

Galaxy

Ties

Book 4:

Chaos and Judgements

Chapter One: The Silence of Karolia

There's an unknown in this story. The destruction of Karolia was no accident.

No declaration of war had preceded it. No invading fleet had darkened the planet's skies, and no warning had reached the Karolian council. There had been no threats, failed negotiations, or border disputes—nothing that might explain the cruelty that followed.

Death came swiftly, accomplished its purpose, and departed without remorse.

On the day the fuse of that terrible event was lit, Primi—the gifted apprentice of the all-powerful Apostle Hindel—was visiting Karolia. An unexplained illness had left her feverish and drained of nearly all her living energy. While the Karolians waited for her recovery, she rested inside the royal palace's medical bay, unaware that the world beyond its walls had fallen silent.

A faint twinkle returned to Primi's heavenly, almond-shaped eyes.

Warm tan light passed over her body in measured intervals, traveling from her forehead to the tips of her tiny, bell-shaped feet. With each sweep, the medical cot beneath her quietly recorded the rhythm of her heart, the flow of energy through her veins, and the slow return of her consciousness.

Primi blinked.

Above her, the curved ceiling of a narrow Karolian medical pod came into focus. Its polished inner walls reflected the scanning light, surrounding her in a soft amber glow. The air smelled faintly of healing herbs and charged metal.

She could not remember falling asleep.

For several moments, she remained still, listening to the low hum of the machinery. Her limbs felt unusually heavy, as if invisible weights had been fastened to her bones. Even breathing required more effort than it should have.

Then the final band of light crossed her body.

A gentle chime sounded.

Primi pushed herself upright. The moment her feet touched the floor, the scanning light withdrew into the wall and returned to its dormant state.

She sat on the edge of the cot, gathering her strength.

No larger than the smallest Karolian adolescent, Primi did not resemble the legendary warrior people whispered about. Her delicate frame, youthful face, and wide, luminous eyes often caused strangers to underestimate her. They saw a child where they should have seen a force of nature.

Primi had mastered the manipulation of living energy—an ancient power that flowed through every creature, seed, and cell. With sufficient focus, she could shape that energy into living entities formed entirely by her will. Hindel had recognized the enormity of her gift and entrusted her with a staff capable of focusing her awakened abilities.

With the staff in her hands, commanding such power required almost no effort.

Without it, the power was unpredictable.

Primi looked beside the cot.

Her staff was not there.

Neither were her traveling garments, satchel, or ceremonial cloak. Only the pale medical robe remained, hanging loosely from her shoulders.

“Strange,” she whispered.

She rose carefully and walked toward the pod’s sealed door. Her balance returned with each step, though a dull pressure still throbbed behind her eyes. She placed her palm against the locking pad.

The mechanism flickered.

For an instant, she thought it might deny her access. Then the lock released with a metallic click, and the door folded into the wall.

Primi stepped into the medical bay.

Silence greeted her.

She stopped.

The room was long and rectangular, bordered by several empty medical pods. Cabinets had been left open. A silver tray lay overturned near the far wall, its instruments scattered across the floor. One of the ceiling lights flickered weakly, casting restless shadows over the abandoned workstations.

“Hello?” Primi called.

Her voice traveled into the adjoining corridor and returned as a faint echo.

No one answered.

She listened for footsteps, distant conversations, or even the gentle chiming of the palace systems. Karolia's royal palace was never quiet. Its halls were normally crowded with healers, scholars, guards, messengers, and visiting dignitaries.

Now she heard nothing—not even the wind.

“Where is everyone?”

A cold uneasiness passed through her.

Primi examined every corner of the medical bay, but there was no sign of the Karolian healers who had been caring for her. More troubling still, she found no evidence of a struggle. There were no scorched walls, no bodies, and no weapons.

It was as though everyone had simply vanished.

She hurried to the storage compartment where her belongings should have been secured. The compartment stood open and empty.

Her staff was gone.

Primi's breathing quickened.

She raised her left hand and studied the battered silver ring resting upon one finger. Rust stained its shallow engravings, and several scratches marked its surface. She had carried it since the earliest days of her apprenticeship, long before Hindel entrusted her with the staff.

“It has been forever since I used this,” she murmured.

She pressed her thumb against the ring.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then a spark appeared above her knuckle.

The spark expanded into a tiny sphere of multi-colored light. It hovered above her hand, trembling like a newly awakened creature. Primi closed her fist and focused on the missing staff, recalling its weight, its energy, and the unique living essence Hindel had sealed inside it.

The sphere brightened.

“Find it,” she commanded.

The light darted away.

Primi followed as it raced from the medical bay and into the palace corridors. The coral sphere scattered into several smaller lights at each intersection, searching the branching passageways before joining together again.

Everywhere Primi looked, she found more evidence of sudden abandonment.

Meals remained untouched on tables. Doors stood open. A child's jeweled toy lay in the center of one hallway. Along the palace walls, banners bearing the golden crest of Karolia hung motionless in the stale air.

Still, there were no people.

The farther she traveled, the stronger her uneasiness became. She attempted to sense the living energy around her, expecting to feel thousands of Karolian souls throughout the palace and the city beyond.

She felt almost nothing.

Only a few distant sparks remained—weak, frightened, and rapidly moving away from the planet.

The ball of light began to glow blue and accelerated down the hallway.

“Wait!” Primi called, struggling to keep pace.

It swept through the royal receiving chamber and passed beneath a pair of towering doors. The doors were partially open, revealing the broad observation balcony beyond them.

The light stopped.

Primi approached it, breathless. With a motion of her hand, she drew the sphere back into the ring. Its coral glow collapsed into a spark and disappeared.

She stepped onto the balcony.

The sight before her stole the air from her lungs.

Beyond the palace stretched the capital city—or what remained of it. Towers had been split open. Entire districts were dark. Karolian vessels burned as they drifted through the upper atmosphere, leaving ribbons of black smoke against the dark orange sky.

Farther out, beyond the moon and the scattered debris, an enormous battleship hung in space.

It resembled a jagged black meteor torn from the heart of a dead world. Its rocky armor was threaded with mechanical veins that pulsed a sickly crimson. Hundreds of weapon ports covered its uneven surface, while massive engines burned behind it like red eyes.

Primi knew who controlled the vessel.

It belonged to the Lurkitt battalion.

Through the living energy surrounding the ship, she sensed hundreds of imprisoned Karolians trapped inside—terrified, wounded, but alive. The presence of so many captives pressed against her mind at once.

Her missing staff was among them.

“No,” she whispered.

A deeper vibration passed through the balcony.

Primi looked down.

Along the battleship’s forward hull, the mechanical veins had begun to brighten. Streams of red energy flowed toward a circular opening at the vessel’s center. The weapon within it awakened with a glow so intense that it stained the stars crimson.

Primi’s face tightened into a scowl.

She raised both hands and summoned what little strength had returned to her. Pale strands of living energy curled around her fingers, but they sputtered and dissolved before taking shape.

She was too weak.

The battleship was too far away.

And without her staff, there was no way to focus enough power to stop what was coming.

“Oh, no.”

The cannon fired.

“NO!”

A gigantic beam of pulsating red energy erupted from the Lurkitt battleship. It crossed the distance in a heartbeat and struck Karolia with the force of a dying star.

The beam pierced the planet’s surface and plunged directly into its core.

For one impossible moment, everything became still.

Then a crimson fracture appeared beneath the royal palace.

It raced across the capital, dividing streets, buildings, and towering monuments as it spread toward the horizon. Countless fractures followed, branching across the planet like glowing veins. Mountains split down their centers. Oceans poured into bottomless chasms. Cities folded into the earth as the world began collapsing from within.

The balcony buckled beneath Primi's feet.

She threw out her hands as the palace tilted violently. The sky turned crimson, and the distant stars disappeared behind a blinding wall of light.

Then the palace was gone.

From space, Karolia appeared to lose its shape.

Its atmosphere faded first, peeling away in thin layers of violet and gold. The surface followed, becoming dimmer and less distinct with each passing second. Continents dissolved into shadow. Oceans vanished. The planet's fiery core briefly remained, glowing like a dying ember in the darkness.

Then it, too, disappeared.

There was no tremendous explosion.

No shattered continents hurtled into space. No storm of rock or metal spread across the surrounding system. There was no dust, no fire, and no planetary debris.

Karolia simply ceased to exist.

Within moments, nothing remained where an entire civilization had once lived.

Only empty space.

Inside the main cockpit of the Lurkitt battleship, King Rammer stared at the vacant region displayed across the observation screen.

The command chamber was carved from black stone and reinforced with bands of dark-red metal. Mechanical veins crawled along its walls, carrying energy throughout the enormous vessel. Lurkitt officers worked silently at their stations, careful not to draw the attention of the four figures standing at the center of the room.

King Rammer occupied the raised command platform.

He was enormous even by Lurkitt standards, his scaled body covered in armor forged from the metals of conquered worlds. A jagged obsidian crown rested upon his head, framing a face shaped by cruelty and contempt.

His three Counts stood behind him, positioned only a few feet apart in their scaled, dark-red armor.

A look of disappointment crossed the king's face.

The Counts noticed immediately.

"What bothers you, Your Majesty?" Guilton asked before either of the others could respond.

He stood to the king's right, rigidly at attention. Madness burned behind his eyes, accompanied by an almost inspirational devotion to his commander. Of the three Counts, Guilton was the most destructive—and the least capable of hiding his hunger for violence.

