

## Chapter X - Deep in the Woods

He dreamed he was back at home in their cozy living room. A fire burned in the hearth while it snowed outside. Dad was hunched over a game of Xo on the coffee table, playing against his personal, artificial intelligence robot — which was nothing more than a metal appendage sitting on a base — while Mom was sitting at the windowsill, sipping oolong, and writing on her journal.

There was no feeling of resentment at being somewhat ignored as he had felt in real life — he was only glad, immeasurably glad just watching them, being with them.

All at once, there was a deafening pounding on their main door. Mom and Dad jumped at the sound. Moments later, the door was kicked in, and a dozen Metalloy police officers rushed in. Murderous robots they looked like, in their metal helmets and armor.

They lunged at Mom and Dad, reaching for them, about to grab them when everything suddenly dissolved into a mist, and Zablaron's eyes flew open. He stared at the ornate ceiling. A knock came at the door.

Zablaron sat up in bed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He threw back the sheets, snatched his maroon dressing gown from the nightstand, and donned it over his striped, maroon-and-white pajamas. He walked over the soft deer rug, ran a hand through his hair, and opened the door.

Two couriers in baseball caps and red and navy shirts stood in the door with a logo that brought an earnest smile on Zablaron's face — Point Blank.

Both held a plastic case each. A garment bag dangled from the fingers of one of them while a shoebox lay at their feet.

"Good morning, sir. It's so good to see you safe and sound, sir," one of them said, doffing his cap.

"Thank you. Did you face any trouble while entering the tunnel?" Zablaron asked.

"We did, sir, but then we had security talk to Ms. Tielin. All the troubles were gone with the wind."

Should I have the call placed now and get her charges cleared? Zablaron pondered. She will stop being useful the moment I do it. It can wait.

"Anyhow, here is the modulator," the other said, pushing his case toward Zablaron. "And Chizear has... those other things."

That other thing had to be things to sneak past spaceport security, Zablaron thought. "Send Uncle Vonsten my thanks. Put them there on the dresser," Zablaron said, stepping aside. "That and that in the wardrobe," he added, pointing toward the garment bag and the shoe box.

Zablaron watched them as they put the things in their place and returned to the door.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" Chizear asked.

"No. Make yourselves comfortable here. I might be gone a long time, but wait for my call."

"Well then, best of luck, sir. And stay safe."

"I wouldn't do this if I intended to stay safe. Now, if you will excuse me, I must prepare."

When they were gone, Zablaron took a cold shower before dressing more appropriately for the forest — a maroon, safari jacket with opened buttons, a white shirt with shirttails protruding from behind, khaki trousers with cargo pockets, and calf-length, burgundy boots. He strapped his VBP to his right forearm.

He proceeded to open the cases one by one. The first carried a device, not unlike a small radio transceiver with multiple antennas protruding — the modulator.

The second case revealed some unassuming, light-salmon and steel-blue metal pieces in different shapes and sizes.

He immediately set to assembling the pieces together — the resulting object looked like a giant, metal horseshoe. Zablaron put it away deep into his jacket's inner pocket and the modulator into an outer one.

Finally, he headed downstairs, had a modest breakfast of cheese omelet and bread in the dining room on the ground floor, and then stepped outside into the hunting lodge's driveway — in Malorawa Forest.

The tunnel from the hangar at the spaceport had joined the underwater tunnel. When it branched off near the end, Zablaron took the station bus to Malorawa Forest. It had led here, to this hunting lodge in the middle of a clearing.

Apparently, the lodge was centuries old and used by the emperor and his entourage on hunting trips. It served basically the same function now, except that now it was used by VIPs arriving from the spaceport if they were so inclined to do a bit of hunting. I do mean to do a bit of hunting, Zablaron thought.

The lodge, a quaint, stone and wood structure, stood on a small, verdant mound and afforded a view of the dense forest canopy surrounding it.

Zablaron started down the sloping driveway toward the stable. He approached the stableman and handed him sixty-nine Karomozian learts. Soon, a brown mare with a white mark on its forehead was trotted out, saddled and bridled.

