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4
DEAD
QUEENS

Astrid Scholte

putnam

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Dedication t.k. in first pass

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Keralie

The morning sun caught the palace's golden dome, flooding the Concord with light. While everyone halted their business and glanced up—as though it were a sign from the four queens themselves—we perched overhead like seagulls, ready to swoop in and pick them apart.

“Who shall we choose today?” Mackiel asked. He was leaning against a large screen atop a building that displayed the latest Queenly Reports. He looked like a charming, well-dressed young man from Toria. At least, that was what he looked like.

“Choices, choices,” I said with a grin.

He moved to drape his arm heavily around my shoulder. “Who do you feel like being today? A sweet young girl? A damsel in distress? A reluctant seductress?” He puckered his lips at me.

I laughed and pushed him away. “I’ll be whatever makes us the most money.” I usually picked my targets, but Mackiel had been in a good mood this morning, and I didn’t want to tip the boat. He submerged easily into darkness these days, and I’d have done anything to keep him in the light.

I shrugged. “You choose.”

He raised his dark eyebrows before tilting his bowler hat to further survey the crowd. The line of kohl around his lids made

his deep-set blue eyes stand out all the more. Nothing escaped his scrutiny. A familiar smirk played at his lips.

The crisp Concord air was clean, unlike the acrid tang of seaweed, fish and rotted wood that pervaded our home down on Toria's harbor. It was Quadara's capital and the most expensive city to live in as it shared boundaries with Toria, Eonia and Ludia. Archia was the only region separated from the mainland.

The stores on the ground level sold a variety of approved goods, including Eonist medicines, the latest Ludist fashions and toys, and fresh Archian produce and cured meat—all collated and distributed by Torian traders. Squeals of children, the murmur of business and sighs of Queenly gossip bounced between the glass storefronts.

Behind the buildings rose an opaque golden dome, encapsulating the palace and concealing the confidential dealings within. The entrance to the palace was an old stone building called the House of Concord.

As Mackiel searched for a target, he held his middle finger to his lips—an insult to the queens hiding inside their golden dome. When he caught my eye, he tapped his lip and grinned.

“Him,” he said, his gaze landing on the back of a dark figure who descended the stairs from the House of Concord into the crowded main square. “Get me his comm case.”

The target was clearly Eonist. While we Torians were bundled up in layers to ward off the biting chill, he wore a tight-fitting black dermasuit over his skin, an Eonist fabric made of millions of microorganisms that maintained body temperature with their secretions. Gross, but handy in the depths of winter.

“A messenger?” I flashed Mackiel a hard look. The delivery

would be of high importance if the messenger was coming from the House of Concord, the only place where Torians, Eonists, Archians and Ludists conducted business together.

Mackiel scratched at his neck with ring-covered fingers, a nervous habit. “Not up for the challenge?”

I scoffed. “Of course I am.” I was his best dipper, slipping in and out of pockets with a feather-light touch.

“And remember—”

“Get in quick. Get out quicker.”

He grabbed my arm before I could slip off the roof. His eyes were serious; it had been months since he’d looked at me that way—as though he cared. I almost laughed, but it lodged somewhere between my chest and throat.

“Don’t get caught,” he said.

I grinned at his concern. “When have I ever?” I climbed down from the rooftop and into the crowd.

I hadn’t gotten far when an old man stopped abruptly in front of me and raised his hand to press four fingers to his lips in respect for the queens—the proper greeting, as opposed to Mackiel’s middle-fingered version. I dug in my heels. My spiked soles gripped the well-worn cobblestones. I halted in time, my cheek brushing the back of his shoulders.

Dammit! What was it about the palace which inspired such slack-jawed stupidity? It wasn’t like you could see anything through the golden glass. And even if you could, so what? The queens didn’t care about us. And certainly not about someone like me.

I slapped the cane from the old man’s hand. He stumbled to the side.

He turned to me, his face pinched in annoyance.

“Sorry!” I said. I fluttered my lashes at him from under my large-brimmed hat. “The crowd pushed in on me.”

His expression softened. “No worries, my dear.” He tipped his hat. “Enjoy your day.”

I gave him an innocent smile before slipping his silver pocket watch into a fold in my skirt. That would teach him.