King Rammer continued staring at the empty space where Karolia had been.

"Oh, it is nothing," he replied with a smirk. "I simply thought there would be a bigger explosion."

Guilton leaned forward eagerly.

"Then let me go blow something up for you, Your Majesty!"

One of the other Counts glanced toward him with disgust, but Guilton did not notice. He was already imagining cities collapsing beneath his weapons.

"No, Guilton," King Rammer said sharply. "That is not important."

He turned away from the observation screen and fixed his cold gaze upon the eager Count.

"You know what comes next. Go and do it."

Guilton immediately straightened.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

"You are dismissed."

Guilton struck a fist against his armored chest in salute.

"I will inform you when the mission is complete."

He turned and strode toward the cockpit exit. As the enormous doors opened before him, a devilish grin spread across his face. Whatever task awaited him, he was already thinking about the suffering he could cause along the way.

Behind him, King Rammer looked once more at the vacant stretch of space.

There was nothing unusual on the screen. No movement. No energy readings. No evidence that Karolia had ever occupied that part of the universe.

The king turned away without another thought.

As far as the Lurkitts were concerned, the planet and everyone left upon it were gone.

Chapter Two: What Was Forgotten

Far beyond the vanished world of Karolia, across an expanse of space untouched by Lurkitt rule, morning settled over another world.

The planet turned slowly beneath a single yellow sun.

From orbit, it looked peaceful: blue oceans, broad continents, and scattered clouds drifting through a thin atmosphere. Far below, in a sprawling city called Haven Crest, sunlight glinted from glass towers and steel bridges. Transit vessels streamed between the buildings while academy cruisers patrolled the upper airways.

From above, the city appeared peaceful.

Inside one modest apartment, however, peace had already lost the battle.

A loud echo tore Kraig out of a frantic, sweat-soaked sleep.

He sprang upright, gasping for air.

For several seconds, he remained frozen on the edge of his bed, his heart pounding violently against his ribs. The remnants of a dream clung to his mind—flashes of red light, cities crumbling, and a loud painful scream.

Then it was gone.

Kraig wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked around.

His mouth fell open.

The bedroom appeared to have been struck by a small tornado. The dresser had been dragged several feet from the wall and turned onto its side. Both chairs lay overturned. Clothes were scattered across the floor, and one leg of his favorite pair of jeans had somehow become wrapped around the ceiling fan.

The fan continued to rotate slowly, carrying the jeans around with it like a defeated flag.

Kraig stared at them.

“What the—”

He stopped, unable to find words strong enough for what he was seeing.

The door to his bedroom hung from a single hinge. Splintered pieces of the frame littered the floor beneath it. A long crack ran through the wall beside the doorway, continuing upward until it disappeared into the ceiling.

“I don’t believe...” Kraig muttered. “How could—”

A loose drawer slipped from the overturned dresser and crashed onto the floor.

“Damn it!”

Fear and confusion battled across his face.

He searched his memory, but the previous night existed only in scattered fragments. He remembered returning from combat training at the academy. He remembered throwing his uniform over a chair, opening a bottle Derek had brought home, and settling in front of the gaming system.

After that, there was nothing.

Kraig climbed carefully out of bed. His bare foot landed on something hard, and a sharp pain shot through his heel.

“Ah!”

He lifted his foot and discovered one of his academy medals beneath it. The silver emblem was bent almost completely in half.

“What happened in here?”

He stepped over the wreckage and entered the hallway.

Two framed pictures had fallen from the wall. One showed Kraig and Derek on their first day at the academy, dressed in uniforms that were too large for them and wearing the proud expressions of young men who had no idea what they were getting into. The other captured them several years later, bruised and exhausted after completing their first planetary survival trial.

Kraig picked up the second picture and wiped a layer of dust from its surface. The glass had cracked between their faces.

As he reached to return it to the wall, something near the floor caught his attention.

A hole had been punched through the bottom corner of the hallway wall.

Kraig lowered the picture.

The opening was narrow and uneven, surrounded by torn wallpaper and broken plaster. Wood shavings and dust filled most of the cavity. It could have been caused by a piece of furniture striking the wall, but something about its shape seemed wrong.

It appeared to have been made from the inside.

Kraig crouched and leaned closer.

Beyond the plaster and splintered wood, something shimmered faintly in the darkness.

“What...is that?”

The light was too steady to be a spark and too bright to be a reflection. Its color shifted between silver and a deep, oceanic blue, pulsing at a slow rhythm.

Kraig placed the picture on the floor and began clearing away the debris. The farther he reached into the opening, the colder the air became. His fingertips brushed against something smooth.

A knock sounded at the front door.

Kraig struck his head against the wall.

“Damn it!”

The knock came again, louder this time.

“Hold on!”

He reluctantly withdrew his hand and pushed himself upright. A thin layer of pale dust coated his fingers. When he glanced into the hole again, the mysterious shimmer had disappeared.

Kraig hesitated.

A third series of knocks rattled the front door.

“I said I’m coming!”

He crossed the hallway and entered the living room—then stopped so abruptly that he nearly tripped over his own feet.

The bedroom had merely been disturbed.

The living room had been demolished.

The couch lay on its back with its cushions scattered across the floor. The bookshelf had fallen against the wall, spilling books and data tablets everywhere. Both chairs had been overturned,

the entertainment system was partially dismantled, and every loose object in the room appeared to have been thrown in a different direction.

One of Derek's boots sat inside the decorative bowl on the dining table.

Kraig stared at the destruction.

"Oh, come on!"

Frustration sharpened every step as he marched toward the front door. He nearly slipped on a magazine, kicked it aside, and pressed his eye to the peephole.

A familiar broad silhouette stood outside.

Kraig released a relieved breath and opened the door.

A flashing green light exploded into his face.

He yelped and fell backward, landing hard on the floor.

Laughter erupted from the hallway.

"Are you serious, Derek?"

The dark silhouette stepped into the apartment. As the strobing light moved away from Kraig's eyes, the intruder transformed into a bald, solidly built man with broad shoulders and the restless energy of someone who considered standing still a personal insult.

Derek held a cylindrical device above his head. Green light flashed rapidly from its glass center.

"I found it!" he exclaimed.

His victorious smile disappeared when he surveyed the apartment.

He slowly lowered the device.

"Damn," he said. "They really messed this place up, didn't they?"

Kraig's irritation gave way to suspicion.

"They?"

Derek looked at him.

"Who is 'they'?" Kraig demanded.

For the first time since entering, Derek appeared uncertain.

“Um...are you serious?”

Kraig rose from the floor and dusted off his sleep clothes. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

“You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?”

Derek studied him more carefully. “What happened to you at the academy yesterday? Did you hit your head during training?”

“The last thing I remember is coming home, changing clothes, and getting on the game.” Kraig gestured toward the devastated apartment. “Then I woke up to this. What am I not remembering?”

Derek glanced around the room, as though searching for confirmation that Kraig’s confusion was genuine.

Then his attention returned to the device in his hand.

“So you don’t remember this?”

Without warning, he threw it directly at Kraig’s head.

Kraig stepped sideways and caught the cylinder in one smooth motion.

The movement required almost no effort. One instant the device was flying toward his face; the next, it rested securely in his hand.

“What is wrong with you?” Kraig shouted. “Are you mental?”

“No,” Derek said, laughing. “But apparently you are.”

Kraig examined the device. The green light had stopped flashing, revealing a dark metallic casing covered in unfamiliar markings. It was heavier than it looked and unnaturally cold.

“I told you not to drink from that bottle,” Derek continued. “Whatever was in it must’ve scrambled part of your memory.”

Kraig looked up sharply. “What bottle?”

Derek’s smile weakened.

“Oh, this is worse than I thought.”

Kraig tightened his grip around the device. A hard, focused expression settled over his face as he tried to force the previous night back into his mind.

For the briefest instant, he saw something.

A stranger standing in the living room.

A brilliant flash.

Derek shouting his name.

The memory disappeared before Kraig could grasp it.

Derek watched him intensely. “Anything?”

Kraig looked directly at him.

“No.”

The humor drained from Derek’s expression. He crossed the distance between them and placed a reassuring hand on Kraig’s shoulder.

“I’m sure it’ll come back,” he said. “Give it some time.”

He pulled Kraig into a brief, brotherly embrace before surveying the wreckage again.

“But for right now, we should probably clean this up.”

Kraig gave him a suspicious look but bent to gather the loose papers covering the floor. “Are you going to tell me what happened?”

Derek moved to the fallen bookshelf and lifted it upright with a strained grunt.

“I don’t know if I should.”

“That is not an acceptable answer.”

“If I tell you everything, you might start filling the empty spaces with whatever I say. Then you won’t know which memories are real.”

Kraig straightened with a stack of papers in his hands. “Since when did you become an expert on memory loss?”

“Since about thirty seconds ago.”

“Derek.”

“I’m serious.” Derek began returning books to the shelf. “What happens if you force it and make things worse?”

Kraig gestured broadly at the overturned furniture. “Does this mess have something to do with my memory?”

Derek paused with a book in each hand.

“Yeah,” he admitted.

“What happened?”

“I told you—I don’t think I should explain it yet.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ll ask more questions.”

“Of course I’ll ask more questions!”

“And then you’ll hurt yourself trying to make it all make sense.”

“It already hurts because none of it makes sense!”