Zablaron never had much love for horses and never understood the Grebriks' obsession with them. For a moment, he found himself thinking about that meddlesome Grebrik at the spaceport. Jayrock. He shook the thought from his mind and mounted the mare.

He spurred it down the dirt path and then turned east when it branched off toward the dense forest. Two police officers stood in the way.

"You again?" the female officer complained. "What do you want this time?"

"The forest beyond here is still off-limits, just like last time. Nothing new here," the male officer added, bored.

"Oh, but last time I forgot to introduce myself," Zablaron replied nonchalantly, looking down at them from his mount. "I am Zablaron Inrazax, CEO of Point Blank, the company whose weapons both of you happen to be wielding, instead of your standard-issue firearms."

The police officers glanced uneasily at their pistols and then back at Zablaron.

"I was present at the spaceport last night when one of my shipments was attacked. I helped thwart the attack. Would you be so kind as to lead me deeper into the woods... to the Crimson Crows?"

For a heartbeat, the police officers remained silent, taken aback. Finally, the male officer spoke up, "Eh, delivering them the CEO of Point Blank can't hurt, can it? Follow us."

Not if I can help it, Zablaron thought.

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They had set up camp in one of the Maloran nintree groves. It was a tiny one with just five nintrees. Ivado, Clarine, and Merel had made cuts in the trees and had half emptied the sap, but Florinok was worried it would not be enough.

Clarine kept blabbering, louder than Florinok would have liked, that she wanted to go back while Merel kept muttering something to himself. Xemesh sat under a tree, his head in his hands.

Her own nerves were on edge. She kept pacing back and forth, jumping at the slightest sound made by some animal or the other passing through the brush. She was so tense she wanted to scream, and she did not want to think about what would happen if any more of those horrible men in suits found them here. But she could not afford to look afraid at any cost or else risk everyone promptly heading back.

Alvoak soon joined them back after contacting her on the holophone. "You should have seen the look on Kez's face when I brought him the bound man," he quipped in a lousy effort to lighten the mood.

"How much time before all the sap is extracted?" Xemesh asked, taking his head out of his hands.

"Just another ten minutes, I should think, sir," Ivado replied, shifting his glasses.

Five minutes later, the trees had been emptied of their sap, and everyone seemed ready to go back. Florinok looked in dismay at the small amount collected in test tubes.

"This is not enough to synthesize an appropriate sample of the drug," Florinok said, looking at each one of them, one by one. "We have got to head deeper and find more groves."

"Ms. Lephyte, I'd... I'd follow you anywhere," Clarine stammered. "Anywhere, except... farther into this forest!"

"We narrowly escaped captivity the last time," Merel insisted. "And you killed a dude, for crying out loud! Who knows what they will do if they spot us! I don't even know who they are and—"

"Just some goons hired by Quinns Furnishings to scare us—" Florinok started.

"And I don't care to know!" Merel finished.

"Whatever would be the purpose of going to all the trouble to come here and then barely bring anything back to work with?" Florinok said. "All of our efforts would just go in vain."

"Then you will just have to find a way to make your drug out of what we have," Merel said, shrugging.

"Ms. Lephyte, if I may, we can always work on some other drug, develop some other molecule, introduce the world to some other miracle cure, as we have done for years," Ivado spoke up. "Please, let this go. It is not a good thing, this ego of us mer."

They waited for her to say something, but she had no reply. If Rosa were here, she would understand — or Lavandora, Florinok lamented. But she had had to leave behind someone she trusted, and she didn't trust anyone more than Rosa.

"Well, then let's pack up," Xemesh said, getting up.

They started packing up — Ivado kept casting her apologetic glances all the time.

When they were done, Florinok took a deep breath and spoke up, "I don't want to leave."

"Here we go again," Merel threw his hands up.

"I'm going in. Alvoak, your gun, please."

"My gun? Ms. Lephyte, it's—"

"Madness, yes. Going back now is madder, however. Your gun, please."