I stood on my toes to find my target. There. He didn’t look much older than me—eighteen, perhaps. His suit clung like a second skin—from his fingertips to his neck, covering his torso, legs and even his feet. While I wrestled with corsets and stiff skirts each and every day, I couldn’t imagine his outfit would be any easier to dress in.

Still, I envied the material and the freedom of movement it allowed. Like him, my muscles were defined from constantly running, jumping and climbing. While it was not unusual for a Torian to be fit and trim, my muscles weren’t from sailing back and forth to Archia, or from unloading heavy goods at the docks. But I’d long been entangled within the darker side of Toria. Hidden beneath my modest layers and pinching corsets, no one knew of my wickedness. My work.

The messenger hesitated at the bottom of the House of Concord stairs, rearranging something in his bag. Now was my chance. That old man had given me inspiration.

I dashed toward the polished slate stairs, fixing my eyes on the palace with my best imitation of awe—or rather slack-jawed stupidity—on my face, my four fingers nearing my lips. Approaching the messenger, I snagged my toe in a gap between two tiles and pitched forward like a rag doll. Inelegant, but it would do

the job. I'd learned the hard way that any pretense could easily be spotted. And I was nothing if not committed.

"Ah!" I cried as I crashed into the boy. The rotten part of me enjoyed the thwack as he hit the stones. I landed on top of him, my hands moving to his bag.

The messenger recovered quickly, pushing me away, his right hand tightly twisted around the bag. Perhaps this wasn't his first encounter with Mackiel's dippers. I stopped myself from shooting Mackiel a glare, knowing he'd be watching eagerly from the rooftop.

He was always watching.

Changing tactics, I rolled, purposely skinning my knee on the stone ground. I whimpered like the innocent Torian girl I pretended to be. I lifted my head to show my face from under my hat to take him in.

He had that Eonist look, even spaced eyes, full lips, high defined cheekbones and a proud jaw. The look they were engineered for. Curls of black hair framed his tan face. His skin was delicate, but hardy. Not at all like my pale creamy skin, which flaked and chapped in the winter wind and burned in the blistering summer sun. His eyes were on me. They were light, almost colorless, not the standard Eonist brown which guarded against the sun's glare. Did it help him see in the dark?

"Are you all right?" he asked, his face giving nothing away. Eonists' expressions were generally frozen, like the majority of their quadrant.

I nodded. "I'm so, so sorry."

"That's okay," he said, but his hand was still at his bag; I wasn't done with this charade yet.

He glanced at my black boot, which had scuffed where my toe had caught between the stones, then to my knee cradled in my hands. "You're bleeding," he said in surprise. He did indeed think this was a ploy for his belongings.

I looked at my white skirt. A blotch of red had spread through my undergarments and was blooming across my knee.

"Oh my!" I swooned a little. I looked up into the bright sun until tears prickled behind my eyes, then turned back to him.

"Here." He grabbed a handkerchief from his bag and handed it to me.

I bit my lip to hide a grin. "I wasn't watching where I was going, I was distracted by the palace."

The messenger's strange pale eyes flicked to the golden dome behind us. His face betrayed no emotion. "It's beautiful," he said. "The way the sun illuminates the dome, it's as though it were alive."

I frowned. Eonists didn't appreciate beauty. It wasn't something they valued, which was ironic, considering how generically attractive they all were.

I bunched the hem of my skirt in my hands and began pulling it up over my knee.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I swallowed down a laugh. "I was checking to see how bad it is." I pretended I only then remembered where he was from. "Oh!" I rearranged my skirt to cover my legs. "How inappropriate of me." Intimacy was as foreign as emotions in Eonia.

"That's all right." But he turned his face away from me.

"Can you help me up?" I asked. "I think I've twisted my ankle."

He held out his hands awkwardly before deciding it was safer

to grip my covered elbows. I leaned heavily against him, to ensure he didn't feel any shift in weight as I slipped a hand inside his bag. My fingers grasped something cool and smooth about the size of my palm. The comm case. I slid it out and into a hidden pocket in my skirt. As soon as he had me on my feet, he released me as though he'd touched a month-old fish.

"Do you think you can walk?" he asked.

I nodded but swayed side to side. Novice dippers gave themselves away by dropping the act too soon after retrieving their prize. And my knee did hurt.

"I don't think so." My voice was light and breathy.

"Where can I take you?"

"Over there." I pointed to an empty chair and table in front of a café.