Kraig opened his mouth to continue the argument, but his gaze drifted toward the clock above the fireplace.

The display read **12:48 p.m.**

His face went pale.

“Oh, crap.”

Derek frowned. “What?”

“Tanya will be here at two.”

For the first time that morning, Kraig’s confusion was overwhelmed by pure panic.

He dropped the papers into separate piles and began rushing around the room, categorizing everything with frantic determination.

“We have seventy-two minutes,” he said. “Help me fix this place!”

Derek remained beside the bookshelf.

Kraig lifted one end of the couch and glanced over his shoulder. Derek had not moved.

“Am I missing something?”

Derek slowly folded his arms.

“But that you remember?”

“What?”

“You don’t remember destroying the apartment. You don’t remember the bottle. You don’t remember this.” He pointed toward the metal cylinder. “But you remember exactly when Tanya is coming over?”

“Some information is more important than other information.”

“Apparently.”

Derek’s familiar smirk returned. “Does Tanya have a sister?”

A book flew across the room.

Derek ducked, and it struck the wall behind him.

“Aw, chill!” he said, laughing. “You don’t have to be like that. It was just a question.”

“Are you going to help me or not?” Kraig demanded. “You know this will be her first time coming over.”

“Whoa, calm down. I just like getting under your skin.” Derek picked up the book and placed it on the shelf. “She really brings it out of you.”

Kraig pushed the couch back toward its proper position.

“You planning to ask her the big question tonight?” Derek added sarcastically.

Kraig stopped moving.

“Damn,” he said slowly.

Derek’s eyebrows rose.

Kraig turned toward him. “Are you psychic or something?”

The amusement disappeared from Derek’s face.

“You’re serious?”

“Yeah.” Kraig resumed cleaning, suddenly avoiding his friend’s eyes. “Actually, I was going to ask if you’d move out if she says yes.”

Derek stared at him.

The room fell silent.

For several long seconds, neither man moved. Derek’s face hardened into an expression of wounded disbelief.

Then Kraig smiled.

Both men burst into laughter.

“Oh, you almost had me!” Derek said, pressing one hand against his chest. “I was about to remind you whose name is first on the lease.”

“That’s what you get.” Kraig threw a cushion at him. “Now come on. Help me clean.”

They worked together, returning furniture to its proper place and gathering the scattered objects. The apartment gradually began to resemble a home again, though deep scratches in the floor and cracks along the walls remained impossible to hide.

Kraig carried an armful of clothes toward his bedroom.

Derek waited until his friend disappeared down the hallway.

His smile faded.

He crossed to the window and stared beyond the neighboring towers. The sun burned brightly above Haven Crest, illuminating civilian transports, academy vessels, and the distant mountain ranges surrounding the city.

Derek searched the sky.

His fingers curled around the green-light device, tightening until the muscles in his forearm stood out beneath his skin.

A stern, troubled expression settled over his face.

“What’s going on?” he whispered.

The device flickered once in his hand.

Derek looked toward the highest reaches of the atmosphere, where the blue sky deepened into the blackness of space.

“Where are you?”

Chapter Three: The Broken Crescent

From the heavens, Serbemia appeared less like a planet and more like a jewel resting in the darkness of creation.

Its oceans were vast and brilliantly blue, covering nearly the entire world. In the center of that endless water rose a single sprawling continent, sculpted into mountainous ridges, deep green valleys, golden plains, and jagged cliffs. The tallest peaks curled around the mainland like the fingers of a colossal hand, sheltering the fertile valleys within. Rivers flowed from those mountains in silver ribbons, carrying melted snow through forests and farmland before emptying into the sea.

The surface people believed Hindel had raised the mountains from the ocean with his own hands. The valleys, they said, were the impressions left by his fingers, while the surrounding waters had spilled from his palms.

Beneath those waters existed another kingdom.

Far below the restless waves, where sunlight descended in pale, wavering columns, lived the ocean-born Serbemians. They built their cities among coral forests and volcanic trenches, shaping towers from luminous stone and carving temples into the walls of underwater mountains. They could breathe beneath the sea as naturally as surface dwellers breathed air, yet they could also walk upon the land when necessity required it.

The ocean-born had their own king and queen. Their own laws. Their own ceremonies surrounding birth, marriage, death, and war.

They knew of the people above them, just as the surface kingdom knew of them. Treaties older than any living ruler allowed the two cultures to coexist in peace, but peace did not make them one people. Neither kingdom participated in the customs of the other. The people of the valleys did not descend to witness the ocean rites, and the ocean-born rarely crossed the shoreline to join the surface festivals.

They shared only two things.

Serbemia—and their reverence for Hindel.

For the surface kingdom, the sea was both boundary and provider. Fishing was not merely an occupation. It was a sacred duty carried out by a brigade of men strong enough to survive the violent waters beyond the protected coast.

Each season, the fishing ships departed for weeks at a time. They traveled beyond the familiar shallows, past the black reefs and the mist-covered islands, into regions where the waves could rise higher than palace walls. The men returned with thousands of fish—silver-backed talonfish, enormous bluefin, striped moonfish, scarlet shell crawlers, and deep-water creatures rarely seen near the mainland.

While the men were at sea, the women sustained the kingdom.

They planted fields of amber grain across the valley floors. They tended orchards heavy with purple fruit, cultivated climbing vegetables along the mountain terraces, and harvested medicinal roots from the forest edges. By the end of every growing season, the storehouses were filled beyond necessity. There was enough food for the weeks of waiting and enough left over for the celebration when the fleet returned.

The homecoming was usually the grandest festival of the season.

Banners woven with autumn flowers stretched between the houses. Children stood upon barrels and fences for the first glimpse of sails. Musicians gathered near the shore with drums, horns, and wooden flutes. The women wore wreaths of red and gold leaves, while priests lifted smoking bowls of fragrant resin and offered thanks to Hindel for guiding the fishermen home.

As soon as the ships appeared upon the horizon, a roar would rise from the mainland.

Not this time.

King Teget stood at the bow of the largest fishing vessel, his boots planted wide against the rolling deck. The wind pulled at his heavy coat and tossed strands of dark, salt-stiffened hair across his face. Beneath him, the ship groaned with the weight of its catch. Nets overflowed with fish. Barrels crowded the deck. The expedition had been one of the most successful in recent memory.

His men were exhausted, sunburned, and eager to return to their families.

Teget raised his brass telescope and searched the coastline.

At first, he thought the distance had deceived him.

He lowered the instrument, wiped its lens against his sleeve, and looked again.

The shore was empty.

There were no flowered banners swaying between the posts. No musicians waiting upon the cliffs. No children racing along the sand. No smoke rose from the ceremonial fires. Even the watchtowers appeared abandoned.

Only the waves moved.

They rolled against the beach with a soft, indifferent rhythm, withdrawing into the ocean as if trying to pull the land away with them.

Teget felt something cold settle inside his chest.

The absence was too complete to be accidental. The fleet had departed on an agreed day and returned within the expected season. Even if a storm had delayed the preparations, someone should have been watching from the towers.

He swept the telescope toward the distant farmland. The fields were untended. Harvest baskets lay overturned beside the grain. Farther inland, several doors stood open, stirring slightly in the wind.

There was no visible blood.

There was no smoke from an invasion.

There was simply no one there.

Teget lowered the telescope before his men noticed how tightly he gripped it.

For several minutes, he said nothing.

He hoped the fog gathered around the shoreline was concealing the celebration. He hoped the women and children had gathered farther inland. He hoped the priests had changed the homecoming ritual in his absence.

But hope was a frail thing, and every passing wave wore away another piece of it.

A young crewman finally pointed toward the mainland.

“Where are the banners?”

The conversations on deck began to die.

One man stopped securing a barrel. Another climbed onto the railing and shaded his eyes. Smiles disappeared as the shoreline came into full view.

“Where is everyone?”

“Do you see the tower guards?”

“My family should be there.”

“What happened?”

The questions spread across the ship and then to the vessels sailing alongside it. Men crowded the rails, straining to see the people who should have been waiting for them. Fear moved through the fleet faster than fire through dry grass.

“Let’s keep calm,” Teget commanded.

His voice carried the authority of both captain and king, but even he could hear the tension within it.

Several men turned toward the smaller boats tied along the ship's side. Teget knew what they were thinking. If panic took hold, fathers and husbands would cut the boats loose and row for shore. Some might dive into the water and attempt to swim. In their desperation, they would overturn vessels, abandon the catch, and possibly drown before discovering what had happened.

"The women might be having fun with us," Teget added. "Perhaps they finally grew tired of feeding you all and decided to hide."

He forced a laugh.

A few of the men tried to join him, but their laughter was brief and hollow.

No one believed it.

The final thirty minutes became the longest of their lives.

The ships drew closer until the men could distinguish individual buildings. The docks were intact, but empty. Fishing baskets had been left along the road. A wagon stood crooked near the edge of the village, one wheel trapped in a shallow ditch. A length of unfinished autumn garland lay upon the ground, its flowers dried and scattered by the wind.

Preparations for the celebration had begun.

Then something had stopped them.

Teget's uneasiness sharpened into dread.

He recognized that silence.

Years earlier, before he had inherited the crown, he had encountered settlements emptied in the same manner. Homes left open. Meals abandoned. Possessions untouched. No bodies. No obvious signs of battle.

He had prayed never to see it again.