"Ms. Lephyte, surely you can't be... are you... are you really going to do this?" Clarine's eyes widened.

"Florinok, are you serious?" Xemesh asked incredulously. "Are you thinking you are just going to shoot your way in?"

"I'm desperately hoping it doesn't come to any shooting. Alvoak, I'm waiting."

Alvoak considered her for just a moment. Then he unholstered his weapon and handed it to Florinok. "I hope you come back to us alive, Ms. Lephyte," he said solemnly.

"I hope so too," Florinok replied with a hint of a smile.

With nothing more to say, she took out her map and left them there to head north. She made her way between the lush green trees, stepping over a root here, pushing away a branch there. The leaves rustled as she passed through, but otherwise, everything was eerily still in this part of the forest — no animals were to be heard. She gripped her gun tightly, splashed her way through a stream, and circumvented some big moss-covered rocks.

At first, it just felt like something in her head, but she could soon hear a faint but unmistakable hum. It grew louder as she pushed forward through the tangled branches of rosewoods. Quinns Furnishings at their work? Florinok wondered.

She halted and held her breath when she thought she could hear voices. She sprouted forest-green leaves all over her body to help her camouflage. Ever so slowly, she made her way to a stand of pines towering before her in a line as if guarding something on the other end. She plastered herself to a trunk, and then gently pulled aside their branches to look into the clearing beyond.

The sight of what lay beyond sent shivers down her spine just as her mouth fell open. What have I stumbled into? Florinok wondered, terrified.

In the surprisingly vast clearing, numerous black tents had sprung up all over the place like mushrooms along with makeshift cabins fashioned out of lumber. Goons in the same black suits milled around in their dozens, some squatted around cookfires, which sent an aroma of roasted meat wafting through the air. Off to the right, part of the clearing was being used for parking all sorts of undercover, black vehicles. Florinok wondered how the cars got here until she spotted a wide path cleared through the pines at the opposite end of the clearing. Another entrance to the forest? I thought there was just one.

One huge, round, and hideous tent loomed near the edge of the pines Florinok was hiding amongst and dwarfed the rest of the structures. It was black as well, but with a red flag on its peak. Pegged down by several strong ropes, it towered above her and looked large enough to comfortably house a pair of elephants.



However, the most conspicuous feature in the clearing was an enormous pit dug out in the middle of the clearing. An excavator stood at its edge, its arm overhanging menacingly while piles of dirt lay around its caterpillar tracks. Along the craggy walls of the pit, a dirt track spiraled downward all the way to its bottom.

Set in the wall near the bottom was a partly excavated, great, ancient-looking gate, standing between gray, stone walls inscribed with runes of some kind. The gate was sturdy iron, decorated with ornate copper discs and large, ring-shaped, gold handles. Something about it told Florinok it had not seen the light of day for a long, long time.

This is not a mere logging operation, Florinok realized. They're up to something big.

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The path had evidently been cleared only recently — trees had been cut down in a span of roughly forty feet, more than enough for two large vehicles to pass abreast. Although the path itself was leveled and lined with gravel, Zablaron could see fresh tree stumps bordering it on both sides.

And here I am galloping away on a horse when I should have been racing by in a MagneCar, Zablaron thought. What was worse was that he had been made to follow two Crows in a black pickup truck when they easily could have given him a ride.

They had been heading south for a long time as far as he could tell. A skidder passed them by in the opposite direction, dragging several long logs behind it. Here and there, Zablaron spotted harvesters and yarders set up on the side of the path, some being operated by workers and still in the process of felling trees.

The pickup truck abruptly slowed down to a crawl. Zablaron yanked on the reins to pull up the mare and avoid running into the vehicle. He must have pulled too hard as she neighed and raised her forelegs into the air. For a moment, he feared he would be thrown from the saddle, but then mercifully, the horse settled down.

Up ahead, thickets of tall pines straddled the path on both sides with a gap through which the trail continued. Beyond the gap, Zablaron glimpsed a clearing infested with Crimson Crows and their camps and, in the center, what seemed to be a precipitous drop into a gaping chasm.

