow finger along the back of my shaved head to the tattoo under my ear. 'C'mon, it's Saturday.'

I frown at the lightheartedness in kur tone briefly before realising what ki means. Today's the only day of the week trods get an extra three hours before they've got to get up for work.

'Enjoy it, then.' I lean away from kur touch. 'If Gobi catches me out again, ki'll sever my credit. Along with my neck.'

'Please,' Lora snorts, pulling the covers closer to kur. 'You're kur child, severing your credit is probably the worst that could happen to you.'

'Doubt it.' I turn to face kur. 'I could be made to work in an oxygen bar that, ironically, doesn't pay me enough credit to top up my own Tank regularly.'

Even in the dim light, I see Lora's middle finger protrude clearly. As if on cue, kur body seizes into another coughing fit. I look at kur, almost feeling pity as ki rummages around piles of junk scattered around kur room, scouring the mess for the Tank ki flung to the floor last night.

The air pollution in this city is getting worse every rotation. With the amount of waste produced from the igwelium trods have to mine, Arcaia in the winter is practically a chamber of toxic smog. But since Director Krome wants igwelium and trods have a production quota to fulfil, the best keyy get is a mouth mask keyy need to constantly top up. A shudder snakes down my spine. *Stars, I'm so glad I don't live in this dump.*

'Frig,' Lora swears loudly. The tank ki's got is cheap, one that needs canisters and a battery charger. Of which Lora has neither.

'Are you just gonna sit there and smirk at me?' ki snaps, kur full lips pressing into a thin line.

I shrug. 'Well, it is a little funny. That model is probably as old as the Occupation itself.'

'So how 'bout you buy me a new one, then?'

'Nice try,' I say as I get up and put my jacket on. 'But you've already been given enough credit from me. Plus, what kind of message would it send if I just gave it away for free?'

Lora's lips curl and ki shakes kur head. 'You beings are all the same. Leeches, the lot of you.'

I arch my brow, the deep scar running through it pulling the stretched skin further. I'm surprised at the insolence in kur venomous tone.

'I'll let you get away with that this time since my blocker's still activated and you know I can't be caught being here.' I grab my wallet and head for the door. 'But next

time I won't warn you when I turn it off. I'm sure you'd love to have your opinions wired straight to the Keepers. Good seeing you, Lora.'

'My name is Laori!' ki yells after me but by then I've already slammed the door.

Striding back down the narrow corridor, I fish for the blocker in my pocket and press the button until the blue light switches off. The floorboards groan underneath my feet as I descend the stairs toward the emergency exit. It leads straight into the Salon.

As soon I'm out of the drinking den, the smell of sulphur penetrates my nostrils. *Stars, it smells putrid;* I rush to hook the small, curved rods of my Tank around the back of my ears. How the frig these trods endure it, I don't know, and I definitely don't care to experience. The Tank bleeps and its translucent green screen activates around my mouth, filtering out toxic air.

I make my way down the fire escape route of this decrepit building unit, stepping over an unconscious trod slumped on the steps. Once I'm on ground level, I head toward the alley I left my bike in.

But the sight of a black Tempest halts me in my tracks.

The large van floats quietly, poised. The only beings allowed to drive vehicles like that serve the Director. Keepers. Uplookers. Enforcers.

Censors. Like Gobi.

I keep my head down and my pace steady as I walk past its darkened windows. Behind me, the door to the Tempest opens. Boots hit the ground.

'Satø.'

Frig. Rolling my eyes, I stop in my tracks and turn around, expecting to see one of Gobi's guards ready to march me back home. But though this figure wears the familiar double-breasted jacket associated with Krome's Class, I don't recognise kur. And I don't like the way ki heads toward me, like a predator on a hunt.

I eye the stranger coolly. 'Who's asking?'

Instead of answering, the stranger clamps a hand on my shoulder. In a flash, my hand grips onto kurs. I twist right and drop my weight, the force dragging kur with me. Before ki can counter, I bring my knee to kur nose and it lands with a satisfying crunch.

I lift my leg, ready to straddle my opponent and rain more blows but before I can, a current of electricity courses through my veins. The shocks are a hot, piercing vibration, like lava shooting through every single nerve. I land on my back, paralysed.

I didn't notice the other figure get out of the van.

'I hope that was gratifying for you.' The being kneels down, taser still in hand. Kur eyes are completely red against kur dark brown skin — a Kenkoi. 'But was it really worth your disobedience?'

I spit in kur face in response and ki wipes it off kur eye, revolted. Grabbing my jacket collar, ki yanks me up and drags me toward the back of the van before I can stand on my own feet. The sun has risen by now, illuminating the filthy slums in morning light. But I'm plunged into darkness again with a toss, the van doors slamming shut. Great.

