



# POWER BRACE

ZAZISHIKI

## Author's Note / Preface

Dear reader,

If you are reading this part, I sincerely thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking your time to do so. The fact that you are reading it also means that I have somehow reached my goal of sharing this story with the rest of the world to some capacity. I know it would have probably been wiser for me to leave writing this part for the very end, after I was done with the whole story, but due to where I currently am in my life and in this whole writing process, I feared that there would be no better time to convey what Power Brace means to me in a better way, despite the fact that it will likely be no groundbreaking masterpiece and rather be remembered as a pretty standard first attempt at creating fiction by an amateur writer with no formal literary education. It is important to me because it may very well be my last attempt as well, and the most important, ambitious and time-consuming thing I will have ever done in my life regardless of how it ends up. I feel hopeful when I think of the possibility of someone being moved by any part of this story or being able to personally relate to it, but I also feel hopeless about the limits of my writing skills, my experiences, and my creativity.

I have too often felt the sensation of being moved by some story or work of art to such a degree that it left me bound to my bed contemplating for long hours, or made me feel as if I fell into a sort of void the moment it ended. I cannot help but feel discouraged sometimes by the thought of never being able to create something as special or masterful as these works, and dreadfully notice the differences between Power Brace and them, along with the similarities between it and several pieces of media that I consider to be mediocre at best. What makes it worse is the fear I have that, as I am writing this, many of the infinitely talented and genius artists' careers may be at risk in the near future not due to any wrongdoings or mistakes on their parts, but due to the current advancements in technology that are moving at such a pace that we can hardly keep up with them anymore, as well as the higher ups and executives looking for an opportunity to replace their passionate workers with these systems to cut costs. To add insult to injury, there is also the guilt I feel. Being a computer science graduate whose career will inevitably involve working with or on these algorithms, I cannot help but see myself as a contributor. Maybe an indirect contributor, but one nonetheless.

I will not turn this preface into a long rambling about generative AI and what it means for creative work, but I do wish to inform you that besides asking for an occasional third opinion on grammar rules whenever I came across conflicting information on which use of a phrase is correct, I have not used any such tool to assist me while writing Power Brace. I have not outsourced any of my creative decision making to these language models, and I make it a core principle of mine to commission artists and musicians for the art and soundtrack of Power Brace as well. That all being said, I won't go into any more details of my opinions on them as this is not the place to discuss them. Not only would they bloat this section, but I can easily see them aging like milk in even a year or two. Change is happening, and it is happening incredibly fast. Discussions keep revolving around too many different things at once, from the ethical and philosophical to the economical and legal perspectives. Beliefs and assertions struggle keep up with the advancements they are about. I know that you probably have your own opinions, whether positive or negative, about these advancements. I am also aware that

because of those opinions, you may see me as an honorable saint or an ignorant fool because of my decision to reject using these tools for my work. I can assure you that I am neither of those things. I am just a painfully stubborn man that had made a promise to himself very early into the process of writing Power Brace: that I would keep it writing it until it is finished no matter what, and I would write it myself.

If I ever break this promise, I will update this preface and any other text as necessary. Either way, I am hoping that this next decision I have made about Power Brace will improve my image no matter what you may be thinking of me now, and I can promise you that I will not go back on it. One of the most important things to me about this story was letting as many people as possible read it freely and without much hassle. This is why I decided to dump everything I wrote onto this website and make it freely accessible. As I've said before, I can make my living on my degree. I do not need to make a profit from Power Brace. All I want is for people to be able to read it. I also wanted full creative freedom and control over it. I do appreciate getting help and feedback from people, but I do not like the idea of possibly being forced by them to make any changes to align with their policies. Thus, I have decided to make no deals with any publisher or editor.

In order to give you an idea of what you should expect from this story without spoiling anything, I need to also mention a few final things. Firstly, I love video games, and that is relevant since this story was originally born as an idea for a video game. It was quite an ambitious one at that, too. I had put no restraints on myself and let my imagination run wild, as if I could turn everything I planned into one giant AAA game with a fully voiced cast and a long main story along with many little side quests in giant open worlds. It would have many cut-scenes, the best soundtrack ever and cutting-edge graphics. I was not delusional of course and knew that this was an unrealistic goal, but I kept insisting that I would make no compromises while planning for my dreams. Even if it would not happen in the next two decades and only become a reality once I turned 50, I was determined to plan everything as what I ultimately wanted. I could climb the ranks and gain experience in the industry in the meantime, or start my own company and slowly have it become the powerhouse it would need to be so that I could make the game happen at last.

On second thought, maybe I was a little delusional. Surprisingly, what made me finally chase after a more realistic version of my dream was the fact that I realized the story I was writing would not make a good game at all without drastic changes. It did not take long enough for me to realize that how I wanted the gameplay to be like and how I wanted the story to be like just did not work with each other. I wanted the game to be fast-paced with lots of enemies per encounter and with multiple encounters per level. In reality however, due to how I was writing the story, it would actually be 80% cutscenes with never-ending dialogue sections, and that would only be the first of its many problems. Even if the game in my head ever became a reality, it was going to be one that was horribly designed and it took me a while to realize that. I realized something else in that process too, however. I realized that I really enjoyed writing the dialogue and describing everything in my head with words when I did not have the means to show it, be it a view of some landscape or some internal conflict of a character. This ultimately led me to this version of Power Brace, which was infinitely more achievable than a big-budget video game and offered infinitely more creative freedom. I would still be happy to see Power Brace adapted to a game, a well-animated TV show, or

something else along those lines someday, where more could be shown rather than told, but I am probably not the person that is going to be able to do that.

The real reason behind why I bother to tell all of this, however, was to warn you, dear reader. Before I novelized its narrative to make it fit into this format, this story was written to be for a video game, and you may want to manage your expectations according to that. Furthermore, as I have mentioned before, not only have I received no proper education towards writing, but to be honest with you, I am also not a person that reads a lot. Most of the stories that move me are from games, movies, shows and so on. You may recognize some tropes and find some parts of the story that were clearly inspired from something you are familiar with. I could hardly describe myself as a creative person at all, or one that can be original. In fact, that is the biggest reason behind why I do not believe I could create anything truly exceptional. It is also important for me to note that English is my second language, and while I do not think of it as being bad to the point that I should apologize for it, it is not advanced enough by any means for me to be able to use certain complex or lesser-known vocabulary, grammar, wordplays and so on. You will likely not find the elegance and proficiency of a native writer in this regard. Instead, you will find a casual and simple language to tell the story, though with some unnecessarily long sentences sometimes. Sorry, I have a tendency to do that.

Dear reader, after reading all of this, if you still want to give this story a chance and see if it could be worth your time, I thank you for doing so and wish you a pleasant experience. I hope you enjoy reading Power Brace as much as I enjoyed writing it, and find something in this story that moves you or inspires you to create something even better yourself. In case you feel that you could still use a little push for that, I will leave you with these final words: We all feel uncertain and discouraged from time to time, especially nowadays. However, seeing people around me that keep trying to get better and better at whatever it is they love to do reminds me of why I have kept insisting on my own obsessions. And I have realized also that no matter how hard you scream about it, no matter how proudly you put that side of yourself on display, most people will not care and that is okay. Most of the time, it is not because people are selfish or apathetic, but because they have to be occupied by other things in their own lives. Some of them that do care will want to help without having quite the same perspective as yours. Try to listen to them as well instead of strictly following what your heart tells you. It may sometimes take an outsider's perspective to realize something wrong with your approach. However, there will also be those that do not care yet still try to tell you what to do, perhaps to make you feel small, perhaps for the credit, and perhaps for their own agenda. The things you aspire to achieve, the way you want to achieve them, or the people you want to achieve them with may all be called many things. You may still get sound advice despite its bitterness, so I leave it to you to decide when to listen and when to ignore. But remember that at the end of the day, it is you who will spend perhaps years of their life making something that most will either not engage with at all or merely spend a few hours with. Most of your creative decisions will make little to no difference for anyone's life but your own, so do not feel so obligated to listen to the world so much when so little of it will listen to you.

# ACT I

## The Tournament

# DATA VAULT ACCESS REQUEST

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WARNING: You are attempting to access the "Data Vault" of the Galactic Federation, the largest and most comprehensive database for every piece of information that is deemed classified to some degree by the Federal Council. Access is only permitted to staff members of any Federal department on Celestol, and only through legitimate gateways via their given IDs. If you are not among these staff members, do not have an ID for access, or are trying to access the database through an illegitimate gateway, abort your access request immediately. Any unsuccessful attempt to force your entry into the database beyond this point without sufficient clearance will be considered a crime and legally punished. The legal sentence will immediately be determined by the Autonomous Federal Jurisdiction System. Apprehension of the individual(s) and the enforcement of their sentence will be carried out by the nearest available federal police unit. A successful attempt of forced entry will be legally punished by more severe means. All federal police units present on the planet where the gateway is used will be put on high alert, and several of these units will immediately be dispatched for apprehension of the culprit. The legal sentence for the crime will then be determined in a trial held at the Celestol Supreme Court of Federal Affairs, overseen by the Federal Council. The sentence will then be carried out by the appropriate parties according to the court's decision.

## ACCESS GUIDELINES:

- Data files are sorted alphabetically by default regardless of their given categories, and the option to search through these files via their titles or unique IDs is provided. You may change how the files are sorted for you using the options menu on the file navigation screen. The clearance level of each file is displayed under its title when it is brought up on the navigation screen, along with its unique ID. Up to 3 consecutive attempts of accessing a file above your clearance level is acceptable, and will be considered misinputs. Further attempts will shut down the gateway temporarily and dispatch the Vault Security Unit for investigation. Note that deliberately exploitative patterns of inputs, such as 3 consecutive misinputs, followed by a correct input, followed by another 3 consecutive misinputs, will be detected by the system and result in the same outcome.
- All users whose IDs are recognized by the system can view any data available at their level of clearance or below. However, the ability to manipulate any of this data is strictly exclusive to those with editing privileges. If you are not supposed to have these privileges but find yourself able to edit any of the data, refrain yourself

from making any edits and report the malfunction to the Vault Maintenance Unit. If you find that you have made any edits by accident in such a scenario, use the undo function until it is disabled. If you find yourself unable to do as such, report this malfunction to the Vault Maintenance Unit as well.

- When you report any malfunction(s), stay within the Vault Maintenance Unit's presence at all times and answer any questions that they may ask until they inform you that the problem is resolved.
- Willingly performing any actions that disregard these guidelines is recognized as an act of infiltration, and will lead to apprehension by the Vault Security Unit. This will be followed by an appropriate legal sentence, which will be determined by the Autonomous Federal Jurisdiction System and carried out by the Celestol Generalist Security Department.

#### EDITING GUIDELINES:

- When editing data, do and only do what you are tasked with by the Vault Content Manager Unit. Do not add any extra information, or edit/remove any information that you are not supposed to. Such an act can range from creating excess files to removing a single letter from where it should keep existing. Any such act will immediately be investigated by the Celestol High-Priority Security Department, accidental or not.
- Editors must only be tasked with adding, editing or removing files at their own clearance level, not above or below. If you find yourself to be tasked with adding, editing or removing a file outside of your current clearance level, refrain from making any edits and report the mistake to the Vault Content Manager Unit. If you make any additions, edits or removals of any file outside of your clearance level even by accident, it will immediately be investigated by the Celestol High-Priority Security Department.
- When adding a file, do not neglect putting it in the correct category even if you personally use a sorting method for the files that does not utilize their categories.
- If you are supposed to have editing privileges but find yourself unable to edit any of the data, report the malfunction to the Vault Maintenance Unit.
- When you report any malfunction(s), stay within the Vault Maintenance Unit's presence at all times and answer any questions that they may ask until they inform you that the problem is resolved.
- Willingly performing any actions that disregard these guidelines is recognized as an attempt to deliberately introduce misinformation to the Data Vault, which counts as an act of treason. Such an extreme criminal act will

lead to apprehension by the Celestol High-Priority Security Department. The legal sentence for the crime will then be determined in a trial held at the Celestol Supreme Court of Federal Affairs, overseen by the Federal Council. The sentence will then be carried out by the appropriate parties according to the court's decision.

## I – Abducted

*What have I been doing all this time?* Janice thought for the millionth time in... who knows how many hours? Days? Maybe. She could not tell if she had slept at all, or how much she had slept. Again, the same, familiar string of thoughts followed afterwards. What had she done with her life? What had she achieved? What was she proud of? What did she regret? What would she have done differently if she had a second chance? Had it been so dull and melancholic because of her trauma, or had she been weak, allowing it to ruin her completely for longer than it had to? Had she used it as an excuse all this time for never pursuing a single dream and just rotting in her corner without much ambition for anything? Had she ever had a dream, even? Maybe when she was a kid, but not one she could remember. Was that even normal?

*Screw it,* she concluded once again. *Not like it matters anymore.*

She had already given up by this point, and accepted whatever dark fate was awaiting her. She was just hoping for it to be quick and painless now. She felt sorrier for her parents than for herself. How were they going to deal with their daughter's disappearance, happening out of nowhere and for no good reason at all? At least, she could not think of any good reason. What could she have possibly done to deserve this? She lightly chuckled to herself for having a thought that naïve for even a second. *Yeah, as if people ever get what they deserve.*

She decided it was probably best not to keep dwelling on her thoughts, and thus yet another iteration of the cycle was complete, with little to no difference from the previous one. It was better than nothing, though. Another small baby step on the way from sheer panic to silent acceptance. The cycle had evolved quite a bit in this regard. She had gone from screaming and demanding to be let go, to silent introspection. It was not like either state of her mind was going to change the outcome, but at least, she was now feeling less helpless and more in control.

She began listening again. Who knew how many were there with her inside the darkness? 8? 10? 12? She could not tell, and had stopped trying to guess for a while now. It was impossible to tell if everyone was participating in the conversation, after all. She had been silent for quite a while herself, and who could possibly know whether she belonged to the majority or the minority in terms of talkativeness in here?

‘Aliens,’ a voice kept insisting. ‘Advanced ones that see us as dumb animals they can open up and figure out. We’re being abducted. Stop with your purgatory nonsense and face the truth. They’ll experiment on us, or worse.’

*That voice again,* Janice thought. *Aliens...* It did make more sense than anything else she had heard so far. Although the wiggle room for any part of her body was as tiny as it could be, it was enough for her to be able to tell that it was not rope or straps that were holding her in place. Whatever contraption it was that bound her to where she was sitting, she could tell that each and every part of it she could feel with her body, except for the surfaces against her back and her hips, were cold, hard and metallic. She would probably bet everything on being kidnapped by the secret service or something of that nature with such setups for a bunch of prisoners if she had not been listening to everyone inside the darkness talk about nonsensical, alien sounding names for people and places for what felt like ages.

This was all yet another thought process that had repeated itself in her head too many times already, but she was just rolling with the cycle now rather than trying to break it, as all the voices around her were likely doing the same as far as she could tell. With the same conversations and arguments taking place only to lead to the same agreements and conflicts, the same assertions and questions being thrown around only to be met with the same responses, it was not hard to tell that everyone was mutually afraid of one thing no matter what they thought or believed: Silence. Everything was already in darkness; the kind of darkness that was the most faithful to its meaning, where light was truly absent and one could not tell whether their eyes were shut or not because it made no difference. Only the most mentally resilient could possibly endure complete silence on top of it for who knew however much longer until they all met their fate.

As if someone read Janice's thoughts at that moment, light suddenly entered into the void from her left side, and the voices, as well as her own thoughts, stopped immediately as she squinted her eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness. She noticed movement in front of her with what little she could see. The same pattern of movements was happening synchronously for all the seats on the opposite side from her. As her vision cleared up, she saw what she had been hearing the most frequently in the darkness to indeed be the most accurate. Each of the seats had a similar basic design but their sizes and less conspicuous features were clearly adjusted to be complementary to the needs of their occupants, which were humanoid creatures she had never seen before, all looking different from one another.

The seats' movements stopped as their armrests brought their wrists together. As Janice felt her hands meet, she was relieved by the feeling of something other than cold hard metal at last. Before she could savor the moment, however, she got distracted by a metal tube rising from in-between her feet to the point in-between the clasps holding her wrists in place. From the tip of the tube, a pair of smaller, horizontal tubes emerged and connected the clasps, turning them into handcuffs. A series of narrow paths opened up on the metallic floor, each one connecting a prisoner's tube to a wider path in the center. The paths revealed a branching, wire-like structure that connected all of the tubes to each other. The tubes then retracted back into the floor, revealing each end of the branching wire to be connected to its respective pair of handcuffs. All that was simply achieved at the end of this needlessly flashy, overly sci-fi sequence was that all the prisoners were now cuffed and chained to each other, not too different from what you could achieve with some good old chains back home. Janice could have been rolling her eyes in a less dire situation.

She heard the rest of the prisoners start murmuring to themselves, but it was short-lived as they finally heard a new sound: footsteps. Everyone fell silent once more as a shadow began creeping towards the end of the room. Janice was breathing heavily in stressful anticipation, but she could not see the stranger. The shadow finally stopped moving and the footsteps could no longer be heard. Whoever they belonged to was just outside of her vision.

The voice from earlier was the first one to break the silence. 'Hey! What do you think you are—'

Janice felt the only sign of acknowledgement from the stranger before the prisoner could even finish his sentence. It was immense pain; one that did not just make her scream but also recall what she had last felt before waking up in this place, and it was originating from the cuffs around her wrists.

‘That’s the electric shock at its weakest level,’ said a cold, apathetic voice after all the screaming stopped. ‘Let that be your first warning. Stay silent unless you’re asked to speak. And if any of you think that you can just endure the pain, you should keep in mind that everyone else here will also feel that pain as a result of *your* disobedience only, and I would try not to frustrate any possible future opponents if I were you. You would not want to make enemies this early on.’

Janice noticed the angry prisoner exhale in frustration. She tried desperately to look towards where he was looking, and as if her thoughts were read once again, it only took a couple of seconds before her head was finally set free with a couple of clicks. She felt her neck ache and click as it turned to face their mysterious tyrant. He was also humanoid. Besides that, Janice could only register his green, porous skin as a distinct feature. Not only was his face hidden behind a mask, but a sleek, lightly armored outfit in white and gold was also covering the rest of his slim body.

‘I’ll give you a moment to regain your senses,’ the stranger said, and it was only then that Janice noticed her whole body to be freed now rather than just her head. She was indeed feeling numb all over from being in the same position for God knows how many hours. After wiggling for a while to recover from her numbness, she stood up to fix her stiffness next. She stretched slowly, and looked around at the rest of the prisoners. They were all nervously talking to each other, with some theorizing further about what they could possibly be here for, others inspecting the cuffs and wires while asking for each other’s opinion on what they could be made out of and whether they could break them somehow, and a few still arguing about whether they were on the land of the dead or an alien planet.

Once again, Janice only listened to and observed them. Finally getting the chance to do so, she first counted how many prisoners there were. It was 14 in total, with herself included. She did not spend too much time noting down each specific feature of each prisoner in her head; not that she could do so, anyway. She could barely catch a glimpse of some of them that were the furthest away from her just every now and then in all the commotion. Still, she was able to at least tell that what set these humanoid species apart from each other were mostly features such as their hair, skin color, eye count, mouth shape, ear shape, and many other relatively trivial differences among their bodies rather than more prominent ones such as how many limbs they had and where.

Although she was pretty sure that talking to the rest of the prisoners was her best bet to prepare for whatever was going to happen to them, she felt intimidated by the burly and violent-looking bunch around her, still arguing with each other. Plus, she was so confused herself that she could not think of anything to ask them that could give her anything different to hear out besides what she was already listening to.

Looking around nervously, she noticed someone that did not intimidate her. It was the prisoner who had been sitting right across from her before they were freed from their seats. A young girl, seemingly. She had messy orange hair, gray skin, and very big, blue eyes resembling those of a cat. Her outfit was also much more familiar to what Janice was used to compared to the bare torsos and tribal-looking rags of the others closest to her. She had a white T-shirt with black patterns, black shorts, and shoes in white and orange that resembled sneakers but were a bit odd in shape.

Janice wondered why she hadn't instinctively approached this girl as soon as possible, but her features and demeanor were more than enough to answer that question. It was clear that she did not want to draw any attention to herself. She was still sitting down on her seat and looking down silently, her fists clenched on her knees. Combined with her short height, it hid her presence among the large and loud prisoners around them quite well. She looked defeated, even more so than what Janice imagined herself looking like just moments before the light had come in.

Noticing the attention she received, the alien girl looked up at Janice nervously, waiting for her to say or do something.

'Okay, enough chatting,' the stranger from earlier spoke loudly, distracting both of them before Janice could even open her mouth. 'Move it.'

Without a word, Janice turned away from the girl, afraid of testing the patience of the stranger because of the earlier shock they had all received. Though she could still not help but internally criticize herself for doing so. Their lives could be in danger, and she could not possibly figure out a way to escape on her own. The girl seemed eager to hear her out and she needed someone she could trust, yet this need was perhaps the reason behind her hesitation in the first place.

*'I would try not to frustrate any possible future opponents if I were you. You would not want to make enemies this early on,'* Janice recalled what the stranger had said. What had he meant by that? It was obvious that they were going to be pitted against each other, and judging by the ominous warning, it was probably going to be a fight to the death. But how it was going to be set up and for what reason it could be were both beyond her. Was it some sort of ritual, experiment, or a spectacle for mere entertainment? It could very well be all three, even. But regardless, it could mean that her life could possibly fall into the hands of this alien girl if she trusted her as an ally, and she could be met with nothing other than betrayal as a result.

*I shouldn't let my guard down for now.* Although the girl looked innocent, Janice knew very well that looks could be deceiving. She turned her attention to the prisoners finally being walked outside in front of her, and moved after them.

An enormous wall in front of them curved both ways towards the edges of her sight. It was a giant, circular building. This had to be the stadium, or rather the *arena* if her intuition was correct, where this competition was going to take place. Although her fate-accepting mindset had allowed her to stay calm until now, seeing her possible place of execution right in front of her like this in the flesh -or whatever material its alien super-concrete was made out of- still made Janice's heart skip a beat and then begin to pound faster.

The stranger led the way to the ominous circular building as a group of similarly dressed aliens of the same species as him spread around and began escorting the prisoners silently, acting as their guards.

Janice nervously glanced at the guard walking right next to her, and noticed the two-pronged shining tip of the halberd-like weapon he was carrying. She gulped in stress, but could not take her eyes off the weapon. One of the prongs was longer than the other, and there were no curvatures around their sides but sharp edges that bent abruptly towards the shaft. It was not like it seemed useless, but it had clearly not been designed with purely pragmatic reasons, either. It was complementary to the guard's outfit, where smooth aesthetic elegance

was punctuated with cold hard steel. Its white and gold façade emanated a deceptive aura of righteousness that boiled Janice's blood to look at. It was as if she was some vicious criminal being heroically delivered to justice.

'NO!' someone suddenly yelled right beside her. 'Don't take him, please!'

She turned around to see the girl from earlier, begging and screaming while reaching for something as two guards forcefully held her back. Curiously, Janice turned her attention towards what the girl was reaching for. It was a glass box being carried by a guard to somewhere else with a small, winged reptilian creature trapped inside it. It had bright red coloration on its underside while the rest of its body was maroon.

*Is that... a dragon?* Janice thought to herself, wondering what else was in store for her to be baffled at today. This was truly the cherry on top after being abducted by aliens.

The poor creature looked desperate to get to the girl, scratching the glass and moving frantically. Likely tired of what was overblown melodrama in his eyes, the guard carrying the cage finally acknowledged the girl. 'You can take it back if you win. Now get back in line,' he said to her in a cold, hostile voice as the two guards holding her finally managed to get her back in position.

*They have a shorter temper than they show,* Janice thought.

'What's happening back there? Do I need to *motivate* you all to move again?' the lead guard said loudly, dangling a button attached to the end of the wire he was holding for all the prisoners to see. Afraid of another electric shock, they all turned their eyes away from the girl and kept moving after him.

Janice looked around for a moment to see just what kind of a place they were at. She saw three other ships in the distance, each unloading another set of prisoners like them. The roster of whatever they were going to partake in seemed to be even more diverse than she had first thought. Across all groups, no two prisoners were of the same species. And unlike her group, some even had non-humanoid ones, from four-legged, intimidating centaur-like creatures to slimy, slug-like ones. She wondered how many more ships had arrived before them, and how many more were on their way to deliver more prisoners. Disturbed by the thought, she turned her attention to what was behind the ships.

Orderly structures stood tall, yet again in white and gold colors. They were generally shaped like ordinary apartment buildings, but with a slicker yet minimalist design as Janice had come to expect by now. Their edges were smooth and their surfaces looked spotless. It would be believable if someone told they were all made of actual marble and gold, especially given the high-society look and attitude the guards had shown so far. The buildings surrounded an empty city square on which the ships full of prisoners were landing on. Around this square were many more of the same species of aliens as the guards, but surprisingly wearing simpler, more modest outfits. The white and gold color palate was still mostly continuous among them, with few interruptions of blues, greens and oranges which were still so light that they hardly caught any attention as outliers. What was more significant was that this crowd was not wearing any helmets, so Janice could finally see the faces of these aliens. From such a distance, they looked mostly identical to human faces besides the green skin.

These civilians were trying to get a closer look at the prisoners from behind the barriers that were set up around the square, which did not seem to serve that much of a purpose considering the crowd's demeanor. One could have expected from the fanatics of an event

that seemed to be so grandiose, considering the sheer size of the building, to trample over each other and press themselves against these barriers to get a closer look at what's happening. Instead, the focused stares of this calm, large crowd of people gently following them without a sound besides their footsteps could have been the most alien thing about this planet Janice had yet seen. She wondered if even the children were this calm. *Probably not*, she thought. Maybe that was why they hadn't brought any.

The odd crowd made her question if this was really going to be an event like she had thought at her first glance at the giant circular building, or if it was just a giant prison with an unconventional architecture. Besides being treated as just a prisoner, there was also the fact that no ceremony or anything of the sort was being held for their arrival to whatever this was, yet the crowd kept watching with eager eyes.

As they stopped moving, Janice almost bumped into the prisoner in front of her. The lead guard stepped next to a wide doorway into the giant building, which was sealed by a metallic gate. He turned to the prisoners while another guard approached the control panel besides the gate.

'Attention!' he yelled. He was now speaking much more formally than before and dramatizing his sentences, as if he was reciting his lines from the script of a play. 'You are currently on Xeila, the most prestigious place to live in the Galactic Federation, and the home-planet of its founder species, the Xeilons.'

The gate was lifted just as he finished his sentence, and the guard next to the console turned around in a quick spin and stretched his chest, standing proudly as the word "Xeilons" was heard. They were moving so synchronously that Janice wondered how many times they had repeated this exact procedure before.

'You have all been selected to compete in the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Power Brace Tournament,' the guard announced as if he had read her mind. 'You will be granted the opportunity to utilize the power bracelets given to you without any restrictions. They are powerful elemental weapons that will also boost your physical capabilities.'

*Elemental weapons? Bracelets?* Janice's previous thoughts on how this day could not get any more insane were shattered as quickly as that. In hindsight, though, she thought that it was not too surprising for these people, who carried halberds and wore knightly sets of armor despite their advanced technology, to be more interested in having their gladiators use such weapons rather than some plasma rifle or laser cannon as she would normally expect.

The guard finally turned back once more and kept moving, dragging the prisoners and the rest of the guards behind him. A set of stairs was leading them underground, below and towards the center of the enormous building.

'You will all fight in the first stage. All 120 of you, in groups of 4. Each battle will end with one last fighter standing. The 30 survivors will advance to the second stage.'

Janice's blood froze as she heard the words uttered, and it only made matters worse when she looked around as they finally reached the end of the stairs. She tried her best to keep herself calm upon the sight of a sci-fi dungeon in front of them. It was not too different of a sight from what she was expecting at this point, and yet she could still not help but get more and more nervous the further they went into it, passing by countless cells. Just like the properties of the vessels that were used to bring them here, each of the cells also seemed to be designed individually to properly accommodate the type of prisoner locked inside it. Not only

did the variety in their sizes indicated that, but the interior of each cell could also be seen thanks to two see-through panels likely acting as doors. They exposed the prisoners inside the cells along with the appropriately customized furniture.

It was clear that the material these panels were made of could not be ordinary glass. Janice could see many of the prisoners banging against them with all of their force or screaming to get the group's attention. The panels never even budged slightly, or let any sound through. A haunting feeling took hold of her as she silently kept listening to the lead guard's unbothered speech while watching the aggravated prisoners desperately trying to break free and make themselves heard. She began to panic, trying to control her breathing while doing her best to not miss any part of the guard's explanation. She wanted to scream and run away, but deterred herself from doing so by keeping her eyes at the sharp and stainless blades of the spears being carried around them. Even without her running, they were already close enough to her throat.

'5 battles, each with 6 of the survivors, will be held during the second stage,' the lead guard kept explaining, blissfully ignoring the locked-up prisoners protesting around them. 'And finally, the remaining 5 survivors will face each other in the final stage.'

They stopped at a junction, and the cells on the corridors to their left and right opened up, with each pair of panels sliding over one another to create an entrance.

The lead guard turned around to face them, and put more enthusiasm behind his words to excite the prisoners about their participation in this sick spectacle he had been describing. 'The winner of the tournament will be able to live as a Federation citizen, in incredible health and wealth! They will never have to return to their miserable and primitive planets ever again! So, fight knowing this is your salvation! Even if you die, you will be the one in trillions to have ever had the chance to use the Power Bracelets so freely! Even most of our own citizens would be jealous of you.'

Janice had thought she had already accepted whatever could happen to her soon after she was abducted, trapped in the darkness with only the other prisoners' voices keeping her company. It had not seemed so horrifying then; just silence the voices and have the darkness last forever. That had to be what death was going to be like. But that readiness had crumbled after the light; after she was freed from her seat and let outside again, only to be met with all of this insane nonsense. No, she did not deserve this. She wanted to live, but it was certain now that the next couple of days were probably going to be her last. She could no longer keep herself calm. She wanted to scream, but all she could do was mutter. 'No, no, no, no...' she repeated in panic, her whole body shaking so violently that it could make her dizzy if she wasn't already. The rest of the prisoners were all protesting loudly, probably, from what she could make of the blurred vision and muffled sounds.

A jolt of extreme pain kept her from fainting. The commotion was brought to an end by an even more powerful electric shock than before, which made Janice recall her last memory before her abduction even more vividly now while writhing in agony. She gritted her teeth and clenched her fists, desperately trying to endure it without bursting into tears. *Why... Why was this happening? What had she done to deserve it?* Every fiber of her body was begging her to let go, but there was nothing she hated more than crying.

*Not in front of you*, she repeated in her mind over and over until the pain began to fade away, slowly converting into rage and a feral wish for revenge. *Fine*, she thought to herself.

*I'm not going to die here.* She looked at the lead guard again while he kept berating them, wishing that she could only see his face in order to remember it later.

'Silence! You do not have the rights to reject your purpose! You are so idiotic and primitive that you do not even see how grateful each of you pathetic sub-creatures need to be! If you keep disobeying, you will only guarantee your demise and leave not a sliver of honor behind you before your death, unlike the graceful fall you may take in the Tournament! You will be disposed of if you refuse to fight during the battles, or if you attempt to harm anyone other than the warriors! You have all been warned. Now rest and prepare.'

The guard finally uncuffed them all with the push of a button, and the rest of the guards separated them into two groups. Janice soon found herself walking towards the two cells opposing each other at the end of a corridor, with that girl from earlier being the only prisoner left besides her. They made eye contact one last time after being placed into their cells, then turned their looks away from each other. Janice knew her reasons for it. *If we really have to fight to the death to get out of here, I can't let my guard down against anyone.* Her anger was starting to fade away, and the initial panic caused by the guard's speech was no more. She knew that she had to stay calm and collected if she wanted to find a way out of this place.

*Think, Janice, think.* She looked around at the dull and sterile cell. There was a door with a button next to a corner of the room, which she guessed to be the door to a restroom. There was a screen on a wall, and a thin white bed against the wall opposing the screen. She lied on it, feeling relieved that it was more comfortable than it looked. Staring at the ceiling which was just as dull and spotless as the rest of the cell, she began to contemplate.

*Out of everyone on Earth, why would they pick me?* she thought, and recalled how and where it all began. Unbeknownst to her, what felt like the memories of days ago had only taken place 13 hours ago in reality.

It had to be about 11 PM, or that was what Janice thought at least, as she finally saw the lights of the suburbs in the distance below the mountain. The empty road she was on was the fastest way, but it definitely felt longer than it was with how many switchbacks were on the way down. The absence of any road lights certainly did not help either, as she knew she could descend way faster than this if she could only see what was on the road without having to rely on her singular headlight. She momentarily thought about how this road used to terrify her not too long ago, and that improved her mood enough to mind the tediousness of the descent just a little less.

She instinctively looked at her right mirror despite knowing that she was not going to see what she wanted to see. Besides their intended purposes, she would sometimes use the mirrors on her motorcycle to look at her hair hanging out from behind her helmet and waving in the wind. She sometimes wished that she could feel the wind on the tips of those strands, but seeing them dance to it was always enough to give her a feeling of freedom. She felt a moment of peace as she looked in the mirror, even if only to see the dim red hue of her taillight. She knew those strands were there, waving as they always did, and that was enough.

She received a call about halfway down the road, and pushed a button on her intercom. With her mood as high as it was now, she spoke with enthusiasm as soon as the echoing ringtone inside of her helmet stopped. 'Hey, mom.'

'Hey, Janice,' her mother answered. There was not the same sign of excitement in it as hers, but Janice could tell that it was only because she was too tired to show it.

'What's up?' she asked.

'Same as always. I just called to ask when you will be here.'

'Probably in like... 40 minutes?'

'Oh, that's...' She had to yawn before finishing her sentence. '...good.'

'You can go to sleep; I have my keys.'

'There's no way I'm sleeping before I see you. You haven't come home in months.'

Janice felt guilty. 'Sorry mom, you know how I am. Mr. Bennett doesn't want me to work so much, but I want to repay him the favor. I didn't want to ask for a whole week off without putting in some extra effort. Besides, you'll get to see me for an entire week this time, so look at the bright side.'

'Oh, you know I couldn't be happier about that. What about that annoying coworker of yours? What was his name?'

'Daniel?'

'Yes, that one. Did you talk to Mr. Bennett about him?'

Once again, Janice knew that her mother had no intentions to bring down her mood with these questions and statements, but that could not prevent her from feeling a bit frustrated. 'Mom, I get why you're worried, but not every guy who wants to sleep with me is a predator, okay? Daniel's a good guy; he's just a dork who doesn't know how to approach girls. Besides, he let go of it after I nicely told him he's just a friend. Trust me, I'm as careful as I can be.'

She heard a patient sigh from her mother. 'Alright, we'll talk about it when you come home. Don't waste any time and come as soon as you can, will you? I missed you.'

There really was no reason to talk about it, but Janice let it go. Her mother being overprotective was not so much a nuisance as it was sweet and homely when they could only see each other so often.

'I missed you too, mom. How's dad doing?'

'Oh, he's fine. He had a pretty rough day at work; just threw himself onto the bed after dinner. I promised to wake him up when you arrive. I think he didn't want to be too tired in front of you.'

'Maybe you should've followed in his footsteps.'

'And maybe you should stop worrying about me so much and just focus on getting here as soon as you can.'

'Alright, deal.'

'Good. Love you, sweetheart.'

'Love you too, mom.'

Janice kept going for a little while longer until a powerful bright light suddenly covered her entire field of vision, forcing her to stop.

*What the hell?* Her heart began pounding as she could not make out anything at all, and whoever was causing this was not making a single sound either. She tried her best to convince herself that there was surely nothing to be scared of. It was probably just a few police cars for an ID check or something, and her eyes just couldn't adjust after riding in the dark for so long, even with her headlight. But she could stay calm for only a moment, before she noticed

two pairs of feet walk towards her from under the cover of her right hand. She understood quickly that these were not officers based on the strange boots they wore. She still tried her best to not panic, but it was not enough. There was fear in her voice as she slowly backed away. ‘Wh- Who are you? What do you want?’

There was no answer. What she received instead was a sudden burst of pain unlike any she had felt before, and it instantly spread throughout her whole body. It made her fall to the ground, writhing in pain and screaming. The last thing she saw before losing her consciousness were the two pairs of feet getting even closer to her.

# LIST OF PAST CHAMPIONS

FEDERATION>CITIZENS>NATURALIZEDPC-2CITIZENS>CHAMPIONSOFTHEPOWERBRACETOURNAMENT

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CLEARANCE LEVEL: 3

ID: DuKMe3534Ak\_f9G

## 1. Zpo' r Rx

HOMEPLANET: Kald

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, moderately monitored.

## 2. Are Liig Nos

HOMEPLANET: Osshin

STATUS: Deceased.

PUBLISHED REASON FOR DEATH: Moon residence life support system failure.

REAL REASON FOR DEATH: Suicide.

## 3. Amela Ghan

HOMEPLANET: Kzuth

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for disruptive public statements.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Conspirators' Wing.

## 4. Tarsus Garrus (Surname Chosen by Champion)

HOMEPLANET: Valarum

PUBLISHED STATUS: Killed by accident during engagement with the 5<sup>th</sup> Division of the Federal Interception Fleet in an attempt to escape beyond Federation Space.

REAL STATUS: Missing beyond Federation Space.

## 5. Çiselle Fähfnir Akhâm

HOMEPLANET: Ravanir

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record, suspicious visits to Thalsaar slums, highly monitored.

## 6. Gadr Y'al Rut

HOMEPLANET: Tillinis

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for attempted infiltration of Celestol.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

## 7. RF-8163

HOMEPLANET: Chillonx

STATUS: Imprisoned for murder.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Homicide Wing.

## 8. Quetz Al Kotal

HOMEPLANET: Maia

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for attempted cult-forming and the kidnapping, torture and murder of numerous citizens for seemingly ritualistic reasons in Thalsaar slums.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Homicide Wing.

**9. Pritat Vantas**

HOMEPLANET: Prosperos

STATUS: Under house arrest for continuously causing public annoyance by "ranting too much", no other criminal offence or suspicious activity, highly monitored.

**10. Bladimuur 13<sup>th</sup> Shahr**

HOMEPLANET: Foufir

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for disruptive public statements.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Conspirators' Wing.

**11. Bralnos Leros Tipsos**

HOMEPLANET: Creece

STATUS: Temporarily arrested on Thalsaar for alleged copyright infringement, future status to be determined by legal trial to be held in Thalsaar High Court of Planetary Affairs.

**12. Erldar Furion (Surname Chosen by Champion)**

HOMEPLANET: Zephros

PUBLISHED STATUS: Imprisoned for leading a terrorist attack with a small group of lightly armed followers. The attack resulted in a failed attempt to breach through the main gates of the Federal Research Department of Celestol with no injuries or casualties.

PUBLISHED PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

REAL STATUS: Disposed of for leading a terrorist attack with a large group of heavily armed followers. The attack resulted in the group breaching through the main gates of the Federal Research Department of Celestol and killing several security officers before being stopped.

**13. Joffrey Johnson**

HOMEPLANET: Earth

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, missing beyond Federation Space with no trail left behind. Peculiar apology note found in champion's residence explaining that someone named "Dean Brand" must be stopped and that the champion will be back once it is done.

**14. Harrar Morr**

HOMEPLANET: Arrx

STATUS: Independent citizen, rehabilitated and released after minor criminal offenses of thievery, no other criminal offence or suspicious activity, highly monitored.

**15. Vera Gallantro**

HOMEPLANET: Umbra Vespis

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, highly monitored due to popularity.

**16. Finnick Worsuk**

HOMEPLANET: Kroximis

STATUS: Imprisoned for mass marketing fraud.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Thalsaar Capitol Prison.

**17. Odradek Gilgadik**

HOMEPLANET: William

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record, suspicious activity, highly monitored.

18. Jumpy Longlegs (Name and Surname Chosen by Autonomous Naming System)

HOMEPLANET: Chillonx

STATUS: Imprisoned for murder.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Homicide Wing.

19. Aria Eir

HOMEPLANET: Quech

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for attempting to plan an escape from Federation Space in secrecy.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Conspirators' Wing.

20. Horlon Artorn (Surname Chosen by Champion)

HOMEPLANET: Valarum

STATUS: Deceased.

PUBLISHED REASON FOR DEATH: Attacked by armed delinquents in Thalsaar slums. It was too late for attempts to save the victim once the body was discovered.

REAL REASON FOR DEATH: Disposed of on the spot along with a group of local collaborators from Thalsaar for breaching the Data Vault and other classified information banks by force. All traces of stolen data was eliminated.

21. Kurushak Pelshi

HOMEPLANET: Gelm

STATUS: Deceased.

REASON FOR DEATH: Reported to be seen trafficking minors, killed in Thalsaar slums by locals before the arrival of police units. Killers were sentenced to imprisonment for resorting to mob justice in Thalsaar Capitol Prison.

22. Agra Rudni

HOMEPLANET: Temenn

STATUS: Under house arrest for continuously causing public annoyance by "talking too much", no other criminal offence or suspicious activity, highly monitored.

23. Derral Boid

HOMEPLANET: Korr

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, moderately monitored.

24. Yor Kimika Furuko

HOMEPLANET: Urumi

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Deceased, replaced with autonomous body double.

REASON FOR DEATH: Suicide.

25. Table Rone

HOMEPLANET: Twix

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for attempts at dividing the public over insignificant matters.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Conspirators' Wing.

**26. Şafrâm Häid**

HOMEPLANET: Ravanir

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, moderately monitored.

**27. QulMpr37gRe**

HOMEPLANET: Jiji

PUBLISHED STATUS: Captured by the 9<sup>th</sup> Division of the Federal Interception Fleet during their attempt to escape beyond Federation Space, imprisoned as result.

PUBLISHED PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Generalist Detention Facility, Rehabilitation Center.

REAL STATUS: Disposed of at the spot by the 9<sup>th</sup> Division of the Federal Interception Fleet during their attempt to escape beyond Federation Space.

**28. Pohlter Gheist**

HOMEPLANET: Ecto

PUBLIC STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned due to extreme difficulty of monitoring champion otherwise.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

**29. Lendo Jerobah**

HOMEPLANET: Ircnir

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for attempted infiltration of Celestol.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

**30. Lind rso Simm**

HOMEPLANET: Urielle

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, highly monitored due to potentially dangerous biological features.

**31. Jarrack the Erect**

HOMEPLANET: Otspir

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, highly monitored due to popularity and public influence.

**32. Ki Gli Tak Ful Mum**

HOMEPLANET: Lumino Vespis

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, imprisoned for attempting to plan an escape from Federation Space in secrecy.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Conspirators' Wing.

**33. Aarzzz Pinch (Surname Chosen by Autonomous Naming System)**

HOMEPLANET: Chillonx

STATUS: Imprisoned for murder.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Homicide Wing.

**34. Sfreq Zcepo**

HOMEPLANET: Derce

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, moderately monitored.

### 35. V'rab Sulm Idr

HOMEPLANET: Tillinis

STATUS: Imprisoned for leading a terrorist attack with a group of armed followers. The attack resulted in a failed attempt to breach through the main entrance of the Federal Council Chamber with no injuries or casualties.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

### 36. Ahfra Yamra (Surname Chosen by Champion)

HOMEPLANET: Valarum

STATUS: Detained and under treatment at the Federal Rehabilitation Facility of Xeila for bigoted public statements and inappropriate public display of genitals.

### 37. Rhaasim Densestache

HOMEPLANET: Asagbe

STATUS: Imprisoned along with crew for multiple acts of piracy on the interplanetary cargo routes between Thalsaar and Refarus.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Space Crimes Wing

### 38. Taldr Helmdar (Surname Chosen by Champion)

HOMEPLANET: Zephros

STATUS: Imprisoned for murder.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Homicide Wing.

### 39. Pröeja Jüpiérre

HOMEPLANET: Sfänze

STATUS: Independent citizen, fined twice for dumping waste on interplanetary highway, no other criminal offence or suspicious activity, highly monitored.

### 40. Bapo Bepitu

HOMEPLANET: Entarc

STATUS: Imprisoned for fraud and tax evasion.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Thalsaar Capitol Prison.

### 41. Xad Gog Dax

HOMEPLANET: Palindro

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, moderately monitored.

### 42. Sonnik Hedgog

HOMEPLANET: Miku

PUBLISHED STATUS: Self destructed ship to avoid capture during engagement with the 13<sup>th</sup> Division of the Federal Interception Fleet in an attempt to escape beyond Federation Space, deceased as result.

REAL STATUS: Missing beyond Federation Space.

### 43. Hlafnar Kasarin

HOMEPLANET: Umbra Vespis

PUBLISHED STATUS: Imprisoned for leading the Coronation's Eve Terror Attacks on Celestol, organized by the now-eliminated terrorist group known as No More Champions.

PUBLISHED PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

REAL STATUS: Disposed of for leading the Coronation's Eve Terror Attacks on Celestol, organized by the now-eliminated terrorist group known as No More Champions.

### 44. Ax Grün

HOMEPLANET: Kald

PUBLISHED STATUS: Imprisoned for taking active part in the Coronation's Eve Terror Attacks on Celestol, organized by the now-eliminated terrorist group known as No More Champions.

PUBLISHED PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

REAL STATUS: Disposed of for taking active part in the Coronation's Eve Terror Attacks on Celestol, organized by the now-eliminated terrorist group known as No More Champions.

#### 45. Prähnum Jüfârl III

HOMEPLANET: Urkhum

PUBLISHED STATUS: Imprisoned for taking active part in the Coronation's Eve Terror Attacks on Celestol, organized by the now-eliminated terrorist group known as No More Champions.

PUBLISHED PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol Maximum Security Detention Facility.

REAL STATUS: Fled the combat zone successfully during the Federation's retaliation against the Coronation's Eve Terror Attacks on Celestol due to the Federal Interception Fleet being occupied with the rest of the attackers. Missing beyond Federation Space.

#### 46. 94713482-T

HOMEPLANET: Phars

STATUS: Imprisoned for murder.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Homicide Wing.

#### 47. Skye Lightlace

HOMEPLANET: Earth

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, moderately monitored.

#### 48. Ike Marahudirrantucsar

HOMEPLANET: Yurb

PUBLISHED STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity.

REAL STATUS: Replaced with autonomous body double, secretly placed under custody of King Jarrik of Ferra as part of a deal with Vice President Ozarn of Thalsaar.

#### 50. Sharpfang Webber (Name and Surname Chosen by Autonomous Naming System)

HOMEPLANET: Chillonx

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, highly monitored due to actions of past champions from Chillonx and dangerous biological features.

#### 51. Belar Radak (Surname Given, Chosen by Champion)

HOMEPLANET: Valarum

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, highly monitored due to actions of past champions from Valarum.

#### 52. Demi Lupita

HOMEPLANET: Leph

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, highly monitored due to popularity and public influence.

#### 53. Taniks Goeyagh

HOMEPLANET: Kochenbarq

STATUS: Imprisoned for sexual assault.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Thalsaar Capitol Prison.

**54. Bahn Qyqisa**

HOMEPLANET: Hox

STATUS: Imprisoned for smuggling illegal substances, materials, tools and weapons from Thalsaar to other Federation planets.

PLACE OF IMPRISONMENT: Celestol High Security Detention Facility, Space Crimes Wing

**55. Ure Miéf Kaard**

HOMEPLANET: Foufir

STATUS: Independent citizen, no criminal record or suspicious activity, highly monitored until next champion as part of regular protocol.

## **II – Fire and Ice**

Janice woke up in her cell to some sort of alarm going off. She saw a bright red light blinking at the corner of the room next to the door panels. It was above a small, capsule-shaped compartment that she had not noticed before. It opened up automatically as she approached it, revealing a few pills and a glass of water.

‘These pills contain your daily amount of required nutrients,’ a robotic voice message accompanied the procedure. ‘Please swallow; do not chew.’