"Hindel protect us," an old fisherman whispered.

Others repeated the prayer.

Below the vessels, shadows moved through the blue depths. Ocean-born sentries followed the ships toward the mainland, their pale armor flickering beneath the surface. They kept their distance, bound by the customs separating the two peoples, but they had noticed the silence as well.

The fleet entered the harbor.

Only then did a small group of women emerge from behind the abandoned storehouses.

There were seven of them.

Their clothing was torn and stained with dirt. One limped badly, supported by another. A woman near the rear carried a child wrapped in a blanket, while the eldest leaned upon a wooden staff. Their faces were pale with exhaustion.

Teget searched among them for his queen.

She was not there.

The moment the ship struck the dock, he leaped over the railing. His boots sank into the salty, wet sand, but he kept moving. The women hurried toward him, their composure breaking as they reached the shore.

Two threw their arms around him.

Another collapsed against his chest and wept.

“What happened?” Teget demanded, holding her upright. “Where is everyone?”

None of them answered.

“Where is the queen?”

The women exchanged broken, terrified glances.

Teget seized the eldest gently by the shoulders. “Tell me what happened.”

The youngest stepped forward.

She could not have been more than sixteen. Dirt streaked her face, and dried blood marked one side of her neck. Her trembling hand disappeared into the pocket of her dress.

“I was told to give these to you, my king.”

She opened her hand.

Two necklaces lay across her palm.

Each necklace held one half of a silver crescent. When brought together, the broken pieces formed a complete moon—the ancient symbol of a vow that could be severed only by death.

Teget stared at them.

One belonged to his queen.

He had fastened it around her neck on the morning of their union, before the priests of Hindel and the people of the valley. The other half should have been locked inside the royal chamber, waiting for the day their firstborn child came of age.

Instead, both pieces were here.

Together.

Removed.

Returned.

“No,” Teget whispered.

The girl flinched as he snatched the necklaces from her hand. The silver felt cold against his skin despite the warmth of the afternoon.

“Who gave you these?”

The girl’s mouth opened, but no words emerged.

Teget looked past her toward the mountains. A trail of black birds circled above the northern valley. Beneath them, almost hidden by the wooded slopes, rose a thin column of smoke.

Then he understood.

The unfinished matter he had left behind.

The warning he had dismissed.

The enemy he had allowed to live.

Before the expedition, Teget had convinced himself that the threat could wait. The fishing season fed his people, and a king who abandoned the fleet risked famine. He had chosen duty over vengeance, trusting the mountain guards to protect those remaining behind.

Now his choice lay across his palm in two pieces of silver.

His knees struck the sand.

The fishermen gathered behind him. As word passed among them, sorrow swept across the shore. Some cried out the names of their wives. Others called for their children. One man tore his

cap from his head and pressed it against his face. Another fell beside a half-finished garland and lifted its dead flowers with shaking hands.

The mourning began as scattered voices, but soon it became a single terrible sound.

It drifted over the empty village.

It climbed the mountain walls.

It traveled across the water, where even the ocean-born sentries stopped beneath the surface and listened.

Teget bowed his head. Tears struck the broken crescents in his fist.

For one fleeting moment, he was not a king. He was only a husband haunted by the last look his queen had given him—a look that had asked him to stay, though pride had kept her from speaking the words.

Then something else stirred beneath his grief.

It was ancient, familiar, and frightening.

A hunger he had spent years learning to control.

The same thirst for vengeance that had once carried him across burning villages and blood-soaked battlefields. The same darkness his queen had helped him bury when she placed the crescent around her neck and made him promise to become more than the warrior he had been.

Teget slowly closed his fist around the necklaces. Their sharp edges cut into his palm.

When he rose, blood ran between his fingers.

His men fell silent.

The softness vanished from his face. The fisherman who had guided them through the storms was gone. The grieving husband vanished with him.

Only the warrior-king remained.

Teget turned toward the distant mountains, where black birds continued to circle above the rising smoke.

He knew who had done this.

He knew where the trail would lead.

And whether his queen remained among the living or waited for him beside Hindel, Teget would not rest until the debt had been paid.

He faced his people, lifted his bloodied fist, and spoke three words that shook the silence from the shore.

“HE... WILL... DIE!”

Chapter Four: The Warriors in the Shadows

Far beyond the reach of common star maps, past regions where gravity twisted light and entire suns burned unseen behind curtains of violet dust, stretched a galaxy known as **The Wrangler's Realm**.

It was an ancient galaxy, vast and untamed, crowded with more inhabited worlds than any scholar could count. Some were peaceful spheres of fertile land and gentle seas. Others were barren kingdoms of stone, fire, or poisonous wind. Empires rose among them, controlling trade routes and commanding fleets, only to disappear into history when stronger civilizations emerged.

Among the Realm's most influential planets were Serbemia, Karolia, Tramek, and Lurkitt.

Serbemia was a world divided between the people of the surface and the ocean-born kingdoms beneath its endless waters. Tramek was known for its towering cities and mechanical wonders. Lurkitt was feared for its militarism, secrecy, and hunger for control.

And Karolia—

Karolia was gone.

Where the planet had once traveled along its ancient orbit, surrounded by golden moons and rings of silver dust, there was now only a graveyard of shattered stone. Fragments of mountains and cities drifted silently through space. Rivers, forests, families, and generations of history had vanished in a single blast.

News of Karolia's destruction had spread quickly through The Wrangler's Realm. Yet the truth of how it had happened remained buried beneath rumor, fear, and deliberate deception.

Kings blamed rival kings. Military commanders denied responsibility. Merchants closed their trade routes, and entire planets recalled their ambassadors. Some believed Karolia's destruction had been a natural catastrophe. Others whispered that Hindel had judged the planet and erased it from creation.

Only a few knew what had truly happened.

Those few were gathered in the darkness.

Their refuge had no official name and appeared on no navigational chart. It lay beneath the surface of an abandoned moon that drifted near the outer boundary of the Realm. From space, the moon appeared lifeless—a scarred mass of gray stone orbiting a dying star. Its atmosphere was too thin to support life, and its surface storms could strip flesh from bone.

Beneath that hostile exterior, however, a network of caves descended for miles.

Cold moisture clung to the walls. Jagged slabs of rock crowded the tunnels, while enormous boulders formed natural barriers around the central chamber. The only entrance was a narrow fissure concealed beneath an overhanging ridge. Even if an enemy discovered the moon, finding the passage would be nearly impossible.

No electronic signal escaped the stone. No scanner could penetrate its mineral crust.

It was the perfect sanctuary for people who survived by remaining unseen.

The warriors who lived there belonged to no kingdom, yet they possessed intelligence gathered from nearly every throne in the Realm. They were spies, infiltrators, scouts, and assassins. They moved through palaces without disturbing the dust. They could cross a guarded compound, steal its deepest secret, and vanish before anyone knew they had arrived.

Some rulers doubted they existed.

Others feared them more than entire armies.

The chamber in which they now gathered was almost completely dark. A narrow opening in the ceiling allowed a blade of pale starlight to strike the floor. Small flames burned within three iron bowls, but they gave off more smoke than warmth. The air smelled of wet stone, scorched metal, and old blood.

Five warriors stood around a circular slab of black rock.

For several moments, no one spoke.

Their faces were partially concealed beneath shadowed hoods, masks, and high collars. Their weapons remained strapped across their backs or hidden beneath their clothing. Although they had fought beside one another for years, habit prevented them from standing with their backs exposed.

The tall warrior broke the silence.

“I can’t believe this.”

He stood near the edge of the chamber, his rugged face turned toward a small projection hovering above the stone slab. The image flickered unsteadily, displaying the final known image of Karolia.

Blue oceans covered its southern hemisphere. Green continents reached toward the north. Storms curled peacefully over the atmosphere.

Then the recording repeated.

A dark vessel appeared above the planet.

A flash of red light consumed the image.

Karolia disappeared.

The projection returned to the beginning.

The massive warrior beside him slammed a fist against the stone. The impact echoed through the cavern, sending a shower of dust from the ceiling.

“How?” he demanded.

He was enormous, even among trained warriors. Layers of armor covered his chest and arms, making him appear broad enough to block the passage behind him. A jagged scar passed over his right eye, and the hilt of a heavy war blade rose above his shoulder.

No one answered him.

Another warrior stood perfectly still on the opposite side of the chamber. His shoulders were unusually broad, but his strength seemed to be failing beneath the weight of his grief.

“Karolia,” he whispered. “My home. My family.”

His voice cracked.

“Everything.”

He reached toward the projection as if he could touch the lost planet. His fingers passed through the image, breaking Karolia into ripples of blue light.

“Gone?”

The smallest member of the group lowered his hood. He was lean and well proportioned, built for speed rather than overpowering strength. His eyes rarely remained fixed upon one object for long. Even inside their sanctuary, he watched the entrances, the shadows, and the other warriors’ hands.

“The Lurkitts,” he said.

The grieving warrior looked at him.

“I saw their markings on the vessel. It was a grand ship—larger than anything in their declared fleet. There was a cannon built into its front. Not mounted upon the hull. Built into it.”

“How large?” the tall warrior asked.

“Large enough to make the rest of the ship look as though it existed only to carry the weapon.”

The projection changed. A blurred recording of the vessel replaced the image of Karolia. Its central body was long and dark, with angular wings extending from either side. At its front rested the opening of an enormous cannon surrounded by rotating metal rings.