Zablaron led his mare through the gap between the pines into the clearing. Tents set up by the Crows were all haphazardly centered on a yawning pit still being dug out by an excavator. Zablaron could not see what lay at the bottom from his angle. What could they have found here? And what does it have to do with my weapons?

He spotted a gigantic, canvas pavilion, black just like anything else with these Crows, near the other end of the clearing. So that's the command center here. A group of Crows stood guard outside.

Presently, some Crows motioned at him to stop as the pickup truck veered to the left toward some parked vehicles he had just noticed. This time he managed to bring his mare to a halt without upsetting her.

Florinok flinched further back into the pines, still cloaked in forest-green leaves, as she watched a platinum blond man dismount from his horse. A goon led the horse away toward the parking area to the right.

"What happened?" Loress' hushed voice came through Florinok's holophone.

"Nothing. It's just that somebody came over from that path at the opposite end. Are you still getting the image?" Florinok whispered, readjusting her holophone camera.

"Yes, as clear as could be. Now be quick and show me what's down there!" Loress said eagerly.

Florinok had called Loress again, hoping she would still be outside the forest. As it turned out, the reporter had just left but returned immediately when Florinok told her what she had seen. Loress had now redirected the satellite dish on her news van toward Florinok's position and was receiving a live stream from Florinok's holophone.

Florinok cautiously positioned herself among the pines to see beyond the hideous tent, into the pit dug into the ground. She aimed the camera of her holophone at the gate at the bottom.

For a moment, there was no sound from the other end. Then she heard a gasp. "Oh, my... is that... is that the entrance to a tomb or something?" Loress exclaimed.

"It sure is something ancient," Florinok whispered back.

"Wait, could you focus on that bolt? There are symbols on there I need to see," Loress said.

A large metal bar ran horizontally across the middle of the gate, held in place by several staples. A symbol was repeatedly engraved on it, not unlike the runes on the stone walls. It seemed like a slender tower with a pair of wings on either side.

"I have seen this somewhere... wait, let me do a quick search," Loress said.

Florinok heard a rapid tapping of keys, and for a long while, there was no other sound. She anxiously looked over at the goons strolling around the place. The platinum blond man was now being led to the large tent.

She watched as he took off his jacket to be frisked by the guards at the tent entrance, his mouth clenched the whole time. A guard took away a weird, cog-shaped gadget strapped to his forearm. Meanwhile, another fished out a black device from the platinum blond man's jacket that seemed like a walkie-talkie to Florinok. Then the platinum blond man entered the tent, followed by the guard clutching the device in his hand.

So far, no one had looked in her direction. Florinok patted her pocket, where she had stowed away her gun, just to be sure it was still there.

Minutes later, there was yet another gasp from the other end.

"I cannot believe it. That symbol is the sigil of Emperor Yilabar, the Fourth of Malora, which he adopted after creating the Nova Blocks. The most popular legend associated with him goes something like this..."

Loress launched into a discourse about a legend, according to which centuries ago, court scientists in the service of the Emperor Yilabar the Fourth discovered the secret to harnessing the power of the 'sparks' — now identified as enertrons — in the air and storing them in small cells called Nova Blocks. This allowed him to store massive amounts of enertrons in the Nova Blocks only to unleash them all at once at his foes and decimate them.

When he was nearing his death, he enlisted thousands of slaves from all over the Maloran Empire, the territory he reigned over. Extending over thousands of acres, a massive stretch of the empire was closed off to the public. The slaves were led into the area, never to be seen again. Allegedly, to keep his prize invention a secret, the emperor had all the Nova Blocks buried somewhere in that area, and all the slaves used to accomplish the task were buried along with them to keep the location from being known.

"It seems crazy, but they may have found the place where the Nova Blocks were hidden!" Loress finished breathlessly. "This is all so mind-blowing! I need to report this right now!"

"No, let me get out of here first!" Florinok replied frantically.