Janice felt insulted. *I don’t even get a final meal, huh?* As she took the pills, she saw two guards bring in that girl from earlier to her cell. Her clothes looked damaged and she looked beat up, but Janice did not notice any physical wounds or bruises on her.

The girl sat down on her bed, covered her face and began sobbing. It did not take Janice too long to understand what was happening. She had survived one of those fights to the death.

Janice froze at the thought. It unearthed within her a new, haunting realization. She had been thinking about her own survival ever since she had been brought to this place, but never about what the consequences of her survival would be for others and for herself. She had never killed anyone before, and whom she was going to face were not even the ones who had kidnapped her in the first place. They were other abducted, seemingly innocent people.

As she was deep in thought, a guard suddenly broke into her view to snap her back to the present. He accessed the console next to her cell’s entrance, and one of the door panels slid behind the other. ‘You’re up next; follow me.’ Another guard tailed behind them as Janice followed the order.

‘We’re allowed to use force if you don’t follow instructions,’ the guard in front of her said. ‘And save the melodrama to yourself. It won’t get you anywhere. I would suggest enjoying the power while you have the chance, and focusing on staying alive if you want more of it.’

Janice was not listening. She was too occupied dealing with her thoughts from earlier, trying to prevent them from jeopardizing her survival. *No, it’s not my fault we’re all in this mess*, she thought. *They brought us here; they’re forcing us to do this.* She had to survive.

The guards brought her to a small, circular chamber and pushed some buttons next to its see-through gate to lift it. ‘Go on, get in,’ ordered one of them. After a moment of hesitation, Janice obeyed, and the gate shut behind her as soon as she did.

The two guards then entered a cabin-like space with a large control panel inside, which Janice could see thanks to a window on the chamber’s wall separating the two areas. One of the guards pushed a button on the console after a short chat with the other that Janice could not hear. Their voices began to reach her afterwards, being so clear that it was hard to believe they were coming from speakers.

‘First things first, we need you to take off your clothes so that you can get suited up.’

‘What? No way!’ Janice objected immediately. She had been patiently obeying their every command up to now, but this was the last drop.

The guard sighed. ‘Listen, I read your report and I get why you don’t want to do that in front of us, but it is standard procedure that must be followed. Otherwise, you will have no

chance of survival. You will either have to be disposed of for not following our instructions, or you will die to a single projectile once you're at the arena.'

'I don't give a shit,' Janice fought back. 'From what I can tell, I'll probably die anyway. What's the chance of me being the strongest out of all these people you've kidnapped?'

'It's not just about strength,' the guard argued. 'There are many factors tha—'

'I don't care. There's no way I'm stripping for you, especially after you put me in here to die for your enjoyment. I would rather die to piss you off instead.'

They stared each other down for a few seconds. Internally, Janice was terrified, but she was determined to show none of it. What she wanted to show the guard was that if she had to march to her death, she was going to do it on her own terms.

The guard finally sighed in defeat. 'Alright. Look, here's a middle ground: We're going to turn our backs to you but my hand is still going to be on the console. All I want you to do is to stand straight and stretch your arms wide open for the scanner after you take your clothes off. You don't have to take off your underwear or anything. We just need the scanner to scan your body shape, so if you can just tell me when you take off your shirt and those... pantaloons, I guess, that would make things easier for the both of us.'

Janice felt a boost of confidence, being able to turn the tables in her favor despite being in a much direr situation compared to her opponent. Glaring mockingly at the guard who did not seem to be familiar with the concept of jeans, she decided to keep pushing her luck, guessing that the guard's superiors would not be too happy with him having a contestant executed if he had already retreated so far so easily.

'You think that's good enough?' she boldly challenged him, but the guard did not seem too eager to listen to any of her objections this time around.

'Listen,' he began patiently. 'I get that you don't want to be commanded by us, but I'm just trying to do my job here. I was not the one who picked you out of everyone on your planet, and I was not the one who set up this tournament. I don't have a personal beef with you or your people.'

Janice stared him down for a moment in disbelief. The guard that had threw them in their cells acted like much more of a fanatic, and genuinely seemed to believe that the prisoners were inferior creatures to them, nothing more than lambs to the slaughter. She got curious if this one was really stating his honest opinions, and decided to test him.

'Well, you don't seem to like us very much either from what I can tell. You're not being *forced* to do this after all, are you?' she asked.

'It's not that simple,' the guard began to explain in a regretful tone. 'This is just the 56<sup>th</sup> tournament, and it's held each year. It's still a very new tradition; something that was established by the previous king before his early demise. It was not that long ago that being in the Xeilon army was just a symbol of our loyalty to Xeila and its people. It still symbolizes that, but once every year, some of us are also chosen to take on this role here. Most of us don't have a habit to disobey orders in the first place, and it would be even more problematic if we disobeyed them out of sympathy for any PC-2 species. Still, we're not expected to be so cruel that we would execute any of you at the slightest inconvenience you give us, so that's why I'm offering a middle ground.'

"PC-2?"

'It's just a term for the species that are brought here to fight. Just accept it as that for now. We're already losing enough time with all this chatting. Just tell me if you're okay with what I'm offering or not.'

After they glared at each other in silence once more for a few seconds, Janice turned her eyes to the ground. She was indecisive about what to do, as the guard did seem reasonable enough to reach for a middle ground at the very least rather than disposing of her immediately.

He was the one to break the silence. 'Listen, we can sit here all day until one of my higher-ups decide that it's time to execute those that are still causing problems. The next round has to start at some point. I don't feel any sort of contempt or passion towards you, and I'm not going to lose my job whether you decide to obey me or not. So, if I were you, I would make my decision based on whether I want to live or die. You may think your chances are slim, but I have a feeling that you'll be more confident once you get your bracelets. So, what will it be?'

After contemplating for another second, Janice turned her eyes back to the guard. 'Alright, fine. Turn back and I'll tell you when I'm ready for your... scanner.'

The guards nodded and turned their backs to her.

'I'm ready,' Janice announced after a short while.

One of the guards pulled a switch on the console, and the scanner mechanism began moving all around her. It had the same robotic voice as that pill dispenser in her room.

'Scanning,' the smooth robotic voice echoed inside the chamber.

'Stay at the exact same position until we tell you to stop,' the guard reminded her.

'Body scan complete,' the scanner announced. 'Proceeding with the binding of reactive armor.'

Several mechanical arms ran through different parts of Janice's body, stretching some elastic, scaly material over them. It looked like reptilian skin. She felt beyond uncomfortable by the procedure, but at least it was just a machine. No one said anything for the next few seconds, leaving nothing but the sound of moving mechanical parts to be heard by either side until the material was stretched over her whole body besides the head and the hands.

'Reactive armor bound.'

'Alright, you can put your clothes back on,' the guard informed Janice. 'Tell us when you're ready.'

'I'm ready,' Janice answered about a minute later.

The guards both turned around as Janice looked at her arms and inspected the peculiar "armor."

'Alright, then I'll quickly brief you on what that machine just stretched over you,' the guard said. 'As you've heard, it's a type of reactive armor that hardens in response to physical trauma. It is composed of hundreds of billions of nanoscales that stay clumped together in millions by default, each clump forming one of those tiny scales you can see if you look closely.'

Janice felt the scales as she curiously ran her fingers through her arms. So these were not even the smallest components at all, then. She could be fascinated by the technology if not for its context.

‘They are loose and flexible in their default condition,’ the guard continued, ‘moving synchronously with your body. They cause no restrictions of movement, and you don’t even feel the armor while wearing it.’

‘And I’m guessing they become not so loose when I get attacked?’

‘Precisely,’ the guard confirmed. ‘The nanoscales detect the incoming threat and react instantly to clutter up more at the estimated point of impact just as you are hit, reducing the damage significantly. They can also do the opposite to loosen up and scatter more if needed to leave virtually no gaps in your defense, making it so that you don’t just burn to death if you’re on fire for instance. It is much more penetrable by precise heavy attacks that way though since the nanoscales can’t clump up in time when they’re all so separated and are already occupied. Got it?’

The mention of being on fire made her anxious, but Janice did her best to hide it. Although she was following his instructions, she was still committed to not showing any weakness in front of the guard. ‘Yeah, makes sense.’

‘Good. Then let’s get to your weapons.’

The guard pushed another button on the console, and two perfectly circular holes opened up on the wall. ‘Put your hands inside those two holes,’ he demanded while gesturing towards them.

Janice reluctantly put her hands inside the holes after a brief moment of hesitation, and felt cold hard metal wrap around her wrists, making her unable to pull her hands back out. She could feel that these clasps were much smaller in width compared to what she had been cuffed with before. There were two pairs, one just behind her wrists and another over the middle of her forearms. They did not apply too much pressure, but were unmoving and so precisely wrapped around these locations that Janice could not move her arms anymore.

Noticing her slight panic, the guard reassured her. ‘Don’t worry, there’s nothing dangerous about the molding process.’

‘Molding process?’ Janice asked nervously. Metallic noises began coming from inside the holes as the same robotic voice as always began to announce the steps of the new process.

‘Scanning forearm proportions...’ the voice echoed, as Janice calmed herself down and turned her interest to the purpose of the process rather than how it was done. She knew that the more she thought about the fact that molten metal was likely flowing through somewhere inside that contraption around her arms, the more she was going to panic.

‘Forming bracelet mold...’

‘I don’t understand,’ Janice said.

‘Don’t understand what?’ the guard asked.

‘Pouring liquified materials...’

‘Why bracelets? Why not like... plasma rifles or something?’

‘Guns are practical,’ the guard admitted. ‘But they lack the visual spectacle. Also, they are not quite as interesting.’

‘Placing power gems...’

‘Not as interesting?’ Janice asked in confusion.

‘Yes,’ the guard answered. ‘It is the extraordinary properties of the bracelets that enthral tens of billions of viewers around the galaxy, not their wearers. Primarily, at least.’

‘Starting cooling procedure...’

‘If we wanted to use guns instead,’ the guard continued, ‘the tournament wouldn’t have even been established in the first place. Everyone would’ve objected, calling it senseless violence.’

‘And what’s so special about the bracelets that *this* is not?’ Janice asked him.

‘You’ll see once you use them,’ the guard said confidently. ‘And speaking of using them...’

Janice felt a new pair of metal objects, larger in their width, wrap around her arms in-between the thin pairs of clasps. She felt a thrilling sensation quickly spreading from there to the rest of her body that could not be easily described. It took merely a couple of seconds for it to spread all the way, and she came out of the other end as if she was now a different person. For the first time since she had arrived on this strange planet, she felt excited. No longer was there a fear of death, or a sliver of doubt in herself. In contrast to her recent acceptance of approaching death, she was now feeling more alive than she had ever felt. It was unlike anything she had felt before, and it was amazing.

‘Power bracelets equipped and ready to use,’ the robotic voice announced.

The guard smirked as he noticed Janice’s instant mood shift. He pushed another button on the console to release the clasps. ‘You can take them out now and see for yourself.’

Janice pulled her hands out of the holes and saw two bracelets. On her right arm was one that was golden in color with a big scarlet-red gemstone on it. On her left arm was another that was silver in color with an equally big, deep blue gemstone on it. Each bracelet fit perfectly, as if they were directly molded onto her skin.

Janice kept looking at them in awe while barely starting to get over the initial wave of sensations that had just swept over her. ‘It feels...’

‘Good, doesn’t it?’ the guard asked, immensely simplifying whatever it was that Janice was trying to come up with to explain the feeling.

‘Yeah,’ Janice confirmed.

‘The one on your right arm is a fire bracelet, and the one on your left arm is an ice bracelet.’

Janice turned to him in confusion. ‘Fire... and... ice?’

The guard let out a chuckle. He was amazed at how unaware she still seemed to be about what was going on. ‘Yeah, haven’t you listened to your warden’s speech? Do “powerful elemental weapons” ring a bell?’

‘Powerful elemental weapons...’ Janice looked back at her bracelets, and then back at the guard. ‘I have fire and ice powers?’

‘See for yourself.’

It was hard to tell whether it was due to that overwhelming “good” feeling finally beginning to dull out, or Janice finally getting used to it, but she was now sobering up. She recollected her thoughts and focused on the bracelets. As she did so, the gemstones on them began to glow in their respective colors, slowly intensifying. She felt two new sensations, one around each of her hands. In mere seconds, her right hand was in flames while her left hand looked frozen on the surface, emanating a faint, misty hue of blue.

The sensations, though, despite feeling so familiar that she had been able to quickly associate each of them with the corresponding element before these elemental shells had even formed around her hands, were something otherworldly. She felt no pain, and every nerve

trapped behind these shells told her that it was because her hands were not frozen or on fire, but because they were made of ice and fire, despite there being no possibility that she could have any idea of what that would even feel like.

She felt enchanted by all of it rather than shocked. Somehow, she felt as if she had always been prepared to see and feel exactly what she was seeing and feeling now. What she was not prepared for, on the other hand, was the sudden wave of pain around each of her arms where the bracelets were, as her hands' frozen and fiery shells disappeared in an instant.

'Ahh!' Janice yelled, noticing how much more intensely the gemstones were glowing now than before. Despite how sharp it was at first, the pain quickly faded after just a few seconds as did the glow.

'The bracelets heat up as you keep using them,' the guard explained. 'And you have to be careful of how much they heat up. You won't actually feel anything until the point of what we call "overheat," which is when those power gems will not-so-kindly ask for a break. And you'll *have to* politely listen to them if that happens; you won't be able to use any powers until they cool down all the way. So, keep an eye out for how much they're glowing from time to time in order to prevent that.'

With the pain now sobering her fully, Janice turned back to the guard. She wanted to berate him for not telling that to her sooner, and ask if he thought it was funny to watch her unknowingly hurt herself for his amusement. She changed her mind right as she opened her mouth, however. She remembered what she was here for, and decided to get as much use from the guard's knowledge as she could before being thrown in the arena rather than losing any more time arguing with him.

'What about the burns?' she asked. 'How many times can I overheat before these things melt my arms off?' She made sure that there was no sign of hostility or sympathy in her voice. It was as neutral as it could be, demanding information and nothing else.

'You don't have to worry about that,' the guard answered in a similar tone. 'You'll start healing any surface-level injuries rapidly after a short while. Not only do you have elemental powers, but the bracelets also boost your physical abilities quite significantly, including regeneration.'

'No shit, is that why I feel like Superman? How do they even do that?'

'It's the gems on them we found on a rogue planet years ago, and we still cannot solve them. We know what they do; we cannot deny what they do. But we don't know how they do it, or why they do it. That's what's entralling about them. Something that seems like real magic. Something tangible that we can't provide any logical explanation for. Maybe someday, we will. If you are also curious, I recommend staying alive.'

Janice felt a wave of stress wash over her as she heard the last sentence. '...Right.'

'There is still time until the battle starts,' the guard informed. 'You can practice however you like in there for now. I'll let you know when your time is up.'

*Practice? But I don't even know how to do anything,* Janice nervously thought to herself, but did not say anything. She could already guess the kind of answer she would receive by now and was not too keen on asking for any more help, especially with how much more confident she was feeling than before. She could surely figure it out herself.

Janice nodded to the guard, turning her focus away from their cabin and towards the opposite side. She aimed her right hand towards the curved wall, palm open. *Projectile...* she recalled. *He said ‘projectile’ before.*

She tried her best to focus really hard on where she was aiming at while reaching her hand out just enough to let the gemstone enter the corner of her sight so that she also could keep track of it. The flames engulfed her hand once more, but nothing else of note happened as the glow of the red gemstone kept intensifying. Instinctively, as she noticed it creep towards the level which had burned her before, she let her hand loose, neither clenching it into a fist nor stretching it out to fully expose her palm. It seemed to do the trick as the flames disappeared and the glow began to dissipate. She thus noted the action as something to periodically repeat or adopt as a neutral stance in battle to keep herself from overheating.

*Baby steps*, she thought to herself, aiming once more. This time, she curled her fingers towards the target as well, noticing the direction of the flames change accordingly. *Okay... Now we’re getting somewhere.* She stretched her fingers again as quickly as possible, hoping that their snappy movement could make something happen, but nothing did. Moving her fingers just changed the direction of the flames, but did not shoot any of them. After letting the bracelet cool down once more, she decided to take a different approach.

This time, she thrust her hand forward while keeping her fingers curled towards the same point, and it worked. A ball of flame shot out from her palm and hit the wall, making no dent or leaving no mark on it. Janice did not mind the inability to assess how powerful her attack was, though. She had done it. Excitedly, she shot fireball after fireball, until the bracelet overheated. Grunting, she tried to keep her focus away from the pain, and tried to make the most out of the experience. *How many did I shoot?* she asked herself. *Five? Six? Let’s say it’s five to be safe. Five shots back-to-back without breaks will make it overheat, so I’ll keep it at a maximum of four if I have to shoot rapidly.*

‘Congratulations,’ the guard’s voice was heard inside the chamber, reminding Janice that he was still watching her. ‘You’ve gotten the hang of it quicker than about I’d say... five others that I’ve seen so far,’ he said mockingly. ‘But don’t worry about it; one of them had somehow made it to the second stage, I think. Though, I would hurry up if I were you. There’s about three minutes until we send you up there.’

Janice felt her confidence waver, and panic set in. *Shit.* She forced herself to calm down. *No. Come on, Janice. They’re having fun with you.* She thought about how understanding towards her and reluctant about his job the guard had seemed before. *It was all a game. It was all to have me let my guard down. They’re having fun with me... to teach me a lesson for disobeying them earlier. They all think what that nutjob was thinking. All of them...* She felt furious and clenched her fists, watching the elemental shells reappear and the gemstones glow. *It’s fine,* she took a deep breath as she let go, and the shells disappeared again. *Don’t let them get into your head from now on. Just focus on practicing.*

She aimed her left hand this time, and tried replicating the same motion with it as before. The shot sent an orb forward, glowing with the same misty blue hue as her hand did. It travelled slowly compared to the fireballs she had shot, and her consequent attempts did not seem to improve its speed much either. She stopped after 6 shots, noticing the intensity of the gemstone’s glow. *Is it stronger than it looks?* she thought. *Maybe I’m doing it wrong.*

She was intrigued by how the orb looked. The glow made it appear as something made of pure energy, but the sound it made whenever it hit the wall signaled otherwise. It sounded like a piece of glass shattering.

*It's probably made of tiny, glowing shards,* Janice thought. *It's like a snowball, likely much harder and colder though.* What it was made of had to be tougher and sharper than snow crystals, too. But no matter how she looked at it, it was just not enough. How could she possibly hit anyone with it when it was so slow?

She thought for a minute, and the sound of breaking glass gave her an idea. She raised her hand up this time, not necessarily aiming anywhere but as if she was holding something small in-between the tips of her fingers. *If shooting the shards like a fireball does that, maybe I can give them another shape.* She took a deep breath, and moved her hand down elegantly while slowly widening the gap between her fingers. It worked, but the spike was summoned a few inches away from the tips of her fingers rather than in-between them. Its tip looked much slimmer, and thus sharper, than what she was expecting. Before inspecting it further, she tried to catch the summoned object by reaching forward as soon as she noticed gravity begin to affect it. But as she moved her hand forward, the spike got pushed away from her, hitting the bottom of the wall and breaking into such small pieces that it seemed as if it got erased from existence. Janice could even swear it to be what happened rather than it shattering if not for the sound.

She analyzed how her motions shaped and moved the spike for a second, and quickly grasped how it all worked. After thinking for a moment, she reached forward, and using the same hand gestures and arm movements but towards herself and parallel to the ground this time, she summoned a spike horizontally with its sharp tip facing the wall. As soon as the object was summoned above her hand, she opened her palm towards the wall while thrusting her arm forward as quickly as she could. The spike shot forward with incredible speed, shattering as it hit the wall and creating the same sound of breaking glass as before, but much louder this time.

Janice exhaled heavily in shock of what she had just done, and looked at the exact point on the wall that she had shot. Although there was still no dent in it, the guard's voice reassured her that it was not because of her inadequacy. 'See, now you're getting it.'

She looked back at him in surprise. He seemed genuinely impressed as he praised her. 'I knew you had something within you. Some don't even realize the ice bracelets can do things like that before it's too late for them. Maybe you have what it takes; a wildcard win is always the most exciting.'

Janice was even more surprised this time by the guard's reaction. It suggested her previous speculations about him to be false yet again. She could see now that he most likely really had no strong feelings towards her or any other prisoner, he had just been stating his honest opinions for the most part. Perhaps some mildly dishonest ones here and there as well to make his job easier or less boring. It was not like he could have more to worry about than that in his position. Maybe a bet, if that was not too uncivilized for them.

A beeping noise was heard inside the chamber. 'It's time. Stay away from the walls,' the guard warned Janice in a serious tone.

A circular hole appeared on the ground, surrounding the chamber. Two half-cylindrical see-through panels emerged from the same half of the circle, one on its inner and one on its

outer rim. They slid away from each other and stopped at opposite ends, encapsulating the chamber completely.

‘Good luck out there,’ the guard said as the floor began rising.

‘Do you really mean that?’ Janice asked him one last question.

He answered after a short pause, just before he completely disappeared from her view as the chamber finally rose past the cabin’s window. ‘Yes.’

There was no way to tell if the chamber was even ascending anymore. It made no sound, and the completely stainless metal shaft in which it was travelling did not feature any patterns on its surface. By the speed at which the window had disappeared, though, Janice had an idea of the speed at which the chamber was rising. Recalling the length of the stairway down to the cells from the surface, she could tell that the trip was going to take a minute or two.

She sat down and began to contemplate nervously. Her mind was on the spike she had summoned earlier. Although it had felt like a powerful attack, and the guard had confirmed her impressions of it, it was still barely held together by what she guessed to be thousands of tiny shards and broke apart completely as soon as it hit a surface. *What’s its advantage if it can’t even pierce through flesh?* she asked herself. She wondered if it had a chance of piercing through anything if the surface was soft enough, breaking into its tinier pieces inside to possibly be even more deadly than it seemed.

*God, what am I even thinking?* She felt ashamed of herself for thinking so deeply about what would be the most effective way to kill others with what was at her disposal. It was disturbing to notice how quickly she had adopted the mindset of a killer once the conditions made it acceptable to kill. It was as if she had been secretly waiting for an opportunity for it all along.

She looked at the bracelets. It was them. She wanted to use them so much. It was hardly noticeable, but the gemstones had a very faint glow even when they were not being actively used. She kept staring at them, thinking about how alive she felt wearing them even without using them. She felt, no, she *knew* she was strong, energized, flexible, fearless...

Sunlight broke in. She could hear noises now, too, belonging to a cheering audience as she had expected. It was not long before she could see them as well. There had to be around 25 different species, some having just a few hundred members among the giant crowd while some had a few thousands. It was not too hard to estimate since they were not really scattered around the grandstands homogeneously. It was not like each species was sectioned strictly to its own area, either. There was some intermingling here and there, but if these were all members of this great Federation she kept hearing about, the first impression she got from this audience told her that it was perhaps not as unified as the guards had made it sound.

Even with most of the giant building being reserved for the audience, the arena itself was still large, and the ground interestingly seemed to be of dirt rather than a spotless, metallic floor that Janice had come to expect. The circular wall surrounding the arena ground on the other hand, upon which the grandstands were placed, seemed to be made by something like marble. It had the same white-and-gold color scheme as the exteriors of every other building she had seen so far. What made the difference, however, were the dust and bloodstains on it. Somehow, Janice did not feel shocked or intimidated by the sight.

Her attention shifted to the giant frameless screens floating around the arena. A pair of commentators appeared on them once the chamber finally stopped rising.

Janice could tell instantly that the commentators were of the same species as the residents of the planet. *Xeilons*, she remembered. She was finally able to get a good look at the details of their faces.

Both of the commentators' facial features looked human for the most part. The pupils of their eyes were black as they were supposed to, and the irises surrounding them were in the conventional iris colors that Janice was accustomed to as well. In-between each iris and its respective light-gray sclera, however, was an extra crescent-shaped golden layer. Each of these crescents had its inner rim, which faced the nose, span around half of the iris. The commentator on the left had blue irises while the one on the right had green ones.

Above the eyes, what seemingly served as eyebrows were not of hair, but dozens of tiny carapace plates of a green much darker than that of their skin, with the parts of the skin on which they were scattered over being lighter in color compared to the rest of their face. Their ears resembled butterfly wings in shape, each looking as if two auricles were welded together, the bottom one smaller than the top one. The last eye-catching feature to note were their intertwined horns. Two sets of dozens of small horns in an overlapping pattern, each set forming a braid which began from just behind the hairline and continued towards the back of the head. Hair did not grow in close proximity to these braids, making them divide the hairline into three parts. Interestingly, the coloration of these horns was different for each commentator. Janice wondered if it was random or a sexual dimorphism thing. The one on the left did look male while the one on the right looked female.

'Welcome back, galaxy!' the voice of the commentator on the left echoed, who indeed had a masculine voice. 'This is Caldo Frollin,'

'And this is Polley Thalvim,' the second commentator finished the other's sentence, and this one indeed sounded feminine.

'We are back and live at the arena,' Caldo continued, 'and there are minutes until the next battle starts but before that, let's quickly recap the last battle one last time for those who missed it, shall we Polley?'

'Yes Cal,' Polley answered and the screens shifted to what seemed to be the highlights of the previous battle.

*It's her*, Janice thought to herself as she saw the footage focus on the movements of a familiar prisoner. It was the girl from the opposite cell.

'The last battle left everyone in shock,' Polley continued, 'as no-one was expecting young Saleena Vetris, who seemed to have significant physical disadvantages against other warriors, to come out on top.'

*Saleena*, Janice noted in her mind.

'Well Polley, as we all know, physical disadvantages often prove to be trivial in the tournament as the choice and utilization of the bracelets are the real key factors,' Caldo continued in his irritating tone. 'Miss Vetris used her bracelets excellently as she survived using stealth until all of her opponents were down except for one, who at that point was so beaten up that Miss Vetris was able to emerge victorious quite easily. The lightning and illusion bracelets proved to be a deadly combination, and it was an excellent choice on Miss Vetris' part.'

Janice kept watching the highlights in interest, carefully noting the moves made by the fighters and their outcomes calmly as if she was not seeing real combat to death with magical attacks of all things for the first time, until she heard that last part of Caldo's sentence.

'Choice?' she let out in frustration. 'I didn't choose my bracelets!'

She turned her attention to the audience watching the highlights at the edge of their seats. She felt furious about how these bloodthirsty savages had the audacity to call her inferior. Not even the Xeilon spectators, which had seemed civilized before, were now showing a single ounce of restraint in their reactions. Those timid, curious eyes and the gentle, subtle movements had all left their place to loud, rabid excitement. For a moment, Janice entertained the thought of attacking these animals rather than the other prisoners, but quickly pushed it aside. She had to focus on surviving for now, and rebelling like that would be an express ticket to the very opposite.

The screens switched back to the commentators, and Caldo began speaking once more. 'Now, for one last time, let's take a look at the warriors that will be fighting in this particular battle. Would you like to start with the ladies, Polley?'

'Certainly. First, we have Nela Yurma, a young lady that has worked as a slave for the various high-class barons and landlords of her planet, Kzuth. She was dealt the wrong hand as an unfortunate victim of the brutal caste system of her planet, as she was treated as nothing more than a tradable item.'

Janice looked at the screen, which was now showing the chamber of one of the "warriors." She was a brightly yellow-skinned humanoid alien with multiple greenish-blue antennae-like appendages on her wide bald head. She had four black eyes, and gills on her throat. She resembled overall what Janice would imagine an anthropomorphic axolotl to look like, with some amount of artistic liberty and stylization exercised by its creator. Her outfit could best be described as a pile of rags, and she looked confused and scared despite her bracelets.

'Being mistreated, assaulted and publicly shamed has unfortunately been a part of her daily life since her childhood,' Polley continued. 'yet she was able to survive longer than most in her situation by playing her cards right. Patiently and carefully, she snuck around those who believed to own her and took from their fortunes what she truly deserved. But to what end? As if she wouldn't end up having to merely perpetuate another cycle of this cruelty even if she could finally set herself free one day. Such would be the fate of such a cruel, backwards society as hers. But she has to endure that no longer, as it is today that she will finally be truly free. It is here that her resolve will either let her rise among her adversaries and start her new life as a champion, or be remembered as a glorious warrior instead of a slave.'

The crowd began to applaud louder as the screens zoomed in on the girl's bracelets.

'It seems that she'll be entering this battle with the ice and illusion bracelets,' Caldo picked up after his coworker once more. 'Not the strongest combination for open combat, but quite efficient in a stealthy approach. It seems that inside this timid looking girl was a huntress lying in wait!'

*Ice and Illusion, huh?* Janice repeated in her head. She had just watched Saleena use an illusion bracelet too, which had let her become invisible from what she could tell. It was not hard to see how anyone, no matter how strong or weak, could win with that, especially since

the fight was free-for-all. She wondered how aware of her advantage and how proficient with that bracelet Nela was.

And then there was also the ice bracelet, which Janice was also equipped with. She was sure, no, she could *feel* that it still had much more to offer than what she had discovered during practice, but she was not sure whether it was her or the girl that had discovered more thus far. Before she could contemplate any further, a drone suddenly flew in front of her chamber and startled her. She saw her own face on the screens as a few other drones flew in as well, showing her from different angles.

‘Next, we have Janice Lane,’ Polley began once more. ‘Another young lady that has unfortunately been dealt the wrong hand. She was sent to a school from a young age that—’

Janice’s every thought and emotion shifted drastically in an instant as the confident and calculating fighter ready for whatever was coming left its place to an afraid and scarred girl, trying not to break down at the face of her past. She covered her ears and looked down, away from the screens. This was not the time.

*Why do they tell these things to everyone?* she wondered. What difference did it make for everyone to know their stories, anyway?

She began to talk aloud as simply covering her ears was not enough by itself to block the voice echoing inside the whole arena. ‘Come on, Janice. You have to fight for your life. Get it out of your head, and focus. Don’t let it distract you. Focus. Focus. Focus...’

In morbid curiosity, she lifted her head up to look at the screens for a moment, and took a chance upon seeing a rendition of earth on the screens, assuming that they were now talking about the planet rather than her.

‘...But the corrupt society of planet Earth never gave an answer to her cries,’ Polley was saying as Janice stopped covering her ears. ‘It goes without saying that her planet is still home to one of the most selfish and ignorant species of the galaxy, doomed to consume themselves into extinction quite soon from what we can estimate.’

Janice took a deep breath and lowered her hands from her ears. They were done with the story.

‘But she won’t have to face the consequences of her people’s irresponsible actions any longer,’ Polley continued enthusiastically. ‘She will finally have a chance to change her fate and join our society to make a fresh new start. One without fear, shame, or torn clothes!’

Janice rolled her eyes at yet another jab towards her jeans. It was not as entertaining the second time. *Thank God they didn’t catch me in heels, at least.* She bitterly thought about how much the jeans alone were probably going to be a disadvantage to her while fighting.

‘It seems that she’ll be entering this battle with the fire and ice bracelets,’ Caldo picked up once more. ‘A classic choice; not the most creative, but certainly reliable.’

The drones flew away to another chamber as he finished his sentence, and the next prisoner appeared on the screens soon after.

‘Next, we have Kairo Tesseli from Croussia, which as you all probably know is a frozen planet home to an incredible range of aquatic species that live deep beneath the thick ice sheets that cover the planet’s oceans entirely,’ Caldo began introducing the next prisoner and their origins.

Janice began inspecting the new alien at the screens. It was a human-sized crustacean creature with a deep blue shell. Its face resembled that of a freshwater crab, although it was

placed deeper into its shell. Its eyes glowed yellow and its body looked similar to a lobster's. It stood tall and straight on its 6 legs, which had different lengths to support this unnatural posture. It looked incredibly calm and not a single emotion could be read from its face, though that could also simply be the result of its rigid facial structure not allowing it to show any. But none of these features were as attention-grabbing as the two giant pincers, which made Janice gulp as she thought about how the creature probably would not even need a pair of bracelets to slay her effortlessly. She instinctively felt around her throat to ensure herself that she was not actually beheaded yet.

'Despite the difficulties in advancing as a civilization underwater, Tesseli's species evolved to become far more intelligent than other species and quickly rose to the top of the food chain,' Caldo continued. 'They formed communities, religions and ideologies. But these basic stepping stones of civilization were not enough for Tesseli. He believed there was more to life than worshipping gods and following orders. He challenged the ideas of his society, claiming that there was more to see beyond the boundaries of their living space, beyond that great ceiling of ice and deep into the unknown abyss surrounding them. Unsurprisingly, he was labeled a heretic that rebelled against the gods' rules and was cast out of his community. Just what you would expect from such a primitive culture! But that's exactly why we brought him here; so that he may know that he was no heretic, and that there was indeed more beyond what his life consisted of. Now, he will either survive to see the rest of what this enormous galaxy has to offer, or he will pass away in peace, knowing that he was right all along.'

'It seems that he will be using the ice and lightning bracelets,' Polley picked up after him as the screens zoomed in on Tesseli's bracelets. 'A very powerful combination, and he can be more aggressive with them since he already has a thick shell to protect him.'

*How is that fair?* Janice thought to herself nervously as the drones flew towards the last chamber.

'And finally, we have Archeon from Zephros,' Caldo announced in excitement.

Janice saw an intimidating, devilish creature on the screens. It was giant, and barely fit its chamber. Janice guessed that it had to be around 12 to 13 feet tall. Its dark red body resembled that of a centaur's with marks of past scars all over it. There were sharp spikes going down from its head through its entire spine to the tip of its tail, which seemed to consist only of these spikes. There were also similar spiky structures on the joints of its limbs such as its knees and elbows. Its lower legs and front arms seemed to be covered by a much harder, bony structure compared to the rest of its body minus the spikes. Its black veins were much more prominent around these areas. Pure rage radiated from its face, and its head was crowned with 6 horns that curved around the sides of its face and thrusted in front of it. It truly looked like a demon.

'Jesus,' Janice muttered.

'Even without previous knowledge, you can easily tell how much of a barbaric planet Zephros is just by looking at Archeon's scars,' Caldo continued. 'But do not misjudge him by his deathly glare. He was a royal knight of his kingdom—'

'What?! How is *that* fair?' Janice exclaimed in stress.

'—until he got tired of the endless wars on his planet. He blamed the king for his provocations, holding him responsible for the suffering of his people. However, his rebellion was overwhelmed by the king's loyalists, and he was exiled for the rest of his life. So, we

gave him a chance to put his experience to good use and fight for what he has always longed for: peace. Whether in life or in death, he will finally have the peace he kept wishing for since he was born.'

Janice kept staring in disbelief at this towering embodiment of rage still being shown on the screens. 'Peaceful life, huh? I'm not too sure about that,' she muttered nervously.

'It seems that he will be using the fire and lightning bracelets,' Polley picked up after her coworker. 'Powerful to be sure, but very limited in terms of defensive options. We will see if this aggressive choice works out for Archeon.'

*Wish I didn't need to see it,* Janice nervously thought to herself.

'And now, we let King Vrollus make the usual announcements,' Caldo said. 'We will be right back after his speech.'

A new Xeilon appeared on the screens, modestly dressed for a king and more showing the age of a prince. The audience, without even being prompted to do so, almost completely silenced themselves. The young man spoke very calmly and without much emotion in his voice. He sounded neutral yet invested. There was this somewhat provocative undertone in his voice as if he was inviting them to make things interesting for him.

'Welcome, warriors. You have been selected to have the privilege to fight in the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Power Brace Tournament. Only one of you will make it out of this fight alive, but do not worry. Despite your primitive and uncivilized origins, all of you will become legends in the eyes of the entire Galactic Federation. That makes all the highly intelligent and advanced species of our galaxy as far as we know. Not only that, but as you've already been informed about, one of you will be able to live amongst us if they get to win the tournament. That is a reward that will make each and every soul in this galaxy envious of you. Not only will you have experienced the true power of the bracelets not once, not twice, but three times; you will be granted a great fortune and the rights of every citizen that is a member of the Galactic Federation. A real champion; a walking legend that has ascended from the lowest places of the galaxy to an elite member of a truly advanced society. Now, embrace the power that has been given to you, use it, and fight for your destiny.'

Even though she was not buying any of his nonsense, the way this man finished his speech still felt shivers down Janice's spine as the audience's cheers returned even louder than before. The young king surely knew how to establish his presence.

The screens switched to a bird's eye view of the entire arena, and then began switching periodically to live footage of each contestant from different angles. The commentators' voices returned.

'And with that, we start the countdown for the 5<sup>th</sup> battle today,' Caldo announced excitedly. 'Let the best warrior win!'

Both of the commentators and everyone in the audience began counting down in unison.

'10, 9, 8...'

Janice took a deep breath, and did not bother preventing herself from thinking loudly while trying to keep herself calm.

'Okay. Okay, okay, okay. Come on Janice. You can do this. Just focus...'

'...7, 6, 5...'

*Big guy first? No. He would shred me into pieces if I attacked him first. He needs to wear out. The other one has armor, and I have no idea how to get through it. He's also the furthest*

*away from me, so I'll worry about him later. He's probably thinking the same about me, anyway...*

‘...4, 3, 2...’

*What about the girl? She's probably the least dangerous, but could still probably do a number on me if she knows how to do ice spikes too. Do I want to be stuck in an arena with the other two after that, all worn out? Besides, who says they'll happily fight each other while I'm dealing with her? No. I can't make a decision without seeing theirs, first. I'll just keep myself safe and watch what they do.*

‘...1, fight!’

*Ok, here we go.* As soon as her chamber allowed her to do so, Janice rushed out and around it to hide behind its two half-cylindrical panels that were now over each other again. From behind the safety of the panels that she knew were practically unbreakable, she began to observe.

As the commentators had guessed, Archeon was highly aggressive. His target was Tesseli. It made sense. Archeon was likely aware that he was the strongest here, and it would be the most logical thing to get rid of the runner-up first while he had all of his strength. Janice felt relieved that she was not his target yet. She watched the flurry of projectiles between the two beasts accompanied by Archeon’s battle cries as he rushed towards Tesseli without hesitation.

She turned her eyes to the other side of the arena. *Okay, that leaves me with...* Where was she?

‘Shit...’ Fear set itself in Janice as she bashed herself for being so stupid. She turned around and looked everywhere in panic, carefully trying to spot any footprints appearing on the dirt, or something similar to that nature. Instead, it was a grunt of effort that finally gave away her enemy’s location.

Janice managed to react faster than she knew she could, instinctively covering her face with her arms as soon as she saw a sharp, ice-borne object thrusting towards her face from the direction of the grunt. She felt no pain, but only a force against where her arms met as she heard a loud clang. Her bracelets had blocked the attack, and she could see the gems glowing as if they had heated up, despite her not using any powers at all. Pretty much everything had a cost when it came to these bracelets then, apparently. She wondered if the reactive armor would have been strong enough to protect her by itself. She hoped she would not have to find that out.

Nela looked at her in surprise. She had likely thought that there would be no way for her attack to miss. Janice decided to push her further towards the edge after seeing that reaction. She took a defensive stance, ready to block again with her bracelets while leaning back, keeping her torso as far away from danger as possible.

‘You thought it would be that easy?’ she taunted Nela to bait an attack, thinking that she could maybe wear her out quickly. Even this singular attack had seemingly left the alien girl breathing heavily.

As she finally made a move again, Janice readied herself, but it was a move backwards that Nela had made. Janice fully pushed her own back against the panels after the girl disappeared right in front of her eyes, knowing it would at least leave only a semicircular area again that she had to watch.

She carefully thought about the first attack while waiting for another one. The blade had extended from the bracelet itself, over the back of Nela's right hand which was made into a fist. *Maybe I'll try it later.* She had no time to focus on learning a new move right now.

Instead, she shifted her focus to the other half of what her enemy's attack had comprised of: invisibility. Why had Nela become visible again right as she was attacking? Was it because she had come too close, or because she had used another bracelet's power? It was not possible to say for sure, but one thing that Janice did know for sure was that, again, everything had a cost when it came to using the bracelets. The more Nela kept waiting for the right opportunity, her bracelets had to be heating up more and more. *She can't stay invisible forever...*

Indeed, the amphibian girl appeared once more, but not anywhere near where Janice was expecting. She was lucky to able to catch where Nela was in the corner of her eye as the girl was almost finished with an ice spike.

Janice dodged as quickly as she could, hearing the projectile shatter right beside her head against the panels. Her heart skipped a few beats, but it did not keep her from thinking. She had to keep thinking to survive; there was no room for panic. Nela disappeared again, but Janice knew more now. If the girl still had to break her invisibility before attacking, it could not be related to distance. She had likely become visible the moment she had begun creating that spike. It had to be tied to using another power, or had it? *Maybe she just ran out of time,* Janice thought. *But then why would she not keep attacking while invisible? Attacking must be what breaks it.*

Another attack. A projectile again, but from a closer distance this time. Janice was regretting her earlier decision now. Nela was being more and more precise with her attacks, learning new things from each encounter just as Janice did. *I should've acted more scared,* Janice thought. *Maybe she would've gotten confident.*

Upon her next appearance, Nela attempted a few melee attacks back-to-back. Janice kept so much focus on those attacks that she did not even register how shocking her own reflexes and precision were. But blocking each of the four attacks in a row so skillfully still did not prevent her from being hurt. Both combatants shouted in pain and momentarily fell on their knees in exhaustion. Both of their ice bracelets had overheated, but with both of them on their knees, Janice now had the advantage. Not spending a moment to think, she attacked with her right bracelet, but not as she had been practicing before. In a moment of frustration and hurry, she went for a punch rather than a fireball, which Nela easily dodged. Once the motion of Janice's right hook ended, however, a cyclone of fire formed around her forearm and shot towards where her right fist was now facing. Hitting the marble wall of the arena, it caused a small explosion, spreading fire around the blast zone.

Both combatants looked at the blast zone in shock, and then at each other. Nela quickly got back up in panic to run away as fast as she could. She then quickly threw herself onto the ground to dodge the next attack she knew to be coming. Janice was still not thinking as she attacked. She was now fascinated with the strength of her newfound power, trying to land an explosive attack on her enemy as she was sure it would make short work of her. It was not that hard to execute, either. She just had to punch the air towards where she wanted to shoot.

It was not long before Nela dodged yet another shot and went invisible once more, while Janice suffered more pain due to another overheat, this time of her fire bracelet. The pain was

sobering, however, allowing her to recollect her thoughts. *Three*, she noted. *Three in a row made me overheat*. It made sense as it was a much more powerful attack than a small fireball.

She screamed as an ice spike hit her right shoulder. The pain was immense, but there was not a scratch on her shoulder, at least not yet. It was not dislocated, either. That reactive armor lived up to the hype, apparently. She turned around and looked, but Nela was nowhere to be found. The girl had executed everything perfectly on this attempt. Now terrified of her enemy having the upper hand, Janice thought of what would have happened if Nela had aimed for her head, where there was no armor. She probably had, but missed.

Janice knew that she was going to recover from the pain quickly thanks to the bracelets. But Nela also had to know that, which meant that she had to attack again soon while she still had the advantage.

Janice backed up against the panels once more, bracing for another attack. It was tiring now to anticipate the next attack each time. She wanted to give up. *The least dangerous, huh, Janice?* she mocked herself bitterly, but then realized something. *She would be without her invisibility.*

That was it. Janice had to stop playing the part of the prey, and strike back at her enemy with everything. Nela had only one bracelet that she could use for attacks, and they had the same armor, so she would be at a disadvantage if Janice could prevent her from going invisible the next time. *I can take a few hits, as long as it's not my face.*

She did exactly that. The next time she saw Nela preparing an ice spike, Janice shielded her face with the bracelets, trying to keep her bearings in the corners of her eyes as she rushed towards her enemy at full speed. Nela paused for a moment in shock as Janice took two ice spikes, one at her chest and the other at her right forearm, but still kept charging. That momentary hesitation was all that she needed.

Nela threw herself onto the ground to dodge the incoming fire cyclone, barely making it out of the blast zone before it was covered in flames. Before she could get up, Janice tackled her, but it was now time for the cracks in her plan to show. There was pain all over her torso and right arm, and Nela quickly turned the tables around as they both rolled on the ground. She got on top of Janice, summoning an ice blade to finish her. In panic, Janice thoughtlessly swiped at her face with her good arm. Somehow, once more, her sheer desperation gave her a new tool, which saved her life.

Nela fell onto the ground, screaming and writhing in pain. She was covering her face with both hands, soaked with orange blood. More was leaking from in-between her fingers onto the ground. Shocked and confused, Janice looked at her left hand and saw small, extremely sharp ice-spikes on the tips of her fingers, extending her hand into a deadly claw. Her fingers were covered in the same orange blood, which was running down her hand onto her forearm. She stood up and looked back at Nela, who was still twitching and turning on the ground while screaming. She had to have been cut deep.

Janice felt sorry for the poor girl, a complete stranger that had not even shared a single word with her. She was a stranger that she had no real hatred towards; a stranger that could have even been a close friend in a different timeline. But it was too late for any regret as she would be in her place now, or perhaps even a worse place if she had not done what she had done. Showing mercy would also be a death sentence at this point, as there would be no room for hesitation for either of them the next time, if the bracelets could somehow even heal this.

It was going to be one of them from the beginning, anyway. Those were the rules. Yet thinking of all of this, Janice could still not bring herself to finish the job. She could not bring herself to finish this crying, screaming girl, brought to this place to die for no reason but to entertain, just like her. Luckily, she did not need to do it herself.

Being alerted by the familiar battle cry, Janice turned around to see Archeon, with his left arm right in the middle of a familiar motion. As soon as she saw a glimpse of the fire cyclone form around it, she lunged away to dodge the blast, feeling the impact behind her. After a moment of hesitation, she looked back, expecting the worst. The worst, she got.

She turned her head away from Nela's corpse instantly, whose head was now no more than orange pulp and shards of what was once a skull. She tried not letting the gory image bury itself into her mind for even a second, but to no avail. The only thing she could think of now was how she had tried to hit her with the same projectile moments ago, and had aimed for the head as well. It was not like she was any better than Archeon. Unlike her, however, he was not carrying a singular sign of remorse on his face right now. Janice understood why. An experienced warrior with who knows how many kills under his belt, given a pair of emotion-numbing magical weapons. He was consciously allowing himself to be as ruthless as necessary in order to get his revenge from his captors, maybe even thinking it was necessary to prevent further suffering down the line. But if this was how it was going to be, then Janice was going to show him that two could play that game. Even if her chances were slimmer, she did not want that revenge any less than he did.

'COME ON, YOU GIANT BASTARD!' she yelled as she made a rush towards Nela's chamber. The taunt did not seem to shift the demonic centaur's mood, which could be due to his fighting experience that kept him unprovoked and calculating, or due to there being no more room left for even more rage and bloodthirst. Regardless, he was as precise as he could be with his attacks. Although the distance between them gave Janice enough time to dodge the incoming fire cyclones even with their blast radius, the lightning bolts Archeon shot from his other hand were much more precise. Distance meant nothing to them as they connected instantly to where they were aimed at, behaving exactly the same as lightning bolts normally did. Managing to dodge the first one still, the idea of getting hit by one terrified Janice because of that.

She could not dodge the second bolt. She had guessed that Archeon would have a knack for quickly recalculating his aim after the first shot missed, and thus saw it coming, but nothing could have prepared her for the aftermath. The pain was excruciating and felt as if every single nerve ending was struck at once. It made Janice want to pass out from it, and she logically had to as well. The shock she had felt before being abducted, which had made her faint, could not even compare to this. She locked in place, unable to move while just a couple of steps away from the safety of Nela's chamber. Luckily for her, Archeon was quite the heavy-hitter, only using the more powerful attacks his bracelets had to offer. He had to use them sparingly as a result, and thus the time gaps between the cyclones and the lightning bolts he shot towards Janice allowed her to stay alive despite being stopped at her tracks. Archeon could have fired them more rapidly, but he already believed that Janice was in the palm of his hand, and it was not worth it to take any risks at this point. He was not going to let himself overheat when he was so close to victory. He knew better.

