

# Chapter 7



Erra, what's war got to do with it?

# Star-Crossed

Nine years ago Osman Subramanian and Boradai Kandafu stood in the center of downtown N.L.A., the largest city on the dusty West Coast of the Northern United States of America. It was late in the afternoon and from behind the tall office buildings the glow of the setting sun cast an orange light on the crowded streets. The shade of the skyscrapers cooled down the streets slightly on this 90 degree autumn day.

The two men stood at an intersection of three streets below a large screen displaying vivid images of fighter jets flying across the dusty orange Martian plains. Below the pictures, captions announced a declaration of war between Al-Ahmar and the American colony of Jefferson, freshly issued by Congress and the President of the United States, and immediately answered by the Emir of Al-Ahmar with his own declaration.

Osman shook his head slowly. "This does not bode well for getting back home quickly. We'll have to go around Mars, maybe bounce to Ceres."

"Nah," Kandafu waved off Osman's worry, showing no concern. "I hate Ceres. We can still go through Rojodo or Hongzan. They can't block the entire planet."

"I don't care if they can or not, I don't want to go through Mars with this going on. It's a small planet."

The screen displayed a mock up of the Raven fighter jet deployed by the Americans. It was a small black spacecraft covered with jagged flat surfaces, armed with programmable missiles. The news report highlighted the details of the craft with white lines and text, showing animations of each feature in action as it engaged in dog-fights with other cartoon jets emblazoned with the seal of Al-Anqaa. Al-Anqaa always lost.

Osman frowned and added, "Our shuttle, it's manufactured by Al-Anqaa, a gift from Al-Ahmar. Do you really want to fly it anywhere near these war machines?"

Kandafu shrugged. "It's a commercial craft, they can't shoot it down. It's more likely to break down, the ancient piece of junk."

"That doesn't mean they won't shoot it down. Look at this place, they're glued to this broadcast, everyone here has stopped to watch. They're hungry for Al-Anqaai blood. We're in New Los Angeles, as in Old Los Angeles fell into the sea because America and their allies tried to blow up part of Al-Anqaa and screwed up by triggering the Age of Quakes. Then Al-Anqaa shamed America by founding the first colony on Mars, making their own bucolic paradise in the heavens, heathens not invited. Then America makes a point to create their own colony, and begins strip mining since it's just a dead planet anyway. Over a century later, Al-Ahmar is trying to farm the same land that Jefferson is trying to mine, and after a few more years of skirmishes over the land rights, well, it's time for war instead of diplomacy. There is no end to the animosity between these two."

Kandafu rubbed his chin. "For a man who makes the things he makes, you sure have distaste for violence. The same money that builds these wars funds a good part of your research."

Osman folded his arms. "That doesn't mean I like war. The people I make could win wars faster. The ultimate soldier and assassin, penetrating all defenses to the source, like surgery to remove cancer."

"Unless we sold it to both sides, then they're back to equal, cutting each other to pieces."

"I can't say that I like one or the other, anyway. You may be more partial to Al-Anqaa, but I do not care. The System would be a more peaceful place without either of them."

A reporter and her guest came on the big screen and began to discuss military strategy. "What will be America's first target?" the reporter asked as they sat in black chairs before a digital map of Mars.

Her guest, an older man with a bolo tie, folded his hands together and replied, "You know, it's hard to

tell, the objective is to get some aspect of surprise on Al-Ahmar. But Al-Anqaa has already begun to mobilize backup support to their emirate from Jupiter and Earth. The U.S. has more support coming from Earth, too. So I think the first big battles will be in space, in the space between Earth and Mars. On the ground, on Mars, it's different, the battles have already begun. Small battles over farms or mines. There have been traps laid in mines by Al-Ahmar, that have killed hundreds of American miners. That's why this war has begun, this sabotage has gone too far. I think there will be a push to take back all the ground America has developed, push back Al-Ahmar. That will be the most difficult part."

"Well, how do people fight on the ground in the Martian Frontier, where there is no atmosphere, no normalized gravity?"

"Special vehicles, armored rovers to transport the troops. They have suits and respirators to protect from radiation and keep them alive. But aside from that, you have jets, like the Raven you've shown. Air superiority will be absolutely key to this battle, for transportation and for precision bombing. To protect the colony and protect our settlements, we need jets always circling those areas. For offense, we need jets. Jets, jets, jets."

"Do we have air superiority?"

The military expert curled his upper lip. "That's hard to say. Their answer to the Raven is the Wasp, it's known to be faster, but carries a smaller payload and has a slightly higher crash record. But it's also been in service longer. Capabilities are very equal, still. With the larger craft, the same problem. Al-Anqaa is a highly technological nation, many people think they may have technology they have not even revealed yet. So uncertainty abounds right now in U.S. Command Central."

Osman turned his head back to Kandafu to reiterate his desire to avoid Mars, and an empty aluminum can hit the side of his head. "Hey!" he objected, looking behind him.

A disheveled woman in a soiled and torn gray military uniform held up her middle finger at Osman. She shouted from her seat on an iron bench, "Get out of my way, I'm watching this!"

Osman glared at her for a moment, annoyed by her incredible rudeness. Then he realized she was crippled, she had a cane and a fake leg. She held her head permanently cocked to the left and rocked her shoulders back and forth, anxiously watching the broadcast on the gigantic screen above. The faded name tag on her chest read: *Aguilar, United States Marines*.

"What is the matter?" Kandafu asked, wondering what grabbed Osman's attention. He looked behind them to see the same woman, then raised his eyebrow at his friend.

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Pollux sits in front of the large gold and black wall with the winged horse design that cages him inside of his tiny corner of the Skiasphere. The former jungle landscape has become an endless savanna where walking in one direction just leads back to the same place, like a miniature planet. A herd of zebras grazes nearby as a faint wind ripples the grass.

The boy stares at the crack in the barrier. A white light leaks through, dazzling his eyes. The crack has become large enough to put his hand through, but he can't feel anything on the other side. So he tries to pull away at it, bit-by-bit, in an effort to free himself from this boring confinement.

Faras materializes behind him, his arms crossed and his eyes squinted with disapproval. "What are you doing?" he asks.

Pollux stands up immediately, trying to hide the crack behind his back. "Nothing," he lies.

Faras doesn't believe him. "Let me see," he says, nudging Pollux aside. He leans over and stares right at the crack on the wall, the light making a jagged line down his face. Then, inexplicably, he examines the rest of the wall, searching for evidence of tampering, as if he didn't even see the glaring chink. "It's rock

solid," Faras concludes, putting his hands on his hips, satisfied with his work. "There's no way you could break this one."

The boy rubs his forearm, perplexed that Faras doesn't notice the imperfection, but completely unwilling to point it out to him. "I guess not," he concedes.

Faras turns back to the world in front of him. "Your imagination is not working very hard today," he says, strolling to one of the zebras and patting it on the neck. "Where's the tiger?"

"There are no tigers in Africa."

"The lion, then."

"The lion went to Mars, with the crab and the princess. The scorpion is there, too. And the bull and dragon, the cup bearer and the maiden, the goat and the strongman. The ram went to Earth, that's where you can find the whale and the dog and the driver and the herdsman. The fish went to Luna, to see the harp and the hero. Here there is a winged horse, a swan, and an eagle, and a bear. A river, an archer, a centaur, the scales, and a man who handles snakes. My twin, and the queen. Oh, and a boat, somewhere around. But nobody knows where the hunter went."

Faras stares at the boy for a moment. "Yet there's only zebras and grass."

"Maybe you can't see them. Only I can."

He shakes his head as if it's the most ridiculous notion ever uttered to him. "You can't hide anything from me."

Pollux glances at the swaying blades of grass at his feet. "I guess I can't," he says, puckering his lips.

"No, you can't," Faras concludes. He begins to say something else, but his face freezes and becomes fragmented, rectangular portions of it jutting off as if stuck a fraction of second before the rest of him.

Pollux smirks. "Connection failure!" He starts kicking Faras's image in the shins with glee, as Faras becomes even more fragmented and his image soon disappears.

In the Caduceus building, Faras wakes up on his bed with a very disappointed look on his face. Aquila is looming over him, poking his face with her index finger.

"Come on," she says. "*Levántate, cabron.*"

He slaps her hand away. "Stop it. What do you want? I'm busy."

"I don't want anything, Nahr wants to talk to us. So get up." After a hard slap to his black-socked foot, she leaves his apartment.

Faras rubs his foot and mumbles to himself "Bitch."

He arrives late to the meeting in the gymnasium. Nahr is already there, with Sage and Aquila. They give Faras a collective glare.

He returns their glares defensively and leans against the wall with his arms folded.

"Wonderful," Nahr says with a nod. "Now I can talk, if what I have to say is still relevant to the present time. Scorpio is en route to Nasr, after breaking into the computer system for the Rojodo police and what appears to be an elaborate casino front known as the Rojodo Gaming Commission."

Faras uncrosses his arms. "What?"

Aquila says to him snidely, "Arrive on time if you want the full details."