He held on to my elbow as he guided me over, using his broad shoulders to navigate the crowd. I fell into the chair and pressed the handkerchief to my knee. "Thank you." I tipped my head down, hoping he'd leave.

"Will you be okay?" he asked. "You're not alone, are you?"

I knew Mackiel would be watching from somewhere close by.

"No, I'm not alone." I put some indignation into my voice. "I'm with my father. He's doing business over there." I waved a hand vaguely at the surrounding shops.

The messenger crouched to look under the brim of my hat. I flinched. There was something unsettling about his eyes up close. Almost like mirrors. Yet, under his gaze, I felt like the girl I was pretending to be. A girl who spent her day at the Concord with her family to enjoy the spoils of the other quadrants. A girl whose family was whole. A girl who hadn't shattered her happiness.

That moment passed.

Something flickered behind his expression. “Are you sure?” he asked. Was that real concern?

The cool of the metal case pressed against my leg, and Mackiel’s hot gaze was on my back.

Get in quick. Get out quicker.

I needed to disengage. “I need to rest for a bit. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, then,” he said, glancing behind him to the House of Concord, his hand on his bag. As a messenger, his tardiness wouldn’t be tolerated. “If you’ll be all right . . .” He waited for me to refute him. I might have oversold my fragility.

“Yes. I’ll be fine here. Promise.”

He gave me a stiff Eonist nod, then said, “May the queens forever rule the day. Together, yet apart.” The standard exchange of interquadrant goodwill. He turned to leave.

“Together, yet apart,” I recited back to him. Before he could turn, I was up off the chair and among the crowd.

I clutched the comm case in my hand as I ran.

CHAPTER TWO

Iris *Queen of Archia*

Rule one: To protect the fertile lands of Archia, the queen must uphold the society's humble but hardworking way of life.

Iris shifted uncomfortably on her throne, rearranging her stiff skirts. The midday sun streamed down from the domed ceiling, hitting the elevated golden dial beneath it. The nation of Quadara was engraved upon the face, with thick ridges representing the walls that divided the land. An amber globe sat in the center of the dial and fractured the sunlight into rays, highlighting hundreds of cursive words etched into the throne room's marble walls. The words reminded each queen, and those who visited court, of the approved transactions between quadrants and the strict rules the queens must abide by. Queenly Law.

The four thrones, and their respective queens, sat in a circle around the dial. While the quadrants remained divided, the queens ruled from the same court.

Together, yet apart.

Each looked out upon her section of the circular room, a painted crest to signify where her quadrant began.

Iris's next appointment stepped from around the partition

that separated court visitors from the queens. She glanced at one of her sister queens, Marguerite, sitting beside her. Marguerite raised an eyebrow in amusement as the man bowed, his nose grazing the polished marble at his feet. He stood upon the Archian crest: a rural island bordered by branches, leaves and flowers with a stag atop a mountain, depicted in bold golden swirls.

Now thirty years old, Iris had not seen her homeland of Archia for twelve years. But for as long as she lived, she would never forget the crisp air, the lush forests and rolling hills.

When the man straightened, he still wouldn't meet her eyes. A shame, for she had lovely eyes.

"My queen," the man's voice trembled.

Good. Iris cultivated fear. A time-consuming but worthwhile pursuit.

She knew Archia could easily be perceived as the least formidable of all quadrants, as Archians mostly kept to themselves, rarely crossing the channel to the mainland due to their general distrust for machinery. They focused on physical work and living good, if somewhat modest, lives.

"Speak." Iris waved a hand at the man before her. "I don't have all day."

A trickle of sweat ran down the man's brow and onto the tip of his nose. He didn't wipe it away. Iris twitched her nose in sympathy—the only sympathy he'd get.

"I have come here to ask you for power," the man said. She scowled, and he quickly clarified, "Electricity—we need electricity."

Iris had to remind herself he was the Archian governor, although the title held little authority in her eyes. The queens were the power. No one else.

Power was a game, and over the years, Iris had perfected it.

“Need electricity?” Iris leaned forward. “No.”

While other quadrants had electricity, Archia continued to use only what could be wielded by hand and heart—a traditional Archian proverb.

Finally, the governor brought a shaking hand to wipe his brow.

“Electricity would allow for machines,” the governor continued. “The workers are struggling to keep up with this year’s delivery schedule set by Toria. Please consider, my queen.”