Pushing her will to its absolute limits, Janice barely managed carry herself to Nela's chamber once she could move again, only to collapse behind it. Breathing heavier than she knew was even humanly possible, she watched Archeon approach the chamber. Part of her still wanted to pass out even from the largely-dissipated pain. She was tired in every way; both her mind and her body wanted to give up. But the gems on her bracelets were still glowing, and she was staring into that glow as if she was being called to it, as if the glow was trying to communicate something. Archeon became a blur in the background while the glow spread over everything. Janice even expected to hear a voice speak to her, but there was none. There was no need for one. The glow itself was enough to tell her to get back up.

*They better give me a lightning bracelet in the second round, or I call bullshit,* she thought as the pain finally disappeared completely. She stood up again, and began analyzing her enemy from behind the safety of the panels as he stood still right on the other side, likely running his own analysis.

He had wounds on his torso that seemed as if they were open not too long ago, far too fresh to belong to the same era he had received any of the other scars on his body. Tesseli had to have scratched him good before dying, and while the deceased crustacean had his own sharp claws by his side to help him, the scars being on the torso still meant at the very least that the reactive armor could be penetrated as the guard had implied earlier, if the wearer were to get too cocky.

*The spikes aren't sharp enough,* Janice thought as she recalled the ones she had gotten hit by earlier. She began trying to think of a way to pierce the beast's armor. They were now circling around the panels in unison with each other, staring each other down while she kept thinking. *Maybe the claws could, or that blade... The blade did have more reach than the claws, unless maybe I could...* She made a quick and brief swiping notion and looked at her hand. The spikes were back at the tips of her fingers, but shorter than before. 'Huh...' After another, wider swipe to experiment, she grasped the rules upon seeing longer spikes as a result. *Maybe I could... fuck it. I don't have many other options anyway. Might as well try. Worst case scenario, I come up with something else while we circle the next chamber.*

Right as she and Archeon were at the opposite ends of the semicircle that the panels made, Janice began running back towards her own chamber. She was not using the shortest path, however. Instead, she was following the angle of the arena wall to draw a giant arc from Nela's chamber to hers while holding out her left arm and executing the swiping motion extremely slowly. Of course, as one does when they are out of reasonable strategies for taking down a 13-feet demonic centaur equipped with elemental weapons and futuristic armor made of nanomachines in a life-or-death situation, what she was hoping to achieve was to summon an awesome claw right as she completed the swiping motion that would be so gigantic and sharp that even his reactive armor would not save Archeon from being slashed to bits.

She kept sending fire cyclones at her enemy's direction to keep him at bay as she ran. The cyclones were also useful for disrupting his aim, as he had to turn his focus away from Janice and towards the cyclone each time to be able to dodge.

*Come on. If this doesn't work, I will have made him angrier for nothing.*

But Archeon was clearly fed up with waiting for what he believed to be his inevitable triumph. Finally losing his temper, he picked up his speed and sent one attack after the other

until his bracelets both overheated. But the pain did not seem to even move a muscle on his face. He kept charging.

Janice's whole body was aching when she found herself on the ground, thrown to it by a fire cyclone blast. It felt as if time slowed down as she watched Archeon charging at her in full speed. The nearest chamber was impossible to reach in time, and although Archeon's bracelets were both overheated, so was Janice's fire bracelet. She had panicked after seeing him pick up speed with the clear intent of trampling her.

The crowd, who had been constantly loud since the very beginning of the battle, was now mostly silent. They were eagerly anticipating the final confrontation, or the execution for that matter. Even Janice knew that this was the end for her, and accepted it. But it was not the peaceful kind of acceptance this time. She had already gone through that, after all. She had already reflected on her life and braced for the unknown beyond death. This one was rather a begrudging and unwilling acceptance, by someone that had done their best to fight back and survive. Alas, it had not been enough, and Janice was enraged because of it. *After all that... it wasn't enough? Dammit. Fuck it. Fuck it all to hell.*

She stood up one last time despite her wounds and faced Archeon, stretching her left arm as far back as possible. *If I have to go, then I'll at least give you something you'll remember.* With the intent of at least scarring her killer before being trampled, she made a huge swiping motion towards the ground and then all the way forward and upward with her arm that she had been stretching back, hoping for claws sharp and long enough to slash the beast at least a tiny bit before the hooves would knock her down and crush her. However, he never arrived at the spot the same way Janice had expected.

As her hand moved upwards, a thick wall of ice emerged in front of her right as Archeon was about to reach her, pushing against the beast's underbelly with unstoppable force and launching the giant centaur towards the audience right behind her. A loud thud was heard before she looked up to see the beast about to fall on top of her, and threw herself out of the way just in time. Another loud thud came from right behind her, shaking the ground as a large dust cloud swallowed her whole.

The audience was now completely silent, as opposed to the gently murmuring crowd they had become the moment Archeon had begun his final charge, waiting for the inevitable final blow after which they would all cheer in unison. But now, everyone kept looking at the scene in disbelief as the weak, wounded little human managed to stand up once more next to the fallen beast, reduced to a giant trophy for her to claim.

Janice knew this was no triumph, though. She took a glance at the wall of ice she had summoned unintentionally, which then shattered itself to countless invisible shards as she had come to expect, as if it had never been there at all. Once again, it was sheer luck that had saved her at the end, but it did not matter. She was more than happy to take it.

Archeon was barely conscious on the ground right in front of her feet, each breath of his heavy enough to lift up a small cloud of dust in front of his face, only to enter his lungs shortly after, making him cough more and more blood. Although Janice did still feel for and respect him, there was no hesitation about finishing the job this time. She took a deep breath, and dug a claw into her fallen enemy's neck as deep as she could while screaming to announce her cathartic victory. A victory that was over not only her terrifyingly strong foe,

but over those that had brought her here as well. She was going to survive, and if that meant spilling some blood, *so be it*.

Archeon let out a haunting cry of pain that echoed throughout the entire arena and sobered him up to witness his prey turned predator. The two foes exchanged a meaningful look, as if they were paying respects and wishing good luck to each other, before the faintest glow that was still present on Archeon's bracelets finally disappeared as Janice pulled her claw back with all of her force, letting out another scream. Dark red blood gushed out from Archeon's neck, covering the ground and Janice in itself as veins and tendons ripped apart.

Janice took a few steps back and sat down, looking at the corpse in silence while taking heavy breaths. It was over. She did not know what else to even think at this point. She did not know how to feel or what to even process in her mind. There was nothing left to think. She had been through, felt through, and thought through so much in such a short time. She just wanted to shut down like an overclocked machine. She wanted to collapse and dream about her life before she was brought here, with no memory of this place or of what it had done to her. She had battled as if she had done it all before, knowing what to be ready for and when to be ready for it, but without the experience that would actually make that possible. That was the real, dark magic of these bracelets. They had changed her programming; turned her into an efficient, cold, brutal machine.

A sudden loud cheer from the crowd snapped her out of it, making her remember why she had been refusing to shut down all along. She looked at the barbaric audience, wishing she could shut them up. The screens continued to show her bloodstained face as the familiar, irritating voices of the commentators began praising her.

'I can't believe it! That was absolutely outstanding!' Caldo yelled in excitement. 'I am certain that this was not an outcome anyone was expecting! I don't know about you ladies and gentlemen, but I say that is one dangerous lady!'

King Vrollus appeared on the screens momentarily, being the first and only spectator to show no signs of being impressed. 'The winner is Janice Lane from Earth.'

Janice felt no sense of pride as the crowd began applauding even more ecstatically than before and chanting her name loudly. She just wanted their celebratory nonsense to end so that she could get out of this cursed arena.

Thankfully, it did not take as long as she had expected for them to quiet down a bit. As a monolith emerged from the middle of the arena, they began talking among each other in excitement rather than cheering.

'Please return your bracelets,' the familiar robotic voice echoed as Janice approached this monolith. Two holes had appeared on its surface as the request was made.

Janice hesitated. A terrible feeling took hold of her; a sense of approaching disaster that would emerge within her the moment she would let go of her bracelets. She looked at the ever-so-faintly glowing gems on them, looking the same as usual but feeling different. It was as if they were asking her to not let go. Although she was acutely aware of their influence on her by now, she had never felt it so strongly.

What if she disobeyed the order? What were they going to do? Send in their guards to apprehend her? Could she not take them with all of her newfound powers? What were they going to do that Archeon could not anyway, with their fancy spears?

No, Janice thought. *I have to.* The way the bracelets were calling to her only made her sure now that she had to get rid of them, not because she was being ordered to but for her own sake. She took a deep breath and reached inside the holes. Right as she felt the strong metallic grip on her forearms, she felt the release of another grip from not only her arms, but also from her mind.

She felt a sudden weakness and fell on her knees as a surge of emotions hit her like a truck. Tears began running down her cheeks before she could even process all of it. The robotic voice echoed again as the grip on her forearms released. ‘Thank you. Please remove your hands from the holes.’

Janice obeyed, and looked at her hands as the monolith began retracting. The flow of the dried-bloodstains cut off at where the bracelets had been. Those areas were completely clean. Not a single mark. She first began sobbing, and then crying while still looking at them. She did not even take a moment to glance at anywhere else as two guards grabbed her arms and lifted her up. She did not hear a single word they said or a single other praise the commentators spat out as she was being dragged out of the arena. She sensed nothing about the present. Everything besides her hands were blurry, and every voice was muffled. She could only think about everything that had happened during the battle.

She wanted to tell herself that it was not her who had just done all of that, but it had never felt as if she was not the one in control of her actions, not even for a single moment, during the entirety of that battle. In fact, she had never felt more in control. Almost everything had been a result of her own thoughts; her own plans and calculations. Her own actions had led to her victory; she was sure of it. But that could not be true. Seeing those bloodstains on the walls and feeling nothing as if it was a familiar sight, carefully planning which of her opponents to go after first, shredding that alien’s neck in rage... *That was all me*, Janice thought while still sobbing. *I did that all consciously. But... I couldn’t. I wouldn’t.*

The thoughts became cyclical, the same scenes playing in her head over and over until she was pushed into yet another small chamber. The guards raised their voices to snap her back to reality. ‘HEY! We’re talking to you! Are you deaf or something?’

‘Wh-what?’

‘We’ve told you to get undressed and lift your arms up for the scanner. You’re not expecting us to let you keep that armor, do you?’

‘O-oh. Right...’ Janice managed to let out in-between her sobs. She casually undressed without an objection this time. She could not care less at this point about whether the guards were licking their lips while watching her or not. She just wanted to be let go and left alone. She felt too exhausted to fight even verbally anymore. Soon enough, she realized that there would be little point to do so anyway.

Only after attempting to undress did she realize her clothes had already been destroyed enough to go from jeans and a shirt to ripped jorts and an extra small crop top. All the voyeurs among the audience and guards had probably already gotten their fair share of excitement out of that anyway. Even what was left of the clothes were covered in burn marks, but none of these bothered Janice at all. They at least indicated that some things were still normal. It would be more disturbing if her clothes somehow turned out unscathed. At least her underwear still was, thanks to the armor over it.

‘Don’t worry,’ one of the guards said as he saw her staring at the destroyed clothes. ‘You’ll be able to get a new batch back at your cell.’

‘Yeah, thanks...’ Janice’s sobbing was over now, yet she still had to force out her responses for trivial topics. Even paying attention to them took too much energy out of what was left.

She looked at the barely scathed veil of nanoscales as the machine finished peeling it off her body. Only a couple of tiny tears here and there were present, likely the marks of the ice shards Nela had shot. The lightning bolt and the fire cyclone she was hit by had also probably damaged a bunch of scales all over as the veil looked a bit thinner than before, or did it? She was not even sure, and the lack of knowledge made her anxious as she realized a whole new reason for why her escape from this place would be impossible.

*All of that... and barely any damage. There’s no way one of these is not stretched over each and every one of these guards here...* Even with bracelets, there would be no way for her to get out of here. Her only chance was winning the tournament, which meant that she had to fight for her life again in that arena... *two more times...* The thought made her dizzy as she left the chamber. Her vision blurred and the guards’ voices got muffled again. Thankfully, at last, they dragged her all the way back into her cell.

‘Well, congratulations Human girl; you surprised us all. Keep it up and maybe you’ll be able to live through all this. Now that would be really unexpected. Think of all the wealth and fame you would get. Heh.’

Janice stared back at them in disbelief without saying anything. Her eyes and face were still red from crying earlier. *Wealth and fame? That’s what they have to say? After all the... I...* She could not come up with words even in her mind to describe the abhorrence of what she was hearing.

‘I guess you’re still bummed out about having to kill all those guys, huh?’ the same guard asked. ‘Why do you care? They all tried to do the same to you, didn’t they?’

‘You forced them to,’ Janice hissed.

‘Yeah, but do you think they would be crying now?’ the guard challenged her. ‘The girl, maybe. But I doubt the other guys would give a shit. It’s a cruel galaxy, sweetheart.’

Janice looked down, saying nothing. She could not think of anything to say, even though it felt as if she could find a million things to answer with if she tried. But she was tired. Too tired to think. Too tired to speak.

‘I guess you should be exhausted,’ the guard said. ‘I would get some rest first if I were you. There is a shower in the bathroom that you can use,’ he pointed at the door in the corner of the room, ‘though you might’ve already figured that out. There’s also a clothes refresher next to it. A slot on the wall. You can put all your clothes in there before you enter the shower, and you’ll get a brand-new batch by the time you get out. All fixed and clean. You can also follow the tournament from this screen,’ he pointed at the screen on the wall. ‘Any questions? No? Good. Have fun.’

The guards left and the door panel slid back, imprisoning Janice in her dull and empty room once more. She sat on her bed and thought bitterly about that last sentence. ‘*Have fun.*’ She scoffed. As she looked outside of her cell in melancholy, she noticed that girl in the opposite cell giving her a side-look. She looked worried.

Janice looked back at her. She wanted to say something, but then changed her mind and walked up to the screen instead. There were only a power button and volume controls, so it did not take her long to figure out how to use it. She sat back on her bed and began following the tournament. The commentators were talking about the battle she had just won.

'...and with Janice Lane as the 8<sup>th</sup> winner, we are now a halfway through the first day,' Caldo was saying. 'There are seven battles left for today, which will be held after the two-hour midday break—'

'—so that you could sit back, relax and grab your lunch as we go back and analyze the first eight battles of this day,' Polley finished her coworker's sentence.

*8 battles done and 7 left for this day, Janice thought to herself. 15 battles for this day, and there was supposed to be... 30. 30 battles in the first stage, so there's going to be 15 more tomorrow, probably. That means the second stage will start the day after tomorrow.* She was calculating to figure out how much time she had to find a way to escape. Despite how impossible it seemed, she had to try somehow. In any case, it was better than just sitting here and waiting for the next battle. If the first one had left her in this shape, the next one was likely going to be her end considering that she was going to fight other first stage victors. It was definitely going to push her limits even further at the very least, and she had no intention of going through more of this nightmare.

But how was she even going to get back to Earth even if she did miraculously find a way to break out? *I can worry about that later*, she thought, and turned her attention back to the screen.

'We've already had our discussion about the last battle just now, so let's go backwards and talk about the 7<sup>th</sup> battle next,' Caldo said. 'It was another unexpected outcome, with young Saleena Vetris from Leph as the victor.'

Janice looked at the alien girl inside the opposite cell again, who was now sitting at her bed, staring at the floor. It looked like she was deep in her own thoughts. *Saleena*, Janice repeated the name in her mind.

Hours passed as she kept watching, trying to gather as much information about all the winners as she could just in case, but also grew more and more tired in the process. It was towards the evening of the same day when she finally realized that she had made no progress in finding out a way to escape, that she remembered very little about the first stage winners since her attention was all over the place, that she had yet to clean herself up, and that she was not going to get anything done without getting some sleep. She got up and headed for the shower, burying herself even deeper in her thoughts as crystal clear water in perfect temperature and pressure washed over her without even the need of an input. At the same time, unbeknownst to her, something peculiar was happening in another cell not too far away.

'...It is the 15<sup>th</sup> and final battle of the day, and—' The screen was abruptly turned off by the mysterious inhabitant of the cell, who then calmly reached for the bathroom door. He grabbed the two pills he had put next to the sink and put one of them inside his ear. He then pushed a tiny button on the other one while holding it in front of his mouth like a microphone.

'This is Z. Come in, Q. I'm reaching you for our scheduled call.'

'Knock knock.' a heavily-filtered voice said.

'Sorry, C-2 only.' the mysterious prisoner answered.

‘Try to make it less obvious in the next battle,’ the voice scolded him immediately. ‘They barely scratched your face.’

‘Did you even see all the crazy shit in the previous battles? That Human girl looked like a joke compared to all of her opponents. No one was expecting her to win that. If they suspect anyone, it will be her or the Suian chick.’

‘Do they intimidate you?’

‘Why would they? You think they can make it to the final stage?’

‘You’re the one who said they’re unpredictable.’

‘Everyone says they’re unpredictable, but they still lack the experience to make it to the final stage.’

‘Everyone lacks the experience to do that.’

‘Everyone but me. The second stage will be much harder for everyone. The chicks had beginner’s luck on their side. They will be facing much stronger opponents this time.’

‘Then what is there to worry about?’

‘Nothing, why? Do I sound worried?’

‘No, but I know you are.’

The prisoner scoffed. ‘Sure you do.’

‘In any case, we’ll see if you’re right or not during the second stage. But more importantly than the “chicks,” how are you holding up?’

‘Correct me if I’m wrong, but you started this conversation with “they barely scratched you.”’

‘I know; I mean mentally.’

The prisoner hesitated to give an answer, and stayed silent long enough for his accomplice to push further for once.

‘You sound unaffected, but I can tell that it’s an act.’

‘Look, this was my idea, right?’ the prisoner finally cracked. ‘I’m going through with it, no matter what. I knew what I was getting myself into; I can handle it just fine. Leave the contestants to me, and just make sure that everything else is ready. We only have one shot at this.’

‘I know. I know it better than anyone else,’ the voice answered. Even through the filter, it was possible to catch the bitterness in it.

The prisoner sighed in realization of his mistake. ‘Right, sorry.’

‘You know I won’t let all of this be for nothing, right?’

‘Yeah, of course I know.’

‘Good. Then I’ll contact you again after the second battle. Q, out.’

The next day passed as Janice did nothing but take her pills, sit on her bed and watch the tournament on the screen. Although she had spent so much time to look for a way out and think of a plan, she had been able to come up with absolutely nothing, and so she had decided at the end that it would be more useful for her to keep watching and gathering information. Although, she was not sure if that was even helping her either. What if the guards were going to give them all different bracelets for the next stage? Or what if her opponents themselves were smart enough, and changed their tactics for the second battle to surprise her because they knew that she would have watched?

Despite the possible uselessness of it, however, she was still sure that this was the best thing she could do for the time being. Although at one point, she also attempted to reach out to Saleena. Catching the girl's glance during the "midday break" of the day for just a moment, Janice got up as Saleena immediately turned her eyes back to her screen. Janice stood against her own cell's door, trying to catch the girl's attention again. She tried waving and moving, but Saleena kept her eyes locked on her screen. Janice knew that she was avoiding her deliberately.

*She can probably notice what's going on in my cell in the corner of her eye, but she won't just look at this way, unless...* Janice shook her head at the absolute ridiculousness of her idea for a moment, but then quickly realized that this was no time to hold back because of embarrassment. She had to do something so ridiculous and outlandish that Saleena would not be able to prevent herself from looking at her.

She entered the bathroom for a minute, and deliberately waited in position for another couple of minutes thinking that Saleena would relax a bit in the meantime, so that she would not be too tensed up to lower her guard or too focused on ignoring her.

After a deep breath, Janice rushed out of the bathroom with the back of her shirt stretched on top of her head, and her bra also on top of her head. She pushed her body against her cell's door while sticking her tongue out, making a ridiculous face. It took a couple of seconds, but Saleena finally glanced at her direction and noticed what was happening. Instead of turning away instantly once more, she kept looking at Janice this time in utter confusion.

*It worked! Now's my chance.* Janice immediately pulled herself away from the door, pulled her shirt back from her head along with her bra and looked at Saleena dead in the eye as she said her name. 'Saleena.' She stressed every syllable and exaggerated the movement of her mouth so that the girl could clearly understand what she was saying. 'Sa-lee-na.' *Come on. That's your name, right?*

But Saleena did not answer. Instead, she turned her head away very slowly, as if she wanted to emphasize how weird Janice had just come off as.

'No, no, no, no, no! Please! Goddammit!' Janice hit the panel in frustration. She then sighed, and sat back in front of her own screen in defeat, watching the rest of the day's broadcast until she went to sleep in fear of tomorrow.

## ARENA LAYOUT

FEDERATION>CULTURE>EVENTSANDPRACTICES>COMPETITIVE>POWERBRACETOURNAMENT

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CLEARANCE LEVEL: 2

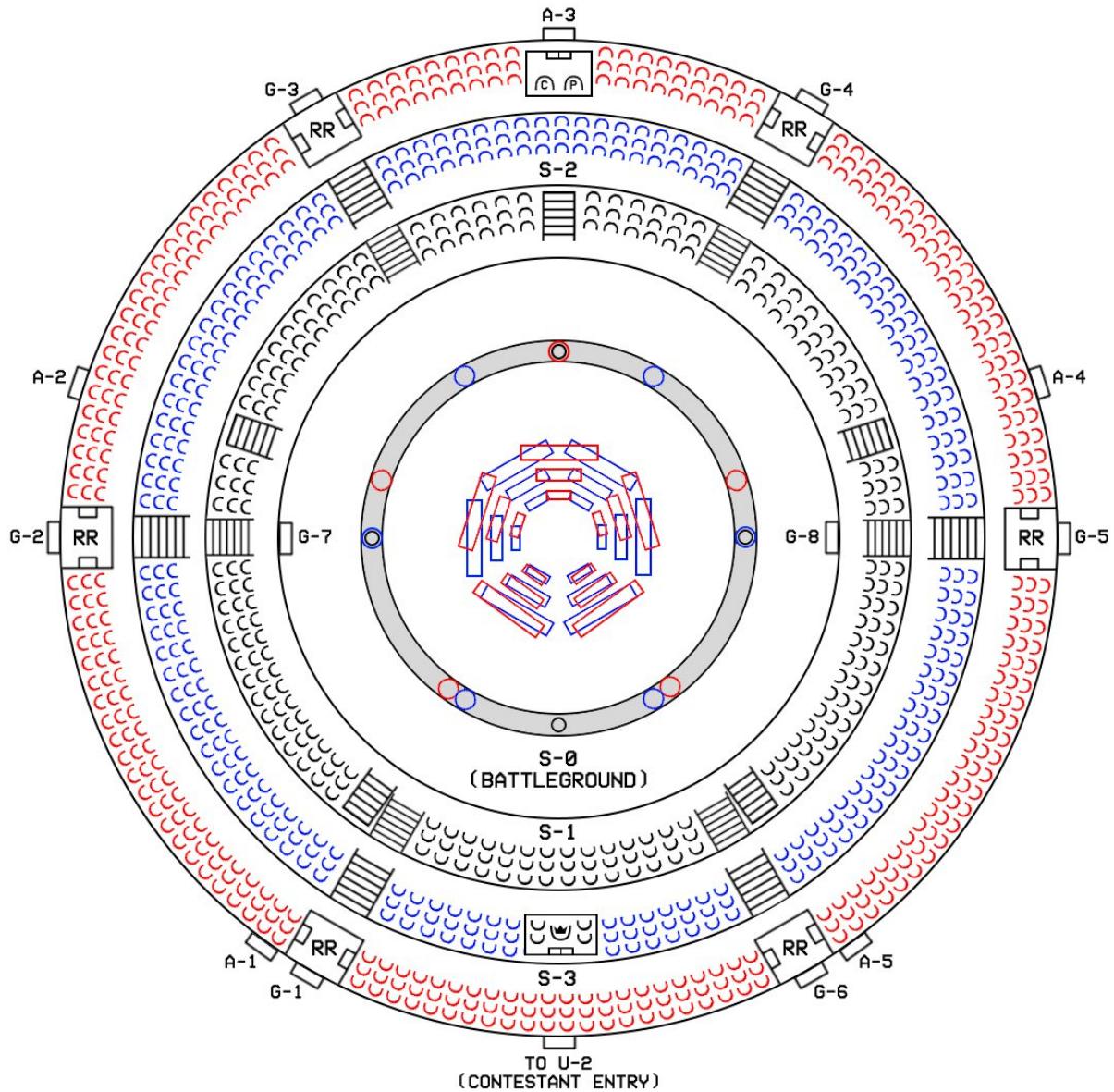
ID: k4r5r3A56v4-tr0

NAMING CONVENTIONS OF BUILDING LEVELS: The underground levels of the arena are denoted by U-1 to U-N, where U-1 is the closest level to the surface and U-N is the deepest of N underground levels. The surface levels are denoted by S-0 to S-N, where S-0 is the ground level and S-N, of N levels above S-0, denotes the topmost level.

NAMING CONVENTIONS OF GATES: Gates A-1 to A-5 stand for the audience entryways. These gates are for the usage of the audience (including royalty and VIPs), the grandstand patrol guards and the commentators. Gates G-1 to G-8 stand for the guard entryways. These gates are for the usage of all arena guards, maintenance staff, medical staff and champion service staff. G-1, G-2, G-3, G-4, G-5 and G-6 are gates for going into and out of the arena, while G-7 and G-8 are for escorting battle victors and carrying dead contestants out of the battleground and into the building. The unnamed gate at the very opposite side of the arena from A-3 is strictly for the entry, and only entry, of the contestants and their escorting guards. The champion and their escorts are to use one of the guard entryways when leaving after the tournament ends. Under emergency circumstances, or by orders of the Federal Council or the Xeila Royalty, any person(s) can be let in and out of any of the gates.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION: This file is aimed to provide surface-level information on the layout of the arena building with no specific focus on any of its individual components and their related statistics. Information such as seat count, pricing of seats, cell count and measurements, restroom stall counts, medical bay patient capacity, and the individual layouts of any rooms or cells are omitted from this file. To provide such information, there are files that are each dedicated to a certain section or asset of the arena, and they can easily be found through the navigation screen by searching the related asset or section, or through interacting with the simplified layout displays below. Alternatively, you may choose to navigate to the "Detailed Arena Information" file under the same category for a detailed full list of such information.

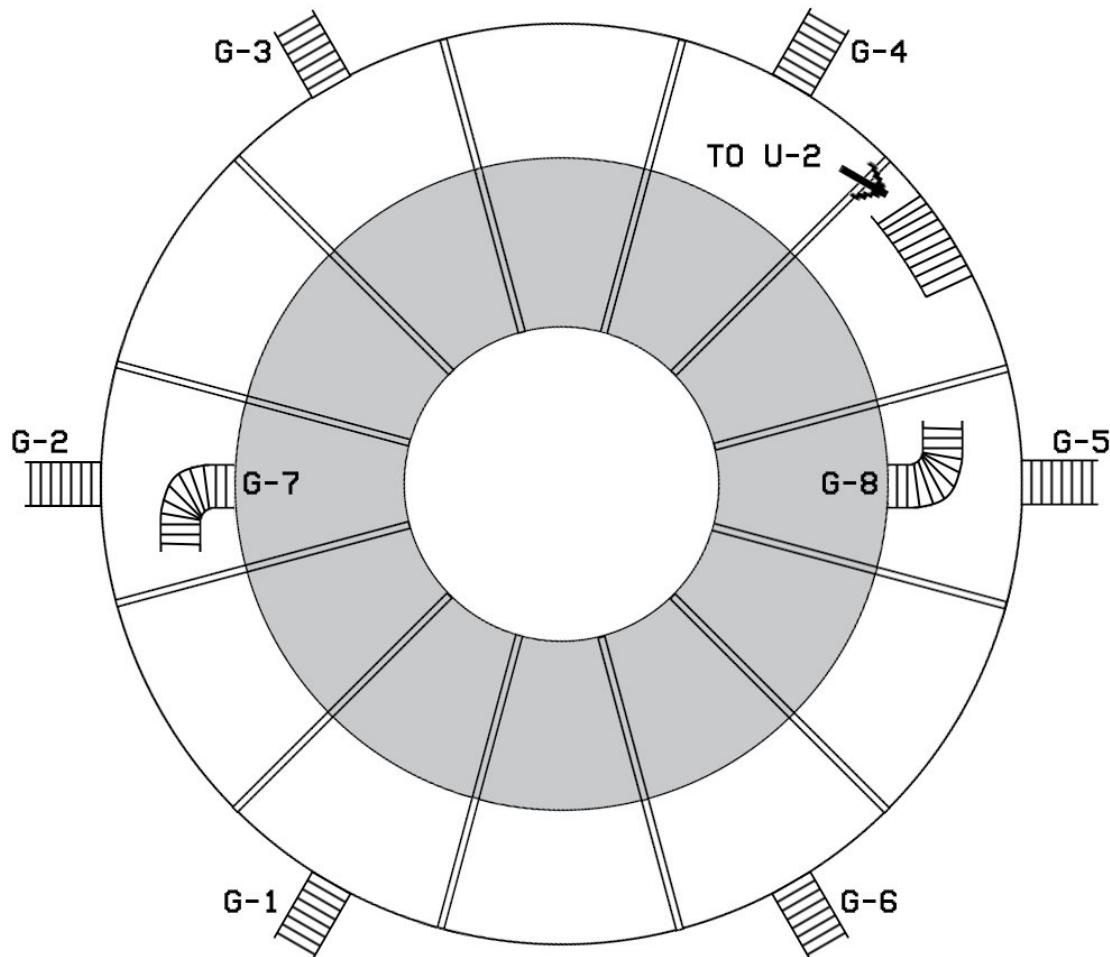
SURFACE LEVELS (S-0, S-1, S-2, S-3) LAYOUT:



- RR: Restrooms.
- CCC: Audience seats at S-1. The number of seats on the display is not accurate to the real number of seats.
- CCC: Audience seats at S-2. The number of seats on the display is not accurate to the real number of seats.
- CCC: Audience seats at S-3. The number of seats on the display is not accurate to the real number of seats.
- : Royal seat. The surrounding seats inside the royal booth are VIP seats, and the number of VIP seats on the display is not accurate to the real number of VIP seats. A certain number of these seats is always reserved for the other members of the royal family if there are any, and the rest of them, if reserved, are always reserved by the current monarch themselves for individuals of their choosing.
- : Commentator seats.

- O: Positions of the battle chambers at the first stage of the tournament.
- O: Positions of the battle chambers at the second stage of the tournament.
- O: Positions of the battle chambers at the third (final) stage of the tournament.
- □: Positions of the objects for contestants to manipulate using telekinesis during the second stage.
- □: Positions of the objects for contestants to manipulate using telekinesis during the third (final) stage.
- No objects are placed on the arena during the first stage as no telekinesis or master bracelets are given to any of the contestants.
- All gates are located at level S-0, the royal booth is located at S-2, and the restrooms and commentator booth are located at S-3.
- The staircases that are aligned with the restrooms on S-3 are for passage between S-1, S-2 and S-3. The rest of the staircases on S-1 each connect to the A gate it is aligned with, leading the audience from it to S-1 and vice versa.
- The gray ring in the middle of the arena represents the top of the shaft that the chambers of the contestants travel through, bringing them to the battleground. It cannot be seen from above the ground.
- The in-arena broadcast screens continuously move at a slow and constant pace via the rails on the superglass dome above the battleground. They are thus not shown on the layout along with the drones that capture the live footage since they are dynamic and have no set positions even at the start and end of the rounds or in-between them.

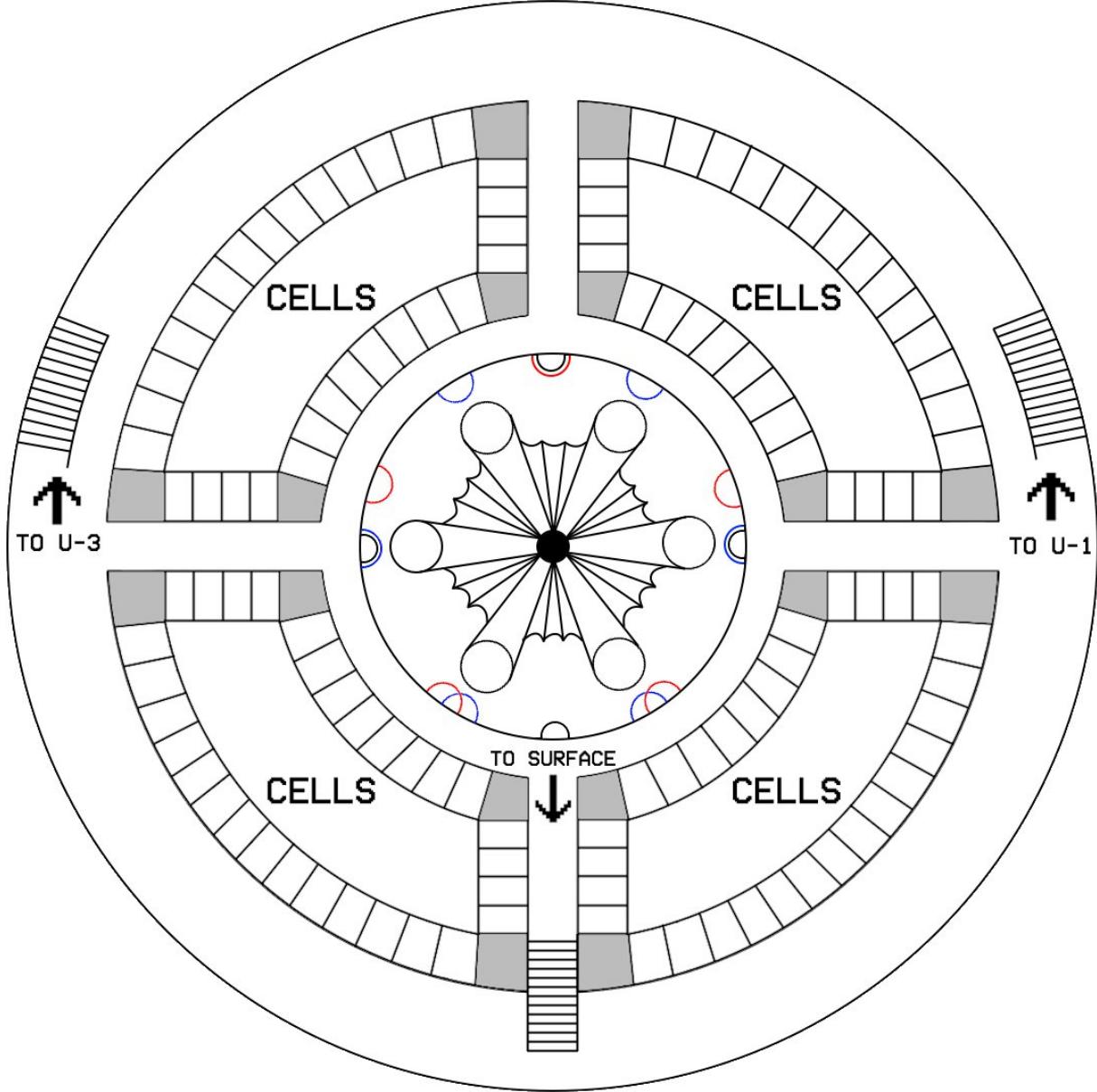
UNDERGROUND LEVEL 1 (U-1) LAYOUT:



- Usually acting as a mere pathway between the battleground and U-2, this level is built merely for passage and for emergencies.
- Each of the twelve seals seen on the layout that together separate the level into twelve equally-sized spaces is made of superglass. During emergencies, they emerge from the outer wall of the corridor. Each seal can be activated or deactivated individually depending on the situation, just as all of the G gates can.
- Each gap between the seals can individually be gassed to neutralize the targets caught in that gap. The gas is tested against all PC-2, PG-2 and PC-3 species and proven to be non-lethal against all of them, but it can put any of them to sleep.
- The shaft in-which the battle chambers travel is angled outwards, so that they end up further away from each other on the battleground than they are on U-2. As a result, the

inner wall of U-1 is angled inwards, making the ceiling's width much less than that of the floor at this level. The gray area on the layout represents this angle. The seals are thus shaped accordingly:

UNDERGROUND LEVEL 2 (U-2) LAYOUT:

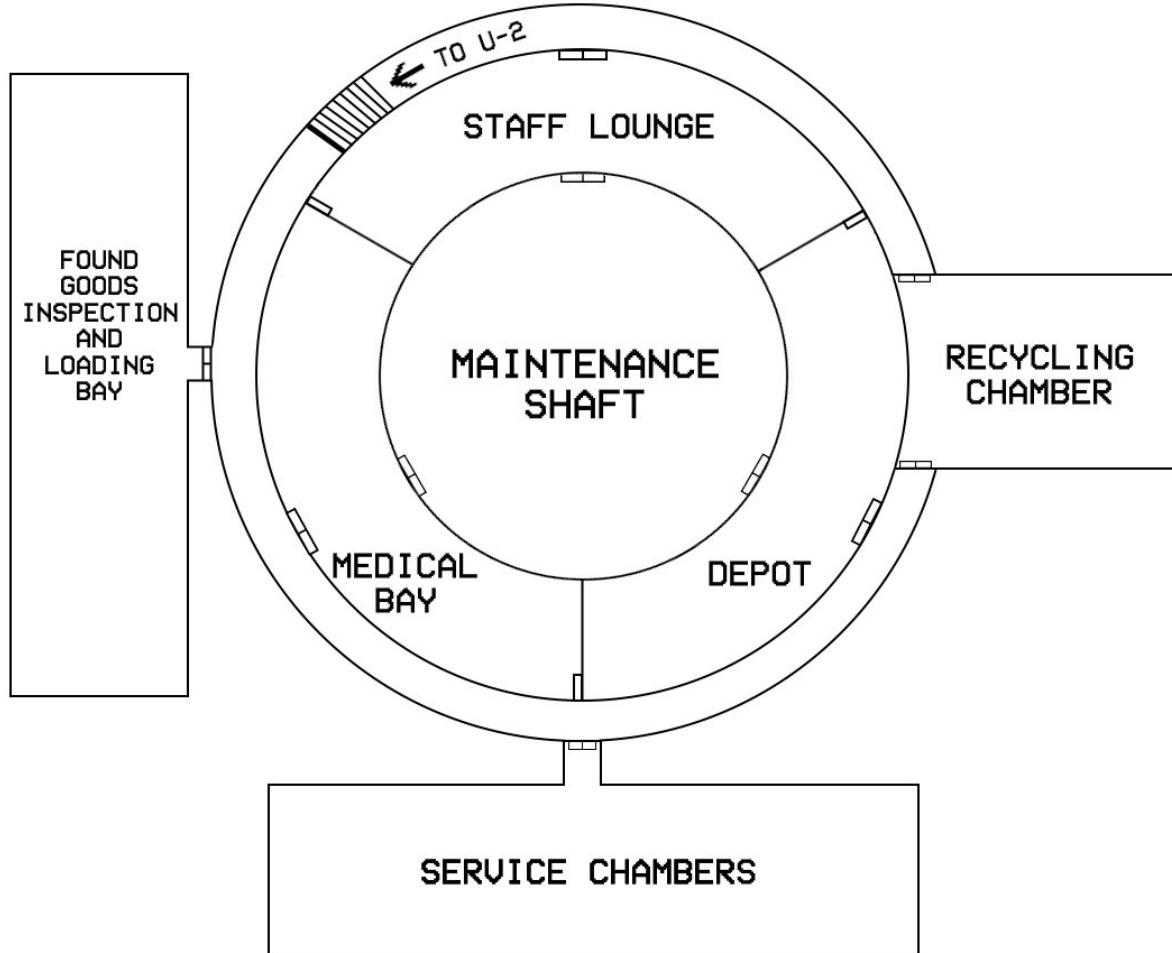


- U-2 contains holding cells for the contestants and entry points to the battle chambers, which serve as practice rooms until they ascend to the arena.
- The six battle chambers are separated by aerogel bellows, shielded by metallic micro-scales. The bellows squeeze and expand in order to align the needed chambers with the entrances for each stage. Thus, two of the chambers are unused and inaccessible during the first stage, no chambers are unused or inaccessible during the second

stage, and one chamber is unused and inaccessible during the third (final) stage.

- : Stage 1 entry points to the battle chambers.
- : Stage 2 entry points to the battle chambers.
- : Stage 3 entry points to the battle chambers.

#### UNDERGROUND LEVEL 3 (U-3) LAYOUT:



- The Recycling Chamber is where the bracelets are melted down and their gems are recycled. It is also where the dead contestants are disposed of. Any unconscious contestants brought here after a battle that are found to be still alive are euthanized before being disposed of.
- The Service Chambers are where the winner of the tournament is brought after the final stage. Here, they rest for the night before the award ceremony. They are tended to by specially chosen staff for all of their needs until the next morning when they are dressed and brought out for the ceremony.
- The Found Goods Inspection and Loading Bay is where the belongings of the contestants are kept and inspected. All but the winner's items are then either claimed by the royal family, sent to Thalsaar to be auctioned, or sent to Celestol for research.

- The maintenance shaft is to be used when any machinery that operates within the arena, such as the battle chambers' scanners or elevator mechanisms, fails. The maintenance hatch in the depot is the one that is used under regular conditions, since the maintenance drones are kept inside the depot and deployed from this room. In the event that the maintenance drones malfunction or show insufficiency in solving the problem, maintenance staff may use any of the doors that lead to the maintenance shaft.
- The walls of the staff lounge, medical bay and depot that are shared with the maintenance shaft are all windowed. This is so that any of the staff inside one of these rooms or on the circular corridor may observe the maintenance shaft. This is so that any immediately visible malfunction inside the maintenance shaft or any problem that the maintenance staff working inside the shaft runs into may be noticed quickly and easily.

### **III – Telekinesis and Illusion**

Janice woke up to the now-familiar sound of the alarm. Wearily, she washed her face in the bathroom, then approached the capsule and took her pills. She took a glance at the opposite cell, but there was no sign of Saleena. Nervously, she approached the screen, but hesitated to turn it on. *What if she... No, she can do it. I know she can.*

As usual, Caldo's irritating voice had to be the first thing Janice heard as she turned the screen on. 'What an incredible outcome! Be honest with me Polley, were you expecting her to win this battle?'

*It's a she! Come on, please be her...*

'I don't think anyone was expecting this, Cal,' Polley continued. 'We've all been thinking that Miss Vetris had beginner's luck on her side, but I think it's now clear to all of us that she has more.'

'YES! YES! SHE MADE IT!' Janice yelled and jumped in excitement. Speak of the devil, she noticed Saleena being escorted to her cell right afterwards. Ecstatically, she rushed to the panels to see her, but her excitement faded away as she saw the girl crying again, with more bruises than before as well. As soon as the guards threw her in her cell, she rushed to the bathroom without even looking back.

*Of course...* Janice felt stupid for expecting to see anything else. The same pair of guards that dropped off Saleena turned to her this time, and one of them opened the door. 'You're up next. Come on.'

Following them silently, Janice's heart began pounding out of her chest. Here she was again, on the way to another battle to kill or be killed. She felt dizzy. She tried to think in order to prevent herself from fainting or having a panic attack. She had to calm down, but her thoughts dwelled on Saleena before anything even remotely comforting or distracting enough. *She looked way worse than before. Did she have to kill more people? How many people were supposed to fight in the second stage? Thirty, divided into 5 matches of 6 fighters each... Fuck...*

Janice did not even notice the absence of the gates to her previous practice chamber at the end of the corridor. She kept thinking about Saleena as they turned right. *At least she made it, but will I make it? If I actually make it, that means... that means I'm going to have to fight her.*

The stress only became more unbearable with that thought, so much so that she wanted to vomit. On her left, the familiar sight of a small practice chamber greeted her as a gate lifted. Only then did she realize that the chambers had moved from their previous spots.

'Get in,' one of the guards ordered.

Janice had no intention of disobeying at this point. *The bracelets*, she thought. *They'll help.* She hated herself for wanting to wear them again, but it was not like she had another way out of her situation.

'You know the procedure, right?' one of the guards asked her from inside the familiar cabin beyond a window. 'Sergeant Ule told me not to look at you while you get undressed. I wasn't curious anyway, so that's fine in my book. Just tell me when you're ready to get scanned.' He turned his back to Janice with his hand ready on the scanner switch.

She was surprised at the guard's immediate compliance this time without her even saying a word, but she sure as hell was not going to question it. At this point, the sooner she got the bracelets, the better it was for her. 'I'm ready,' she said after quickly undressing.

The guard flipped the switch, and as usual, the scanner announced the steps of the procedure as they were completed. 'Reactive armor bound.'

'Tell me when you're dressed and we'll move on to the bracelets,' the guard ordered in a bored voice.

'I'm dressed,' Janice answered after a short while.

The guard pushed another button on the console, and a familiar pair of perfectly circular holes opened up on the wall.

Janice approached them right away, but still hesitated for a second before reaching inside despite how much she wanted, no, desired to. Her heart began pounding again as she took deep breaths while looking at the holes.

'We don't have the whole day here,' the guard snapped her out of it. She had to remind herself that the more she hesitated, the more time she lost before the battle. She had to train. With this reminder, she took one last deep breath, and reached into the holes.

Everyone stayed silent while the robotic voice announced the steps as they were completed, ending the procedure with the relieving message that Janice was waiting for: 'Power bracelets equipped and ready to use.'

The cold metal grip had become soothing to feel now. Janice felt amazing as her worries began to disappear, leaving their place to confidence and hyper-awareness. She was powerful again, feeling alive and ready. *I could get used to this*, she thought as she looked at her new weapons. This time, there was a golden bracelet with a purple gemstone on her left arm, and a silver bracelet with a white gemstone on her right arm.

'The one on your left arm is a telekinesis bracelet,' the guard began to explain, 'and the one on your right arm is an illusion bracelet.'

Janice paused for a moment as her hairs stood up. 'Illusion...' She barely managed to say it calmly instead of yelling it in excitement, gently caressing around the elegant white gem on the bracelet.

'Sure is,' the guard confirmed. 'Try it.'

Janice jogged her memory to remember what it was that Nela had done to become invisible. She observed the bracelet as she replicated what she remembered. The white gem's faint glow increased a bit as she raised her hand to the same level as her face, palm facing backwards. As she closed her fist, the edges of her vision became somewhat blurry, and everything looked duller in color. She could tell there was a change, but not whether she had really become invisible or not. She could still see her hand.

'Did it work?' she asked. 'Am I invisible?'

'I don't know,' one of the guards answered mockingly. 'What do you think?'

With yet another sign that this pair of guards was not going to be as cooperative with her as the previous one, Janice accepted that at least for now, she had to convince herself that it must have worked. Looking back at her bracelet, she noticed the gem's glow intensifying, and momentarily thought about how bizarre the concept of an invisible glow was. It was not like she had time to dwell on how the bracelets worked though, so she quickly relaxed her fist before the bracelet could overheat. Her vision turned back to normal, and the gem's glow

began to fade. *Simple as that, huh?* But she was not done experimenting. She wanted to inspect a peculiarity she had noticed right before lifting her cloak. After waiting for the bracelet to cool down completely, she became invisible again, and there it was.

‘Hey!’ she called out to the guards while still invisible. ‘What is this circle around me?’ It was faint, but not enough to make it difficult to keep track of. It had to be important, but the guards still seemed to prefer messing with her instead of being helpful.

‘What circle? Are you sure you’re not just seeing things?’ one of them said in a smug tone, clearly lying.

Janice could not see a meaningful reason for their act at all besides simple immaturity and perhaps believing in the generic “worthless sub-creature” rhetoric. The former probably amplified the latter. Regardless, she already had an idea about the circle without their help, and decided to test it.