The image lasted less than a second before dissolving into static.

“It vaporized the planet as though Karolia were nothing,” the scout continued. “There was no invasion. No demand for surrender. No warning.”

He stared into the trembling light.

“The ship simply appeared.”

“Ships do not simply appear,” said the tall warrior.

“This one did.”

“What about the planetary defenses?”

“They never activated.”

“The orbital guard?”

“Gone with everyone else.”

The chamber fell silent again.

Water dripped from one of the stones and struck the ground with maddening regularity.

The behemoth turned away from the projection. His breathing became heavier as anger pushed aside disbelief.

“This never would have happened if the Gole brothers were still together.”

The broad-shouldered warrior spun toward him.

“There are no more brothers!”

His voice thundered through the cavern.

The flames in the iron bowls trembled.

“Granger is dead,” he continued. “Getrum was banished to some distant galaxy, and Gillium—”

He stopped.

His anger faltered, replaced by something that looked disturbingly close to fear.

The tall warrior stepped away from the wall.

“What happened to Gillium?”

The broad-shouldered warrior lowered his head.

“He isn’t himself anymore.”

“That tells us nothing.”

“I cannot explain what I saw.”

“Try.”

The grieving warrior closed his eyes. “It was horrible. I can’t imagine what he must be going through.”

The smallest warrior looked from one man to the other.

“He obliterated his own brother’s fiancée,” he said, “and her unborn child.”

The large warrior’s head snapped around.

“No.”

“He did.”

“No way!”

The shout startled several black-winged creatures from a crevice high above them. They poured through the chamber and disappeared into the tunnel beyond.

“I saw what remained,” the scout said quietly. “There can be no mistake.”

“Gillium protected her after Getrum’s banishment,” the tall warrior argued. “He swore he would keep her safe until his brother returned.”

“That promise died before she did.”

“What could make him do such a thing?”

The scout hesitated.

“A red aura.”

The behemoth frowned. “What?”

“It surrounded him. Not flame. Not energy from any weapon I recognized. It moved through him as though it were alive.”

He spread his fingers over the projection controls. A new image appeared—grainy, distorted, and torn by lines of interference.

At its center stood the outline of a man.

Gillium.

His head was bowed. His arms hung stiffly at his sides, and scarlet light pulsed beneath his skin. The aura rolled from his body in waves, staining the surrounding darkness red.

For the briefest moment, Gillium lifted his face toward the recording device.

His eyes glowed like dying suns.

The image vanished.

No one spoke.

The tall warrior slowly shook his head.

“I suppose it is best that Getrum was banished before he learned she was expecting.”

“Best?” the broad-shouldered warrior asked sharply.

“To discover that your brother murdered the woman you loved would destroy any man. But to learn he murdered your unborn child as well...”

His gaze drifted toward the empty space where Gillium’s image had been.

“That is unforgivable.”

The grieving warrior covered his face with both hands. “The Gole brothers were the greatest protectors Karolia ever had. If Granger were alive—”

“He isn’t,” the scout interrupted.

“If Getrum had not been banished—”

“He was.”

“And if Gillium had not become—”

“Enough!”

The command cut through the chamber like the stroke of a blade.

A sixth warrior stepped into the firelight.

He had remained in the shadows near one of the cave walls, listening while the others argued. Long dark hair fell over his shoulders, and a narrow sword rested inside a holster strapped across his back. Its hilt was unusually thick, wrapped in strips of worn black leather. Ancient symbols had been carved into the exposed metal.

Unlike the others, he wore no heavy armor. His clothing was fitted closely to his body, allowing him to move without sound or restriction. Several throwing blades rested at his waist, accompanied by two curved knives.

His hand remained close to the sword.

“We need to stop thinking about what we wish could have happened,” he said. “Karolia is gone. Granger is dead. Getrum is beyond our reach, and Gillium may now be more dangerous than the Lurkitts.”

The broad-shouldered warrior’s eyes hardened.

“That was my world.”

“And mourning will not restore it.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“I think grief is making you careless.”

The grieving warrior stepped toward him, but the behemoth moved between them.

“Not here.”

For a moment, the two men stared at one another across the giant’s armored shoulder.

Then the swordsman relaxed his hand.

“We look to the present,” he said, “and decide what must happen next.”

The scout restored the image of the Lurkitt vessel. The colossal cannon dominated the projection.

“How can we defeat them with a weapon like that?”

“We cannot meet it in open battle,” answered the swordsman. “Not with the forces available to us.”

“Then we warn the other planets,” the tall warrior said. “Serbemia. Tramek. Every inhabited world within range.”

“And tell them what?” asked the scout. “That the Lurkitts possess a hidden ship capable of destroying planets? We have a damaged recording and the testimony of one operative. Half the rulers in the Realm will accuse us of spreading panic. The other half will begin building weapons of their own.”

“Serbemia must be warned.”

“Which kingdom?” the behemoth asked. “The surface kingdom or the ocean kingdom?”

“Both.”

“They barely share information with one another. What makes you think either will listen to us?”

The tall warrior looked toward the flickering image.

“They praise Hindel. Perhaps that will be enough to unite them.”

“Faith has not united them yet,” the swordsman replied. “Fear will do no better.”

The scout enlarged the image of the vessel’s bow.

“Even if the Realm believed us, we still know nothing about this ship. We don’t know what powers it, where it was constructed, or how it crossed Karolia’s defenses without being detected.”

“I don’t understand,” the swordsman said, studying the recording. “How could the Lurkitts possess something of this size?”

“They have always hidden their military strength.”

“Not this well. A ship requires builders, minerals, fuel, testing grounds, and supply routes. Thousands of workers would have known.”

“Perhaps the workers were killed.”

“Even dead men leave evidence.”

The swordsman moved closer to the projection.

The ship's hull bore unmistakable Lurkitt markings, yet its design seemed wrong. Lurkitt warships were massive but inelegant, built to overwhelm their enemies with thick armor and excessive firepower. This vessel was different. Its dark surface appeared almost organic. Its edges curved like bones, and the rings surrounding the cannon resembled the open jaws of some ancient creature.

"Where would they hide it?" he asked.

The question lingered in the cold air.

A quiet laugh came from the darkness behind them.

Every warrior drew a weapon.

The behemoth lifted his war blade. The scout dropped into a crouch with knives in both hands. The tall warrior turned toward the sound, while the swordsman's thick-handled weapon slid halfway from its holster.

"Now those," an unseen voice said, "are intriguing questions."

A figure emerged from between two enormous boulders.

He was an old man, although he moved with the confidence of someone who had never accepted the weakness of age. A thick, scruffy beard covered the lower half of his face. His gray robes were torn along the edges and darkened by years of travel.

His left arm was missing from the shoulder down.

In its place floated a metallic aura.

Silver particles gathered into the vague outline of an arm, separating and re-forming with every movement. The strange limb pulsed as though it possessed a heartbeat. Threads of light traveled from the shoulder to the translucent fingertips, illuminating the scars along the old man's neck.

The warriors immediately lowered their weapons.

"Master," they said in unison.

They dropped to one knee.

The old man walked among them without acknowledging the gesture. His eyes remained fixed on the image of the Lurkitt vessel. When he reached the stone slab, he passed his shimmering hand through the projection.

The image distorted around the metallic aura.

“You may rise.”

The warriors obeyed.

The Master sat upon the floor in the center of his disciples. The metallic particles forming his arm loosened and drifted around him like silver ash.

“How long were you listening?” the swordsman asked.

“Long enough to hear warriors grieving like widows, arguing like politicians, and thinking like frightened children.”

The behemoth looked down, ashamed.

The old man studied each of them in turn.

“You ask how the Lurkitts constructed such a vessel without the Realm knowing.”

His gaze returned to the projection.

“You ask where they gathered the materials. Where they found the labor. Where they tested a cannon powerful enough to erase a planet.”

He raised his metallic hand. The silver particles passed into the projection and spread across the image. Sections of the ship brightened as the aura traced energy channels hidden beneath its outer shell.

Symbols appeared along the cannon’s rotating rings.

They were not Lurkitt symbols.

The scout leaned closer. “What language is that?”

“One that was forbidden before your grandparents were born.”

“You recognize it?”

The Master did not answer.

The image rotated. Beneath the Lurkitt markings, another emblem became visible—a circular symbol crossed by three jagged lines.

The Master’s expression darkened.

For the first time, his disciples saw uncertainty in his eyes.

“The Lurkitts did not build this ship,” he said.

The grieving warrior stared at him. “Then who did?”

“That is not our first question.”

“What is?”

The Master closed his eyes.

Through the stone above them came a distant vibration. It was too steady to be an earthquake and too powerful to be thunder. Dust sifted from the ceiling as something enormous moved across the surface of the moon.

The flames went out.

Darkness swallowed the chamber.

The warriors stood in silence, hands returning to their weapons.

The Master’s metallic arm became the only source of light, pulsing like a beacon in the blackness. He looked toward the ceiling and listened to the vibration growing steadily louder.

Then he returned his attention to the frozen image of the planet-killing ship.

“Where would they hide it?” he murmured.

His silver fingers closed around the projection. The image collapsed into his fist.

“Where would they, indeed?”

Chapter Five: The Trail of Ice

Tramek was a world that refused to remain the same.

Every structure, machine, and living organism on the planet was considered unfinished—a temporary design awaiting improvement. Progress was not merely encouraged among the Tramekians. It was their reason for existing.

