

*Cradle for the child
Taken from the nest
The bird searches in vain
Her fledglings wilt away*

*Child tries to fly
Into Mother's arms
Her wings are just a dream
In sleep, warm and charmed*

KILL HIM, PRINCESS. OR ME.

CHAPTER ONE- Mother and Child

“Don’t come any closer! Y-you’re just like her! Your HORRIBLE mother!”

The sharp edges of the broken glass bottle stalked Tiera like a wolf with its fangs drawn out wide. Tiera was a tall, young girl with flowing, crystal white hair and pale skin. She wore dark sangria colored robes- the sacred attire of the Koujin knights. With growing trepidation, Tiera gaped at the old woman who was clutching onto the neck of the bottle with her dear life, her eyes trembling in fear, her frail body ready to die in a final stand at any moment.

I have to do this, Tiera thought to herself with grim determination. There’s no one else who can save her family but me. She channeled all the courage she had into her throat and tongue, and uttered, “Please ma’am, I’m trying to help-”

“LIAR! Those blood orange eyes. You’re hiding them! But I feel them glaring at me just the way your mother did all those years ago, to my own daughter!”

But Tiera had never had orange eyes of any shade- they have always been a light, lilac purple. Sadness seized her. She was too late; there was nothing she could do to help this poor woman. The Qivin had drained her of her empathy, of her trust, and of her sanity.

The two were locked in their struggle in a dark, empty dome. Its brown, metallic walls barely let any light in, its neon lamps fading like a dying flame. There were broken pieces of droids littering its floors. And then, footsteps, prattling down from the creaking stairs.

“Grandmother, please stop this!” A young boy of no more than ten stepped down the stairs, desperately racing to reclaim his grandmother’s kindness. The old woman pounced her bloodshot side-eyes towards the boy.

I have to get him away, Tiera thought to herself. She whispered to the child, “She’s already gone.

She's been touched by the Qivin."

But the boy did not listen. "Grandmother, I know you're in there! It's me, Jacob!" The boy dashed towards his grandmother and hugged her. The old woman did not even move an inch. She only grasped the broken bottle in her hand even tighter, and tighter. Then, with one arm, she nestled her grandson towards her in a hug. She was growing more paranoid by the second. She eyed the boy with utmost suspicion. And finally, she made up her mind.

The old woman screeched and raised the fangs of the bottle high up into the air, but Tiera thrust her hand out and shattered the cracked glass with the Wraithen Energies. Its shards collapsed downwards and sliced through the old woman's forearms, and she screamed even harder. Tiera jumped forwards and broke the grandmother's strong grip, grabbing the crying boy and landing away from the old woman while shielding the child from danger.

As the old woman sat in her own blood and stared at her forearm, Tiera clutched onto the boy and ran out of the dome. She stepped outside onto the ground of the looming, gray planet, its cold dirt drenched in dry red and its palm trees caked in dust and soot. Frantic screams rang out in all directions as villagers scrambled to run from their homes.

"The Qivin! They're here!"

A villager swept past Tiera, dragging forwards the soot layered on the ground in a fleeting dust cloud. Tiera's mind raced to think of what to do, and then she asked the boy, "Where's the rest of your family?"

The crying boy tried to speak up, "T-there's no one else left. It was only me and her."

He's lost everything, Tiera thought to herself. She had to get him on the escape ship. Tiera ran through the crowds, pushing past a flurry of tan rags and scarves, and finally reached an opening. Just a few hundred feet ahead of her was an enormous, sleek silver transport ship, its engines roaring as villagers raced to jump on board, with soldiers working tirelessly to manage the situation growing out of their hands.

But as Tiera peered ahead, something was not right. The villagers moved savagely, without care. There were no families escaping together. Each one was fighting alone for their own self.

"HEY! Tiera shouted to the soldiers outside the ship, "We have to relocate! Those villagers have been blighted by the Qivin!"

The soldiers looked at Tiera, but they could not react fast enough in time. Villagers swarmed them and wrestled them down to the ground, snatching their weapons away, and firing the stolen blasters at each other as they selfishly tried to steal the few seats on the ship for their own selves. Thousands entered the scene, outnumbering all the officers, and the very few Koujin knights.

I have to find another ship, Tiera thought to herself. She ran west, running as fast as she could. The boy's tears gradually stopped falling, and the only thing consuming him was fear.

And then, an engine's roar boomed just above her. Tiera looked up and saw a golden ship descending. The doors opened, and from them came a young, dark skinned man wearing black, noble battle attire, and a royal coat. Downy silver bangs swept across his eyes and met with the rest of his soft, short hair. "Tiera!" he called out to her.

Tiera ran on board, and the two entered the cockpit, with the young man taking control of the pilot seat. The ship lifted off the ground and flew through the clouds.

Tiera breathed a sigh of relief. "Victor," she said to the young man, "What's happening with the Qivin?"

"Our army's driven off most of the Qivin predators. We couldn't save most of the villagers here, but we've stopped them and the Amoth from attacking the neighboring villages. They're retreating."

Though his words told of triumph, Victor's face was solemn. His broad shoulders were completely channeled into piloting the ship to a safe place. He was the Prince of House Xiffinsire, the heir to the throne of the Nobilis Kingdom. He had been raised by his grandparents to be one of the finest representatives of their House, becoming the greatest swimmer on his home planet, and one of the most accomplished, up and coming leaders. When, at a young age, the Temples discovered his bond with the Wraithen Energies, he was conditioned into a Koujin warrior. It was during his training that he met Tiera, the daughter of the late hero Bronson Hyloaether, and she was chosen to become his personal knight and retainer for life.

Tiera sat in silence. The boy, huddled in her arms, could not speak. Slowly, he drifted off into a slumber. Victor noticed that something was bothering Tiera, and he broke the silence. "I'm surprised you aren't dozing off like that kid. You haven't slept in days."

Tiera sighed. "It's not easy being a knight."

"That's because you worry too much about me," Victor teased, and then grinned. "Just because I'm a prince doesn't mean I can't take care of myself."

"Worry about you?" Tiera scoffed. "You've got a wild imagination. Don't forget that my main duty is to protect the people of the galaxy. You're just an afterthought."

"You say that, Hyloaether, but you never really mean it. If you were really serious about becoming a Koujin legend, you'd show up to all the sermons and take our masters' words in heart."

"Oh, I'm sure I've showed up to more sermons than you have. Weren't you the one who said how boring those old Koujin were?"

Victor smirked. “Boring, yeah, but not pointless. They’ve drilled that stuff in me since I was a kid, so I know it by heart. At least I’ve got an excuse for skipping out and cruising around Duron.”

Tiera rolled her eyes. “I’ve learned more on Duron than I have at any sermon.” She paused for a moment, lost in a thought, and spoke again, “It’s a miracle Duron hasn’t been torn apart yet by this war. There’s all kinds of orphans and beggars there. Ratuya, Korfren, Mab. Even... those ones we’re forbidden to speak to. No matter how terrifying they are, I wish I could save them. But the Koujin won’t allow us.”

Her words stroke deep into Victor’s heart, and he stared into the open sky. “I hate seeing all that, too. But as Master Vulcavini said, there have to be sacrifices in war. The only way we can save many is by letting go of the few.”

The ship landed near a camp teeming with Nobilis soldiers and villagers. As Tiera, holding the sleeping boy, and Victor stepped out, an old man with well polished antlers and a long, grey beard walked towards them with a warm smile. He wore dark plum robes, as all Koujin masters did.

“Tiera, Prince Victor,” the old man greeted the Koujin knights, “I’m glad you two are safe.”

Victor nodded back. “Thank you for your concern, Master.” He then walked away to aid a battalion with injured villagers.

“Master Vulcavini,” Tiera replied with great respect, “We need to help this kid. He just lost his whole family.”

Vulcavini looked towards the boy, and his expression fell in pity. He told Tiera, “We’ll do all we can to help.” He walked towards the boy, but just then, he sensed something familiar. He lifted the boy’s forearm up, and revealed several markings.

“Master,” Tiera said, puzzled, “What’s wrong?”

“This boy,” Vulcavini said, “His markings are a family tradition which tell of the boy’s parents. I recognize them. His mother had them, too.”

Tiera was taken aback. “You knew his mother?”

“She was a Koujin knight.”

“She... what?” Tiera suddenly remembered what the old woman said to her. “That boy’s grandmother, after she was blighted by the Qivin... she claimed she knew my mother. She said my mother did something horrible to her daughter.”

“Her thoughts must have been twisted by delusion and paranoia. The Qivin feed upon the

goodwill of others, draining it from them. I'm sorry you had to be subjected to her attacks."

"But what if it wasn't all delusion? You know my father kept the marriage a secret- no one knew who my mother was. My father wanted to protect her identity from Qivin assassins looking for her. So if this boy's mother was a Koujin knight, the Wraithen Energies must run strong in his lineage. What if his grandmother truly sensed something she knew in me?"

Vulcavini shook his head. "We can't let into our minds the words of someone so far gone."

Just then, a piercing shriek cried out in the distance. Soldiers ran past Tiera, and shouted at each other, "Qivins have escaped from custody!" Tiera nodded at Vulcavini, handed the boy to her master, and joined the chase with the soldiers. She rushed past the camps of war torn villagers, jumping over crates and droids, running faster than all the soldiers in front of her. When she came to an open steppe, the shrieks stopped. Tiera had outran all the soldiers, and was left alone, surrounded only by empty tents and plains of dirt. She closed her eyes, and focused. I sense them, she thought to herself. She headed towards a tent, and lifted its flap. Inside, she saw a trembling mother in a robe, holding her child. Both of them had four red streaks across their cheeks, two on each side.

"I feel the good in you," the mother pleaded, "Please, you have to help us! Take him, take him somewhere safe!"

Tiera was paralyzed, unable to process the moment. The mother approached closer, holding her child in front of her, desperately trying to force it into Tiera's arms. But Tiera did not move. The child was closer to her now. Inching ever so closer, its soft arms reached towards her. But at the last moment, Tiera backed away.

The soldiers caught up to Tiera, barged inside of the tent, and shouted, "GET OUT! GET THE HELL OUT RIGHT NOW!"

The baby started crying again. The mother begged the soldiers, "You can't do this to us! If he doesn't feed soon, he'll die!"

The soldiers, clad in protective gear and gloves, ignored her. They grabbed onto the mother and hauled her out of the tent, ripping her baby away.

"NO!" the mother screamed, quivering in fear. "Please, just give him a little! He's just a child!"

Tiera could only stare at her as she was dragged away. Though something deep inside her wanted to do something, she knew she couldn't go against the greater good. She clenched her fist, and exhaled with silent anger inside. She remembered what happened to that boy's grandmother- no matter what, she had to resist the urge to let them feed. She could never let the Qivin feed.

CHAPTER TWO- A Hate Filled Heart

FROM dark, clouded orange skies above, hissing gold sparks shot down into the mahogany tiled ground. The clouds lifted, and from above, gargantuan mechanical contraptions of steam and smoke glided through the air, sizzling with sparks. They hovered above an industrial kingdom, their mahogany paths paved smoothly with gold streaks outlining their exteriors. Large towers fumed with black fog and smothered the palaces below. Giant, metallic golems traversed the land.

In the streets of the kingdom, a short, petite black robed figure, clutching something within its robes, stepped through a market, agilely brushing past the people walking past. Finally, it reached an alleyway, and followed it down into an abandoned lot. In a hidden corner, the figure opened a trapdoor, leading to a small corridor that was only big enough for a mouse to pass through. The figure unhooded itself, and revealed a young girl with short, spiky brown hair and thick, side swept bangs. Her irises were of a dark, bewitching purple. She uncovered a cage she was holding, setting it down on the ground, and opened it. Inside were four yellow bird-like creatures with scales, manes and dragon-like wings. They chirped and looked at her.

The girl smiled at them, and whispered, "Go on. You'll be safe here." The creatures chirped in sadness, not wanting to leave. The girl bit her lip in sorrow. "You can't stay with me. They'll find you all and do something horrible. One day, we'll find each other again. I promise."

The creatures chirped a farewell, and the girl brushed her hand softly against their manes. As they went into the corridor one by one, a stern voice suddenly boomed behind the girl: "AHEM!"

The girl turned around and saw an old nanny, her face etched with anger and wrinkles, wearing brown, royal garments. Four red stripes streaked along her cheeks, two on each side. She had her hands on her hips and was staring right into the girl's eyes. The girl gulped.

"Princess Rui!" the nanny shouted, "What did you sneak off to do this time?"

"Patilda, I- um, I was just taking a stroll," Rui meekly stammered.

"Ah, yes. Taking your pets out for a walk, I see?"

"N-no! Pssh, I got rid of those 'pets' a long time ago."

"Then why did I hear chirping just now?"

Rui stood frozen in silence. Finally, she admitted, "Duke Adalbert saw one of my pets when he escaped. You know I had to do it. They..." Rui cringed in disgust, "They consider them a 'delicacy'. After what they did to poor Jiffy, I couldn't let them hurt my Cradles."

Only beings of human-level intelligence or higher possessed souls with the necessary nutrients for a Qivin to live off of. It was taboo for Qivin to feed on other Qivin. Each species had their own unique taste, and since the Qivin could not overhunt the life on their planet and cause extinctions, they scoured both their planet and the galaxy for their prey. Creatures of lower rank could only ever be treated as desserts. The kinder the soul of the creature, the more pleasing and satisfying was their taste.

Patilda sighed. “This is why I told you that you are not allowed to keep any pets with kindness points above three,” the nanny trilled. “Those creatures belong in the wild, where they will naturally be hunted by the Qivin. Now come along, dear. Your father wants to speak to you.”

INSIDE of a grand, industrial palace, enormous gears creaked cyclically and gave strength to the intimidating powerhouse. Its walls were plated by gold, and statues of Qivin legends stood proud in its halls. As Rui and her nanny walked on its cold cobblestone paths, armored guards carrying plasma lances surrounded and marched beside them. Across the cheeks of everyone, except Rui, in the hall, there were four red streaks. Rui shirked down, her head pointed downwards, embarrassed by the spectacle. Rui started to put her hood up, but Patilda immediately snapped at her. “Act like a princess!” Rui put her hood down.

They entered through large palace doors into a throne room churning with a maze of gears, pulleys, pistons and steam. But before them were sheaths of red laser walls obscuring all before them. As the troops marched forward, the walls disappeared one by one, until at last, at the very end, was a mighty obsidian throne. On top of it sat a machine-like figure donned in black, with golden spheres ribbing on the exteriors of its forearms, chest and legs. A dark ruby cape drooped behind it. It wore a skull-like mask of the same gold, black and red, and burning orange eyes peered through. Rui, Patilda and the Qivin soldiers knelt before the throne. The figure stood up tall.

With the greatest respect, Patilda said, “Kurahlara, we are here at your service.”

The figure spoke: “I have received grave news. The Koujin have killed many of the Qivin during one of their traditional hunts. Including your good friend, Thilim.”

Rui’s eyes widened. “Father, it can’t be true! Please tell me those reports are unreliable!”

“He died fighting them with utmost pride.”

Rui shut her eyes in mourning. She asked him, “Why didn’t you send me there to protect him?”

“I sensed that she would be there, too. You are not strong enough to confront her, yet.”

“Yes, Father,” Rui said obediently, but with reluctance, “I know I have to train harder.”

“You have become incredibly powerful, my daughter. I have seen you develop into a proud Amothian warrior. Never falter in your oath- remember that the Amoth must serve the Qivin. We

are the only ones protecting their culture, their customs, and their heritage against the cruel, hypocritical Koujin. The Amoth may not be Qivin, but we are inherently aligned to their life force, to their ideals.”

Rui trembled in place. She tried her best to believe his words, to immerse herself into the blood oath, to swear her life to the Qivin. But whenever she tried to hold on, she wanted to scream inside.

The Kurahlara spoke again, “She still does not know the truth. But in time, she must. When the right moment arrives, you will tell her. Stand strong before Tiera, your twin sister.”

The axis around the Qivin planet made a full rotation. The day ended; another began anew.

TIERA yawned. She sat cross legged on a cushion in a calm, meditative room with a window circling throughout as the old, austere Koujin masters droned on and on in the sermon. As she began to doze off, she felt a pebble hit her head.

“Pay attention!” a Koujin master yelled at her.

Tiera yelled back, “To what? All you’re talking about is sacrifice for the greater good. I’ve heard it a hundred times!”

“AND YOU STILL DON’T HAVE CONVICTION!” the Koujin master fumed at her. Beside him, Vulcavini was sitting down. He intervened, “Master Wimble, perhaps it’s time to end this sermon a bit early. Tiera hasn’t slept in a long time; we may be overworking her.”

Wimble scoffed. “Her father had far more determination in him.”

Angered, Tiera got up and left the room. She couldn’t stand it when someone compared her to her heroic father, the Chosen hero Bronson Hyloaether, the one who was destined to end the terrifying reign of the Qivin, until he sacrificed his life to save his fellow knights. He was Victor’s idol, and he would never stop asking her if she knew anything else about him, even when, every time, she said she knew nothing. Though she wanted to be just like her father, too, there were times when she questioned why she should. What was he even fighting for? How did he become so devoted to the Koujin oaths?

“Tiera!” Vulcavini called out from behind her.

Tiera turned around. “Master Vulcavini. I apologize for the outburst.”

“And I apologize on behalf of the Koujin masters, too. You are being pushed far too hard.”

Tiera sighed. “As I should. How can I ever save everyone if I don’t have my father’s conviction?”

“It takes time. But you have already come very far. I’ve raised you since you were an infant, and have seen your talent grow to surpass that of all your peers.”

Tiera closed her eyes, and rubbed her forehead with her fingers. She wore her grandmother’s sapphire necklace, one claimed to have been imbued with calming properties, that Vulcavini gifted to her when she was young. It always gave her the courage to tell her truest thoughts to her Master, even when times were hard. Now, she asked it for strength, and said, “But sometimes, I feel like I just don’t belong there. I’m not like the other Koujin. Sometimes, I even hesitate when I’m confronted with fighting Qivin. I don’t know why.”

Vulcavini placed his hand warmly on Tiera’s shoulder. “Every Koujin has self doubt. But you do belong here. You’re my apprentice. You’re a knight sworn to the House of Xiffinshire. And I believe that you will one day blossom into the greatest hero the galaxy’s ever seen.”

Tiera smiled. “Thank you.” She turned around, and headed out the building.

“Don’t be out too late,” Vulcavini said as she walked away.

Without turning back, Tiera replied, “Yes, Master.”

THE dim, pink and cyan neon lights of Duron flickered as rain poured down on the crowded, dirty city. Duron was eternally in the bask of night. Street vendors shouted at passerbys, waving green sludges of food around in their hands. On the roads, vehicles hovered through the rain. Tiera and Victor, each on their own Cruiser hoverboards, swept passed the traffic.

The two approached an isolated highway in the city, and Tiera began to straighten herself up. Standing tall on her Cruiser, with her long white hair flowing behind her, Tiera coolly said, “I’m so sick and tired of the sermons.”

Victor glided alongside her, and teased, “You do look tired, alright.”

“Shut up,” Tiera muttered, “I don’t want to sleep. Just let me have this.”

Victor smirked, and said nothing more. His face turned pensive as he immersed himself in the rushing winds of the Duronian atmosphere, the thin air waving past his body, and brushing through his hair. He glanced at Tiera and saw her tall majestic figure standing dignified against the dashing pressure, her shoulders smoothly curving with the breeze. Her face was sharply attuned to the glide, and she was taking calm, rhythmic deep breathes, fully synchronized with her surroundings. She was adorned with her sapphire necklace. Victor peered downwards, noticing that Tiera was barefoot, and felt that she could fully feel the pulsating board beneath her. As the two rode together, Tiera’s robes fluttered and presented a beautiful spectacle of white and violet, like marble flowing through a painting.

Tiera glanced at Victor, noticed that he was looking at her, and curly said, “What?” Victor

responded with a funny look, and Tiera smiled back. She gazed at his sharp features, his silver hair brushing against his deeply dark skin, and his muscular chest tense and athletic. He really was a swimmer, she thought to herself. He was braced against the wind with a tall, imposing presence, one that was enticing her further towards him. But she stopped her racing thoughts. She told herself: Tiera, knock it off. He's a goddamn prince. It's forbidden for royals to become intimate with commoners. You shouldn't even touch him.

The Cruisers approached the end of the highway, and a crescent sadness descended upon Tiera. It's already over, she thought. The two entered the smoky city, their hoverboards slowing down to a brisk pace. Tiera checked out the cramped stores shoved in the mess of apartments and buildings, trying to find something she didn't already have. Not a single discount today, she sighed.

Victor nudged his shoulder against Tiera's, surprising her. He whispered, "Hey, I heard old Grim's selling some modifiers, let's check them out."

They glided towards a beaten down store, but there was no one on the stand. Victor knocked on the counter. "Yo, Grim are you here?" There was no immediate response. Then, a figure sauntered out. He was a short, purple and round being with blue spots all over. He also had a small mouth with fangs, beady black eyes, and was wearing a greasy apron covered in oil.

"Hey Grim," Tiera smiled. But Grim didn't smile back. Then Tiera saw it- in his stubby arms, he was holding a sharp, metallic tool. Covered in blood.

Victor whispered to Tiera, "Something's wrong. This isn't like him."

Then it struck her. She whispered back, "They must have gotten to him. They're here."

Suddenly, Grim screeched out and jumped across the counter, startling all the passerbys, and grabbed onto Tiera's forearm. She shook him off and kicked him, knocking him unconscious. Tiera pressed against a transmitter on her ear and yelled, "Qivin are in Duron! A Urosi shopkeeper's been blighted. Report to Grim's Shop and detain any suspected blighted."

Without hesitation, Tiera and Victor glided past an alleyway to the backdoor of the shop, and placed a device on its key that hacked in and opened the door. They entered a cramped storageroom and searched around for the suspects. From the corner of his eye, Victor saw a shadow. "There!" he shouted. They rushed towards the shadow, and followed it out back into the city. Faint neon lights illuminated the entity, and revealed a ragged looking woman with four red streaks across her face.

"Surrender yourself," Victor declared with intensity, "You can't outrun us."

The ragged looking woman sneered at them, and cackled. From out of the shadows, four other Qivin stepped out, carrying bloody plasma knives.

“You’re Qivin thieves,” Tiera said, “Outcasts from the kingdom who hunt for endangered species.”

The ragged looking woman replied, “What we’re here for is none of your business. We knew Duron was heavily guarded, but we had no choice. That delicate piece of goodness scurried its way in here. Its taste is unlike anything in this galaxy.”

“Then why’d you attack that shopkeeper?” Tiera countered.

“Honey, you have no idea how long we haven’t eaten. If we didn’t find a few morsels, we would’ve starved to death.”

Tiera glared at the smug scoundrel. But next to her, she felt an even more frightening presence. She looked at Victor and saw that he was engrossed in a pressuring rage, one that he was desperately trying to imprison inside, but one that was also quickly finding its way out. It was happening again.

“Victor,” Tiera whispered. “We’ve got them cornered and intimidated. The Koujin superiors will be here any minute to detain them. If we fight, things will get messy and we might lose them.”

Victor ignored her. Gone was his pleasant, calm demeanor. He had been possessed by an anger living deep inside. One that was born when his parents were killed by Qivin.