Staying invisible, she approached the window enough to have the two guards enter within the circle. They were startled, and each took a step back as Janice suddenly appeared right outside of their window. She noticed the disappearance of her cloak as well. Her vision went back to normal the moment the guards entered the circle, despite the fact she was still clenching her right fist raised next to her head, and the gem was still glowing brighter and brighter as time went on. ‘Huh.’ She stepped back before the bracelet could overheat, and noticed how she became invisible again as soon as the guards were out of the circle. She then quickly relaxed her fist and took a mental note as the bracelet began to cool down. *So it does have a distance limit. Good to know.*

‘Hey!’ one of the guards yelled. ‘Don’t forget we’re your superiors here. If you keep using those powers to show us attitude, then—’

‘Then you will have shown some worse attitude to your own superiors, right?’ Janice challenged them confidently. ‘I’m sure they wouldn’t be too happy about you executing a first stage winner just because she acted up a little, would they?’

‘No, but they also wouldn’t care too much if we didn’t give you anything to test out your other bracelet with.’

Confused for a moment, Janice turned her full attention to the golden bracelet on her other arm for the first time, remembering what the guard had called it earlier. ‘*Telekinesis bracelet.*’ She turned back to him in surprise. She had thought that these two might be just a couple of dumb pushovers trying to put up a tough front based on their reactions earlier, but that was clearly not the case. *Shit. Shouldn’t have pushed my luck that far, I guess.*

‘Alright. Not a bad point,’ she admitted. Realizing that the guards had just turned the table in their favor, Janice decided to sweet-talk a bit, and then negotiate. ‘Though I’m sure you two devoted gentlemen must have a sense of duty, or else you wouldn’t be recruited for this job out of all the possible candidates in your army, right? I’m sure that if I train enough here to show it on the arena, it will also be the sign of a job very well done by the two of you, will it not?’

The two guards looked at each other knowingly and then turned back to Janice, looking impressed. ‘Not a bad point,’ the one of them said with a smirk while the other one reached for a button, also with the same smirk.

*Are we flirting now?* Janice wondered for a second. *Did I sound flirty saying all that?* She did not dwell on it too much. What was important was that whatever she had just pulled off

seemed to do the trick. With the push of the button, an opening revealed itself on the wall a second after, containing a large cube with rounded corners. It was time to focus on training again.

‘Thank you,’ Janice said kindly, and reached out with her left arm towards the cube, holding her hand out to it and curling her fingers as if she was grabbing it. The cube flew towards her in great speed, coming to a full stop just inches away from her fingers. She exhaled in relief, and felt grateful to herself for not panicking and letting go midway.

*Easy enough*, she thought while looking at the floating cube right in front of her palm. She felt a small amount of pride for figuring it out so quickly. She was starting to realize that the execution of some powers made sense in a certain way, and thus the movements were easy to figure out and memorize.

She observed the gem’s glow for a bit, assessing how long it was going to take for it to overheat. Then, relaxing her hand again, she dropped the cube and the bracelet began to cool down. Again, it was simple enough, but how was pulling an object towards herself and then dropping it possibly going to help her? There had to be a way to throw the object too, and luckily, Janice had already figured out what to do.

After waiting for the bracelet to cool down completely, she moved away from the cube and grabbed it again, this time making a throwing motion afterwards and stretching out her fingers as if she was releasing the object at the end of it. It worked. The object stayed right in front of her palm throughout the whole motion and releasing it at the end made it carry its momentum.

She realized that the idea behind these telekinesis powers were quite simple. She could still feel as if she was holding something, and throwing it was not much different than how she would do it without magical powers, either. The only real difference was that she could grab things from further away, and that they felt much lighter than they actually were.

‘Are you done?’ one of the guards’ asked, grabbing Janice’s attention from the cube she had thrown. ‘You’ll be up there soon. You’re required to return the cube before doing so, or else we’ll have some real reasons to disqualify you.’

*Sheesh.* ‘Alright, sure. I’m done, I guess,’ Janice replied, putting the cube back in its compartment soon after. ‘But... are these really all these bracelets can do?’

‘They’re called telekinesis and illusion,’ the guard replied condescendingly, as if he wanted to imply that a baby could figure the answer to that question out. ‘What else did you expect?’

‘I mean, going invisible is not really the same as creating an illusion.’ She was going to follow it up with an inquiry as to whether or not it also had a decoy ability or something, but the guard interrupted her mockingly before she could continue, a new sting in his tone making it clear that he was beginning to grow tired of her.

‘Why not? You’re creating the illusion that you’re not where you actually are, aren’t you?’

‘You know that’s not what I—’

‘Listen,’ he cut her off in frustration. ‘You’re really pushing your luck now as a C-2.’

‘As a what?’ she asked as if she was hearing that term for the first time. She still wanted to know what it exactly meant, but neither of the guards acknowledged her question. Instead,

prompted by a familiar beeping sound inside the chamber, one of them just pressed a few buttons on the console.

Once again, a circular hole appeared on the ground and surrounded the chamber. The half-cylindrical see-through panels emerged once more, and slid to the opposite ends of the chamber to encapsulate it.

Janice kept begging for tips in panic as the chamber began rising. ‘Wait! How am I supposed to even attack anyone with these? Can I lift up and throw other people, or is it just objects? Hey, WAIT!’ But the grumpy guards had already left their cabin, and its window was already out of sight now.

‘Dammit,’ Janice muttered, waiting in silence while looking at her bracelets. *Alright, I'll have to figure out something, I guess. Maybe I can even discover a few more things in the arena like yesterday.*

Sunlight broke in as Janice began hearing the chants of the audience. She noticed right away that something about the arena was different this time, and luckily in her favor. Rectangular, metallic objects with rounded corners, reminiscent of the cube that Janice had been practicing with, were put orderly towards the middle of the arena, evenly distributed as six batches for the six warriors. These objects were of various sizes, and Janice immediately thought about how she could use some of the bigger ones as portable cover. It would surely beat running from chamber to chamber like yesterday, and even if she had to utilize the chambers themselves like before, there were now six of them instead of four. She felt confident and ready, but the improvement in her mood did not last for long as Caldo once again showed his repulsive face on the screens.

‘And now, it’s time for the second battle of the second stage!’ he began assaulting her ears. ‘As usual of course, this battle will be commentated by us, your lovely hosts, Caldo Frollin...’

‘...and Polley Thalvim.’

‘Now, as we’ve said before, since this is of course only the second stage with 30 of our warriors still battling it out, it might be difficult for our audience to keep themselves familiar with each of the winners of the first stage. And thus, we are once again going to give a quick rundown of our fighters’ backgrounds to jog your memories. Would you like to start, Polley?’

‘Certainly,’ Polley confirmed as the screens switched to one of the chambers. It contained a calm humanoid alien, sitting on the ground and staring in the distance with a blank expression. His gray skin was rough and scaly like that of a reptile. Some darker, natural plating was present on some of his key joints that were visible, such as his right shoulder. There were no whites in his eyes. A blue iris encapsulated the left pupil which was narrow and as pitch black as the rest of the eye. His right eye was the same, except for the iris being green.

‘First, we have Zat R’al Yoom from Tillinis,’ Polley began introducing this first alien. ‘Used to be an extremely skilled swordsman, Zat was ripped of his titles and banished from his homeland. His crime? pushing back its invaders by utilizing tactics that the rest of his people deemed dishonorable. Seeing that his acts of heroism were unjustly punished rather than awarded by the feeble-minded citizens of his nation, he carried on to find a new purpose in life, unbound by the shackles of such outdated and pointless conceptions of honor, so we brought him here to give him one. He has proven himself to be far more capable than any of

the warriors he fought against during the first stage, and an overwhelming 70% of our voters think that he is going to win this battle. Let's see for ourselves, shall we?

The posture and demeanor of this alien was already sufficiently intimidating by itself, and that description had only made Janice more worried. 'You can't be serious,' she muttered to herself as the crowd cheered for this contestant. He indeed seemed to be a fan-favorite.

'Next, we have Oash Merril from Hughfum,' Polley began introducing the next contestant, 'a representative of a duty that is still vitally needed outside of Federation Space. He was a whistleblower; someone who put everything at risk to inform his people of their government's shady operations and corruption. And as you would expect, he received nothing but a constant threat to his life in return. Instead of living the rest of his life on the run, in constant fear of being captured and tortured, he can now go out in a far less painful and more dignified way, or live the rest of his life in luxury if he emerges as the champion, getting what he truly deserves for what he's done for his people.'

Janice observed the green-skinned humanoid alien on the screen while listening to his story. He was wearing a button-up shirt with what appeared to be numerous illustrations of a portion of his homeplanet's fauna and flora on it in vibrant colors. He was also wearing what looked like cargo pants and sneakers. He had pitch black eyes with no irises, pupils, or even lids by the looks of it, while his mouth was a lipless circular maw with sharp teeth. Despite these features greatly limiting his expressions, he was still clearly worried as could be read by the rest of his movements. The top of his head was covered in what looked like many bean stalks rather than hair, with very fitting bean-like ends. They were messy, going in all different directions, and with each of them transitioning from the green of his skin on their roots to a pale yellow on their tips. This color transition from green to pale yellow was also a feature of his arms and legs. His hands and feet were pale yellow while his upper arms, and while not visible to Janice, likely thighs as well, were green. To add to the weirdness, each of his hands had... *Seven? No, eight. Eight fingers. Freaky.*

'Just by looking at Merril, you could easily guess that he was an unexpected winner of the first stage,' Caldo continued. 'Not only was he physically weaker than the rest of his opponents, but he seemed to be, and in fact, still seems to be, much more worried than them. However, his clever intuitions allowed him to strategize his advances better and utilize his bracelets in the most optimal ways, giving him a decisive victory.'

The crowd cheered once more, but not as ecstatically as they had for Zat. Not nearly. Janice could not help but wonder how much they were going to cheer for her.

'Next, we have Ludia Weyr of Quech,' Polley began introducing the next contestant. 'A young girl, forcefully taken away from her family at a young age as a result of nothing more than her parents' pure-hearted benevolence. During the infamous Great War among the nations of her planet, her family opened their doors to a group of fugitives from the opposing side, peaceful souls rejecting to fight in those pointless battles and looking for those with similar kind-hearted spirits to offer them their home. When the authorities found out, their house was burned down with the fugitives still inside and Ludia's family was imprisoned for life due to treason, almost being sentenced to death row if it wasn't for their good nature.'

Janice could not help but feel sorry for the alien girl. 'Good God...'

'She was sent to an orphanage,' Polley continued, 'which to her chance was run by one of the most skillful assassins of the last generation. Having never been caught, his true identity

had always stayed a secret until he willingly revealed it to Ludia, as he saw her massive potential to be a true prodigy. Under him, she honed her skills so that not only could she help her unjustly punished family break out of prison, but also punish those who had dragged her world to calamity. Yet one day, she received news that her family was already gone, along with many other prisoners, due to a plague. They were of least concern among the ones to be treated. Not only had the vicious tyrants taken away her family, but they had also left them to die with a cruel indifference to their suffering. In her fury and despair, Ludia ran away before her training was complete, as she could wait no longer. She was either going to have her revenge now or die trying. Of course, we knew that if she was willing to face death, there was a more meaningful way of doing that. Here, fighting for the ultimate glory and freedom instead of a hollow revenge.'

Janice observed the alien girl, whose gray legs looked like that of an avian creature with sharp talons while the rest of her body was covered in white fuzz. Her face resembled that of a moth, but with a small white beak that was only subtly visible. Her arms and hands seemed to be shaped similarly to her legs, but were also covered in the same type of fuzz as the rest of her body. A line of large feathers also ran up from the hands to the shoulders, definitely not enough by any means to make her fly, but... *maybe helpful in... maneuvering or something?* The actual wings were on her back, and as she stretched them, Janice noticed two large and smooth plates lift up. They were similar to a bug's elytra. The wings under them however were feathered, looking much like the wings of a bird than that of an insect. Janice thought the girl looked pretty in a unique way, graceful even. A bird and moth hybrid would not be the first answer to come to her mind if someone asked her to merge two animals for a prettier one, but she could see now that it would clearly be a valid one.

'She did nothing but impress the audience and us during the first stage,' Caldo praised Ludia. 'If you were right about one thing in her story Polley, it was definitely that she had indeed honed her skills to near perfection before coming here. She was cunning, calculating, agile and ruthless in the first stage. Just the whole package, really. I have to say, I am most intrigued to see what *she* is going to be doing this time out of everyone.'

*Yeah. Me too.* Janice was beginning to get more and more stressed as the warriors kept being introduced.

'Next up, we have Princess Rachz tol Vagr from Urielle,' Caldo introduced the next alien. Her body was shaped like a snake from below the waist, her tongue was forked and her fangs could be noticed from a good distance whenever she opened her mouth. Her dark pupils were also vertical and narrow, with the rest of each eye being bright orange. Her skin looked even scalier than Zat's, naturally. The rest of her features however were almost completely humanoid. She looked like one of those mythological creatures she could not remember the name of. *It started with a G...*

'She was born with an extremely rare genetic mutation that made every second of her life harder than it should,' Caldo continued, 'which is the harsh reality of being born into a species who has not even developed themselves enough to eliminate such diseases that no-one should ever be victim to.'

Janice looked at the alien's reptilian features and felt sympathy for her struggle. *Man... That's rough.*

‘You see, unlike the rest of her people, her body developed two large appendages on her chest resembling mammalian breasts,’ Caldo explained in a sad tone.

Janice paused for a second in surprise, and turned her eyes to the alien girl’s large bust. *Oh.*

‘Because of a feature of her body outside of her control, she was discriminated against by the rest of her people, and found no-one that loved her for who she is throughout her life.’ Caldo was almost entranced at this point by his endeavor to fish for the audience’s sympathy. ‘Even her parents were ashamed, as if it made her less of a person!’

*Would make her more of one if she was born on the right planet,* Janice thought. *Or one with the Internet.* She quickly discarded the tasteless images in her head out of shame.

‘Can you imagine?’ Caldo asked loudly. ‘Treating someone as such for such a banal reason in our day and age? And towards a princess, mind you! She has been one of the loneliest people of her status. Each man that she loved turned her down, each servant schemed behind her back, and each diplomat demanded someone else from the loyal family to speak to. Her infamy was spread not just across her kingdom but across the entire continent in the form of overexaggerated gossip and false rumors. Each story added newer elements to her affliction, painting her as a vile and grotesque creature, a dangerous monster to be avoided. Of course, she couldn’t take it after a certain point and ran away, thinking that it would be best both for herself and for the kingdom. But unfortunately, it turned out that her presence was the only thing which had been holding back a treacherous takeover!’

*Oh, shit!* Janice thought mockingly. It was in no way directed to the princess herself, but to Caldo who was telling it like a sudden plot twist in a soap opera episode, and to the audience who could not get enough of it.

“The kingdom had been good to its people, its lords and ladies living modestly to keep their subjects most prosperous, especially compared to those living in neighboring nations. Alas, this was not enough for the ungrateful majority, which organized an uprising to overthrow the benevolent king, now that his daughter that they called a demonic guardian was out of the picture. It took years for the news to reach the princess, who now lived as a nomadic recluse. Many took her for a bog witch, while others recognized her as the lone survivor of her bloodline. Not only had she become more isolated and bitter than ever, but she was now being hunted by her family’s murderers as well, a people she had devoted her past life to despite everything. She kept running, without knowing where to and what for. Her entire life had been a tragedy, but this new aimlessness, this struggling alone for mere survival, was the real misery. And of course, we brought her here to put an end to that.”

‘Sure you did...’ Janice muttered as she rolled her eyes. Not only had Caldo’s spiel been overly long and detailed with this one, but from start to finish, the princess’ chest had remained at the center of every single angle shown by the giant screens. It was painfully obvious that they knew what they were doing.

‘It was likely all of her rage that was built up throughout the years which led her to victory,’ Polley finally picked up and moved on from the backstory part, ‘as she was fierce and aggressive throughout her first battle, keeping the pressure on her enemies constantly until they could no longer take it. Let’s see if she will adopt the same tactic this time as well, and how effective it will be.’

As the drones around Princess Vagr's chamber flew to the next one, Janice silently kept watching her majesty. She noticed her head turn towards the chamber in which Ludia was in, and make some sort of gesture to her. Although it was far away, Janice could also see Ludia make a similar head gesture back. Her heart skipped a beat. *Wait, are they... teaming up?*

'Next is Dharlin Ghondo from Korr,' Caldo began introducing the fifth contestant, 'an innocent man framed for manslaughter, when in reality, he was just at the wrong place at the wrong time. That's what happens when you're born into a society that still has no reliable ways to identify the true criminals, of course. After spending years of his life behind bars, he managed to escape from captivity, aiming to find the man who was actually responsible of the crime and bring him to justice to clear his name. But of course, he kept being hunted down, and was forced to continue his search while on the run. That was until the day his luck ran out during a chase. He kept running, but he knew he was cornered. Just as all hope seemed lost to him and the thought of going back behind the bars took over his mind, we came down for him.'

*To force him to commit the crime he was framed for, huh?* Janice had not known that she could still feel even more disgust for the commentators and the cheering audience until hearing this story. She looked at the humanoid alien on the screens. He was enormous, not in an unnatural sense like Archeon was, but he was bulky and muscular. Although it was not his height that drew attention to his size first and foremost, he was also much taller than the average human as well. Janice guessed that he had to be about 8 feet tall. He seemed to be amphibian as he had gills on the sides of his neck, a finned tail, webbed hands, and webbed feet. Adding his facial features on top of this combination made it look like he had evolved from something similar to an anglerfish if it had an amphibian's limbs. He had no lips, and his teeth were completely exposed, but not as thin as the needle-like teeth of an actual anglerfish. They were fewer and thicker, but still enough to remind Janice of the creature when combined with the appendage on his head. Just like the bait of an anglerfish, it acted as a light source, but what set it apart was a cone of flesh around the bioluminescent tip that actually directed the light to a certain direction like a flashlight. It likely served no purpose in this bright of an environment. Unlike what Janice assumed it would normally do, the cone was not moving to align its direction with wherever the man was looking. He was even lightly squinting his eyes, which were not quite as colorless as that of an anglerfish but still made up of dull shades of gray.

'It sure seems that those years he spent in prison toughened him up,' Polley continued, 'as he shook us to the core with his resilience during the first stage. After all, all that you really need to do in the Power Brace Tournament is outlast your opponents, and he seems to have learned that quick.'

*He looks like a natural at that to be honest,* Janice thought nervously as she looked at the marks of many scars around the man's bulky torso.

'And of course, last but not least, another unexpected winner of the first stage: Janice Lane from Earth,' Caldo finally began introducing her while the drones surrounded her chamber.

*That's my cue,* Janice thought as she covered her ears once more and began thinking aloud to eliminate any possibility of her still making out what the muffled voice was telling to everyone about her. She focused on her enemies and tried to begin strategizing while still

occasionally checking the screens in the meantime. She could still miss vital information after all if she was not careful; the commentators had not even talked about which bracelets everyone was equipped with yet. It was not too hard to guess just by looking carefully at their arms, but she could do with some reliable confirmations before the battle.

In the bathroom of his cell, the mysterious prisoner once more grabbed his communication devices disguised as pills. ‘Q, are you there?’

‘No,’ said the voice, with a hint of annoyance detectable despite the filters.

‘Very funny,’ the mysterious prisoner answered impatiently.

‘What is it? I thought we decided to make no calls outside of our planned schedule unless it’s an emergency.’

‘Come on, we both know I would’ve been dead by now if they had a chance of finding this frequency. And don’t act like you don’t already know why I called.’

‘Is it about the “chicks” again?’ Q was audibly tired of the topic coming up again.

‘You can’t fucking tell me that you saw that coming,’ the prisoner barked. ‘That Suan girl; what was her name?’

‘Saleena?’

‘See? You’re acting all calm and cool, but you’re worried too. How many of the other fighters’ names do you remember?’

‘A lot. I have a good memory.’

‘No doubt about that, but you didn’t even think for a second before saying that girl’s name. You’re worried that she might fuck up the operation.’

‘I’m not worried; I’m intrigued. Also, I never thought I would be hearing these from you. Weren’t your abilities and experience the greatest?’

‘Oh, they’re the greatest alright, compared to everyone else in the tournament. But not every two, three, or four. What worries me isn’t Saleena herself, it’s who else might join her against me in the final stage.’

‘You’re worried they will all team up against you?’

‘You don’t know that they won’t, and I honestly don’t even know if it would be worse or better if they teamed up. We don’t want them killing each other, after all.’ The man sighed, trying to somewhat calm his nerves before continuing. ‘Anyway, it’s not because of Saleena that I’ve called you. You saw who’s fighting in this battle, right?’

‘Are you referring to the “Earth chick?”’

‘Did you see her bracelets?’

‘Yes, I saw her bracelets. Telekinesis and illusion.’

‘Which is the shittiest combination you can get.’

‘It’s more situational than the others, yes. Your point?’ Q was getting really impatient now. This conversation was already unnecessary in the first place, and it was now starting to take way longer than it needed to.

‘What if she wins this one too?’ the man stated his worry long before any sign that could be the basis for it even showed itself, frustrating Q even more. The battle had not even started yet for fuck’s sake.

‘It will mean that she’s the chosen one who’ll bring balance to the universe,’ Q answered in a mockingly whimsical tone.

‘Will you be able to make jokes like this then?’

‘What do you expect me to say?’ Q finally snapped. ‘We’ve looked over and practiced for countless scenarios together, and now you’re freaking out over just a few unexpected winners. You want to back out and try next year? How will I know you won’t back out then?’

The prisoner stayed silent in shame, and Q took a moment to sigh patiently in the meantime, calming down. ‘Also, you know that I can’t just bust you out of your cell. Even getting those devices among your pills was harder than I ever imagined.’

The man sighed in shame. ‘You’re right; I’m overreacting. Sorry.’

‘Listen,’ Q responded in an uncharacteristically sympathetic tone. ‘I know that this is taking a toll on you but you have to hang on for just a little longer. I know you can do it and you know it as well. Even if they all win with telekinesis and illusion bracelets, you’re still far more capable than all of them. Thankfully, you did listen to me and allow your enemies to hit you a bit in the second stage, but I know that even those few hits were intentionally taken.’

‘Yeah. Well, thanks,’ the man modestly responded. ‘I’ll do my best, and I won’t call again until the final stage,’ he finally assured Q. ‘Speaking of that, is everything good on your side?’

‘Everything is going according to plan,’ Q answered. ‘We’ll give them a tournament they’ll never forget.’

‘Understood. Z, out.’

‘Brave warriors,’ King Vrollus began his speech. ‘We have been honored to watch you ascend one step closer to becoming one of the most elite and well-respected members of our Federation. While many honorably fell in the pursuit of this great purpose, regardless of whether you make it to the final stage or not, your legacies will even be greater than theirs. May the power of your bracelets carry you towards the summit, and may peace fall upon those that will not reach it.’

Staring at the king as he finished his speech, Janice gritted her teeth. *You’ll see what falls upon you once I win, asshole.* With this cherry on top of all the bullshit the commentators had already spewed out, she was now more motivated than ever to fight her way to the next stage.

‘And with that fantastic speech,’ Caldo followed after the king’s words as the audience began cheering loudly again, ‘I believe that our brave warriors must be motivated and our audience must be excited. I know I am. Let’s not keep anyone waiting for any longer, and let the battle begin!’

‘10, 9, 8...’

Janice took a deep breath and readied herself. ‘Alright, come on Janice. Just one more after this,’ she told herself. The right wording, while being technically true, made it feel more as if she was somewhat close to the finish line rather than just being a mere third of the way there. It was all about perspective, after all.

‘...7, 6, 5...’

*Okay... Sword guy has fire and ice,* she began reciting which bracelets each combatant had. *Beanstalk guy has illusion and... what was it? Ice. Right. It was ice.*

‘...4, 3, 2...’

*Moth girl has fire and telekinesis; snake girl has lightning and illusion; and fish guy has telekinesis and... fire, no, ice. Telekinesis and ice.*

'...1, fight!'

Janice instantly bolted out of her chamber and made a U-turn while clenching her right fist. Staying invisible, she began running towards the edge of the arena to get away from everyone as quickly as possible. But before she was even midway through, she heard a loud screech and wing-flapping noises coming from behind her. They got closer and closer as she kept running, making her ask nervously to herself if she had somehow failed to become invisible. Her vision was blurry and the colors were as dull as they needed to be. She could also see the circular outline around her, so was she not most definitely invisible? If so, then why was Ludia so determinedly approaching her position without stopping?

Janice's heart kept beating faster and faster as she kept running, her illusion bracelet approaching the verge of overheating while the hellishly rapid wing-flaps behind her became louder and louder. It felt so close that she found it unbelievable how she could still see the circular outline. Finally, she threw herself to the left while still clutching her fist just in case she actually was unseen like the bracelet was telling her, despite finding it hard to believe at this point. She soon found out however that it was telling her the truth. Ludia flew past her, close to the ground. By the looks of it, they would have collided by now if Janice had kept running. The alien girl then flew upwards with an elegant motion upon reaching the midway point between the edge of the arena and Janice's empty chamber.

With only a few seconds in her hands now until her illusion bracelet would overheat, Janice tried to catch her breath on the ground while looking up at Ludia. The girl was looking at the ground, around where Janice was, likely trying to find out where she could be since her chamber was the closest one. Janice somehow felt relief and anxiety at once; an impossible mix of emotions. Ludia was looking for her but did not know where she was. She was safe for now, but for only a couple of seconds more before the bracelet would overheat.

Ludia finally stopped her search to turn her attention, and her first attacks along with it, at somewhere else right as Janice's illusion bracelet overheated. She gritted her teeth so hard while grunting that it felt like they were going to shatter and break inside her mouth. *Can't scream...* All she had now was a telekinesis bracelet, and there were none of those objects nearby. If Ludia heard her screaming now, there was a real possibility of it being game over for her. *This soon, too...*

Janice did not even move an inch while the bracelet kept cooling down, thinking that it could alert Ludia. She only moved her head extremely slowly to look around and make sure that none of the others were coming after her, which also gave her a clear picture of what Ludia was currently occupied with. It now made sense why she had flown at her direction from the get-go despite not being able to see her. Her chamber was right across from Janice's, next to Princess Vagr's; and between Janice's and Vagr's chambers was Dharlin's chamber. Janice knew that the two girls were cooperating, and by the looks of it, they had set Dharlin as their first target. Their plan was to trap him between the two of them, making it necessary for him to defend against attacks coming from two different directions.

Despite looking like a brute, Dharlin was at least clearly smart enough to protect his face whenever he could, and use his flashlight appendage to his advantage. It was only able to blind Vagr for a moment though whenever he focused the light at her face, while the same practically had no effect against Ludia. It even seemed to provoke her to attack more relentlessly, making it more of a double-edged sword than a reliable advantage for Dharlin.

Janice just could not turn her eyes away from the dance between these three, completely forgetting for a moment about her other two enemies. Ludia was so efficient with her attacks, never overheating but almost never ceasing to attack either. She had found the optimal rhythm to overwhelm her enemy with a relentless rain of fire, and objects that she kept grabbing from in front of Janice's chamber. It was unfortunate for her that Dharlin was also equipped with a telekinesis bracelet, and was not too shabby at grabbing the objects thrown at him mid-air to send them back towards one of the girls.

*I should also go to prison,* Janice thought to herself watching this imposing man capably stand his ground against relentless attacks from two different directions at all times. The two directions hardly stayed the same, too, with Vagr constantly disappearing at and appearing from a plethora of different positions around Dharlin, and Ludia flying in unpredictable patterns. If the man was not so tough as well besides being skilled, he would have likely fallen by now. But whenever an attack that he could not dodge or block landed on him, he did not even fall to his knees but rather kept protecting his face and pushing on with a grunt. Still, Janice predicted that he had not much time until it all became too much for him. He could not find a moment to attack, and although it was durable, Janice knew that the reactive armor had its limits. Those limits were likely going to be pushed for Dharlin's armor soon enough.

She wondered if she should help the man, as she certainly would not last a second against the two vicious girls once they finally bested him. Then again, even if that worked, she would have to duel against the hulking man himself after that. Even with him wounded, she was not sure if she could match Dharlin in a fight. Not with these bracelets. She cursed her luck for getting such a useless pair of them. Perhaps, the best thing to do for this battle could be waiting it out and letting everyone else tear each other apart before making her move.

*Everyone else...* Janice panicked with the sudden realization that she had not even looked at the direction of Zat or Oash yet, and one of them was allegedly the most skilled fighter inside this arena. How was she still alive, when she had not even moved an inch from her position lying on the ground for multiple seconds? Her illusion bracelet had even cooled down completely a few seconds ago without her realizing it. She quickly turned invisible, and looked around to see where her other two enemies were before trying to get up.

She could not get up in time to dodge Oash's attack, an ice blade thrusting towards her from nowhere as the man's body appeared with it in front of her. He had approached her while invisible, not that it mattered as Janice had been unaware of him the whole time. If he had casually walked up to her, it would not have changed much. This was all Janice could think about within the split-seconds before the blade would reach her throat. The only thing on her mind was how profoundly careless and idiotic she had been for some reason since the beginning of this battle rather than any sort of possible counterattack that could save her life. It was not even as if she was unfamiliar with the situation at hand; she should have known by now thanks to her previous fight with Nela to use her bracelets to block. But in panic, all she did was helplessly push against the man's chest with both hands to stop him. To her surprise, the attempt was not so helpless after all despite all of its clumsiness, as it happened again. She got lucky.

Oash got launched multiple feet into the air, higher than even the altitude at which Ludia was flying. It momentarily caught everyone's attention as the man let out a horrifying high-pitched scream, which was fitting considering his face looked like that of a cheap creepypasta

monster. The noise, and the man's own conscious movements all stopped as he hit the ground and tumbled across it for a few feet like a ragdoll.

Breathing heavily, Janice got up in shock and looked at her hands, of which the left one seemed responsible for what had just happened. The purple gemstone of the telekinesis bracelet was glowing. She felt relieved. So it was not so useless without objects after all. She regained her composure, and let everything she had observed since the beginning of the battle re-enter her mind without any panic this time. It was clear now just how tougher the rest of this battle was going to be compared to the previous one. She had just taken out the one other unexpected first stage winner, and the rest were all either skilled, tough, or both beyond measure.

As all of these thoughts crossed her mind in a mere split-second, the rest of her startled enemies noticed her at last. It was fine by her now, though. She was not going to get careless again, and it was better if luck did not decide her fate from now on as it had numerous times by now. She was sure that it had to run out at some point.

With full focus and not an ounce of panic, she quickly lunged away from the blast zone of a fire cyclone shot by Ludia, and went invisible mid-air. Although her opponent was smart enough to launch her next attack towards where Janice would have landed right after that, Janice had a back-up plan of hers as well. She had planned to make herself land as close as she could to one of the small objects that had been used in the girls' 2v1 fight against Dharlin and somehow landed nearby. It looked similar to the cube she had practiced with before, so it had to be easy to grab and quickly move with telekinesis. She immediately reached for it while relaxing her other hand to let the illusion bracelet cool down, knowing that using her telekinesis bracelet would break her invisibility anyway.

She quickly launched the object towards Ludia's fire cyclone to intercept it. As the explosion happened mid-air, it momentarily blocked their views of each other, during which Janice went invisible once more. She lunged away just in time to barely dodge the object sent back at her with great force by the explosion. Despite the how loudly it hit the ground and how much dust it lifted up, though, Janice did not give herself even a second to think about how close of a call that was. She had to get used to it by now. Reaching to a hair's length from death was commonplace in this arena, and each second was too important to waste on conjuring the image of her getting crushed to a red pulp only to stress herself out.

Still invisible, Janice immediately got up and rushed to her chamber, hoping that its panels would provide a barrier between the two girls the next time she would have to become visible again. She was confident that Ludia was not going to attack her until then, as she could not be sure of her path after the explosion. To Ludia, it was possible that Janice had dodged any other way as well, and could now be moving at any direction. Janice knew thanks to what she had seen of her so far that Ludia would not risk wasting her attacks, and she did not. While trying to regularly keep an eye on the rest of the arena from this point on, Ludia went back to helping her ally, who was now beginning to struggle without her aid against a somewhat recovered Dharlin.

Janice unclenched her fist and relaxed her arm as she finally reached her chamber and got inside, leaning against its practically unbreakable panels in relief. She thoroughly looked around for anything close to the unprotected semicircular area in front of her. As soon as she made sure that neither the girls nor Dharlin were in a position from which they could

immediately harm her, she was finally able to turn her attention to Zat. What she saw instantly drew a clear picture in her mind about why she had not yet been killed.

The man was standing inside his own chamber, watching the rest of them calmly. Janice understood immediately what was going on. Zat probably had some sort of honor code he followed even under the influence of the bracelets, which was unsurprising considering his story that the commentators had told. He had most likely lived by the same code until that invasion pushed him to break it in order to save his people, but he had gone right back to following it after. Even in his exile. Janice could swear she had seen the exact same plot in a movie once. Or was it a video game? In any case, Zat was patiently waiting to be engaged, and refusing to take any of the countless opportunities in front of him to catch his enemies off-guard. He was only keeping an eye on everyone in case he would need to defend himself against them, not willing to engage unless it was going to be a fair, one-on-one fight. It was due to this realization that Janice really understood why a whole 70% of the audience was expecting him to win. It was one thing to be skilled or tough. It was a whole other thing to be so experienced in facing death, so confident in your ability to survive, and so immovable from where you morally stood even with no one to bat an eye if you did move, that you could keep honor as your first priority without a second thought in a situation like this.

Sure, it could also be read as a cheap tactic to sit by the corner and wait until everyone else was eliminated besides one beat-up fighter to face him at the end, but it was not like that was guaranteed to happen. After all, the two girls could have targeted Zat instead of Dharlin at the start of the round. Hell, even all five of them could have targeted him together, in theory. Yes, it was unlikely and Zat had undoubtedly known that as well, but Janice could sense that this man would still act the same regardless of the chances of any scenario, as he was equally unbothered by all of them. He was truly confident that he could have won a 1v5 if it had occurred.

While Janice felt thankful that the man was not a threat to her yet, it only worried her more about what was still in store for her besides the still-kicking rest of her enemies. She was already feeling overwhelmed just by Ludia, and still had a long way to go before making it out of this hellish round alive, if there was even any hope for her.

No, she told herself. *Stay calm. Calm and collected.* She turned her attention back to the three others still battling it out. She was sure that Ludia was going to treat her as a threat for the rest of the battle no matter what, and Dharlin was beginning to struggle again. She did not have to go through a million different scenarios inside her head this time to decide what she needed to do. The man was her best chance out of this, and it was a good thing that she made up her mind right then and there as she saw Princess Vagr, seemingly tired of trying to wear this mountain of a man down, take a risk herself and get close to him for a more deadly attack. Janice had just begun running at them with her right fist clenched when the serpentine princess buried her fangs deep into Dharlin's neck while latched onto his back. With that, the man was now in the direst situation he had faced since the beginning. His ice bracelet was on the verge of overheating, and there was not much he could do against Vagr with the telekinesis bracelet without also putting himself at risk. He could smack himself with an object flying directly at his head or destroy his neck and right shoulder with a point-blank shockwave towards it. It had to be the ice bracelet then, but he could not claw at the princess

and then also protect himself from the fire cyclone shot by Ludia coming straight at him. He had to pick one to deal with, and he chose to stop the cyclone with an ice wall.

With Dharlin and Princess Vagr behind the wall where she could not hit, Ludia decided to try and stop Janice. She had seen her turn invisible while looking at Dharlin and the princess, and although she could not see her, it was better to test her luck than doing nothing while watching the other two. Janice had guessed however that she would try that, and was purposefully going not on but around the shortest path. Unfortunately, Ludia realized what was happening after a couple of cyclones hit the path without giving away Janice's location, and decided to focus on the ice wall instead.

Dharlin hopelessly looked at the iceborne barrier he had built shattering slowly. He was unsure if it would hold on until his ice bracelet cooled off, and he was still unable to get rid of the ravenous princess, whose fangs were still dug deep into his neck pumping him full of venom. Beginning to think that this could finally be the end of him, he felt a strong force graze against his back, feeling as if it could tear it off if not for the armor. At the same time, he also felt the fangs lodged into his neck finally let go, though not without also tearing apart a chunk of flesh around the area on their way out. It opened two large wounds on the left side of his neck that were luckily not quite deep enough to slash anything vital under all that muscle. It was *almost* deep enough though, and the pain was still immense. Despite that, he could keep bearing it as he had been bearing every other pain for a while now if not for the new, burning one deep inside the area where his neck had been bitten, slowly spreading inside.

Falling on his knees, he looked at the glow of his bracelets' gems. They were intense despite not being used to attack, likely doing their best to slow down the spread and keep the man alive for at least a while longer, but this was it. They were not strong enough to heal this. With the realization of what was now beginning to happen to his body, he felt even more terrified than he had been just moments ago, when he was on the verge of accepting his demise. The acceptance he now had to face on the other hand was of a slow and agonizing death waiting for him even if he survived the battle. His vision began to blur and the voices around him became muffled as he began recalling events from his past in-between his heavy breaths. He was not sure if the images were induced by the venom itself or his own anxiety of its slow kiss of death, but it did not matter. At the very least, he had done his best to live honestly, with nothing to regret and no debts left unpaid. Unbeknownst to him, someone was about to change that.

'HEY!' Janice yelled once more right as the thick wall of ice in front of Dharlin finally got destroyed with an explosion, snapping him back to reality. He remained almost frozen for a moment while regaining his senses, looking first at where the wall's non-existent remains would be, then at Ludia and her enraged, frantic movements in the sky, and finally at Princess Vagr seeing stars while lying against the edge of the arena on his right.

'HEY!' he heard someone yell again from behind on his left, and turned around to see Janice. But although he had thought he was the intended receiver of that message, the girl was looking at Ludia instead, with her left hand ready to grab a nearby object. Ludia on the other hand, finally having broken through his protective wall, was still focused on Dharlin. The man finally gathered what was going on after witnessing Janice save him from a fire cyclone by throwing an object to intercept it.

‘WALL!’ she yelled while running towards him, as the object barely missed him and landed behind on his right. Although he hesitated for a moment to trust Janice, he let go of his doubts quickly. There was no point in them anymore with death already being right at his doorstep. The girl took shelter with him behind a new ice wall he quickly raised. *No debts left unpaid*, he repeated to himself. He found some solace in the fact that he had just found a reason to make his final stand, and that reason was now standing right next to him.

Janice hesitated to let her guard down at first herself, despite the fact that the man was now letting her seek shelter under his protection. Although she did not completely throw away the idea of possibly being betrayed, a meaningful look and a few nods of knowing approval she shared with her new ally eased her mind a bit and prioritized the girls they were up against as the more immediate problems.

She made a quick head motion towards Vagr, who was slowly beginning to regain her composure. ‘We have to do something about her while we have the chance,’

‘What about her?’ Dharlin asked, gesturing towards Ludia.

‘Can’t you just keep building walls as we move?’ Janice asked while trying to protect their small space safe from attacks coming from new directions. Ludia was frustrated beyond measure, and was tired of playing it safe. She had begun flying around them in all directions to bypass the protective barriers they kept raising.

‘No. It doesn’t work the same as everything else,’ Dharlin said.

‘What do you mean?’ Janice asked nervously while blocking yet another fire cyclone with a moderately large object that she was now holding onto rather than throwing. She found it to be more effective this way, but it was also beginning to take a toll on her to withstand all the explosions and thrown objects against the other side of her makeshift shield. She had to exert some extra force each time, not too much but just enough to keep the object at where it was hovering, at the very instant the explosion or clash happened in order to avoid losing control of the it, which could then crush them if she failed. Her bracelet was quickly reaching the point of overheating too, as if constantly reacting in time and with the right amount of force was not enough of a challenge by itself.

‘It’s not tied to heat alone like everything else,’ Dharlin answered her question about the ice wall. ‘There is a time period before I can do it again, even if the bracelet is ice-cold already. I don’t know why, but that’s just how this one is.’

Janice got distracted just as she was about to respond. Ludia was done with her shield, and was now trying to snatch it away.

‘Let go,’ Dharlin told her as he grabbed the object instead, leading it to hover in mid-air while shaking violently as Ludia and Dharlin pulled it towards opposite directions with all their effort. ‘You’re already about to overheat. Let it cool down a bit.’

‘No! I’ll handle her,’ Janice insisted, yet still following his advice to let her telekinesis bracelet cool down in the meantime. ‘You deal with the other one before she gets up.’

Dharlin looked back at Vagr upon remembering how she had poisoned him, the pain still burning deep inside the wound and spreading. He nodded to Janice, and ran towards the ravenous beast as soon as he felt Ludia’s grip on the object they’ve been fighting over disappear. She had overheated, and Janice could indeed easily handle her by herself now. For him, it was time to get payback.

Janice nervously watched Ludia frantically fly in unpredictable, unhinged patterns while letting out an ear-piercing screech like a wounded bird of prey. She then furiously dove towards Janice while making the same noise as if it was a battle cry. Janice panicked not as she saw her diving, but as she noticed the familiar movement of her left arm. Even if she could block the fire cyclone with the object Dharlin had left to her, she had to then decide on whether she wanted to keep it as a shield or throw it at Ludia, who could maneuver in the air so quickly that she would probably miss. If she kept it as a shield, she would probably not be able to withstand Ludia's momentum and be crushed under it. And if she did not bother with the object at all, she was still going to be fresh meat for the girl's talons even if she could lunge away from the cyclone's explosion. Invisibility would not help her at that point either at such close proximity, though maybe she could get her off via a shockwave if it ever came to it. Wait.

*Shockwave...* Janice remembered now. It was not actually luck that had saved her at the start of the round when she used it. Even if she had done it subconsciously, she had actually known all along how that ability worked thanks to the time she had spent in her cell watching every single battle. Even if she had hardly been able to pay attention to most of it, there had been moments where things took such turns that she had stored them in her memory like perfect recordings. One of those moments had thought her how valuable of a counter-attack a shockwave could be. She made her decision just as the fire cyclone shot from Ludia's fist. Right as she leapt away to dodge, she also sent a shockwave directly towards the cyclone.

Ludia had already decided that she was not even going to bother trying to dodge the shockwave. She had grown incredibly tired and frustrated by the persistence of this irritating pest by now, and she knew that she was safe the moment she had recognized Janice's arm movement from so far away. She had already assessed the range of that attack; there was no way it was going to hit her. Janice clearly knew that she was out of options by now, and was in panic, making sloppy mistakes. It was not like it would have mattered; the most she could have done at this point would be buying herself just a tiny bit more... *What—*

The shockwave's range proved to be just enough to catch the cyclone in it, and redirected it towards the exact opposite way of its original trajectory at the same speed. Ludia was not even able to process what happened in time to dodge. She was still diving at full speed when her own projectile, travelling just a bit ahead towards the same target as her, turned around to target her instead. With such little distance between them and both being so fast, contact was made in less than the tenth of a second. The cyclone met Ludia's head, and only her corpse made it to the ground out of the explosion.

Ludia's lifeless body landed on where the cyclone otherwise would have, making a loud thud instead of an explosion. Janice breathed heavily while unable to take her eyes off the burning corpse. In mere seconds, the flames put themselves out without a clear rhyme or reason, in classic magical bracelet power fashion. The feathers that had covered Ludia's graceful wings until just a second ago were now mostly gone, exposing a thin layer of charred flesh underneath. The chitinous elytra that normally shielded them now seemed fragile rather than sturdy, as if just a little force would be enough to easily crumble them. As for the antennae that normally arched over the eyes of the girl and always kept moving like a pair of busy feather dusters, nothing remained of them. Thankfully, a scream let out by Dharlin, not

of pain but of rage as far as she could tell, caught Janice's attention before she could even begin to feel sick. Although, it was perhaps for the worse.

The giant man had rushed towards Vagr while Ludia was occupied with Janice. The serpentine princess had immediately tried going invisible in panic as soon as she was able to, but it had been too late. Dharlin had sent a powerful shockwave from a close distance, smashing her whole body against the same wall with even greater force than Janice's earlier shockwave. He had then approached her as she was writhing on the ground in massive pain from the impact. Now grabbing her from the throat with his left hand while facing no resistance at all, Dharlin recalled the moment of the bite as the burning, painful sensation was spread to almost his torso at this point. He knew that he had so little time left now, but he was at least going to outlast her, which was enough payback in this situation. Letting out a raging cry, he slammed the serpent's head against the marble wall of the arena and covered his right fist with ice, with short but sharp spikes summoning above his knuckles. As it met the princess' face, her skull caved in under the crushing force of the ice gauntlet, with the bright glow of the ice bracelet's deep blue gem reflecting clearly on the blood that spurted out in all directions and covered the wall at the same time.

Janice felt sick to her stomach, but understood the reasons behind the man's brutality. Not only had she watched him overwhelmed under the relentless pressure of two enemies at once for long enough, but she had seen both the moment of the bite and its aftermath. Vagr herself would have been just as brutal with him if she had gotten the chance. Ludia would have been just as brutal with Janice if she had gotten the chance. Hell, Janice herself had been this brutal just two days before. She had blamed the bracelets for all of it at first but really, it was not anything inside the arena but everything around it. It was all because of them; the ones who were watching, the ones who had built it, the ones who had kidnapped and then dragged them into it.

*Screw whatever happens. Screw it all.* She looked around the arena. The dull rectangular objects were almost all used at least once, and were thus scattered all over the place. She walked towards the biggest clutter that she could see as everyone watched her with intrigue, from the last two fighters that remained besides her, to everyone in the audience. They were all curious as to what her intentions were, and that curiosity was quenched soon enough.

Janice threw one of the objects with as much force as she could possibly exert towards the audience while screaming in rage. She already knew that they were behind an unbreakable glass dome; it was just so clear and spotless as everything else on this wretched planet that it was impossible to see it. She only knew of its existence because it was what Archeon had hit before almost falling down on her before, and she had already seen multiple other attempts to break it during the battles she had watched on screen. So, it did not surprise her one bit when the object merely made a thud in the air just as it was about to reach the fancy grandstands, and then fell back on the ground. The volume of the audience lowered as cheers left their place to silent chatter and anticipation of what was going to happen next.

It was not enough for Janice. They were startled somewhat, but they were still safe. *Not fair... Not fucking fair...* she knew that was not going to change; she knew that she was not going to be able to do anything to them. But it did not matter. This was not about getting revenge. It was not about sending a message, either, or any such goal. It was about releasing all that had pent up within her since she had been brought here. The imprisonment, the

fighting, the deaths... She had endured all of it without stepping out of line, without showing her frustration, without showing even once whom she really wanted to use these goddamn bracelets against. She could not take it anymore; she had to let it out. All of it.

'Woah-ho-ho! It seems that miss Lane has gotten a bit too inspired by Dharlin's impressive displa—' Caldo had begun speaking right as Janice sent another object at the dome with another equally raw scream. The timing was coincidental, as the fighters could not actually hear the commentators during the battle stage, and only the audience could. Janice was simply continuing with the release she needed.

'WHAT?! WHAT'S THE MATTER?!' she yelled at the audience, but they were unfazed by the second attack at the dome, and were now carrying on as usual just watching with interest. It was all the same for Janice as she kept going. 'ISN'T THIS WHAT YOU WANT?! AREN'T YOU ENTERTAINED?!' Another violent toss of one of the objects, and yet the audience was still mostly silent not out of worry but intrigue. They were, in reality, indeed quite entertained by the sudden outburst, eagerly waiting to see what was going to happen at the end of it. 'WHAT?! YOU NEED BLOOD TO CHEER UP?! GUTS?! IS THAT IT?!'