Their cities stretched for miles across valleys of polished black stone. Needle-shaped towers pierced the clouds, their surfaces alive with streams of information. Suspended railways curved between buildings without visible support, carrying passengers inside transparent capsules that moved faster than sound. Mechanical bridges assembled themselves whenever someone approached and disassembled afterward to conserve energy.

Even the skies had been altered. Artificial moons regulated the planet's climate. Weather engines redirected storms toward drought-stricken regions. Fleets of microscopic machines filtered pollutants from the atmosphere before they could descend upon the cities.

Science was their labor.

Medicine was their duty.

Engineering was their worship.

The Tramekians did not pray to Hindel with songs, sacrifices, or ceremonies. They honored him through discovery. Every disease they eliminated, every invention they perfected, and every mystery they solved was regarded as another step toward understanding the mind of their creator.

Death itself had become increasingly negotiable.

Damaged hearts could be printed and transplanted within hours. Severed limbs were replaced by mechanical versions capable of feeling temperature and touch. A patient suffering from organ failure could be placed inside a regenerative chamber while swarms of medical nanites reconstructed the dying tissue one cell at a time.

But the same knowledge that preserved life had also perfected the art of destroying it.

No weapon demonstrated that contradiction more completely than the **Tramek Fury**.

Tru'sum staggered through one of the abandoned research corridors beneath the city of Caydrus, pressing both hands against his lower abdomen.

The weapon had struck him near the bladder.

At first, the shot had left only a narrow incision—barely wider than the tip of a needle. There had been no explosion and no dramatic burst of blood. The Fury’s beam existed only to create an entrance.

The true weapon was what it deposited inside its victim.

Nanotech.

Billions of microscopic machines now swarmed through Tru’sum’s body. They entered his bloodstream, attached themselves to his cells, and dismantled his organs from within. They did not poison him. They disassembled him.

Every few steps, a new wave of pain tore through his abdomen. It felt as though invisible teeth were chewing through his flesh.

He slammed one hand against the wall to keep himself upright.

Ice exploded beneath his palm.

It spread instantly across the metal surface, racing through the corridor in branching white veins. Frost coated the illuminated panels. The temperature displays flickered, failed, and disappeared beneath a growing sheet of crystal.

Tru’sum pulled his hand away.

“No,” he gasped. “Not now.”

His breath emerged as a cloud of white vapor.

The cold had always responded to him. With discipline, he could summon it, shape it, and direct it. He could freeze a weapon before its owner fired, build barriers of solid ice, or stop the blood inside an enemy’s veins.

But pain was breaking his control.

The air around him became colder with every breath. Ice crawled across the floor behind him, preserving the impression of each uneven footstep. The trail curved down the corridor, passed beneath sealed laboratory doors, and continued directly toward his position.

Anyone hunting him would not require a scanner.

They would only need eyes.

Tru’sum reached inside his coat and felt the small metal object hidden in its inner pocket.

The flash-chip remained there.

He had stolen it from the most secure research vault on Tramek. The chip was no larger than his smallest fingernail, yet its crystalline layers contained enough information to transform civilizations—or destroy them.

Biological construction sequences.

Military access codes.

Restricted planetary coordinates.

And somewhere inside its encrypted memory was the location of his daughter.

That was the only reason he had taken it.

He had not betrayed Tramek for power. He had no desire to sell its secrets or deliver its technology to a rival world. He had entered the vault because the people holding his daughter had demanded the chip in exchange for her life.

At least, that was what they had promised.

Tru'sum had learned long ago that promises were only another form of leverage.

He pushed himself away from the wall.

The corridor seemed to tilt beneath him. Blue emergency lights stretched into glowing lines, and the doors on either side blurred together.

He tried to take another step.

His right leg failed.

Tru'sum dropped to one knee, catching himself against the frozen wall. A surge of pain ripped through his abdomen and climbed into his chest. Beneath his skin, faint silver lines began spreading outward from the wound.

The nanotech had reached another organ.

“Hold on,” he whispered.

He could see his daughter's face.

She was seven years old, with dark eyes and a missing front tooth. On the morning she disappeared, she had been sitting on the floor of their home, surrounded by the broken pieces of a mechanical bird. Tru'sum had promised to help her rebuild it after work.

She had folded her arms and frowned at him.

“You always say after work.”

“I mean it this time.”

“You said that last time.”

He had laughed, kissed the top of her head, and left.

When he returned, the mechanical bird was still scattered across the floor.

His daughter was gone.

A message waited for him on the wall.

Bring us the flash-chip, and the child lives.

Tru’sum clenched his teeth and tried to stand.

“For her,” he said.

The cold intensified.

Ice climbed the walls and covered the ceiling. Pipes cracked above him. A security lens froze inside its housing, and the lights dimmed as frost invaded their circuits.

Tru’sum managed one more step.

Then the corridor turned black.

His body struck the floor.

The ice continued spreading after he lost consciousness.

On most days, the lower research corridors remained empty.

The laboratories had been abandoned after a containment failure several years earlier. Although the Tramekian authorities claimed the area had been decontaminated, few citizens believed them. Doors sometimes opened without command. Lights activated in sealed rooms. Maintenance machines entered the corridors and failed to return.

No one traveled there unless they had a very good reason.

Or a very bad one.

A woman emerged from an access passage carrying an enormous green-and-white plaid bag.

She was neither thin nor graceful. She had a healthy, heavyset figure beneath layers of dreary brown clothing, and her wide face was covered with dark freckles that resembled spots of spilled ink. Moist strands of hair clung to her forehead. Her thick-soled shoes scraped against the floor with every step.

She hummed quietly to herself as she walked.

The tune was unpleasant and slightly out of rhythm.

She stopped when she saw the ice.

It covered the wall ahead of her in a glistening layer. Frost spread across the floor, reflecting the emergency lights like shattered glass.

Her humming ceased.

“Oh,” she muttered.

She took one step backward.

Something moved inside her plaid bag.

The bag jerked in her hand. A muffled growl came from within, followed by frantic scratching against the fabric.

The woman glanced down.

“Be still!”

The bag shook again.

She nudged it firmly with her knee.

“I was going anyway!”

The scratching stopped.

The woman studied the frozen corridor. Her expression shifted from irritation to caution. Cold air drifted toward her, carrying the faint scent of blood.

She followed the trail.

Each step became slower than the last. Her eyes searched the ceiling, the doors, and the intersecting corridors ahead. The trail of ice grew thicker as she continued, rising in sharp formations along the base of the wall.

She passed a fire emergency station.

A red-handled axe rested behind a glass panel.

The bag shook violently.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I see it.”

A low sound came from inside.

“Yeah! Exactly!”

She struck the glass with her elbow.

The panel resisted.

Frowning, she struck it again. A crack formed across the surface. On the third attempt, the glass shattered, sending fragments across the floor.

The woman removed the axe and tested its weight.

It was heavier than she expected. She adjusted her grip with both hands, rested the handle against her shoulder, and continued into the frozen passage.

The temperature dropped sharply.

Her footsteps crunched over the ice. Frost gathered upon her hair and eyelashes. The corridor turned to the left, disappearing beyond a blind corner.

She stopped before reaching it.

The plaid bag whimpered.

“Oh, hush,” she whispered. “You’re not the one holding the axe.”

She leaned forward and peered around the corner.

A man lay in the middle of the hallway.

For half a second, fear widened her eyes. Then she noticed that he was not moving.

She lowered the axe and hurried toward him.

Tru'sum lay facedown with one arm trapped beneath his body. His skin had become pale, and ice had formed around his fingers, fastening them to the floor. A thin line of dark blood ran from beneath his coat.

"Oh, my," the woman said. "What is wrong?"

She dropped the axe. Its metal head struck the floor and slid several feet across the ice.

The plaid bag landed beside it with an offended yelp.

The woman knelt and struggled to turn Tru'sum onto his back. He was heavier than he looked. She pulled one shoulder, planted her feet, and rolled him with a grunt.

His face was covered with sweat despite the freezing temperature.

"Oh dear," she murmured. "What can we do?"

She placed two stubby fingers against his neck.

His pulse was weak.

Something silver moved beneath the skin of his abdomen.

The woman's frightened expression disappeared.

She opened Tru'sum's coat and discovered the small incision near his bladder. The wound itself appeared insignificant, but a dark web of dying tissue had begun spreading around it.

She recognized the pattern.

"Oh, no," she said. "We can't have that."

She knew the damage caused by a Tramek Fury. Everyone on the planet did. Once the nanotech entered the bloodstream, a victim had minutes before organ failure began. Standard medical nanites were useless because the weaponized machines consumed them as raw material.

Treatment required an illegal counter-swarm—or immediate removal of the affected organs.

Perhaps both.

The woman turned toward her bag.

It was already shaking with anticipation.

She wrapped her moist fingers around the zipper and pulled it open.

A pointed black nose emerged first.

Then two bright golden eyes.

A fox-shaped creature climbed from the bag and stretched upon the frozen floor. It was roughly the size of a medium dog, with thick dark fur, oversized ears, and a tail that divided into two separate tips. Thin blue markings ran along its sides, glowing faintly beneath the fur.

The creature sat down and began licking one of its paws.

The woman pointed at Tru'sum.

“Take him, Urim.”

Urim continued cleaning himself.

“Now.”

The creature stopped.

Its ears flattened.