Tiera whispered again, “Victor-”

“Don’t! Just stay out of this!”

“You know we’re not supposed to engage unless it’s on orders or in self-defense.”

“I don’t give a damn what they preach!” He reached towards his waist, and grasped onto a metallic rod hanging from his belt.

“What will they say when they find out that the Prince of House-”

Victor charged towards the five Qivin and whipped out his weapon; on top of the metallic rod, liquid, moving as fast as light, swiftly materialized into a curved, dark obsidian blade, with neon blue thinly coating its edge. Damn it, Tiera thought to herself. She glided towards the Qivin, just trailing behind, and a Qivin thief jumped up above her and sliced down with his plasma knife. But the knife was met with the neon emerald edge of an obsidian blade- Tiera had activated her scivitar, the weapon that the Koujin had used for a thousand generations, fit for an epoch of enlightenment.

As they fought the Qivin, Tiera felt the thieves getting more and more impatient. They didn’t come here for this, she thought. She struck against three at the same time, but from the side, she

saw one of the thieves break off and run into an alleyway. She must have found it, Tiera thought. Suddenly, Victor flung a tracker flew onto the fleeing Qivin's leg. The next thing she knew, Victor was on his Cruiser chasing after the escaping thief.

"Hey!" Tiera shouted at Victor, "You got the tracker on, just give your radar to the Koujin and let them find her!" Tiera dodged two knife swings at her neck, and then shouted again, "You're just gonna leave me here with four of them?"

Victor didn't reply. Tiera grunted through her teeth. Compared to her, the four were weak. But they were hungry. Bloodthirsty, even. They seemed like that might pose a bit of a challenge. Tiera looked for Victor again, but he had already ran off. She didn't have the slightest clue as to where.

CHAPTER THREE- The Prince and the Princess

ON his Cruiser, the prince glided through the dirt and trash littering the tight slums. He was locked onto the Qivin, like a beast tracking its prey. He thought to himself: Damn it, I can't let the Koujin intervene; I have to catch this one. Victor shut off his transmitter. Just then, the Qivin thief jumped into an underground tunnel. Victor jumped in after her.

The Qivin ran fast, but she was no match for a Koujin knight. After running through a maze of dark, dirt-filled tunnels, with only small plants and fungi radiating slivers of light illuminating its paths, the Qivin found it- a large, horse-like creature with golden fur and crystal blue eyes. It had turquoise stripes across its back. The Qivin lunged at the creature, but a flying scivitar sliced her hand off, and she screamed in pain as she fell down and crumpled on the tunnel floor. Victor had her cornered. He picked up and slammed the ragged looking woman against a wall, his scivitar pressed near her neck, and shouted, "Couldn't resist it, huh? You people don't give a damn if it's endangered or not. You're nothing but a plague on this galaxy."

The woman snarled at him, "I didn't choose to be born this way!"

"Maybe it would've been better if you hadn't been born at all."

Just then, the golden creature loudly neighed and galloped away. Victor knocked out the Qivin thief, and peered towards the creature. It was hard to see in the darkness, but as his eyes began to adjust to the light, there was no mistaking that there was someone else in the tunnels. The creature trotted to the shadowy figure, and Victor saw who it was. A black robe, inscribed with orange Amothian insignias, covered a young girl with short, spiky brown hair. Inside the robe, she was wearing a white dress with three large belts wrapped around her body.

"You're an Amothian warrior," Victor said, "You came here to protect these Qivin scum, didn't you?"

The girl gasped, and didn't reply. Instead, she ran away from Victor, and the creature followed her. "Hey!" Victor yelled after her. He gripped his scivitar even tighter. I didn't expect to find an Amothian here, he thought to himself. I'm gonna have to be prepared for a fight.

The girl ran as fast as she could, but she could not outrun a Cruiser. Just as Victor swung his scivitar at her, she turned around and, using a wraith-grab, a metallic handle flew into her hand, her own scivitar igniting with a crimson red lining. Red and blue clashed against one another, and the two fought with ferocious energy and might.

As the warriors battled, the golden creature howled in pain, and ran off.

Victor struck his scivitar down on the girl, who pushed against him with her own. "You have to stop!" the girl cried out.

"Why should I?" Victor said with defiance.

"The frequencies of the blades are hurting him!" the girl said in desperation.

Victor yelled back, "You're the one trying to harm him!"

"I'm trying to save him from the Qivin!"

The girl jumped back, away from the duel, and for a moment, Victor stopped too. "And why should I believe an Amothian?"

"I won't fight you." The girl de-activated her scivitar. "You saw how much pain he was in. We have to get to him before the Qivin find him again."

Victor stared at her with suspicion, but he knew she was right- he couldn't waste time fighting her when the Qivin were right on the creature's tail. "Then turn around," he ordered the girl.

"What?"

Victor pointed his scivitar towards her, "Stand in front of my scivitar, and give me yours. If you really care about this creature, then you'll lead me towards him. Pull off anything else and I'll kill you right on the spot."

The girl glared at him, but complied. Victor took her scivitar and raised his blade near her shoulderblades. "Get going, Amothian."

The girl bravely walked through the tunnel, ignoring the threat posed against her. At last, she saw gold shimmering in the distance.

"Rufus!" the girl cried out.

Victor raised his brow at her. “You gave him a name?”

The creature saw the girl, but shuddered. The girl whispered to Victor, “Put your scivitar away. He’s afraid of it.”

Victor was disgruntled, but did as she said. When he sheathed his weapon, the girl ran towards the creature, and it galloped towards her too. She greeted it in a hug, and nuzzled against its mane. Victor stood there, completely confused. The creature trusted her. It was even deeper than that—they had a bond. He thought to himself: Who even was this Amothian girl?

As the girl brushed her hands through the creature, Victor noticed a perplexed, worried look on the girl’s face. He walked towards them, “What’s wrong?”

“He’s injured,” the girl replied, “He’s a Kotui, one of the last of his kind. They live in quiet spaces and get hurt by certain frequencies. He’s in pain, and I don’t know what to do.”

Victor thought for a moment, and remembered something he was taught long ago. He raised his hand over the Kotui, and a light apparated from beneath his palm.

“Hey, what are you doing?” the girl asked, slightly worried.

“My grandparents taught me this when I was young. They told me about these endangered creatures who couldn’t live around certain frequencies. If I was ever to come across one that was injured, I could use this technique to heal them. I never saw a Kotui in real life and I almost forgot about them. Until today.”

The light beneath Victor’s hand soothed the creature, and in a few moments, the creature began to relax. Its pain was leaving.

“Rufus?” the girl asked the Kotui. Rufus responded with a happy neigh.

“You actually saved him,” the girl said, “Thank you. Who are you?”

“My name is Victor, Prince of House Xiffinsire, and a Koujin knight of the Nobilus kingdom. But just what kind of Amoth warrior are you?” He noticed her insignias. “You’re royalty, too?”

The girl replied, “My name is Rui, Princess of the Qivin Kingdom.”

VICTOR gaped at the girl. The daughter of the Kurahlara. Standing right in front of him.

“I’m not like the other Amothians!” Rui blurted out, “I don’t like the Qivin hunting practices. And I hate seeing them harm others.”

“Then why are you an Amothian warrior?” Victor asked.

“I was born as one. Ever since I was a child, I’ve been raised to believe that Qivin were the most important lives in the galaxy. I’m not the only one. Thousands of children have been sent by their devoted Amothian parents into this religion.”

“So why don’t you leave? There’s no reason why Amoth should fight for the Qivin. They’re not even the same people.”

“It’s not that simple,” Rui protested, “I have nowhere else to go.”

“Well,” Victor smiled, “It’s a good thing you met me.” But Rui did not rejoice one bit. She remained silent, and downtrodden.

“I can’t go against my father,” Rui responded.

“I know it’s not easy. But you know what he’s done. He let all those Qivin loose. The Qivin have killed so many. Including my own parents!”

Rui’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry,” she said, in a panic. “I’m really sorry, I am.”

Victor heard the pleas of the sweet girl, and realized what had come over him. He took a deep breath, and calmed down. And then, he remembered that there was something he still had to check on.

“Pardon me,” Victor bowed to the girl with one hand behind his back. He shuffled away as Rui looked at him, puzzled. Victor put his hand next to a transmitter on his ear, turning it back on, and whispered, “Hey, Tiera, you there?”

There was a crackle and a sizzle. And then, in a hush, a voice replied, “Victor! The Koujin have been looking all over for you! Did you find the creature?”

“Yeah, yeah. Those guys give you any trouble?”

“Victor...” The prince could hear Tiera seething through the transmitter. Tiera sighed, “Just give us your location.”

Victor was about to speak, but then he looked around where he was. He thought to himself: They can’t come here just yet. Not with this girl around. I have to know more about her.

Thinking quick, he sputtered, “Uh... hold on... I’m losing signal...”

“DAMN IT VICTOR!” Tiera shouted, and Victor shut off his transmitter.

Victor thought to himself again: Sorry, Tiera. I'll make it up to you with something.

The prince turned back to the princess, and said, "So you were trying to hide, um, Rufus, from the thieves?"

Rui nodded. "I met Rufus a few years ago. He was being pursued by Qivin poachers, so I hid him away in a cave on my planet. Every so often, I would visit him. But earlier today, Qivin discovered him, and he ran away. I had just finished a mission, and when I heard he was gone, I didn't even have time to change out of my uniform. I've spent the whole day looking for him."

"Does your father know you're here?"

Rui shook her head. "Father is always busy, so it's usually my nanny or other servants who keep an eye on me. But they don't do a very good job and think I'm off training in the mountains."

"Well, that's a relief," Victor said, and sat down next to Rui. He continued, "Was Rufus your only pet?"

"I've had several. But I can never keep them hidden well enough. Qivin royals or poachers always find a way to them. So I always know that when the time comes, I have to send them off some place safe." Rui was overcome with sorrow. "Just like what I have to do with Rufus, now."

"Hey, I love pets and creatures too. That's why I asked my grandparents to teach me all sorts of techniques in treating critters. You can just send them to me!"

"Hah, I wish. But I think your kingdom would get too suspicious. I know places they can go where Qivin can never reach. Either way, I'll most likely never see them again."

Victor wanted to ask her to come with him again, but he knew it wouldn't work. He thought for a moment, and said, "Here, take this." He took out a small device from his coat pocket.

"What is it?" Rui asked.

"It's a secret transmitter used for spying. It's got a way to cloak its signals from all sorts of trackers. With it, I can send you messages, and they'll be displayed on a hologram. If you ever need help caring for your creatures, just reach out to me. Maybe I can even teach you a thing or two about healing their wounds."

"Oh," Rui said, "Thank you." But she didn't reach for the device in Victor's hand.

"What's wrong?" Victor questioned.

"There's... something else I can't tell you. I just can't do this. I wish I could. But you have to understand."

“I get it’s hard. You don’t need to keep the device on at all times. Just talk to me through it when you can.”

Rui eyed the transmitter, and with hesitation, she reached towards it. She thought to herself: Am I really doing this? I can’t...

But without thinking, she gently folded her fingers around Victor’s palm, and grasped the device. Without looking at him, she walked towards Rufus. They were leaving.

Victor shouted at her, “Before you go, can you just tell me what you’re hiding from me? I promise I’ll keep it a secret.”

Rui stopped in her tracks, but whispered to herself, “It’s better if you don’t know.” She continued to walk towards Rufus, and straddled herself on top of his back. They rode off, leaving Victor alone in the tunnels.

As the prince watched the mysterious girl ride off, he said to himself, “Hope to see you soon, princess.”

CHAPTER FOUR- Forbidden Dance

“JUST what were you up to?” Tiera shouted as she stormed into a well-lit room of tan marble, full of mirrors, fire torches and inanimate holograms mock dancing alongside its walls. They ran off as soon as the knight entered. Inside, Victor jumped up, and saw his pissed off bodyguard scuffling towards him. She was in a loose, lavender ballroom dress, her face half-finished with makeup, her gloves slipping off, her jewelry loosely dangling from her neck and wrists, clearly not fully tightened yet.

Right after Victor was found, his grandparents realized he was late for the royal event, an important diplomatic gesture, so they brushed aside the Qivin matter for later, and ushered him and Tiera into separate dressing rooms in the Grand Planetarium, a looming crystal dome that floated above the Nobilis kingdom palace lake, embellished with holograms from all different cultures in the galaxy, from the wild Xyxo fire cooks to the calm Votu ballet dancers. The richly dressed guests entered the Planetarium and gazed in awe at the holographic spectacles. But while everyone else was enjoying themselves, Tiera was at her wit’s end.

“It was just a fuzzy signal, don’t worry about it,” Victor said. He had already dressed himself in a loose black suit, with layers of jackets hanging downwards as if forming a cape. He was also wearing a white collar and sash, and a royal insignia necklace hung across his neck.

“Stop with the bullshit, Victor. All the Koujin may have bought it because you’re some kind of

golden boy, but I know you better than all of them combined.”

Victor sighed. “Alright. I met an Amothian down in the tunnels.”

“You what? And what happened to him? Did he escape?”

Victor chuckled with a bit of unease. Tiera scoffed in return. She sarcastically said, “Or did you have a little chat with him and just went about your separate ways?”

“I actually did. And the warrior was a girl.”

Tiera laughed, but it was not in jest. Victor knew what was coming. Tiera jeered through her teeth, “So you wasted all our time just because you thought some Amothian was cute. Holy hell. I don’t even know what to say.”

Victor tried to laugh it off. “It’s not like that. It was strictly for military reasons. She hates the Qivin. She loves a lot of the same creatures that I do. I think with a bit of persuasion, we can get her on our side. And then we’ll have a way inside their kingdom.”

Tiera rolled her eyes, and exhaled sharply. “I doubt you thought that far ahead. But you are good at making excuses on the spot. Did you ever think about what I had to deal with? I had to cover for your reckless outburst!”

Victor looked genuinely sorry. “Tiera, look, I-”

“I’m getting sick of this. How many times have I had to save you from being kidnapped or trapped just because you ‘wanted to do things your way’? When the tribe of Wokklos took you hostage. When you fell into that ocean of sea people. Lava world. I’ve always had to risk my own life for your stupid mistakes, even when I was so scared, I was shivering! And I never even get a ‘thank you’ from the Nobilis royals or their people. Just a pat on the back by some crusty old Koujin masters, because all I did was do the job I was expected to. Sometimes, I even get blamed for your actions. All I’ve ever been to them is your whipping girl!”

“You know I always make it up to you somehow. Besides, I keep on trying to tell the royals that you’re the best retainer anyone could ever hope for, but they never care.” Victor curled his fingers into a fist. “I never mean to hurt you. And I admit, I do stupid things sometimes. I just-”

A loud acoustic burst rang out, and the entire Planetarium could hear its echo. The ball was starting soon. Without hesitation, Tiera turned towards a mirror and began adjusting her hair, putting a hairpin between her pursed lips as she fumbled around, then grabbing the hairpin and stabbing it in a bob behind her. She sighed, and said, “I’m not gonna snitch on you. Just don’t talk to her anymore. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Victor hesitated, and then said nonchalantly, “Yeah.”

“Let’s just get this dumb ball over with. Always hate it when the Nobilis royals tell me to dress up so I can blend in,” Tiera wearily sighed. She wraith-grabbed a vial of makeup from under her dress, and it floated up beside her. She flicked her fingers and it started brushing alongside her face.

Victor tried to lighten up her mood, and joked, “They just want you to stay close to me at all times, so you can take the shot in case someone fires at me.”

“I hope they’re a good shot.”

“Maybe they’ll take us both out when they see how bad of a dancer you are.”

Tiera adjusted her sapphire necklace, put a gloved hand on her hip, and quickly turned to face Victor with a smirk. “I’m sure I’m way better than you, now.”

“We’ll see about that. We’ve got just enough time for a test run.”

Tiera tucked her arm beneath Victor’s forearm, and positioned herself into the traditional Nobilis dance. Victor placed his hand on Tiera’s waist, and leaned in close to her, his chest noble and proud. Tiera could just anticipate what Victor was about to do. She had studied his movements every waking moment- his strikes, his jabs, his parries. They translated smoothly into the dance. The pair drifted through the mirrors of the marble room, lost for a moment in their joined movements, but both of them could not help but laugh at how ridiculously formal they were being with each other. Tiera lost control of her laughter and stumbled a bit, but Victor caught her.

Tiera let out a long yawn. Victor noticed, and said, “You’d rather be in a bed than at a dance, wouldn’t you?”

“I wish I could always be in bed. Being a knight sucks.”

“Well if you find yourself falling asleep, just lean on my shoulder and take a nap. I’ll carry you around and make them think you’re working hard at it.”

Tiera yawned again, and instinctively nudged her head down onto Victor’s shoulder, shutting her eyes. She thought to herself: Because that’s what a literal bodyguard’s supposed to do.

As they sauntered along, Tiera softly said to her prince, “So, this girl you’re never going to talk to again. Was she some sort of low ranking grunt? Or an elite?”

“She... was a princess.”

Tiera was stunned with surprise, but it soon subsided, and she weakly chuckled. “Princess or not, it doesn’t matter. Not like a Nobilis prince can ever marry a Qivin princess, anyways.”

But deep inside, she felt an aching longing. She wanted to grip into Victor, to make him forget about her. Mustering up her Koujin discipline, she resisted. Tiera thought to herself: a princess, huh? Wonder what that's like. That lucky brat.

Victor sighed, knowing that Tiera was right. He looked down at his slumbering knight, her serene yet strong hand holding onto his jacket, not wanting to let go and have him fall prey to whatever was out to get him. He thought to himself: Sometimes, Tiera, I wish you could've been born a royal.

For a moment, Tiera forgot about all the formalities, all the rules set in place, and pressed herself closer to Victor. She felt a disturbance near his heart, but couldn't tell what it was. But she guessed it was about the princess. She whispered to him, "It's bothering you. But you're a Koujin. You just have to let go."

Acoustic bursts rang out once more, and the gears within the Planetarium walls rotated ever so faster. It was time for the ball to begin. Victor and Tiera slowly let go of one another, and Victor presented his hand to his retainer. She gently placed hers onto his, and they walked out of the marble doors, into the night ball.

AS the months passed, Victor and Tiera continued to fight side by side, just as they had before. But deep down, they knew they were not allowed to get any closer than they already were.

Rui went through the motions of her training. The ritualistic prayers. The torturous self-flagellations. She pushed through it all, and felt herself growing stronger. But none of that gave her what she truly wanted. She thought to herself: what's the use in getting stronger if I can't ever see them again?

During the first few days after she said goodbye to Rufus, she hesitated to even look at the transmitter, hiding it under her sheet covers. But after several days of groaning and flopping down on her bed after grueling hours in the Boiler, she relented. She fired up the hologram, then gaped in awe at the livestream that Victor had sent her. A large, blue beast, with two mighty arms holding it up, and a round, imposing grumpy head. Fur covered every inch of its body. It was far away in a forest, but it could be seen towering over its trees. The hologram then showed Victor waving hand signals at it, with a cheerful disposition. "It's an Olumpus," Victor said, "Just say the word, and I'll show you how we help get the thorns out from its palms."

"Are you crazy?" the quiet girl tried to exclaim as loud as she could, "That thing looks like it can stomp you with one hand!"

But Rui was curious, and eventually, she sighed and gave Victor the go. She watched as the young man jumped through the trees, motioning to the Olumpus to let him climb onto it, and used a spell to extract large thorns out of its palms. The whole time, Rui was nervous. But as Victor confidently strolled up to the beast and healed its wounds, she could feel calming relief journey

through her nerves. She smiled when the beast nodded at Victor with thanks, and whispered, “Yes!” after he got back down safely.

Each time Victor showed her one way he treated a creature, Rui would tell him stories of the pets she had owned. Small, rounded ones who would always find a way to roll out of her room and into the kitchen. Long, slithering ones that she would wake up to and find them hissing over her. She said goodbye to them quickly. Victor would chuckle at her stories, sometimes with uneasiness, holding back his worries. But Rui sensed them and insisted that he share his thoughts- she wanted to learn what to do, so she could better help the creatures she came across.

They never spoke of the details in their missions. Due to her unique talent as an elite assassin, Rui was only ever assigned to stealth missions, and the Koujin knights in Victor and Tiera’s squadrons never met her on the open battlefield. Though Victor hated the Qivin and wanted to eradicate them, he knew that if the Koujin started attacking the places Rui told him about, the Amoth would become suspicious of Rui, and he would put her in danger. He trusted his Koujin superiors and believed they didn’t need his reckless intervening. But most of all, he didn’t want his secret connection with the princess to end. It gave both of them their own hidden alcove to escape from the pressures of the savage war.

After several weeks, Rui got tired of just telling stories. She wanted to show Victor her world, too. She didn’t always have pets to show him, so one day, she traveled into the Qivin wilderness, and from far away, as to not disturb their natural habitat, she pointed the device towards a pack of scruffy, four-legged lapis colored creatures.

“I usually try not to intervene,” she said to Victor, “But if I ever see a pup abandoned by its mother, I’d do what I can to nurse it so it’s strong enough to live on its own. Sometimes, I’d have to adopt it. Being hidden in the palace is safer than being alone in the wild.”

Victor was always attracted towards Rui’s enthusiasm, drawn into her mysterious world, and leaned in when she spoke of her tales. Just then, he noticed something in the hologram. He said to her, “Isn’t that a pup right there?”

Rui jumped up, and rushed towards the pup lying alone, hidden in the bushes. It was not long before he became Rui’s newest friend, and she nicknamed him “Ictor”, a dumb name that Victor suggested.

Eventually, Victor started showing Rui more of his world. Not just of waterfalls, beaches, multi-mooned auroras and sunsets- Rui had seen them all before. But cities. Rui had never, in her whole life, walked through such crowded cities full of non-Qivin. A melting pot of all different kinds of humans and even species roamed through the streets, watching tournaments together, playing together in parks, and sometimes arguing over petty things like sale ripoffs. All the Qivin were the same tribe of human. And though the Amoth consisted of all kinds of species from different planets, Rui never got along with any of them, as she was at unease with their fanatical, religious devotions. Among the Qivin, Rui had few acquaintances, and most were her caretakers.

Rui could only dream of wandering such cities and towns. She knew that realistically, she never could. And though she badly wanted to show Victor more of her life, she never showed him more than the wilderness, and her pets. Not once did Victor ever see her interact with anyone other than a creature. It was this missing piece about her that lured Victor in the strongest. He filled its holes in with his imagination, wondering what a day walking through the jungle with Rui would be like. Part of him knew that he was over-romanticizing it all. Yet he didn't want to stop.

"Come on," Victor nicely asked her, with a slight curiosity, "I want to see what the training's like. Well, not to spy or anything like that. Just because you keep on saying how bad it is."

Rui let out a faint smile, and shook her head. "I'm sorry." And with that, Victor wouldn't press on any further.

There was a strange denial they shared. If neither of them talked of their missions, that side of the others' life never existed to them. They were separated by distance, never truly knowing the intimate lives of one another, bonded only by the device in between them that pulled them into a half-truth simulation.

To Victor, he was enticed in his imagination. None of the Nobilis princesses had ever caught his eye quite like this. They were obsessed with status, with fancy carriages and jewels. He remembered the tales his grandmother used to tell him when he was a young boy, about the prince who slay the beast to rescue the princess. To his dismay, he had never wanted to rescue any one of those princesses if one had ever gotten kidnapped. But Rui was different. She was kind and held the purest heart of anyone he'd ever known. Though he could only see one side of her through the transmitter, it was all he ever wanted to see. He never wanted to that to change.