They had taken his VBP, his jacket, his modulator, and even his holophone. But as he had anticipated, they were so occupied with their discovery that they never thought to look for anything else — especially in the inner pocket.

There were about thirty people in the pavilion minus himself and the lout who had followed him inside. Zablaron had refused to explain what the modulator was, so the guard was forced to bring it in to show it to his commander.

"Sir, Inrazax is here," the guard behind him announced. "And we weren't sure, but we thought you'd like to know that we found this on him," he said, holding out the modulator.

The pavilion seemed even more capacious from the inside. The floor was covered in a red, silken carpet, and the walls of the tent were lined with the supplest leather sofas. A marble counter stood at one side, laden with all sorts of drinks. Muted amber LED lights were affixed to the canopy in a ring, bathing the interior in a warm glow. Stacked over a large, round table in the middle were several weapon cases bearing his company's logo — Point Blank.

The lead Crow was hunched over the table. He had a clean-shaven face, deep-set, emerald eyes, and thin lips curled in a smug smile. His muscular build was framed in a tight-fitting black armor, much more ornate than the other Crows', and a red-and-pink knife was sheathed on his left thigh.

"Welcome, Mr. Inrazax. My name is... well, you may call me... Vulture," the lead Crow chimed, taking the modulator from the guard. He dismissed the guard and examined the object in his hand. Then he looked up at Zablaron. Detecting the confused look on Zablaron's face, he said, "Don't look so surprised, Mr. Inrazax — these Wystals are our guests as well, sent by our dear friend, King Riplartz of Wystalline."

What Zablaron had not expected at all was the presence of an envoy from planet Wystalline. He recognized the Wystal Foreign Minister, Philin Luko, a willowy lady in a blue pantsuit, seated on a sofa facing Vulture. She was accompanied by a couple of other Wystal officials and several instantly recognizable Wystal soldiers in their scarlet service uniforms, bright blue sashes, and tall helmets with points at their peaks that seemed to be made of crystal. That's too many people. I need to get rid of these Wystals and fast, Zablaron thought.

"We were in the middle of transferring a share of your weapons to the Wystal army, but I guess I should have a talk with you first. Let me say I apologize profusely for getting hold of your weapons without your consent. But what can we do? Your products have a hefty price tag on them." Vulture shrugged.

"So, the Crimson Crows can't afford them? All of a sudden, you seem to be such a sorry lot," Zablaron retorted.

"Oh, we can, but those funds are much better spent elsewhere. Um... may I ask, what is this?" Vulture said as he placed the modulator on the table with a thump, never breaking eye contact with Zablaron.

"A pet project I am working on that I carry around with me." Before Vulture could say anything, Zablaron pushed his hair back and turned to Philin Luko. "And tell me, Ms. Luko, what happened to the dear King Riplartz's deal with Ferrina Tielin? Last time I checked, she was the one who was supposed to supply him with my weapons in exchange for him attacking the Metalloy Embassy."

Vulture narrowed his eyes in confusion and turned to look at Philin, who shifted uncomfortably on her sofa. She took a long sip of the margarita in her hand. "Nice try... but there is no such deal," she said after wiping her mouth. "Everyone knows the king of Wystaline would never make a deal with our sworn enemies, the wretched Metalloys. Next time, try making an accusation that might seem somewhat plausible."

"Next time? How about right now? What if I produce evidence of that deal?"

"If you have it, stop wasting time and produce it!" Vulture insisted.

"What in the...? You believe his lies?" Philin said incredulously.

"I don't believe him. I only believe in evidence," Vulture replied.

"I'll need my holophone for that," Zablaron said.

His holophone was brought inside. He contacted Ferrina and demanded that she send the original document of the deal between her and King Riplartz. When she refused, all he had to do was inform her of King Riplartz's double-crossing. Reminding her that her charges were still not cleared also helped. The document arrived within seconds, and Zablaron projected a holographic image of it in midair, signed and stamped by Ferrina and King Riplartz. Philin stared in disbelief.