"Shut up. What is Scorp up to?"

"He's cleaning up Aqua's casino fraud accusations and bringing him back to Ganymede," Sage tells him plainly.

"Ha!" Faras laughs. "I'm not surprised, Aqua probably took the casino for millions."

"Two hundred million from thirteen casinos."

Faras's eyes go unfocused and his mouth gapes open, unable to come up with another comment until he stutters, "D-does he still have that? That money?"

They look at Nahr and he answers, "We're holding it captive. Scorpio is moving with Aqua, V, and Kandafu to Nasr so they can come back here undetected.

Aquila asks, "V? You didn't mention V before. What did she do?"

"Use your imagination," Nahr replies to her.

Aquila looks up at the rafters in the ceiling, thinking to herself.

Faras laughs at her. "Grunt."

She frowns at him. "*Semper Fi*, asshole."

"That doesn't even mean anything."

"It means more than a rag like you would understand!" she says, pointing to the eagle insignia tattooed on her arm, decorated with the stars and stripes of America.

"Aquila," Nahr says firmly, "we're all from Al-Anqaa."

Aquila looks at Nahr and Sage, then stops pointing to her arm. But she adds, "We're Trojans now. But I'll always be American, I don't care where I am."

Nahr is unmoved by her patriotism. "Since you and Faras get along so well, I'm going to put you both on bodyguard duty tonight."

"Bodyguard duty?" she asks. "Which body?"

"Ursa and Centaur will be having a lovely dinner tonight. I would like you two to be their security."

"A date?" Aquila asks.

Nahr replies, "I don't care what you call it, just keep them safe."

Faras wrinkles his face in disgust. "Centaur's such a big man, why can't he do that himself?"

"Because he will be busy having a lovely dinner. Don't you want him to enjoy himself?"

"No, I want him to get food poisoning from the oysters or *foie gras* or whatever nasty shit he eats."

Nahr sighs. "His tastes are never that exciting and he doesn't get sick."

Aquila shakes her head and puts her hands on her hips. "Can't I do this myself? I don't need him around." She motions to Faras by jerking her head in his direction.

"Faras has nothing better to do," Nahr concludes, picking dirt from under his nails. "He's just a chauffeur anyway, so let him drive. You and your bird can do the actual work."

"*Es verdad!*" Aquila laughs, giving Faras a brief sneer.

Faras glares at her profile, wanting nothing more than to run her down with a car.

Nine years before, back in the crowded intersection of N.L.A., Osman and Kandafu sat on either side of the veteran as they continued to watch the news broadcast on the big screen above the streets.

The President of the United States talked to his nation with the Great Seal of America behind him. "We will not back down," he said, holding both sides of the podium. "Al-Ahmar and their parent Al-Anqaa cannot drive Americans from our settlements on the plains of Mars. We made those settlements with our own sweat, tears, and blood. These mines are integral to maintaining our national resources, gathering essential minerals such as iron and magnesium and silver, without further destroying our home, the Earth. It is integral to the future of this nation that we take a stand and affirm the rights of America to the Martian Frontier and its many bounties."

Kandafu leaned over to the veteran and asked, "What's ailment do you suffer from, did you get crippled in the military?"

She pushed him away with her elbow. "I'm listening to this," she said.

The President continued, "America will keep our settlements through any means possible. We will get back the settlements that Al-Anqaa has already taken. We are a force of reckoning, as strong as we ever have been in our six centuries. As strong as we were during the Great World War II and during the Great Annexation. Our battle ships, our missiles, our bombs, the able-bodied men and women of the military – they are all focused on this cause, and they are the best in The System. Some people try to cast doubt on that, saying Al-Anqaa might have some tricks up their sleeves. I don't believe that's the case. We are America, the Strong, the Brave, the Just."

Osman looked behind the veteran to Kandafu. "Bombs? Missiles? We're going to die if we go through Mars. We're going to get blown up."

"*Cállate!*" the veteran told him to shut up in Spanish.

The President said, "Some people are concerned about casualties. They want to know if it's worth it, if we're gambling on Al-Anqaa bluffing about their military prowess. Again, there is exaggeration about what Al-Anqaa can do. They have no magic to strike us down. We have the same American ingenuity and skill expressed time and time again throughout history. I will not lie and say there will not be lives lost for our nation. But America is great, and America will win. They have brain-washed legions like the Mujahideen and Al-Mitwaadhi to lead their charge, there is nothing genuine in their cause except the forced will to serve their master. Our soldiers fight with a clear heart, understanding the risks, but well-equipped to live and fight and win."

Kandafu said to the veteran, "I know a Mujahid, he's not brain-washed. He's a little mean and standoffish, but he's an excellent soldier."

She looked from side to side at the two men around her. "W-what do you want? I'm busy."

Osman pointed up to the screen, "You know he's not going to say anything real, he's just going to say what you want to hear. The Martian Front will be blown to all Hell, thousands will die, and it will end in a stalemate because they're going into a war of attrition."

The veteran commented "You're not from round here. Are you spies?"

"No, we're from Ganymede," Kandafu said. "We have to go home soon, my friend here is upset that we're going through Mars."

She tightened up her nose. "You're really going to Mars?"

"No," Osman asserted. "Not to Mars, to Ceres."

She stared up at the President, taking in a deep breath. "I would be there, if I d-didn't crash that plane. I woulda shot down the Mit-Mitwa. What they call them, I can't say it anymore."

Kandafu pointed to the decorations on her faded uniform. "Second lieutenant, Marine Corps. Training accident?"

"I fucked up in flight school."

"Do they take care of you at the V.A.?"

She tried to shake her head. "Bad conduct. I fucked up."

Osman scratched his forehead uncomfortably while his friend thought of his next question.

In his apartment in New Jersey, Ryan sits on his bed, dressed in a stylish suit and shiny patent leather shoes. He holds his hands together, waiting anxiously while his three satellites hover around him.

*'Let's run through the plan again,'* Rigel says. *'She picks us up, we go to La Maison where we have reservations for 7:30 PM. There we —'*

"I don't think I need many plans beyond that," Ryan interrupts him. "There are too many variables to calculate."

*'That's why this is a terrible idea,'* Bella complained. *'Bad bad bad. She's going to find out.'*

Rigel insists, *'There are not too many variables for me to calculate, within a certain margin of error. As long as we follow the 176 points, there is a 99.7% chance of achieving our goal of appearing normal.'*

Betel says, *'I thought our goal was to score a home run.'*

Ryan adds, "I thought the idea was to get to know Rosie better, not play baseball."

*'It's a metaphor for —'*

Rigel says, *'Don't listen to him, point number 52 is no physical contact.'*

*'Booooooooooooo,'* Betel boos, *'you are fail, Blue Ball.'*

*'If she touches you,'* Bella drifts off into her own conversation, *'hit her in the back of the head, just enough to knock her out. Then run.'*

*'Don't do that,'* Rigel says. *'Point five, avoid physical violence.'*

"I think that one is obvious," Rian says.

*'Let's review all points, then. Point one: Blue Ball is fail.'* Rigel pauses, his blue lights growing dimmer. *'Betel has overwritten my 176 points.'*

Betel spins and flashes his red lights. *'Good one, huh? You are fail. BLUE BALL. Hahahaha. I'm so funny.'*

Bella concurs, *'It's true, Rigel is fail. He thinks this date is a good idea. It's gross. Humans are gross.'*

The buzzer rang in the other room and Ryan looked up. "I will do fine."

In a black town car with tinted back windows, Ursa sits in the middle of the backseat staring forward. She's dressed in a blue and white robe with her jet black hair styled in a conservative bun. Her defending orbs float on either side of her. Faras drives the car and Aquila sits in the passenger seat, tapping her fingers against the window.

"You should have taken Ithaca," Aquila tells him impatiently, referring to the traffic that has them stopped. "Now we're stuck on Hebe. I told you, Ithaca."

"You did?" Faras replies, shifting his hand on the steering wheel. "All I heard was chicken squawks."

Ursa looks from the back of Faras's cloth-covered head to the back of Aquila's head, with its short red curls. She bites her lower lip, assuring them, "There is plenty of time."

"I'm not worried," Faras says flippantly.

"I don't sound like a chicken," Aquila adds.

"I didn't say you sounded like a chicken, I said I heard a chicken from somewhere. I don't know where I heard it from, it just came from the ether."

She folds her arms, looks out the window, and says under her breath, "*Que te folle un caballo gordo.*"

"*Tu primera, bruja,*" he mumbles back.

Ursa frowns. "I can hear what you're saying."

"But can you repeat it?" Faras asks.

She translates humorlessly, "She told you to get fucked by a fat horse, you told her she should go first and called her a witch."

Aquila twirls one of her curls in her finger and bares her teeth. "It sounded better in Spanish."

Back in N.L.A., the veteran sat on the bed in a hotel room, staring at the television. Osman did a physical exam on her as she watched the news.