To Rui, talking to Victor was an escape. Victor was the only outsider, in her whole life, that she had a connection to, and was the only one she was sure would ever listen to her boring life as a pretend caretaker. If only I could show him more, she thought to herself. The more she longed for it, the more she thought about the prince. But what if he wouldn't accept that side of her that she tried to hide? Rui never wanted to think about that matter. She always pretended that he would.

It was, of course, simply just fantasy. Though there were days that seemed like they would never end, an ominous veil would always preside over the two young royals. A veil that separated their two hateful kingdoms. Then one day, the veil was unshrouded, revealing the ugly reality it was concealing.

Rui lay in bed, pulling its covers over herself. Her room was darkened. She didn't want to move. A message appeared on her device, and she opened up a hologram. It was Victor, and he warmly greeted her. "How's Ictor doing?"

Rui couldn't respond. After several seconds passed, Victor felt the sad, Wraithful Energies surrounding her. Somehow, he knew what happened. Ictor was gone. He wanted to reach out and

comfort her, but he couldn't. But he did his best to stay on the line, to be next to Rui when she needed someone. Finally, she broke the silence.

"Why is this all happening to me at once? First Ictor, then my nanny, and now this war. They moved the assault to tomorrow. I was so ready to do it then, but I can't do it now. I can't, I just can't." She squeezed her pillow harder and harder.

"Hey," Victor said, "I know you're strong enough to get through this. You've gotten through all of them before. Once you get back, I got another Olumpus to show you, if you ever want to see."

Rui tried to smile. "That sounds nice. But..." She trailed off. As she thought about the mission, its stark reality starting to materialize stronger and stronger as the clock ticked closer, her grim sadness relinquishing her of the adrenaline and focus she had fostered during training, Rui could not live in her fantasy anymore. "But just how much longer can this go on? How much longer can we talk like this? What if we meet on the battlefield one day?"

"Rui..." Victor didn't know how to respond. He never had to answer such a question. It had always been buried deep inside.

"They're doing a full body scan. I can't take my device with me to the mission. I'll talk to you when it's over. I hope to see you soon, Victor."

Victor hoped so too. On all the previous missions, Rui had returned, sometimes a bit battered, but she always managed to find the strength to recover. However, this time, it would be different.

A few days passed. Victor checked his transmitter, and there was no response. He thought to himself: I'm overthinking this. There's no way she'd respond that soon.

But then, a week went by. And finally, another week. It was then that Victor knew something was wrong. He couldn't reach her through the device, but then, as if by fate, he was delivered the news he craved.

"Prince Victor!" a messenger clad in battle armor announced as he entered in the throne room, where Victor sat on a chair next to the grandfather, the King of Nobilis.

"What is it that you deliver?" Victor gracefully asked.

"We received astounding news about the latest mission. As you know, we have been trying to free our prisoners held by the Qivin kingdom. Just now, a valuable bargaining chip that the Kurahlara cannot ignore has fallen in our possession."

"What?" Victor exclaimed, worry dripping in his hurried words. It can't be, he thought. As before, he believed that his anxious fabrications must be deluding him into thinking of the worst. But soon he would learn that this time, there was no delusion.

The messenger continued, “Our troops have successfully thwarted an assassination attempt on the planet of Conova. They’ve captured all the assassins who hid in the Pivus mountains, and are transporting them to the nearest ships as we speak. Among them is the daughter of the Kurahlara, Princess Rui.”

CHAPTER FIVE- Blood and Snow

HER eyelids flickered, and Rui awoke to find herself being carried in a metal cage with plasma bars. It rocked back and forth with a grumpy heaviness, making Rui nauseous. Outside the cage were Koujin soldiers, cat-eared villagers, and rhino-like, horned creatures with heavy armor. They were hiking on top of a mountain path with black snow, which dimly reflected an ivory morning sun. Rui realized she was being carried on top of one of these beasts. Before her, a young girl rode on the beast. She was a few years younger than Rui, with cat-like ears, a human face, braided blonde hair, a flowery dress and a striped tail. She was gently humming as she carried reins that steered the beast forward.

Rui was exasperated, and felt her stomach rumbling. It had been days since she’d been captured and knocked unconscious. Though she was tired and hungry, she still felt like she had enough energy to carry on. Her eyelids began to droop again.

“Hey,” a voice whispered to her, startling the young princess.

Rui turned towards it and saw the cat-eared girl staring at her, smiling.

“Wa-wait,” Rui stammered, “Why’d you turn around? Who’s steering the creature?”

“Shh!” the cat-eared girl whispered, “They’re all too far away and focused on the path to hear us right now. Grenda can walk well on her own. I’m only here to steer her over the difficult parts.”

Rui sighed, and her expression fell. She touched her robe, and noticed it was in tatters. She had bruises all over. The girl noticed Rui’s sadness, and said to her, “My name’s Elyn. My people have been enlisted to guide the Koujin over these mountain paths. We know the land well, and know all sorts of ways of evading its predators.”

“So why are you talking to me?” Rui meekly asked.

“Well, I’ve heard only bad things about the Amoth. About how they were big, evil monsters and stuff. But you’re just a young girl, like me. And you looked like you needed help.” From underneath her dress sleeve, her hand, which had long, carefully sharpened fingernails, reached out and secretly handed Rui a small piece of flatbread. “Here,” Elyn whispered, “If you want to take a bite or two.”

Rui eyed the flatbread hesitantly, feeling embarrassed at accepting such a pure gesture of kindness. But her stomach rumbled even more, and she relented. As Rui silently chewed on the flatbread, she smiled, and whispered, "Thank you for being so trusting. But not all the Amoth are like me. Most of them are cruel."

"Well, I'm glad to have bumped into you, then. Anyways, I'm only here because my mom and pop told me to. I don't really wanna be, though."

"That's the same with me! I wish I didn't have to do what my Father wanted."

Elyn let out a quiet laugh. "I could tell you were good. I sensed it, because my people are one with the Wraithen Energies, and we're really good at doing things like that. Don't tell anyone, but unlike the other villagers, I also know how to track the scent of wraith-sensitives. I just don't want them using me as a weapon. But I hope I can show you some time."

Rui was happy this girl was talking to her. However, she knew that whatever she was dreaming of could never happen. "It's better if you didn't know me so well," she said with sadness, "I don't want you being dragged into this mess."

Elyn pouted, and said, "Okay. But whenever you get bored during this journey you can always talk to me. I'll be there for you."

Elyn turned back to steer the beast, and Rui slumped down even further. She thought to herself: I just want to get out of here as soon as I can. She closed her eyes, and in her Wraithen Energy trance, she felt the cold exteriors of the plasma bars. The Koujin didn't know, but she had secretly been learning how to bend them. When the moment was right, and no one was looking, she would find her way out.

FOR several days, Victor lay awake, unable to come to terms with what he had heard. There was nothing that he could do, and he felt powerless. Could they have captured the wrong girl? An imposter? Wild thoughts raced through his mind, and it showed in his training. During a spar, in a room with only two inside battling a horde of practice droids, Victor missed his target, and hit his partner on the head with his practice weapon.

"OW!" Tiera yelped out.

"Tiera!" Victor worryingly asked, "I apologize! Are you hurt?"

Tiera rubbed her head, then smiled. "Hey, you know I've had much worse."

Victor breathed a sigh of relief, the first he had in weeks. Tiera spoke again, "Are you okay? You don't look so good. I thought you'd be ecstatic about the weeks of free time we'd been given, since they cancelled that boring mission we hated. I've had the best sleep I've had in ages!" Tiera

grinned and stretched her arms out.

“Don’t worry about me,” Victor tried to grin back. But his inner pain still showed.

Tiera tried to comfort her prince, “Being well rested made me look back to all these past months. Sorry that I’ve been so cranky. I guess I just really needed a breather.” She paused. There was something else that she had been thinking about saying for a long, long time. And now, in this perfect moment, the two were alone, and she felt ready. Tiera took a deep sigh, and spoke up, “Victor, I’ve been wanting to tell you something...”

When Victor looked up at her, she lost her cool, and tried to hide her emotions again. She stroked her fingers through her hair, and her courage rejuvenated inside. “Victor...”

But before she could utter another word, messengers burst into the room. They shouted at the two: “Squadron 196 needs backup on Conova. We need you two in the ranks.”

“Conova?” Victor asked intensely. It was the planet that Rui was being held captive on.

“Yeah, I thought 196 was handling it pretty well,” Tiera chimed in.

“There’s been a change in plans. Amoth have discovered our secret caravans and have swarmed their locations. The assassins have also found a way to escape, and they’re racing towards Amoth escape ships. Including Princess Rui.”

Victor’s eyes widened. And when his nerves began to shudder, Tiera felt it, too. She whispered to him, “That’s the girl you met in the tunnels, right?”

“It was.”

Tiera tried to find something else to say, but stopped herself from doing so. It was better if I didn’t, she thought to herself. The only thing important now was to focus on the mission.

THROUGH a forest of pale white trees, Koujin soldiers trudged through black snow that gently fell from the dark blue night sky. There were three moons, glowing bright, but covered by navy blue clouds. There was not a whisper among them; only the haunting songs of the woodlife creatures, the sudden hoots of its prey, and every so often, the howling of a predator, could be heard.

Tiera, Victor, and Vulcavini were bundled in warm winter hunting clothes, with sturdy black boots and gloves. With the other Koujin knights and soldiers, they carefully treaded through the snow, listening for sudden movements. Victor was somber, his face grave, sending out a clear signal that he wanted no one to utter a single word to him. Tiera was immersed in her scouting, and picked up a disturbance- she turned to her right, and heard a long, terrifying, blood curdling howl, one unlike any others she heard before.

Vulcavini whispered to her, “A Crown of Death. Not a Qivin or Amoth; some say worse. Only a few of the living have ever seen one before, but I wouldn’t worry about that one now; it will never attack those who are in groups.”

Tiera exhaled an icy breath into the cold night air- one tinted with relief, but hardly. Suddenly, before she could regain her senses, she heard a choking scream. The soldiers all turned towards it, but there was no one there, only a puddle of blood soaked in the black snow.

Vulcavini whispered, “The Amoth- they’re in the forest shadows!”

The soldiers rallied together in formation, their backs facing against one another, each one assigned to scout in a pivotal direction. As they lay perfectly still, there was nothing. And then, another scream. Another puddle of blood.

Tiera’s eyes were fiercely drawn into the shadows, watching for any peculiar changes, as she had trained to do in the simulations. Her mouth was tightly curled, taking in short, sharp breaths, but never for more than a second. Before she could take another, a shadowy, thorny vine grabbed onto her leg and flung her back onto the snow; she cried out in pain, and in just a few seconds, she was rushed into the dark depths of the white forest. Reacting quickly, she withdrew her ignited scivitar and cut through the vine, releasing herself.

The vine hid back from whence it came, and Tiera placed a hand over her pierced wounds. Blood dripped onto her fingers, but she grit her teeth and pushed through it. Standing back up, she positioned herself, her emerald scivitar humming, ready to kill. Suddenly, she whirled around and slashed her scivitar down, and cut through the chest of an Amothian warrior, who was carrying a scivitar and a whip. Two more rushed her at different angles, and Tiera rolled out of the way. Her blade clashed with another saber, and from the corner of her eye, she saw another emerald scivitar pierce the darkness, pounding onto a red Amothian weapon. Vulcavini ferociously attacked the Amothian, finding his way through its defenses and stabbing its neck.

Tiera made quick work of her enemy, and with Vulcavini, she ran back out into the open moonlight. But there was no one there anymore.

Vulcavini assessed the situation and noted, “The troops are scattered. The Amoth successfully broke our formations.”

“That was their plan all along,” Tiera whispered, “To lure in the Crowns of Death.”

“As long as we stay together, they won’t attack.” Vulcavini’s eyes shot to the side, and he clenched his fist, commanding the Wraithen Energies to drop an Amothian spy down from the tree and into the snow. He pulled his fist inwards, dragging the spy towards him, and thrust his scivitar through the wailing soldier.

Tiera was far more alert than she was before. From behind, she sensed another vine- but now, she wouldn't fall for the same trick twice. She slashed against it, and from the shadows emerged more Amothian warriors. Tiera and Vulcavini fought side by side, adrenaline pumping hard against the icy winds of the forest.

In just a few moments, the blood of six Amothian warriors seeped into the black snow. Tiera caught heavy, well-needed breaths, but there was no time to rest- her transmitter crackled. Tiera put her hand against her ear. She heard Victor's voice.

"Tiera, where are you? They killed the two other knights I was with."

"I'm with Vulcavini, lock onto my coordinates, we'll find you!"

Victor shouted, "I-" but he was cut off; the transmitter sizzled.

"Victor?" Tiera frantically whispered. There was no response. His coordinates were gone, meaning his transmitter was crushed. Then from the distance, a scream rang out. Tiera recognized it much too well- it was one she never wanted to hear.

Tiera ran towards the scream, and Vulcavini shouted after her, "Tiera, we must find him together!" But she didn't listen. Her master was experienced enough to survive alone, so his safety wasn't her main concern. Tiera ran through the dark forest, out of the moonlight. She could only focus on Victor. The Koujin assigned her to him. It was her duty in life to protect him. She thought to herself: If I failed... No, I can't think about that now.

She reached the open moonlight again, where she thought Victor would be. She stepped through the black snow, and noticed a glowing device on the ground. She picked it up, and saw it was Victor's transmitter, ripped apart. It was covered in blood. But Victor was nowhere to be seen. Tiera looked behind her, and realized that her master was not behind her, either- did the Amoth ambush him as she ran? She didn't know. All she knew now was that she was alone.

A frightening howl echoed nearby. A Crown of Death.

RUI ran through the forest in a tattered black robe, gasping as she hid from the Koujin warriors chasing after her. It was starting to hit her. The weakness in her legs. Just as the voices approached closer and closer, she spotted a nook of shade amongst the pale trees, and jolted inside.

The Koujin warriors reached a crossroads, and they split up. Three encroached along an ominous path, getting darker and narrower, and the snow growing higher. It had gotten up to their waists, and now up to their shoulders. Soon, nothing could be seen ahead but the haunting fall of snow, and the faint moonlight. Total darkness.

"She's here," one of them hissed, "Stay alert."

Before he could react any further, the warrior hoarsely bellowed out and was dragged into the depths of the snow, leaving a trail of blood behind from where he stood. The other two followed the trail, but it was getting thinner and thinner. And then it disappeared. They readied their scivatars.

Suddenly, a piercing, blood stained blade stabbed through the chest of one of the warriors, splattering against the white bark of the trees, and from behind her, Rui jumped out. The last warrior slashed towards her, but hit nothing. He kept on slashing, but it was as if he was a madman attacking imaginary mirages, his mind twisted by the lonely darkness of the forest. He panicked, and thought: I know she's there, there's no mistake!

And then he looked at his chest. In the center of his flesh was a gory hole. It was not a fresh one- its blood had long since dripped into a puddle beneath him. He thought to himself: I've been dying this whole time. He collapsed, and before him, standing in the moonlight, was a withered young girl. But the warrior was still alive. She could not let him die just yet.

CHAPTER SIX- Helpless

TIERA stood still for the longest time. Seconds passed, then minutes. As the moonlight waned above, she began to lose track of time. How long had she been there? How many hours? No, she thought to herself, it couldn't have been that long. I'm losing my mind.

As she listened for another howl, staying still just as her masters had taught her, her eyes began to glaze over. She was growing ever so tired, and as her breaths became heavier and heavier, she felt herself drifting off. Her vision distorted into a haze. There was now only a blinding whiteness.

A memory. She was a child again, and before her stood Master Vulcavini. But she could not make out what was around her- it was shrouded by fog. Many years ago, she had wanted to run away. The training was too rough, and when she couldn't join the other children in the meadow, she pouted.

"Why me?" she defiantly asked her master.

"Because you have been Chosen," Master Vulcavini warmly replied, "You are not like the others; you are special. You must use your gifts to protect them."

"So that means I can't play as much anymore?"

"It would be good if we could all play all day, but in this life, there are those who wish harm. If no one stood up to them, we wouldn't be able to see another day in the sunlight. Your father, like all the Koujin knights before him, knew this. All Koujin have to give up something they love to help others. You are still young, but one day, you too will understand."

The young child thought for a moment. And then she replied, “When those mean streetpeople tried to take my friend’s toys away, I tried to take them back. I got one.” She lifted her sleeves to reveal her bruises.

Vulcavini said, “That, Tiera, is the warrior’s spirit.” Vulcavini walked out of the foggy memory, and reappeared with a sapphire necklace, and a curved, holographic blade. “Here,” he handed the necklace to Tiera, “This belonged to your grandmother, who was Master to your father and I. And this is a scivitar.” He handed the replica blade to Tiera, and continued, “The weapon of the Koujin.”

Tiera lifted the scivitar, and gazed in awe at its humming light. But as it vibrated through her hands, and into her arms, she suddenly felt a compulsion. An order. A command. A voice hissed: “Sacrifice”. With shaking hands, she gripped the handle tighter, and slowly felt her wrists turning. They turned all the way around, until they were pointed inwards. Before she knew it, the blade was facing her chest.

“TIERA!”

The memory collapsed and Tiera gasped as she snapped back into the icy night. Before her eyes was the piercing tip of her own scivitar, her hands grasping its metallic handle, ready to penetrate through her chest. She panicked and dropped the scivitar, and fell down onto the snow. All around her was a terrifying nest of white spider legs, numbering in the hundreds, with red, poisonous bulbs layered throughout. The legs moved erratically, each one out of sync, and they shrieked and howled. Tiera was in the middle of this monstrosity, covered by a red liquid goo. On instinct, she wraith-jumped several feet above out of the atrocious circle, landing just outside the nest, but could not pull out her scivitar in time. The Crown of Death screeched and rattled towards her.

But before the legs could reach her, a slice vibrated through the air and a flurry of white, porcelain legs flew upwards. The Crown of Death scuffled backwards, and its swarm of red orb eyes shot behind. Standing before it, with his scivitar gallantly aimed upwards, was Victor, bruised and bloodied.

“I won’t let you get even an inch closer to her,” Victor fiercely shouted. The Crown of Death jumped towards the prince, but he dodged, and using the Wraithen Energies, a tornado of black snow hurled from beneath the monster, piercing through its soft, red center. The monstrosity launched a barrage of legs towards Victor, but he dodged them all as he swiftly circled around it, his scivitar slicing through each and every one of the white scythes. Finally, pushing against the ground with all his might, he summoned six tornados that rushed inwards, crashing through the nest, and merging into one gargantuan beast. The tornado exploded and ripped the Crown apart, killing it once and for all.

Tiera slowly got up, catching her breath, and saw her scivitar in the distance, covered by red goo. She wraith-grabbed it, wincing as the goo projectiles flew onto her. A hypnotic sedative, she

thought to herself. One that can only be activated when its wielder is alive.

“I told you I’d repay you,” Victor said, gasping for air. The spell took a lot out of him. “Took me a while to fight off those Amoth who ambushed me, but I managed.”

Tiera pouted with a stern face. “Don’t get out of line. I’m supposed to be the bodyguard.”

“And I’m supposed to give you orders. This must’ve been the thousandth time that we’ve broken those rules.”

Tiera smirked. She brushed her hand through her crystal white hair, trying to wipe the goo away as the melting, falling snow washed it off, taking a moment to calm down her racing nerves. But they couldn’t stay calm for long. She saw Victor’s eyes freeze, in a sudden panic.

“You’re sensing someone coming, aren’t you?” she asked her prince.

Victor did not answer. He turned away.

“You can’t go alone,” Tiera demanded, “Those Crowns are still out there. Just tell me what it is!”

But Victor still did not answer. However, Tiera felt an unnerving presence. A light trot through the snow. A small creature? No. There was something powerful within it. Tiera turned to her left and saw an outline of a shadow sprint through the darkness- tattered robes flowed around its figure, fluttering against the swift wind. An Amoth warrior, but with an energy unlike any Tiera had felt before. Somehow, in a way she could not understand, she knew who it was: the Amothian princess. Without hesitation, Tiera ran after her, but Victor had taken off just a second before, and was a few feet ahead.

With tension tightening around her tongue, Tiera said to Victor as they ran, “You were trying to get to her alone; you never cut those ties with her at all.”

“Give me a chance to talk to her,” Victor said through gritted teeth.

“Victor, what the hell?” Tiera shouted back, “She’s an Amothian!”

“I told you, she’s different! You won’t know until you meet her yourself!”

“When I do, I won’t care to find out. She’d be dead before she can speak.”

“You can’t kill her. By my orders, you’re forbidden.”

Tiera scoffed, then muttered, “Just shut the hell up. You know what you sound like? An old Koujin. We always said that we’d keep each other from making stupid decisions. And I know you better than anyone else.”

Victor huffed with impatience, insulted by Tiera's cold words towards him and Rui. Impulsively, he told her, "You're just my bodyguard. Nothing more."

His words pierced her deep inside. Anger and pain emerged within, and she wanted to shout at him, to fight him. But though her emotions gnawed at her, Tiera wrestled them down. She thought to herself: I've gone too far this time. Summoning all the discipline she could, Tiera buried her pain in her heart. Yet she could not shut herself off from their faint echoes: He didn't mean it. He couldn't have. No, none of that matters. I'm a Koujin warrior, and this is my duty. I have to obey.

HAUNTING shadows of pale branches were scattered through the forest. Rui thought to herself: I have to get to an Amoth escape ship soon. But I don't know how much longer I can last.

She felt her body wilting, her eyes growing weary, her blood pumping ever so slowly. But she had to stay awake, lest the Crowns appear. Ever since she was a child, her father had trained her to evade the Crowns, among many other monstrosities. It required so much effort, and Rui could feel herself fading away.

Her thoughts intruded: It wasn't enough. I need more.

She shook her head, trying to ignore it all. As she sprinted with a light trot, she could hear the small, woodland creatures hiding around her, afraid. Not just afraid of the terrible skirmish. But before she could complete the rest of that intrusive thought, she forced herself to stop thinking about them any longer. Deep inside, she was sorry.

Her thoughts betrayed her once more: They're right there, waiting for you. Just enough to live.

Rui felt a pounding in her heart, and nearly choked. She gasped for air, and looked all around her. Was anyone following her? She was too dizzy to tell. She spotted a cave nearby, one where a terrible monster may have nested. But using her training, she could tell it wasn't home yet. Lifting her withering body with all her last remaining strength, she hid inside.

Rui stumbled in the darkness, coughing, with only faint crystals illuminating her way. At long last, she collapsed against the cavern walls, curling up with her hands hugging her knees. Her breaths were short and staggered. Minutes passed. Or perhaps even an hour. She couldn't tell. Then, from the corner of her eye, she saw her. The villager girl with braided blonde hair, and a flowery dress.

"Rui," Elyn whispered, "I was so worried when you ran off; I heard that you were in trouble. I brought you some food." She cradled a loaf of bread in her arms.

As Elyn walked closer to Rui, a frightening shiver crept up Rui's body. Rui weakly whispered, "Thank you for all the nice things you've done for me, but please, you must leave."