Janice kept spouting whatever came to her mind first without a thought as she kept hurling objects at the dome. 'WHY DON'T YOU COME DOWN HERE TO GET A CLOSER LOOK THEN?!' Another toss. Her bracelet was about to overheat. 'WHAT'S WRONG?! DON'T YOU WANT TO JOIN THE FUN?! HUH?!' Another toss. 'COME DOWN HERE AND LET ME SHOW YOU!!' Finally, her telekinesis bracelet overheated and the pain brought her down on her knees. 'I'LL KILL YOU!! ALL OF YOU!! YOU'LL ALL FUCKING DIE ONCE I GET OUT OF HERE!!' Her throat hurt from screaming. She looked at her illusion bracelet, and tried all kinds of motions with her right hand towards the audience to see if she could unlock something, just anything other than invisibility. Any sort of attack at all would be fine, but nothing happened.

Still on her knees and looking down in disappointment, Janice punched the ground in rage. 'AAAARGH!! FUCK!!' She kept breathing heavily as her vision began to blur excluding two things, those being the gems on her bracelets. Their glow was not only intense, but it was also swallowing everything. Metaphorically, she was still seeing red. Literally, she was seeing only purple and white. Something new was stirring within her. It was different than anything the bracelets had awakened before. Her arms were burning where the bracelets were but without pain. It was not due to overheat. This was unlike anything else she had experienced so far. She was drifting into the unknown but she did not fear it. On the contrary, she had never desired anything this much before, even though she did not even understand what it was.

'W-well, this is quite an outburst Polley, and uhh, although this could be a reason for Miss Lane's disqualification if King Vrollus wishes so... I'm uhh, more intrigued as to whether or not what we're, uhh, w-witnessing... you know...' Caldo stuttered as for the first time in forever, he felt genuinely worried about what he was seeing while commentating a tournament.

Although panic had taken hold of her as well, Polley tried to sound calmer in comparison to keep the audience's stress under control. 'I-I don't think that could be possible, Cal. I-I mean, it's only her second time with the bracelets. And in any case, t-there is a dome over the audience too, as we know. So... as long as nothing summons in-between the... domes...' She

had realized her mistake too late. Most of the audience began scattering, running around the grandstands in panic and arguing with the guards by the exits to let them out.

'Order!' a demanding voice finally echoed. It was King Vrollus, who still looked and sounded as calm as ever. 'My dear citizens and equally dear visitors, please, return to your seats and trust my expertise. I assure you that Miss Thalvim is correct. There is no way for someone to overcharge during their second use of the bracelets, period. There is nothing to worry about, and if something worrisome ever somehow emerges, I will personally order our more than capable guards to handle it. You can trust their skills in such a situation just as I do. So please, do stay calm and enjoy the rest of the show.'

He was not completely honest. In fact, he wanted to believe the exact opposite of what he was saying, that it *was* possible for someone to overcharge during only the second time. He wanted to see it happen so bad that the reason he had even bothered to give that speech was to agitate the human girl even more. He could not give her the satisfaction she needed; he could not let the panicked spectators leave or the battle to be suspended, indicating that she finally managed to make them fear her. No, he needed to keep the audience around her, still watching without a worry to remind her of how pointless her tantrum, how meaningless her struggle, how insignificant her life was. He needed her anger to grow even more. *Come on*, he thought as he carefully kept observing his subject. *Let it out. Show these idiots what they deserve.*

'Janice!' Dharlin yelled, but she did not hear his voice. She was not hearing anything but her own thoughts. *I'll kill them all... I'll show them...* she was repeating in her head as she kept staring at the ground but not seeing it. She was still seeing nothing but the glow.

'JANICE!' the man yelled louder as he finally reached her, and pulled her by the shoulder to snap her out of it. Janice pushed him away instinctively as soon as she felt his grip. Then, just as she was about to attack what she thought to be a guard trying to apprehend her, she realized who it really was. It was the one man that had helped her thus far, and she had almost sent him flying towards the marble wall with a point-blank shockwave in her rage.

Dharlin was sweating profusely and breathing heavily. His body was clearly on the brink of completely giving up by now. It was not hard to tell that the man was barely managing to stand up, let alone walk. Yet, he had walked up to her. Janice felt ashamed, devastated even. She looked at where the man was looking, at her left arm frozen in the middle of the motion of creating a shockwave.

'Easy,' he said. 'It's me.'

Janice lowered her arm and looked at him. 'I... I'm sorry, I don't know what... I—'

'It's alright,' said the man as he grunted and fell on one knee. Janice grabbed him by the shoulders to make sure he was not going to fall, but Dharlin gently pushed her hands away. 'Listen, just focus on fighting from now on, alright? Don't worry about me.'

He pointed to his still-worsening bitemark. The wounds were just as open as when they were fresh, and the skin around them was also blackened. 'None of us can do anything about this now, so forget about me, and just focus on him,' he gestured towards Zat, who was still watching them from his chamber without a word. 'He's the only one left. You can do this.' He was forcing a single sentence among each of his breaths. 'You can win this... alright? They won't get you out until you win... Unless it's to get rid of you... for disobeying... So don't give them that... Don't give them a reason for that... When you're so close... You can do it... Win.'

Janice stopped the man from collapsing on the ground. He was still not dead, but even speaking was difficult now. He wished it was not, but he was at least sure that Janice got the message. *Win...* he said once more in his mind while looking at the teary eyes of the young girl, who was trying to gently lay him on the ground. *Win for all of us. Live.*

Janice stood by Dharlin, unsure of what to do. She thought that it would perhaps be best to end his pain, but could not bring herself to do it. She did not know if the man really wanted that, or if he wanted to hold on for just a little longer despite the pain. She was too scared to ask.

In reality, Dharlin was calm and accepting of his fate at this point. It would be easier for him to go now than wait for another few minutes, but he did not want to make Janice go through another kill just for that. He remembered her first round. The girl had even cried for a beast that had tried to trample her to death with no hesitation. She reminded him of someone.

‘If you’re not going to end his pain,’ a stern but calm voice came from behind Janice, ‘then I can do it for you.’

Janice turned around to see Zat, finally stepping out of his chamber.

‘W-What?’ she said in bafflement while trying to wipe away her tears in-between sobs.

‘He’s wounded,’ Zat said. ‘More than wounded, in fact. He is at the edge of death. You two have fought well together, but that was not your only responsibility towards him. If anyone is to end his suffering, it has to be you.’

The man’s arrogance frustrated Janice enough to put an end to her sobbing, shifting her mood completely. ‘Oh? Well if you cared so much, maybe you could’ve done something instead of sitting in your chamber when he was getting ganged up on. It’s fine when it’s all dishonorable or whatever but you’re not involved in it?’

‘It doesn’t concern me how others fight among themselves,’ Zat responded calmly, but a hint of bitterness could also be heard in his voice. ‘Not anymore, anyway,’ he then added while glancing at the ground, seemingly recalling a painful memory of his.

The man’s somber tone only got another rise out of Janice, however. It was as if he was trying to get her to ask what he meant so he could tell her more details about his painful backstory. It was as if this was some theater play, or hell, as if someone actually gave a flying fuck. This was just the cherry on top of everything. Not only had he the audacity to not involve himself in the battle for its entire duration and then give a whole spiel about what’s right and wrong, but he was now trying to make it all about himself?

‘Who the hell do you think you are?’ Janice snapped.

‘Hmm?’ Zat was genuinely taken aback by the response. He had likely expected something else after Janice had paused for so long.

‘I said who the hell do you think you are, some kind of legendary hero destined to save the world or some shit? You think we’re just little setbacks on your epic quest? You think you look so cool and intimidating sitting in your little chamber like a duck?’

‘What’s a duck?’

Janice did not acknowledge the question. She was too caught up in her own monologuing now to ridicule the man. ‘Oh and right at the end, the main character finally steps in! Get ready for the epic showdown, everyone! Oh, he’s gonna get involved now! Oh shit! What’s he gonna do? What badass power is he gonna use to destroy her in one move?!’

Zat finally let it get to him. There was clear frustration in his voice, even if he did his best to sound as calm as ever. ‘This is not about any of that. If you really think that’s the kind of man that I am, you don’t—’

‘I’ll tell you what kind of man you are,’ Janice cut him off. ‘You’re the type of man that thinks he’s hot shit, when you’re as equally unimportant as any of us here. They didn’t bring you here on a throne and roll out a red carpet for you. You were dragged here with the rest of us like a prisoner. You’re just another piece of trash like the rest of us, and no-one here will remember you when it’s the next year’s tournament. But you don’t have an ounce of self-awareness to see that, can you? You think this is some grand trial set up just for you? You’re nothing to these psychos, just like all of us. Yet you act like one of them, just watching us tear each other apart and whoever comes out alive is worthy enough for you.’

‘That’s enough, you arrogant fool!’ Zat snapped. ‘You have no idea what you are talking about. You are still consumed by your anger, and mindlessly lashing out because of it. This is going to be your last duel; you must stop staining its legacy like this.’

‘Jesus fucking Christ, you’re so committed to this, aren’t you? I’ll tell you what I think of your legacy. I think you’ll forever stay as the most irredeemable piece of shit that ever set its foot in this arena, and that includes all the guards and the audience. You know, your clan definitely made the right call on banishing you.’

Zat’s expression finally changed to match his voice. He was not only audibly angry now, but visibly as well. ‘I think it’s about time somebody taught you a lesson, girl.’

‘Do your worst, daddy’s little vagabond.’

The two began circling each other, staring each other down silently for a while. It did not take long for Zat to cool down. ‘It’s a shame,’ he told Janice. ‘I can tell how much more skilled you are than you look, when you are calm and collected. I would have wanted to see your very best before this ends. Now, I’ll have to put you down like a wild dog instead.’

Janice took deep breaths while listening to him. She had already said all she had to say to him, and gotten it all out of her system. There was no point in escalating it more, especially since Zat was actually right this time. She had to calm herself down and focus in order to fulfill Dharlin’s last wish from her. *It doesn’t matter who he is. It doesn’t matter what he thinks of me or what I think of him. It doesn’t matter who’s right or wrong. All that matters is that he’ll be tough to beat, and I have to survive. I have to win. Focus, Janice.*

Janice tensed up as they stopped circling and stood across from each other. Almost everything fell silent, as even the noise from the audience dimmed to a minimal amount. After a few suspenseful seconds, Janice finally thrusted her left hand all the way forward as quickly as she could for a powerful shockwave while running left. At the same time, she raised her right arm to make a fist. Zat’s reflexes however were quicker and he had seemingly been ready for such a move. There was not much Janice could try with the tools at her disposal, anyway. There was not enough time to grab an object and throw it at him with this short of a distance between them. It was either this or going invisible without an attack, which would be too risky for her. The man had fire and ice bracelets, and he put them to good use as soon as she made her move.

Zat had seen the slightest movement in Janice’s feet as soon as possible, indicating that she would move to her left. He had begun the necessary movement of his left arm to form an ice wall in front of him at that moment. The wall was going to emerge right before the

shockwave would normally hit him, so that problem was solved. The next one was to decide on his next move. Not only did he find projectiles to be unreliable despite having many such options in his arsenal, he was also wary of Janice possibly redirecting them with a shockwave towards him as she had done before against Ludia. No, he was going to deal with this the way he was familiar with, which gave him two options. If he moved to his right around the wall and then tried to reach Janice, it would take shorter for him to do so, but if Janice could find the time to charge up another shockwave and hit him with it from that distance, it could send him flying. If he emerged from the other side of the wall, that would likely be where Janice would not be expecting to see him come from. However, it would take longer for him to reach the girl and she could still likely find enough time to charge up a shockwave after noticing him, leading to the same outcome. But the longer path would also allow him to bait a shockwave from a safe distance so that he could resist being pushed away by it, and then attack before Janice could charge up a new one. He made his decision the moment his wall's surface cracked under the power of Janice's first attack.

Janice panicked as she saw Zat emerge from the further edge of the wall rather than the one closer to her. As if that was not enough, she also saw the man hold his right hand out for a type of attack she did not recognize, adding to her stress. What came out was a wide but slowly travelling stream of fire towards her, like she was being attacked by a giant flamethrower. It covered too large of an area for her to dodge either left or right, so she quickly tried to send out a shockwave towards it and hope for the best. Luckily, the stream moved slowly enough that she could find enough time to analyze all of this and make the necessary motion for a shockwave before the flames could reach her. She managed to redirect them at the last second, which resulted in an even wider stream of flames back towards Zat, which was, unbeknownst to Janice, exactly what the man had expected to happen.

Zat immediately stopped his attack the moment he saw the stream of fire change reverse its direction and grow larger. Protecting his face with an ice shield he summoned around his bracelet, he ran towards the thick cloud of flames, behind which Janice was standing still. She was expecting her opponent to appear from behind the cloud, either on its left or right, if he was even still kicking. Instead, Zat emerged from within the flames, just a few steps away from and directly in front of her. She panicked with the sudden realization of her fatal error. Even though it was only for a second, she had been completely distracted by the remnants of a clash of two powerful attacks, one of which she had not ever seen before. She had stopped running and kept her left arm relaxed, not at the ready for attacking or blocking in any way if needed. If she had, she could have escaped, or she could have even possibly won with another, point-blank shockwave as soon as she saw Zat in front of him. But her opponent had acted unlike anything she had expected to see from him, and played a gamble.

It had never been a gamble from Zat's perspective, however. He had figured out his opponent by now, and known that she would lose her focus for long enough. It was already over for her. With an elegant move of his left hand, he summoned a large crescent of ice, and grabbed it by the end as Janice became visible in front of him. She instinctively blocked the attack with her right bracelet, but rather than it bouncing off with a clash, the entire outer rim of the crescent grinded against the bracelet slower than the efficient slice of a blade, but quick enough that her hand would still be quickly severed if not for the bracelet. Within this second-long window of contact, the bracelet quickly overheated and the heat made the blade shatter.

It was over. Janice could no longer use her illusion bracelet, and to prevent her from using the telekinesis bracelet as well, Zat just covered his right hand in fire without shooting anything. It was the least costly use of his fire powers possible, and he simply used it to grab Janice's left arm with his burning hand. It was not going to be long until his fire bracelet overheated anyway, since he had just used a powerful ranged attack before this. His ice bracelet had almost reached its limit as well, so close to overheating that he could not summon anything that could kill Janice right now, but he only had to wait for a second or two for his victory.

Janice knew as well that everything was over for her. Even though the bracelet would otherwise let her use something, her left arm was completely in Zat's control, who was physically much stronger than she was. And as if that was not enough, she could also feel where he was grabbing burn like hell, even with the armor doing its best to prevent most of the damage. She kept screaming from the pain in tears. It would perhaps be bearable if it was just one arm, but the other was also burning from the bracelet's overheat, and to top it all off, she knew now that she had definitely lost. This was the end. She made one last attempt to swing at Zat's head with her right arm, attempting to burn his face with the overheated bracelet's surface.

Zat blocked it using his left arm, not with his own bracelet but with the part of his arm in-between the bracelet and the elbow. Although it hurt, the armor was enough to protect his arm, and he had to make sure that his bracelet kept cooling down for just another moment. Mere pain had never been able to best him anyway, as the rest of his torso that was still on fire was already a proof of. The damage did not matter, either. The burning was going to end by itself in a second, right as his ice bracelet was also going to have cooled off enough. He was going to endure it all for just another half of a second, and then summon an ice blade to finish this once and for all. Just about...

*'The nanoscales detect the incoming threat and react instantly to clutter up more at the estimated point of impact just as you are hit, reducing the damage significantly,'* Janice remembered the exact words she had heard the first time she wore the reactive armor, as she saw blood spurt out. It was not from her body. *'They can also do the opposite to loosen up and scatter more if needed to leave virtually no gaps in your defense, making it so that you don't just burn to death instantly if you're on fire for instance. It is much more penetrable by precise heavy attacks that way though since the nanoscales can't clump up in time when they're all so separated.'* Of course. That explained how the ice spike that Janice was now staring at, its bloody tip only inches away from her face, had been able to pierce through Zat's chest just as the flames disappeared. The gems on his bracelets stopped glowing as he coughed up blood before collapsing on the floor. The spike shattered into its non-existent pieces as he hit the ground, leaving behind a huge hole from which spilled a great amount of blood and gore around the corpse.

Dharlin stared at thec corpse from a distance. He had done it. He had saved his savior. *No debts left unpaid...* he told himself one last time. Now, he was really ready to go.

*'Win...'* he could hardly manage one last time after Janice rushed over to him. She gently crouched beside him, watching the faintest glow on his bracelets and the dim light still somewhat emanating from the appendage on his head finally all snuff out together.

'I will,' she promised silently while closing the man's semi-transparent eyelids, dwelling on his last words in deep agony. In contrast, the crowd cheered like never before, as if to mock her and everyone that had died so that she could live, just to hear this.

'I can't believe it!' Caldo screamed into his microphone. 'What an unbelievable show, ladies and gentlemen! One of unexpected alliances, sacrifices and even heartbreak! And with the young Janice Lane from Earth winning against such an outstanding lineup of opponents, each seemingly much stronger and more experienced than her, yet again! Even with such an unorthodox pair of bracelets! I am at a loss for words right now! What a fantastic battle! Absolutely brilliant!'

Vrollus appeared on the screens, thankfully ending the commentator's speech before it could go on for any longer. 'The winner is Janice Lane from Earth.'

The monolith then emerged from the middle of the arena, and the usual robotic voice echoed like always: 'Please return your bracelets.'

Janice looked at the monolith, but did not make a move towards it. She looked back at Dharlin's corpse instead, and got closer to his face. 'I'm sorry,' she silently whispered to him. 'I swear I'll make them pay for this.'

The crowd had somehow begun to stop being so noisy after seeing her ignore the monolith the first time, and they almost all fell silent once they witnessed Janice get up, glance at the monolith, and do the same a second time. She began walking in the other direction, towards Zat's body. Then, for the first time, she heard a hint of worry in Caldo's voice, making it sound slightly tolerable for once.

'Uhh, ladies and gentlemen, it appears that our champion is not willing to return her bracelets as of now, which should be a breach of the rules,' he nervously spoke. 'I suppose we'll wait for King Vrollus' signal to determine whether the guards should interfere or not.'

'She seems to be approaching one of the fallen warriors, Cal. What do you think is her purpose?'

Janice listened in disbelief as she approached Zat, as skeptical as humanly possible of the commentators' confusion. Surely, they had to know what was happening and were just trying to excite the audience. The interesting thing was that the audience itself was seemingly playing along, watching her more silently than ever as if they were without a clue of what her intentions were. But surely, if this was the fifty somethingth tournament, someone before her had to have done what she was about to do. There was no other way, right? She hoped that it was the audience and commentators forcing themselves to feel excited over a somewhat rarer occurrence than usual for the tournament, despite actually being familiar with the concept of paying respects to the dead, at least enough to recognize it. Surely, they had to at least value their own people.

'Well, I'm not sure, Polley,' Caldo finally answered his coworker's question after a nervous pause. 'But it seems that King Vrollus might have recognized her intentions as he seems to have made up his mind.'

'Let her,' Vrollus' voice silenced him, taking both commentators aback and leaving only loud whispers to be heard among the audience. This time, Janice did not actually think it was an act on their part, as the young king had talked now in a different tone than he had during his previous speeches, clearly noticeable even in only two words. It was stern but curious. Janice could see, as their eyes met from even such a distance, that although looking as devoid

of emotion as ever, the man was now genuinely interested in her for some reason. In contrast, however, she vengefully stared at him without a single hint of curiosity to learn anything about him. It did not matter. Nothing he could tell or show her at this point, especially a gesture as simple as letting her pay her respects to the fallen, no matter how the sick audience could see it as a shining beacon of honor or whatever he wanted it to be seen as, would be enough to earn her sympathy or respect. His time was going to come.

For now, what was important was for her to bury the memory of those that had been killed in this last battle deep into her mind, so that she would never forget the promise she had just made to Dharlin. That is why she crouched next to Zat and performed the same ritual of respect for him, closing his eyelids and promising him in whispers that she would make their abductors pay for what they had done, apologizing also for what she had spewed out earlier about him. Perhaps, it was because she could not trust herself otherwise. She did not know yet whether or not she could trust herself to act on her promise afterwards even if she did manage to win the final stage. Would she not lose all of her strength, confidence, quick reactions and so much more the moment she lost all access to the bracelets, after all? Would her promises be enough to push her towards risking her life in order to put an end to the tournament? Could she possibly go up against powers that seemingly controlled a whole galaxy that she did not even yet fully understand?

The crowd suddenly began to cheer again after realizing what Janice had done for Zat, along with Caldo beginning to throw empty compliments at her. ‘What sportsmanship, ladies and gentlemen! Did you see that? Not only is she a winner, but she shows massive respect for those that she beat as well! I say she’s well fit for her potential upcoming federal citizenship with that attitude.’

The phrase “federal citizenship” reminded Janice of the supposed fortune she was going to also get as a reward if she could win, and eased her mind a bit as she got back up and began walking towards Ludia’s corpse. *Of course... I could use that to start.* No matter how much time it would take to do so, she was going to find out how she could use that to find people that could help her with her plan. She guessed that if there could be one thing in common with Earth and this Federation, it had to be that money talked louder than anything and everyone had a price. She comforted herself with the thought and let it go for now. She did not need to worry about any of that yet.

She visited the rest of the corpses one-by-one, even though none of them had eyelids to close, and promised the same thing to each one of them. However, with her mind at ease now about how she could keep her promise, she had not been able to ignore the irritating, empty compliments thrown at her way by the commentators and the ecstatic cheers of the audience accompanying her during the entire process. By the time she was done and finally walking towards the monolith, her blood was boiling as she kept gritting her teeth and clenching her fists to refrain herself from obliterating the drone flying right next to her to film her every move.

She finally arrived at the monolith and placed her hands inside the two holes, preparing for her suppressed emotions to be freed again and hit her like a truck. As she felt a sudden wave of exhaustion, she did her best to not let the surge of emotions affect her, though it was not as severe as the last time. Still, she could not prevent herself from falling on her knees, and a few tears still ran down her face despite her best efforts to stay strong. The sudden

devastation she felt as soon as the bracelets were removed was still immense. Although she was slowly getting used to all of this, she obviously still had a long way to go, and that long way was possibly going to disappear after the final stage, anyway, instead leaving its place to a path of organizing rebellions and fighting more conventional battles without magic.

As Janice locked eyes with the two guards approaching her, her willingness to walk that path, no matter what, only increased. They held her arms and began walking her back to her cell, meeting no resistance by her at all. She only kept repeating the same thing in her head over and over as her blood was still boiling at the same temperature, if not even higher after being released of the bracelets. *I promise, I'll make them pay.*

# PRIMA SCALE OVERVIEW

SPECIES>ALL>PRIMASCALE

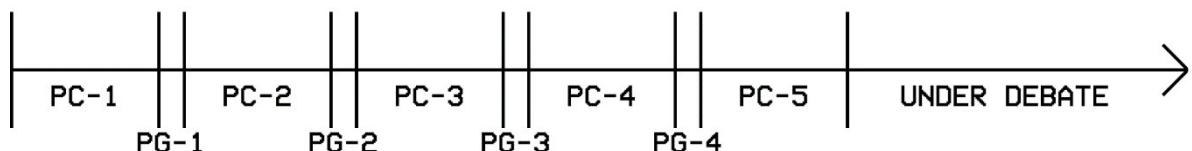
CLEARANCE LEVEL: 1

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The Prima Scale was first proposed by Dr. Hartunar Prima in 468 P.F. and was accepted in the same year by the Federal Council as an official classification system for all known species across the universe based on their level of advancement. Although it has gone through minimal changes in its classes' definitions since its inception, the system still divides the species into 9 classes overall. These classes are briefly explained below along with a simplified visualization of the Prima Scale. You may navigate to the individual files on these classes for further details and full lists of species belonging to them.

PC - PRIMA CONSTUS: Main stages of advancement. These intervals are where most of the known species currently reside. These species either show no signs of advancing to the next stage in the foreseeable future or are evidently doomed to extinction before they can advance to the next stage.

PG - PRIMA GATUS: Intervals where species that show clear signs of advancing from one stage to the other reside. These intervals are much less populated, with only tens of PG-1 species and three PG-2 species currently monitored.



PC-1 CLASS SPECIES: Species that show no capability for speech or conscious advancement, and are rather dependent on biological evolution as their only form of progress towards the next stage. PC-1 is the stage that statistically always lasts far longer than any other, and it is the most populated stage with hundreds of billions of species across the galaxy. Countless animal, plant and bacteria species can be given as examples.

PG-1 CLASS SPECIES: Species that display noticeable development patterns likely to lead to the first steps of conscious advancement even if primitive in the foreseeable future, with a high chance of advancing to the PC-2 stage before their extinction.

**PC-2 CLASS SPECIES:** Species that are capable of speech and of conscious advancement independent of their biological evolution. These species do not show any capability of travelling to other solar systems beyond their own by surpassing light speed in the foreseeable future or before their extinction. Examples include Humans, Kroans and Suians.

**PG-2 CLASS SPECIES:** Species that show promise of surpassing light speed and travelling to other solar systems beyond their own in the near future and before their extinction. The three species currently recognized as PG-2 species are all likely to be members of the Galactic Federation in the next 250 years according to the joint analyses of researchers and prediction algorithms.

**PC-3 CLASS SPECIES:** Species that are able to travel to and from anywhere in their own galaxy, but show no signs of being able to travel between different galaxies in the near future or before their extinction. Although it is commonly debated whether they are really PC-3 or PG-3 class species, all of the species that are current members of the Galactic Federation are officially recognized as PC-3 class species.

**PG-3 CLASS SPECIES:** Species that show clear promise of being able to travel between different galaxies in the near future and before their extinction. Officially, there are no known species identified as PG-3 class species.

**PC-4 CLASS SPECIES:** Species that are able to travel between galaxies within the known universe but still show no signs of being able to prolong their extinction or the death of the universe indefinitely in the foreseeable future. There are no known species identified as PC-4 class species.

**PG-4 CLASS SPECIES:** Species that show signs of being able to influence universal-scale events and prolong their existence indefinitely in the foreseeable future. There are no known species identified as PG-4 class species.

**PC-5 CLASS SPECIES:** Species that are able to fully control the known universe and manipulate it to their will, effectively being able to prevent its death and indefinitely prolong their own existence. There are no known species identified as PC-5 class species.

**NOTE:** Although further classes are proposed by some, they are still being debated due to the lack of empirical evidence and theoretical consensus. Researchers and council members in favor of the proposal back it up using the widely accepted Universal Architects Theory, since it suggests that there may exist species able to manipulate and outlast multiple universes.

## **IV – A Promise Fulfilled**

‘Nice job,’ one of the guards said as he pushed Janice into her cell. ‘You sure showed them, and then showed the audience who they should root for with that little act of respect, too. Though, I don’t see why you’d do that. It’s not like the audience will help you win. Take that sword master guy today. His 70% sure as hell didn’t help him now, did it?’

Janice looked at the man with no sign of hostility or frustration, but of just genuine confusion. She felt as if she was going crazy with every day that she spent on this planet, as things continued to make less and less sense. Even putting the aliens and magical bracelets aside, the vicious brutalities she kept witnessing in the arena each day only seemed to evoke more signs of joy or apathy from both the audience and the guards. As if he was making small talk, the man was casually describing the events that were probably going to make her traumatized for the rest of her life. She got reminded for a moment of how even looking at any real footage of death would be enough to disturb people back home. This place did not even make sense as a different planet with its own culture and traditions. It was as if she was in a completely different dimension instead; an alternative reality where societies advanced in a fully incomprehensible and illogical pattern. Completely contrasting their clear technological superiority, these aliens reminded Janice of bloodthirsty peasants from the medieval ages watching someone get burnt at the stake or skinned alive as their weekend pastime. She wondered if any of them were against the Tournament, and if even children was allowed to watch this bloodshed.

‘You want to say something or what? Don’t keep staring at me like that if you don’t.’

Janice just then realized how she had been staring at the man without saying anything for the last few seconds. Now that she was not wearing bracelets, her thoughts were back at their regular speed, taking much longer than the blink of an eye to form in her head. Knowing she wanted to get some answers but unsure of where to start, ‘I don’t get it,’ was all she managed.

‘Don’t get what?’ the guard scowled impatiently.

Janice guessed that if she asked any of the most obvious questions on her mind, she would again get the usual answers that she was tired of hearing. She did not need to hear about how worthless and primitive she was for the fifteenth time. She thus carried on with another thing that had been on her mind.

‘Why me?’ she asked. ‘And why everyone else here? I mean, have you ever been to Earth? I mean... sure, I’ve had a rough life, but do you know how many more people have it even worse? If you were looking for someone with a sad background, surely you could’ve found a better candidate. Hell, you could’ve even found someone that would be *willing* to risk their life here for your rewards instead of me. So, why didn’t you?’

‘Oh, sweetheart,’ the guard said in a condescending tone, only to continue with an answer that Janice should have honestly expected. ‘It’s not so important who has it the worst among you. Your lives are all accepted as meaningless and miserable, regardless of how they would rank against each other. You think that princess really had it that bad, for instance? She was *royalty*, and she always got what she wanted. Sure, maybe her life did have problems, but there were likely many more under her family’s rule that suffered more. I mean hell, she might’ve even got some of the frustration out of her system using a few “arrogant” or

“ungrateful” peasants, and I just heard that from a higher-up friend who barely skimmed her actual file, you know? Did you think about *those* poor souls while paying your respects to her?’

‘And how did you decide *this* was what she deserved as punishment?’ Janice challenged him. ‘And why bother being her prosecutor if she was just as lowly as the rest of us to you? You’ve even let her hurt more people on top of those poor souls, so how does that justify what you’ve done?’

‘There’s nothing to justify, and there was nothing to punish her for. None of you were picked because we felt anything towards any of you in particular, whether that be pity, disgust, or whatever you may think of. Each of you were rather selected from a list of specimens our observers found to be perfect for gluing people to their screens. Your story was sad enough for the audience, and you were added to that list because of some other qualities combined with it. In your case, I would say it’s because you’re hot.’

Janice paused for a second as a chill ran down her spine. ‘What?’

‘You heard me. There are a lot of factors included in why someone gets picked, but I’ll give you a basic rundown: Some candidates are picked because they have combat experience and it’s fun to watch them work; some are picked because they look scary or badass; some are picked because they look weak, so it’s even more exciting to see when they win against all odds; and some are picked because they’re, well, attractive. I’d say it was probably the last two of those for you. We seem to have enough scary and experienced fighters this year, anyway. We were probably short on eye candy by the time it was Earth’s turn, so they picked you. And look at where you are now; you’ve made it to the final stage as a weak human. Oh, I cannot even begin to imagine what some degenerates must be fantasizing about you right now.’

Janice felt violated, folding her arms around her body as if she was trying to hide it. It made the guard let out a chuckle in amusement. ‘Well, I’ll leave you alone to prepare for tomorrow if you don’t have any more questions.’

‘Please do,’ Janice hissed.

‘Alright. Good luck, then.’

Right after the guards left, Janice noticed Saleena looking at her with a hopeless expression. The girl did not shy away this time when their eyes met. Janice approached the panels of her own cell, and put a hand on one of them as if she was holding out to her. Seeing the gesture, Saleena did the same. They were finally open to each other, just before it would be too late for it. Until now, at least one of them had always ignored the other to be ready for what could eventually happen. Yet now, neither of them was. Neither of them had the will to do it despite barely knowing each other, not even having shared a word before.

*I can’t... Janice told herself while still looking at the girl’s big eyes. I won’t. Not again. Not even to survive.* But she then hesitated and looked down. *But... I made a promise.*

After a moment of indecisiveness, she looked back at Saleena again with a different, determined expression. *Then we’ll find a way, she thought. We’ll find a way to make it work.*

She tried to communicate, forming simple sentences and exaggerating each syllable so that Saleena could read her lips, while also using her hands to describe what she was saying. ‘You. and. me...’ She pointed towards Saleena and then to herself. ‘...don’t. have. to...’ She held her arms in front of herself diagonally from each other, in the shape of an X. ‘...kill. each.

other.' She quickly ran a finger across her throat to depict the act of slitting it. 'You. and. me...' She pointed towards Saleena and then to herself again. '...can. team. up.' She held one of her hands with the other tightly and in front of herself.

Saleena nodded to show that she understood, but her uncertainty could easily be read from her face. She was unsure of whether it was a good idea or not.

But Janice was determined still. 'You. and. me...' She pointed towards Saleena and then to herself once more. '...will. have. bracelets...' She held her left wrist and then right wrist to imply the bracelets that they would be wearing tomorrow, and then moved her hands as if she was shooting projectiles from them. '...to. force. them...' She moved as if she was pushing someone against her cell's wall. '...to. a. bargain.' She rubbed her fingers together. 'Two. winners.' She showed two fingers with her right hand while flexing her left arm. 'You. And. me.' She finally pointed again towards Saleena and then to herself.

But the girl still seemed uncertain. Tired and beginning to feel hopeless again, Janice stopped elaborating her syllables and gestures. 'That's the best I can come up with,' she said in a defeated manner.

Saleena looked down for a moment to think, then lifted her head up to nod in approval. Relieved, Janice nodded back in excitement. 'Thank you,' she said, feeling grateful for finally having someone on her side. 'We'll make it out of here, don't worry.'

Saleena could not perfectly read that last sentence, but understood the main idea. She was similarly grateful to have made an ally, or perhaps even a friend for the future if their plan worked out. God knew she desperately needed one.

The two girls left each other to themselves after a final exchange of reassuring smiles, each sitting down on her bed and watching her screen while nervously thinking about whether she made the right decision or not.

Caldo and Polley were talking about the battles fought today as usual, but Janice could not concentrate. Not that she wanted to, anyway. If she had not been sick of hearing them before, today had definitely done it. All she was listening to was her own thoughts about her supposed alliance with Saleena. *Will that really work?* she wondered. *Can we take all those guards if we need to? No, we won't have to. There's no way they'll watch their beloved advanced citizens get killed by a couple of lowly creatures like us just to follow the tournament rules. But then, will they accept our terms? Will they just let us both have the prize or share it? Or will they just wait until one of us kills the other? Maybe they have some other way of killing us both besides the guards, like filling the arena with gas or something, or some way to force one of us to kill the other. Would that even be accepted though? ...Of course it would be for these bastards.*

She began turning on her bed in stress while thinking of bleaker and bleaker scenarios. *Maybe they'll threaten us? They know where our families live, probably. She also has that dragon. They could probably threaten her with that if they haven't killed it already. Maybe they'll just leave us at the arena until we give up and decide to fight. Shit. Maybe one of us could pretend to be dead? Do they check the corpses in case they're still alive before taking them? Do they even take them with their bracelets, or do they take them off first? Even with the bracelets though, would it even work? We don't know where they take the dead, and it might even lead to a more painful death if it doesn't work... Whatever. I guess we'll go with the plan and see what happens tomorrow. I should probably just keep watching the*

*tournament to see who we're going to be up against.* With that final thought, Janice turned her attention back to the screen and kept watching the tournament for the rest of the day, after which she showered and went to sleep.

The next day, Janice was rubbing her hands and tapping her leg in stress while waiting for the giant recap of the two previous stages to end. Her mind had naturally been busy since she had woken up, almost working as fast as it did with the bracelets on. It was, however, much more exhausting and inefficient without them. Her thoughts had become cyclical as she had run out of any new possible scenarios to imagine by now, or at least, it felt like it. She had tried to take into account every possible bracelet combination for each combatant and every possible chamber lineup, which only led to the analysis of each individual case to be only as vast and deep as a teaspoon. It was not like she was unaware of it, though. She was merely trying to keep herself away from even worse thoughts at this point. She had to believe in herself and in Saleena.

At last, the broadcast began with Caldo and Polley enthusiastically greeting the audience, after which they quickly moved onto the conditions of the final stage. They began with the layout of the arena, showing the positions of the finalists' chambers and the objects for telekinesis on a diagram. Janice felt relieved for a moment to see that her and Saleena's chambers were going to be adjacent to each other, but what the commentators said right after immediately took that away.

'Of course, as always, the five fighters will all be wearing master bracelets on both of their arms, being able to utilize any element at any time they want to,' Caldo stated casually.

'WHAT!?' Janice let out. Before she could hear more, however, two guards arrived and opened the door to her cell. She tried taking a deep breath to calm her heartbeat as they called for her to get ready. She could not believe that this was the first time, just right before being taken to the final stage, that she received the most important piece of information regarding it. She could guess that everyone in the audience had already known about it beforehand, and doing their job for the audience first at the end of the day, it was not too absurd that the commentators had not found it necessary to bring up until now. But Janice just knew that was not it. It had never kept them from constantly repeating every single thing fifty times before, no matter how important or minute, and no matter if it had already passed or was coming. No, this one had to be intentional. It was visible from the guards' smirks as they saw her expression. She took another deep breath as she got up, and told herself that it was fine. It was not like she was the only one that had not known of this beforehand. The playing field was still even. In fact, it had to be more even than it had been in the previous rounds. Her heartbeat finally slowed down to not a regular but at least a manageable pace.

Saleena was also being escorted out of her room by two other guards, and was seemingly in a similar state of mind based on her expression. They exchanged a brief but meaningful look before Janice stepped out of the cell to take her place in-between her own guards.

Everyone walked in silence for a bit, with Saleena and her guards leading in front, a short distance away from Janice and hers.

'Are you nervous?' one of Janice's guards asked her.

'What do you think?' Janice answered coldly.

The man chuckled. ‘You know what, I think you might have this one. Everyone says you humans are weak but there’s something about you. I could name more than a few species that look stronger on the average but have never won before, but we had two humans so far become champions. Was it the... 17<sup>th</sup> and... 43<sup>rd</sup> tournaments? Something like that. One of them was a girl like you; the more recent one. You remind me of her. No-one was expecting her to even pass the first stage either, let alone win. They began feeding you differently in the recent years or something?’

Janice noticed that the chamber she was being escorted to was straight ahead this time by the looks of it, as she saw Saleena and her guards take a right turn in front of it and disappear. This one had to be prepared for her, then.

‘Can’t say. I just eat what I find tasty. I’m a savage like that,’ she answered arrogantly. She had gotten comfortable around the guards by now. She was still nervous, but not as much as any of the previous times she had passed this corridor. She was used to it, and knowing that this was going to be the last time no matter how the final round went, it even made her feel somewhat nostalgic. Every single cell around them was now empty, just like the classrooms she would pass by on the final day of the school year when she arrived later than everyone else to get her report. Despite everything that had happened, the arrival of the summer break would still remain as a force powerful enough to cheer her up no matter what. This was the first time Janice realized how much she missed it, enough to even search for it in these lifeless steel dungeons, apparently. She wondered what her classmates were up to now, and what they would think about her if they knew the things she had done here. What would her parents think if she ever saw them again? She really wished they were here right now, even though that was wrong.

The guard laughed. He seemed to have liked her answer about food. ‘We are not so different in that regard!’ he said joyfully.

‘You’d be surprised how well some of you would fit in among humans.’

‘Eh, I’ll pass. Anyways, it’s time to see if my predictions come true. Come on and get inside the chamber. Let’s get this over with already. You’ll only get more nervous the more we wait, and I don’t want my chances to diminish.’

‘Played a bet?’

‘A safe one. I only need you to not be the first to die. Let’s make sure you’re prepared well, and it should be easy enough for you.’

‘How thoughtful,’ Janice said sarcastically as she stepped into the chamber. As usual, the two guards took their places inside the adjacent cabin behind the window.

‘So, as far as I’m informed, you get nervous by us looking at you undress, so... I’m going to turn away while you do so. Just tell me when you’re ready to get scanned for the armor,’ the guard spoke in a mostly friendly tone and turned his back to Janice, his hand ready on the scanner switch.

*This one seems chill enough, at least,* Janice thought about him while she was undressing. ‘I’m ready,’ she announced once she was done.

As usual, the scanner stretched the reactive armor over Janice’s body.

‘Tell me when you’re dressed,’ the guard said.

‘I’m dressed,’ Janice said a minute later.

‘Good.’ The guard and his silent coworker turned back to her. As Janice had come to expect by now, one of the guards was again the talkative one while the other just listened and followed instructions.

‘Then let’s move onto the bracelets. You’re getting a special treat today since this is the final stage.’

‘So I’ve heard,’ Janice said, showing neither hesitation nor excitement this time as she instinctively approached the two circular holes as soon as they opened up on the wall, without even a need for the guard to prompt her beforehand. She was familiar with everything by now, and simply did not want to waste any time. The sooner she figured out these “master bracelets,” the better it was. She put her hands inside the holes and waited as she listened to the robotic voice go over the steps as usual. She was not as ready as she had thought she was, however, when the cold metal finally embraced her arms once more. Her earlier indifference disappeared in an instant, as the sensations were truly something else this time. It felt so much better than either time before. She pulled out her hands in excitement and looked at her new weapons.

This time, each arm had a black bracelet on with its slot filled with... a fire gem? No. The color was the same, but there was something different about the glow. It was mostly the same scarlet red of the fire gem she was familiar with, but she could barely make out tiny reflections of different, familiar but duller colors mixed in when she looked closely.

‘Master bracelets are costly,’ the guard began explaining. ‘That’s because it takes a lot of energy to be able to even cut through those gems, let alone grind them into equally tiny pieces.’

‘Grind them?’

‘What you see as a fire gem right now is actually a perfect amalgamation of all five different types of elemental gems used for the bracelets,’ the guard kept explaining ecstatically as if he was rambling about a passion of his. ‘There is an exactly equal amount of each in there. All the pieces are weaved in a perfect pattern so that each element is equally distributed inside the condensed mass that they make up, resembling a single gem. The gem pieces of the element that is currently in use are the ones that glow, and with the others being inactive, it makes it so that the glow overall resembles that of... well, a fire gem in your case.’

Janice was getting interested herself, and felt glad for the guard’s lengthy explanations rather than bothered. In fact, she forgot about the urgency of her training for a moment and asked about further trivia rather than practicing.

‘That does sound costly,’ she remarked. ‘I’m guessing then that all these amalgamated “gems” are identical and reused tournament after tournament?’

‘Precisely,’ the guard began another long dump of trivia, stoked by Janice’s interest. ‘As I’ve said, even cutting one of these gems the right way is costly enough by itself. Luckily for us, as another part of their mystery, they are all found in pieces of that exact shape and size buried into the surface of the planet they come from, so we don’t have to process them in any way for any other type of bracelet. Another reason why most think that they’re created by the Architects. It just doesn’t make much sense as a natural formation.’

‘The Architects?’ Janice asked.

‘It’s...’ the guard paused for a moment, trying to keep himself from going on a tangent about a completely different and long subject on top of his already-lengthy explanations. He

knew that he still had a job to do, and wanted to do it properly for a finalist like Janice, whom he had taken a liking to. He had just wanted to play it safe with the bet. In actuality, he wanted her to win rather than just survive for long enough.

‘...probably not something I should go into right now,’ he finished, trying to prevent Janice’s disappointed expression from getting to him. ‘Anyway, what I was getting to is that the gems are always reused and never destroyed or recycled; what customizes the bracelets accordingly to the combatant each time is rather the shape of the bracelets. You can thank the molding and melting processes for that.’

‘And I guess another reason is that one planet full of these things still makes them rare when the whole galaxy has their eyes on them?’ Janice inquired further. Practicing was not a priority for her at this point, since everything that had managed to keep her alive until now was what she had discovered during combat or from the broadcasts, anyway. She was already familiar with four different types of powers as well. All she had to learn was one more and how to switch between them. It could wait until right before the battle. Right now, she was instead dedicated to learn all that she could about the bracelets. She figured that this could be her last chance to do so before getting out of this place, either by winning or by force. Things were not going to be pretty with either route if she wanted to keep both Saleena and herself alive by the end of it, and it was probably not going to be so easy to find a friendly and knowledgeable informant like this once they were out.

‘Exactly, which makes those master “gems” on your bracelets even more precious as a result,’ the guard answered. ‘In fact, there are only 10 pairs of them in total. Five for the finalists to use in tournaments, four for the royal family, and one for the highest-ranking officer of the Xeilon Army, Grand Admiral Ghaun.’

Janice froze for a couple of seconds while trying to process that last sentence. ‘Y-you don’t only use these in tournaments?’ she asked nervously, playing out imaginary battles in her head against hundreds of armored and trained Xeilon soldiers using all kinds of bracelets, and losing each one. Holding out against a few people armed with them in a large arena was already hard enough by itself. She could have begun feeling dizzy even without what the guard said next.

‘Of course not. We also set up a few trial chambers every year for tourists,’ the man listed yet another way in which the magical weapons were utilized. ‘They get to try out the bracelets for themselves, but in a controlled environment with no live targets and under heavy watch and protection, of course. It’s overlooked how much revenue that makes, honestly. Despite being absurdly expensive as you may guess, the lines never get short for the whole five days mostly thanks to an army of snobs from Thalsaar. They get hooked on it too, returning each day just to wear them for another five minutes more. Still, after wearing them yourself, I’m guessing that shouldn’t sound too crazy to you.’

‘It doesn’t,’ Janice confirmed, but her mind was still on the army she was going to have to face. ‘What about the army and... was it the royal family? You seem to use these things a lot for how rare they are. Why aren’t *you* equipped with bracelets?’

She could tell by a momentary change in the guard’s expression that her question had upset him, but nevertheless, the man answered with no hard feelings. ‘It’s only the high-ranking officers of the army that are permitted to wear and use bracelets. And the royal family, well... that one has more... arbitrary reasons rather than practical ones. Mostly the

king's decisions, really- the previous king's. He was the one who discovered the gems, and he remained fascinated with them until his death, ordering for a pair of master bracelets to be made for each member of his family.'

Janice had already felt relieved the moment she heard him say "only the high-ranking officers." She was calm enough to redirect the conversation elsewhere now. 'What happened to them?' she asked about the royal family.

'To the family?'

'Yeah. If he was the previous king, that's his son up there, isn't it? King... what was it?'

'Vrollus?'

'Right, Vrollus. Why is he the only one up there? Where's the rest of the family?'

'Well, that's... a bit of a long story.' The guard hesitated for a moment to say anything else, and Janice could tell from the shift in his tone that it was a sore subject. Not only that, but he now also seemed even somewhat apologetic and regretful with the way he was looking down.

A familiar beeping sound interrupted both of their thoughts, snapping them back to the task at hand (practicing) which they had now failed. Janice did not mind or even see it as a failure, really. The same could not be said for the guard, however.

'O-Oh, shit. We got carried away. You were supposed to—'

'Don't worry,' Janice told him in a reassuring tone as the panels rose and began moving, on their way to encapsulate the chamber. 'You've done much more than I could ask for. I'll practice on the way up. Thank you.'

The guard looked confused by that statement. 'Thank me for what?'

'For everything you've told me, and... Listen, I don't know about your... accomplice there,' she gestured towards the silent guard, who gave her a neutral glance without saying anything. 'But I can tell you're at least different.'

'Different?' the guard asked as the chamber finally became encapsulated and began rising.

'Just...' Janice hesitated if she should finish her sentence, worried about making her intentions clear. But she felt obligated to repay the guard for being so cooperative and helpful without a sign of adversity unlike the previous ones. She wished that she could see his face, but for different reasons this time. *Fuck it.* 'Just... if you ever see me again, let me know it's you, okay? Signal it to me somehow.'

The window, behind which the guard was listening to her in confusion, completely disappeared just as she finished her sentence. She could not hear a response or see a reaction from the man, and she was not even sure if he had heard her until the end. *Whatever.* She had no time to think about whether what she had just blurted out was going to bite her in the ass, end up working as intended, or cause something else she could not foresee right now. She had merely a minute before the chamber would rise above the surface.

She looked at her bracelets. Both gems were still glowing red. *Okay, I gotta figure out how to switch,* she thought. First, she tried simply replicating the movements necessary to create spikes and claws with ice powers, hoping that the bracelets would automatically switch to that element as soon as she prompted them with the easily recognizable movements. But it did not happen. She only ended up leaving trails of fire on the air that disappeared in an instant, useless for anything.