The American news channel was showing a speech from the enemy, from a tall, dark-skinned woman dressed in a highly decorated uniform for the Al-Anqai military. The title at the bottom of the screen said: Suhaila Al-Malika, General of Al-Ahmar. As she spoke in an Al-Ahmari dialect of Arabic, a voice-over translated her words to English.

"The Americans have a history of encroaching on the lands of other nations. From their first century driving the natives from the North American continent so they could expand their territory, to the invasion of Arab lands to secure petroleum reserves, to the aftermath of the Age of Quakes when they absorbed the nations of Latin America too poor and too devastated to pay off their debts. Manifest Destiny, they called it. The Great Expansion. Globalization, capitalism, and democracy for all, as long as it is on their terms. The military and economic supremacy of America and its allies enslaved my ancestors until the Caliphate of the Phoenix arose to unite all Muslim nations against American hegemony, for the benefit of the many and not the few. Together, the states of Al-Anqaa have created an empire of prosperity, which excels in technological advances and recognizes the sanctity of humanity and life above wealth."

The veteran watches with her mouth wide open. "I don't like her," she said, shaking her head in remote fear.

"Of course you don't," Osman said, feeling the muscles and joints inside of the veteran's shoulder. "She's your enemy. And she is going to make America hurt very, very badly."

General Suhaila continues, "President Benson doubts the ability of Al-Anqaa to win against the military

might of America. I say to everyone, especially the Americans listening, he bluffs. If you invest your hope in doubting our might, you will be sorely disappointed. Divert your efforts from the Martian Frontier and leave us the land that we claimed first, or else the Red Planet will be stained a truer shade of red."

The veteran's eyes widened with anger. "I would b-b-beat her ass," she asserted with a jerky, sweeping arm gesture that pushed away Osman and slapped him lightly on the chin.

He rolled his eyes and pushed her arms back down. "No, you would not."

Kandafu walked into the room, holding a brightly-colored plastic cup and a straw to his lips. He stood next to the television while sucking up light brown horchata, watching the Al-Ahmari General stare menacingly at her viewers, until the feed cut to the insignia of Al-Anqaa — the name of the empire in Arabic calligraphy designed in the shape of a flying bird. "Uh, oh," Kandafu said, looking at Osman. "Did I just miss Suhaila's grandstanding? This was to be her shining moment, she'd be irate if I missed it."

"You missed it," Osman told him as he squeezed the veteran's forearm. She let out a squeak and tried to squirm away. "Sit still," he told her, holding her in place. "I'm almost done."

Kandafu pointed the straw in his drink at her. "She checks out. No close family keeping tabs on her, she's been lost to the streets of N.L.A. What about her physical state?"

Osman replied, "She has malformed bones. Whoever set her injuries did a horrible job. Some joints are almost useless. Some muscle atrophy. Plenty of scar tissue. The worst is her brain, she must have received a serious concussion in her accident because she has the intelligence of a six-year-old."

"Oh, that reminds me," Kandafu said, pulling a small pre-packaged chocolate cake from his pocket and giving it to the veteran. She saw it and snatched it away eagerly, ripping it open and shoving it in her mouth, leaving brown goo around her lips. Kandafu wrinkled his forehead, finally realizing the depth of her mental impairment. "Maybe you should fix this poor creature, then. Her and the Russian girl."

"We need to get back to Ganymede first. Suhaila just said she'd cover Mars with American blood. You still want to go that route?"

"She said that?"

"Yes, she said that." Osman grabbed the remote and replayed the end of her speech, to the protest of the veteran. "Hear that?" he asked, ignoring the veteran. "We can't go through Mars."

"We can go through Mars," Kandafu persisted with his optimism. "I just talked to Xaio and he's arranging for an escort through Hongzan. They'll send out jets to meet us before Mars and protect us until we refuel and move far beyond the fighting. It will be fast and quick, but they'll treat us like royalty. And we'll be back to Ganymede in less than a week, Mars is very close to Jupiter right now."

Osman folded his arms, trying to pull out some skeptical remark. "Are you certain they'll meet us?"

"I am certain, there is nothing to worry about. We will be safe, we will stay out of this."

Aquila grabbed the remote back from Osman. "Mine."

Ryan sits in the passenger seat of Rosie's old brown Herzog. She drives down the streets of Princeton at night, to a restaurant Gene Johnson had recommended to Ryan. She wears a blue flower dress and has her hair up, well prepared for their date.

Although she has made up herself, her usual cynical attitude still persists. "Aren't you going to learn to drive?" she asks him.

Ryan thinks for a moment. "That never crossed my mind."

"How do you get to school normally?"

"I walk."

She wrinkles her nose. "That's like two miles."

He shrugs. "It's a nice walk."

"But you could get a nice car. Better than this piece of shit. You know it's getting colder, you don't want to walk in winter."

"I don't?"

"No, it's cold, there's snow on the ground. And with a car you can go to other places, like New York or the Boardwalk. You just need to take a driving class and buy a car."

Ryan watches a red-colored luxury car pass by in the other lane. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'll get a car."

Rosie tightens her grip on the steering wheel, confounded by his complacency. She changes the subject. "Where is this place? Do I need to park on the street?"

"No, they have a valet. It's right up here." He points to a circular driveway leading up to a chateau-style building surrounded by a small garden. "*La Maison*," he says the name in a French accent.

She stops at the mouth of the driveway and looks at him. "Do you speak French?"

"*Oui, je parle de nombreuses langues.*"

"I don't speak French."

"I pretend," Ryan lies. "Pretend that I can speak a lot of languages. It's sexy."

His strange answer gets him an equally strange stare from her, until someone behind her honks their horn to compel her to move. She drives forward and comments, "You're weird."

Inside of the restaurant in Troy, Centaur waits at a table in a private room on the third level. Next to the table, a large arched window overlooks the street below. As he watches the cars drive by, a brown-feathered eagle flies to the ledge outside and lands, looking in at him with large yellow eyes.

He sits back, meeting the eye on the side of the bird's face that is turned to him. It focuses on him with an artificial lens and pupil made of metal and plastic.

Ursa enters the room and sees him locked in a stare with the rare bird. "Is that Altair?"

Centaur's face darts to her. "Yes, it's Altair. I don't know why Aquila put her there, right on the window."

Altair cocks its head to look at Ursa, who slowly takes a seat at the table as she keeps a careful eye on the eagle. "I know she's meant to be watching over me, but she seems to be just watching me."

Down on the street in the car, Aquila stares at the dashboard while Faras plays a game on his phone.

"Oh!" he shouts out suddenly, showing her the screen. "See that?"

Aquila glances at it with utmost apathy. "That game is stupid."

"You're stupid. You probably hate it because you suck at it."

"You want to play a game? How about a real sport? Let's try rugby, I'll — "

Centaur talks to them over the security circuit, '*Aquila, move your satellite to a less conspicuous location. She's upsetting Ursa.*'

She frowns and rolls her eyes. '*Whatever, okay.*'

Faras snickers to himself as he continues to play his game.

Back at their table, Ursa and Centaur watch Altair fly away, to a perch across the street, where it continues to stare through their window.

Ursa asks, "Are there any real raptors in Troy?"

"Some, to kill the pigeons around the spaceport."

"I imagine that one is designed to kill more than pigeons. Osman's work?"

"Of course it's Osman's work, Aquila is one of his masterpieces."

She looks at him with a curled up nose. "Masterpieces?"

"His word, for his best work. Also his most, um, imaginative work. Aquila, Scorpio, Leo, Sage, Cettie... Ryan, of course. Being Erra's patient, I'm not in that elite club."

"Isn't that a good thing, then? Not to be made into his vision, into a weapon?"

Centaur furrows his eyebrow. "To be fair, Erra made the most dangerous stellar of us all."

Ursa looks down at her empty plate. "That is true, but in the end a stellar is responsible for their own behavior. I worry about the self-restraint of someone like Aquila or Leo."

He lifts an eyebrow. "That's why we have override."

Ursa stares at the eagle again. "True."

Nine years before, Caduceus's private shuttle approached the orange sphere of Mars, the craft flanked by two small jets marked with the Chinese and Hongzan flags. Kandafu and Osman stood behind the pilot in the cockpit, watching the Red Planet and the space around it. Within that black expanse and above the plains of Mars thousands of distant metallic objects twinkled in the light of the Sun.

Osman commented, still unhappy with Kandafu's route home, "That twinkling, that can't be stars."

"Those are jets," the pilot replied. "The fleets are parked around Mars, waiting to move."

"Fleets?" Kandafu asked. "Waiting to enter Mars?"

"Some of them. Most of those dots are military from Al-Anqaa and America. Some are Rojodo and Hongzan, standing guard to keep them away from their part of the planet."

"Go around them," Osman told the pilot anxiously. "We're not taking an Al-Anqaai model shuttle through that cloud."

The pilot replied, "That's not really my choice, Doctor. I'm going where they escort me."

Kandafu put his hand on Osman's shoulder. "Don't worry, Hongzan's boys wouldn't take us into the fray. They're here to keep us safe."