She sat back and let out a breathy laugh. “You know better than to ask this of me.” It was true that Quadara’s population continued to grow, and no matter what they’d tried, all quadrants other than Archia remained barren.

Quadara’s divided nation was an ecosystem, each quadrant playing its part. Archia provided crops and natural resources; Eonia developed medicine and technology; Ludia provided art, fashion and entertainment; and Toria arranged imports and exports between the quadrants. And Queenly Law upheld the ecosystem.

Archia was the nation’s only hope. Which was why Iris needed to protect her homeland at all costs. She couldn’t risk overharvesting the land with the use of machines. If they destroyed Archia, Quadara would starve.

While some might still consider Archia primitive, it was not weak. Not while Iris ruled.

The governor’s bottom lip jerked outward. “I know we are not meant to take technology from other quadrants, but—”

“Then you bore me with this conversation because . . . ?”

“Perhaps you should allow this?” Marguerite asked. At forty, she was the eldest and longest reigning queen, and often the voice

of reason. Even though her last appointment for the day had been canceled, she continued to watch court with interest. Like all Torians, her curiosity for other cultures could not be satiated.

An utter waste of Marguerite's time, Iris thought. She snapped her gaze to her sister queen. "This doesn't concern you, Marguerite." Her tone was forgiving, though; meddling was in the Torian queen's nature.

Marguerite tucked a graying curl of auburn hair behind her ear. "You'll remember I asked Corra to have her doctors develop an inoculation to prevent the blood plague from spreading further. Sometimes we must bend the rules, but not break them."

Iris tilted her head to see Corra's braided black hair, tied up in the common Eonist way, her gold crown gleaming against her dark brown skin. But the twenty-five-year-old queen of Eonia did not glance back at the mention of her scientists. Stessa, however, the queen of Ludia, looked over and grimaced, as though Iris was annoying her. She probably was, for everything Iris said or did seemed to annoy the sixteen-year-old queen.

"An entirely different situation," Iris said to Marguerite, ignoring Stessa's glare. "The plague threatened to wipe out your people. The inoculation was a one-off intervention; it did not significantly alter your quadrant. Even if I allowed machinery for a short amount of time, how would we return to our old ways? I can't risk it."

Marguerite gave her an understanding, but amused, smile, as though she thought Iris was being stubborn for the sake of being stubborn.

"No," Iris said, turning her attention back to the Archian governor. "Electricity is not from our quadrant; therefore, we

shall never have it. We will not be aided by machines and their automatic witchery.”

Iris had seen what technology had done to Eonia, and she would not have the same happen to her quadrant. With their mostly frozen and inhospitable land in the far north of the nation, Eonia had no option but to focus solely on technological advancements, and even genetic alteration, to survive. In turn, they had lost a part of their humanity. Or so Iris thought. She couldn't help but look at Corra once more.

Iris did not miss the governor's glance to the string of electrical chandeliers hanging in the four passages that led to the central throne room. Iris knew it appeared as though she enjoyed the pleasures of all quadrants, but the governor didn't know Iris still read by candlelight and bathed in the natural warm springs in her private garden rather than use the palace's heated water system. She wasn't about to discuss her hygiene regimen with him.

When he failed to respond, Iris raised a brow and asked, “Anything further?”

The governor shook his head.

“Good,” she replied. “And if anyone wishes to quarrel with my decision, then they know where to find me. The palace is always open to my people.”

With that, she stood and stepped down from the dais, leaving court to her sister queens.

IRIS DECIDED TO SPEND the remainder of the day in her cultivated palace garden. Growing up, she had enjoyed countless hours in the immaculate grounds that surrounded her childhood home.

It was there where she had imagined her reign and how she would rule an entire quadrant. Iris had been a solitary child, and while she had thought she'd prepared herself to be queen, she had not expected anyone could be capable of influencing her reign.

Or her heart.

The garden was located in the Archian section of the palace, split in four as the nation itself. The garden sat outside the golden dome, perched on the cliff overlooking the channel toward the neighboring isle of Archia. Long ago, one of her ancestors had demanded access to nature—to life. Queenly Law decreed the queens were never to leave the palace—for their safety and to ensure they weren't moved by outside influences.

Iris would never set foot in her quadrant again, never soak in the beauty of Archia, or see the stags and deer roam the mountains.