*Okay. Not like that, then. At least they didn't heat up much. Maybe it has nothing to do with movement.* She looked back at the gems. *You guys are magic anyway, aren't you? That's how you get inside my head and tweak it, so what if the key's in there?*

She took a deep breath and focused, stretching both of her hands ahead so that both of the bracelets were in her view as she aimed. *I want to...* She reduced everything in her mind to a single thought, or rather a desire. She did not have many good memories of her dreams, as nightmares had always been much more common for her. But even so, she had still been able to lucid dream a couple of times before, recognizing the dreamscape as a product of her own mind and shaping it to her will as soon as she could. She had given herself superpowers before, with merely thoughts and desires. She knew how to do it; all she had to do was breach that barrier of common sense which told her she could obviously not do that in real life. She had to convince herself that this was a dream more than it was real life with all of its aliens and magical bracelets. She had to believe that just like in her dreams, she was in control.

*I want to shoot lightning,* she finally finished her thought, her subconscious filling in the necessary details as it would do in her dreams. It chose her dominant hand. The lightning did not summon, but it was enough for Janice to finally see a golden glow on her right bracelet instead of a red one. As usual, the rest had to come down to movement. She performed the same motion she had been performing to shoot fireballs and ice orbs, which indeed worked for this element as well. A golden-colored, bright ball of electricity shot forward like a projectile, similarly sized but significantly faster than the fireballs.

Janice could have thought about a lot of things as the projectile hit the wall and made a sound reminiscent of something being fried by a power line. She could have noted the ever-so-slight increase of the gem's golden glow and confirmed to herself that it was a low-cost attack like its distant fiery cousin, probably having the exact same cost, even. She could have been baffled at the perfectly shaped ball of electricity moving freely through the air like magic, slower than electricity should ever be able to. But she was already used to managing her magical resources and witnessing their mysterious powers by now. What had instead blown her mind away this time was the realization of how powerful these "master bracelets" really were. It had washed over her the moment she saw the golden-colored projectile.

*That is literally a fucking game changer,* she thought to herself while watching the surging electricity dance all around her right hand. She recalled how that same bracelet had just let her shoot fireballs moments ago, and now...

*You really saved the best show for last, haven't you? You twisted motherfuckers,* Janice thought to herself in a mix of excitement and fear. There was endless potential with a pair of these bracelets, yet it was not only for her to take advantage of, but for each of her enemies to do so as well. *At least I'll have three of them and not four,* she comforted herself as sunlight finally broke in.

As soon as her chamber rose high enough for her to be able to see the other chambers, she looked for Saleena's. As it turned out, she was looking for hers as well. The two girls gave each other once more a brief but meaningful look, not nodding or making any other type of gesture yet so that the rest of their opponents could not notice what was going on for now. Janice felt glad that they were able to think so synchronously with such little planning beforehand.

‘It is time, ladies and gentlemen, for the final showdown! Here we all are for the moment you have been waiting for!’ Caldo announced enthusiastically. ‘The final stage and battle of the 56<sup>th</sup> Annual Power Brace Tournament! Looking at the audience, we can already see how the excitement is through the roof as always.’

It really was through the roof, but Janice was used to the disgusting nature of both the audience and the commentators at this point. It did not bother her so much to hear the obnoxious cheering of the crowd anymore. Plus, she had more to worry about. She kept switching the elements of both of her bracelets and using all of the different kinds of abilities she knew for practice. In a rhythm, but one that was slow enough to keep either of her bracelets from overheating, she summoned ice spikes, fire cyclones and shockwaves one after the other while listening to the rest of Caldo’s speech.

‘This has been one hell of a tournament if I do say so myself. We have such an interesting set of finalists this year, and looking at their performances so far, anything could happen at this point. Now, we know that you have all been anticipating this battle and know the five final contestants very well by now, so we will not be spending any time introducing them to you for the third time. Instead, we’ll be getting right into the action after Polley gives us a quick reminder of who’s fighting and what they’re using one last time.’

‘As usual, we have five warriors in this final battle,’ Polley continued after her coworker. ‘They’ll be competing for the ultimate prize of federation citizenship and an incredible monetary prize of 100 million credits. Only one of our finalists will be able to achieve this life-changing victory and leave an unforgettable legacy behind them.’

Janice and Saleena glanced at each other once more as they heard the last sentence. *Make that two, you slimey slut.*

Five different sets of drones were flying around this time, each set hovering around one chamber. ‘Our contestants are:’ Polley prepared for listing the finalists. ‘Janice Lane from Earth...’

There were five screens set up this time rather than four. Each of the finalists appeared on one of the screens, and Janice quickly recited to herself what she knew about them at the same time. Thank God she had spent her time watching the second stage and all of its recaps.

‘Saleena Vetris from Leph...’

*Poor girl*, was Janice’s first thought while looking at Saleena’s face on the screen. *Lost all of her family. Parents died in an accident; sister murdered. No prior experience with fighting or anything similar; an unexpected finalist like me.*

‘Galem from Valarum...’

Janice had already known how big this man was. He was as big as the hulking, brutish Dharlin that had been able to take freakishly much before going down, in fact. Yet seeing this new imposing figure inside the same arena as herself, right across from her, was even more nerve-racking than she had anticipated. She did not know the specific name of any of the tribal-looking clothes he was wearing; all she did know was that they indeed fit his badass backstory.

*Chief*, she began reciting. *Extremely strong and tough. He was constantly involved in wars and political conflicts among tribes since his youth, until he got exiled for failing his tribe in many of the latter back-to-back. Even exhausted and ridden with disease in his exile, he fought off wild animals with his bare hands to survive until he was brought here.*

Even recalling the information while staring at the man's imposing figure almost made Janice dizzy from stress. She looked at his face to distract herself from it.

He was bald. His eyes had no whites; both the sclerae and the pupils were black. Only the azure-blue irises gave Janice an idea of where he was looking at. A flat, bony structure on the middle of his face branched out to serve as a nose with 4 nostrils, shaped like a star whose arms were thin but short. His ears were small and almost completely circular, and there was some kind of tattoo, no, probably warpaint, of some weird symbol on his forehead. Three horns grew on each side of his face, emerging from the cheekbones and arching over his cheeks as if they were supposed to protect them for whatever reason, and the tips being aligned at the same level as his mouth. Another pair of much shorter horns grew out of the chin and towards the sides of his face. Janice could not help but wonder if hair grew below where the horns were arching over, and if so, how the man shaved. Interestingly enough, she could not see any hair on him anywhere; neither on his head, nor on any visible part of his body.

'KR-3546 from Chillonx...'

This one, somehow, unnerved Janice even more than Galem did despite the fact that, again, she had known beforehand what to expect. She also had the bracelets and the numerous near-death experiences she had already been through the last few days by her side. And yet even with that preparedness, she could hardly look at this at this creature that was named like a terminator to add to his terrifying appearance on top of everything.

The bipedal yet insectoid finalist was wearing an outfit that was surprisingly reminiscent of human clothing. It looked like a pair of worn-out trousers and an old, faded, rust-colored leather jacket. She noticed two lumps; one on each side of the jacket where the waist would be if a human wore it. *You have more arms in there, don't you...* she thought bitterly. *At least they won't have bracelets wrapped around them.* The bracelets that he was wearing had been molded into the weirdest shape that Janice had seen them in so far in order to remain stable around the sharp joints of his exoskeletal body. Some of these joints had even ripped through the already-withered clothing with ease and a long time ago by the looks of it. He had four sharp and jointless appendages serving as three "fingers" and a "thumb" on each "hand," and that was not nearly as disturbing for Janice to look at as his face was. He had dark pseudopupils within his large, yellowish-green eyes, which were front-facing for the most part but also slightly angled towards the sides of his face, seemingly to give it a larger peripheral vision than the other, humanoid finalists. A pair of antennae were rooted at the middle of his face, in-between the eyes. They were segmented and bent from the middle, downwards over the eyes like a hornet's, which was one of the very few insects Janice would have to admit being truly scared of. Even that, however, was not what unnerved her the most. That prize went to the two pairs of long, sharp mandibles he had as a mouth, rooted just below the eyes and running all the way down to the bottom of his jacket's lapels. Janice could hardly imagine getting a limb caught in-between them without shivering. She bet that it was not too different than a mini-guillotine.

*Once even more experienced than the other one, Janice began reciting his backstory from her memory. Bred for war, but ran away at some point, with another fugitive like him. When they came after them, he was rusty, but still able to take most of them down by himself and get away. His partner wasn't so lucky. He vowed revenge, and got put here before he could*

*get it. Probably pissed beyond measure because of that. Thank God his chamber is away like the last guy's. Maybe they can fight each other while we take out the other one and recharge...*

‘And Zadiyah Lupin from Ircnir,’ Polley had just mentioned the last finalist when Janice’s attention shifted to him. Being averagely built, at least by the standards that Janice was used to, he was giving the impression of an alien trying his best to look human with his attire. His outfit was modest: a dusty plain shirt and cargo pants, fit for a witty fictional adventurer on a quest to find the secrets of some ancient temple. It reminded Janice of the Oklahoma James movies and the Unearthed games. His body underneath that outfit, however, looked like the result of some comic book villain’s failed experiment. The scales of his reptilian skin, which had a beautiful and unique color between purple and turquoise, were larger and thicker on the parts that likely received the most sunlight, while the rest were smaller and looked softer. He had what resembled the spikes of an iguana’s spine over some of his most active joints, like his elbows. More such spikes were also, unsurprisingly, running down his back where his actual spine probably was, and the shirt was buttoned in-between these spines whenever there was a gap.

*How do you even button that?* Janice thought nervously, wondering if the half-reptilian man was able to turn his head a full 180 degrees backwards. That creepy thought turned her attention to his face, under which, on either side of the neck, were what looked like two bulbous nodules. Janice was sure that it was not a sign of sickness though, based on everything that she had seen of him thus far. The “nodules” looked more akin to those natural things on the sides of an iguana’s neck, *whatever they’re called*.

She knew that he was just as skilled as the previous two despite not looking as intimidating, and it was not to say that it was not unnerving at all to look at him. His yellowish green reptilian eyes each had three pupils, each as narrow as it could be like a viper’s, and what served as a nose and ears were just holes and slits. No snout and no auricles. In a ridiculous contrast to all of these that he lacked, he was surprisingly not bald, yet it was not hair that covered his head, either. The spikes that ran down on his back and covered some of his joints were also making an appearance here in much greater numbers, making the top of his head look like the back of a porcupine.

*Hitman, Janice recalled. Failed to kill a target, who decided to punish him by murdering his family. Furious and without anything to lose after that, he cleared out a whole building of goons all by himself, and tortured his target slowly. His handlers didn’t like that very much though. He had severely disobeyed orders by massacring so many at once. He endured much worse than what he had put that guy through, before he barely escaped death by their hands. He became a hunted man after that with the biggest bounties on him, and yet he survived until now. He’s resilient, both mentally and physically. Much more vicious than he looks with that B-movie outfit, too. It’s likely a deliberate choice to make him look unthreatening.*

Vrollus appeared on the screens as usual. ‘Warriors! It has been an honor for all of us to see all of you come this far. Out of all the 120 contestants, you five were the only...’

Janice could not concentrate on what he was saying, and she was not too concerned about it anyway, not with all three of her current worries staring down the arena as she was. She took deep breaths, unable to decide on whom to go for first. Her eyes juggled between Galem, KR-whatever-it-was and Zadiyah, before she gave up and turned to her ally instead for advice. To her luck, Saleena seemed to have already made the decision as their eyes met. The girl

made a slight head gesture towards Galem, and Janice agreed right away with an affirmative gesture of her own. It was not as if there was time for disagreements, anyway. No matter whom they decided to focus on, the only thing that could possibly leave them as the last survivors was going to be nothing but efficient and synchronous teamwork. Otherwise, they were as good as dead, and both of them knew that.

Still, Janice could not help but question if she was putting too much trust into her supposed ally. She glanced at Saleena, who seemed to be focused on Galem. *Can I really trust her? Even if this would work, how could I know she won't be waiting for the right opportunity to dispose of me, too? Right when we're about to defeat the last guy, she could easily... No.* She shook her head whilst recalling what had led to their alliance in the first place. *She wouldn't, I know it. I've seen it in her face. She didn't want to fight me. You can't fake an expression like that... Or can you? ...Probably. But I can't worry about that on top of everything, too. I have to trust her. It's my only choice. There is no way I could take these guys alone, not when we all have access to the same powers.* She clenched her fists. *And I'm not dying here.*

With that, she turned her attention back to Galem, staring him down while readying herself both mentally and physically for what was about to come.

‘10, 9...’

As the familiar countdown began, likely for the last time for her in any case, Janice got more and more tense. A significant part of that was because of Galem’s piercing gaze upon her, which had formed right after he had taken a glance at Saleena’s direction and clearly realized what was going on. The two girls were both looking at him with the same intense expression.

*He knows, Janice thought bitterly. And it looks like he wants to do something about it too, starting with me.*

‘...8, 7...’

They all clenched their fists while focused on the glow of each other’s bracelets. The pairs were blue and gold for Galem, white and purple for Saleena, and red and gold for Janice.

*She's smart, Janice thought about Saleena. Illusion and telekinesis. A shockwave from close-enough range and even this guy can't take it, I'm sure. I wonder if she got that idea from watching me... Doesn't matter. In any case, I'll distract him then; keep his focus on myself so that she can get close. But I doubt he's stupid enough to not pay any attention to her at all if he's come this far. I have to pin him down somehow.*

‘...6, 5...’

Janice calculated a dozen scenarios in a second, always reaching the same conclusion. *Cyclones are too slow; he can practically just walk away if I fire them from this distance. Ice spikes take a long time to form, so there's the same issue with them. Shockwaves travel fast but are ineffective from this far away. Throwing an object can backfire horribly if he intercepts it; too unreliable. Lighter attacks are faster but not strong enough; he can take them like it's nothing. Fuck. Think, Janice. Think!*

‘...4, 3...’

She got it. Archeon. He had used it against her multiple times during the first battle. Most were misses, but when it had actually hit her, it had stopped her dead in her tracks from the excruciating pain. Real lightning, or at least something resembling it, had shot directly from

his hand. It was hard to aim, and required extreme precision against a moving target; that much had made itself clear to her. But even so, that was exactly what she needed now; that lightning speed and devastating power, not that small orb of electricity she had shot earlier.

‘...2, 1...’

*I think you misunderstood me earlier,* she spoke in her mind to the bracelets, while also doing her best to memorize the exact movement of Archeon’s arm when he had shot those lightning bolts. Knowing that she would likely not be able to hit his head from this distance anyway, she aimed for Galem’s torso. *I said before that I want to shoot...*

‘...fight!’

‘...LIGHTNING!’ Janice yelled out her attack like a duelist from a children’s cartoon. Thankfully, it shot forward, or just appeared, rather. It was that fast compared to any attack that she had used before. A straight line from point A to point B. Point A was her right hand and point B was... Galem’s ice shield. The large chunk of ice that shattered and broke away from it should have surely produced a large sound itself, but no one, not even Galem, despite being the closest to it, had been able to hear anything besides the loud, roaring thunder for a moment. Nevertheless, he was not shaken. Let alone being “not stupid enough,” Galem was much more perceptive against his opponents’ moves than Janice had anticipated, but she knew that she could not let herself get intimidated by that. She had to keep his focus on herself, which meant that she had to keep attacking without hesitation.

In the meantime, noticing that one of the finalists closest to his chamber had not even been paying attention to him at all, Zadiyah quickly decided on eliminating Janice first and foremost while her attention was on Galem. He bolted towards her while invisible, his other bracelet switched to telekinesis. It seemed that this final round was not going to be as tough as he had worried it could have been. He was so sure that Janice was already in the bag that his thoughts were following before his actions. *Nice. Easy first blow. Already took out one. And she was teamed up with Saleena, too. Hope the rest goes this smoothly.*

He slammed Janice to her chamber’s wall with a powerful shockwave from close range. *Sorry. I know it hurts but it will save your life.* He then switched the same bracelet to lightning and shocked her for a solid two seconds with a constant stream of electricity as she squirmed and screamed in pain. Although it sure as hell beat killing anyone, like he had to do in the previous stages to reach this far, he was still getting no joy from what he was doing right now. *Sorry, but I have to do this for you.* Right before going invisible again, he heard Saleena scream her fallen ally’s name in panic, and noticed Janice’s eyes move towards her in response before they shut close. *Don’t worry, Saleena. She’s not dead.*

Janice opened her eyes to a couple of arena guards staring back at her. She tried to burn one’s face off in a panic, but realized immediately that her bracelets were no longer on her arms. The guards stepped back as she heard someone else’s voice behind her. ‘Easy.’

She turned around to see a bunch of other guards and the rest of the finalists standing around her. She quickly got off from the fancy stretcher she had been lying on top of and stepped away from them, confused and scared.

Zadiyah, apparently being whom the voice from two seconds earlier belonged to, slowly approached her. ‘It’s okay; calm down. You’re safe.’

But understandably, as sweet as the idea of being rescued was, Janice could not possibly feel relieved right away while facing the half-reptilian man who had last hurt her to the point of, well, passing out, apparently. It was clear that his intentions, at the moment at least, was to keep her alive for whatever reason. If not, he could have disposed of her quite easily according to his earlier display of skill. That idea did not help her much in calming herself down, but it at least gave her a reason to lower her guard.

‘What the hell is going on?’ she demanded answers.

‘You’re being rescued,’ Zadiyah answered.

‘Rescued?’ In disbelief, Janice looked at the man, and then at everyone around her. ‘No! You’re working with—’ she began, pointing at the guards.

‘They’re with me,’ Zadiyah explained. ‘These are my men, disguised as guards. We’ve infiltrated the tournament to reach you and save your lives.’ He was talking like a tactician giving a briefing to his soldiers. Straight to the point but sufficiently thorough with each sentence, all delivered in a neutral and professional tone. If he was not being honest, then he was a great actor selling the idea that they were now a part, or the objective, or perhaps both, of a critical and elaborate operation which they had to follow if they wanted to stay alive.

Still, Janice could not get over her disbelief so easily. ‘What? What do you mean, “we?” And what happened to all the other... contestants? I was sure they were...’

Zadiyah sighed, seemingly upset about what he was going to say. ‘They are, but it’s not your fault. You were forced. We could have tried to help them too, but we couldn’t risk it. I’m sorry. I tried to convince my partner at the beginning, but seeing now that even rescuing you four was dangerous enough by itself, I guess they were right to throw away that idea.’

‘Who’s “they?”’

Zadiyah let out a quick sigh, this time out of exhaustion rather than sadness. With Janice being the last one to wake up among the rest of the finalists, it was reasonable to assume that he had already answered a lot of similar questions before hers.

‘Sorry, but I can’t give that information yet. Not while everything’s still in motion. Look, I’ll explain everything once we escape the planet, but now, I need your help in getting all of us out of this arena.’ He made a gesture to one of the guards standing beside him, who gave him a pair of master bracelets he had been holding onto while listening to their conversation. ‘Here, your bracelets.’

Janice took the bracelets, but did not know what to do after. These were her bracelets alright. It was clear by the shape and size that they would fit her perfectly, but how was she supposed to get them to where they needed to be?

‘But... how do I wear them?’ she asked. ‘I thought you needed a machine for this.’

‘That’s just for the molding process,’ Zadiyah explained. ‘Once the bracelets are formed by those machines according to the shape and dimensions of your arms, you can just slide these two gears and they’ll unlock,’ he pointed to a small rectangular plate on one of the bracelets, which Janice had somehow never noticed before. On each of its longer sides was a tiny gear, only protruding enough for a few its teeth to be seen.

With some force, Janice slid the gear from one end to the other on each side, and the bracelet unlocked. She could now see a hinge as well on the exact opposite side from this lock, keeping the two halves of the bracelet together. She sighed. ‘I can’t believe this.’ While still embarrassed somewhat for never realizing the existence of the mechanism before, she felt

relieved at least that she would not have to find one of those smelter monoliths each time from now on.

As she wore her bracelets, Zadiyah dragged her attention to the ominous compartments on the walls with a gesture. ‘Those that lose the battles are normally brought here, and their bracelets are thrown into that small compartment at the end there to have them be recycled.’

‘And I’m guessing the larger ones are for...’ Janice struggled to finish.

‘Yeah, unfortunately,’ Zadiyah confirmed her worries in a regretful tone. A part of his mind was still asking for forgiveness from all of those that ended up here because of him.

‘At least they make sure they’re definitely dead before throwing them in there,’ he continued. ‘Usually, if they’re found to still be alive, they are first “euthanized” using injections, and then disposed of. The public doesn’t know that, of course. Soon enough, they hopefully will.’

‘And how do *you* know all of that?’

‘Sir, the last of the spectators have left the arena,’ one of the “guards” barged into their conversation in a hurry before Zadiyah could form an answer. He was glad for that.

‘Good, then let’s wait for a little longer before our strike,’ he ordered him. ‘Make sure that they’re all a safe distance from the arena so we don’t put any of them in danger.’

‘Yes, sir.’

“Sir,” Janice repeated the word out loud as the fake guard left. ‘You’ve really been involved with this for a while, huh?’ she asked Zadiyah. ‘What about all that bounty hunter stuff? Is any of that real?’

‘Hah, no. That backstory’s a fake one,’ Zadiyah answered nonchalantly. ‘It’s just the files that need to be convincing, and thanks to some of our friends here...’ He waved at the “guards” around them, who were still monitoring the leaving audience and discussing among themselves. ‘...creating those was the easiest part of this whole operation. No one bothers to fact-check any of it, anyway. The ones that create those files are often the ones that gather all the data for it in the first place. In other words, the only ones familiar with the background of the subject. All we had to do was have some of my men here take on the role of my supposed observers, and I just had to be in the right place at the right time for my scheduled “abduction.”’

‘I see,’ Janice said. ‘Then what’s the real story?’

Zadiyah’s expression changed slightly. ‘Well, that’s... We better leave that story for another time,’ he avoided. Janice did not insist.

‘I’m going to check on the situation of the arena, and discuss a few things with my men,’ he said, not even trying to hide anymore that he was overwhelmed her questions. Out of all the finalists he rescued, she was definitely the nosiest one.

He gestured towards the rest of them, who were having their own conversation by another corner. ‘I’m sure you four may want to get familiar with each other, so I’d join them in the meantime if I were you. Saleena was especially eager to talk to you.’

Janice could not believe that she had completely forgotten about Saleena, and that the girl had not been the first thing she had asked about after waking up. ‘Uhh, yeah. Sure,’ she mumbled, disappointed in herself.

They nodded to each other before Zadiyah walked away to talk with the “guards,” and Janice approached the rest of the finalists. Saleena was the first and only one to show any sign

of friendliness as they noticed her, not that the other two showed any hostility. They watched the two girls' interaction neutrally without interrupting.

'H-Hey,' Janice shyly spoke to Saleena, whose smile now seemed so genuine that she felt ashamed for doubting her earlier before the battle for even a moment.

'Hey,' the girl responded in a similar, embarrassed tone. Without the context behind it, anyone seeing them say the most basic things to each other so nervously and with hardly any eye contact could mistake them for a couple of socially awkward high-schoolers with a crush on each other.

'I'm... glad to see you're okay,' Janice spoke honestly, and forced herself through the embarrassment to look Saleena directly in the eyes to show how genuinely she was saying that.

'Yeah, me too,' Saleena responded with a similarly warm expression on her face. 'I was sure you were a goner there at the arena. Not that I had much time to dwell on it before he got me too,' she said while looking at Zadiah.

'Yeah, I guessed as much. Well, at least we're here now. To be honest, I have no idea how we could've both made it out of there otherwise. I've thought of a bunch of things last night and today, but none of them really seemed... realistic, you know?'

'Yeah, same here. I was honestly really scared that you would, uhh... you know.'

'Don't worry,' Janice reassured her. 'I was considering the same, especially since I was sure you'd put that little friend of yours before anyone else here. They said you could get him back if you win, right?'

Saleena looked down as she responded. 'I was hoping to do that at the beginning, but I stopped believing what they said after a while. I was sure they must've already killed him by the time we spoke, and that's why I decided to go along with your plan. Besides, I was rooting for you, you know? After the first two stages, I just couldn't bring myself to...'

'Same here,' Janice said, freeing the girl from her struggle to finish that sentence.

Silence ensued for a few seconds before Saleena lifted her head back up and spoke with determination. 'Well, like you said, we're both here now and apparently have a chance to get out of this place, so let's make the most of that.'

'Right. I've been waiting for an opportunity like this,' Janice said vengefully, looking down at her bracelets. It was time for payback.

'This is pretty much all I have, too,' Saleena said. 'You've probably already heard it from the broadcasts, but I don't really have anyone or anything to return to back home. I might as well stick with you guys and at least see this arena crumble.' She looked at all three of the finalists around her as she finished her sentence, bringing Janice's attention to Galem and KR-whatever.

Nervously, Janice approached Galem first, the mountain of a man with the most piercing gaze out of any, whom she had tried to fry with lightning the moment she was able to. She expected the worst backlash, but forced herself to take the first step anyway. 'Hey... uhh... I'm sorry for... you know...'

'We've already made amends amongst ourselves...' Galem answered without a sign of hostility in his deep voice. He spoke in a serious manner, but with also a noticeable overtone of empathy that reassured Janice. '...and you don't need to apologize to any of us, either. We were all misled spirits, apparently.'

‘Y-Yeah, I guess so.’ Janice felt disappointed in herself for forgetting about the man’s backstory, which was obviously what had shaped this demeanor and outlook of his. *Right. You guys probably had your fair share of peace treaties to stop murdering each other, huh?*

The next step was no easier for her to take, as she turned to what was a man-sized, insectoid yet resembling no single particular insect that she was familiar with, creature with giant mandibles. He stood on his hind legs and clearly followed her with his pseudopupils. Ironically, she still was unsure whether these features that made him look... human, trapped within this exoskeleton of nightmares, were more relieving or more unnerving to see. If she had seen Saleena and Galem on Earth, perhaps from a distance, she could have fooled herself into believing that they were just two very professional and interestingly-sized cosplayers of something she did not recognize. But this was clearly, even from a mile away, a goddamn alien whose species would be invading Earth in an average action movie. Yet she persevered and did her best to not panic while introducing herself to KR...54... No, what was it?

‘And uh...’

‘Krevin,’ he answered with a voice vastly different than what Janice was expecting. It was smooth, deep and masculine, reminding her that of a cool and jaded noir detective. It did not sound alien at all and was even rather charismatic, especially considering whom it belonged to.

‘...What?’ was all that Janice could manage after awkwardly pausing for a moment.

‘My name. It’s Krevin.’

‘...Oh. I thought-’

‘Yeah, don’t think that. Those bastards are full of shit,’ Krevin hissed ill-temperedly. He seemed to be at the limit of his patience despite the conversation being about 10 seconds old, but it was clear that he was not annoyed with Janice herself specifically. Still, she decided to tread carefully to avoid angering him. Even a Honeywool actor’s voice could not make those mandibles not scary, and in addition to those, Janice could now see many other pairs of much smaller mandibles behind them, rooted to the same opening. Of course. The two big pairs on the front would likely not be very effective at chewing as they would be at cutting or pulling apart.

‘...Right,’ Janice said nervously, continuously cycling through looking at and away from the insectoid man’s compound eyes, neither forming nor breaking eye contact for long periods of time. She had many questions she wanted to ask him, but she was deeply worried about prying into something she should not. She wanted to turn back to and learn more about the other two, now that the introductions were over with, but she did not want to turn away from Krevin, either, in case it would frustrate him. In the end, a few seconds of silence ensued between the two of them while the other two watched the awkward pause.

Tiredly, Krevin let out a guttural sigh and looked at all three of the fleshy creatures around him. He was frustrated by now trying to communicate with a bunch of weirdos. What was with everyone treating him so weirdly? He understood that he looked much different than everyone else in the room, but why was that a big deal? Everyone was aliens to each other here, anyway.

‘Listen,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what the hell is up with you people. All I know is that I want some payback from those assholes that brought me here. And I have a feeling that you do too, so why don’t we let go of what happened at the arena already? As Saleena said, we’re

here now, and we got a chance to make them regret pitting us against each other...' He lowered his voice and got closer to them before continuing, noting the girls get nervous as he did but restraining himself from getting annoyed by it. '...that is if our friend here is really as trustworthy as he says he is,' he looked at Zadiyah. 'So, what do you think? Do you trust him?'

A moment of silence ensued once more. Saleena and Janice were looking down, seemingly unsure of what to say.

'I'm not entirely sure what to think of any of this,' Galem broke the silence first, looking at the two girls to see if they had any answers.

'Well, I think if he wanted to get rid of us, he would've already done so,' Janice threw in her own two cents finally. 'I'm guessing he shocked you both too?'

'Yeah, and he made sure that we wouldn't kill each other before that,' Krevin said. 'He put a lot of effort into keeping us alive, but that doesn't necessarily mean he's here to rescue us. It's just hard to believe someone would go through all this trouble just out of the goodness of their heart, especially for a few random aliens like us. He could have another motive behind what he's doing, and once we've all outlived our usefulness, it could be lights out for each of us.'

'That's fun to think about,' Saleena commented, disturbed by the idea.

'Listen, I just don't trust people easily,' Krevin said. 'That would also include you, but I think all four of us at least want the same thing here. So, let's keep our eyes peeled and hang on to each other in case he ever tries to do something. He's clearly the best with the bracelets out of any of us, but I bet all four of us together could take him.'

Zadiyah had been glancing at them every so often for a while now. Although he could not hear what they were saying, it was apparent from their body languages what was likely being discussed. He decided to step in. The arena was now fully cleared of civilians, so they had to move soon anyway.

'I'm guessing that some of you may not fully trust me yet,' he interrupted the rescued finalists' discussion as he approached them. 'But frankly, you don't have a better alternative right now. Even if you manage to get out of the arena, there's almost no chance for you to find a way out of this planet. It would be different if it was Thalsaar or Nah'Cli, but here on Xeila, not a single person would risk their neck to help a single one of you. But we can, and I promise to not let any harm come to you as long as you're willing to help me too. Do we have an agreement?'

A moment of silence ensued as all the finalists nervously glanced at each other.

'I'll take that as a reluctant "yes,"' Zadiyah said. 'And in that case, it's time for us to move. No civilians are left around the arena and it will be kept that way for the rest of the day, so we can strike without worrying about their safety. And it shouldn't be too long until my absence from the service chambers will begin to raise suspicions.'

'Service chambers?' Janice asked.

'Outside of the people in this room and the people involved in our operation, everyone thinks that I have won the tournament, and are thus expecting an award ceremony tomorrow, which would again be held at the arena, where I would be declared as a member of the Federation and be rewarded with 100 million Federal Credits,' Zadiyah casually explained. 'Of course, as both a prize and an assurance that their champion shows up to the ceremony in absolute pristine condition, the evening before this ceremony is dedicated to getting them

ready for it. The champion is first taken to a fancy bath, then a massage, then a bunch of other pleasantries such as a luxurious meal, and they are finally given a luxurious suite to spend the night with a comfy bed, comfy clothes and everything. Of course, their body's also scanned at some point before all of that to make more formal clothes for them to wear at the ceremony the following day. All of these things are done inside the service chambers, also called the champion's suite. It's on this same floor, a little further beyond that door.'

'You're telling me even that "suite" is deep underground like the cells? Some service,' Janice said mockingly.

'Yeah, but no one ever expects the champion to feel claustrophobic because of that. As you may imagine, the rooms are quite spacious and the simulated windows and nature sounds work like a charm. They even replicate their own homeplanets' nature based on very detailed and up-to-date data on it.'

'Uh-huh,' Janice rolled her eyes at the idea of simulated nature. She had come to expect such insultingly artificial introductions of comfort into what were essentially still prison cells. She wondered if many Xeilons just lived this way throughout their daily lives too, waking up to simulations of the sky on their ceilings accompanied by artificially generated bird noises that echoed in their sterile and empty empty rooms.

'As you may all guess, everyone thinks that I'm in there, with these "guards" around us watching after me. But I'm certain that someone will figure out that's not the case eventually, likely when it's time to serve dinner, which should be soon. So, we have to make our move now, especially when most of the guards are busy with the extraction of spoils.'

'Wait, spoils?' Saleena jumped in, visibly stressed. 'Like, things they took from us?'

'Yeah, most of them end up in a huge auction event for the rich in Thalsaar, and some of them are taken to Celestol for research. Why, you had anything important?'

'Yeah, Phy! My dragon!'

'Something alive?'

'Yes!'

Zadiyah looked down for a moment, and sighed. 'That's not good. They'll probably take it to Celestol, then; to the Federal Research Center.'

'Why is that bad news?' Saleena asked nervously, though she did have a guess. A "research center" built by aliens that liked to watch people kill each other as a pastime did not bear anything but the worst possible implications for her little friend. She even regretted asking the question for a moment.

'Celestol is an artificial megastructure that's about the size of a dwarf planet,' Zadiyah explained. 'It is practically the heart of the Federation. The Federal Council, the Research Center... Everything is there, and it's all highly protected. The hardest place in the galaxy for anyone unauthorized to get anything at all, let alone themselves, in or out of it. Most that goes on in there is classified. Not all, of course. Otherwise, it wouldn't make any sense to have the Council there. But almost nothing that is released to the public that originates from there is ever completely honest, as you may guess. It's a single, dense ball of corruption that shares none of it with the planets themselves, where the civilians' life and most of the things they care about actually take place. Nothing that goes on in there concerns the average joe. They can practically do anything to your dragon and not a soul would know.'

‘Then just tell me how I can save him now, before they send him there,’ Saleena demanded without hesitation. Zadiyah quickly grasped how much this creature meant to her, but he could still not bring himself to propose a way to save it. It would just be too risky.

‘If we hurry, maybe we could make it in time to save him before he’s taken away, but that would require us to go the opposite way of where we’re supposed to go, and we could easily get trapped in here as a result. If we want to escape, we need to make our way towards the exit as fast as possible, without any detours.’

Saleena took a step forward aggressively. ‘I’m not just going to leave him.’

Zadiyah looked down and sighed. ‘I know.’ He had already known he would not be able to convince her, but it was worth a try. Now, though, any further arguments would just be a waste of time.

‘Then we need to split up,’ he declared, turning to Galem and Krevin. ‘You two, take four of my men and go with her.’ Then, he turned to Janice. ‘I’ll take the rest of them and Janice.’ He then finally turned to Saleena, who was now standing together closely with her assigned group. ‘We’ll clear the path to the exit. In the meantime, you focus on saving Saleena’s friend. And once you do that, immediately make your way back here and then towards the exit. My men will lead you through the correct corridors, so make sure to protect each other as you would protect yourselves. Don’t lose any time and meet us at the palace once you’re outside.’

He handed out three pairs of small devices to Galem, Saleena and Krevin. ‘Take these. Communication devices. Just push the red button to connect and disconnect from the channel and the blue button to toggle your voice input. You can switch channels too but you won’t need to use that for now, so don’t mess with it. We will all be hearing each other over the current channel. That’s all,’ he finished while Galem and Saleena placed the devices inside their ears. Krevin was still uncomfortable with the idea of blindly following Zadiyah’s orders, however.

‘Now hold on just a minu—’

‘Listen,’ Zadiyah cut him. ‘We’ve already lost enough time, okay? Do you want to make it out of here? Then follow what I say until we’re out of this planet. Then, we can argue about anything you like for as long as you want. Deal?’

Krevin gave Zadiyah one last dirty look, then accepted his offer while sneaking a glance at Janice’s way, trying to signal her to be careful. ‘Deal.’

‘Good,’ Zadiyah said. ‘Next is the gas masks.’ He signaled one of his men to hand him a bag, from which he then pulled out four slick, metallic masks. They did not have any large, circular filters protruding out of the mouth part like what Janice would expect to see. Instead, the whole surface of the part that would cover the mouth and the nose seemed to be laced with tiny filters. The visor, like anything made of that superglass material on this planet, was unnaturally clear, as if there was nothing to protect the eyes.

‘Unfortunately, while they’re pretty adaptive to most face shapes, not even these would fit that of yours, Krevin,’ Zadiyah said half-mockingly while handing the other three finalists their masks. ‘But don’t worry, the gas we’re trying to avoid isn’t lethal. It’ll just put you to sleep, and we’ll be there to make sure no one kidnaps you during your nap.’

‘So you’ll steal all the fun for yourselves in other words, huh?’ Krevin said sarcastically, feeling unbothered by the alleged threat.

‘I’m sure my partner will make it up to you if that happens,’ Zadiyah assured him. ‘You can file all of your complaints about this operation directly to them once we get out of here.’

‘Sure, whatever.’

In the meantime, Janice followed the instructions of the fake guard next to her on how to wear the mask, which simply consisted of gently pressing it against the face and holding it in place for five seconds or so. Staring at Galem do the same during that five-second wait, she matched what she watched happen behind his head with what she was hearing behind her own. From three different points emerged metallic wires of sorts that were thick and segmented. Two of the points were near the bottom of the mask, each being on one side, while the third one was on the top of the visor right in the middle. The three wires connected at the back of the head with a click, right above the nape and exactly at the edge of the reactive armor’s protection zone. A slit on each side of the middle wire then opened, from which emerged a thin layer of some blackish-gray, metallic yet porous material, extending out until it reached the other wire on each side. With that, the back of the head was finally fully covered and protected by the mask just as the front was.

‘If you ever need to take it off, press against all three sides of the lock right above your nape; the thing that made the click,’ Janice’s instructor advised. ‘I don’t recommend doing that until you’re at least off the planet, though. It’s not just for the gas, but also for general protection. It’s made of tougher materials than those nanoscales over your body. Might feel a little less comfortable than them, but it sure as hell beats getting your head blown off, right?’

‘I can hardly feel I’m wearing it,’ Janice said. ‘It’s not uncomfortable at all.’

‘Good to hear. All the more reason to keep it on. Now, one last thing. Do any of you know how to disguise?’

‘Disguise?’ Janice, Saleena and Krevin asked in unison. ‘You mean—’

‘Not invisibility,’ Zadiyah foresaw the question. ‘Here, switch to illusion, everyone,’ he ordered and switched one of his own bracelets to illusion. Everyone followed his example.

‘Now target one of our lovely “guards” who is shaped and sized similarly to you for the best results, and reach out your hand towards them.’

It took a few seconds for everyone to select a target. ‘Now focus on whoever you’ve selected,’ Zadiyah continued. ‘You’ll see your gems glow more and more. Don’t worry about overheating; just keep your focus on them until the glow begins fading away.’

Janice did not look away from the fake guard she had chosen for even a moment as the glow of her bracelet began intensifying. A strange, transparent aura began forming around the hand she was holding out. A couple of seconds passed and the glow only got more intense while the aura began taking a more clear, recognizable shape. Then, a couple more seconds passed. Then, a couple more. The aura was resembling a transparent, hollow arm now, inside of which Janice’s was captured. A couple more seconds passed as the glow reached the level at which Janice would otherwise absolutely let go for the bracelet to cool down, but she trusted Zadiyah and kept her focus on the guard. Then, right as the bracelet was perhaps milliseconds away from overheating, it began cooling down and the aura finalized its form. Janice exhaled in relief and turned to the others, but they were nowhere to be found.

‘I’ll be damned,’ said one of the guards, whom Janice did not remember to be there.

Wait... She grasped quickly what had just happened. *No fucking way.* She then looked around to see another four new guards of varied sizes, and none of the rescued finalists or

Zadiyah were around anymore. She then looked at herself and saw that the aura, resembling a transparent version of whom she had targeted, was over all her body and moved synchronously with it. ‘Fuck off,’ she let out.

‘Heh. Now listen up, and don’t move while doing so,’ one of the new guards, whom Janice guessed to be Zadiyah, ordered. ‘First of all, as you can hear, it disguises your voice as well, so don’t worry about that. Second of all, notice the circular area around you. It works the same way as the invisibility one, if you’ve ever used it. Don’t let anyone break into it and don’t use any other power if you want your disguise to remain intact for as long as you like, which brings us to the third and final point. Notice that you don’t heat up while disguised. It only heats up while grabbing the disguise, and it takes a long time to grab it, as you might’ve noticed. So, for future reference, don’t try to disguise yourself in the middle of combat or you’ll get yourself killed. Find a spot where you’re not seen and can safely focus on someone in your direct line of sight, and make sure that your bracelet is at its absolute lowest temperature before you do so. Got it?’

Janice and three other guards nodded.

‘Good, then get into a formation with enough spaces between each other so that you don’t break each other’s disguises. Then try to move as synchronously as possible after we split up. You’ll appear as proper guards that way as long as no-one messes up their disguise. We’ll avoid alerting anyone and getting into combat unnecessarily. If someone’s disguise does break though, do not hesitate to engage immediately. Don’t let them take the first shot. It’s likely that it will happen at some point anyway and we’ll have to cover each other’s backs, which is why I didn’t want us to split up in the first place but we’ll make do. So, any last questions?’

Everyone stayed silent while trying to get into a sufficiently formal-looking marching position with the rest of their group. Soon enough, both parties were ready.

‘Good. Then let’s do this. See you on the other side, and good luck,’ Zadiyah finished, and so they split up into the two groups, exiting from the two opposite ends of the room.

Each group was formed as a line of two-people rows, and Janice was walking at the very last row of their group on the right, with Zadiyah just in front of him on the second-to-last row of the group. She found it to be a peculiar decision that he had made. ‘Shouldn’t we... or you, rather, be leading the group?’ she whispered to him.

‘We’d be doing that if all my men didn’t already know all the possible routes out of this place, as well as in which order we are going to try using them,’ he whispered back. ‘The building has a very simple layout; even you guys would’ve figured it out in a few minutes. Unfortunately, we didn’t have even that much time to waste after all that chatter.’

‘Then why are we not... you know, running?’

‘While we’re this close to each other with disguises?’

‘I mean... couldn’t we just spread everyone out a bit more? It would be fine if we could all keep up mostly the same pace.’

‘See, the problem there is that it would immediately raise suspicions if anyone saw us running inside this place. There should be no need for that unless there’s an emergency, especially considering the tournament is over. Not only that, but it is most likely for us to be seen right now at this floor until we reach the stairs.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because we’re walking right next to the staff lounge, where most of the guards and other staff that’ll be working for the rest of the day to set up the ceremony, patrol the corridors, serve the champion and yadda yadda are probably hanging out right now before their shifts begin. So, anyone could enter or exit that door over there that we’re about to pass,’ he pointed at a large but lonely double door on the left.

‘And what about after the stairs?’ Janice asked.

‘We’ll be at the next floor, U-2, where the cells are,’ Zadiyah answered.

‘The cells where they kept us?’

‘Yeah. Should bring some fun memories, huh?’

‘Sure, I feel giddy right now just thinking about it. What then?’

‘There’s only one gate that leads outside on that floor. It’s the one they used to bring you into the arena in the first place, actually. Remember that one?’

‘Uh huh.’

‘We can just use that if all goes well. It’s normally not supposed to be used as an exit but only as an entry into the building, but there’s a switch next to it for emergencies. We should be golden unless someone seals the door from the outside.’

‘They can do that before we get out?’

‘Yeah, each of the gates here can instantly be sealed with the push of a button next to it, either from the inside or from the outside depending on whether you want to keep something in or out. Once a gate is sealed from one side, all the door controls on the other side instantly shut down, and good luck trying to brute force your way through. You’d need a moon cracker for that.’

‘I’m guessing you don’t mean the snack.’

‘Probably not; doesn’t ring a bell.’

They finally reached the stairs, but it did not lead to the moment of relief they had been hoping for. The supposed danger zone in front of the staff lounge was now behind them, but on the other end of the staircase was a group of guards approaching them.

‘Shit. That’s a patrol team,’ Zadiyah whispered as they stopped and the front row began being questioned.

‘What now?’ Janice asked nervously. She could not hear what was being said from this distance.

‘We hope Jaflon and Triski can cook up something that’ll convince them to change course, or at least pass by without suspicion. But if they decide to get up close and personal with everyone to check IDs or something, then we’ll be in trouble. And in that case, well...’ Zadiyah paused for a couple of seconds before finishing that sentence, watching the guards be clearly not convinced, and continue their questioning with the next row of the group while also taking out an ID scanner.

‘Well...?’ Janice tensed up.

‘We do this,’ Zadiyah said as he jolted to his left, breaking his disguise. The guards immediately recognized the champion as he ran towards them and quickly held their spears against him in panic, but ‘Hey! You’re not supposed to b—’ was all they could manage. They had not been able to notice in time that he still had the bracelets equipped, and so he was able to get close enough to send a powerful shockwave up close. Most of the guards got launched

from the stairs into the corridor, and the couple remaining ones could not even process the shock of the event before getting apprehended by Zadiyah's men.

Janice froze still as Zadiyah used both bracelets at once to quickly neutralize the guards held on the ground by his men, and then ordered them to push forward into the corridor while he turned back, summoning an ice wall behind him and Janice right as a few dozen guards emerged from the staff lounge, rushing to their position. Everything had happened so fast, and everyone besides her seemed so prepared for it, synchronously anticipating and dealing with threats from all directions. 'What the fuck?' she let out.

'What?' Zadiyah responded as if Janice was supposed to be as ready as them, not being surprised by the sudden shift in plans.

'You could've at least warned me,' she said as she finally took cover behind the ice wall.

'Didn't think I'd have to. That's an awful reaction time for someone with bracelets,' Zadiyah berated her while sniping another guard in the head with a precise lightning shot. These shots had the same undetectably fast speed as the powerful lightning strike Janice had launched at the arena, but they appeared to be thinner and heated up Zadiyah's bracelets less. It was almost hypnotic how efficient and rhythmic he was with his attacks.

'You've been using those bracelets for quite a while, huh?' Janice asked.

'Yeah, I have. I've got a pretty good grasp at what kills someone and what knocks them out, so you should leave the offense to me. Just bring up another ice wall whenever this one breaks, and push back anyone that comes too close with a shockwave or two.'

'You really want to leave these guys alive? What are you, Mothman or something?' Janice asked in frustration. Things could be much easier if Zadiyah did not introduce such a dumb code into the fight and instead just blew everyone up with a few fire cyclones instead. The guards were practically begging for it with how many and clumped up they were.

'Listen, I get that you wanna spill these guys' guts out after all you've been through, and those bracelets are sure as hell making you more bloodthirsty at such an early stage, but killing them will only be trouble for us in the long run. I'm not just saying that because of some potential feeling of guilt; I wouldn't give two shits myself. But it would undermine the end goal of this operation.'

'What end goal? Aren't we just trying to escape the planet?'

'That, and to overthrow the king right after, replacing him with a new ruler. And believe it or not, people don't like to have a ruler with blood on their hands, especially if it's the blood of their own kind.'

'I would've bet otherwise considering their favorite pastime is a death tournament.'

'Well, hopefully they won't be doing that anymore once we make the Federation recognize you guys as people.'

'Great, I can't wait to be loved and accepted for the savage I am. Bet everyone will totally be on board with that policy change.'

'We'll get them on board one way or the other, don't worry.'

Both Janice and Zadiyah were on a rhythm as they kept bantering. Using their bracelets as efficiently as possible, Janice was keeping their cover intact and their enemies driven back while Zadiyah kept knocking them out one by one. That lounge had to have been full to the brim for sure by the looks of it, but they were finally thinning out the waves. In the meantime

however, a couple of corpses rolling down from atop the stairs, whom Zadiyah recognized as those of his own men, made it apparent that the battle was far from won.

‘Shit!’ he let out as he pressed a button on his communication device. ‘Jaflon, you there?’

‘We’re being overwhelmed, sir!’ someone was heard over the radio. ‘They’ve sealed the gate, too! We’re doing our best to keep them away from the stairs.’

‘Fuck. Janice, go help them. I’ll hold off the rest here on my own. And keep focusing on support, not aggression. Leave the takedowns to my men, and just try to keep them alive as best as you can. I’m not ordering this to hold you back, trust me. I’m ordering it because they need your protection, not more firepower. We’re all done for if we don’t work as a team.’