"Still doesn't seem plausible, Ms. Luko?" Zablaron said snidely, running a hand through his hair.

Vulture's face darkened. "This does not bode well for our friendship, Philin... at all. I suggest you explain yourself."

Philin suddenly got up and threw her glass to the floor. "I will not stay here and suffer this insult over forged evidence by an enemy of Wystalline."

That's more like it, Zablaron thought.

"Then you are free to leave. This time, I'll let you leave unharmed, but the next time we meet, I won't be so kind," Vulture threatened.

"It is not wise to make an enemy of King Riplartz. Know that all Wystal support for your operations has been withdrawn, effective immediately," Philin shot back. That said, she stormed out of the pavilion with all her entourage.

"Well, you cost me that alliance, Inrazax." Vulture said after a while, resting his hands on the table. "But you do seem useful. I hear you helped foil an attack on the Knight and Steed

at the spaceport. And now you just exposed that backstabbing, fat king. Unfortunately, I won't pay you back for your weapons if that's what you came for. But I do have a proposal."

"I am not interested."

"You don't have a say in this matter, Inrazax. You did try placing trackers on your weapons when you got wind that they were being smuggled. How well did that work out, I ask you? We found all the trackers and disabled them as soon as the weapons arrived at the spaceport."

Vulture went to the counter to pour himself a drink. Zablaron judged the distance between him and the modulator. I can't snatch it quick enough with all these Crows around me, he thought. Think of something, Zablaron.

Coming back to the table, Vulture continued, "You did notice that excavation going on outside, didn't you? We have confirmed the presence of some powerful artifacts in that vault through some imaging technology. We could blast our way through using the explosives we took from you, but it could cause hazardous damage to the structure. What say you design a new explosive for us that would bust open the gate but leave the rest of the structure unharmed. I know you can do it."

"I don't see what's in it for me."

"This time, we will pay you for your services."

"And if I refuse?"

Vulture let out a chuckle. "Then you can't leave here alive, I'm afraid."



Suddenly, two Crimson Crows rushed inside the pavilion, dragging a girl between them. She had small, green eyes and long, black hair reaching down to her thighs, flowing in two tails on each side of her head.

"Sir, this woman was found hiding in the trees and making a recording of our campsite," one of the Crows declared.

Vulture slowly walked over to the girl. "Release her. Who are you?"

The men let go of her arms. "Florinok Lephyte, Head of Drug Design at Curavez Pharmaceuticals. And you are trespassing in my forest," Florinok found herself saying. What are you doing? They will kill you! They were all looking at her — except the platinum-blond man who was pouring himself a drink at a counter.

She had frantically tried to stop Loress from running a report there and then, but she had not listened. Apparently, Florinok had made too much noise, and they found her. They took her gun away from her and dragged her here.

"Did you send that recording to anyone, Ms. Lephyte?" the green-eyed man in front of her asked calmly yet coldly.

She began to reply in the negative, thinking that could help save her life. But then she realized it would do the exact opposite. "Yes, I did. For all I know, my recording may be airing on one of your Karomozian channels."

"Which one?" the man demanded, clenching his teeth. "Ino, get the heck out of here and turn on a darned TV, for Ahore's sake!"

The henchman to the right of her, who happened to be Ino, scurried out. "Which one, I said?!" the green-eyed man shouted in her face and moved to strike her.

Some long-lost reflex, ingrained in her since her Trezonish Reljos training at the orphanage, awakened, and she dodged the blow in a dance-like leap. She then formed a thick vine in her hand and cracked it hard against the man's face. The man let out a cry and put his palm against his cheek. But that was all she could do before the pairs of eyes directed at her also aimed their weapons.

"You are so going to regret this, you—" the green-eyed man began.

"Get down!" she heard someone cry out. From the corner of her eye, for barely a second, she saw a figure rushing toward her. Before she could do anything, she felt the breath knocked out of her, and she hurtled toward the floor.