She sat back in her wooden settee; it sank into the grass while her black skirt swallowed the frame. She removed her heavy crown and placed it on the table beside her. She tilted her head, enjoying the sunlight on her pale skin. The warm springs bubbled nearby, reminiscent of the gentle brook that trickled not far from her childhood home.

This would have to do.

Also dictated by Queenly Law, Iris had been raised by adoptive parents outside the palace in the region she would one day rule. But while she'd been raised in a humble stone cottage, she'd never wanted for anything. She didn't know how to want for things she'd never seen, never experienced. She learned all she could about her land, the animals and her people. And Quadara's dark past.

Archia had been an untouched refuge from the nation's troubles for hundreds of years; in fact, it wasn't until Toria had

built their boats and traveled to the west that the lush island was discovered. The rest of the nation had grown desperate, their natural resources nearly depleted. And there was Archia, ripe for the taking.

While the distinct regions had each developed strengths and resources, they shared the same weakness. Jealousy.

And so began the Quadrant Wars. They lasted nearly a decade, with thousands of lives lost. During this time, the other regions attempted to conquer Archia. But their plans were foolish. As rearing livestock was foreign to Eonists, Torians grew restless and wanted to discover new lands, and Ludists didn't want to dirty their elaborate outfits by tending to the crops.

Then the founding queens of Quadara built the walls to separate the regions, finally ending the Quadrant Wars. The walls provided space to breathe, allowing the quadrants to continue to evolve independently, and harmoniously.

Archia was once again safe.

Iris left her homeland for the first time on her eighteenth birthday, when she had been informed her mother had died. She sailed across the channel on a Torian vessel toward the palace. She took to her new world and throne without blinking, insisting she attend court minutes after her mother had been laid to rest beneath the palace. That evening she had stayed awake until the early morning, reading books on Archian history and diplomacy. Nothing could shake Iris. Not even the death of her mother.

Iris opened her green eyes to the vibrant blue sky—enjoying the break from the enduring golden palace. With the palace enclosed by a glass dome, every room, and everything within it, was cast in a golden hue. Even at night, the corridors blurred into a

deep amber, as though darkness would not dare caress the queens with inky-black fingers.

When Iris looked to the clouds in the sky, she thought of her father. Not the father whose blood she shared—a man who'd never been identified by her mother—but the man who had raised her in Archia. When she was a child, he'd told her about a world in the sky and the people who lived there, giving her someone to confide in when he couldn't be by her side. When she was alone, she would look to the clouds and share her gravest fears and wondrous dreams, knowing her secrets were safe with them. Her most loyal confidants.

It wasn't until years later that she realized it was merely her father's way of providing comfort. Then she came to the palace and met the queens. They spent every evening together—often staying up beyond a “respectable” hour to discuss their childhood, families and quadrants. Iris was no longer alone.

Still, she often looked to the sky, but now she spoke to her father, long dead.

“Father, I have not wavered,” she said. “Queenly Law is, and will always be, paramount. However, there are certain rules that pertain to the queens, to me, that I have come to see as irrelevant over the years.” Even speaking the words aloud felt wrong. Iris shook her head. She would need to be stronger, be the woman with an iron backbone. “We are the queens. We should be able to change the rules that do not affect the quadrants and the peace we uphold. We should have some control over our own lives.” She shook her head. “I will continue to fight for Archia and protect all we have, but I want more.” She shook her head again, thinking of the governor's request. “Not more for Archia, but for me.” She hated how weak she sounded.

“I have a plan.” She let out a weighted breath. “I’ve been too many years silent. But no longer. Tomorrow things will change. Queenly Law will change. Tomorrow I will—”

A bee pricked her throat. An intense bite, followed by a dull ache.

Bees, and all other bugs and insects, were supposed to have been eradicated from the garden by a spray. Another wonderful Eonist creation, Iris thought wryly. Iris didn’t object to sharing her garden with the creatures that should come with it. But the advisors had insisted it was best, for Iris’s safety.

A smile appeared on Iris’s face, perhaps nature had conquered technology in the end, beating out the spray. She couldn’t wait to gloat about her findings to Corra at tonight’s evening meal.

The bee’s sting grew more painful, to the point where Iris was unable to swallow. Saliva pooled in her throat. Was she allergic?

She brought a hand up to the bite and found a gaping ridge of skin. When she pulled her hand back, it was darkened with blood. A wail gurgled from her lips.