*We’re all done for...* Janice repeated the phrase inside her head as she nodded, remembering what “all” meant. Once again, she had completely forgotten about Saleena and the others until now. She prayed for them to be okay as she ran up the stairs.

One of the fake guards approached the console next to the door of the room Phy was supposedly in, if they were not too late. Two of Zadiyah’s men walked into the room while the other two and the three disguised champions stayed outside just in case someone inside could decide to get too close to them for comfort.

The two men had their meticulously crafted fake digital IDs scanned by the guards inside, which thankfully proved able to fool their scanners. They then explained to the staff that they were sent on the orders of the Royal Guard, who had stated that King Vrollus had changed his mind about the finalists’ belongings, and taken an interest in them. In the meantime, the others outside were listening closely over the channel to the negotiations, ready to barge in at any time in case their covers were blown. They were tense as the staff had gotten skeptical. While they agreed to hold off on sending the finalists’ belongings off to Thalsaar or Celestol for now, they were going to ask for confirmation on these new orders later in the day during the king’s vacant hours before handing them over.

‘This is a waste of time,’ Krevin mumbled impatiently. ‘We should’ve been unleashing hell upon these guys by now.’

‘I have a feeling that’s where this is going anyway if we keep pushing our luck,’ Saleena said. She was getting impatient as well, not because she was after revenge as much as Krevin was, but because Phy was right there in the room and she just wanted to safely get him back by now.

‘Wait,’ Galem said, looking alerted. ‘Do you hear that?’

‘Hear what?’ Krevin asked, just before the sound of many fast footsteps echoing down the corridor became clearly audible to everyone.

‘That doesn’t sound good,’ Saleena whispered nervously. She prepared herself for combat without breaking her disguise as she saw the large group of guards appear, not only because of its possibility but also because it was probably the only thing she could engage in effectively. Unlike Zadiyah’s men, she had no idea how to talk with these guards using all the correct manners and buzzwords, let alone the necessary information to answer any questions they could ask her.

‘Hey, you!’ The guard at the very front yelled at them. ‘We have alerted all the vacant guards inside to arena for aid over the channels! Why are you here?’

‘A-Aid?’ Saleena managed nervously.

‘There’s an ongoing escape attempt, by two of the finalists and conspiring guards. In fact...’ The guard and the one next to him pointed their weapons at Saleena and Krevin. ‘...we have very good reasons to believe the other finalists are involved too, with more conspiring guards.’

Saleena attempted to de-escalate the situation. ‘N-No, we were just delivering a message from the Royal—’

‘IDs,’ the guard demanded impatiently, slowly approaching closer with his finger on the trigger.

‘Okay, okay,’ Krevin responded this time, slowly lifting his hand up to give the impression that he was going to reach for his ID. ‘Here’s mine,’ he said as he shot a fire cyclone right at them.

‘Fire!’ one of them barely managed to yell as he fired a few shots of his own before the projectile hit. Saleena tried to duck as soon as she could, but two of the shots still ended up hitting her head. These masks were surely tough, as she did not even feel anything but a light push.

The cyclone hit one of the guards right behind the two in the front, and thanks to how closely they were clumped together, it scattered a dozen of them around, only leaving a few rows at the back on their feet. Galem knew however that this was no reason for them to relax yet, and quickly summoned an ice wall in front of them even before Krevin yelled: ‘Wall!'

Now trying to strategize behind the somewhat transparent wall, the three finalists watched a handful of the scattered soldiers get back up.

‘Looks like some of them are already down at least,’ said Krevin. ‘They’re not all getting back up.’

‘But now, they’re scattered,’ said Galem. ‘We won’t get any more shots as lucky as that one.’

‘You can be more aggressive,’ one of Zadiyah’s men behind them spoke.

Krevin noticed him rubbing his shoulder as if it was sore. There were two bullet holes on the clothing there, but nothing had pierced the skin. Of course. He had heard a couple grunts behind him right after he had shot that cyclone.

‘Huh, that scaly armor even protects against gunshots?’ he asked, impressed.

‘In fact, guns are the main thing it’s supposed to protect from,’ the man informed. ‘These things are much older than those bracelets, and they were made to be worn in war against small projectiles like these. The smaller whatever hits you is, the less area those scales have to cover when to protect you, so more can clump up at the same point.’

Krevin had already trusted the man’s first sentence fully before he finished explaining, taking a couple of hits on his thorax while protecting his face with an ice shield and frying a guard with lightning in the meantime.

‘And no-one decided it was a good idea to one-up that?’ he asked as he took cover again behind the wall that Saleena had just replenished.

‘Of course they did,’ the man answered. ‘There were several weapon models made soon enough that could penetrate the armor, as well as ones with larger projectiles or more spread...’ He paused to peek out of cover and take a few shots at the guards himself. ‘...but those have all been disassembled and banned since the Great Disarmament. There’s just no

use for heavy weaponry now. There hasn't been a single war in Federation Space outside of small clashes with outlaws and such in almost 500 years; not even the threat of one, in fact.'

'So this counts as one of those small clashes, too?'

'For now, yes. After this, probably not. But unless we let the king escape, there shouldn't be a reason for all of you to get involved with that part. We can probably handle the rest.'

'I wouldn't mind getting involved,' Krevin said right after incapacitating the final guard. With the three finalists increasing their aggression as the man had recommended, and the rest of Zadiyah's men also shooting on their side, they had made quick work of all the guards.

'I would if I were you,' the man admitted. 'Some of those heavy weapons could start getting manufactured again with a few simple orders from high-enough places. They're not as pleasant to see as they are to talk about.'

'Heh,' Krevin scoffed, still unbothered by the idea.

In the meantime, Saleena rushed into the room now that the fight was finally over, running into another one of Zadiyah's men at the entrance.

'We've secured this area, miss. Your friend and belongings are all yours to recover,' he told her while pointing at Phy, whose glass cage was now open. Next to the cage was a shivering Xeilon who did not seem to be dressed like a guard.

'We've spared the workers, of course,' the man explained. 'Would've spared the guards too, if they didn't engage us first. Your scuffle outside with the others had them jump us. We had to kill them in self-defense.'

'Don't worry,' Saleena said as she approached Phy. 'We probably ended up killing all of them outside, too. Krevin seemed to enjoy it though, at least.'

'A true Amph, that one.'

Phy was wriggled into the corner of the cage, almost curled up into a ball out of fear. He was timidly looking around, raising his head only high enough for him to be able to see everywhere. Finally, as he saw Saleena come by the cage, the only friendly face he had seen in days, he squeaked in joy and ran out of the cage unprompted. Quickly climbing all the way up to the girl's neck, he began circling and gently nibbling it. Saleena scratched his back while laughing. She was tickled as always of course, but it was more out of love and gratitude that she laughed. She had made it. It had not been too late.

'P-Please...' the shivering worker by the cage pleaded, putting an end to Saleena and Phy's joyful reunion by reminding them of his presence. Phy hissed at the man aggressively, even climbing down to Saleena's waist to get closer to him while still remaining attached to her. Now that she was here with him, he had nothing to fear. If he was able to breathe fire like his mother, he would surely cook this guy alive.

But the man did not even seem to register that Phy was there. He was still looking at Saleena, or rather, what Saleena was wearing on her arms.

'I was just... following orders,' he managed barely in-between sobs.

Saleena did not recognize this man as any of the guards that had taken Phy from her at the first place, not that she needed to check with how he was dressed. Again, his modest work uniform had nothing but its color scheme in common with the slick, armored guard uniforms. She took another step towards him while trying to think of how she could best articulate what she wanted to say, but he only shriveled into his corner more.

Saleena wanted to say a lot of things at that moment. She wanted to emphasize to the man that the act of mercy she was going to show him was a clear sign of her not being a savage. On the other hand, even though she had not directly killed any of the guards herself just now, she had definitely enabled her allies to do so, right in front of this worker. Not only that, but she had casually spoken about it like nothing in front of him just now too, even mentioning how “Krevin seemed to enjoy it though, at least.” She had been cold-blooded; not regretful about what they had to do but indifferent to it. Maybe her motivations were not as pure as she was telling herself. Maybe needing to save her friend was an excuse for her to make some guards suffer, rather than a justification. Though, none of this would have ever happened if those guards had not dragged them here to their slaughterhouse of entertainment like livestock. She wanted to ask the man who the real monster was, not even because she wanted to challenge him, but because she was not so sure of the answer herself. Maybe they were all monsters. Maybe the bracelets were the monsters, infecting everyone in their presence with an unnatural bloodthirst, wearer or not. Or maybe they were just mirrors, merely uncovering the real nature of their wearers. Whichever was the case, it was all the same to the terrified man after all, and it was all going to be the same for her future self. She was going to have to live with the blood on her hands from now on, not only of more than a dozen guards but of the other prisoners she had killed at the arena as well, all while trying to drown the guilt with the same thoughts: *I have to save Phy; I can't die here. I have to save Phy; I can't die here. I have to save Phy; I can't die here. I have to save Phy...*

‘Miss,’ someone called to her as they put their hand on her shoulder. Only then did she realize that she had been standing there staring down at the scared worker without a word for multiple seconds while thinking all of that. If there was ever a chance of spewing all of those thoughts at him without making the situation worse, it was surely gone now. She gave up on him and turned around to see who it was that snapped her out of her thoughts. It was the same man who had just explained what happened in the room earlier.

‘I get how you feel, but he’s just a defenseless worker. Please don’t do anything you may regret afterwards.’

Saleena stared at him in disbelief. So even he thought that she was planning on how to best torture the guy or something rather than how to talk to him.

‘But... I wasn’t... never mind.’ She sighed and left to explore the rest of the room, not that there was much to explore. A dozen or so large conveyor belts were set up on one of the long sides of the room, opposite from the where the door was. She could probably get on top of one of them and ride it all the way outside if the hatches at the end had not been sealed shut. There was also a platform that could be raised with a switch next to each belt, as well as a crane on top; seemingly two different ways to potentially move a heavy object. Credit where credit was due; the staff really did seem prepared to deal with anything they could come across, but she could not reasonably see anyone being abducted with the boulder they were carrying for whatever reason.

Outside of these belts and the spared workers sitting on the other side in stress, the room was almost completely empty. By the looks of it, everything that belonged to anyone who died during the first two stages of the tournament was already gone, and only the finalists’ stuff remained. Next to one of the belts, Galem and Krevin had gathered all of said stuff to inspect them. They were intrigued by the few weird items they had never seen before.

Saleena noticed that Galem also had two axes on his waist now, one on each side. A bow and a loaded quiver were also on his back.

‘I’m guessing you two have found your stuff?’

‘I didn’t have anything to begin with,’ Krevin answered. ‘This guy on the other hand was a walking army it looks like.’

‘Even in times of peace, I always keep these weapons by my side,’ Galem talked in his usual stoic warrior tone, arms crossed. ‘They were left to me by my father, and I care for them just as I cared for him. Besides, it’s always good to be prepared for anything.’

‘Right. That’s a good way to honor him,’ Krevin affirmed, without an ounce of his usual sarcasm and devil-may-care attitude. He looked and sounded uncharacteristically respectful towards what Galem had just told him. It made sense, considering his backstory.

Saleena leaned in and took a look at the remaining items herself. There was her wallet, with everything in it in one piece. Her house keys and her phone, which still seemed to have half of its battery left, were also there. There were still some other items on the desk though, all of them except for one being very similar to what she had.

The odd item was a slim rectangular object with one of its sides completely black, featuring a singular, somewhat ominous button at the bottom with a rounded square on it. The other side was slightly less black with a weirdly smooth and simple glyph of some half-eaten fruit by the looks of it. On the same side were also some bumps close to one of the corners, which looked like small camera lenses. It also had some weirdly shaped cable ports and buttons on its edges. Nothing happened when she pushed any of the buttons on the device, however. Maybe it was out of energy, but that did not make sense. Her own phone, which was clearly much more primitive than whatever this was, still had half of its battery left after all.

The other items included a bunch of keys like hers and another wallet. Inside the wallet were a bunch of cards, each with things written on them with an alphabet she did not recognize. Each however also had a photo of whom she recognized as none other than Janice.

*Oh, shit.* Right, Janice. She had completely forgotten about her after they had split up, and based on what the guards had said about that “escape attempt” they were trying to stop, she had to be in trouble. Saleena grabbed all the stuff that she now believed for sure all belonged to her, and told everyone that they were ready to move. They had to hurry if they wanted to catch up to Janice and Zadiyah before it could be too late. She prayed for them to be okay as they all ran out of the room.

‘Roger that,’ Zadiyah said over the radio. ‘There shouldn’t be any hostiles left on your path to us. Let’s meet up at U-1. We’re just about to make it there. Reconnect to the channel if anything happens on the way.’

He turned back to Janice right as they finished climbing the staircase to U-1. ‘Mask still fits okay? No damage or dislocation?’

‘Yeah, everything’s fine,’ Janice responded, lightly touching her gas mask to feel it. She had forgotten that it was even there.

‘Good,’ Zadiyah said. Unlike before, both of them were now only talking when it was necessary, in brief sentences of very few words. It was only the two of them that was left of their group, and the lengthy battle just to be able to pass through one floor had already exhausted both of them. Although there could not be any more guards left inside the building

by now waiting to ambush them on the next floor, it was better for them to save their energy and be alert nonetheless. The news of their escape attempt had likely already been broadcast, and reinforcements could appear at any minute.

*I could ask Lyndri about the situation outside, Zadiyah thought to himself. No, nevermind. She's probably confident that we can handle it, unaware that we split up and that I lost almost all of my men already. It would just worry her if I asked about it; maybe even draw her here for support. We can't afford that. She needs to get into that palace while she can.*

In reality, Zadiyah could contact anyone to get that information rather than just her, but he wanted to fool himself into believing that it were rational reasons rather than emotional ones that kept him from reaching out to anyone that could help them. The truth was that he was distraught after losing so many people already, and he did not want to draw even more of them into the slaughter. Furthermore, just having Janice by his side was enough right now to give him both the consolation and the purpose that he needed to keep pushing on. Although he barely knew the girl, he had already taken a liking to her and was willing to make sure that she made it out alive. After all that she had fought through, she did not deserve to die here when they were so close to the exit. Whatever they could face from now on, he was going to handle it.

‘Stay behind me,’ he ordered Janice as they finally reached the top of the staircase. This was it; there were six gates here that led outside and nothing more. The whole floor was designed for emergency exit and entry. If anyone wanted to deal with them, this would be the best opportunity with six different directions to attack them from. There were also the twelve seals.

*Right, the seals...* It gave him an idea. These seals worked the same way the gate seals did; once they were activated from one side, they could not be deactivated from the other without involving the Royal Guard, as only they were given the code that could override the security protocols. If they got ambushed, they could quickly seal whichever way the hostiles were coming from using telekinesis, which would-

The twelve seals emerged all at once as he was thinking, each one speeding across from the outer wall and connecting to the inner one. They were all impossibly transparent, and their movement was dead silent as one had to expect by now. In fact, Janice only noticed one by bumping into it. ‘Agh! What the fuck?’

Zadiyah could not hear that reaction, however. Struck by the realization that he had just become unable to hear Janice’s footsteps, he turned around to see her pushing against the seal in confusion. As they made eye contact for a moment, he pointed to his earbud. Janice got the message, and contacted him through the channel.

‘What the hell do we do now?’ she asked while continuously pulling the switch next to her up and down in panic.

‘Stay calm,’ Zadiyah said, but he was also nervous. Although he was sure that it would not work, he also tried pulling the switch on his side up and down once, but to no avail. The seals had been activated remotely, which meant that the manual switches on neither side would work.

‘Dammit. How?’ he complained angrily. This was not supposed to happen.’

This was what Janice feared hearing the most. ‘You mean you don’t have a backup plan for this like everything else?’

‘The seals could only be activated from a distance like this by someone in the control room, but we had sabotaged the emergency functions there...’

‘Maybe you didn’t sabotage it good enough?’

‘No. If that was the case, we wouldn’t have even made it to this floor. They would’ve sealed the entrance to the stairway leading here when we were at U-2. It probably *is* sealed right now just like the corridor, anyway, considering this is a remote lockdown of the whole floor. We’re by ourselves until we deal with this.’

‘How do we do that?’

Zadiyah sighed in defeat. ‘We probably can’t. If it wasn’t the control room, it means there’s some other panel somewhere specifically for this that was implemented recently, and none of our many sources of intel were of high enough clearance to know. That would only mean it was directly issued by Vrollus himself. Bastard got us. This whole thing just reeks of him.’

Just as Zadiyah finished his sentence, a thick, green gas began filling every slice of the corridor in-between the seals.

‘Good thing we were prepared for this, at least.’

‘What even is this gas?’ Janice asked, nervously looking at the ominous green cloud getting closer and closer to her from every direction.

‘It’s not poisonous or lethal or anything. Just puts you to sleep. Still, keep your mask on if you don’t want to possibly wake up in jail, or never. It’s not exactly a 10-minute nap.’

‘Alright.’

They both looked around for a while idly, barely being able to even see each other anymore through the thick gas.

‘So... what now?’ Janice asked impatiently.

Zadiyah could not think of an answer in time before the last person he wished to speak with at this very moment happened to make his current situation feel even direr. ‘Hold on for a minute,’ he regretfully told Janice. ‘I’m getting a call from someone else.’

‘Z, what’s your status?’ Lyndri asked as soon as he picked up.

*Shit, what do I tell her?* Zadiyah knew that she was probably aware of how long they were taking. If they had all stucked together at the beginning instead of splitting up, and if this secret control panel did not exist, they would all be out of the building by now. Although he did not want to admit it, things were beginning to look grim on their side, which was all the more reason that he could not afford to tell the truth. If they ended up not making it out of the arena, then she at least had to seize the palace.

‘Z?’

‘I’m here, Q. Guess there was a disruption for a second,’ Zadiyah spoke with as much fake confidence as possible.

‘Odd, but not worth investigating at this point,’ Lyndri sounded as if she took the bait for once. ‘That aside, what’s your status?’

‘We’ve dealt with all the guards on U-3 and U-2 without any casualties thanks to the five pairs on our side,’ Zadiyah outright lied. ‘But we then had to make a little detour to the inspection and loading bay,’ he decided to sprinkle a little bit of truth into his next lie. ‘Saleena was insistent on rescuing a little creature of hers. We’re making our way back to U-2 now.’

‘That’s adorable, but couldn’t you have split up?’ she asked bluntly. ‘I know I advised you to avoid splitting up your group in there, but it wasn’t a strict rule. Even if it was, I’d still expect you to have disobeyed it considering how much of a rulebreaker you normally are.’

*Shit, Zadiyah felt his confidence waver. She was getting suspicious after all. Good job Zadiyah, thinking you can outwit her of all fucking people.*

‘Or alternatively, you could’ve just gone there right away before going up. Would’ve saved you the detour,’ she lectured him further.

‘I suggest you tell all that to Saleena once you guys meet,’ Zadiyah went for a comeback. ‘She’s the one that suddenly connected the dots halfway through the exit that her little friend could be in there.’ He felt horrible for throwing Saleena under the truck like that for his lie, but he could apologize a thousand times later if he had to.

‘In any case, it seems your little detour has paid off, somehow,’ Q threw him a backhanded compliment. ‘I was thinking that most of the Capitol Police wouldn’t get involved until you made it out to the streets, but they seem to have surrounded the arena already. Whether you do it outside or inside, I suggest you don’t wait much longer to give them a warm welcome. I’m halfway there to the palace and there are still some clear paths to the courtyard, though there won’t be any left soon enough unless you guys draw in the attention.’

Zadiyah had tensed up to his limit just hearing that the arena was surrounded from all sides. At least Janice was not in immediate danger, but there was a gate right next to him. ‘Roger that,’ he tried to sound as calm as possible. ‘Any idea on what they seem to be planning? Are they going in yet?’

‘I think their plan was to just wait it out first. It’s not like you guys can do anything to escape when all the gates are sealed. But they seem to have changed their mind, likely to check for any surviving guards inside. They’re following protocol right now for a controlled flush. It’s just one of the gates that they unsealed; G-2, it seems. The majority of their forces are camped outside that one while a group is scouting the inside. You seem to have given them quite the scare; it’s like they’re stepping into your territory and not theirs.’

This new information helped Zadiyah calm down a bit. At the very least, he was not going to have to face an attack from multiple directions.

‘How long has it been since they went in?’

‘A couple of minutes. They should be making their way down to U-2 right now. You should all be meeting them pretty soon.’

‘Understood. We’ll keep them busy. Anything else?’

‘Yeah. Don’t die.’

‘Heh. Roger that. Z, out.’

That last roger was not so genuine. His and Janice’s chances would both be higher if they were trapped together, but with the two separated like this and the police following protocol, the one thing that was certain was that they were going to be dealt with one by one. What was driving him crazier than anything was not knowing in which order it was going to happen. If the police had breached G-2, they were likely coming his way first rather than Janice’s to take the shorter path to U-2, but there was no guarantee. He could either die first and leave the others to fend for themselves against the army outside, or helplessly watch Janice die first. He did not even have the ability to pick between the two; all he could do was wait until they came

for one of them, and even glancing at Janice made each second of that wait feel even worse. The girl was nervously leaning against the seal between them and looking at him as if she was begging for him to be able to come up with something, but he had nothing.

Impatiently, Zadiyah walked away from the seal separating them, and towards the other one that had trapped him. He put his face against it to be able to see as much as he can of the other side through the thick green fog. The fog was thinner on the other side, and he could barely make out a series of silhouettes in the distance. He cursed his luck. His dreadful question of who was going to be the first was answered with that sight, but only now did he realize that he would not have actually minded if it had taken a while longer to happen. The bastards had already come so close in such a short while. He was sure that it would normally be a much longer hassle for anyone to get the clearance from the Royal Guard to unseal the gates manually one-by-one like that. *Fucking Vrollus. He knows exactly what's going on.*

If he was not mistaken, it had to take around three minutes to clear a slice of the corridor from the gas. This section had just begun being cleared by the looks of it, and his was next. He had about six minutes. He could use that to prepare, but who was he kidding? The group was already large, he was by himself in a wide, open space where it would take much more than an ice wall to protect himself, and the enemy had all the reinforcements in the world they could possibly need until he was taken care of. It was better for him to use these four minutes to get a few things off his chest while he could. He turned back to Janice, and connected to the channel again. ‘Janice.’

‘Hmm?’ she responded. She had been overthinking herself to near death with all the possible scenarios while waiting for Zadiyah’s call to end, and the increased speed at which she could think thanks to the bracelets had certainly not helped.

‘Listen, I need you to promise me that when they get to you, you don’t try taking them all out by yourself, okay? I will deal with as many of them as I can, and what I want you to do is look for any green keycards lying around after I’m done; that’s what you’ll need to unseal the stairway to U-2. I figure at least a few would drop around without me even trying, with how they’re just dangling off their uniforms like that. So, wait for them by that staircase, grab one of those keycards with telekinesis as soon as you can without trying to fight anyone, just pass it by the console over there, and then sprint down those stairs as fast as you can, alright? Focus on finding the others once you’re down there and don’t look back, let alone try to fight by yourself. Don’t try to avenge me; just focus on getting out of here in one piece, okay? You all have the best shot at that if you work together.’

‘W-What?’ Janice let out in panic. She had just fabricated a lot of possible tough scenarios in her head, but in all of them, Zadiyah somehow persevered thanks to his incredible skills with the bracelets. ‘What do you mean “avenge you?” Who’s getting to me? And why are you speaking like—’

‘The Capitol Police is here; the top security department on the planet. Sure, it’s still a joke compared to what it apparently used to be before these last few centuries, but... Ugh. What am I even still lecturing you about? None of that’s important. Just... promise me another thing too, okay? Promise me that once you get off this planet and out of danger, take off those bracelets and don’t wear them again, alright?’

Janice was expecting to hear something more depressing like “tell the others it was an honor,” or “take care of the others,” but this injected her with genuine confusion rather than melancholy. ‘What? Why?’

Zadiyah sighed. ‘I’ve been doing this for years, Janice. There’s a phenomenon that happens. Mental convergence, they call it. You know how you’re one way when you’re wearing those bracelets, and then the complete other way once they’re off? You know what I mean, right?’

Janice hesitated for a moment. She knew exactly what Zadiyah meant, but did not want to admit it right away. ‘Y-Yeah, I guess.’

‘Well, that doesn’t last very long, you know? At first, it’s like you’re not really yourself whenever you wear them. Well, you kind of are, but not really. It’s hard to put into words but you get it. It’s as if you’re a tool for the bracelets and not the other way around. Even letting go of them is hard to do, like you’re fighting for control.’

Janice looked down as Zadiyah kept talking, vividly remembering the painful memories.

‘But at least once you take them off, you’re back to your usual self again. Maybe that you is not as powerful, cunning or fearless, but they’re you. They’re the real you, and that’s what matters, right? You tell yourself that, but deep down, you know that a small part of that killing machine was still you. And with time, it becomes more and more of you.’

‘No, stop. Please, don’t say things like that,’ Janice begged.

‘The same goes for the opposite end, too,’ Zadiyah disregarded her plea. ‘In time, you stop being able to move and think as fast as the first time you wore them. Your reaction time slowly decreases. You don’t feel that boost of energy whenever you put them on anymore. And all the experience you gain even if you constantly practice day in and day out can barely make up for it. That’s why it took me quite a bit to knock you all out during the final stage. I caught you off-guard but after that, the other three always kept their eyes on me. They still weren’t teamed up. They continued to scuffle among each other, and it was still difficult. None of them went down as easily as you did, and you wouldn’t have gone down that easily either if I didn’t get the jump on you so early on. If you had all teamed up, I couldn’t have lasted a minute and this whole operation would fail as a result. It was one of the biggest risks we had to take, even though my partner wouldn’t admit it.’

Janice understood where he was going. ‘So, then...’

‘It’s like the two selves meet at a halfway point and become one. Besides the elemental powers, there’s no difference anymore between when you’re wearing the bracelets and when you’re not. What’s so scary in your case, especially after witnessing that outburst during the second stage that nearly made you overcharge, is that you seem to be reaching that point faster than anyone else I’ve ever seen. You’re almost unnaturally synchronous with your bracelets.’

Janice recalled that moment he described. ““Overcharge?”” Is that what that was? I thought I was reaching... something. I was on the verge of getting to it, even.’

‘And you would’ve gotten to it if it wasn’t for Dharlin snapping you out of it. There’s no telling how things would’ve played out after that. The first time is always the most violent too, and lasts the longest.’

Janice felt a strong urge to inquire more about this mysterious phenomenon, but refrained herself from doing so. She felt that it would betray what Zadiyah was preaching, and she wanted to follow his advice. She did not want to lose herself like he described.

'That all being said, it's not too late for you, Janice,' Zadiyah assured her. 'I know how good it must be feeling right now to wear those, but I promise you that nothing good will come from it in the long run. I know from experience.'

'You do?'

'Yeah, especially from my experience with L- my partner,' Zadiyah caught himself right at the last second.

'With your partner?'

'Yes. I must warn you about her,' he subconsciously dropped the gender neutral language without realizing. 'What she's fighting for is a noble cause, and it's because of her that we're here in the middle of this rescue operation in the first place, but she's not really that different from Vrollus in how dirty she's willing to play in order to get what she wants. You won't realize it at first. She's more subtle. All I can say is when you get out of here and meet her, if she still hasn't gotten what she came for, she will ask for your help. Don't accept. Just take off your bracelets, and demand that she drops you off to Earth. Don't involve yourself in this mess like I did. Go home and live a normal life, for your own sake.'

The police force was now at the seal right behind Zadiyah, and the green fog around him was slowly but surely getting thinner. Janice would have just promised to follow his word if she had realized that, but the still-thick fog inside her own slice of the corridor barely allowed her to see Zadiyah's silhouette in the first place, let alone the exact thickness of his surrounding fog or the many other silhouettes behind it. She would have to be leaning against the seal between them for that. Instead, she was distanced from it, blankly staring at the ground while contemplating.

'I... I don't get it; what did she do?' she finally asked bluntly about this mysterious partner.

'This isn't the first coup attempt, Janice,' Zadiyah revealed. 'In fact, it's not really a coup attempt this time at all. This rescue plan was just something we threw together in a few weeks, and its real purpose was to be a diversion to lure the police and the guards to the arena and keep them occupied. In the meantime, without any of them possibly getting in the way, we could infiltrate the palace and take Vrollus out of the picture. Of course, even if we could do that, it would just merely be a solid first step that increased our chances for what comes after. War.'

'War?!" Janice's heart skipped a beat. She knew that she had wished for an opportunity like this earlier to get back at the Federation, but this was all too sudden and too soon. She was now face to face with the reality of how such a scenario would play out, having watched dozens die around her left and right even in a small-scale battle. She grasped that fighting in the tournament was, despite its gruesomeness, one thing, while fighting a war would be another. There was not even any way to tell just what type of insane tactics and armies would be involved in a galactic war with all of these aliens and their crazy advanced tech. She was not even too familiar with the conventional ones back home.

'Yes, war,' Zadiyah reaffirmed. 'That's what the real planning and prep during the last ten whole years went into. We've established connections, formed alliances and gathered

resources, all to secretly train millions of so-called savages and arm them with the most advanced weapons and ships we could smuggle from the Federation without being noticed.'

Janice was trying her best to keep herself calm and follow along, but it was especially difficult when she was being exposed to these reveals during everything that was already going on. 'Armed "so-called savages?"' she parroted keywords, hoping Zadiyah could elaborate what he meant. 'Connections, alliances? You mean...'

'120 contestants are brought to the tournament,' he explained, 'each one from a different species across a total of 95 planets, even if you count the Vespis and Tophef binaries as one planet each. All of them are routinely monitored and explored by the Federation to a minor degree, but none are infested with the kind of heavy surveillance and loyal federal citizens that would turn you in the moment they got suspicious of anything. Many are also overpopulated to the degree that even when you can't be so bold and have to hide your visit from the Federation's eyes extra carefully, it's easy to blend in with the crowd. Not to mention that they offer plenty of hideouts where you could safely negotiate and establish a foothold. Ever heard of Area 35?'

'You're shitting me.'

'Heh. It was a match made in heaven, from the outside perspective. When you're in a more hands-on position with all of that though, sometimes it was... more like hell.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'm one of the first C-2s she ever recruited. We got close, and worked together on most of our "diplomatic" missions to offer alliances. The thing is... sometimes words or gifts alone aren't enough. Sometimes, you have to prove yourself in their trials, do favors for them, or defend yourself when you are met with instant hostility. Some of those are more honorable than others; some of them don't even need any blood spilled. Others, though... They get dirty, and like I said, she has no problem getting her hands dirty for her goals. It's all necessary evils for the greater good to her. I've heard people say she wasn't always like that, but... ever since I've known her, she's always been like that, probably because she had already trained with the bracelets for thirty years when we met. Hell, I've only been using them for nine and I became accustomed to all the dirty shit almost that long ago.'

'Zadiyah...' Janice wanted to comfort him, but did not know what to say. She had witnessed nothing that he was talking about, after all. She could have no idea of how dirty or forced all of it had really been.

'But this tournament? Seeing all these species together? Killing all kinds of them that were just trying to survive? It brought too many memories all at once; the worst ones. And yet... I still don't feel enough for them. I don't even feel enough for all the men I've just lost, and I've known some of them for years now. And you know what the worst part is? It's my fault. This operation was my idea; not hers, or anyone else's. They're all dead because of me, and yet there's still not enough remorse, not enough grief, not enough pain... not with the bracelets, and not even without them when you reach the point I've reached.'

Janice did not know how to answer. Nonetheless, hoping that she could somewhat comfort Zadiyah, she leaned against the seal between them to get as close to him as possible. But what she saw then was enough to make her the one that really needed comforting. Only the faintest green hue was left around Zadiyah, meaning that the dozens of officers Janice

could now see behind him had almost made their way in. Despite that, however, he seemed at peace now after getting all of that off his chest.

‘Remember what I said, Janice,’ he spoke calmly. ‘Grab a keycard, unseal those stairs and run down without looking back. I want you to stay alive; for me, for my men, for all of us.’ He then took a deep sigh and turned around.

‘Anytime, now...’ He stretched his back, neck and arms while staring down his enemies.

‘Zadiyah...’ Janice whimpered, getting emotional. It was not only because of Zadiyah’s final stand she knew she was about to witness, but also because of how powerless she was to even do anything while it all happened. Even with the bracelets, all it took was a thick enough layer of this fucking alien glass.

‘That sounded emotional, genuine,’ Zadiyah said, still facing away from her. ‘See, you’re still yourself, unlike me.’

‘D-Don’t say that...’ Janice could barely hold back tears.

‘I’m tired, Janice. I’m tired of not being myself, not remembering myself. I don’t want to keep leaving that me even further behind. Not anymore. I want to stop, here and now. I will take out as many as I can to increase your chances, and I’m glad that’s all I can do. I know the bracelets will try to keep me alive, and they would keep doing so in the war if it ever came to it, too. All while keeping me from carrying any weight on my shoulders other than themselves. I’m glad I won’t have to carry them anymore.’

‘N-No...’ Janice whimpered while a couple of tears finally escaped her eyes and ran down her face. She could see one of the policemen finally approach the switch next to the seal they were behind. ‘No, no, no, please...’

‘Follow my advice, Janice. Get out of here and live. For your own sake.’ Zadiyah pressed against his earbud, cutting his communication with Janice for good as the seal finally lifted.

‘ZADIAH!’ Janice yelled while watching him engage his enemies as skillfully as ever despite the overwhelming odds. A handful of them were already down by the time he had to begin being conservative with his attacks to keep himself from overheating. Even so, it quickly became apparent that this was indeed going to be his final stand. Their numbers had about doubled soon after his initial display of skill. These guys had no intention of underestimating their enemy, and they could send as many reinforcements against him as necessary now that there were no seals along the way.

Janice shot a fire cyclone followed by a shockwave followed by an ice spike followed by a lightning strike and with many lighter attacks sprinkled in-between. She tried attack after attack towards the vicious battle of the silhouettes she could barely make out from this distance to the seal, despite knowing none were going to get through. With the slimmest hope she already knew to be false, she approached the seal again while her bracelets cooled down. As she had expected, not even the smallest dent was made. Not only that, but now that she had a much clearer view of the fight, it was a lot harder to watch.

*Dammit, it’s not gonna be enough,* Zadiyah thought during the second he could take a breather behind an ice wall before it shattered as quickly as it had risen. If he kept fighting defensively and attacking with the intent of merely neutralizing his enemies rather than killing them, then his last stand was not going to amount to much by the looks of it. Albeit small, there were many tears all over his reactive armor already. They were not wide enough yet to expose him to anything but the luckiest shots of the galaxy, and his gas mask provided more

than enough protection for his head. However, he did not like the pace at which his odds of survival were decreasing one bit.

‘Come on, COME ON!’ Janice punched the seal with all of her force, which would have definitely shattered some knuckles if it was not for the gauntlet of ice she had formed around her fist. Once more, nothing. She tried the claws, and again, nothing happened. She remembered that blade Nela had used and managed to find out how to summon it after a few quick attempts. Still, that did nothing to the seal either. She pressed her hands against it and covered them in flames, hoping that maybe the glass had a low melting point at least. It did not. All that she had done was burn herself, as she had kept pressing until the bracelets both overheated.

Oh, how easy it would be for Zadiyah to send a fire cyclone right there where six of them were clumped together. That was what he thought when he took another nine-or-so shots to the torso just to take down one more guy. Not only was this approach horribly inefficient, but it did not have much of a point by now. After all, he was the only one that knew just how much power to exert for that sweet spot for a non-lethal takedown. He had no doubt that the rescued finalists, with all eight of their bracelets, would manage to get out of here together by any means necessary. But he knew that they were going to kill everyone they came across to do so. The public was going see yet another coat of Xeilon blood on the hands of their usurper queen even if it all worked out at the end, so it would make more sense for him to resort to killing as well, after all. He could survive for longer and take down dozens more before going down, vastly increasing Janice and the others’ odds.

‘AAARGH!’ Janice punched the seal again without even any ice to protect her fist, as both of her bracelets were in the middle of cooling down. Despite them continuously pushing her to do otherwise, she cared less and less about herself the more she saw Zadiyah take. The more tears appeared on his armor, the more she punched with her bare fists as they bruised at first, and then blood came out. She knew that she was going to crack them if she kept going like this, perhaps worse if she did not stop herself even then. She was going to end up with a pair of hands she could not move by the time she had to fight, and Zadiyah’s sacrifice was going to be for nothing. But she did not hear that thought as desperation had taken hold of her, and it was even stronger than the bracelets. She screamed away the pain and kept going. Although it was immense, she had gone through worse by now.

No, Zadiyah refused. *I’m done with killing. I’m not going to taint my last fight like this.* But what happened then made these thoughts irrelevant as he could probably taint it no longer even if he wanted to. A tear on his armor, right where his right shoulder was, had become far too wide a while ago. Although the weapons he was up against were not of the highest destructive power like those banned rifles, they still packed quite a punch if their shots met no armor on the way, enough to go straight through his body.

Janice gasped in horror as she saw Zadiyah collapse against the seal with a bloody hole on his right shoulder. It looked like he could not move his right arm, and his left one was occupied with holding the wounded shoulder.

‘No... No, please...’ she whimpered as a small group approached Zadiyah and pointed their weapons right at his face.

‘Slippery motherfucker, aren’t you?’ the chief said, and took a glance at the two dozen unconscious officers around him. ‘You gave us quite the trouble. Don’t know how I’ll explain this mess to the Royal Guard.’

‘They’re not-’ Zadiyah opened his mouth, only to get it kicked by the man.

‘I don’t remember giving you permission to speak, C-2. You seem to think you’ve already been declared champion. You don’t have any rights here besides the one to stay silent. Now, since you’re not so slippery anymore and we’ve been authorized to dispose of you for good by any means necessary, what we’re going to do...’ He reached behind Zadiyah’s mask to unlock it, and then ripped it off his face. ‘...is shoot you repeatedly in the skull until your head becomes nothing but a pulp sliding off that seal behind you while your friend watches.’

He glanced at the sobbing Human girl, satisfied to see her so hopeless. She had been the most irritating fan-favorite he had ever seen in a tournament, having the nerve to disrespect and threaten the audience like that, daring to walk away from the monolith at the end of a round, and still somehow getting the permission from King Vrollus himself to do so just for such a banal show of “respect.” He had been so satisfied to see her go down first in the final round, and fortune was somehow on his side for a second time now. Although this little conspiracy of the finalists had been a problem overall, he was at least going to get to kill the Human bitch with his own hands after he was done with this one.

‘So...’ he cut to the chase. ‘Any last words?’

‘Like I was trying to say, your officers are not dead,’ Zadiyah said. ‘None of them; not yet. But...’

‘But?’

‘I suggest you carry them outside, lift all the seals and let the finalists simply pass if you value their lives or your own,’ he threatened him with confidence. ‘Because I can assure you... they will *not* be as merciful as I am.’

The chief laughed. ‘Look at this one. Still making threats even when he’s about to die instead of begging for his life. Told you guys he was my favorite for a reason. You think that whore right there would give a final speech like that?’

‘Oh, she will give more than a speech to you,’ Zadiyah defended Janice’s honor. ‘I can promise you that.’

The chief stopped laughing and made a gesture for his men to stop pointing their guns at Zadiyah for a moment. He crouched down in front of him, getting close to his face. ‘Listen, buddy. You’re not fooling anyone. We all know you’re toughest among them, and she’s alone in there just like you were alone here. You couldn’t even take half of us out, and we’re just one team they sent in out of a dozen. You really think *she* has what it takes?’

‘No, I *know* she does.’

‘Heh. Well, we’ll see about that.’ He rose again and pointed his gun back at Zadiyah’s face. ‘Too bad you won’t, though. Still, that was a great final speech; I’ll give you that. But now...’ He gave the signal to his men to point their guns at Zadiyah again. ‘...I’m afraid time’s out, champion.’

‘NO!’ Janice screamed after the first shot, and each of the consecutive shots made her take another step back. She kept backing away while crying until she could no longer see the remains of Zadiyah’s head spread over the seal. She then turned away, just to make sure she

wouldn't have to see it again until... Right. They were going to move on to her now. They were going to drain the gas before lifting that seal, and they were going to come in. Finally.

*You...* Janice began feeling that sensation again. The bracelets were not numbing her feelings anymore; they were asking her to let it all out. She had the perfect blend of grief and rage from witnessing Zadiyah's death flowing inside her, perfect for them to use as fuel for the death machine they were about to unleash. Everything, from the urge to survive to the thirst for vengeance, was impeccably aligned.

*I know what I'll do to you...* There was no reason for her to hold back anymore. It was just her and dozens of those bastards. The same bastards who had brought her here, locked her up, and made her fight for her life for their enjoyment. The same bastards who had mocked and belittled her through all of it, exposed her life to the whole galaxy, and apparently even jerked off to her. All she had done in the meantime was listen to those commentators, talk with those guards as peacefully as possible, and even restrict herself from killing any of them after all that just to follow Zadiyah's word. And now, because of the same bastards, he was not here anymore to stop her, and she had endured enough. It was time. Not only were her bracelets saying so, but every single cell in her body was as well. *Go on. Come in. Lift that seal and see what happens.*

She waited, holding back the explosion. She remembered how terrified the audience had gotten the first time she had neared it like this at the arena. She had not realized it then, but watching the battle recap later in her room had showed her what happened. She knew these ones were going to scream and scatter away too if she let it go right now, and she was never going to get through that seal. She had to keep holding it in until the right moment. The gas cloud kept thinning, so it had to be not much longer now.

'Well, well, well... Not so bold now, are we?' Indeed, it only took half a minute or so before Janice finally heard someone behind her, accompanied by a few different sets of footsteps.

'Not even going to put up a fight, huh? Just going to keep curled up into ball and cry?' the chief kept taunting her confidently as he approached. 'I can't believe you're even more pathetic in person than anyone could ever imagine. All that show at the arena, and you won't even try to avenge your friend when push comes to shove.' He sighed. 'You know, I would ask you for any last words like I asked him, but... you don't even deserve it.' He cocked his rifle, ready to give himself the honor of executing the most all-luck-no-skill finalist he had seen in years. 'I bet even that Suiyan bitch would've at least fought before going down.'

Janice finally began rising slowly, the chief's condescending spiel finally giving her the last drop she needed. Her back was still turned to them, but her bracelets told her enemies everything they needed to know as she stretched her arms. Only after seeing both the burning scarlet red and the shimmering pure gold gems shine brighter than any he had seen before did the chief realized his miscalculation. Those loud inhales and exhales that he had assumed to be the sign of Janice fearing for her life was in fact fueled by something else. She had in fact not been kneeling on that floor with her head down to pray for her god to save her, but to call in a demon for help. That glow on her bracelets could not emit from someone in panic or despair. They could only be a sign of one thing, and he had failed to anticipate it. But the most significant factor that had led to him miscalculate was really his unawareness of Janice's promise. He did not know that during what he had viewed as a mere show, she had made a

promise to everyone that had died at the arena for this tournament, and to herself. A promise to *make them pay*.

‘We’ve just received confirmation that the hangar is safe, sir,’ said the headguard, but Vrollus still seemed disinterested in retreating to Celestol for now.

‘Thank you for informing me, Uster. It may come in handy as a last resort,’ he calmly said, still observing the courtyard’s entrance where a flock of panicking civilians kept demanding to hear from the king or to take shelter inside. He felt fortunate that the Royal Guard was useful enough to handle an unarmed mob by themselves at the very least, for as much of a joke as they were. He knew for sure that all six of them out there were going to last at most a second once the actual threat finally emerged.

‘Sir. With all due respect, I don’t think it would be wise to stay here,’ Uster tried to assert. ‘The arena is on lockdown and under control, but we don’t know if there’s anyone outside that’s in on the conspiracy, or how many there are if that’s the case.’

‘Don’t act so naïve, my dear headguard,’ Vrollus remained unmoved. ‘Of course they’ve got outside help. You know you can speak your mind more honestly with me; I’m no tyrannical dictator that would have your head cut off for voicing an opinion against me. I’m sure you can clearly tell this sort of a plan wouldn’t be devised by just a handful of guards in the arena. Just the champion alone proves that. He was impeccably skilled with the bracelets and played a key role in their operation by exerting just enough power to knock out every other finalist without killing any. He was trained, and I’m sure you can guess who would be responsible of that.’

Uster froze in place. ‘Y-You don’t mean—’

‘I *do* mean her, Uster. I’ll tell you what a bunch of conventionally “educated” arena guards picked from the most incompetent bunch in the army so that they’re at least useful for something would come up with. They would try to brute force a rebellion by the first stage, thinking numbers alone would help them. They would be romanticizing banal ideals in their head like freedom for all the poor imprisoned species, and attempt to leave no one behind to fall victim to the vicious, oppressive Federation. They would be blinded by wishful visions of themselves as the instigators of a rebellion that would not last a day in reality. All 120 contestants they freed, unarmed and unprotected, would alarm every guard and officer around the arena instantly. Their supposedly huge army would easily be gunned down before even getting close to an exit gate, and it wouldn’t even take much effort. Most would already be dead before the police even got inside, because our heroes would have wrongfully assumed that all 120 of the contestants would be so willing to work together without hassle and escape the arena. Everyone in their right mind would be aware though that a considerable number of those we bring here each year really do have nothing to return to, and would rather take the competition for a chance at a new start. The last straw would be someone robbing them of even that chance. I’m not even getting into the seals and the gas; there would just be way too many odds stacked against them overall even at their luckiest.’

‘Well, this plan doesn’t seem to have gone so well for whoever came up with it, either,’ Uster boldly argued. ‘That skilled champion has been dealt with, after all. With him out of the picture, I’m sure the rest of them inside the arena will be a piece of cake. We’re also prepared for anything that may happen outside of it, if only you would make your way—’

'Even that?' Vrollus cut him off, pointing at someone among the crowd in front of the courtyard. They were dressed in a brown cloak and keeping their head down. All that could be seen was the mouth. The height, figure and skin color indicated that they were most likely a Xeilon and nothing more at first glance, but Vrollus knew for sure who *she* was.

'Excuse me, sir? Who?' Uster asked, and his question got answered immediately by what he witnessed afterwards.

Vrollus and his wide-eyed headguard, the former indifferently and the latter in terror, watched all of the guards at the courtyard entrance go down one-by-one in seconds. The cloaked stranger had two master bracelets that she utilized with machine-like proficiency, putting on a display that would shake anyone to their core except for her brother.

'T-The guards!' was all that could come out of Uster's mouth.

'She didn't kill any,' Vrollus preemptively answered his next question. 'I can tell. We had the same training for 30 years, after all. She quickly scanned the environment, as well as the enemies in both number and composition. She sent those shockwaves and lightning bolts exactly where she needed to.'

The woman finally lifted her cloak and revealed her face. To the surprise of absolutely no one that had witnessed the display of skill, it was indeed the ever-so-stoic-yet-alluring face of none other than Lyndri Xollum.

'W-What do we do, sir? Shall I activate the—'

'Do so, and I'll have you exiled beyond Federation Space, Uster,' Vrollus spoke for once without complete apathy and disinterest in his voice. He was serious. Now that he could see his sister's face, a flood of emotions he had buried deep down years ago were resurfacing. There was some nostalgia, some anger and some worry; but more than anything, there was excitement. After so long, it was finally time for another round.

'Take all your men inside here and go get those terrified civilians to safety, Uster. And then help the police officers with anything they may need until I call you back here.'

'What? B-But sir, we can't leave you here by—'

'Myself? Again, Uster, please don't play dumb with me. You and me both know that your supposed layer of protection around me really means nothing in practice,' Vrollus bashed his headguard and his men. 'All of you together couldn't even lay a finger on me or my sister if you tried, so don't act like I'm the one that actually needs protection here. You're just for display, so go make yourselves useful for once,' he hissed and then pointed at his sister again. 'And if you're too scared to do so because of her, I can guarantee you that she won't engage unless you do. Really, if you aren't even aware of *that*, I advise you thoroughly refresh your memory at the first chance.'