Osman looked at Kandafu's hand and pushed it off by jerking away his shoulder. "I'll stop worrying when we're past the Planet of War."

Kandafu shrugged and walked out of the cockpit to the lounge on the other side of the metal wall. The veteran sat in front of a television, watching footage of the fleets looming above Mars. In the corner, the Russian woman Osman found in Saint Petersburg read an instructional book on learning English. She still kept her body and face covered with long clothes and a scarf.

"Quit watching that stuff on the television," he said to the veteran. "You can see such things with your own eyes from the cockpit."

The veteran groaned, annoyed that he was interrupting the program. "Go away."

"No, I won't go away. You've been watching that for days now. If you're so fascinated with war, you should see the real thing."

She folded her arms and pouted, hoping her obstinate silence would make him go away.

He sighed and motioned to the other woman, talking to her in Russian. "Deva, do you want to watch us come closer to Mars?"

Deva looked over the edge of her book sheepishly. "Yes I do," she replied in English, putting her book down and following him to the cockpit.

After Deva left, the veteran rubbed her arm and said, "Stupid Commie-Pinko-Russian."

As minutes passed, Mars and the sea of fighter jets came closer. They were ordered in a precise grid, each jet hovering stationary as it watched over its own section of land below it, creating a sphere that surrounded the planet from pole-to-pole. Above the grid of sentinels, on the edge of the Martian Frontier, a fleet of AI-Anqaa and AI-Ahmari jets stared down American jets on the other side of an invisible line several miles wide — very thin in the huge space around them.

"What are they doing?" Deva asked.

"A standoff," Kandafu explained. "They're holding their fronts to prevent the advancement of their enemy. Every inch of their land is accounted for and protected with deadly force. Just one attempt to encroach on the enemy's property will break the balance and give them an excuse to release their utmost aggression upon each other."

Deva's eyes widen. "I don't want to be here."

"We shouldn't be here," Osman agreed. "Why are we getting closer to the Frontier?"

The pilot replied, "Hongzan is on the other side of those jets, just over that horizon. America's soldiers are cutting close to China lately. But they say the Americans aren't hassling them, they just let the Yankees know who they are and the Yankees let them be."

Osman leaned over next to the pilot. "Did I mention we're in an AI-Anqaa shuttle?"

"About 50 times, Doctor," he replied, staring forward with a frown. "It's not registered to AI-Anqaa, it's registered in Troy. There is a Trojan flag painted in bright fluorescent colors on the side of the ship. It's broadcasting a Trojan identification signal. And this AI-Anqaa model we're touting about is at least thirty years old, it's a dinosaur, it's been decommissioned in AI-Anqaa for a decade."

Kandafu chewed on his lower lip as his eyes moved around the cockpit, taking inventory of the scratched and tarnished metal walls, ripped upholstery, and replacement instruments stuck in their consoles with gobs of solder and epoxy. "She is a little over the hill, isn't she?"

"Almost two hundred billion clicks on the odometer," the pilot agreed. "I'm surprised this thing still

flies."

"This ship is insured for a lot more than it's worth. Maybe an accident would be fortuitous."

Osman gave his friend a horrified look. "When you say that you sound like you're scheming."

"Of course I do. I'm always scheming, Subramanian."

Osman felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as they grew dangerously close to the rift between the opposing armies. The idea became very prominent and probable in his mind that Kandafu had an insane plan to get a new shuttle by staging an accident with the help of his friends in the Chinese military. But even this seemed beyond Kandafu's calculations and manipulations, so Osman pursed his lips and watched the American jets come closer and pass by the starboard side of their vessel.

Kandafu laughed at him. "All is well, quit sweating."

In the distance, one shot fired from an Al-Anqaai jet, traveling across the gap to hit an American jet, which exploded into a white and black burst of shrapnel.

Deva pointed it out with a gasp. "They shot it down!"

Kandafu's jovial expression disappeared as he saw the scene unfold. From that one hit, the American jets began to move, rippling out from the point of impact to engage the Al-Anqaai on the other side. As the Al-Anqaai noticed the Americans mobilizing, they went into motion themselves to defend their front. In less than a minute, the tense balance had snapped into all out warfare.

"Move, move!" Osman yelled urgently at the pilot. "They're going to shoot us down!"

The pilot held his hand over the radio in his ear. "Wait, I'm trying to get instructions from — "

"Fuck the escort, get us out of here!"

"Calm down, Sub!" Kandafu snapped at him. "Let's just stay calm and get to — " his sentence trailed off as the fragments of flaming metal fuselages drifted toward them, freshly shot from American Ravens. "Get to the escape pod."

In the lounge, the veteran watched a news story about the stalemate on the Martian Frontier as the debris came closer to the round window beside her, unnoticed. Suddenly Osman grabbed her by the arm and started to pull her to the back of the ship, the veteran kicking and screaming and cussing about being torn from the television all the way to the small chamber at the back of the shuttle.

After all five of the people aboard crammed into the tiny space, the pilot closed and locked the door, just as a massive impact hit the rest of the spacecraft. He sat down and buckled into the safety restraints of one of the chairs in less than a second. "Strap in, or you will die!" he shouted.

Osman forced the restraints on the still-fussing veteran, then secured himself and turned to Kandafu to give him the most sincerely displeased look he would make in his entire life.

Kandafu shrugged as the escape pod uncoupled from the rest of the shuttle and began to accelerate on a path downward into the Martian wasteland.

As they fell in the windowless vessel through the thin atmosphere of Mars, the g-forces increased quickly. A roaring static sound surrounded them and the metal walls shook, every bolt threatening to pop out from the stress. The veteran began to panic and scream and cry, ignored by everyone else as they gritted their teeth and waited for the ordeal to pass.

In La Maison, Ryan looks around the dining room, at the gaudy chandeliers and paintings of bucolic scenes with mythical nymphs frolicking in pleasant brooks and satyrs playing pan flutes. A man dressed in a

striped shirt and a beret plays slow music on an accordion as he meanders around the restaurant.

"I thought this was supposed to be a nice restaurant," he says.

"It is," Rosie replies as she looks at the menu.

"It's silly."

"Does nothing impress you?"

"No."

"Then what does impress you?"

He thinks. "Jupiter."

"Jupiter?"

"Yes."

"So something needs to be as impressive as Jupiter to impress you? That's a pretty high bar."

The waiter visits their table, dressed in a fancy tuxedo with his short hair parted down the middle and smoothed with pomade. "Have we had enough time to decide?"

Rosie looks up at him. "Filet mignon oscar style and a lobster tail."

The waiter glances at Ryan as if he expects Ryan to contradict her order. But Ryan doesn't care, he just shrugs and says, "I'll have the same. And this bottle of wine." He points to the wine list without looking at it.

The waiter leans over to read the list. "The \$200 bottle of pinot noir?"

"Yes. I want to be impressed."

"Could I trouble you for identification?"

Ryan pulls out his ID card and gives it to the waiter.

"And your method of payment?"

Ryan gives him a credit card.

The waiter looks over both cards, then says, "I will return shortly," before leaving.

Rosie leans forward. "He's not impressed, he thinks you can't pay."

"I can pay."

"I know you can pay. But you look like you're seventeen."

"Why didn't he ask you for an ID and credit card?"

Rosie stares at him. "You're the man."

"So?"

She fidgets with her salad fork. "Who pays for a date in Troy?"

"I don't know, I've never been on a date."

Rosie furrows her brow. "Never? Are you joking?"

Ryan shakes his head. "Never. I... didn't get out much."

The waiter comes back and returns Ryan's cards. "Thank you, sir. I will put in your order to the chef. How do you like your steaks prepared?"

"I changed my mind," Rosie says, less gleefully than before. "A chicken salad instead."

"Chicken salad?" Ryan asks, surprised. "The steak and lobster sounds much tastier."

She looks away anxiously.

"Get that steak, it's my treat. Chicken salad does not impress."

Rosie smiles again, relieved. "No, it does not," she agrees. "I am unchanging my mind. Make my steak medium rare."

"I want medium rare, too."

"All right," the waiter nods. "I will put in your order."

After he leaves, Ryan says, "I've never had steak or lobster before, is it good? Better than fried chicken?"

Her smile eases a bit. "You've lived a sheltered life, haven't you?"

He looks to the side for a moment. "We don't have these things in Troy. At least, they're rare."

Rosie leaned forward. "This might be a little rude to ask you, but, where does your money come from? A trust fund? Were your parents rich?"

Ryan gives his prefabricated answer. "Yes, they were rich. They left me a trust, but I lived with my relative on Ganymede after they died. I was a baby, I never knew them. I didn't get the money from the trust until recently, when I turned 21 a couple months ago. August 14. My parents, they came from America, from New Jersey. Gene Johnson knew them. So I came here, to attend Princeton, like my father."

She looks him in the eyes. "You were not rich, when you were on Ganymede?"