Zablaron pinned the girl to the floor and then pressed a button on the modulator. Several lights on it blinked to life, and it produced a screeching sound. Outside, he saw a steel-blue magnetic field emitting out of the horseshoe-shaped magnetic bomb hidden inside the inner pocket of his jacket.

Quickly, he closed his eyes for a moment and pressed another button, which activated the trackers he had once placed on some of his weapons, which began to emit electromagnetic waves of their own. The magnetic field strength of the magnetic bomb was amplified about a hundredfold, and then chaos ensued.

Pistols, rifles, cannons, and explosives tore out of the Crows' hands, holsters, and all weapon cases throughout the campsite. They shot through the air, homing in on Zablaron's jacket, held by one poor Crow. The weapon cases inside the pavilion tent burst open, and weapons came out flying. They smashed into any and all obstacles in their way, including Crimson Crows, and continued flying outside, tearing through the pavilion tent. One Crow, whose rifle was slung around his back, was flipped upside down and sent flying through the air before the weapon broke free of its sling, and the Crow crashed down onto the ground. A cannon caught another square in the face, and he immediately collapsed to the ground.

Outside, Zablaron could see the excavator dangerously tipped toward the magnetic bomb before it lost balance and was sent tumbling into the pit, letting out a deafening clangor of metal impacting the ground. The Crows were screaming in fear and in pain, unable to

process what had befallen them. Most were lying motionless on the ground, enertrons seeping from their wounds while others still writhed around on the ground in agony. Only a few were left standing.

When the storm subsided, Zablaron got up and ran outside to spot his VBP lying near a lifeless Crow. "Steel Knight!" he cried, and a light-salmon and steel-blue cannon with a triangular muzzle materialized in his hand.

He shot at a Crow, who had just picked up a weapon and locked his aim on Zablaron. A light-salmon, metal triangle burst out of his cannon and knocked the Crow back several feet. As he heard footsteps behind him, he turned to aim at another Crow — this one raised his arms above his head, so Zablaron let him be. The Crow ran into the pines, out of sight. When the coast was clear, he took out his holophone and dialed a number.

"Chizear, was it?" he spoke into the phone. "Get to my position immediately with all the horses you can get and prepare to collect my weapons here."

Florinok lay dazed on the carpet, numb from the madness around her. Just in a moment, the camp had been reduced to ravaged tents and bodies on the ground. She never thought she would see weapons flying through the air, and yet here she was, a witness to it all. She sat up slowly and saw the green-eyed man groaning in pain, reaching for a walkie-talkie.

"I need exfil... exfiltration... right now! RIGHT NOW!" he cried into the device.

Florinok left him there and stumbled outside. She saw the platinum-blond man standing over the mound of weapons that formed where the guard holding his jacket had stood. Florinok shivered to think the guard must still be buried underneath.

"You should get out of here," the man said. "Reinforcements could come in at any time."

"Who are you?" Florinok asked. "Why did you not just let me die like these men?"

"My name is Zablaron. I am the CEO of Point Blank, the weapons company these fools happened to steal from. As for your other question, well, you are an innocent civilian as far as I can see. But what were you doing here?"

"I am Florinok Lephyte. The company where I work has been trying to develop a drug against an incurable disease that has spread to several planets. It's been named the Mad Diver disease. It's a disease that takes over your brain... takes over you and creates an irresistible urge to jump into a body of water and stay submerged for extended periods. You could even drown. I was trying to collect raw material for the drug, but these horrible men wouldn't let me. I am glad you did that to them. I hate them."

"Ah... I know about that one. Why, I recently pretended to be a health official concerned about its breakout," Zablaron replied. He paused and then added, "You know, you could be the most powerful person in the galaxy if you wanted."

Florinok didn't know what he meant at all. "How so?"

Zablaron ran a hand through his hair. "What if... those in power were to be infected with the disease, and you were the only one with the cure? How powerful would that make you?"

Florinok raised her eyebrows. Slowly, she came to understand what he was suggesting. "Well, I don't know, but I am beginning to like the way you think."

Do give me your feedback about this chapter, and if you enjoyed it, please consider dropping a vote. Have a great day!