"I'll help you escape," Elyn pleaded, and held the bread loaf closer to Rui, "I don't want to see

you like this.”

Rui thought to herself: I can’t hide it from her any longer. She needs to know the truth.

Rui tried to speak up again, but choked. She couldn’t utter a single word. Her throat was too dry; she could feel her body craving for it. Now, the weakness was seeping inside of her faster than ever before.

Rui tried to drag herself away, but Elyn wouldn’t stop coming towards her. Elyn whispered again, “I know you don’t want me to get dragged into this war. But I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

”No!” Rui cried to the innocent villager. It was the only word she could say. She thought to herself: Stay away from me! I won’t be able to resist!

It was too late. Elyn’s arms lifted the loaf of bread towards Rui, and the young princess, battered and deprived, instinctively grasped her friend’s gift. But her hands weren’t around the loaf of bread. They were around Elyn’s arms.

THE two Koujin knights approached a cave. Victor didn’t hesitate to enter it, but Tiera stopped him with her hand on his shoulder.

“You can’t go in,” Tiera said, “The energy from that cave... I’ve never felt anything so cruel.”

“She’s in there. And she’s not alone.”

“Then just leave her with it.”

Victor ignored her. Tiera thought to herself: Fine. I don’t give a damn about you anymore.

Victor walked into the cave, and with great, yet dutiful, reluctance, Tiera followed him in. Their scivitar lit up the dark interior, and as they penetrated deeper into its depths, they heard growling.

Victor ran as fast as he could, and before him, he saw her kneeling down. The princess. Blood soaked through her white dress, her black robe was torn to pieces, and she was covered in deep scratches and scars all over her skin. She was crying. Something was gnawing behind her, its teeth wrapped around the side of her neck.

“RUI!” Victor cried out. He reached his hand forwards and wraith-pushed the beast away from the girl.

“Victor!” Tiera angrily shouted, “She’s an Amothian! Why are you helping her?”

Suddenly, the growling evolved into a hurtful roar. It had been attacked. No one in the cave wanted to help it. From the shadows, the beast leapt forward, and Victor saw gleaming, sharp

claws pounce towards his face. Without thinking, he thrust his scivitar into the creature. Then, once the deed had been done, he got a clearer look at what it was. He whispered, “No...”

The prince was paralyzed, unable to come to terms with what he had just committed. The dim light of the cave’s crystals shone onto the creature, revealing its true form- a young girl, with cat-like ears and blonde hair. He felt the aura around her; she had been blighted. He withdrew his scivitar’s blade, and the girl let out one final plea for help. She fell onto the ground and never uttered another sound again.

Tiera gripped her scivitar with unfathomable rage, and yelled, “She’s not just an Amothian. She’s a damn, disgusting Qivin! Victor, how could you?” Swinging her sword ready at her side, she charged at the blood soaked girl, her scivitar pointed sharp, but as soon as she got close, the girl looked at her, and Tiera could see her tearful, yet glowing eyes. They were fervantly drenched in the moment of a feast. But it was their color that truly struck her nerves with fear. Blood orange.

Victor whispered, “Rui... is it true?” He didn’t want to believe it. He denied the very thought that Rui was a Qivin, the ones he hated more than anything.

Rui faced away, not wanting him to see her tears touching her torn and bloodied face. As she wept, she whispered back, “Why didn’t you just let her kill me?”

Tiera could only stare at the broken girl. She thought: There was no reason for her to continue living. She wanted to die.

Tiera raised her scivitar, its blade heavier than it ever was before, until it was just a hair away from Rui’s cheeks. Victor yelled at Tiera, pleading, “Tiera, don’t do this! We have to listen to her side first!” Tiera shut him out. He didn’t care for her. His thoughts were worthless. But before she could strike her weapon down, she heard the broken girl whisper.

“I wished we didn’t have to meet like this.”

“You wanted me at the end of your blade instead, didn’t you?” Tiera stated, her face expressionless.

“No. Because you’re my twin sister.”

Tiera froze, as if thunder had struck from within. She thought: Why can’t I move? Why am I even listening to her?

But she could feel it. The Wraithen Energies were speaking into her soul. Though she did not want to believe it, she knew its words were true.

Tiera lowered her weapon, and Victor ran towards them, crouching down and hugging Rui. “Please,” Victor softly asked her, “Please tell us what’s going on.”

Rui sniveled, and wiped her flowing tears away with her hands. She looked up at Tiera. “Father didn’t want me to tell you until the time was right. But now, I don’t have a choice. You have to believe me. About who our father really is.”

CHAPTER SEVEN- The Truth I Hid From You

[~Two decades ago...]

Bronson Hyloaether awoke to a faint, orange light. He was a well-built man, with short white hair and a strong jaw. All around him were gears and mechanical contraptions, and gold plated walls. He groaned and saw that someone had removed his armor from him. A thick gauze covered the wound cut across his chest.

“Finally awake?”

Bronson quickly looked in the direction of the voice, and saw her: clad in imposing, sleek black armor was a tall, muscular woman with a dashing, long brown ponytail, weaved in a traditional Qivin pattern, and four red streaks across her cheeks. Halskette. His unyielding rival.

Bronson tried to raise his arm into a fighting stance, but he could hardly even move. “Damn it,” he muttered to her with a space ruffian accent, “What’s the meaning of this? Why haven’t you killed me yet?”

She replied, “A true Qivin wouldn’t take a life they didn’t need. In other words, I wasn’t hungry.”

“I was trying to kill all of you!”

The mission had not gone the way the Koujin expected. Bronson was forced to sacrifice himself to save the others. He had held the bomb in his arms, thinking that his last moments were to be protecting his fellow knights escaping from a swarm of Qivin. But the next thing he knew, someone had tackled him into the vermillion waters of the Qivin kingdom. And after that, he couldn’t remember what happened next.

“I disabled the bomb,” Halskette said, “And knocked you unconscious.”

“And bandaged my wounds? Don’t your people know that the moment I regain my strength, I won’t leave a single one of you alive?”

Halskette chuckled. “You’re a good liar. I saw your merciful side. You could’ve killed those Qivin villagers when you had the chance. But you didn’t.”

Bronson remembered. Not long ago, the Koujin had invaded a Qivin outpost, and the local militia had geared up to face them. It was a decisive victory for the Koujin. Bronson's superiors had ordered him to kill the remaining soldiers. But when faced with wounded Qivin crawling on the ground, he saw a locket one of them was carrying. It had a hologram of him and his family. Bronson took pity on them all, and let them go. Halskette had been waiting in the shadows to protect them, to snipe Bronson before he made his move. But after seeing what he'd done, she stood down.

Halskette walked towards Bronson, her face dark and provocative, and said, "Let me ask you this, Koujin. Why are the lives of the majority more important than the lives of the few?"

"Sacrifices always have to be made," Bronson answered, "Let's see. The majority who doesn't need to feed off civilized souls? Or the minority whose lives depend on doing so, including on their own fellow humans? Eradicating the Qivin would bring peace to the kingdom."

"Natural disasters, starship explosions, supernovas... all those kill far more than the Qivin do. There are only a few billion Qivin, amongst quintillions of civilized souls in this galaxy. Nearly all of us need to feed on just one once every few days. We hardly make a dent."

"Then forget the numbers! Every life is sacred. There is no conscious intent behind natural disasters and supernovas. Every Qivin has a choice. To lay down their own life, or to take others'. We Koujin strive to stop those with selfish and evil desires."

"Yet we do not kill with malicious intent, either. We only do it to survive."

Bronson chuckled. "So you're saying we should treat you lot as primitive creatures, with a lack of free will? When a predator threatens the innocent... we hunt it down."

"So why don't you hunt down the elites who exploit the labor of the poor? Or those, on overpopulated planets with scarce resources, who nab jobs away from their competitors, leaving their families to die in starvation? Because their consequences are not so direct? Because you can't assign a face, or a culture to them? You just said it yourself. Sacrifices always have to be made. Why must the Qivin be the unwilling victims who bear this burden?"

Bronson meditated on the matter with his deepest thoughts. He wanted to counter with emotion, telling Halskette of the innocents who wake up the next morning to see their beloved gone. But the images he saw of Qivin being rounded up and detained in their own villages stopped him. He wanted to say that those instances Halskette countered with were those of survival. But so were the Qivin's. He grunted with impatience, not wanting to respond.

Halskette continued, "When the poor are exploited, the cowardly elites cannot see their faces. But Qivin are a proud people. If a life's goodwill is taken, we bear the responsibility of seeing their last moments. We decide if they should live or die. Using the Ferori incantation, any deceased body can immediately be turned to ashes, providing them with a sacred farewell."

“So why don’t you put all of your victims out of their misery?”

“A true Qivin would. But many times, we cannot do so, because the Koujin have outlawed the Qivin from hunting people traversing the wilderness. Soldiers patrol nearly every open plain with villagers. The Koujin have forced us to feed in the shadows, while our prey are sleeping. The commoners are not skilled enough to take a life in its sleep without creating a commotion, and thus, they must feed and leave as soon as they can.”

Bronson took a moment to let Halskette’s words sink in. Then he said, “I’ve seen Qivin who have every opportunity to put their victim out of their misery. But they choose not to. They sadistically revel in what they have done, because they don’t give a damn about being a ‘true Qivin’ or not. They’re scum.”

“Scoundrels like that exist in every walk of life!”

“More so in yours. The Koujin have found that one in ten Qivin become bloodlusted on their power. It’s a desire that manifests in some Qivin when drinking the goodwill of souls. It’s not a trait anyone can anticipate at birth, or by ancestry! So how are we supposed to stop these scoundrels?”

“We must all work together to stop them- it is the responsibility of the Qivin kingdom to instill self-discipline in its people! We teach each other to never feed on our allies. Our ideal heroes resist the urge to do so even in times of famine. Those who can not resist are exiled. Our enemies are our prey.”

“And what of those who remain neutral?”

“Do carnivores care for their prey in the forest? Do champions care for those they have beaten?”

Halskette’s words triggered long repressed memories within Bronson. He was raised alone by a war torn land, where he strived to defend the weak against the majority. The majority were only trying to survive. But so were the weak. Oftentimes, someone had to die. His own experiences rebelled against the Koujin’s ideals- that those who are not willing to lay down their lives for others do not deserve compassion. What have the majority of Nobilis’s people sacrificed? Nothing. They were merely submissives who mindlessly obeyed the Koujin’s hypocritical ways. Bronson had long buried a belief that he did not want to admit. But now, it was illuminating within him once again: the belief that carnivores belong to the natural will of the universe.

Halskette stood proud and tall. She felt that she had reached Bronson. There was something within him that was different than the other Koujin, a desire for independent thought that she was slowly beginning to admire more and more.

Bronson felt a stinging pain in his arm. Halskette noticed, and said, “Rest up, Koujin. You have a

long day, tomorrow.”

“I was just beginning to like it here. You got another prison for me?”

Halskette smirked. “If that’s what you want. I was thinking about giving you a tour around our kingdom.”

Bronson didn’t know what to think. But the next day, Halskette did just as she said. Bronson saw the extraordinary lengths of discipline that the Qivin went through, their relentless labor and comradery, their exalted respect for their centuries of culture, as a people dedicated to enacting the natural will of the Wraiten Energies. Their gold and steam machines roared through their mighty kingdom, orange lights glooming over red-violet power plants of the finest industrial craftsmanship Bronson had ever seen. It was the vitality the Qiven received from their prey that was breathed into these automatons; without these sacrifices, such works of art could never come to life.

Bronson felt a bond with the Qivin that he had not experienced anywhere else; the Qivin knew, and thus, treated him with utmost hospitality in return. However, there was also a dark side to it all. Orphans and beggars littered the streets, and thousands of buildings had been abandoned, or had worn down from an absence of maintenance.

In a few days, Bronson had seen a side of the Qivin that filled him with admiration and longing. But he had yet seen that which would truly revolutionize his heart. Halskette took him to the fiery dances of the Brazen Sky. It was there that Bronson experienced a freedom that he had long since forgotten, one that the Koujin had told him to smother out as a knight. He burned down the Koujin’s utopian ideals, revealing the truth he had always known. Bronson looked into the eyes of his dance partner Halskette, this strong Amothian warrior who was unconditionally confident in her judgment about who she would kill. They beckoned him inside, deeper and deeper in.

Halskette leaned in close. “The fastest way to a prey’s heart,” she whispered as she brushed her hand over her bare clavicle, “Is through its neck.”

The lives she had captured from her prey were being channeled into the dance, unleashing a pleasure that could not be felt through any other means. But it was not enough. The Koujin knight needed more. And there was only one way he could get it.

Bronson ran with the Qivin on their hunts. He rode on their mechanical beasts, their hookshots ready in his hands, the focus of their journeys obscuring the rest of world outside of his own view. It did not matter what the outside world thought of them. On the hunt, each individual could decide who they wished to attack. On an isolated plain, they came across a village, where their leaders, their former heroes who had saved them from great dangers, were using their power to exploit their own people. The villagers were too conflicted to rebel.

The Qivin hunters braced themselves, silently meditating upon their prayers in the shadows. These

leaders must be exposed. The villagers were trapped in a difficult situation- they could not go against those whom they believed were good. But if the good in their terrorizers were removed, they would come to terms with what they truly were, what they had become. It would be easier for the villagers to decide to execute them, once they stand trial to admit their crimes, if they chose to do so.

“Great Mothers of the Wraithen Energies,” Halskette whispered, her eyes closed, her hands together in prayer, “Grant us the strength to deprive your children of their kindness. For once their thoughts are made impure, the true darkness that lies in their souls will be revealed.”

Bronson gazed at the Amothian warrior. The rituals of the Amoth. There was something in them that he was drawn into. He turned back to the village, at the leaders laughing haughtily at their disheveled people, and he readied his scivitar, aligning it right with his desired target.

HE was the quintessential Koujin hero of the Nobilis kingdom, the one foretold to bring an end to those feared, vampiric monsters. His was a prophecy that was told in other galaxies, far away. They all told of heroes who belonged to a collective of Chosen Ones. Because of this, the Koujin exalted him, and so every soul in the galaxy knew of his legendary deeds. But the more he learned of the Qivin, the more Bronson became disillusioned with his former order.

Halskette showed him the prayers the Qivin performed before a feast. One that thanked the Great Mothers for gifting each soul the chance to fight for what they believe in. One that blessed the prey for a life well lived, so that they may end with a sacred purpose- to grant the champion of the hunt the sustenance they have earned.

She showed him how the royals, elderly, infants and disabled fed: through willing sacrifices. These devoted acolytes believed in the natural will of the Wraithen Energies, and that their life was destined to give power to a worthy cause. They were never forced into the religion, as they could leave at any time. But they had been so indoctrinated since their birth that few ever did.

“You have not seen them yet,” Halskette said to Bronson, “The numerous injustices our people have suffered.”

“Lead me to them,” Bronson demanded.

They journeyed, in stealth, to hidden Nobilis prisons, where Qivin were being held captive. The Koujin did not allow them to feed. Instead, to sustain their lives, they placed the Qivin in pods that radiated artificial life force. They leaked with drops of precipitated white mist. Bronson was overcome with anger as he witnessed hundreds of thousands of Qivin suffering in agony, wanting to die, but unable to.

The Koujin tried their best to not harm the Qivin. They believed that their culture could slowly die off. Qivin were given the choice to live free in their home, for the rest of their life, if they underwent forced sterilization. But if any were found to have attacked Nobilis citizens, then they

had to be sealed away.

“Damn it!” Bronson said, “I can’t let this go on. I know I’m ready. Take me into the rituals. Let the Great Mothers judge me, to let me become one with the Amoth!”

Within the ritualistic chambers, Bronson, his chest exposed so as to let the priests draw a long scar into his back with their longwords, gritted his teeth as the Amoth priests tested his resolve. But even after many grueling hours, they did not let him pass.

“Impossible,” Bronson asserted, “My will is stronger than all of yours combined.”

“It is not our choice,” a priest replied, “It is that of the Great Mothers.”

Bronson continued to hunt with the Qivin, to learn their ways. But he was not allowed on the battlefield, to fight the Koujin. The Amoth had determined that there was still too much conflict in his heart, that he still retained compassion for his companions and friends in the Nobilis kingdom. Deep down, Bronson knew it too. Sometimes, when he would stand beneath the bronze waterfalls of the Qivin kingdom, remembering the lakes he swam in as a youth, he was reminded of his truest friend. The one he had grown with, whom he had saved many times before, and who had done the same for him. Vulcavini.

Over the course of a few months, he led a new life. As he grew accustomed to the Qivin, he fell into a great veneration for their powerful free will, that which exposed those who claimed to be purely part of the light, yet harbored darkness within, as all beings did. Entire cultures had been lost just because they were incompatible with Nobilis’s idealistic notions of peace. Unlike these subservient kingdoms, the Qivin culture had survived in isolation. It was this veneration for the Qivin that made Bronson find his way into Halskette’s heart, and the two warriors fell into an inexorable love.

“To choose one life over another,” Halskette said to Bronson, as the two stood over a cliff in the Qivin wilderness, “Is not an easy task. If Nobilis has its way, many lives, chosen over the Qivin’s, will be saved. Yet in a few hundred years, those same lives will have perished. While the Qivin culture would be destroyed.”

Bronson continued what she wanted to say next, “There is more to our cause than preserving individual lives. We must let the Qivin customs live on.”

Halskette turned to face Bronson, her hand placed near his waist, her other hand stroking down in front of his chest. She whispered, “Not just for the Qivin. For our way of life.”

Now both of them looked away from each other, and into the sunset. Halskette continued, “For ages, the galaxy, ruled by Nobilis, has called us monsters. We have known nothing but fear and animosity. And so our wills are being devoured. The Qivin deserve to know an era where they will not be ashamed of their heritage, one where they will stand proud and equal with the rest of the

galaxy!”

Bronson faced his lover, and reassured her, “We will build a better life for Qivin’s children.”

Halskette smiled at him, took his hand in hers, and guided him towards her belly. She told him, “We will build a better life for our children.”

THERE was a secret she had kept from him. Now that they were joined in holy matrimony, she was ready to reveal it. Halskette was no ordinary warrior of the Amoth- she was the princess of the Qivin kingdom, the daughter of the Kurahlara. But she hated her father, and demanded that no one would speak of them as related by blood.

“My father is a corrupt man. He has lied to our people, brokering deals with Nobilis elites, hoarding our kingdom’s wealth for himself. Because of him, orphans litter the streets, and our armies are quickly being defeated. Soon, I fear the Qivin kingdom will fall, and our people will be no more. They are suffering under his rule.”

Long ago, the House of Amoth had become sympathetic to the Qivin cause, and washed themselves in the religious waters of the Great Mothers, swearing to protect its forgotten children. They were exiled from the Nobilis Kingdom, who had fought hard to keep an unsteady peace between its legion of lesser kingdoms. Its advisors, the Koujin, had claimed that to maintain this tremulous alliance, royals were permitted to marry only royals from other Houses. The Qivin had no such rule.

The lovers plotted together to take the throne for themselves. When the time was right, they would overthrow the Kurahlara, and Halskette would reign as its new and rightful queen. But this future would never come to fruition.

The Koujin discovered them. A battalion of Koujin knights took the pregnant mother and her unborn children, holding her captive. Vulcavini could not believe what he was seeing.

“He’s alive,” he said to the other knights in disbelief.

They stared into the distance, at their sacred fountain that they prayed to, in silence. Then one of them spoke: “The rest of the Koujin knights do not know. Only our battalion bears this secret. We can never let anyone know of what he has done. His legacy is too important and cannot be tarnished! We will put the mother on trial after she has given birth, then execute her for her crimes. Find Bronson, and eliminate him before it is too late.”

Vulcavini could not believe what he was hearing. When his comrades were away, he would visit Halskette, bringing food for her and her unborn children. She was being kept in a pod of artificial life, and it was ripping into her will. Though she was suffering, she would tell Vulcavini of Bronson, and the Qivin. Quickly, Vulcavini became more sympathetic to her side, though he remained loyal to Nobilis. He had always asked for the Koujin to broker peace with the Qivin. Yet

all his attempts were unsuccessful- due to the Qivin's carnivorous nature, no peaceful solution was ever found.

Bronson was consumed with thunderous fury. Unable to contain his passion any longer, he marched into the ritualistic chambers, pushing past the priests who pleaded against his case, and knelt down, taking the gigantic blade of a longsword into his own hands. He did not need a priest. He thrust its edge deep into his back, and did not utter even a single word. A scar seared within him, and at long last, the orange embers of the dark chamber trembled. The priests gaped at him in fear as he walked past, his mark now sealed within him forever. The Great Mothers had felt his will. He was now an Amothian warrior.

Halskette went into labor, and gave birth to fraternal twin daughters. The Koujin carefully observed them. One of them did not have the need to feed. She was just like the rest of them, though inside, she harbored a fierce independence that all Qivin shared. The other was not so fortunate. She was in agony, and longed to touch the Koujin healers, begging for their life force. But she was not just an ordinary Qivin. She had been born with a craving greater than what any other Qivin ever had. The healers feared her, and placed her within a pod of artificial life. As she feasted, her body undying but her soul trapped in eternal, tormenting hunger, the infant's eyes glowed blood orange- the color that signified royalty.

The royals of the Qivin kingdom had abilities quite unlike all the others. When they drained their victims of their goodwill, a tremendous power would be captured inside. They would receive a temporary gift, enhancing their strength and connection to the Wraithen Energies. The stronger the victim, the stronger the gift.

Bronson assumed the armor of the Amoth. But the Amoth forbid him from pursuing journeys of his own. Their Chieftan despised his own daughter, and believed it would be a waste of blood to try to rescue her and his grandchildren. Bronson could not let this bastard imprison him like this. He slashed down guard after guard, and every Amothian warrior who tried to stand in his way. He proved himself to be far more skilled and robust than them all. And finally, the former Koujin knight stood before his father-in-law, his dark scivitar coated by a thin red glow, ready for what he had to do. He slaughtered the old tyrant in cold blood. Over the obsidian throne, he cradled the Kurahlara's mask in his hands. Bronson would now assume command of the entire Amothian army. Then, when the rightful heir returned, he would transfer the crown over to her, and she would become the Kurahlara.

He kept his identity a secret, so as to to exalt the figure into a more sacred being. The Amoth would never follow a newcomer. He could not attach his mortal identity to the throne.

Amothian warriors stormed the hidden strongholds, freeing prisoners from their torment, and reached the pod where Halskette was being kept. When Bronson freed his lover, she saw her father's mask before her. She smiled as she knew that Bronson had succeeded in achieving their goal.

But their children were not there. The Koujin knights had hid them away.

Together, Bronson and Halskette scorched the entire galaxy, freeing trapped Qivin from Nobilis rule. In just a few revolutions around the Qivin planet's axis, they had reinstated the Qivin Kingdom's glory, pushing back against the Koujin's ensured victory, and restoring the formidable might of Qivin's military. The war had just grown a thousand-fold- the dark energies powering the machinery and automatons of the Qivin were now strong enough to equal the overwhelming, yet pacifist, army of Nobilis soldiers.

For days, Bronson and Halskette searched relentlessly for their daughters. And finally, they found them. They tore through soldiers guarding a hidden medical facility and reached a metallic dome, lightning shooting over its imposing ceiling and underneath the bridges the Amoth warriors stood upon. They found a pod of artificial life, and rescued their half-Qivin daughter.