He shakes his head. "I lived in a small bedroom, it wasn't much. It was enough. But my uncle was not rich, he gave me the minimum." He starts to mix reality with his lie, and a grimace invades his face. "He did not care what I needed or wanted, only about himself and his bizarre imagination and the quest for perfection. He'd spend hours working on his — " A headache forms behind his left eye in a fraction of a second, stopping him from speaking further. He closes his eyes and bows his head.

Rosie is taken aback by his sudden pain. "What's wrong?"

Ryan snaps back up. "Nothing. I just didn't like to be around him. I don't want to talk about him, either. I would rather that I never saw him again, I don't even want to think about him."

Rosie folds her hands on the table, discomfited by his sentiment. "Then let's not talk about him, whoever he is."

He notices she is unhappy now, and apologizes. "I'm sorry. My life, as nice as it looks now... my life has not been very good. But it's getting better now." He gives her a small smile.

She smiles back. "It sounds like you need to live a little more than you were allowed to before. I think I can help with that." After grabbing a piece of bread from the basket on the table and taking a bite, she gives him a wink.

In the front seat of the town car, Aquila stares at Faras as he continues to play his hand-held game. He pokes the device furiously, trying to achieve some challenging and engaging objective. When it eludes him, he hits his fist on the dashboard, and yells, "Shit!"

Aquila snatches his phone from his hand and holds it away. "We're on a job, here. You're supposed to be looking out for the bad guy, not dicking with your phone."

He gives her a nasty look. "You're the one with eagle eyes, I'm just the driver. And don't give me a lecture on professionalism, I know how much television you watch. It's disgusting."

"I don't watch it on the job, *cabron*. And I don't watch junk, I watch history. Documentaries. It's educational."

"It's all about military history or serial killers or war machines, you just like to see people get blown up and stabbed and killed. It's sick how much you love it." He doesn't try to recover his phone from her, instead he pulls out a joint and lights it up.

Aquila frowns at him, but doesn't stop him.

"You know," he continues after rolling down the window and blowing out the smoke, "I killed people. I killed a lot of Americans. I don't know how many I killed, because I was dropping bombs and taking out other crafts with long-range missile fire. I didn't stick around to count the bodies. I do remember how many ships I took down. Forty-two, in one year. I flew with no care for my life or others, the enemy hated me, my squadron hated me. But I got results, and that got me respect. Then I got shot down, and died, according to the records. I was honored as a national hero, my ashes entombed in the Mosque of the Crossed Swords. Here lies the pilot of the Red Wasp, Homam Nidal.

"But, now, I'm here, sitting in a car outside of a restaurant, smoking hash and playing games. Nobody is shooting at me, I'm not shooting at anybody else. I am sitting on my ass and wasting time. And, guess what – I'm not yearning for flights across the hazy orange horizon or those medals pinned on my fake grave. I don't even care if you have that stupid tattoo on your shoulder to advertise you're my former enemy, the people who ended my former life, because I'm not fighting anymore. Fighting and killing is not fun." He inhales deeply from the joint, and speaks while holding his breath, "This is the life, wallowing in obscurity."

Aquila sighs. "Homam Nidal. At least you got a chance to be famous, I didn't even get that. I never got to the Frontier. I crashed my Raven in Death Valley because I was hung over."

Faras looks at her seriously for a moment, then starts to laugh. "Hung over? That's your excuse? No wonder you Americans can't take Al-Anqaa, you're all piss drunk. If you show up hung over in Al-Mitwaadhi, they'll suspend you. A clouded mind is a dead mind when you're flying at Mach 8. I should call you Tequila."

She pushes his shoulder to get him to stop laughing. "Shut up. I almost died."

"That's called natural selection, isn't it?"

She holds up her fist, ready to punch him in the face. "I'll show you natural selection. I could beat you into a bloody red pulp only recognizable by DNA."

"Hey! I'm kidding! Can't you take a joke? You Americans have no sense of humor unless it involves farts, dicks, or puppets."

"No sense of humor?" Aquila asks. "That, coming from an Al-Anqaai?"

"Al-Ahmari."

"Whatever! You're all the same to me." She sits back in her seat and steals the joint from him, inhaling the smoke even deeper than he can. She blows the smoke out of the car window, then looks at the joint with an impressed look. "That's pretty good Mary Jane."

"Of course it is, it comes from the plains of Mars, just outside of Nasr. They make the finest in The System."

She takes another drag. "You know, I don't really hate Al-Anqaa. I just love America."

"Well," he reclines his seat and puts his hands behind his head, "I don't really hate America. I don't really care for Al-Anqaa or Al-Ahmar anymore, either. I'm just a bastard to anyone."

She giggles. "*El gran cabron.*"

Faras squints his eyes at her. "Do you not have toxic nullification?"

She laughs again, still smoking. "No, I have ethanol metabolism. That's it. Nothing like they gave Scorp."

"I see."

"Do you miss Scorp, your boyfriend? Must get lonely at night, huh?" She gives him a caustically flirtatious expression.

He leans closer to her. "He's not my boyfriend, I don't know who started that rumor."

"I did," she says with a smile. "Many years ago. Because I know it's true." She bites her lip. "I saw you kiss him."

"That doesn't mean he's my boyfriend."

"But it means you like guys."

"I like women," he reiterates.

Aquila raises her chin. "How fast did you take your jet, the Red Wasp?"

"In atmosphere or in space?"

"In atmosphere, of course."

"Mach 13.4."

"Liar."

Faras shakes his head. "I'm not lying. I blacked out for a few seconds and almost crashed." He adds, whispering, "It was exhilarating."

Aquila stares into his eyes, her thoughts hazed by the mild narcotic.

He puts his hand on the back of her neck and pulls her into a kiss.

Back on the Martian Frontier, Kandafu steadied himself against the outside of the escape pod. It was now burrowed a foot into the rusty soil and covered by the white parachute which deployed before it crash landed. Osman stood next to Kandafu, glaring at him with his arms folded.

"Well," Kandafu said, looking around at the fields of soybeans nearby, "at least we landed on farmland, that's fortunate." He panted between sentences, still disoriented and shaken. "There's air to breath."

Osman stretched his neck. "Did you plan this to get the insurance money on the shuttle?"

Kandafu shook his head as if the accusation was utterly crazy. "I couldn't start a war, let alone start a war in order to get insurance money on a meager shuttle. That's ridiculous."

"No, you didn't start a war, but you are one to take whatever opportunity comes your way."

"Dr. Subramanian," Kandafu said, stiffening up with umbrage, "my ventures are calculated, and never involve putting myself in harm's way. I am not stupid."

As the two men argued, the veteran still sat in the escape pod, crying. Deva tried to calm her down, but she could not because the veteran just pushed her away. Deva tried to cover the veteran's mouth with her hand to shut her up, but the veteran bit Deva, who yelped and held her hand in pain.

The pilot walked around the perimeter, scouting out their location with a GPS device and a pair of binoculars. He saw a farmhouse in the distance, beyond the fields, where he noticed a curtain was open in one of the windows. The curtain shut as soon as he saw the face of someone inside looking out at him.

"If you're not stupid," Osman contended, "why did you insist on coming to Mars instead of going through Ceres? Ceres would have been safer, and faster."

"Because I hate Ceres," Kandafu said. "That accident we just came through was just that — and accident. I couldn't orchestrate that."

"Guys!" the pilot shouted, running back to the escape pod. "We're in contested territory. We've got to get someone to pick us up, as soon as possible. Who do we call? Hongzan isn't going to come out here, not with a battle like that going on."

Kandafu scratched his ear. "I believe an answer will come without us having to make a call."

"I didn't turn on the distress beacon yet. If I do that, Al-Ahmar will come."

Osman turned around and looked in the distance, seeing a group of five military vehicles approaching down a dirt road. "They're already here," he said. "And they're armed."

Kandafu shrugged. "There we go."

When the soldiers arrived, they arrested all five of them and took them to a tiny prison in the nearby town, locking them up in a cell guarded by iron bars. The police station and jail were one room, made from red brick and concrete, with bare floors and a few desks and chairs. Red dust blew around the ground and the bright Martian sun came in through one open window.

Kandafu sat chained to one of the desks, while a soldier in a red uniform interrogated him from the other side. The soldier rifled through their belongings in a brown canvas duffel bag, turning over and examining every object he found before placing it on the desk.

Another soldier watched the Al-Ahmari news on an old television, occasionally glancing to the side at the four prisoners inside of the cell close to him. The veteran put her face up to the bars, trying to comprehend the Arabic newscast.

"Why so many medical supplies?" the soldier asked Kandafu.

"They belong to Dr. Subramanian," he replied, pointing to Osman in the cell. "He's a doctor, he also works with Caduceus. He owns part of Caduceus. We were on our way back to Ganymede."

"Why come to Mars then? Didn't you know about this war?"

"Yes, but we had an escort from Hongzan. They were keeping us safe."

The soldier laughs once. "They didn't do a good job, did they?"