That last part was not fair, and Vrollus knew that. After all, no one had spent as much time with his sister as he had, and he had been obsessed with trying to anticipate her every move for quite a while now. Reading her had been a substantial part of most of his life. Still, being fair could wait. Right now, all he needed was for the palace grounds to be left to him and Lyndri, and absolutely no one else. If he needed to insult everyone out of his sight, he was going to do it without hesitation.

'...Understood, sir,' Uster replied coldly. The insults had worked. He gathered the rest of his men and stepped outside, coming face to face with Lyndri on the stairway to the entrance. She stopped and calmly gazed at the guards without a word, her bracelets at the ready. Uster

hesitated to ignore her, but it only lasted for a moment. *Whatever. Fuck him.* ‘Come on, let’s move!’

Lyndri relaxed her hands a bit as she saw the headguard make a hand gesture signaling the rest of the guards to go around her. She watched her sides carefully, still not letting her guard down just in case. She was sure that there was no ruse at play since she had been expecting her brother to insist facing her alone anyway, but she had not come this far by solely trusting her own judgement. This, right now, was all according to Zadiyah’s plan after all.

‘Oh Lyndri, what a surprise! Welcome back home,’ Vrollus called out from the doorway with a warm smile and open arms once the guards left. ‘Sorry I had no time to prepare anything, but I have a feeling that’s quite alright with you, is it not?’

‘Of course it is,’ Lyndri responded to his fake hospitality with an equally fake sincerity. ‘I just wanted to see how my little brother’s doing. You’ve been eating well, it seems. You weren’t this built the last time, were you?’

‘Oh, you flatter me,’ Vrollus showed humility, which would be enough by itself to make it apparent to anyone who even remotely knew him that he was acting. ‘Honestly, though, I could say the same about you. We should exchange our exercise regimens.’ He stopped blocking the middle of the doorway and moved to the side, making an invitational gesture. ‘Please, won’t you come inside? We may chat more comfortably in a little more privacy.’

‘Why, thank you. I was just thinking the same,’ Lyndri accepted his invitation and walked inside the giant main hall. She breathed in deeply a whiff of nostalgia as her brother closed the door behind them.

‘I’d say make yourself at home, though I assume that’s why you’re here, anyway, aren’t you?’ Vrollus asked.

‘That’s right,’ Lyndri responded as she turned back to him. ‘So let’s cut this shit already, Vrollus,’ she dropped the bit. She had no more patience for any more roleplaying, not with all the factors she could not control outside. She had faith in Zadiyah, but the poor man had already kept the diversion up for long enough. There was no reason to push him any further.

‘As you’re probably aware, I’ve got people waiting for me,’ she said. ‘So are we going to get this over with already, or are you too nervous after the last time? You could just give up now and make things easier for the both of us, you know?’ she teased Vrollus while visibly preparing herself for combat.

Although Lyndri had just violently stepped on a nerve, Vrollus did not lose his cool. He was not about to fall victim to mere taunts and provocations after preparing for so long in anticipation of this moment. He readied himself as well. ‘Straight to the point as always. There’s still one thing likable about you, at least.’

For the same reason but different desired outcomes, both of their minds went to the arena briefly for one last time as they circled each other, with all four bracelets glowing and cycling between gem colors. They were both confident in themselves, as long as the arena could keep everyone’s attention on itself for just a little longer.

A wave of fire, followed by one of lightning, spread in every direction around Janice, which would have been enough by itself to burn everyone around her into a crisp if not for their armor. Nevertheless, it was still enough to fry most of their nanoscales. The chief and his

men laid on the ground in perfect irony, fearing their life and heavily breathing in panic. They knew that this was only the beginning.

Janice emerged from within the explosion, showing every symptom of someone that was overcharged. The veins on her arms around the bracelets had become visible, shining in the respective colors of the gems. Her irises had changed color as well, her left eye glowing the same red as the bracelet on her left arm, and her right eye glowing the same gold as the one on her right arm. It was a question in the air whether the officers would have been more or less terrified if her expression was fully visible and not mostly obscured by the gas mask, which drew all the attention to her glowing eyes.

Before the chief could even begin to beg for mercy, a pillar of fire rose from the ground on his left, large enough to engulf two of his men. They screamed in agony for a full second before it disappeared, leaving only the burnt corpses behind. The chief was about to scream also, right as another one appeared on his right and made another two of his men share the same fate. With that, in merely two seconds, he was the only one left among Zadiyah's executioners. Janice had a more personal plan for him.

'P-PLEA—' he attempted, but she was already on his throat, strangling with both hands. Even her physical strength was immense. He tried for his gun, but fire and lightning spread simultaneously from his throat to all over his body before he could even point it anywhere. He could scream if he could, louder than any of his men had just screamed inside those personalized storms of hell before dying. Just like them, it only took a second for him to perish as well, and his mind was on the most haunting fact he had realized with just a glance at those burning eyes of the girl in his last moment. She would have made him suffer for even longer if she could control herself.

'SHE'S OVERCHARG—' screamed one of the remaining officers in the back, cut by another pillar that rose from beneath his feet as soon as he tried to run away. But unlike the previous ones, this was not one summoned by Janice. It was rather another byproduct of the overcharge outside of her control. Not only could she summon a fire pillar herself at any point she wanted, but numerous others kept rising around her by themselves at random points as well. Most importantly, unlike what she had been used to by now, these pillars just instantly *appeared* below her enemies. There was no aiming required. All she had to do was mark her target, and they were engulfed in flames. Another change she had noticed was that she could now keep throwing out attacks as fast as she could without stopping, suffering no repercussions for it. The bracelets were no longer heating up, as they were seemingly at their maximum temperature at all times anyway, perhaps beyond that. She did not recall ever seeing them glow this bright even at the exact moment of an overheat before. Despite that, they did not burn her arms. On the contrary, they felt even better than ever.

Janice was not only overcharged, but neither her reactive armor nor the mask she wore had even a single considerable scratch on them. Knowing they had no chance against her, none of the remaining officers even tried to engage. They instead kept running away, trying to get out of the pillars' range.

One of them selfishly tried rushing for the switch next to the seal she passed to keep Janice from getting out no matter what, even though some of her remaining comrades were also behind it still. She knew they were going to get killed, but it was a sacrifice necessary to contain the beast. Except, Janice was of course not limited to using only these pillars just

because they were the strongest ability she had. Not only could she now shoot fire cyclones and lightning bolts much more liberally, her senses were also at their most heightened and her reflexes were at their quickest. Everything was locked at its maximum from the power to the precision. That officer thus never made it to the switch, and a bunch of others froze in shock for a second after witnessing a lightning bolt that had shot from behind them strike her dead in the head.

A second was all Janice needed. She caught up to one of the guards while charging up a fiery fist, knowing that he was going to try and dodge her once he heard her footsteps reach right behind him and a little to his left. His quick movement to the right happened almost synchronously with Janice's ninety degree turn right next to him, letting her fist meet his face.

He knew it was already over when he found himself down on the ground. Even if Janice did not finish him herself, it was only a matter of time before one of the pillars engulfed him. He could already feel the heat and hear the noises of all the ones that kept rising around him. It would be fine if he sensed only that, but he could hear explosions, lightning, and cries as well.

A second passed. At first, he assumed that she was catching up to the rest of the team one by one as well, but the noises' distance did not change. What was happening? Had she stopped them in their tracks too, right next to him, and was now torturing them? Were the others trying to help him, and kept falling one after the other trying to do so?

Another second passed. *No please, I'm sorry...* He wanted to scream it, but was too frightened to do so. He felt an overwhelming sense of guilt, quickly followed by an even more overwhelming sense of shame for only feeling that guilt when his life was on the line like this. In reality, deep down, he had known that he was on the wrong side for years, but had never seen any point to fight or reject it. What a hypocrite he was to only ever think of it consciously when it came around to bite him in the ass. He deserved it. He acknowledged it and apologized profusely in his mind, swearing to never be a part of this ever again if he made it out alive.

Another second passed. He swore to leave the force, leave Xeila and move to Nah'Cli or wherever necessary to advocate for C-2 rights. Hell, he would advocate for them here right now if he could. He would even join the rebellion beside her against the Federation if that was what he had to do to redeem himself.

Another second passed as he kept begging, before he finally felt a warmth against his back that turned into his personal hell in just milliseconds. He screamed in a pain he thought was impossible to experience, tears vaporizing before they could even form.

It did not matter to Janice. She was completely unaware of what had even happened, as she had paid no attention to that one officer after knocking him down. She was hyperfocused on her one goal to reach that gate now that she could see it. She knew there was more of them waiting outside, and she was going to make it there not to save herself at this point from the arena, but to obey the same thought that kept circling her mind over and over as her rampage continued. *Make them pay... MAKE THEM PAY.*

'SEAL THE DOOR! SEAL THE DOOR!' the last remaining officer yelled as he climbed the stairs leading outside. Unaware of what was going on, everyone outside reacted in confusion, unsure of why sealing the door would be necessary. After all, the biggest threat had been eliminated, and most of their forces had not even been sent inside. Surely, whatever

this particular officer was so worried about could not be anything beyond what they were able to handle even if it made it out.

Disappointed by his comrades' inactivity, the officer tried reaching the door controls himself, but a fire cyclone hit him right in the chest before he could do so. It sent him flying toward the barricades behind which the remaining police forces were at the ready. They braced themselves for combat after what they had just witnessed, anticipating for the rest of the finalists to appear. What appeared instead was a giant, dark cloud that formed directly above their heads at a concerningly low altitude. It sent them all into a panic, since such a phenomenon had only one possible source, and it was one which they knew they were not prepared for.

Before they could even decide what action to take, let alone act it out, a couple of golden thunderbolts struck two of the officers randomly, and one of them was the nearest to the door controls. Then, just a second after that, right as another officer tried reaching the controls, a fire pillar rose directly in front of her, stopping her in her tracks. A couple more then rose around the door, but she did not get deterred this time and made another rush towards it, only to get struck by a lightning bolt sent from inside this time.

Within the same second, the source of that bolt appeared for all to see and with that, the horrifying full picture was revealed at last. It was just the Human girl by herself. Not even the Suiian girl, let alone the Amph or the Drahns had she needed by her side to come this far. Even if they survived this fiery thunderstorm somehow, there could be three more in store after it.

They all had protective visors to deal with the countless small flashbangs of the constant thunderstrikes at least, but the thick fire cyclones and their own barriers were enough to keep obscuring their vision when they most needed it against the rabid Human. She was absolutely crazed, running around and jumping from person to person while sending all the fire cyclones and lightning strikes she possibly could in a perfect rhythm and with nightmarish precision. They had called for the rest of their forces spread around the arena to relocate here the moment she had shown her face, but even those reinforcements were flowing in slower than the savage girl and her hurricane of death were killing them. The sentiment they had all heard at least once throughout their years of service, the sentiment they had all utterly rejected until now, was being proven correct right before their eyes in the most terrifying way possible. They were pathetic. They always had been. The centuries of peace without the heavy weaponry or autonomous enforcers, coupled with the lightweight training only to have them be capable of stopping the very occasional thievery or street brawl of this crime-free, prosperous planet, had made them all nothing but a joke. In more than a minute, when they were so many against just one target, all that they had been able to do was hit not more than a couple dozen of their shots in total. Overcharged or not, she was only one girl.

The mayhem that Janice spread around her portrayed accurately the cathartic sense of freedom she felt. At last, she had made it out of the arena, surrounded by nothing but monsters to slay at her most powerful, and without having to share. Unbeknownst to her, she had ended up being Zadiyah's trump card without either of them intending for it, and this was not even going to be the end of it. She had already set her next goal the moment she had noticed the palace in the distance. As the storm around her dealt with the rest of the dwindling, retreating enemy forces, she made her way towards it. That King Vrollus was next.

Quickly raising her arms in front of her face in a very precise position, Lyndri deflected all four ice spikes at once. Two of them hit the bracelets, and the other two hit the tips of the long ice blades she had summoned over her hands. Everything made of ice shattered in unison as Vrollus prepared to attack with a lightning strike and a fire cyclone simultaneously this time. Lyndri effortlessly deflected both, blocking the former with an ice shield while redirecting the other at her foe with shockwave, but Vrollus' reflexes were on par as well. He blocked the incoming cyclone with an ice wall, and turned invisible just as the explosion obscured him enough to hide his movement for the next attack. But of course, he was not the only one in the room who could rely on the almost overpowered defensive advantage of the ice wall when necessary. Lyndri had summoned one for herself also just as the cyclone had hit her brother's cover, protecting her from the wide burst of fire he released in retaliation.

Both siblings took a breather behind their respective ice walls. Each wall was damaged yet still standing with yet a few more seconds left of its lifetime. Their relative thinness compared to when they were first summoned allowed the siblings to stare each other down through them easily as they cooled down for a bit, not that they needed to. Neither was, despite the unnaturally fast pace of their battle, nearly out of stamina. Neither had even a scratch on them, either, and despite the fact that their bracelets were all on the very cusp of overheating, it was not like either of them was going to let them reach that point anyway. Even if they did not have these walls, both of the siblings would still be having their short break right now, circling and staring down each other without attacking. They knew better than to risk a five-second period of inactivity for any of their bracelets, even if their next attack would be a guaranteed hit. Right now, neither even had an opening like that with the walls, so resting was the best option for both. It was better to keep recharging in small bursts during the fight anyway, rather than waiting for the moment they would absolutely need to. In fact, this was their seventh short break since the beginning, and many more would likely follow if Vrollus did not finally notice what was going on outside.

*That's the spirit. I knew you could do it,* he celebrated Janice's triumph in his head while watching her approach the courtyard. She was going to be here before long, and with that fiery thunderstorm around her, too. For once, he felt thankful for the palace for being perfectly soundproof and the windows for being fully protective against flashing lights. Otherwise, Lyndri could have easily been alerted to Janice's presence as well. For now, she was unaware, as all of her attention was solely on him. He had to make sure it stayed that way, as merely turning her head the other way was all it would take for her to see what was going on.

Still, Vrollus did not hurry. He had to avoid raising any suspicions, so he waited until the walls shattered like he normally would. The dance then continued once more with each sibling being as tactical and precise as ever. Like before, neither's ironclad nerves or lightning-fast reflexes gave in to the overwhelming pace of their fight. Not a single mistake was made by either side as projectiles flew only to be deflected, and defenses rose only to be shattered, until both reached dangerously close to the point of their bracelets overheating once more. This time, however, was going to be the last time during this fight.

*Got you now,* Vrollus thought confidently. He had managed to lay everything out perfectly for the plan he had cobbled together quickly just moments ago. The main hall was just behind him while his sister was directly across from him. She was standing in front of the

main doors, and Janice was now close enough for the circle of death around her to engulf anyone that would leave through them.

As Vrollus switched both of his bracelets to telekinesis, for the first time in who knows how long, he saw genuine shock on his sister's face. He had caught her off-guard for once, and that was going to be enough for him to leave this encounter satisfied despite its premature end.

*Until next time, sis*, he said his silent goodbyes to Lyndri while using one hand to open the doors behind her, and the other to launch her outside with a shockwave. With both of his arms in pain from the overheat, he then immediately turned to the very opposite direction and ran through the main hall without looking back. Once more, the duel's conclusive results were going to have to wait, but he did not have a problem with having to be just a little more patient. He had already waited for ten years, after all.

Janice did not question what had thrown the woman outside like that, nor for what reason. Vrollus was so close now, and she was in the way. Surprisingly, even in this state, she hesitated for a moment before attacking someone that was clearly not a guard or an officer. She could see that her modest clothes were of that of a civilian, however... they were not so innocent either, were they? No, of course not. All that cheering in the arena... All that psychotic enjoyment she saw on their faces whenever blood was spilled... All of those times she wished she could hurt them, show them what real savagery was...

The woman had a terrified expression on her face. She looked shaken to her core by what she was looking at. 'Stop!' she yelled while getting up.

*Look at her beg*, Janice thought gleefully... No. No, she did not. She could not think that. Even with all she had been through, this was not right. She had no way to know if this woman had ever been one of the spectators, and even if she had, she was now begging to be spared. She was not going to attack someone that clearly had no intention or way of hurting her... But after all that? Half of those officers had tried to run away rather than fight, had they not? And she had shown no hesitation at all while barbecuing them all and relishing in their screams. Did she really think this one woman was going to make the difference in whether or not she was going to be able to sleep from now on? Was her life alone going to be the sole decider on whether she was going to be the hero of this story or the opposite? Of course it was not, so why would she stop indulging now, when she was so close to her ultimate reward?

*NO*. This was enough, already. She wanted to stop. She was *going to stop*. Zadiah was right; she should have followed his advice. She should have never tried to avenge him, and went back to meet up with the others instead like he had told her to. She should have controlled herself. She should have resisted like he said she could, and kept herself from giving into their influence. But even though it was already too late for any of that, she could at least stop herself right now from going any further. She could keep herself from hurting this— *What the fuck?!*

*Can't believe she actually listened to me*, Lyndri thought as she weaved in-between fire pillars and thunderstrikes seemingly dangerously close, but she knew that although there was randomness to their patterns, each fire pillar and thunderstrike always appeared at least a certain distance away from the previous one. She calmly and elegantly moved from fire to thunder to fire to thunder and so on, eliminating her chances of actually getting hit by consistently *almost* getting hit. Someone inexperienced or less knowledgeable about the

bracelets watching her would likely think she was trying to kill herself, and Janice's expression reflected the same kind of confusion in her as well. Only once Lyndri got close enough to her while visibly preparing one hand for a shockwave did Janice even realize what was going on, and it was already too late by then.

*Poor girl. Inner conflict kicked in, didn't it?* Lyndri thought as she immediately turned a full 180 degrees back to the palace and ran inside while Janice kept tumbling down the modest but long slope of the courtyard.

*You'll get used to it. I'll make sure you do,* Lyndri entertained the thought of using the girl's clearly massive potential to her advantage after this. If only she could still catch up to Vrollus now, it would all be perfect. Alas, he had blocked the entrance of the office with not one, but two ice walls back-to-back. Lyndri knew that by the time she broke through, there would be no sign left of Vrollus or the passage to the hangar at all. Still, she forced her way to the empty and relatively familiar room. Some furniture and minor decorations were new and some old stuff was gone, but Mindar's miniature bust was still by the corner of the large desk. Knowing for certain she was going to be disappointed, she moved it in a giant Z-shape anyway, visiting all the other corners one by one. Unsurprisingly, it did nothing. *Fuck.* Of course Vrollus had changed it. It would be absurd if he had not taken one of the most immediately obvious precautions against her in ten whole years.

‘...Janice?’ Saleena took off her mask and leaned over the girl. She was lying on the ground with her arms open and her eyes half-open.

‘Oh... Hey,’ Janice answered as Galem and Krevin also entered her view. Her head hurt, and she felt too exhausted to be able to lift even a finger, but there was also an unusual calmness and comfort within her now that the storm was over. The sky looked beautiful with the mild orange of the approaching dusk, and its light on all of her friends’ faces made them all look pretty. Okay, maybe not *all* of them when Krevin was there, but she at least felt relaxed for once while looking at even his face as well.

‘Good to see you guys,’ she mumbled.

‘What the hell happened?’ Saleena asked. ‘How did you do all this by yourself?’

‘I...’

‘She overcharged,’ a woman’s voice answered from atop the slope, at the palace’s entrance. Janice slowly turned her head to the direction it came from to see... Right. That woman from earlier. Janice had not even noticed her bracelets during her internal crisis. She felt grateful for that, as it had finally brought an end to her... “overcharge,” apparently.

‘Who are you?’ Saleena asked while she, Galem and Krevin each took a fighting stance, carefully watching the woman and especially her bracelets.

‘Lyndri Xollum,’ Lyndri answered. ‘Biological sister and practical nemesis of Vrollus Xollum. I’d say I was pleased to meet you all if your friend did not ruin my plans to capture him right at the last second.’

Janice’s memories of the rampage were becoming clearer and clearer now, and the brief relaxation she had felt was fading as a result. She felt ashamed of herself not just because of what Lyndri had just said, but because of everything she now remembered. She was about to say she was sorry, but Lyndri seemed satisfied enough just seeing the regret on her face. It was apparent even through the gas mask.

'But it's not like that's important now,' she continued. 'The army's going to be here soon, since just one of you managed to singlehandedly make short work of almost an entire police department.'

Janice was confused on whether or not Lyndri had praised her this time, or scolded her for yet another problem she had caused.

'So, I suggest you all lower your bracelets and follow me inside, unless you want to miss what's probably your one and only ticket off this planet.'

That last sentence was all that the finalists had to hear. They helped Janice up and took off her gas mask while chatting in-between themselves.

'So, this is her, huh?' Krevin took a suspicious glance at Lyndri. 'Zadiah's partner, and I guess our future queen,' he hissed the last part.

'She seems not too different from her brother,' Galem commented. 'There's the same coldness in her eyes and words.'

'Fine by me,' Krevin said. 'She can keep her friendliness to herself, if she has any.'

'How'd you guys get out?' Janice asked as they followed Lyndri from a generous distance behind into the palace. 'Zadiah told me to unseal the stairway and run back to you, but I forgot about all of that once the overcharge began. I was seeing nothing but red.'

She looked down in shame, this time not only because of the rampage but also because of her irresponsibility. 'I should have done as he said. I should have come back for you.'

'It's okay,' Saleena reassured her. 'One of his men reached the others through the channel. He had some of them stationed outside too, apparently, just in case. It took a while for them to get us out, though. They said they only got an opening to come inside and unseal the gate after you dealt with all the officers around by yourself and got far away enough. They were apparently scared to go anywhere near you in that state. We didn't believe it at first, until we made our way out and saw it for ourselves. I still can't believe how you did all that.'

'The first overcharge is always the most violent, and lasts the longest,' Janice said without hesitation. Her mind had already gone to Zadiah and his final speech the moment Saleena had uttered his name. She remembered every single word vividly.

'Where'd you learn that?' Saleena asked.

'Zadiah told me,' Janice explained, while nervously glancing at Lyndri and recalling everything Zadiah had told about her. Was she even aware? She had not asked about him at all, which was more than weird considering how much history the two apparently had.

Lyndri was, in fact, very aware. She had been informed of it while scrounging inside the office. The lackey that had warned her over the radio about the army getting involved had also given her the devastating news about Zadiah's death. She just did not want to show how devastating it was for her. That was the real reason behind the current distance between her and the finalists. Normally, despite her usual formality and boundaries, she would be doing her best to let any new potential allies get comfortable with her. She would be explaining everything they needed to know, and pausing along the way to answer questions or at least ask if they had any. She would do it all casually too, mixing in words of praise or encouragement for them, as well as tactically injecting in some of her dry humor here and there to have them warm up to her as quickly as possible.

This time, she just wanted to be left alone in her silent, internal grief. She would not even have considered any other fallen comrade as anything more than the loss of an asset, probably

besides Solt and Cyliph. But even for her, even with this thick of a shell, someone like Zadiyah could never be cannon fodder; not after all they had been through. She could try to fake it if necessary, hiding any signs of her vulnerable side and act as if she was not distraught at all, but she did not have confidence in her ability to pull it off. Even if she could, she did not really want to. It was not a better option with how disrespectful it would be to her partner, whom she had spent years with... Yeah, who was she kidding? She had not been able to thicken her shell enough at all. Tears were forming now, one slowly making its way down each cheek. The best she could do to hide it was to keep her distance from the finalists, and hope for them to not ask her anything so that she could hide the emotions that would infest her voice.

‘Uhh, your highness...’ Janice began nervously to Lyndri’s dismay. ‘I don’t know if you know this, but... Zadiyah... he...’

‘I know,’ Lyndri forced out, trying to make her voice sound as neutral as possible. ‘We...’ she paused uncharacteristically, likely blowing her cover. Regardless, there was no reason to keep lowering her barriers more just because she had messed up once. ‘...will talk about it once we get out of here,’ she quickly changed course.

Janice did not push further as she understood the meaning behind that pause, and Lyndri tried to distract herself from the grief in the meantime as they entered the office. She glanced at the hexagonal game board of jesters, upon which the pieces were still as she had left, keeping the secret passage open. She felt disappointed in herself that it had taken her so long to figure out the solution. Of course it was the Cerulean Gambit. Who on Xeila but Vrollus would fantasize about beating their opponent with something as unreliable but flashy as the Cerulean Gambit?

‘Whoever enters last, pull that lever next to you to seal the door behind us,’ she ordered the finalists while sitting at the far end of the monorail shuttle. ‘We wouldn’t want anyone else discovering this passage.’

Galem followed her order once he finally entered after the others. He had barely been able to fit through the entrance, and had thus worried that the passageway it led to would be equally as claustrophobic. He was happy to be wrong as he stepped foot inside the large container that was about as spacious as the vessels that had brought him here days ago, but without those imprisonment mechanisms. He glanced back at the room they had come through as he pulled the lever, and caught a glimpse of some pieces on that weird board game sliding to different spots while the door slid shut.

The endless-looking tunnel lying ahead lit up as the entrance to the monorail shuttle closed. Its doors, just as the rest of its outer body, was again made mostly of that superglass material the finalists had come to hate more than anything else by now. Although this time, they could tell exactly where it was thanks to the steel edges that enveloped them and drew the vehicle’s outlines clearly.

Janice was glad that the seats were thankfully not just two long plastic benches on each side like a regular subway train would have. There were 7 individual seats on each side instead, softly cushioned and with armrests. Lyndri was sitting at the furthestmost seat on the right side, and she picked the seat next to her. Although she was beyond ready to leave this planet already, it was so relaxing to sit that it even made her wish that the journey would take at least a little while before they reached wherever they were headed to. *Oh, yeah...*

‘Where are we going?’ she asked Lyndri, who was occupied with a console on her right.

‘The Royal Hangar’ she answered without turning her head away from the console. ‘Though I’ll have to start this at a lower speed than usual or the inertia would be too much for Galem.’

‘Oh,’ Janice tried to sound disappointed as she glanced at Galem, who had not been able to find a suitable seat like the rest of them as they were all Xeilon-sized.

‘I can take whatever that is,’ he insisted. ‘There’s no need to slow down because of me.’

‘I know you can, but you don’t need to feel the embarrassment that comes after that.’

While Janice and Saleena both flashed back to a compilation of their falls and bumps in accelerating/decelerating subway trains, Galem was confused by the statement. Krevin would be confused as well if he cared enough.

The shuttle began to accelerate slowly while autonomously securing everyone but Galem with over-the-shoulder restraints. A few seconds went by as everyone quietly watched the tunnel twist and turn for a while.

‘Lyndri, uhh... about what happened inside the arena...’ Janice tried to break the silence.

‘If you’re blaming yourself for anything and want to apologize for it, don’t. Sabotaging the control room was supposed to be enough. No-one could’ve predicted how things went. No-one except for me, really. I’m the one who knows my brother best, after all. I should’ve taken it into account. If there’s anyone here that’s supposed to apologize... it’s me,’ Lyndri could barely force out the last two words while still facing away.

Janice did not want to push her any further, but felt as if she had no other choice. She was terrified of this tunnel potentially being the end of the line after they had come so far.

‘No, no, it’s not about that. I mean, it is, but not the apology part. I was gonna ask what if Vrollus anticipated us coming through this tunnel, too? What if he put explosives somewhere ahead he could remotely detonate, or-’

‘He didn’t,’ Lyndri wiped off a single tear as her voice switched to its usual stoic tone. ‘He wouldn’t. Not when I’m the only other person besides him that could use it. Blowing me up would be too easy. He wouldn’t be satisfied with it.’

‘What?’

‘He wants, no, needs to beat me in a one-on-one fight, all fair and square. Absolutely no external factors that could help either side allowed.’

‘Are you serious?’

‘You’d understand how serious I am if you knew our history. I know it may sound like I’m going with a gut feeling right now but I can assure you, it’s a reliable fact. You’ll even see it for yourself soon; we’re almost there.’

Janice could not believe what she had just heard, but they were indeed beginning to slow down, soon to likely prove Lyndri’s point. A few seconds went by in stressful silence besides a couple of Phy’s worried growls. Janice was not sure if the little creature could somehow sense what they were feeling or if it was just getting scared of the tunnel now. She watched Saleena gently scratch its back until they finally stopped and the restraints lifted. The doors opened on the other side this time, revealing the gigantic hangar.

Just as Lyndri expected, Vrollus had picked the largest of the Royalties to escape. The remaining four of the five ships were all here, and seemingly in pristine shape.

‘These are the Royalty ships,’ she began explaining after everyone got off and the passageway to the monorail closed by itself. ‘Each of them is custom-built and one of a kind, constructed about 40 years ago by my father’s orders for specifically our family’s usage. Each of them has highly advanced stealth capabilities, turning them completely invisible and silent at the press of a button, only at the cost of some extra energy. But that is hardly an issue with the efficiency of their state-of-the-art engines and hyperdrive cores. On top of that, each ship is armed with heavy cannons and auxiliary light turrets that are able to pack punches like no other. Lastly, as you can guess, each larger model has additional quarters and compartments in them with various purposes that the smaller ones do not have.’

Janice looked at the gorgeous vessels while passing by them and listening to Lyndri. Indeed, the four ships varied in sizes, and were placed in the order of smallest to largest from where they had entered to the other side of the hangar. She guessed that there was supposed to be a fifth one judging by all the empty space between the fourth ship and the wall on that side.

‘We’ll be taking Royalty M,’ Lyndri continued, ‘since it will provide us with a sufficient set of tools, and will also be fast and maneuverable enough. We could take Royalty S as well since it can house 5 people, but you never know when you may need the extra space or weaponry.’

As Janice had expected, they approached the third ship. She felt giddy while watching Lyndri push some buttons on its underside, and even giddier once an entrance appeared on its side, from which a ramp extended down to the ground, inviting them in. It was not only that she was excited to finally escape the planet, but also that she had just now realized how exciting it was to be around all this ridiculous sci-fi nonsense without having to worry for her life. The ships here probably had the sickest designs she had seen on this planet until now, and the idea of getting to explore an actual alien spaceship as a welcome visitor of it, rather than a prisoner inside its trunk in complete darkness, was really something.

The finalists immediately spread out to explore inside the ship while Lyndri camouflaged and silenced it from the bridge. She then focused on plotting a course which could let them safely break out of the atmosphere without being detected by any of the radars at the border checkpoints. She also had to take into account the patrol orbit of XPIF, which had to be on high alert by now. Busy with all of this, she was not too concerned with the finalists fiddling around with anything inside the ship, since there were safety locks on everything else but the main bridge console right now, with which she was interacting herself. There was no way to unlock anything without accessing that one, either.

Janice quickly lost interest in the minimalist and sterile interior of the ship with everything she could interact with doing nothing but displaying walls of text in an alphabet she could not read. She began watching outside one of the large windows as the ship finally began to ascend at such a speed that she could not even find enough time to take in the view of the planet itself before they made it to... space. It was beautiful.

‘Oh my god...’ she silently mumbled while staring at the endless ocean of stars with one hand on the window. For once, without hesitation, she took off her bracelets to fully take in all of it, her emotions unchained. It was not just for Zadiyah, or even for herself. Not for her current self, at least. Her mind had instead gone to memories so old that they showed her the life of a different Janice, one who had everything she could ask for without a single experience of tragedy. She remembered herself almost falling off the little stool her dad had

set up for her to step on so that she could look through the telescope. She would keep turning it from one direction to the other for hours at a time in some evenings, flipping through the pages of one of the four science magazines they had at home about space, trying to see just one of those countless planets and galaxies as they were in the pictures. She remembered her dad bringing her snacks from time to time with a glass of milk, telling his little astronaut to eat if she wanted keep exploring like that without passing out.

*Why?* she asked herself as a tear ran down her face. Why was she remembering those evenings so vividly now, while most of her childhood before that night was a blur? Why had she stopped looking at the stars just when her interest in them had peaked? Why had she stopped wanting to be an astronaut earlier than every other kid? What had happened to that telescope, or those magazines? These were all questions she knew the answers to, and that was what had really made those tears form. It was not the inability to recall what had changed, but rather the ability to not only recall, but clearly visualize it before her. That was what she was really staring at in tears; not her reflection at the moment, but at that night.

‘Well, good news,’ Lyndri announced to the finalists. ‘We’ll safely be in position to jump outside of Federation Space soon. That will put us off the grid, and there seems to be no one on our tail right now. I’d say it’s safe to say that you four have successfully escaped from the Power Brace Tournament; congratulations! That’s one hell of a story you can tell your children in the future.’

A moment of silence ensued, broken by Saleena after a second. ‘Yeah, I don’t really think they’d believe this,’ she admitted, her and Phy both staring at the same stars right beside Janice.

‘I don’t think I’ll be telling anyone about it anytime soon, to be honest,’ Krevin said in a bitter tone. ‘I’d rather do more fighting than chatting if I’m honest, your highness,’ he turned to Lyndri. ‘I’m still pissed that Janice got that whole army for herself, and I’m sure you haven’t saved us just to get into Xeilon heaven. Why don’t we cut this meet and greet session short and get to the point? Do you need us for anything? I don’t know about these three, but I’m feeling really fucking charitable after all that hospitality on your planet.’

Lyndri smirked. This was why she loved Amphs. ‘Of course, we can get to the point if you’re so eager. I’m waging a war against the Federation, and I’ve been gathering, training and arming people like you for the past decade. As you may guess, it’s pretty sizable and strong by now. We wouldn’t have pulled off this whole stunt otherwise, which would have sparked war anyway. The goal with it was to take my brother out of the picture before it all began, but I guess we’ll have to deal with him the hard way now.’ She tossed a glance at Janice’s direction, not because she was really blaming her for Vrollus’ escape, but because she wanted to make her feel indebted. She had already noticed that the girl had taken off her bracelets while everyone else was still wearing them, and her expression clearly implied the inner struggle of someone that was trying to convince themselves to step up to this intimidating woman and tell her assertively that they were not going to be a part of this conflict.

*Zadiyah left an impression on you, didn’t he?* she thought. *I’m sorry. I know he would be proud, and I don’t feel good about this, but I can’t just set you off after witnessing what you did. You’re too valuable. For both sides.*

‘I’m... sorry; I didn’t mean to—’ Janice attempted nervously.

‘I know you didn’t, Janice,’ Lyndri made herself sound as understanding as possible. Now that she had silently grieved enough to a point where she was comfortable leaving the rest of it for later, she was back at her regular game. ‘As I’ve said before, you’re not to blame for anything, but that’s not really the main issue here, is it? I can send you all off to your homes if that’s what you want; you have my word for that. But, I’m sure you do realize that you’re all highly wanted criminals now. Probably the highest, even. Do you really think you’ll be able to chill in peace and quiet after this? Do you really want to hide by yourself from a whole federation of advanced aliens without even knowing when you’ll be abducted again, only to be either thrown into the highest-security prison known in the galaxy or promptly executed? And even if you could, is it what you really want? Now knowing what’s at play here, and seeing what you’re capable of, do you want to take off your bracelets and walk away, leaving it to chance which side will win and whether your planet will be annexed for its resources or be made a prosperous member of the New Galactic Federation? That’s the point,’ she gave Krevin a look. ‘I want you to help me. You have all proven yourselves to be very capable with those bracelets, and I can help you unlock even more of your potential. Besides, you will be the everlasting faces of the revolution once this is over. The ones who cast the first spark and led the rebellion with the queen herself, each using a pair of the legendary Master Bracelets, of which only ten pairs were ever made. Forget about the escape, now *that’s* one hell of a story to tell, don’t you think?’

Another moment of silence ensued as all the finalists but Krevin contemplated for a moment, only for their thoughts to be interrupted by him.

‘Well, you already have my answer,’ he confidently reaffirmed his earlier decision.

‘I’m in too,’ Saleena suddenly jumped in, surprising the rest of them.

‘What?’ Janice turned to her. ‘You can’t be serious.’

‘I am,’ she asserted. ‘I’ve already told you I don’t really have anything to go back to. I don’t even know what I would do if I went back. Finding a place, a job, new people... I don’t want to go through all that again for the n<sup>th</sup> time. Not after this. I can’t just forget all of it and try to start over. I’d rather stick around with the people who helped me escape, and at least fight for some goal here. I’ll just be drifting aimlessly otherwise.’

‘But—’

‘I *don’t* need to think twice, Janice. I’m staying here.’

Janice tried to think of something to say, but Lyndri did not give her any time. ‘Good. And what about you, Galem?’ she turned to the Drahns tribesman. ‘We could really use someone of your skill and strength,’ she praised him honestly, not just throwing empty compliments to flatter him into the deal. He had much to learn, but his potential was unmatched by the others. If it was not for her and Zadiyah, he would have probably won the tournament.

‘I have many questions to ask, and I don’t know where to even begin,’ Galem answered. ‘What I was gathering at first was that some spirits moved on to here from other, different lands I had never known about. Not one of them resembled the Gods or their eternal servants after all, and they were undertaking the same trials as I. The weapons convinced me that it was a part of the path that I did not know about before; the path to be able to rest in the Gods’ chambers in peace for eternity. I could not understand why everything was worded so differently, but I recognized the patterns as familiar enough, and thought that it was just some

common pattern of speech that warriors from every land could recognize, at least enough to get the main idea. I accepted the idea of being a challenger for a holy trial. But then, killing them... that was what woke me up. It was just as it was back in Valarum. The same brutality, the same madness in everyone's eyes, the same cries we all let out... It was no competition, no duel. It was slaughter, no, it was even worse. There were women among those forced to fight as well, who were never meant to; not where I was from. How could that not be mentioned in our teachings? How could they not tell me that I would have to slay mothers and sisters like I would men? I knew for a fact then that it was not right, that I was not where I thought I was. I figured I should try to listen to those announcers, but they only confused me more. I simply carried on, doing my best to survive until I could figure out what all of this was. This "tournament," these "planets," these "species," the "Federation," the "galaxy," where I exactly am, and whether or not I can return home. If I stay here a while longer, can you enlighten me about any of those?"

'Yes, I can,' Lyndri accepted the herculean challenge confidently. 'But it will take time for us to go over everything, Galem. I'd suggest great patience if you would like to learn everything. That might mean more than "a while longer," but you have my word that your stay will be invaluable. Not only to you, but to us and to your people as well once you return to serve them again. So, with all that said, do you think you're ready to make up your mind?'

Galem contemplated for a bit while everyone else silently watched. 'Alright,' he finally said. 'I will follow your lead in exchange of what you promise.'

'Thank you. Know that it's a promise I'll keep.' Lyndri assured him.

Janice's heart began to beat faster as she felt both the pressure to accept the deal and the weight of Zadiyah's last speech. She remembered word for word what he had advised about Lyndri. *'All I can say is when you get out of here and meet her, if she still hasn't gotten what she came for, she will ask for your help. Don't accept. Just take off your bracelets, and demand that she drops you off to Earth. Don't involve yourself in this mess like I did. Go home and live a normal life, for your own sake.'*

*What am I supposed to do?* she asked herself. She wanted to follow his advice, but at the same time, Lyndri had a point as well. How could she just go home and try to keep living as if none of this ever happened? Plus, years and years of her life had already passed in loneliness and paranoia. She had been holed up by herself in a corner for so long, too afraid to reach out to anyone without fear, and feeling powerless to change anything. Sure, the last few years had been better, and she had begun to open up a bit, but it felt as if she had already missed the train, and was trying to make up for the youth she had lost far too late for it to make a meaningful difference. Did she really want to go back to that? That was the normal life that she would keep living if she listened to Zadiyah, and it was one she still felt lost and aimless in, just continuing to carry on for her parents' sake, who had suffered even more and yet always endured for her.

She wondered what they would think of her now. What would they say to their beloved daughter if she walked up to their doorstep with so much blood on her hands after being missing for days worrying them sick? Would they even believe what happened if she told them, or would they think that their daughter has finally lost it? Was she just supposed to keep her mouth shut about it for good, with no evidence to remind her that all of this really, actually happened and was not just a fever dream? What if Lyndri wiped her memory with

some crazy device in the ship before dropping her unconscious body in the same place she was abducted? Would it be better to forget all of this, or worse?

‘Earth to Janice, hello? That’s how you say it back home, right?’ Lyndri snapped her out of her thoughts.

‘W-What?’

‘I was staring at you hoping you’d notice I’m waiting for an answer from you as well, but you’ve been staring down in silence without saying anything for the last minute. I take it you’re unsure of what to do?’

‘I...’ Janice was indeed unsure. She had no doubt that Zadiyah was telling the truth about the dirty work him and Lyndri had done, especially now that she had met the woman. She was sure that she would have to do far bloodier things than what she had done today, and she could still feel the weight of that on her shoulders. But after all, she had only made it here because of Zadiyah and Lyndri, and that Vrollus had run away at least, even if he was not caught. She was sure that Lyndri knew what she was doing. After all she had seen, it was not too hard to believe that you needed to play dirty against the Federation, to match it in cruelty and deception. She had a clear-cut way of being a part of that rebellion she had dreamt about in the arena, right in front of her. Even Saleena was going to be by her side, so was this overall not the perfect opportunity she had been waiting for? If anything was worth betraying Zadiyah’s final wishes, was this not certainly it? She felt sorry for even entertaining that idea, but it was not going away. She could not bring herself to say either yes or no at the end, and so she decided to buy more time and knowledge for the decision.

‘I need to learn more,’ she finally said.

‘...Learn more?’ Lyndri asked, surprised by an answer she was not expecting. ‘More about what?’

‘Everything,’ Janice clarified confidently. ‘Sure, I may have more of an idea about what’s going on compared to Galem, but that’s not good enough for me. Not when I have a family waiting at home who are probably worried sick, and I’m just as worried for them. I’m not just going to blindly rush into a war and risk my life knowing what my death would do to them.’

She took a step forward in everyone’s admiration. Saleena especially looked emotional after that last sentence, and even Lyndri was jealous of her for being able to form it. *You’re lucky to have them, and they’re lucky to have you. I’ll make sure you’ll safely return to them after all this, don’t worry.*

‘So,’ Janice continued, ‘I need to know more about what the hell I’ll get into if I accept. I need to know more about the Federation, about what a “C-2” is, about what the “architects” are, and for fucks sake, about what the hell exactly happened with your family, especially between you and Vrollus. I need to know just who you are, and why you care so much for us, your highness. That’s the only way I can decide if I want to help you or not. I’ll be thankful to you for my whole life for saving me, but I can’t just willingly risk my life for you when I barely know anything about you, or the details of your plan. Do you think you can spare me enough time for that? I don’t need the basics like Galem does, just the crucial parts.’

Lyndri genuinely liked that assertive yet reasonable request, seeing it as a sign of the girl’s sensibility and fortitude.

‘May I, dearest adversary of chit-chatting?’ Janice smugly asked Krevin, who was showing clear disinterest in the idea of listening to more boring lore.

He sighed. ‘Sure, I guess.’

‘Then gather around,’ Lyndri ordered the finalists onto a line of comfy armchairs of what looked like a fancy bar, directly across from the bridge console against which she was leaning. These ones were luckily self-adjusting in size, automatically extending or shrinking in dimensions to be perfectly comfortable for their users, so Galem could sit as well this time.

Once everyone sat down in front of her, Lyndri continued. ‘Let’s start from the very beginning, which, as most believe, starts with the architects.’

# UNIVERSAL ARCHITECTS THEORY OVERVIEW

UNIVERSE>ORIGINS>UNIVERSALARCHITECTSTHEORY

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CLEARANCE LEVEL: 1

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The Universal Architects Theory was first proposed by the now-closed Nefaaris Research Institution of Astronatural Phenomena in 195 P.F., under the original name of Designed Universe Theory. This earliest iteration of the theory was mainly based on the Designed Language Non-Diversity Hypothesis and the Designed Celestial Movements Hypothesis, with the Artificial Power Gems Hypothesis later being added as a third basis in 1401 P.F. The theory suggests that the known universe we reside in was created by one or multiple species of one or multiple civilizations which had reached an advancement level of at least PC-5 (Prima Constus 5). These creators were named the Designers when the theory was proposed, and the name persisted until 886 P.F., when they were renamed to the Architects due to the theory's name change. Different groups of believers in the theory suggest different origins, motivations and bodies for the Architects themselves, while the theory itself does not suggest anything but their involvement in our universe's creation and their level of advancement.

Brief overviews for all of the three hypotheses that form the basis of the Universal Architects Theory are given below. More detailed information on each of these hypotheses can be reached by navigating to their individual files.

1) ARTIFICIAL POWER GEMS HYPOTHESIS: This hypothesis suggests that the currently unexplainable abilities of the power gems used in the crafting of power bracelets are a sign of them being not naturally occurring materials, but rather artificial ones created by the Architects. While their molecular and even sub-atomic structure do not suggest anything unusual based on our current knowledge, their behavior does not match or correlate to any other known natural or artificial matter of our universe. The hypothesis thus suggests that these gems were made to imitate their naturally occurring counterparts, but were given their special properties and behaviors via some artificial method that cannot be determined yet, as no trace of such a method is yet discovered.

2) DESIGNED CELESTIAL MOVEMENTS HYPOTHESIS: This hypothesis suggests that the rotation and revolution patterns of all celestial bodies observed so far in our universe are too relatively convenient for each other to be the result of natural randomness during the universe's formation. As known from basic education, there is a pattern among the rotations of

planets where each planet's rotation period is a perfect multiple of some faster-rotating planet's rotation period, if there is such a planet. The same goes for some slower-rotating planet's rotation period being a perfect multiple of both planets' rotation periods. This same rule applies to not only the rotations, but the revolutions of all planets that we currently know of as well. As an example of rotation periods, Thalsaar's rotation period is exactly 72 hours in federal units, while Xeila's is exactly 24 hours. As an example for revolution periods, Earth's revolution period is exactly 360 days, while Urielle's is exactly 120 days. These frequencies make a centralized system of measuring time among different planets a far easier task than it would be if such patterns did not exist. The hypothesis draws attention to the fact that based on our current knowledge of astrophysics, we can deduce that there is no reason for a celestial body with a movement pattern that breaks this rule to not exist. As further evidence of this, Celestol, an artificial planet constructed by the Galactic Federation, completes one rotation every 13.6 hours and one revolution every 173.79 days. The hypothesis suggests that the Architects placed everything in a perfect pattern to make interplanetary trade, travel and communication between the residents of the universe simpler than it would have otherwise been, which also correlates to the Designed Language Non-Diversity Hypothesis.

3) DESIGNED LANGUAGE NON-DIVERSITY HYPOTHESIS: This hypothesis suggests that the differences in languages spoken by different species, and even nations where applicable, would have featured more significant differences among each other if not for the Architects. We observe that the communication patterns of species tend to converge from many different sounds and techniques at the earliest PC-1 stages, to speech at the PC-2 stage for almost every single species, and with mostly the same patterns. While languages show much greater differences in writing due to different alphabets, numerals and other symbols, these differences become mostly negligible when they are spoken. The hypothesis puts forth numerous experiments and research findings on speech pattern development as evidence that there would be no reason for such a universal similarity among languages to exist without the Architects. Mentioned experiments and research report that there is no common part found in every species' brain that would lead to the formation of mostly the same speech patterns. Even experiments on individuals grown in complete isolation until these patterns form yield the same results. The hypothesis suggests that without the interference of the Architects, there would be infinitely more significant differences among the languages of societies that do not interact with each other as they advance. It suggests that in a universe dictated by pure cosmic randomness, there would not just be minor differences in pronunciation and naming conventions, but vastly different

grammar rules, sentence structures, whole vocabularies and even different sounds used. According to the hypothesis, there would be no way in this case for someone to understand any other language than theirs without either years of studying and practice, or using some artificial translator. It asserts that this was the exact reason the Architects made every language so similar in this universe; so that communication challenges among and within species above a certain advancement level would be trivialized.