"Rui," Halskette whispered as she cradled her child in her arms. The Amoth quickly took her away, feeding her a sacrifice and shuttling her back to their kingdom.

"Where's our other daughter?" Bronson questioned. Rui's twin sister was not there.

Before they could react, the Koujin had sent a swarm of knights to retaliate. Bronson and Halskette decimated the new arrivals, but the swarms would never end. The Amoth who could not escape in time were trapped, and one by one, they fell to the Koujin. They fought through many chambers in the facility. Finally, Bronson and Halskette reached a chamber of haunting red lights, where they felt a luring energy- right ahead of them, through a heavily barricaded door, was their other daughter.

However, it was guarded by Koujin knights. Among them was Vulcavini.

"Step out of the way, Vulcavini," Bronson demanded.

"What have you done?" his former friend said with sorrow, "We were so close to achieving peace throughout the galaxy. Now the Qivin will terrorize our kingdom once more!"

"You are so blind that you can't see the injustices the Qivin have endured! The Koujin are hypocrites... they'd go so far as to kill a mother and her children!"

"Bronson, have you forgotten your duties as a Koujin knight? Have you forgotten when you saved me from the Qivin? When you promised those Koujin children that they would always have someone to look up to?"

"No. But to not let those memories hold me back is a sacrifice I'm proud to make."

"BRONSON! I will not let you poison your own daughter with your misguided ideals!"

The Koujin and Amoth clashed in a terrible battle, and many lives were lost. The Amoth had succeeded in eliminating nearly all of Vulcavini's battalion- those who kept the secret of Bronson's betrayal hidden. Now in the facility, Vulcavini was the only one left. Before him, Bronson and Halskette were the only Amoth who remained.

Vulcavini stood in front of Bronson, his resolve conflicted as he faced his former friend. But just as he was about to fight him, Halskette intervened.

"GO!" she shouted, "That door recognizes only Koujin. You have to go in and save our daughter!"

Halskette and Vulcavini brawled with intense fury. Bronson hesitated, but ran. He had nearly reached the door, when he saw from the corner of his eye, a neon emerald blade thrust itself deep into his lover's neck.

"HALSKETTE!" Bronson shouted in agony.

Vulcavini was distraught, his scivitar shaking as he saw what he had done. He had gotten to know the Amothian warrior, to admire her fortitude and will. But on the battlefield, none of that mattered.

Bronson dashed towards Vulcavini with all his might, and the two assaulted one another relentlessly, leaving all of their past behind. Bronson had gotten the upper hand, and had nearly sealed his victory. But witnessing the death of his lover had cemented a large tear in his soul. He lost control of his defenses. Vulcavini swung his scivitar and sliced off Bronson's arms, then kicked his former friend down into the crackling lightning of the metallic dome.

He could only stare in regret as Bronson cried out in anger, electricity piercing through his entire body. Vulcavini was paralyzed- he could he do it? Could he deliver the finishing blow?

His indecision cost him. A towering fleet of Amoth ships crashed into the facility, and Vulcavini was forced to run. He headed towards the maternity ward, where Bronson's other daughter lay. Holding the infant close in his arms, Vulcavini escaped in a cloaked starship. He watched from afar as the Amoth destroyed the facility, and retrieved their Chieftan from his dying breaths.

The Qivin worked tirelessly to save him. They merged their machines with Bronson's organic body, and once his vitals had returned, they installed him as the Kurahlara of their kingdom. For years, Bronson was plagued with injuries so severe that he could not leave his throne- he needed to stay still. Years passed as he waited in recovery, vengeance growing stronger inside him with every passing moment. The Amoth healers would bring him his daughter, and through a virtual reality simulation, they linked both of their consciousnesses into an artificial world, where Bronson would be with Rui and watch her grow up. The Qivin, being isolationists, were forbidden from using these technologies, in case any commoners used them to interact with the outside world. But Bronson had forced the mechanists to make him be an exception.

A young girl and a tall, strong man stood in a meadow, surrounded by a calming white light.

“Father,” Rui said, smiling up at Bronson while kneeling and tending to a flower in a meadow. “I’m glad we could meet today.”

Bronson heartily smiled back at his daughter. “I will always be there to protect you.” Deep inside, the loss of his wife was still lingering. But he hid it away; he needed to, so that he could have the strength to raise Rui.

BY the time the former hero could stand on the battlefield once more, Rui had reached the age of 9, and Vulcavini had indoctrinated Tiera with dogmatic, Koujin ideals. The Kurahlara sensed, through the Great Mothers, that Tiera’s heart was conflicted, and that she could not turn to the Amoth unless she discovered a reason for doing so herself.

The mighty Chieftan waited. He knew the right time would eventually come. And Vulcavini would pay for what he had done.

CHAPTER EIGHT- Lullaby

“YOU are now a Koujin knight, like your father before you. He would have been so proud. I am very proud of you, too.”

Tiera trembled in fear as she remembered her master’s words. She did not want to believe it, but the Wraithen Energies told her it was all true. She had been lied to her whole life. She had searched for her mother her whole life. And now, she realized where she had been. Her mother’s life had been taken away by her master’s own hand.

Victor thought to himself: Bronson, Tiera’s father, the one who I looked up to. He was a traitor.

The very words pierced his will and conviction. Victor held Rui tighter as she cried. He shielded her away from the world, from the reality of what had just transpired. ‘Rui, don’t look’, he thought to himself, hoping his thoughts would reach her. But Rui could only stare at her friend, lying still and motionless just a few feet away.

“Her name was Elyn. She didn’t deserve to die. I did.”

Victor looked into Rui’s eyes, and told her, “Don’t say that. I know who you really are. You’re that kind, beautiful girl who wouldn’t let anyone hurt her creatures.”

“But...” Rui choked up. “I’m not. When I was young, I hurt one myself. I never wanted to do it again. I...”

Victor bit his lip, hoping he could say the right thing. He told her, “You were just a kid, you didn’t know any better. You’re stronger now.”

Victor wanted her to believe him. But Rui did not reciprocate. And soon, he realized why. When he peered in Rui’s direction, he saw the body of the girl whose life he had just taken. She was a child of the Nobilis kingdom. He had let one of his own die, killing her with his own hands. And it was all because of Rui, a Qivin; she belonged to the ones he hated more than anything.

Could he believe his own words? Did he really know her? Or did he only know one side of her, the side that hid her true self?

Victor’s thoughts began to race uncontrollably: Was she ever real? The girl who had captivated his thoughts, whom he had spoken to late into the night? Or was she just an illusion?

He tried to believe that his heart was not in the right place. ‘She’s real,’ he thought to himself. Yet no matter how many times he repeated it to himself, he could not reconcile the two together. It was as if they were two separate people.

Tiera stood behind the two, frozen. She thought to herself: We can’t stay here. I have to move.

She reached down into her soul to try to find the strength to carry on. She looked at Elyn, then at Victor, who was holding Rui close to his heart.

“Victor,” Tiera whispered, “We have to leave.”

He did not respond. Tiera walked up to them, and to her surprise, Rui looked up, and they locked eyes. Their irises shared a similar color- a captivating shade of purple. For the first time, Tiera saw someone just like her. And now, the truth had finally sunk in: the agonizing craving that led her sister to all this, the persecution that had painted the Qivin as monsters. They were all part of her, too. It was so absurd that Tiera could not believe it. Her own father, the hero she had looked up to, was the very enemy she had sought to defeat. She had been raised to kill the Qivin. How could she ever accept herself as one?

“Rui,” Tiera said to the girl, her voice tingling with distress, “That’s your name, isn’t it?”

Rui nodded. Tiera felt a lump in her throat, but pressed on. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Rui sniveled, and tried to answer as best as she could. “Father said your heart was too conflicted. You weren’t ready yet.”

Tiera knew it was true. She walked closer to her sister, and reached her hand out towards her. “It may be too much for me to handle now. But right now, what’s important is that I have to help my sister who’s in trouble. I’m not going to let you stay like this.”

Rui stared at Tiera's hand, and without saying a word, she sensed what she was feeling. Rui reached out and put her hand in Tiera's, and Victor slowly loosened his embrace. Tiera lifted Rui up as she leaned onto Victor, and the girl stood on her two feet.

"That's how they teach an Amothian warrior to stand?" Tiera said, trying to lighten her.

Rui shuffled her feet, and began to feel the strength return in her legs. "Yes," she replied, "I shouldn't be like this. This isn't how I was raised." She wiped her tears away.

The two gazed at one another. Tiera nodded, and Rui nodded back.

Suddenly, Victor interrupted them. "Do you hear that? Someone's found us."

Rui perked up. She knew who it was. "You two have to hide. The Amoth are here."

Tiera turned around and peered down the cave. She moved her hand towards her sheathed scivitar, ready to fight. But Victor gently placed his hand onto hers, and said, "Not now. I sense that we're outnumbered. We just have to hide and let her go."

Tiera knew he was right. She could only watch as Rui walked forward, step by step, into the darkness towards the entrance.

"Rui," Tiera called out to her, "I'll see you again. Now that I know the truth.... I won't run from it."

Rui delicately nodded, and continued to walk.

Then Victor called out, "Rui, we'll find a way to rescue you. To save you from your curse."

Rui turned around, a tinge of hope entering her heart. "You promise?"

"I do."

Rui smiled. She wished it were true. Now, she had something to look forward to.

Victor wanted it to be true, too. If it wasn't, he wouldn't know what to do.

Victor held onto Tiera's hand as the two walked into the shadows, standing still and close to one another. They watched Rui disappear into the darkness. Her footsteps were getting farther and farther away. And soon, they were gone.

THE mission was a failure. The Koujin retreated, and Victor and Tiera flew together in their own starship, away from the rest. Tiera confronted the Koujin and demanded to know where her master was. But he was still missing. A confusion tsunami of worry and anger crashed through Tiera, but

for now, she had to let it go. The two shut their communicators off. They needed time alone to think about what they had just learned.

Tiera and Victor sat in silence for the longest time. Finally, she spoke up.

“The Koujin want all the Qivin dead. And now that I know the truth... I know that one day, they’ll want me dead, too.”

“No one will ever have to know,” Victor asserted, “And I’ll never let anyone hurt you. I’ll give my life to protect you.”

“I can’t live like this,” Tiera said, her voice breaking, holding a silent anger beneath, “I can’t live in a lie. I have to find who I was meant to be.”

Victor couldn’t believe her. “You want to become the very thing that murdered my parents, that has made this whole kingdom too afraid to live in peace?”

“I already am.”

“You’re not. I’ve known you for so long. You’re not like them at all.”

“What do you know about the Qivin?”

“I know they have a choice. They can stop having kids. Integrate into Nobilis, then fade away as generations pass on. But they’re hellbent on preserving their culture, their identity, and their blood.”

She hated seeing this side of him. It was like it wasn’t even his true self, but a demon possessing him from within. But as long as she never thought about it, all she’d see in him was her prince.

They did not say another word. Tiera was growing tired, and sat next to Victor in a seat as he piloted the starship, leaning onto his shoulder as she shut her eyes. Her hands fell onto her lap, and she felt a warm hand embrace them.

But Victor could not let his mind rest. All he thought about was the girl in the hologram he had longed for, for all those months. A terrible fear crept up inside of him, one that he did not want to hear: that he would never see her again.

THEIR starship landed near the crystal Nobilis palace. Tiera awoke, rubbing her eyes, thankful that she was back home. But something was off. It did not feel as welcoming as it did before.

“Prince Victor!” a Koujin soldier called out as the two descended from their ship. “You must come quick! Nobilis has been attacked!”

“What?” Victor exclaimed. The knights ran into the kingdom, into a tower, over a balcony overlooking all of the castles and farmland before the palace. The cities were in flames.

Tiera gasped. The soldier relayed what had happened to them: “It was a surprise attack. They lured our most capable battalions away into far off skirmishes. Amoth and their machines rained down from the sky. The Qivin flocked into the cities, turning our people mad. We are rounding them up, and detaining the blighted.”

“What of the palace? Of the King and Queen?”

The soldier’s face fell in sorrow. “My Prince... the Qivin have attacked the Queen.”

Victor ran off from the tower, towards the palace, and Tiera followed. The Qivin, she thought to herself. Her own people. They did all this.

When they reached the Queen’s chambers, Victor’s grandfather and his attendants sat next to his grandmother, who was lying still in a bed.

“Grandmother!” Victor called out, rushing to her side. Tiera stood next to the door, unable to come forward, hiding a shame she did not want to admit.

“Victor...” the King whispered, “She has been touched by Qivin. When we tried to rescue her, a Qivin swung her down and she couldn’t get up. Your grandmother is in a coma.”

Victor knelt down, and clasped his grandmother’s hand. “No...”

Tiera could not stand it any longer. She ran off from the scene, her guilt wringing into her. Her thoughts raced: What’s happening to me? I didn’t do this. Why do I feel like I did?

As she ran, she began to experience a sensation she had never felt before. She was being forcibly reconnected to her roots. They were painful. They wrapped around her arms and legs, and dragged her inside. Yet though she felt its bindings digging deep into her, she wanted to stop fighting. And when she did, the pain subsided. She felt herself being carried along in a firm yet gentle floating carriage, returning closer and closer to that where she was supposed to be.

Then, she heard a voice within: You must learn the truth.

She stopped running. Curiosity seeped into her. She replied to the voice in her thoughts: Why?

It answered: To see the injustices suffered by your people.

Tiera remembered what Rui had told her. The pods that the Koujin had kept the Qivin in. Were they real? Or just an exaggerated lie?

Tiera shut her eyes, and thought back to her military briefings. Where would these prisons be located? Surely, the Koujin must have detained the Qivin who invaded just now? She felt the Wraithen Energies guiding her to where she wanted to be. Her feet moved on their own. And finally, she found it.

Tiera saw a prison before her. She hid in the shadows, evading the Koujin guards. When she found her way inside, she couldn't believe her eyes.

Rows upon rows of Qivin lay within cold, isolated metallic husks. At first, they seemed to not be moving. But when Tiera walked nearer to them, she realized the horrible truth. They were still awake, too weak to move, and were trying to scream for help. Their voices were being drowned out by the husks they were inside, its walls preventing even a single utterance from escaping.

Tiera placed her hand over her mouth, her eyes in complete shock. She ran through the columns, and then, from the distance, she saw something that was off. One of the husks was not working. Unlike the others, it did not leak a single drop of white mist. Inside, the Qivin was dying.

Tiera sprawled her hands all over the broken husk, trying to find a way to release it. After a moment, she found how. The pod opened, and a withered, skeletal body of an old man fell; Tiera caught him in between her arms, and knelt down. The old man had four, fading red stripes across his cheeks, with loosened tatters of hair, deep wrinkles, and his eyes could hardly open.

She heard an ill voice speak: "Q... Queen Illysia?"

Tiera did not know who he meant. She tried her best to find the right words to say. "My name is Tiera," she gently told the dying man.

"Y-you... you look just like her. My Queen."

Tiera realized whom he meant. The last Queen of Qivin. Someone she was close to by blood.

"Is she gone?" she asked.

He began to remember, and sadness crept into him. "She passed away, long ago. Her cruel husband was all that was left." The old man coughed. "Until the new Kurahlara took over."

Her intuition was right. Queen Illysia was her grandmother.

The dying man tried to speak once more, but only whispers were heard.

Cradle...

Cradle for... the child...

The words were hauntingly familiar to the young girl. "A song?"

The old man started to smile. “Yes... during the famines, when I was a child, she used to sing to us all... a song that soothed our pains... it is the only way to soothe a Qivin’s famished pain.”

But as he sung its words, the old man’s pain lingered. Tiera was worried. “Why isn’t it doing anything?”

“Because only she possessed the magic to do so. It is a rare gift... that not even the princess inherited. When she left us, we yearned for the day she would sing to us again...”

He tried to sing once more. A realization dawned in Tiera. She thought to herself: Why did fate lead me here? Could there be a reason?

“I’ll,” Tiera choked up, but fought through it, “I’ll sing with you.”

The old man thanked her with a smile. And together, Tiera carefully listened to his words, and followed. The man in her arms shut his eyes, and whispered:

*Cradle for the child
Taken from the nest
The bird searches in vain
Her fledglings wilt away*

Tiera was enchanted by the song’s words. And then, to her awe, she saw a glowing aura apprate around the old man. But even that was nothing compared to what happened next. She felt a passion flow through her eyes. They had become blood orange. She was taken aback, but could not let the moment sink in; she had to continue to sing along:

*Child tries to fly
Into Mother’s arms
Her wings are just a dream
In sleep, warm and charmed*

As the song finished to a close, teardrops began to fall from the young girl’s face, down her cheeks, and onto the cold ground. The song had numbed the suffering within the man, and he had lost himself in his old memories. He did not feel the strain of hunger any longer.

“Thank you, my Queen,” he whispered, one last time. And then, he died in Tiera’s arms.

Tiera knelt still, for what felt like an eternity. She prayed that his soul found peace. For the first time in her life, she felt a meaning for her existence. She had found the reason why she was born.

CHAPTER NINE- Farewell

VICTOR rushed to the cries ringing through his kingdom; pleas of help came to him from all different directions. For first time in his life, the Nobilis capital had been attacked. He never thought this day would ever come. The Amoth tricked its people with a false sense of security, making them think their defenses were invincible. The serenity had molded a blithe disposition into the young prince.

But now, as he ran to save a temple from being consumed by roaring flames, as he stayed with a girl whose father had been lost, as he was forced to leave her to calm a mob down from destroying the city from within, he realized he could not shirk from his responsibilities any longer.

“Prince Victor, please help us! We don’t know who else to turn to!”

The voices begged for him. He wanted to drown them all out. In his mind, there was a single moment of solitude. He thought back to his grandmother. When she awoke, would she remember him as she did before?

He knew the Qivin were people, too, despite how monstrous they were. But if he had to kill a thousand Qivin for his grandmother, he wouldn’t hesitate. Yet could he kill Rui for her?

I can’t, he thought to himself. When he thought of Rui, there was only warmth and cheerfulness. How could this girl be one of them? She couldn’t be. They were not the same.

Suddenly, someone grabbed his hand from behind.

“Victor.”

He turned around and saw Tiera. Her face was crestfallen, her lips barely parted, as if wanting to tell himself something, but was holding back.

“Are you hurt?” he asked her.

Tiera shook her head. “There’s something I have to show you.”

She led him into the prisons. And there, the prince stood amongst the horrors committed by his own kingdom. His soul quivered at the very sight.

“Tiera,” he whispered, “What do you want me to do?”

“Why... why are you asking me? You didn’t do anything of this,” she replied, astonished.

“No, don’t you see? It’s my responsibility. I have to do something about it. Because one day, I will be King!”

Just then, the enormous doors to the prison opened. In walked Koujin Master Wimble, and several guards.

“What is the meaning of this?” Wimble shouted at the two knights.

Tiera glared at him. “How could you torture these people like this?”

Wimble was taken aback. He scoffed, “What else could we do? Let them roam in this already ruined capital, and plunge it further into chaos? You should watch your tongue, wretch!”

Victor shouted back at him, “Wretch’? You should watch your tongue, too. These people are in our kingdom now. They’re our responsibility!”

“WHY I’D NEVER!” Wimble yelled, furious, “To think that you would choose the Qivin over Nobilis. You’re a prince! You should be ready to lay your life down for your own people!”

Footsteps echoed. Behind Wimble, someone else entered. It was King Xiffinsire, Victor’s grandfather.

“Grandfather,” Victor said, with great but betrayed veneration, “You knew of this.”

The King hung his head in shame. “Yes,” he replied, “But as of now, we know of no other way. It is only a temporary solution. We have debated over what to do. To let them die, or to live in agony. But these Qivin will not stay here forever. Soon, each and every one will stand trial, and if their crimes are deemed true, will either be exchanged for one of our own prisoners, or be put out of their misery.”

Victor knew his words were genuine. He tried to think of something to say. “Everyone out there is suffering. Do we not have enough resources to help them all?”

The King shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

The horrible dread of reality struck Victor. It was at that moment that he was faced with a cold, hard decision. If he was to be King, he too would have to choose who to save. One side depended on him. The other did not.

Then Tiera spoke up. “All of our knights are helping the Nobilis people. No one is helping the Qivin.”

Everyone turned to look at the brusque young girl. Victor’s eyes shuddered at her with worry. What are you doing, he thought to himself. Tiera, you can’t let them suspect you!

The King peered at her. But his face soon relaxed, and in a soft tone, he told her, “You are right.

Then I will provide you both with a choice. The city is still in dire need of aid. But there are Qivin prisoners who need to be fed, and clothed.”

He looked straight at Tiera. “I know what you will choose.” Tiera looked away; she had been conditioned to be ashamed. But deep down, a new sense of rebellion was forming. An independence.

Then, the King turned to look at Victor, “Now, grandson, what will you choose to do?”

Victor stared at his grandfather. For a moment, his heart was with Tiera’s. He didn’t want to see her sad; he wanted to make her smile just a little. He knew what she was going through. But those voices yearned inside, begging at him. They echoed strong: Please, Prince Victor. Help us.

Victor stood steadfast, and with a heavy proclamation, he told his grandfather: “I will help the city.”

He turned to Tiera. She was heartbroken. Not with disappointment- for she knew that Victor had been forced into a hard position, and knew what he would inevitably choose. She was heartbroken because this was where she had to part ways with her most cherished prince.

“My King,” Master Wimble exclaimed with surprise, “How could a retainer separate herself from her lord? She has to obey him!”

The King rebuffed his opposition. “I am the King. Therefore, this time, I will make an exception.”

His grandfather’s strength filled Victor with admiration. He hoped to one day be as wise as he was. But his grandfather was the same one who let these prisons come to be. If even a man as great as him could not stop them, how could he ever do so himself?

He buried his carefree disposition deep inside. How could he have been so light-hearted when his people were suffering? Guilt gnawed at his core. He never wanted to see that side of himself ever again.

And as soon as he cut those ties, he saw her. His knight was walking away, not even looking back. She had made her choice, too. It was no time for Victor to regret anything. He thought to himself: Every soul out there needs me. They need the Koujin. Their laws are the only ones keeping everyone safe and smiling. It’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.

Tiera departed from the prison, and headed towards the city. She did not know where she was going. But she knew there were still Qivin out there, hiding, and needing her help. Untamed thoughts raced through her head: Victor’s grandmother didn’t deserve any of this. But if the Koujin did not oppress the Qivin, would she have been attacked?

There was no sudden change; there was merely a destruction of denial, unleashing her buried

empathy with the Qivin. She had always sympathized with them. And now, knowing that she was one, too, Tiera felt a responsibility that came from her heart, not from the orders of Koujin. She alone possessed the power to soothe their throes. How could she keep such a gift from her kingdom?

She had gone far from the prison, and was lost in her thoughts. Though she told the King she would head into the city, she knew that she could not. How could she still be a Koujin knight, after witnessing all those atrocities? Then, something broke her out. A presence. He was here. She stopped dead in her tracks.

“Master,” she said, with quiet aggravation seething out from her undertones. “You’re home safe.”

“Tiera.”

Vulcavini could sense it. He sensed that somehow, she had uncovered the truth. She was about to say words that he never wanted to hear:

“What did it feel like putting a sword through my mother’s neck?”