"No, I suppose not. But, in complete disclosure, both Subramanian and I have visas for Al-Ahmar, they're in there somewhere. The two women don't because we weren't expecting to come through Al-Ahmar, they only have visas for Hongzan and Troy. The other one is our pilot, he has a license through Hongzan and China."

"The two women, they are crippled. One of them is burned, the other is an invalid. Why are they with you?"

"We need to get them to Ganymede for urgent medical attention."

The soldier watching the television noticed the veteran trying to watch, and turned the screen away from her. She objected by reaching out her arm and crying. The soldier stood up, annoyed by her, and grabbed her arm. Then he saw the American eagle tattoo on her shoulder and his face turned irate.

"Hey!" He yelled at the other soldier. "This woman is American military! A Marine!"

The soldier interrogating Kandafu frowned and furrowed his brow at him. "A Marine? Why do you have an American grunt with you?"

Kandafu insisted, "She's not a soldier anymore, she was discharged for bad conduct after a training accident. She has the mind of a child, we're trying to help her."

"Why are you trying to help an American? Are you working for the Americans?"

"No, I'm an international man. I'm a citizen of Troy, but I work for no country. Find my wallet in there," he said, pointing to the bag. "I have been everywhere, I know everyone."

"You don't know me," the soldier replied, unamused.

Kandafu sighed and put his head in his palm, propping up himself on the desk.

The soldier motioned to pull more objects from the duffel bag, but was interrupted by a group of men entering the station. Four soldiers dressed in perfect red and black uniforms followed behind one tall, skinny man — a colonel with a square chin, a thin mustache, and a fine uniform decorated with epaulets and three gold crescents.

As soon as they saw the colonel, they stood up and saluted him. "Colonel Djibrael," the soldier interrogating Kandafu said. "It's an honor to see you. What is the reason for your visit?"

Colonel Djibrael ignored them, instead sauntering over to Kandafu and leaning over the desk to grin at him like an old and dear friend. "You do find trouble, don't you, Mr. Kandafu?"

The soldier put his hand down. "Do you know him, Colonel?"

"Yes. Unchain him and release his friends. Suhaila wants to see him in Nasr."

"General Suhaila?" the soldier asked, confused, glancing between Djibrael and Kandafu.

"Yes, Suhaila," Djibrael answered him. "My boss."

In the car, Faras and Aquila are getting hot and heavy. Aquila straddles his lap as they neck in the front seat.

Inside of the restaurant, Centaur and Ursa discuss less steamy matters.

"What do you see yourself doing in a few years?" she asks him. "Five years from now?"

His answer is fast and unequivocal. "Working for Caduceus, on the Hera."

"You don't have more ambition than that?"

He shakes his head. "Caduceus takes care of me."

Ursa smiles. "But with your charisma, you could go farther. Maybe even take over Crowley's job,

become head of the Administrative Council. I'm surprised Kandafu hasn't put the thought in your mind, he'd love to have even more friends in high places."

Centaur pokes his half-eaten duck breast with his fork. "He already has. I declined. I'm too honest to be a politician. I asked him why he doesn't do it."

Her smile weakens a bit. "What did he say to that?"

"He said that he has more power in anonymity."

Ursa's eyes drift out of the window. "He works effectively from the shadows."

"He prefers it that way. He told me when it comes to who you know, it's quality over quantity."

She looks at him again, more directly. "You're better than him, Centaur. Beware of his advice, there's always a personal motive behind it. He takes more than he gives."

Centaur crosses his eyebrows. "I know that, Ursa. But he is still my friend."

Ursa tilts her head slightly. "Do you have a selfish side? An angry side? You always seem so noble, I wonder if you think of yourself. Deep down, what does Centaur want?"

He leans forward. "I want to serve."

She leans forward closer to him. "To serve?"

He leans in further. "I -- " Something catches him in the corner of his eye, outside of the window and on the street below. A police scooter has parked behind the black town car and a policeman steps off. Centaur sits back up and looks out of the window.

Ursa folds her arms. "Are they not supposed to park there?"

Centaur squints his eyes, seeing part of the activity inside of the car. "No," he replies, displeased, rubbing his neck under his collar, "that's not the problem."

She notices the same, and lifts an eyebrow. "Oh."

He stands up with a sigh and tells her, "I will return shortly."

Down on the street, the officer walks up to the driver side of the car and stoops down to stare at Aquila and Faras. They don't notice him until he raps his knuckles on the hood, then they both look at him with hostile expressions.

The police officer asks, "Don't you have a better place for this?"

Faras replies, "Not really."

The officer sniffs the air. "Marijuana?"

"It's legal."

"Is she legal too?"

"Hey!" Aquila objects. "I'm not a whore."

"She's my coworker," Faras explains. "We're working."

"Working?" the officer asks. "Working at what?"

Faras rolls his eyes. "Look, do you want something, or do you just want to exchange innuendos?"

The police officer straightens up slowly, putting his thumbs in his belt loop and staring down at Faras for ten seconds before asking, "Would you please step out of the car?"

"*Mierda*," Aquila swears under her breath, opening the car door and stepping outside.

Faras just folds his arms, remaining in the car seat.

"We're with Caduceus," she explains. "Ursa Kirinson and Kent Langham are in that restaurant, we're working security."

The police officer gives her an incredulous look. "If that's true, you're not doing a very good job."

Aquila holds her arm out to the side and Altair lands on her bare forearm, startling the officer. The eagle flaps her wings a couple of times before settling down, and drills the officer with her yellow eyes. "I have another pair of eyes," Aquila tells him, petting Altair's head.

The policeman examines the bird. "That's a neat trick. But then why didn't he see me coming?"

Altair looks at Aquila, and Aquila asks her, "Yeah, what's wrong with you, bird brain? You were cleaning your feathers?" The eagle raises its hackles.

Faras bangs his forehead on the steering wheel. "You are so stupid."

She smacks the hood of the car, leaving a dent. "You shut up. Something is up with Altair, I can't control her."

"She landed on your arm."

"She'll hear commands, but I can't see through her eyes, she's not returning data."

"I'm not your mechanical bird repairman, don't ask me about it."

The officer folds his arms, looking at Faras. "Can you explain what's going on here, sir?"

"Hormones and hash."

The officer shakes his head. "At least you're honest."

Centaur arrives at the scene, walking slowly across the street. "Is there a problem, officer?" he asks.

The officer looks up and recognizes him immediately. He acts more cordial to Centaur. "Good evening, Mr. Langham. Do you know these two?"

Faras rolls his eyes.

"Yes, I know them," Centaur replies. "They work for Caduceus. They were keeping a lookout for me and Ms. Kirinson, in case another unsavory character made an appearance."

The policeman glances at Faras and Aquila. "But, they were —"

Centaur steps closer to the officer and says with a lower volume, "I'll handle it."

After looking Centaur directly in the eyes, the officer nods. "You'll take care of it," he agrees. Then he strolls back to his scooter and drives away.

Once the policeman is gone, he turns to Faras and Aquila with a less diplomatic expression on his face. "Get out of the car, Faras."

Faras shakes his head. "No, I'll just stay here."

"Get out of the car," Centaur reiterates.

Faras gets out begrudgingly and stands next to Aquila. His jagged and slouched posture displays an incredible amount of contempt for the situation.

Aquila holds Altair in front of her, partially hiding her face behind the bird. She says nothing.

Centaur says, "If you're told to pay attention, you will pay attention. I don't care about the nature of what you were doing, I just care that it took your attention away from the task you were given. And I'm not going to punish you for it. That will be Nahr's call. Just don't do it again for the rest of the night."

After lingering for a moment, Centaur turns and walks back into the restaurant.

Faras and Aquila look at each other.

He says, "Put away that damn bird."

"I can't, she won't fly away." Before she finishes her sentence, Altair flies away.

He watches the eagle land on high windowsill of the building in front of them. "We'll finish this later," he concludes, getting back in the car and picking up his phone to play another game.

She glares at the bird, trying to figure out what's wrong with it.

Inside of the restaurant, Ursa stands in front of the window with her eyes closed. In her mind, she's looking down at the car from the eyes of Altair. She thinks the words, '*Stop override on target Alpha Aquilae.*' Then she ceases to receive the bird's perception, opening her own eyes before sitting back down at the table.

When Centaur returns, she asks, "Was something wrong?"

"It's taken care of," he reassures her.

She leans over the table, twirling a stray lock of hair in her index finger. "Any other plans this evening?"

He replies, preoccupied, "I should probably get back to the kids."

"So soon? Cassie is sixteen, she can't take care of herself and Jimmy?"

"She's been feeling a little lost since coming to Troy. I try to make sure she's okay every night."

Ursa shrugs, leaning back in her chair. "That's very fatherly of you," she says, concealing her own disappointment.

Back on Mars, Djibrael took Kandafu and his companions back to the capital city of Al-Ahmar, Nasr, via a bullet train across the red plains. As they grew closer to Nasr, the red soil turned into grassland, getting greener and wetter with every mile. Soon orchards and lines of shrubs and hedges filled the landscape outside of the train windows, revealing a beautiful garden city. Blue canals crossed paths with roads paved with red bricks, flowing under the graceful arches of stone bridges. Adobe buildings lined the streets, growing taller as they approached the city center.