A deep snarl rose from its throat.

Bones cracked beneath its dark fur.

Urim's back arched as his body began to expand. His legs lengthened, and thick cords of muscle formed beneath his shoulders. Curved claws pushed from his paws, scraping through the ice and cutting grooves into the metal floor.

His gentle muzzle stretched into a powerful jaw lined with ivory fangs.

Within moments, the fox-shaped critter had transformed into a massive beast. His shoulders nearly reached the woman's chest. The blue markings along his body blazed with light, and vapor rolled from his nostrils.

Urim's growl vibrated through the corridor.

The woman smiled.

It was not a comforting smile.

The corners of her mouth rose too far, revealing several narrow teeth that did not belong in an ordinary Tramekian face. Her dark freckles shifted beneath her skin, briefly arranging themselves into a series of unfamiliar symbols.

Then they became spots again.

Urim lowered his head and sniffed Tru'sum's wound. His lips pulled back as he detected the nanotech dismantling the man from within.

"Careful," the woman said. "He has something inside him that bites."

Urim opened his jaws and gripped Tru'sum by the reinforced fabric of his coat. With surprising gentleness, the beast lifted him from the floor.

As Tru'sum rose, the flash-chip slipped halfway out of his inner pocket.

A small blue light blinked along its edge.

The woman noticed it.

Her eerie smile vanished.

For the first time since entering the corridor, she appeared genuinely concerned.

"Well," she whispered. "That explains why they shot you."

A distant alarm sounded.

Red light flooded the hallway.

The ice-covered security lens above them twitched as its internal heating system activated. Cracks spread across the frost. Somewhere beyond the intersection, heavy mechanical footsteps struck the floor.

Tramek security machines were approaching.

The woman snatched up the flash-chip and pushed it back into Tru'sum's coat. She retrieved the plaid bag and the abandoned axe, then turned toward a maintenance passage at the end of the corridor.

"Come, Urim."

The transformed beast followed, carrying Tru'sum as though he weighed nothing.

The woman pressed her palm against a blank section of wall. For several seconds, nothing happened.

The footsteps grew louder.

A mechanical voice echoed through the facility.

“SECURITY BREACH DETECTED.”

The woman tapped the wall impatiently.

“Oh, don’t embarrass me now.”

“RESTRICTED TECHNOLOGY HAS BEEN REMOVED.”

A hidden panel slid open.

Warm green light spilled from the passage beyond.

Urim carried Tru’sum inside. The woman followed and turned toward the approaching security machines. Several tall silhouettes appeared at the far end of the frozen corridor, their armor reflecting the red emergency lights.

Targeting beams swept across the walls.

The woman gave them a cheerful wave.

Then the panel closed.

A second later, the security machines reached the spot where Tru’sum had fallen. They scanned the blood, the shattered emergency glass, and the deep claw marks carved into the floor.

But the man was gone.

Only the trail of ice remained.

Behind the hidden wall, the woman led Urim deeper beneath Tramek’s magnificent city—away from its advanced hospitals, beyond its celebrated laboratories, and toward a place where forbidden medicine was still practiced.

A place where science had no laws.

And where death was merely another problem waiting to be solved.

Chapter Six: The Last Karolians

Karolia was gone, but it was not forgotten.

The planet had once glowed like a blue-green lantern within the darkness of the Wrangler's Realm. Its cities had stretched across wide grasslands, its temples had risen from golden mountains, and its people had filled the streets with music, competition, invention, and debate. Fifty thousand citizens had called Karolia home—experienced leaders, disciplined fighters, eager scholars, ambitious builders, and spirited enthusiasts who believed their world would endure forever.

In a matter of moments, nearly all of it had been reduced to dust.

Now, wherever fragments of Karolia drifted through space, the broken remains of towers, homes, and monuments turned silently through the emptiness. Nothing distinguished the ruins of a royal palace from the stones of a farmer's house. The planet's proud history had become an expanding field of debris.

Only two thousand Karolians remained.

They had been crowded aboard the king's royal touring ship, a vessel designed for diplomatic voyages and ceremonial appearances—not the evacuation of an entire civilization. Its guest chambers, theaters, conference halls, and observation galleries had become temporary shelters. Families slept across floors once reserved for dignitaries. Children rested beneath banquet tables. Medical stations overflowed with the wounded while narrow passageways became crowded with blankets, salvaged belongings, and grieving survivors.

Food was rationed.

Water purification units operated without pause.

The air recyclers labored beneath the demands of thousands of frightened passengers.

The touring vessel drifted without direction, carrying the last remnants of Karolia through the stars.

No king guided them.

No council governed them.

No neighboring world had promised them sanctuary.

Fear spread quickly through the ship. Arguments erupted over food, sleeping areas, and rumors of failing life-support systems. Some blamed the royal family for not detecting the attack. Others accused the warriors of retreating while Karolia burned. Several demanded an immediate assault

against Lurkitt, while many simply wanted to find a place where their children could sleep without hearing alarms.

Grief made enemies of people who had been neighbors only hours earlier.

Within the cockpit, five of Karolia's surviving warriors gathered around the king's empty chair.

Rowan, Kullen, Brock, Lonzo, and Drake stood beneath the dim light of the navigational display. They were the remaining protectors aboard the vessel—not necessarily the last Karolian warriors alive, but the only five available to defend the refugees.

The empty chair rested in the center of their circle.

It had been fashioned from dark Karolian wood and reinforced with silver metal along the arms. The emblem of the royal bloodline had been carved into its back: a winged beast rising above a field of stars.

None of the men would sit in it.

The chair belonged to a dead king.

Even touching it felt like declaring that his reign—and the world he had ruled—was truly over.

Brock paced around it, his powerful hands opening and closing at his sides. His oval-shaped head was scarred from years of combat expeditions, and his thick neck disappeared beneath the collar of his armor. Of the five, he had traveled the farthest across the Wrangler's Realm. He had faced raiders, beasts, and armies, but never an enemy capable of destroying an entire planet.

"We know who did this," Brock said. "The Lurkitts attacked us without warning. We should take this ship directly to Lurkitt and return the favor."

"With what weapon?" Rowan asked.

"With every weapon we have."

"We have a ceremonial touring vessel."

"We have anger."

"Anger does not penetrate a planetary defense grid."

Brock stopped pacing and faced him. "Then perhaps you should explain that to the families outside. Tell them we intend to float through space while the people responsible celebrate."

Lonzo stepped beside Brock.

“I agree with him. Every moment we waste gives the Lurkitts time to attack another world.”

“And every reckless decision brings them two thousand more Karolian victims,” Kullen answered.

Lonzo’s jaw tightened. “Are you calling revenge reckless?”

“I am calling suicide foolish.”

“Karolia deserves justice!”

“And who will remember Karolia when the last of us are dead?”

The argument had repeated itself in several forms since the ship escaped the destruction. Brock and Lonzo wanted to take the fight directly to Lurkitt. They spoke of honor, vengeance, and the obligation to answer blood with blood.

Rowan and Kullen wanted shelter.

Their people needed land, water, food, and time to recover. The survivors could establish a settlement, rebuild their population, and prepare for whatever came next.

Brock considered that plan nothing more than a slower death.

“There are no uninhabited planets left,” he argued. “Not any that can support us. Every livable world belongs to someone.”

“Then we negotiate,” Rowan said.

“With what? We no longer have minerals, trade routes, ships, or territory.”

“We have knowledge.”

“Everyone in the Realm has knowledge.”

“We have two thousand skilled citizens.”

“We have two thousand mouths to feed,” Brock countered. “If we want territory, we will eventually have to take it.”

Kullen stared at him. “So your solution is to survive the destruction of our planet by invading someone else’s?”

“My solution is to accept reality.”

“Your reality sounds remarkably similar to Lurkitt’s.”

Brock lunged forward.

Lonzo caught one of his arms while Rowan pushed against his chest. The navigation panels trembled as the cockpit filled with angry voices.

Throughout it all, Drake stood away from the group with his arms crossed.

His eyes remained closed.

He listened as Brock demanded retaliation, as Lonzo warned that hiding would dishonor the dead, and as Rowan and Kullen argued over which planets might accept refugees. He heard every insult, interruption, and repeated opinion.

Finally, his eyes opened.

“ENOUGH!”

The command struck the cockpit with such force that the four men stopped immediately.

Even the survivors gathered in the hallway beyond the cockpit doors fell silent.

Drake unfolded his arms and stepped toward the empty chair. He looked at each warrior in turn.

“We can spend all our time agreeing to disagree,” he said, “or we can do something productive.”

No one challenged him.

“From what I hear, we all want the same two things. We want revenge, and we want to ensure the future of our people. Am I right?”

Brock reluctantly nodded.

“So do I,” Lonzo said.

Rowan and Kullen agreed.

“The question is how,” Drake continued. “We have roughly two thousand people aboard this ship, and almost none of them possess combat training. We have farmers, artists, builders, healers, scholars, and children. If we attack Lurkitt now, it will not be a battle. It will be a massacre.”

Brock looked away.

“We could attempt to reach Tramek,” Drake said, “but our long-range communication system was damaged during our escape. We have no way to inform the Tramekians that we are coming. Even if they already know what happened, they may refuse to risk aiding us.”

“They honor Hindel through knowledge,” Rowan said. “Surely they would not abandon two thousand lives.”

“You hope they would not,” Kullen replied.

Drake raised a hand before another argument began.