Vulcavini shut his eyes. “I had to. For the good of the kingdom.”

“Did you feel like you were enacting justice?”

“I felt that I was protecting you from your father’s misguided ideals. I had sought to end him before he could lead you astray. But now, I am too late.”

Tiera hastily turned around, like a banshee wildly after a human soul. Anger was etched into her eyes, her mouth, her teeth. “You took it away from me! My heritage! Who I REALLY am!”

“I could not let you go down the same path as your father.”

“You never let me make that choice! I never knew him. I never even knew that I had a sister,” Tiera said, her voice nearly breaking.

“I am deeply sorry. But the path of the Amoth will only lead to suffering.”

“Will it? You don’t know if that will happen. But I do know what has. The Koujin have made me suffer. And your lies have hurt me, too.”

Vulcavini did not reply. There was not a thing he could say.

Tiera spoke on, “You told me that it was a secret marriage, and that my mother had died by her own hand. You said my father wanted to protect her from Qivin assassins; but she was actually a Qivin this whole time!”

“Knowing such truths would have destroyed a young child’s mind. I had to raise you to know only peace and hope.”

Tiera remembered. She remembered how Vulcavini went out of his way to give her a life an orphan could never have. An opportunity to become a Koujin knight. To serve under royalty. Yet no matter how hard he tried, he could never give her that which she wanted most.

“You made me kill my own people,” she whispered under her breath, “I can never forgive you.”

Vulcavini hung his head down in shame. There was only one thing left for Tiera to do. She started to walk again. She walked towards her master, but did not face him. It was time for them to part ways.

But Vulcavini turned towards her. “Tiera, where will you go?”

“Where I’ll go is none of your business.”

“I am still your master. And you are still a Koujin knight.”

Finally, Tiera turned to face him. “Why won’t you let me go? Why are you keeping me hostage?”

Vulcavini could not hold it in any longer. His true feelings escaped him, and he said, “Because you’re all that’s left of Bronson! His last shard of light!”

The truth hurt Tiera like nothing else Vulcavini had told her before. It was then that she realized that ‘protecting’ her was not the only reason why he had hid the truth. It may not have even been his most important reason at all. She was nothing more than a keepsake. To remind Vulcavini of his lost friend. To make him believe that he was not responsible for killing him, that a part of him was still alive.

Tiera was truly furious now. She shouted at him, “I won’t let you use my father to guilt me any longer!”

She needed more. She needed more to show him that she would never turn back and was done with it all. Tiera grabbed onto her grandmother’s sapphire necklace, and pulled on it as hard as she could.

“Tiera!” Vulcavini cried out. There was nothing he could do to stop her.

Tiera ripped the chain off her neck, and held the broken necklace in front of her master.

“Here,” she told him, “I don’t want it anymore.”

Vulcavini relented. He reached his hand out, and Tiera dropped the hierloom onto his palms. She was shaking inside. The necklace had been a large part of her life. She wore it everywhere she went. Now, she would never see it again. Tiera tried to calm herself down, but her emotions would not let her look at Vulcavini without being enthralled in painful betrayal. The sapphire spell had been broken.

Tiera walked away.

Vulcavini watched as the child he raised left him. But he knew that this was for the best- he had to let her go. Now, the only way she could find peace in her life was by choosing her own path. But there was still one thing Vulcavini wished for her to see. She did not have to agree, but he wished that she would understand it: That he truly cared for her.

THERE was no turning back. She had left her King, her Prince, and her Master. She didn't want to bring up any old memories she had with Vulcavini. Using all the discipline she could muster, she buried those memories in the deepest part of the soul. She shut her eyes, and searched for someone she could turn to. Rui. She remembered her promise to her that one day, they would see each other again.

"Can you hear me?" Tiera whispered. The connection was faint, but growing. They were being connected by the Wraithen Energies.

A voice echoed back. "Tiera?"

She felt it. Her sister's presence.

"Rui. I need to meet you. I'm leaving the Koujin. Listen to my feelings; you know they're true."

"Tiera..." For a few moments, there was no reply. Tiera had thought that even she had turned away. But then, she heard Rui's voice again.

"I know a place where we can meet. Back in the Qivin kingdom. I will tell you where when you are ready."

Tiera could feel the nervousness in Rui's voice. Her sister was not sure about going through with this. But she was willing to try.

"Rui, thank you." Tiera waited for a reply. But for now, the connection had been lost.

CHAPTER TEN- Temptations

THE knight stood in her chambers for the last time. For her entire life, Tiera had called the place

her home. It had gone through many changes, many redecorations. Its walls had been plastered with frills and artwork she bought from Duron. She hung her old Cruiser models on their hooks, and placed their mechanical modifiers close by. On its cabinets sat holograms of her favorite Cruiser athletes. She stared for a moment at the drawings she had done of her imaginary castles and gardens, back when she training to be a knight, yet had desired for nothing more but to be a princess. Tiera let out a bittersweet smile. She thought to herself: And now, my dream has come true.

She had nearly finished packing, and lugged a thick baggage onto her fluffed up mattress. She let out a sigh. Just then, she noticed someone was now behind her. She had not cared to close her doors, as she was about to leave soon, anyways.

Tiera knew who it was. Deep down, she had wanted him to come. To say his final goodbyes. But Tiera discerned that was not why he was here. He had sensed what she was about to do, and was trying to stop her from leaving. Even though he was burdened with heavy responsibilities, she was still very important to him; he must have convinced the masters to give him an hour off or two. She twirled around and strutted up to her tall prince, and told him right in his face:

“For the longest time, I’ve been searching for a place I could call home. And I finally found it. Don’t take it away from me.”

Victor countered her, “Just because their blood runs through you, does not make you Qivin. You’re Nobilis. You always have been.”

“I’m not Nobilis. I was their prisoner. I was yours, too.”

“Don’t ever say that!”

“Then let me leave. You’ve disobeyed orders so many times before. What’s gotten into you?”

“I saw what they did to my kingdom. And I realized just how ungrateful I’ve been this whole time. Nobilis raised me into who I am today. My grandparents gave everything they had for me! What have Qivin ever given you?”

“If Vulcavini hadn’t hid who I really was, they would have given me everything I ever wanted! You just don’t get it, Victor. They never hid your identity. But they did to me. They shrouded me in a lie, just so I could be their pawn. I want nothing more to do with Nobilis.”

“Even me?” Victor said, “You would leave me for the Qivin?”

“There’s only one reason why you want me to stay,” Tiera said, her heart aching, “I’m nothing more to you than your bodyguard.”

With trepedation, Tiera looked into Victor’s eyes, anxiously anticipating what he would say. She

wanted Victor to say her words were true. He had to push her away. But Victor could not stop himself. He was so impulsive. It was a part of him that he could never let go.

“I wasn’t even thinking when I said that. I just wanted to hurt you. But I never really meant it.”

It was at that moment that Tiera felt Victor unsealing a forbidden lock within himself. It was something that he should not have done. An act that he knew he may deeply regret.

“Victor, don’t say it.”

He shouldn’t. If he did, there would be no turning back. He would hurt her with a wound that would never heal.

“Tiera, I love you. I love you more than anything.”

Tiera felt herself curling up inside. She could sense that his feelings were true, but they were suffocated with half-lies. “Why?” Tiera cried out, “You knew you’d never choose me over your kingdom. Why did you have to let me know?”

“I’m sorry. I just couldn’t let you leave without knowing the truth. I couldn’t live with myself if I did.”

Tiera turned away from Victor. She wanted to walk away, but her feet wouldn’t move. She couldn’t leave now. It was too late.

Tiera turned back to her prince, their faces just a breath of air away. She whispered, “You’re so selfish.” Victor pulled her closer to him, and Tiera met his lips with a kiss.

IN a darkened bedroom, under heavy blankets, Rui held Victor’s transmitter in her hands. Its holographic light illuminated the darkness of her dome. The girl had sent a message to the Nobilis prince, yet received no reply. She waited. Sometimes, for just a few moments, she could feel a message coming. But no message ever came.

She needed someone to talk to. Her nurses had washed her, had bathed the blood off her skin, but then left her alone. She had tried to crawl into a deep sleep, but she was being awoken by nightmares of her deceased friend. The claws would scratch her bare skin. Sharp teeth sunk into her neck.

“I’m sorry, Elyn,” Rui begged her friend for forgiveness. Just as the apparition’s tail elongated into a monstrosity several hundred feet long and wrapped around Rui’s body, she screamed and woke up, sweat pouring down her chest.

Rui shut her eyes. Why didn’t he reply? What was he doing? She threw her transmitter under her pillow, and pulled her thick blankets over herself even tighter.

Rui's imagination raced. Every few minutes, she looked at her transmitter, wishing to see those holograms again.

Did he ever think about her? He must have missed her pets. Yet she feared what she thought was the truth. That because Victor had seen what she really was, he would never want to speak to her again.

"But he promised," she whispered to herself. No, he couldn't have forgotten. One day, her prince would arrive and take her from the kingdom. And then they'd visit all those lively, cavorting cities like she'd always wanted.

Most of the Qivin had been conditioned by society to embrace their lifestyle without question. But Rui was different. She'd always known there was a side to her that she was never allowed to explore.

The brown haired girl clutched her pillow harder, and wished that an answer to come soon. She remembered that Tiera had wanted to meet her. She wondered what her sister was like. Perhaps she would tell her what Victor had been up to.

VICTOR held Tiera in his arms, his hand running down through the girl's flowing, crystal white hair. Tiera rested her head on his strong, right shoulder, his bare dark skin brushing against her cheek. The prince took her hand in his and kissed her fingers. It was a moment she wanted to last forever. Yet no matter how badly she wanted it, she gripped onto her thoughts tight enough to stop her mind from slipping into fantasy. She pulled herself off from Victor's embrace, turning her face away. But the prince softly placed his hand over Tiera's cheek, and down onto her hands.

"Why are they doing this to us?" Tiera pleaded, "I don't give a damn what the Koujin think. I just want to be with you." She couldn't stop herself from asking one last time, even though she knew what he would say. Her words carelessly left her mouth. "Why can't you choose me instead?"

"We would hurt so many."

"Someone always has to be hurt." She searched for something to hold on to. And she found it. "That's why I have to go to the Qivin. They don't deserve to be framed as monsters just because the rest of the galaxy doesn't want to be seen as one. I have to become who I was meant to be."

"You'd be a Qivin princess. And I'd never see you again. Not even as my knight."

Suddenly, a wild idea came about to Tiera. "Victor! I'd be a princess! It has to be fate. This is how we can finally be together!"

Victor immediately sensed what she meant. "You're crazy. These two kingdoms have been locked in war for centuries. The House of Amoth will never reunite with Nobilis."

“But one day you will be king. And you can change everything.”

“No. There’s a reason why the Koujin made these laws. We can’t let the Qivin do whatever they want and ruin the galaxy.”

“You don’t know if they will! Why won’t you take the risk and break tradition?”

“You’re asking me to get rid of the Koujin order?”

“Yes!”

Victor thought to himself in silence for several minutes. But at the very end, he couldn’t change. “I’m sorry.”

Tiera pushed Victor’s hand away from hers. She clenched her own hand over her face, turning away, unable to look at her prince, trembling in anger for falling for what she had anticipated a mile away. “I knew. I knew this whole time. I hope you know that the only thing you’ll leave me with is a hole in my heart. And that’s the last thing I’ll remember about you. Goodbye, Victor.”

It was finally time for her to leave. Victor did not say another word back. He could only feel the guilt rise up inside of him after what he had done, all for just moments of cathartic release. Tiera would never be the same again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN- Right Where I Belong

IN her dark sangria colored robes, she came across a mechanical plain, with eight-legged walkers roaming its fields of crimson crops. Tiera brushed her hand against its wheat-like grains, peering into the distant sunset. She thought to herself: For all my life, I’ve been told how savage the Qivin were. But this kingdom... it’s so peaceful.

She climbed a hill, and on top of it was a girl in a black robe and white dress. Dark, solemn purple eyes. She had been waiting.

“So this is where the Qivin live?” Tiera asked her sister.

“It’s where they hunt,” Rui replied, her voice worn and tired.

Tiera stood next to her, and gazed at the meadows in awe. “It’s beautiful.”

Rui could hardly laugh. “Not once you see the blood shed on its crops.”

“I’m a warrior. I’ve seen more blood than most will ever see in their entire life.”

Rui shook her head. “Not like this. They call them their ‘prey’. Innocents who didn’t do anything wrong, but who were ‘let go by Fate’, if you want to say it like a Qivin.”

Tiera peered at the grounds below, trying to imagine them covered in sheets of dry red. “Then show me what a hunt is like. I’m ready.”

It was a spectacle like none she had ever seen. Tiera and Rui watched in the shadows as the Qivin crept into the village. People running from their huts, looking around, not knowing where the footsteps were coming from. There must have been hundreds of them. They left their homes, running into the open plain. And then, in a swift instant, three bodies fell unconscious. They had been grappled down by plasma hookshots from afar. The Qivin left their hiding spots, and circled around their prey. They held hands as they chanted to the Great Mothers, and together, they shared the meal, not letting a single drop of kindness go to waste. Finally, before the defeated could wake up, the Qivin shot a single plasma spike squarely into each of their necks. Then, they kneeled down, pressed two fingers onto their bodies, and the deceased crumbled into ashes that flew away, not leaving a trace of their mortal flesh behind.

Tiera swallowed a thick lump in her throat. She had been conditioned to stop these predators, to save the innocents from being hurt. But all those memories of starving Qivin started flooding into her at once. The infant, withering away on a rock, his mother gone. The caged Qivin who were forced to feed upon each other, an act that was strictly taboo. And the old man dying in her arms. She had to make a choice. And now, knowing that she alone held the gift that would soothe a lost people, Tiera held herself still and tight.

“Those villagers,” Tiera whispered to Rui, “It’s as if a hurricane got to them.”

Rui’s eyes fell in melancholy. “You sound just like Father.” She paused, and sighed. She had always wondered what her sister was like. She had heard she was a knight of the Koujin, an order that many respected, unlike the Amoth. Rui had harbored a slight jealousy towards her for being born in the Nobilis Kingdom, though the Amothian princess never wanted to do anything bad. She was just somewhat disappointed that her sister would throw away the gratuities she had always yearned for.

Tiera felt what was bothering Rui. She said to her, “Hey, I brought you something.”

Rui looked down at Tiera’s hand as she took out a small, chocolate-like snack from her pouch. She whispered to her Koujin sister, “What’s that?”

“A Nobilis snack. Something you’d never find in on this planet. Not because it doesn’t have the right ingredients, but because the people here don’t know how to make it.”

Tiera motioned to her sister to try it, and Rui popped it in her mouth. She smiled as the warm

sensation descended into her cheeks. “It’s pretty good,” she whispered back.

“I figured you’d want to try some. You’ve never been away from this kingdom, have you?”

Rui gave off a humble smirk. “I have. Not just on missions. But when I sneak out.”

“Sneak out? What for?”

“Well, when I go visit my pets. I mean, creatures.”

“Oh,” Tiera replied. She didn’t really care. But Rui’s delight as she talked about those beasts reminded her of the one she had left behind. She didn’t want to think about him anymore. She thought of something else to say.

“I’m sure you’ll get to see the outside cities one day. I know most of the Qivin aren’t savages. They won’t kill just anyone on the streets. We have to make Nobilis understand that.”

Rui looked away, hoping her words were true. But there was something else on her mind.

“Tiera, back in the cave, do you remember what your Prince said? His promise?”

Tiera exhaled sharply inside. Damn it, she thought. I just told myself I don’t want to think about him ever again.

“Rui... I don’t think he knew what he was talking about.”

Rui was dejected again. “But he did. I know he wouldn’t lie.”

Tiera let out an annoyed chuckle. “So... I’m guessing, for these past few months, you’d been talking to him in secret. But you’ve only seen whatever he wanted to show you. Just trust me when I say this: he’s not the guy you think he is.”

Rui fumbled around with her hands for a bit. She clenched her teeth, looking for the courage to ask Tiera, “Were you two ever, um, close?”

Tiera was taken aback. “He was my prince. I was his knight. That’s all you need to know.”

There was nothing else Rui could ask. Tiera didn’t want to talk about it anymore. But the princess did not let her words get to her. I can’t give up, Rui thought to herself. Not until I hear from him again.

THE sisters walked side by side through the bronze tinted streets of the kingdom’s market squares. Tiera was amazed at the mechanical automatons roaming around. They seemed to have a life of their own. She wondered if they actually did.

A life for a life, she thought to herself. Without the Qivin's feasts, these golems would never exist. Regardless of whether they were living or not, or served some sort of practical purpose for those who were, they were marvelous.

Rui showed her the shops and the parlors, the vermillion fountains and the stalls where they could watch light shows illumine right past them. Next to large floating lanterns, musicians played on their instruments, strumming tunes both brisk and slow. For the first time in a while, Rui forgot about the calamities that had befallen her, and happily strolled down the city with her sister. She was smiling from ear to ear.

"Rui! Hey, princess!"

Rui looked at an alleyway and saw a small band of scruffy looking mechanics, dressed in oil covered overalls and berets, sporting cybernetic arms and piercings, grinning at her. Rui smiled back at them, waving.

"Joshua! Yeltva!" she called back.

Yeltva, who had dark skin, turquoise hair and a beret, chewed on a mechanical pipe, spit it out and walked towards Rui, greeting her coolly. "Who's the girl in the sparkly robes?"

"Um, this is my sister, Tiera."

Yeltva and the other mechanics gaped at the pair. Yeltva exclaimed, "You found your twin?"

Rui nodded. "I'm showing her around the city. I'll bring her to the palace soon, too."

Yeltva grinned and shook her head, "Well, damn. Another princess. Now there's two of 'em. Pleased to meet you, second princess."

Tiera shook her hand. "The honor's mine." It happened so quick that it took her a moment to realize what happened. Oh, this is crazy, Tiera thought to herself. Someone just called me a princess.

As the duo walked away, Tiera asked Rui, "Those your friends?"

"Um, sort of. Acquaintances, at best."

"Why don't you guys get any closer?"

Rui paused. Then she replied, "They're not very nice hunters." She shirked down, cringing. "They're actually pretty brutal."

Tiera pouted, then tried to change the subject. “So, what’s it like being a princess?”

Rui let out a nervous laugh. “Not as great as you think.”

“Really? You’ve got people greeting you from every alleyway in the city. They like you here.”

“They only do that because they want to get on my good side. Everyone wants a royal to do favors for them. They don’t really like hanging out with me.”

“So what do you usually do then?”

“Sometimes I go out to the forests and try to find Cradles to feed. Wanna go see?”

“Uh... I think I’ll pass.”

They walked past a peculiar building. At first, Tiera thought it was just an ordinary restaurant. But as she peered at its window displays from the corner of her eye, she began to become somewhat bothered. There were words sprawled upon its entrance: LIVE FEAST TONIGHT. Tiera did not want to stare at it any longer. Best to just forget about that, she thought to herself.

They approached a boring looking museum, and Rui turned to Tiera to say, “There’s no better place than the Modern Museum of Qivin History, if you want a quick run-down of what’s been going on. I think you’ll...”

Tiera was drowning out what Rui was saying, not even looking at the museum in front of her. Instead, she was staring at a rugged, pale gold hospital nearby.

Rui noticed something was wrong. “Tiera?” she asked.

Tiera could barely whisper back. Her feet started moving, as if on their own, towards the hospital.

“Tiera,” Rui shouted after her, “Why are you going there? I don’t think you want to see what’s inside.”

“I just... feel like I have to.”

Rui couldn’t stop her. Tiera walked into the hospital, and heard crying. Instinctively, she dashed into the wards, and saw row after row of Qivin lying in worn down beds, coughing and suffering. Amothian healers were next to them, chanting, as if giving them their last rites. They were too preoccupied to notice Tiera watching them.

A finger poked on Tiera’s shoulder. She turned around and saw Rui.

“Rui, what is this place?”

Rui sadly answered, “It’s for Qivin who are starving, and can’t feed anymore. Some of them with born with disorders that stopped them from doing so. Others had injuries that make them unable to eat goodwill. They want to be live on, to hope that the Great Mothers would cure them one day out of mercy. And then there’s the last kind...”

Tiera could feel a lump in Rui’s throat. Rui tried her best to continue, “They’re conscientious objectors. They ascribed to a belief that it’s not right to take the lives of others just to live. And so, after undergoing many meditative trials, they’ve forced themselves to stop feasting. But sometimes, their beliefs can wane and return, so the healers won’t let them die.”

Tiera gaped in horror at what Rui had just told her. She looked back at the weakened patients, their fingers clutching onto dear life on their hospital beds. So they do exist, she thought to herself. Qivin who believe their kind is better off dead.

Out of the darkness, the voice inside began to speak to her again: It is up to you, now.

Tiera whispered back to it, through her thoughts: I don’t feel like I can. I need your help.

The voice told her: Believe in yourself. It has been inside you this whole time.

Cradle for the child...

Rui gasped as Tiera, her eyes shut, started whispering a lullaby, one that her nanny had sung to her as a child. All the Amothian healers turned to face Tiera, too. They watched in awe as she finished the rest of her song. The beds before them started to glow, an aura radiating from the bodies of the dying Qivin.

...In sleep, warm and charmed.

The Qivin began to drift away into a long slumber, their faces peaceful and content. They had not perished yet, but their pain went away. It would subside for the rest of the day.

Tiera opened her eyes. The Amothian healers were all gazing at her, their faces astonished, but thankful. One slowly walked up to her.

“Who are you?” she asked the foreigner.

“My name is Tiera. I... just got here.” She didn’t want to reveal too much, so she said the first thing on her mind.

“But how? How did you come in possession of Queen Illysia’s magic?”

Rui answered her, “She’s my twin sister.”

The healers gasped. “The lost princess? She’s been found?”

Rui nervously shuffled her feet. “I didn’t want her to be overwhelmed by too much attention before she got used to our customs, so I didn’t make a big announcement.”

“By the Great Mothers,” the healers whispered, “Her song has risen again.”

Before Tiera could react, she saw an monumental sight. All the healers had knelt down, their heads hanging low in solemn veneration, thanking her for what she had done.

“Princess Tiera,” the healer next to her said, “We welcome your return.”

THE twins walked within a heavily armored formation of Amothian guards. They treaded nobly along the bronze cobblestone. Tiera did not know what the proper Qivin posture was, but she held her chest up high, as she had been trained to do. Next to her, Rui was shirking down, her shoulders hunched, her black hood drooping over her head.

“Rui,” Tiera whispered, her voice stirring with excitement, “All my life I’ve wondered where I belonged, and now I’ve finally found it.”

“I’m glad you have,” Rui replied, with genuine grace. But something else was bothering her.

“I wished I had never lived in Nobilis,” Tiera said, carelessly, “I wish I could have been born here.”

Rui could not keep it hidden inside herself anymore. “And I wish I could have been born with a power like yours. All I have is a curse. At least you got to see what Nobilis was like.”

Tiera felt sorry for the girl. She wanted to make her feel better. “Well, it’s not all sunshine and rainbows there. The Koujin are pretty strict. There’s a lot of things we can’t do, a lot of relationships which we’re forbidden from having. I’d rather be a Qivin mechanist than a Koujin.”

Rui shouted back, “Well, YOU never had to be burdened with what I have! All I’d ever wanted was to walk in the Nobilis cities like everyone else. But I’ll always be a monster to them. And rightfully so.”