At the end of their journey, they came to the Red Palace. The palace grounds were surrounded with 30-foot walls built from giant blocks of hard Martian rock. Inside, a vast complex of stately buildings sprawled across hundreds of acres of opulent gardens, filled with jasmine, wisteria, red roses, and dozens of other flowers, creating a full color palette against the lush green leaves. A straight road led to the the Grand Entrance, where a canopy of columns and vaulted ceilings covered an intricate 500-foot Persian rug.

As they walked along, taking in the beautiful scenery inside and outside, Djibrael talked to Kandafu. "I am sorry about the ill treatment. We are at war and our soldiers are very sensitive to strangers."

"It's no bother," Kandafu replied casually. "It was far worse landing in that escape pod, I never want to do that again."

"Surely you heard of this conflict before you left. Why didn't you go through Ceres? Your course would have been much faster, a day or two less with the current alignment."

Kandafu shrugged. "I don't know."

Osman glared at Kandafu from the corner of his eye.

Inside, Djibrael led them to a large office decorated with geometric arabesque designs. A pink marble relief of an ancient Persian battle circled the room, displayed images of rearing horses drawing war chariots and soldiers clashing blades, some dead and trampled on the imaginary battlefield.

Nobody was in the office, but Djibrael asked his guests to sit, motioning to the couches. "Suhaila may be a little while. She is, of course, quite occupied lately."

"Of course," Kandafu agreed, taking a seat in a posh armchair. "We have enough time to wait for her."

The veteran was on edge. While everyone else settled down, she paced the room, examining everything with suspicion. "What is this place?"

"It's a very nice hotel," Kandafu told her. "Take a seat and be still."

Osman said, "Someone should take her to another room."

No one stood up to put his suggestion in motion. Instead the veteran walked up to Djibrael and stared at the decorations on his chest, then at the white and red patterned keffiyeh covering his head. He lifted his eyebrows as she came uncomfortably close to him.

Inches from his face, she asked, "Why you dressed like the rag general?"

Osman shot to his feet and pulled her away, apologizing to Djibrael, "I'm sorry, Colonel, she doesn't know any better. She has severe health problems, touched in the head. I'll take her somewhere else."

"No, that is okay," Djibrael said. "You can keep her here, she will not offend."

Osman sighed and forced the veteran to sit on the couch next to him. "Please don't call anyone a rag, that's not polite here, or anywhere."

"Here?" she asked. "Where is here?"

"We're in Al-Ahmar, we crashed in Al-Ahmar."

It took a while for this to process in her mind. "P-O-W?"

"No, we're guests, not prisoners. These people are not our enemy."

General Suhaila entered the room, dressed in a uniform similar to Djibrael's. Her curly hair was down and uncovered. She did not appear as foreboding and aloof as she did when she berated the Americans in her broadcast many days earlier.

But the veteran recognized her immediately and jumped on the couch, pointing and shouting, "It's her, she wants to destroy us!"

Suhaila looked at her curiously. "She must be the American with the mind of a child."

Kandafu got to his feet and greeted her while Osman calmed down the veteran. "Suhaila, it is magnanimous for you to see us like this."

She replied, "Magnanimous?" Her tired demeanor had a difficult time staying agreeable. "You always

use big ostentatious words when you want something, Mr. Kandafu."

Kandafu was not put off. "You're the one who called for us, General."

"Because you sent out a distress signal from your mobile to my central command."

He shrugged. "Yes, that was me. I didn't know it would actually get through, or that you would answer it personally."

"I didn't answer it personally, Djibrael did. I am in the midst of a war. I'm still trying to figure out what happened up in the exosphere today." She pointed upwards.

"Someone from Al-Ahmar shot down an American," Osman spoke up. "Then the Americans fired back at you. The debris hit our shuttle."

"You witnessed that?" she asked. "An Al-Ahmari jet fired first?"

"Yes, I saw that, with my own eyes. A Wasp shot down a Raven."

She frowned. "Then there is a pilot who needs to be disciplined, if he is still alive. You are Dr. Subramanian?"

"Yes," he replied, approaching her.

She smiled slightly. "I sent you and Dr. Ulizio two patients. I infer that these three you have with you are also new patients?"

The pilot looked at the veteran and Deva. "I'm not a patient, I'm just the pilot here. There's nothing wrong with me, for the time being?"

Osman said, "Two patients, one from Russia and one from America."

"Well, I hear they are in capable hands." Suhaila walked to her desk to stand next to Djibrael, and looked back at Kandafu and Osman. "I trust Nahr is doing well."

"He is in good health," Kandafu replies, "but still as ornery as ever."

She looked down at her own left hand, making a gesture as if she had a knife in her hand. "That is good," she acknowledged, looking back up at them, with a bittersweet expression. "I don't have time to discuss much today. I have two gifts for you. The first is a young woman, she was raped and tortured by miners on the Frontier after they invaded her family's farmland two weeks ago. We took it back during our push last week and discovered her, half dead."

"Another patient, you mean?" Osman asked.

"Yes. The people who did this to her are all dead, they were killed during the attack. There is no further justice I can give her, but if you can give her a new life, that would be more luck than the innocent normally get."

"We will try, Suhaila," Kandafu nodded solemnly.

"My other gift is a new shuttle, to replace the one that was destroyed. Not an old one this time, this shuttle is a new craft, a Scarab. Bigger than the last. Faster. You can make up time on your way back to Ganymede."

"Ah!" Kandafu pressed his hands together and bowed to her, happy to hear this news. "This is very generous. Xaio will be ecstatic."

"You can leave as soon as you wish. I'll have you escorted out, the safe way this time."

"See? You are magnanimous, I don't lie."

Suhaila shook her head. "No gifts are free, Kandafu. You know that. Some day we will want a return on this."

"And you will get a return, I promise that."

Osman turned his head to look at his friend, uneasy with this vague promise to the Al-Ahmari General. But he made no objection.

On a hill outside of Princeton, Ryan and Rosie sit on the hood of her car, staring up at the stars in the calm and clear night sky. She huddles in a fleece jacket in the autumn chill, holding her hands under her arms to keep them warm.

Ryan's eyes bounce off of the visible stars, naming each constellation in his head. "They're so dim," he comments. "The atmosphere hides all of them except the brightest."

Rosie looks at him. "The stars? I read that all you could see from Troy was Jupiter, no stars."

"I saw the stars from the shuttle. There isn't anything else to look at when you spend a week in space. I just watched them and memorized their names."

"You memorized them? All of them?"

"They don't all have names."

"Name some of them for me."

He picked out a few points of faint light. "Sirrah, Markab, Algol, Capella, Schedar, Hamal."

Rosie watches him point, but the names don't quite stick in her mind. "They sound Arabic."

"Most of them are. Islamic astronomers mapped them a long time ago."

"Then why are all of the constellations from myths? From the Greeks?"

Ryan shrugs. "I guess that's just the way people started to do it. Greek constellations, Arabic stars."

Rosie points to a particularly luminous star. "What is that one?"

"That's Jupiter."

"Oh. A planet." She puts her hands on the hood of the car, hunching over and looking at him. "Do you miss it? Jupiter?"

"Jupiter? No, Jupiter is ugly."

"Your home, I mean. Troy."

He shakes his head. "No. I don't want to go back there."

"You told me about your uncle, but isn't there something there that you still miss? I mean, it's home, it's where you grew up. I don't like Camden, but it's my hometown, I still like some things in that town. Old friends, places I hung out as a kid."

Ryan thinks about it. "I guess I miss a couple friends." He scratches his chin, remembering people back in the Polaris Facilities, people who were kind to him, people like Xaio. But the image of Osman Subramanian invades those thoughts, followed by others who were cruel such as Leo and Sage. The negative emotions oppress the positive ones. Generalized fear and pain supersede the very few happy memories in his

mind, obscuring any feelings of joy before he can realize them.

Rosie watches him ponder her question, wrinkling her face with concern as he stares forward at nothing, his hand frozen on his face. His expression grows more anxious and afflicted as seconds pass.

She puts her hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay, Ryan?"

Ryan sits up, taking in a deep breath. "There's too much bad to see the good. Bad memories. Troy is a good place, as good as it can be. But my memory of Troy is filled with things I don't want to remember." He turns to her, looking her in the eyes. "I came here to start over. Create new memories. Happy ones. Jupiter is 900 million miles away. The people there shouldn't affect me anymore."

"That's quite a distance to put between you and your demons."

"It's still shorter than it seems."

Rosie puts her hand on his hand as it lays on his thigh. He looks down at her hand as her fingers squeeze around his. She says, "Maybe once you have more happy memories, you can conquer those demons."

"Maybe," he agrees, still staring at her hand.

"You're a little unusual, but you're a good person. You seem honest. You took care of me when I drank too much."

"But that made you angry. You yelled at me and kicked me out."