“We also have no idea where the Lurkitt forces are heading next. If we encounter that warship, this vessel will not survive a single attack. For now, the five of us are the only capable fighters aboard.”

He looked around the circle.

“What can five warriors do against the Lurkitt army?”

Silence answered him.

In that moment, silence had never sounded so loud.

The five men lowered their heads. Beyond the cockpit windows, thousands of stars surrounded them, yet none offered hope. Somewhere among those lights was Lurkitt’s planetary weapon. Somewhere was an army that had erased their home.

Drake lifted his head first.

“I suggest we settle somewhere discreet,” he said. “Somewhere the Lurkitts would never think to search. We can repair the ship, organize the survivors, and train anyone willing and capable of fighting.”

“Train them for what?” Lonzo asked.

“The battle ahead.”

Brock studied him. “You believe we have that much time?”

“No. I believe it is our only chance.” Drake looked among his brethren. “Any ideas?”

Doubt filled each face.

Every known habitable planet in the Wrangler’s Realm was governed, occupied, or fiercely protected. Even the barren worlds were monitored for resources. A population of two thousand could not land unnoticed, particularly aboard a royal vessel.

Rowan suddenly lifted his head.

His expression changed as a half-forgotten memory returned to him.

“Naul!”

The others stared at him.

“The planet Naul,” Rowan said.

“Naul?” the four men questioned together.

Brock frowned as memories of his expeditions zigzagged through his mind. He had crossed asteroid belts, navigated forbidden territories, and landed upon worlds omitted from ordinary civilian maps.

He had never heard of Naul.

“Where?” he asked. “Why haven’t I heard of this planet?”

“I only learned about it recently,” Rowan replied. “I’m not sure why, but the king demanded that its location remain secret.”

Kullen glanced at the empty chair. “Our king knew of an undiscovered planet?”

“Titus told me when we crossed paths yesterday. I can’t believe I almost forgot.”

Drake narrowed his eyes. “Titus told you?”

“Yes.”

“And where is Titus now?”

“On Naul.”

No one moved.

Rowan continued before fully considering the weight of his revelation.

“Tristin is there with him. They were supposed to be completing a scavenger hunt and training exercise.”

“What?” the four warriors shouted.

Brock’s thoughts seemed to collide inside his oval-shaped head. He stumbled backward and dropped into the chair beside the navigation console.

Drake stared at Rowan.

“Not only are you telling us there is a secret planet no one has ever heard of, but you are also saying that Tristin and Titus are alive?”

Rowan nodded carefully.

“And they probably have no idea what happened to Karolia in the last few hours?”

“Well, if you say it like that—”

Drake moved before Rowan could finish.

His boot struck Rowan in the chest with a perfectly executed dummy-down kick. Rowan flew backward through the cockpit doors and landed in the hallway.

Several survivors screamed and scrambled away.

“Get your butt back in here and show us where to find Naul!” Drake roared.

Kullen and Lonzo dropped instinctively to the floor, startled by the sudden attack. Brock gripped the arms of his chair and stared at Drake in disbelief.

Rowan stumbled back into the cockpit, his dignity more wounded than his body.

“You could have asked.”

“I did.”

“You could have asked twice.”

Drake raised his leg again.

Rowan rushed to the navigational console.

Brock was still seated before it. Rowan shoved him aside, sending both the warrior and the chair rolling across the cockpit. Brock spun to the opposite aisle, struck the wall, and glared at him.

Rowan ignored the look.

His fingers moved across the controls. A vast display of the Wrangler’s Realm appeared above the console. Stars, planets, moons, and established travel lanes filled the projection. Rowan expanded the eastern edge and rotated the map toward a region surrounded by warning symbols.

“There.”

A tiny point of light blinked on the far side of the image.

“In the thirty-first quadrant, past the Drebin asteroid field.”

Brock pushed his chair upright and rolled himself back toward the console.

“That region is designated hazardous,” he said. “Unstable gravity, drifting mines, raiders, uncharted solar storms—we would have to remain alert every moment we were there.”

“Which explains why no one would search for us there,” Drake replied.

“I am skeptical of any planet the king wanted hidden.”

“If Naul is located in a hazardous region,” Lonzo said, “the king might have concealed it for the safety of the people living there.”

“Or for the safety of everyone outside it,” Brock answered.

Kullen studied the blinking point.

“I don’t believe we should concern ourselves with what the king thought was best. The king is dead. His decisions died with him.”

Rowan turned sharply.

“Don’t be cruel, Kullen. He sacrificed himself so the rest of us could escape.”

“Yes,” Kullen said. “He did. So did everyone else who failed to make it off Karolia in time. Their sacrifice means nothing if we allow grief to trap us in obedience to a dead government.”

Brock struck the console with his fist.

“We need to avenge them.”

“We will,” Drake said. “But first we survive.”

The stars rotated slowly above them.

Then Lonzo looked toward the image of Naul.

“We know now that Tristin and Titus are alive,” he said. “But what about Getrum? Did anyone hear anything about him?”

Rowan froze.

His eyes widened.

“Getrum,” he whispered. “Why didn’t I realize it before?”

Drake slowly formed a fist.

“Do not tell me you also forgot that Getrum is hiding on another secret planet.”

“No! Not that.” Rowan stepped away from the console. “What Kullen said made me remember.”

“What are you talking about?”

“He said the king’s decisions died with him.”

Realization spread across Rowan’s face.

Kullen inhaled sharply.

“He’s right.”

Lonzo’s mouth fell open. “Oh, Hindel.”

Getrum Gole—the exiled warrior.

Once, his name had inspired pride throughout Karolia. He had been among the fiercest protectors the planet had ever known, a fighter capable of breaking enemy formations almost single-handedly. Then the crown had accused him of an unforgivable offense. Karolian law had stripped him of his rank, his home, and his right to return.

But Karolia no longer existed.

Its courts were gone.

Its prisons were gone.

Its king and lawmakers were dead.

Even the territory from which Getrum had been banished had been obliterated.

“We were so consumed by the losses,” Rowan said, “that we failed to recognize the one advantage hidden among them. Getrum was banished under Karolian law. There is no functioning Karolian law now.”

Kullen looked toward the refugees beyond the cockpit.

“He can return to his people.”

A spark of hope entered Brock’s expression for the first time.

“With Getrum and Tristin leading the survivors, we may actually stand a chance.”

“Wait,” Drake warned. “Think about what Bellix told us.”

The spark faded.

Bellix’s report had contained rumors about Gillium, Getrum’s brother. Gillium had changed. A violent red aura had overtaken him, and in its grip, he had committed an act no one believed possible.

He had killed the woman Getrum loved.

And the unborn child Getrum did not know she carried.

“How do you think he’ll react when he discovers the truth?” Drake asked.

No one answered.

“If his grief controls him,” Drake continued, “we may bring back something worse than the enemy chasing us.”

“We have to take that chance,” Brock said. “We cannot give the Lurkitts more time.”

“Finding him will not be simple,” Lonzo added. “Someone must contact Primi. She is the only person who knows where he was sent.”

Rowan’s face went pale.

“No.”

Drake studied him. “What is it now?”

“No. No, no...”

Rowan placed both hands on his head.

“How could I forget?”

Brock rose from his chair. “Forget what?”

“It’s my fault.”

“What is your fault?”

“The only person who was supposed to know was Gillium,” Rowan said. “But before he left on an excursion, he told me. He was afraid something might happen while he was away.”

“Rowan,” Drake said slowly, “what are you talking about?”

“Primi was on Karolia.”

The room seemed to shrink around them.

“She returned secretly,” Rowan continued. “She was unconscious inside a medical pod when the Lurkitts attacked.”

The blood drained from Brock’s face.

Kullen backed away from the console.

Lonzo lowered himself into the nearest chair as though his legs could no longer support him.

“WHAT?” they cried together.

Drake did not shout.

The strength simply left his body.

He slid down the side of the king’s empty chair and landed upon the floor in a slumped position. One hand covered his face while the other remained clenched against his knee.

Primi had possessed the only known path to Getrum Gole.

If she had died with Karolia, then the greatest surviving warrior of their people was lost somewhere beyond their reach. He might never learn that his world had been destroyed. He might never know that his banishment had ended.

He might never discover what Gillium had done.

Outside the cockpit, two thousand frightened survivors waited for the five warriors to decide their future.

On the navigational display, Naul continued to blink within the dangerous thirty-first quadrant.

It was their only sanctuary.

Tristin and Titus were their only known reinforcements.

And somewhere in a distant galaxy, Getrum lived in exile, unaware that there was no longer a home waiting for him.

Drake lowered his hand and stared at the hidden planet.

“Set a course for Naul,” he said.

Rowan hesitated. “What about Getrum?”

“We find shelter first. We find Tristin and Titus. Then we search for another way to locate him.”

“And if there is no other way?”

Drake looked at the two thousand lives reflected in the cockpit glass.

“Then we create one.”

Rowan entered the coordinates.

The great touring ship groaned as its engines awakened. Slowly, it turned and faced the distant thirty-first quadrant.

The survivors felt the change in direction beneath their feet. Conversations stopped. Parents drew their children closer. The wounded lifted their heads, and grieving citizens stared through the observation windows at the dark, distant vacuum called space.

They had no king.

They had no home.

They had no certainty that Naul would offer salvation.

But for the first time since Karolia’s destruction, they had a destination.