The guards shifted their eyes towards the sudden outburst, wondering what was happening, though they turned a blind eye to it and kept on marching. Rui was panting, finally at ease after releasing what she kept bottled inside. But she quickly regained her walk, her hands softly gripping her hood. Tiera didn’t know what to say. She hated herself for not being able to allay her sister’s troubles.

They entered into the throne room. The Kurahlara sat atop the obsidian throne.

Before any of the servants could speak, the Kurahlara hailed their arrival: “So, you have found your way home.”

Tiera was stunned, her mouth hanging open, but Rui, her head hung in obedience, nudged her on the arm. Tiera quickly regained her senses.

“Sir, I mean... Father? My liege...?”

The Kurahlara stood up. He strode down from the high steps of his throne, the ground quaking with each pounding of his armor. The guards stood still as he approached, and Tiera found herself staring straight into the mask of her long lost father.

“For years, I have searched for you. But Vulcavini had plunged you into his cage, sunk deep within the trenches of the Koujin depths. Now, you have broken through its chains on your own. You have escaped from their lies.”

His hefty words shook her core. Tiera felt pressured, at this monumental moment, to say something just as profound in response. But all she wanted was to integrate in as soon as possible, to find herself comfortable in her new home. Just then, she felt the cold touch of Wraithen Energies. A reminder of what her life was like in the Nobilis Kingdom. The burial of her true thoughts. The forcible detachment of her desires. From the fathoms of her soul, she expressed her beliefs in a way she had never done before:

“Every day I served under the Koujin, I felt my emotions becoming more dull. I felt that if I had stayed, I wouldn’t feel them anymore.”

Tiera was astounded at what she had just said. Were those words true? Did she feel like she would have become an empty husk? Even with her Master, and her Prince at her side? There was a quiet voice inside that told her there was no deceit; had she not learned the secret, she still would have been at unease. The truth was merely a catalyst.

The Kurahlara was pleased. It was the right answer he was looking for.

“I see that our thoughts are nearly aligned. You have come to this land with the same impetus that I had, long ago. I can sense it within you. A desire to help our people. It is a desire that makes me proud to welcome you back as our Princess, and my daughter.”

She had done it. She had been welcomed by one whom she had longed to speak to the most: her father. She peered at intimidating King, his spiked armor, half machine, half man. The one spoken about with great reverence by all the Koujin masters. The great hero Baron Hyloaether. Yet none of them ever knew who he truly was. He was not some exalted deity whom she could never be. She could feel his strengths and his desires as if they were her own. She felt her tongue without her command:

“Why couldn’t they let us be free? To let those with the strongest wills to survive?”

“They lack a free spirit within. They waste the gift given to them by the Wraithen Energies, to choose what they yearn for most in life. But you have this spirit in you. You know that the Qivin serve a purpose. To remind people of the realities of this world. Among them, the reality that total harmony is but an illusion.”

Tiera felt a flame beginning to stir. Her father had told her exactly what she had wanted to hear, but could never formulate. She immediately pronounced:

“I am ready to renounce my Koujin oaths. To fight for the Qivin. I can’t stand to see them oppressed any longer.”

But the Kurahlara rebuffed her request.

“There is still too much conflict in your soul. You did not arrive because the right moment had come, but because of circumstance. If you were to fight against your former kingdom, your psyche will be torn in two.”

Tiera shut her eyes. Then I have to let go, she thought to herself. I have to let go as fast as I can.

Her father continued, “However, I have heard of what you have done. The people revere your return. You seek to ease their afflictions, and so, that is what you will be free to do. And as a warrior, you will protect them. I shall assign you to guard the nomads, merchants, and pilgrims from the horrors that lurk on their journeys’ shadows. The pilgrimages have been dangerous endeavors; but with the power you bear within, you shall awaken a fire of determination that will guide their spiritual tides.”

Tiera was confused. But soon, she would have her answers. Through ice and heavy rain, mud and lava, she trudged in rugged grey robes through with mile-long caravans, her neon emerald scivitar at her side. As conflict still resided in her, she could not harness the crimson red just yet. However, it did not matter what color her weapon shone. Tiera fought bandits, feral beasts, and other monstrosities with all her heart. Tales of her heroic deeds, joined with her soothing songs, spread throughout the land, and soon, the kingdom spoke with excitement about the new princess, one who was both warrior and saint.

The Kurahlara finally revealed the truth to his people. It was no secret that the long lost princess was actually the daughter of the ‘late’ hero Baron Hyloaether. And so, the Chieftan reclaimed his past, though not his old identity. The people did not bat an eye. Why did it matter to them, they told one another on the streets. The land has prospered under his rule. In fact, they rationalized among themselves, the very act of betraying the Koujin meant that the Qivin ideals were stronger-strong enough to rip even the most venerated hero from his former ranks.

Rui was curious to know more about her long lost sister. She was eager to show her more about the Qivin life, taking her to outdoor, jazz-like music shows late in the night, giving her a tour of things she could never introduce to anyone before. Crowds would bow and greet them as they entered in their royal dresses. Golems, dressed to a tee, would serve them drinks, much to Tiera's bewilderment. And then, there were the dances of the Brazen Sky. Though she would never join in, and only watched, Tiera finally could feel what her father was drawn into, as her soul and the dancers' hypnotic twirls were entwined together in spirit.

The venues reminded Tiera of her Nobilis past. Though she did not want to linger in it for too long, because Rui really, really ached for the outside world, Tiera would tell her stories of things in Nobilis that had a slight resemblance to Qivin things her sister was familiar with, yet were vastly different. Tiera shared Nobilis customs and luxuries such as their dresses, their cakes, their various shades of makeup. Rui was agape with wonder when she heard of the grand, violet fountains of light, the festive celebrations that stretched from city to city, the joyous dances that inhabitants from all walks of life shared together. Tiera shared with her things she saw that Victor had never gotten to know, or which he thought were things that a Prince should have no interest in.

For a time, she would forget about the dreaded rituals she had to perform, and the sacrificed meals that she had become desensitized to. She had found a new kind of happiness. Yet she still did not forget about the prince in her dreams. She waited patiently for her transmitter to vibrate again. Contrarily, Tiera would never speak of him. She was trying her hardest to leave the past behind, to begin anew.

But no matter how much the Qivin adored her, or how hard she tried to get use to the Amothian meditations and prayers, her heart was still not in the right place. As Tiera lived amongst the hunters, and tried to not think about those ominous 'restaurants', she longed for her past. The customs were strange, and their food was a bit off- they didn't care that much for those kinds of meals when souls were far more delicious. Tiera was beloved, yet like Rui, she couldn't truly get along with her people. She was but a royal figure of veneration to them, and they never wanted to treat her as a commoner. It was this lack of a personal welcoming that made Tiera sigh as she felt loneliness slowly enroach. Sometimes, she would sit by herself in a cofnik shop, and stir her drink as she thought back to her old life. She thought back to when she was young, and remembered warm, guiding hands teaching her to swing her scivitar. She remembered running away from boring sermons with her best friend, and how they spent their time gliding over the Duron waters. She tried to shake those memories away, and they drifted off. Yet every time, there was one thought that would always stay: No amount of freedom could assuage her heart of the feelings she buried deep inside.

The months went by, both as slow and as fast as the mercurial blossoming of red Qivin flowers.

Together, on mechanical beasts, the twins rode through the land. Rui smiled at her sister Tiera, who returned a smile as the wind brushed past them. Through the cliffs, through the crimson crops, they lost themselves in the moment. However, like all things in life, it was fleeting. Nothing could last forever.

CHAPTER TWELVE- She Never Was

THE transmitter to Rui rested on a desk next to Victor in a dimly lit study, untouched. For the last several days, he had been pouring over volumes upon volumes of holograms, searching in vain for an answer.

He thought of the poor girl, and how alone she must have been. He looked at the transmitter again, and nearly gave in. But he didn't dare touch it. Not after what he had done to Tiera. He couldn't break his promise to Rui, too. If he spoke to her, he knew he would only promise her more things he couldn't keep.

To save the Princess from the Beast, the Prince had to slay it.

He had to become that Prince.

Soft footsteps prattled down the stone steps. Another messenger, Victor thought to himself, irritated. He was prepared to dismiss this one away like he did to the others; this morning, he had already spent many hours dealing with dozens of issues for his kingdom. Why couldn't they just leave him with a few to help Rui?

But when he turned around to face the staircase, he discovered it wasn't a messenger at all- it was the King.

"Enough, Victor," his grandfather said, "There is more to be done, and you cannot neglect them any longer. The Raptorial Kingdom and the Calrin Kingdom have both suffered heavy losses. It is our job to decide how to fairly distribute our resources to aid each one, yet I am burdened with keeping together the falling alliance between our lesser kingdoms; you are the only one who can oversee this task."

"The other leaders lack confidence in dealing with the two kingdoms' animosity towards one another. That's why they've turned to me?"

The King nodded. "You understand the Raptorial diplomacy far better than they do. Consult with the advisors; for two days, they have been waiting on you to make the final decision."

Victor's hand was firmly placed over the hologram. He had just opened up a new file. What if this one had the answer? Rui was waiting on him, too; every minute that passed was one where she might do something she could never return from.

"Give me another hour. I'll meet with the advisors soon."

“Victor!” the King boomed, “How much longer must the people suffer while you spend your days lost in your own world?”

Victor clenched his hand into a fist, and moved it away from the hologram. The King was right. Why was he spending his days helping this one girl while trillions in his kingdom suffered? It was one of the most selfish things he had ever done.

He had deluded himself into believing that the more time he spent on her, the closer he would get to an answer. Everything he had read told him the reverse. For millenia, scholars had concluded that it was impossible let a Qivin fast without causing them insurmountable amounts of pain. Nothing could quench the Qivin’s thirst. They were destined to be seen as monsters.

Tiera, Victor thought to himself. He had let her walk into their bloodthirsty jaws. If he had disregarded the Koujin rules earlier, and bethrothed himself to a commoner, would she have stayed?

Only her pleas to him, telling him to give the Qivin a chance, remained. Victor knew they were people too, however savage they lived. He had to do something. The artificial life force in the prisons was waning, and the prisoners needed to be transported elsewhere, lest they face death. He shut his eyes, saw his fading memory of Tiera before him, and gave in.

“Send them back home,” he commanded his subordinates.

“Prince Victor, are you certain?”

“Do as I say.”

He watched as the Qivin prisoners, who were being transferred into cryogenic pods, boarded the starships. Many could not believe the prince was freeing them. Some even had thanks in their hearts.

The starships departed, and days passed. It was as if it was all according to plan. But then, Victor learned of their ultimate fate.

A few prisoners had broken free. They slaughtered the Koujin soldiers on board, and took over the starships for themselves. Now, Nobilis did not know where they had gone.

“This was YOUR fault!” Master Wimble bellowed at him with a volcanic rage. Victor sat on a royal chair, surrounded by Koujin masters, but Vulcavini was absent. He and his old battalion were discharged for hiding the truth. Vulcavini accepted his shameful fate, and went to live on a farm. Only the most loyal Koujin masters remained. They had trusted him, and he failed them all.

He bowed his head in shame, and cursed himself from within. Even after letting them go, they took advantage of his goodwill? He knew it was not all- but it was too much of a risk to trust any

when even a few could betray them, and the others would not stop them. At their very core, when they were faced with hunger, were they just savage beasts, with no control or free will? He realized he was making the same mistakes as Bronson did. No longer was he his idol; Victor had let him go. He had become the very man that Victor did not want to be.

Rui couldn't have been. The girl he saw in the cave was not the same girl he had let into his heart for all those months. But now that girl was fading away, as if she had only existed in a dream.

She was real. She had to be.

But the longer he spent in his chambers alone, pondering on himself and his kingdom, the more he encountered his dark, untamed imaginations. And it was becoming harder to fight them.

WHILE Tiera opened herself to a whole new life, Rui buried herself deeper within. She was happy that her sister had found her place in the kingdom. But each time she heard the lullaby her nanny used to sing her, she wanted to cover her ears and hide away.

No more, she thought to herself. I can't live like this.

Rui couldn't stand to go to dungeons and feed on her sacrificial meals any longer. When she fed upon them, she was reminded of her own monstrosity.

Let me die, she thought to herself. Let me wither.

She skipped out on her meals, only going when the urge crept up on her. But all this ever did was make her crave it stronger.

She wanted to live. She wanted to live long enough to see her wish come true. When will my prince return?

THE dream they had built together was collapsing.

One day, Victor's grandmother awoke. He ran towards her ward, hoping that she would not succumb, that the universe wouldn't be so cruel. But it was just as he had feared. He watched as Koujin knights put her out of her misery.

Now, the true dangers of the Qivin pierced his heart. Rui, he thought, still holding on. Her memory was slipping from his grasp.

Was she ever real? Or just an illusion that he desired?

At first, it was hard for him to choose who to aid, and who to leave behind. Yet when faced with the dilemma, it soon became clear what decisions he had to make. Choose those who actually look to you. Choose those close to you. It was his grandmother's death that allowed him to finally push

through, and become the Prince his kingdom wanted him to be.

Victor sunk himself deeper into the Koujin koans and chants. With each prayer, he saw his parents' faces, and anger rose within, directed at himself. While his parents and elders gave their lives for the cause, he was busy becoming intimate with the enemy. For a while, he was sure that he had crossed over, and had become strong enough to choose a side. Yet it wasn't until he was faced with his darkest demon that he would realize he still had to overcome one, final decisive test.

The starship's thrusters burned the dusky, green swamps below. Victor peered out, and saw nothing but fog and encroaching vines. They were suffocating the land like parasites crawling around their prey. His soldiers' families had been kidnapped by the Amoth, and they had insisted that they go with him to rescue them. Their mission was to sneak up on the Amoth. To prevent them from sending many of their forces to capture the valuable prince, Victor concealed his identity with a mask. He had to lead them all home safe, so they could all be together again. Not a single life could be lost.

The battalion trudged through the marsh, their spirits worn but determined, their nerves racing as they darted past the carnivorous vines around them. They had to watch for assassins in the shadows. Victor was in front of them, being the first to sense any incoming dangers.

Suddenly, dusk fell. All at once, darkness covered the jungle, reminding Victor of the black snows of Conova. The power in the soldiers' night vision equipment were being rapidly drained by the treacherous fogs of the swamp.

"Stay together!" Victor shouted. "We have to stay strong until the moons shine on us again!"

It was not long before a scream was heard, and then another, and another. Victor jolted around to sense where the Amothian were. His Wraithen Energies were blazing like never before. And then, he felt it. A presence he thought he had once knew. But it was only now that he could see its true face.

From the far distance, he saw a shimmer in the darkness. Faint, orange insignias. They were coming closer to one of his soldiers. Ben, whose whole family had been taken hostage.

His hand moved towards his blaster. He had to do it. But when he remembered her pleas, her lonely longing, he hesitated.

A scream rang out, and Victor trembled when he peered into the distance. Now, the moon was beginning to glow again. He heard a lustful gnawing, and saw that a creature had wrapped its hands around Ben's throat. It could not see him, but he could see her glowing orange eyes.

In a moment, the moonlight returned, and the darkness disappeared. With their cover gone, the assassins disappeared.

The Beast tricked him this whole time. She was not a princess within its clutches; it already had possessed her very being, and now she was too far gone. He thought to himself: How could I have trusted a Qivin? To have been so naive and foolish? Why couldn't I resist her?

He needed to believe all his thoughts were true. He couldn't let another innocent life be hurt. That poor girl was nothing more than a monstrous Qivin creation, one whom he couldn't bear to see suffering any longer. It was then, only then, that he let in the truth:

She's not real. She never was.

THE messenger shouted: "We have the plans! A way to take down the Qivin Kingdom!"

After a long, grueling succession of months, the Koujin had finally found a way in to win the war. If they succeeded, it would all be over. If they did not, then their army would never recover its losses. Many lives had already been taken in this brutal campaign.

"Prince Victor," a messenger said to the young man as he stood atop a balcony in the sunset, facing a mass of civilians who had come out to hear him speak, "We are finally in a perfect position to strike against the Qivin capital."

Victor shut his eyes, his hands behind his back. At long last, he had grown into a noble prince. He couldn't keep his promise to Rui. But there were crowds of yearning eyes looking at him from below, waiting for their prince to give them hope. It was this reality, not his dream, that he had to live in. Tiera, he thought to himself. I have to save you.

"My people of Nobilis," Victor declared, his voice inspiring and true, "Let us end this once and for all."

Their dream collapsed. When Rui met her prince again, she could not recognize him at all.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN- In Sleep, Warm and Charmed

VULCAVINI watched from afar as the starships departed. He had vowed his entire life to the Koujin, to join them until the very end. And now, he sat on a chair, rocking near a quaint, barren land, a metallic dome behind him. I must atone, he thought to himself. This is what I deserve for putting the kingdom at risk by letting the Qivin princess reside amongst them. He shut his eyes. He prayed that she would be alright. But the truth betrayed his thoughts. The Koujin were on orders to kill both of the princesses.

THE spiralling, staggering chains of machines roared through the blazing red sky, like dragons guarding the thrones of their home. Starships swept through them, but the Leviathans crunched down on them, as enormous, blue whale-like ships blasted them with pulses of energy.

On the ground, Qivin civilians screamed in terror, running from their homes. Koujin soldiers had just broken through the capital's defenses, and now, they were charging straight towards the palace walls. Amothian warriors sprinted towards the invaders and clashed their blades down. Golems picked up Koujin knights and hurled them across the cobblestone paths and into the power plant towers, leaving a path of destroyed restaurants, stores and cafes in their wake. Together, a band of Koujin reached out and brought a Golem down with their Wraithen Energies, breaking their metal shells into lifeless chunks. It was a massacre like none had ever seen.

Tiera was sprinting over the Qivin wilderness, her red, green and gold loose regal dress flowing past her as she ran. She had just gotten back from a pilgrimage, one that demanded its pilgrims dress in formal, ritualistic attire, and she did not have to lift her blade a single time; it was the most tranquil one she had ever been on. Now, panic snaked through her very being as she rushed to her kingdom. She thought to herself: I have to save them. I have to!

But when she stood before the capital's gates, her legs quivered, and her knees bent inwards. Her thoughts raced: What the hell is happening to me?

It was the Koujin.

She never had to encounter a single one. Though she had devoted her life to the Qivin, and believed she had finally crossed over, the conflict within her heart was finally beginning to surface again.

Victor.

Tiera ran into the city, her scivitar sheathed in her belt. She watched as Koujin knights slew her Amothian brothers and sisters, and was torn within. Who would she help? Tiera ran on. There was only one person she could talk to. She had to find him before it was too late.

It was there, on a crimson balcony, standing tall and alone and overseeing his army, that she found him. Somehow, he had anticipated this moment. She took careful steps forward. But he sensed her too.

"Tiera," Victor whispered, and turned around. He was fitted with titanium silver battle armor, with sangria lining its exteriors. It was built for a king.

"Victor," Tiera demanded, "You can't do this! These are my people now; take your army and leave!"

"And the Nobilis are mine," Victor countered, "I'm ending this war. We have slaughtered one another for far too long."

Something in his voice did not sit well with Tiera. It was different than anything she had known

about him. Where was his carefree demeanor? His smirk, his free flowing spirit? It was all gone, replaced with an authoritarian rule.

“Victor...” Tiera could hardly stand to look at him now. “What have they done to you?”

Victor did not immediately reply. Then, he answered, “I have been thinking to myself, for a long time, about what I did wrong. About why you ran away. And now I finally understand.”

“You... you do?” Tiera said, taken aback, her eyes wide. She was in disbelief.

“I know you don’t trust me,” Victor continued, “But I feel it in you. You miss your home. Not here, but your real one.”

It was true. He had sensed what she had buried deep inside. Tiera tried to protest, and said, “I just need more time to adjust.”

But Victor could sense the lie that Tiera was trying to conceal. He wouldn’t fall for it.

“I was the one who pushed you away,” Victor insisted, “But you were right this whole time.”

Tiera perked up. Could he have really done it? Could he have changed? But the words he said next were not what she had expected to hear. Victor revealed his true intentions:

“Fate made our love happen. It wants us to join houses, so you can bring the Amoth away from the Qivin. Together, we will put an end to these monsters.”

Dread flowed through Tiera, dripping into hopeless puddles beneath. He had made his choice. He had taken the risk to let her inside his heart. But he still could not let go of that which kept them apart.

“Not like this,” Tiera pleaded, “Victor, you have to tell them to give the Qivin a chance.”

“You don’t really want to be with the Qivin!” Victor shouted back, with a fervor in his eyes, “Your oath as a knight was what was suffocating you. You just wanted a release! And I wasn’t strong enough to give you one. I made you turn to the Qivin. But Tiera, I feel that I’m ready to change.”

“Victor, why won’t you listen to me? No matter what they told you, no matter what you’re imagining, I love the Qivin. I need them. They’re my people!”

“Tiera...”

When he looked at her, Tiera wanted to cry inside. Where had he gone? Where was her prince? Who was standing before her?

The truth was that Victor had changed. He had finally grasped what that story, of the prince, princess, and the beast, had meant this whole time. Victor saw Tiera differently now. Not as a knight, but as a Princess. It was his destiny to rescue her from the Beast.

Tiera stared behind him, below at the fires consuming her city. She forced her hands to move, slowly towards her belt. They nearly grasped the scivitar. But they couldn't.

The prince was walking towards her. When he approached, she could just sense the embers of his conviction burn the surface of her skin. She shut her eyes. Victor was now behind her, and their backs were turned towards one another.

"When I see you again," Victor said, "The war will be over. And you will be free."

Tiera could not say a word back. Soon, Victor was gone.

RUI hid in the shadows of the streets. Her black robes masked her in the darkness. She could hear the metallic clinking of the Koujin soldier armors. She counted the seconds passing. When they had gone, she swiftly snuck past. As she ran, Rui thought to herself, her eyes shut tight: Why is this happening?

She wondered if Tiera was safe. She hoped all the townspeople got away before the Koujin invaded, and that the bloodshed would stop soon. But it was a wish that could never come true. Rui saw a boy in the distance, no older than eleven, wearing light Koujin armor and lying with his back against a shop's corner. He was injured, his chest bleeding, and crying for help on the ground.

"MAMA!" the boy begged.

Rui knew that there were children who lied about their age and were conscripted into the army. The children often did so because they were orphans, and sought revenge upon the Qivin. Sympathy poured into Rui's heart as she watched the boy, and she was overcome with an unstoppable desire to find a way to get him back, away from the Amothian warriors. But just then, she felt the pangs in her neck reach out and claw at her.

Her thoughts raced: No, not now!

Rui had been starving herself, hoping to grow used to not needing to feed on souls so often. But her endeavor did not succeed. Now, it was keeping her from helping the child.

I have to resist, Rui thought to herself. Just long enough to save him.

She ran as fast she could towards him, but just as she was near, an aura began to glow around the boy. His head tilted upwards, and saw that someone was reaching their hand out and healing him. His savior stepped out from behind the corner of the shop, and Rui gasped. It was Victor.

She could not contain the joy bubbling up inside. “Victor!” she called out towards the prince. At long last, she thought to herself, he had come back. Just as he said he would.

But he did not answer. He did not want to even look at her. Instead, a darkness descended upon his face. He only gave one reply:

“I couldn’t let you do it again.”