Next time, Satō, just stay longer in bed.

One minute bleeds into the next as the van glides. There's a blocker chipped into it somewhere and with no way of making contact with anyone, I pass the time by lighting cigarette after cigarette. Wherever the destination, I'll only have to tell kem who Gobi is for kem to release me. I relax into my seat, leaning my head back. Or if keiy're mercenaries, Gobi can pretend ki'll pay off whatever amount I'm bargained for before having kem all killed. I shake my head amusedly.

I hope these beings have loved ones keiy care about. I'm going to enjoy watching keir hearts break.

The van glides to a stop, steadily lowering to the ground before the engine switches off. Low grumbles are exchanged for a moment before the Kenkoi comes round the back to open the doors. Ki ushers me forward with a flick of a finger. I get up, stretching slowly before jumping out the van. It's only when I've tossed my finished cigarette and looked around that I see I've been taken to...my house?

Okay...

'Well, as fun as it was being kidnapped,' I turn to the mercenary who tased me, 'I've got sleep to catch up on. Thanks for the lift.'

'Not so fast, firecracker.' Ki holds onto my shoulder as we walk up the long driveway to my house. 'There's someone who wants to see you.'

As we approach the door, I frown. It's been kicked in. The glass window pane has shattered and my boots crunch against the shards as we make our way into the reception hall.

Where Gobi kneels amidst a pool of blood.

My head swings left to right, scanning my surroundings. Android-2693 lies in a heap of torn limbs and frayed wires. The spiral stairwell is caked in red. The trail leads directly to Gobi, who's breathing hard.

'What's going on?' I ask kur.

'Satō, you shouldn't —'

'You know, Satō, when I employed your guardian, I did it because out of every human I've ever met no one has served my Domain so ruthlessly diligent as kur.'

I watch the figure sauntering out of the drawing room. Ki holds an okalite rod in kur hand, wisps of smoke still drifting from the branding iron. I swallow hard at the blood coated on it.

'Director Krome,' I start. Even though I see kur often enough, watching kur empty gaze, kur black military overcoat flowing behind kur as ki walks makes my heart palpitate. 'What a pleasure.'

'Is it?'

Gobi looks up at me desperately. 'Satō, whatever ki says, I'm —' Gobi is silenced with a hand the Director lightly places on kur shoulder.

'You're a clever youngling,' Krome says to me, tapping kur fingers on Gobi's shoulder. 'Tell me, what would you do if someone had purposely not reported vital information involving a plot to undermine my rule?'

'Punish kem for keir weakness.' I don't even think as I say it. Weakness is sin. Only the strongest survive Krome's Domain. Only the strongest deserve to.

It's a mantra that's been repeated to me since the day I could understand words.

'Wait... ' my voice trails off as realisation hits me harder than a steel ball. I look from Gobi to Krome, who wears the faintest hint of a smile.

'But, why...?' I ask Gobi, anger suddenly twisting in my chest. *Why would ki betray Krome? Why would ki be so stupid?*

'Your guardian will be executed, along with Xal and the other perpetrators, tomorrow at dawn,' Krome says casually, like ki's in the middle of buttering toast.

My heart sinks to my gut like an anchor. *Gobi's going to die.* In seconds, my senses blur, thoughts swirling so fast I can barely concentrate on what Krome is saying next.

'I wanted to tell you this personally because, unlike Gobi, I respect you.' The Director's teeth grit as ki talks, kur nails digging into Gobi's shoulder deep enough to make kur wince hard. *'I would never crawl behind your back like a filthy rat in the dark.'*

'Wait...is there anything I can do instead?' My armpits prickle with sweat. When Krome's brow arches, outrage threatening kur glacial expression, I continue quickly. 'Not that I'm disagreeing with you. Your punishment is just, Director. It's just...I...' *I haven't got anyone else. Gobi is the only family I have left.*

'My guardian's sins are my own, Director,' I continue, forcing myself to stay as composed as Krome is. 'Let me atone for them. There must be something I can do. But please...spare kur life.'

Krome stays silent, kur fully black eyes boring into mine. The moment stretches endlessly, until I almost feel my bones ache with frantic anticipation. I open my

mouth to talk again but Kur guard silences me with a hand. The one whose nose I kneed. Ki stands behind Director Krome with a smug sneer, practically licking Kur lips in pleasure.

Krome tilts Kur head thoughtfully. 'Gobi will spend Kur life in solitary confinement, that much is certain. But if you want Kur life spared, perhaps there is something you can do for me.'

'Anything.'

'Then I have a task for you, youngling.' Krome's dark eyes glitter mischievously.

'Only, you may not return from it alive.'