She half-smiles. "I was embarrassed. That wasn't your fault."

"It sort of was my fault."

"No, I did it to myself. I was just being a bitch. I can be a huge bitch sometimes."

Ryan shakes his head. "You're not a bitch. I've known some unpleasant women, you're not one of them."

"Known? Like biblical known?"

He gives her a perplexed look. "I don't know what that means."

She bites her lip. "I guess you don't have the Bible on Ganymede. In the Bible, it says that a man knows a woman when, you know, they have... sex."

"What?" Ryan looks aghast. "No, I didn't know them in that way." He shakes his head emphatically. "I've never really..." He trails off.

"Never?" she asks, surprised.

"No, never."

"You really need to start living."

"I'm trying," he says, then quickly corrects his statement. "Trying to live. Trying to be happy. Not really trying to... know..."

Rosie leans in closer to him with her eyebrow raised. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Ryan looks down at her hand again, on top of his. Suddenly he has butterflies in his stomach, an entirely new sensation of nervousness and anticipation, excitement rather than trepidation. He's unsure what to do next, what to say, what is right, what is wrong. The indecision makes his heart race and his pores sweat.

She slips her hand inside of his, holding it tightly. "Surely you've at least kissed someone before."

"No," he admits, his voice cracking like a teenager.

"I find that hard to believe, with a face like yours."

Ryan can't look at her or reply. He starts to feel as if the night is closing in on him and he's going to pass out.

"Ryan?"

He finally turns his head, and the blackness recedes, making the world and his mind much clearer. A decision pops into his head, absolutely finalized by inexplicable and impenetrable reasoning. He tells her, "You're pretty and smart and a good person. I like you, I like to be around you. Do you like me?"

She grins. "Yes, I like you a lot."

He nods, smiling back. "Good."

"What are you going to do about it?"

In response to her teasing, he gives her a long, lingering kiss. After a few more, she whispers to him, "You're place?"

He pauses, thinking of the three nagging orbs waiting for him at home and other impediments that might come up if he proceeds. But for some reason they all seem insignificant. His unwavering decision cannot be reversed. "All right," he agrees.

In the gymnasium at the Caduceus Building, Aquila vents off a wide spectrum of emotions by punching and kicking a large sandbag that hangs from the ceiling.

Faras watches her with his arms crossed. "Are you finished with that yet?" he asks. "There are more relaxing and cathartic activities you could try."

She stops and steadies the sandbag. "For the last time, no," she tells him with a raised voice. "I was being stupid, I don't even like you. You're an asshole."

"There has to be something there, or you wouldn't have been so receptive before, huh?"

"I was stoned."

"Then let's get stoned again."

Aquila storms over to him, grabbing his collar and yanking him forward. "I will break your face if you don't back off, *perro*."

He's not intimidated. "You're pretty hot when you're livid."

She growls, holding up her fist to strike him. She freezes in place, unable to move her arm.

"Well?" Faras asks, feigning impatience. "Did you lose control of that, too?"

"Enough of that," Osman tells them as he enters the gym, his hands behind his back. He paces forward, taking very measured steps. "I don't know what you're fighting over, but I need Faras in one piece."

Aquila regains control of her arm and she drops Faras, backing away. "What do you need this jackass for?"

"I need to go Mars in the morning. To Al-Ahmar. Fast."

"Fast?" Faras asks, his interest piqued. "Markab fast?"

"Yes, Markab fast. You're going to fly me there."

Aquila crosses her arms. "Hmmpf. What's so important?"

"Kandafu has arrived in Nasr. Al-Ahmar will want to see the progress of their investment."

"What?" Aquila stiffens up with outrage. "You're going to sell to the rags?"

Osman squints his eyes at her, grated by her choice of words. "The more I tried to fix you, the more you stayed the same." He looks at Faras. "Pack for a few weeks, I don't know when you'll come back. I'll see you at Markab in the morning." He walks away, out of the gym.

Faras turns to Aquila. "I'm going home tomorrow," he says smugly. "How about one for the road?"

She returns to her sandbag and resumes attacking it in effigy, preferring to ignore him rather than reply or attack.

He frowns, and before leaving, says to her, "You're a *picadora*, Tequila."

Aquila's face contorts with rage, and she starts to hit the sandbag harder, screaming at it and pummeling it until a seam splits and yellow sand spills out.

In the Kirinson Mansion, Ursa lays on her large bed, surrounded by down-filled pillows and white linen sheets. She stares at the black lacquered wood of the ceiling, at the tiny cracks between the planks. Polaris lays in her open hand.

She asks him, *'Does Centaur have any vices?'*

*'Why would you want to discover such a thing?'*

*'Because he can't be perfect. Nobody is perfect.'*

*'Does he please you?'*

Ursa turns her eyes to the iostrite pendant. *'You say that optimistically. Have you been grooming him for this? You and Kandafu, finding and training the best hope to placate me?'*

Polaris remains silent for a moment. *'He's a good man, please be kind to him. Centaur has no ill intentions. He deserves no spite.'*

She sits up on the bed. *'I don't intend to be unkind to an innocent man. But there is something not quite right with him. I can feel it, but I can't place it.'*

*'I think you will find you are wrong. You are wrong in so many, many, many ways, Ursula.'*

*'Not as wrong as you are, father.'* She turns off the device and falls back on the bed with a cushioned thud.

When Centaur arrives home, Cassie is laying on the couch, crying to herself in the dark. Centaur hears her sobbing, and turns on the light. He looks down at her with confusion and concern.

"What's wrong, Cassie?" he asks, approaching her cautiously.

She stops and looks up at him, her arms curled to her chest. Her eyes are red and her cheeks are wet.

Kneeling down next to her, he asks, "Did something happen?"

Cassie holds up her arm slowly to show him a large burn across the back of her hand and wrist. "I was boiling some water, and the kettle spilled on my hand."

Centaur investigates the hand. "When did this happen?"

"A couple hours ago."

"Why didn't you tell Alpha?"

"I don't know. I felt stupid."

He stares at the burn, which stretches from her knuckles to the middle of her forearm. It's swollen, red, and blistered, the damage reaching deep into the skin. "I'll call a doctor."

When Osman arrives home, he walks down the long hallway, over the light and dark wooden checkerboard parquet, passed the portraits of his ancestors framed with gold-leaf-covered wood carved into intricate flourishes. Before he reaches his bedroom at the end, Libby comes out, pulling on a jacket. She looks as if she had just woken up and dressed in a hurry.

She sees him and stops. "You're home late," she says, annoyed with him.

"I had to find Faras. Where are you going?"

"Centaur called, he says Cassie has second-degree burns on her hand. I need to go to the clinic to take care of her." She walks passed him to leave.

"I'm leaving in the morning," he says to her quickly. She stops again. "Faras is taking me to Nasr."

Libby crosses her eyebrows and tilts her head. "Why? Cecilia just arrived on Mars. Kandafu, too."

"Kandafu sent for me. Al-Ahmar is very keen on our product. They want a demonstration."

She walks back to him. "A sales pitch?"

"I suppose that's an apt idiom."

"Selling to them? I'll never be able to go back to America again."

"Now, that's an exaggeration. Trust me, I will not include everything in the catalog. Medical applications only."

She shakes her head. "Do you think Kandafu would bring you all the way to Mars for that?"

"Kandafu already has Scorpio and V and Aqua to impress them. I don't need to be there to sell the Al-Ahmari on anything. I need to be there to temper Kandafu's ambitions."

She gives him a look of inhibited surprise. "To stop him?"

"Somewhere in the middle. We still need to make a sale." Osman steps forward, looking her in the eyes. "How long are you going to be tonight?"

Libby glances downward. "A couple of hours, if the burn is not too severe. I hope she didn't hurt herself too badly."

Osman nods. "I'll be here, packing for my trip."

She nods back and leaves.

After watching her leave, he goes to the bedroom and sits on the disheveled bed. Libby's night clothes are tossed on the ground and the bathroom light is still on. He picks up a silky blue gown from the floor and feels the smooth fabric.

After a long sigh, he mumbles to himself, "I hate Mars."

In her room at the Caduceus Building, Aquila sits on the bed in her own room watching television while Altair sits on the back of a chair and preens her feathers. The television shows a brutal match in a red boxing ring. One hulking man has another hulking man hanging on the ropes as he breaks his nose with a punch to the face.

But the violence doesn't grab her attention right now. She sips from a can of beer while staring at the wall next to the television instead of the screen. A small black spider crawls up the plaster. After consuming the rest of the beer, Aquila crushes the can in her hand and throws it at the wall, smashing the spider.

Jumping off the bed, she leaves her apartment and heads a few doors down to Faras's quarters. She knocks on the door loudly and waits, but he doesn't answer. Then she knocks again, and still no reply.

After a couple minutes, Aquila throws up her hands, yelling, "*Tonto!*" She returns to her own room and slams the door.

Inside of his own apartment, Faras lays on his bed, unconscious, hooked into the Skiasphere with a smirk on his face.