“Victor?” Rui whispered, her voice hurt and lingering. Suddenly, she realized what he meant.

“Victor, you misunderstand!” Rui protested, “I was just trying to help him!”

At last, he turned towards her. “Then why do I sense the Qivin’s hunger in you?”

“I was trying to not to give in!”

“Could you really? You’re a Qivin.”

“Victor, what are you saying?” Rui pleaded. Her worst fears were beginning to be realized. “You know I don’t want to harm anyone. I just want to leave this life behind. Ever since we parted, every day, I wished for a way out.” Tears dripped from the corner of her eyes. “So if we don’t give up, I know we can find one.”

Victor stared straight at her. There was something inside that wanted to reach out and embrace her in his arms again. But he did not allow himself to give in. “I’m sorry, Rui. I wished for a way to help you. But life isn’t a fairy tale.”

“But Victor, you promised!”

Victor turned his head away from her, and picked up the injured boy in his arms. For a moment, he hesitated. It was the Koujin’s orders. They told him she had to end. But he shut those thoughts out. Without saying another word goodbye, he began to leave.

Rui thought to herself, anguish gripping throughout her whole body: This whole time, the whole reason he hadn’t responded. It was because he saw me. I wish I never had to show you who I truly was.

She turned from him and ran, running as fast as she could, hoping that she could leave this dreaded world and return to the holograms she once knew. But just then, a fiery explosion rained down from the sky, and a gigantic mechanical contraption slammed into the ground before her. Rui looked up and saw that the Qivin machines were being overwhelmed by the Nobilis aerial reinforcements. She was forced to flee somewhere else.

The Leviathans are losing, she thought to herself. No... Father...

Rui felt a danger creep up inside. She sprinted towards the palace, and faced a legion of Koujin soldiers. Rui unsheathed her scivitar as they charged her, and she cut through them all like a wasp stinging its prey, but she made sure not to kill them- they were poisoned, and disarmed, but did not die. She thought to herself: This has to stop. I can't let anyone else die.

She snuck in through a hidden passageway, and eventually, she reached the throne room. The hums of its towering, red laser walls filled its vast silence. There was no one inside; the guards had been dispatched to the entrance of the palace. Rui ran towards the obsidian throne, standing in front of the red walls, where her father was very still, in a deep, meditative trance, his whole being like an unmoving stone. All of his energy was being focused on infusing the machine army with dark energies, and controlling the Leviathans. But Rui sensed something was wrong.

"Father," she whispered, "Are you hurt?"

The Kurahlara remained motionless, but a part of his consciousness emerged back in the real world. He replied, "They have stormed the sacred temples and killed all the Leviathan generals. I am the only one left controlling these beasts."

"Father..." Rui said, praying for the carnage to end. Then, there was a sudden shift in the atmosphere of the room. A sinking void.

"Rui," the Kurahlara said, his voice becoming more commanding and austere, "You have brought outsider into the palace."

"I... I couldn't have..."

But from the shadows, Rui sensed what he felt, too. She faced them, and saw a faint, pale glimmer of titanium silver. The prince emerged. He faced the Kurahlara, and shouted, "What have you done to her?"

The Kurahlara spoke back in a dark and solemn tone: "I have given her what she has always wanted."

It was not what Victor wanted to hear. "Once our forces defeats yours, and demolish your kingdom once and for all, whatever spell you have cast over Tiera will be broken. I will save her."

Rui clutched her heart with her hand. She thought to herself: Tiera? Why did Victor want to save her? Why did a prince need to save his knight?

The Kurahlara met him with an ominous laugh. "Save her? From whom?"

"From the Beast."

When Rui heard the prince's brusque reply, her imagination bound her and took her by its reins. She looked for her dream, but when she shut her eyes, she realized it was already gone. Tiera had not told her what she really felt about Victor. Rui was never the Princess; it was whom Tiera wanted to be. But then, just who was the Beast?

The prince walked up to the nearest red wall, and peered through it. "At any moment now, our droids will have disabled your shields. Kurahlara, I will kill you."

"Victor!" Rui cried out, "We have to stop fighting! My city's been covered in blood; why do we have to let more people die?"

Victor was standing a few feet before her. They were both in front of the layers of red walls, the only shields separating them from the Kurahlara. Victor looked Rui in the eyes, and said, "The Qivin killed my mother and my father. And now, they killed my grandmother, too. All because of him."

"But he's my father! And I... I don't want to..." Rui tried to make herself say it, but she couldn't. Something was holding her back.

"He's a murderer and a traitor." Victor turned to gaze at the foreboding tyrant. "And before he dies, he will answer my last request."

The Kurahlara remained motionless, focused. Just then, the enormous palace doors started to rumble, and from them, a girl in a flowing royal dress ran in.

"Rui!" Tiera cried out in worry.

"Tiera?" Rui said, surprised.

"I felt you running in. You sensed it too? Father is fading!"

Before she could reach her sister, Tiera stopped dead in her tracks. She saw who was next to her, only a few feet away.

"What are you doing here?" Tiera shouted at Victor.

"I'm here to make your father pay for his crimes! And I will ask him the question I've always been seeking. The one the Koujin have told me never to look for!"

Tiera clenched her fists. "Victor... you can't ask it. The masters forbade you."

"You don't care what they say. You left the Koujin. So you can't stop me; I will not make the same mistakes as Bronson did." The prince turned to the Kurahlara, vengeance now sewn into his

conviction. “My father, the Knight of Thorns. And my mother, the Knight of the Ocean. Do you remember betraying them?”

Seconds passed. Finally, there was an answer: “Yes. Those invaders of Qivin land. They did all they could to raze it.”

“They were trying to protect our people!” Victor yelled back in anger. “They were killed by Qivin! And not just any Qivin, but elite Amothian warriors! So I want to know... which one of your soldiers slew them in cold blood?”

The Kurahlara’s spirit became enshrouded in an ominous ambience. Rui shivered as its cold air touched her bones. Tiera felt it, too. Their father spoke: “It is not wise to ask such a question.”

“Don’t tell me what to do, dark lord.”

“Then you shall suffer.”

“I am prepared! The murderer. It was a Qivin, wasn’t it?”

“Yes... a Qivin killed your mother.”

There was a long, terrifying pause.

“Who? Tell me who that bastard is, and I’ll cut him down!”

“She is here no more. But her child lives on.”

The girl in black robes shuddered, and suddenly, felt the greatest urge to hide. She had to get away. She looked all around her for an escape, but she was trapped. Rui looked at her sister, but she was frozen, lost. She then turned to the tyrant on the obsidian throne, and pleaded, “Father, it can’t be!” But the Kurahlara did not retract his answer.

Victor was in disbelief. He looked at Rui, at the sweet girl he had sworn to protect, and for a moment, the image he had concocted of the Beast was gone. But he knew that it still lingered. “No... that can’t be,” he whispered. Yet, by unbreakable chains, he was bound to his anger. He shouted at the Kurahlara: “And what of my father? Did she kill him too?”

The Kurahlara roared back: “Foolish prince. I killed your father!”

The prince clenched his fist, right next to his scivitar. He was so blinded by his wrath that he couldn’t see what was around him anymore. Rui wasn’t there. Not even Tiera. All he saw was the one he had longed to kill, sitting defenseless right in front of him.

“No...” Tiera whispered. She did not move.

“Father, why?” Rui cried out. She wanted to run towards him, to hold his hands in her own and tell her it wasn’t true. But they were separated by guards of sinister red walls. All she could do was stay near the vengeful prince.

It was then that Victor noticed her pleas. He turned to Rui, and told her, with a shred of warmth in his voice, “You heard the truth. And you still call out for him?”

Rui begged him, “Please, you can’t! I’ll do whatever you want to end this war! Just don’t do it!”

Victor glared at her. With the coldest of tones, he told her, “If you really wanted to help, you would help me kill your father.”

The words struck Rui like a sharp, iced sword. Her hands trembled near the crimson scivitar. For a moment, she thought about it. She wanted for nothing more but the war to end. She had been ashamed of the Qivin her whole life- they had given her nothing but a curse. If she did it now, and shed one last drop of blood, the carnage would be over. But suddenly, she remembered the white light, and the meadows, that she had shared with him. She shut her eyes, and hesitated. Her thoughts held her in place: I can’t. He’s still my father.

Victor watched as Rui tore herself apart. He could feel her pain, and did all he could to stop himself from pitying her. But no matter how hard he tried, his thoughts did not go away: ‘I can’t stand to see her like this.’ From the Wraithen Energies, he felt her starvation. He remembered all their faces: Elyn, his grandmother, Ben. How could he let her be like this any longer? Her mother’s curse, the blood of his own mother’s murderer, ran through her veins. He wished she could just go away; he wished, before she lost control again, that she could be free her from her pain. It all accumulated inside, and he shouted at Rui:

“For once in your damn life, make up your mind!” But Rui only shook her head back.

He was angry at her for not having the same resolve, the same pressure that had been dealt to him, that told him he needed to sacrifice herself. Why did he have to endure all this when she didn’t? It enraged him deep inside.

You can’t give in. She’s not real.

It was the beast inside of her. She was possessed by its evil. He had to end her suffering. He had to save Tiera.

His hand gripped his scivitar. But he thought to himself: What am I doing? How could I do this?

He still cared for her. But it was this very selfish desire that was threatening his kingdom. Could he live with himself if he brought death to trillions of innocents? Could he let her take his Princess away? For one last time, he told it to himself, finally sealing it forever within:

She's not real. She never was.

"I'm sorry, Rui. This is the only way."

The broken girl cried out, her last hope forever gone, as she wraithen-pulled her dark crimson scivitar into her hands, and shielded her neck from the neon blue light slashing down upon her. Victor sent an vibrating wave of illumination through the air, and Rui reached out to suffocate it in place. But then, he continue to rain down blows of his scivitar upon her. They fought with the truest of their shared emotions, the illusions of the holograms finally shattered. The edge of Rui's blade found its way through Victor's defenses, and for a sharp second, it cut his forearm. Victor's scivitar immediately countered and bit straight through Rui's collarbone. The blood drawn from their bodies conjured the closest sensations that they had ever felt together.

"VICTOR! RUI!" Tiera shouted. There was nothing she could do; she could only watch her two beloved fight before her eyes.

Suddenly, a voice spoke to her from within. However, it was unlike any she had heard before. It came from her father.

"Tiera, my soul must be entwined with the Leviathans. You are the only one who can save her."

Tiera shut her eyes, and channeled her thoughts back to her father: "But it's still there. The conflict in my heart. The one that you wouldn't let near the Koujin!"

"Now is the time for you to change, to prove yourself. I sense it. Your resolve. You are realizing your final destiny!"

"I... I can sense it..." Her throat tightened. "But the Koujin voices speak to me too..."

"Vulcavini was the one who threw those shackles over you, holding you in bondage! He killed your mother. Do not let him do the same to your sister!"

Tiera swiftly opened her eyes, and saw Victor relentlessly hunting Rui down, his scivitar pounding mercilessly against her, and finally, she lost her grip on her metallic blade. Suddenly, she cried out in pain as Victor's blue shards cut against her hand; her scivitar fell to the floor, and she tried to wraithen-push her assailant away, but could only thrust him backwards a few feet. Victor had disarmed her. Knowing the battle was over, he readied himself for the finishing blow.

Victor glared at the broken girl; she was hunched over and panting, her eyes fierce as she did all she could to cling onto the last threads of her life. Blood dripped from her face. Her dark, bewitching purple eyes were narrowing into him, telling him to stay as far away as possible. But inside, she was giving up. She could not want to fight any longer.

Just then, the dark purple irises disappeared, covered by light lilac. Tiera had stepped in between, and was facing her former lover, their eyes fiercely locked together.

“Victor...” Tiera said, her voice firm and angry, “You can’t do this.”

“I have to let go,” Victor said, breathing heavily.

He gripped his bloodied weapon tightly with both of his hands. There was nothing on his mind but his knightly oath; he swore to be the protector of quintillions who lay defenseless in the galaxy. But now, she was right there: his Princess. She was not behind the Beast, but in front of it. He remembered his grandfather’s words: that it did not matter what he felt inside. To save his kingdom, he had to sacrifice even the one he loved the most.

His own selfish desire stood before of him, and was holding all those innocent lives in its dangerous grasp. Victor did not relent. He did not turn away. This was the ultimate decision that his whole life had led up to.

Tiera leapt towards him and swung her scivitar down, but Victor parried. Their blades clashed downwards, forcing the two to push in close to one another.

And then, before Tiera could react, Victor grabbed Tiera’s waist with one hand, leaning in with his one-handed sword now pressing even closer to her own, his passion unwavering and bloodlusted. Tiera could just anticipate what Victor was about to do. She had studied his movements every waking moment- his strikes, his jabs, his parries. Tiera impelled his relentless stroke upwards and, sensing Victor’s next move, she countered one step ahead, her scivitar plunging forwards in a single thrust.

A silence. A solitary beat of a heart.

Rui was trembling, hugging her arms close to her body. The sight was too much for her to bear.

Tiera realized what she had done. Her hands slowly loosened from their grip. Her scivitar had buried itself into Victor’s heart.

Victor fell onto his knees, but Tiera caught him, his heavy body weighing her down into a kneeling position. She withdrew her scivitar from his chest. Blood dripped from the corners of his lips, and all Tiera could do was wrap her arms around her prince’s waist, his bleeding heart pressed against hers. She held him closer to her than she had ever done before.

“Tiera...” Victor whispered, his voice fading.

She felt an unstoppable hole digging deep into her own heart, too. There was nothing she could do to keep it from killing her inside. But she could not cry. Her mind was in shock at what she had just done.

Victor's eyes met with Tiera's, and he saw their pale violet light yearning, wanting to hide. Suddenly, all at once, the voices bounding him into sacrifice, into the greater good, vanished into nothingness.

He always knew that there may have been a day where he would die on the battlefield. Perhaps to a Qivin, killing him on a lonely plain where no one would see. But he never expected he would die to her. There was no need to hold onto the duties his kingdom imposed onto him any longer. Tiera's familiar, loving gaze was all he wanted to see before he was gone; he just wanted to take a look into her eyes one last time. Victor gave her a serene, reassuring smile, one that she had not seen since they last parted ways. It told her: Please, don't be afraid.

Tiera knew what he was trying to tell her. But it was not enough. She thought to herself: I need him to stay. I have to say it.

"Victor... I loved you."

She wished he could hear what he had always yearned for. She couldn't live with herself if he didn't.

Tiera waited. She was met with silence.

"Victor?" she whispered. The knight tried to look into her prince's eyes once more. But he was already gone.

"Tiera?" Rui whispered to her sister, tears trickling down her cheeks.

The knight could not cry. She was in shock over what she had just done.

"Rui," Tiera whispered back, and turned to face her sister. Her eyes were empty, in pain, but showing no emotion.

"Why did you do it?"

"I did it to save you!" Tiera shouted, her eyes now filling with the shreds of her tattered soul, "To save us! I sacrificed the one I loved the most for our kingdom!"

"Tiera, you shouldn't have. Not for me," Rui quietly replied, her voice cracking.

"I had to. The quarrel that lay inside me. It's gone."

Rui looked into Tiera's eyes. Their shades of purple met, in an understanding unlike any other. Rui knew what Tiera was truly feeling. Her heart had not crossed over. But she could not admit it hadn't.

“I wanted him to understand,” Tiera said, with a suffocating voice, “But I knew that no matter what I did, he never could.”

Rui reached deeper in their shared bond, praying to find a way to help her sister. It was then that she found the answer to her wish: Tiera wanted Rui to tell her that she had done the right thing. She needed Rui to comfort her.

Slowly, Rui walked over to the fallen knight. She stepped in close to her chest, and embraced her arms around Tiera. Then, her twin embraced her, too.

“Our kingdom is safe,” Tiera whispered, “We saved the Qivin.”

But the only thoughts that ran through Rui were those that she could not bear. The sacrifices. The isolation. Tiera’s hopeless face, one that was so far gone, and could never smile again. She tried to smoulder them away with her dream, and lost herself one last time in that faded world, the one she lived in with Victor. She remembered the creatures and pets they showed one another, the happiness they shared together. It was just enough to hide the pain that would come from what she was about to do.

“It’s going to be alright,” Rui whispered back, “I’m here for you.”

A crimson red blade shot through the air and, from below, it pierced straight into Tiera’s back. The girl with the crystal white hair gasped, and her twin held her still.

“I’m sorry, Tiera.”

Immediately, Rui let go and wrapped both of her hands around her twin’s neck. The Qivin’s eyes began to glow.

“RUI!” their father roared out in fury. At once, the barriers of light before him were shaking, and the metallic exteriors holding them in place were being crushed one by one. He had relinquished control of the Leviathans. It did not matter to him now how they fared in the war.

Rui saw her sister’s life disappearing before her, and felt her hands shaking as she knew what was about to come. She couldn’t end others’ pain like her sister could. Now, she finally had a way.

Tiera choked, coughing, her eyes betrayed for a few moments. But not for long.

“Rui... I’ll kill you...”

It was the last act of mercy Rui could give her. Before she died, Tiera wouldn’t have to feel the pain of being killed by a loved one. She would die fighting with a warrior’s heart.

The red walls exploded, and finally, they were no more. The Kurahlara rose from his obsidian throne, and bellowed out a mighty yell:

“Your own sister! What have you done?”

Rui shut her eyes. Tiera, she thought to herself. You’re no longer suffering.

The girl faced her father. Now that she had been gifted her sister’s powers, they nearly stood on equal grounds. Her eyes were primed with a bloodthirsty orange.

“I’ve felt it every moment since I was born. Why couldn’t you feel it too? All the pain you caused me?”

The Kurahlara answered with subdued anger, “I made you stronger. Nothing from the outside world could hurt you.”

“I would rather be hurt by the outside than be shunned by it. I was nothing more but a monster. You did this to me!”

“You fell to the Koujin! You were poisoned by that prince and his abhorrent ideals!”

Rui seethed at her father through her fanged teeth. “All we’ve ever done is hurt others. We’re all just abominations. Not a single one of us deserves to live.”

Then, she thrust her hand out towards the dark tyrant, and a low rumbling was heard.

“Rui, stop this at once!” the Kurahlara roared, “You know nothing of what will happen once you unleash that power!”

A finale of darkness descended upon the father and his daughter. From the obsidian throne, the King levitated towards the high, luminous ceiling, with golden rays gleaming through the enormous windows behind him. He was channeling all the power he had into his very being. The mechanical contraptions broke free from the architectures holding them in place. Ropes snapped and pulleys fell. All at once, the myriad of gears whirled and burst from their frames, and pipes shot hot steam through the air. The golden palace was demolished into its last moments of existence.

It was a clashing of two powers that rivaled that of a supernova. Rui screamed as she gathered all the strength within herself to fight her own father. Then, there was an explosion of the brightest white light.

BRONSON stood in the meadow, facing a young child, his sturdy right hand holding his daughter’s left. Her elbow was bruised, and she was weeping.

“If you knew how strong you were,” the tall father said, “You wouldn’t cry.”

The girl wiped her tears with her hand, and smiled. But she still harbored a bittersweet sadness within her. "They're all gone," the young girl said. "Father," she looked up and asked, "Will you leave me too?"

"I'll never leave. I'll always be there to protect you."

The girl reached out her right hand and wrapped both of her hands around her father's right. Bronson wanted his words to be true. But it had always been inevitable that one day, she would realize that he could not keep his promise.

RUI was kneeling down, holding her father's body in her arms, her hands cradling his bleeding palm. His mask had cracked, and his machine-like body was torn apart. The man's life was fading away, and into her own. Slowly, she felt herself being filled with an unimaginable energy. And finally, her father succumbed into the darkness forever.

It was all over. She knew it was the only way. And now, the Qivin would not curse them anymore.

Rui cried out in pain, her screams reaching every corner of the room's metal walls. The floors of the palace shook, and the pillars broke into millions of pieces. Qivin soldiers and royals frantically scrambled to find the cause of this destruction. They ran into the throne room, and saw Rui covered in blood, kneeling down with their Chieftan lying dead in her arms. Golden sparks and stones fell from the ceilings in avalanches, crushing the helpless royals.

From outside the palace, the guards gaped at the crumbling sight. And then, there was a gigantic gash in the ground- an earthquake had shattered the land in two.

From all across the city, Qivin screamed for help. Their entire home was being devoured. Every house, every tower, gone.

When the quake stopped, only ruins lay in the aftermath. The broken parlor signs resting in the ground. The shattered fountains, never to have vermillion waters flow through them again. Next to corpses of soldiers lay the remains of Golems and Leviathans. The restaurants, the lanterns, the musicians stalls- all gone. The cafes, the bronze lights. They were all gone, too.

At long last, the bloodshed had ceased.

"THE war is over. The Kurahlara and his kingdom have fallen. Nobilis has won!"

Cheers rang out in the capital's streets. When he left his metallic home to observe the commotion, Vulcavini saw parades celebrating in the distance. He had listened to the reports on his hologram. Though Nobilis was reigning with joy and jubilation, all the reports could only leave him with was a forlorn that he could not describe.

A hand patted the old master's shoulder.

"Vulcavini," a Koujin knight greeted him.

"A Koujin?" Vulcavini said, astounded. He had been shunned by the order. Why were they visiting him now?

The knight continued, "The war is over, so there is no need for further animosity. It is not the right time for that."

Vulcavini nodded gently. Then the knight clasped his hands onto Vulcavini's, and told him, "Prince Victor gave his life for the kingdom. He will forever be remembered as a hero."

Vulcavini nodded again. After the old master shook the knight's hand too, he slowly let go, and said goodbye, thanking him for his visit. He sat down, opened a cabinet, and retrieved a sapphire necklace. He isolated himself in his thoughts.

Vulcavini missed her. He remembered her curious questions, her warm smile. The sapphire necklace shone faintly through his fingers, his lips hardly parted as he tried to remember how she wore it everywhere she went. And now, she was gone forever.

He remembered his old friend's words: War is inevitable. But for as long as I can breath, I will never stop fighting for what I believe in. This is the gift that every soul has been given. Don't take it away.

Vulcavini looked outside from his windows, and saw a horrific sight.

Thousands of Koujin starships descended from the skies. When they landed, Qivin, shackled in plasma chains, were being herded by soldiers. Vulcavini could only watch as the Koujin brutally pushed them all along like cattle- old or young, fit or disabled, it did not matter to the wardens. He knew where they were being transported to: the prisons, where they would be forcibly sterilized. It was the inevitable outcome of the war.

Just then, there was a knock on his door. Vulcavini immediatly jumped up and opened it, and at the entrance, he saw a young Qivin girl. From the distance, he heard a woman scream.

The Koujin had separated the mother from her child, but the girl had escaped. Now, she looked for someone to help her.

"Please, mister," she pleaded, "I don't want them to take me!"

The child reached her hands out to Vulcavini. But he did not reach back. He did not dare.

Below the somber fall of the sun, admist the ashen Nobilis sky, Vulcavini shut his eyes in

mourning as he pressed his master's sapphire necklace against his lips.

“What have I done?”

EXEUNT

Cradle for the child
Taken from the nest
The bird searches in vain
Her fledglings wilt away

Child tries to fly
Into Mother's arms
Her wings are just a dream
In sleep, warm and charmed.