A figure loomed over her, teeth gleaming with menace and delight. A thin knife reflected a slice of sunlight, dripping red.

Fury flashed through her as hot blood spilled down her neck. Her arms flung backward, knocking her crown to the floor.

An outrage! I am the Archian queen!

How dare someone cut my thr—

CHAPTER THREE

Keralie

Mackiel Delore Jr. sat at his heavy oak desk and rotated the comm case in his hand, his rings sliding along the metal surface, his brows low. He'd been strangely quiet since I'd handed it over, and during the long, cold walk back from the Concord, through Central Toria and down to the auction house located on the half-rotted dock. He hadn't been this quiet since the day his parents' died.

His pale skin and dark hair held the only resemblance to his father. Painfully narrow, he wore a waistcoat to help expand his width, and a bowler hat added to his meager height. Still, he was a fragment of his father, of who he wanted to be.

Mackiel Sr. had wanted a formidable protégé. Instead, he'd gotten a waif of a boy. He worried Mackiel's presence would not instill the same kind of fear and admiration in everyone who'd dealt with him and his business of Delore Imports and Exports.

He'd been wrong.

Mackiel looked upon the comm case as though he was equally delighted and troubled by what was inside.

"Are you going to open it?" I asked him.

"And tarnish the goods?" He wagged a finger at me, his expression lifting. "You know better than that, darlin'."

I hissed as I took the seat opposite him.

“Hurt yourself, porcelain doll?” he asked with a grin. “You should be more careful with your goods.”

I rolled my eyes and gently rubbed my bandaged knee under my faded black skirt. My con clothes were at the cleaners; hopefully they could beat the blood out. It was my mother’s skirt. One of the few items I had of hers.

It had been six months since I’d seen my parents. Six months since my father’s accident. Six months since I’d fled my home, unable to look my mother in the eye, and shut off that part of my heart, never to look back.

“It was worth it,” I said. I’d do anything for Mackiel. While he was only two years older than me, he was both a friend and mentor. And the only family I had left.

He jerked his chin. “With you, it always is.”

I ignored him. Mackiel was always joking, but this time I didn’t know if it was a jibe or whether he actually wanted more from me, from us. I wondered what he saw when he looked at me. Was it the put-together Torian girl I pretended to be? Or a broken girl, his porcelain doll; all that was needed was a crack to reveal the darkness growing within.

I didn’t question what he would prefer.

Mackiel’s office was located in the attic of the auction house, overlooking the Torian harbor. The moonlit sails the boats glowed like ghosts on the dark water. I often wondered why he’d chosen this room overlooking the sea. Was it simply because it had been his father’s? Or did he want to confront his phobia of the ocean each day, hoping the fear would one day subside?

Mackiel scratched his neck briefly to check he was not, nor

was he about to be, submerged in water. He was stronger than he gave himself credit for. Unlike me. I couldn't face what haunted me. Any space smaller than my compact quarters behind the auction house stage sent me running from the room. Simply thinking about tight spaces made my chest constrict.

Small breath in, small breath out. There's a way in, and always a way out. The mantra helped still any anxiety curling in my belly, like an agitated eel.

"How much do you think it will go for?" I asked, distracting myself.

He placed the comm case on the table and stretched out his other hand. "This is for you."

In his palm was a silver locket in the shape of a gold quartier, the currency that united Quadara. I reached for the locket. He grabbed my fingers in his. There—the darkness that lately plagued his expression bubbled to the surface, and my friend was gone. "You took too long out there," he said.

I pulled away from him, the locket in my grasp, and leaned back in my chair. "Too long for what?" I countered. "Has anyone else stolen a comm case without being arrested by Quadarian authorities?"

"Touché," he said, tilting his chair back, mimicking me. The wooden frame dwarfed him. The room had been built and furnished for a larger man—Mackiel Delore Sr. And everything was exactly as he'd left it, before the blood plague.

The plague had started as a seasickness contracted on a return voyage from Archia and had spread swiftly once the boat had docked and the crew had returned to their homes in Toria. The disease had been merciless; mere hours after you'd been exposed,

blood would seep from your eyes and ears, before hardening. Mackiel's mother had contracted it first, then his father.

Mackiel had rushed to the Eonist Research Facility in hopes of gaining access to HIDRA. The Holistic Injury and Disease Repair Aid was an Eonist cure-all—Quadara's most prized creation. But only one "deserving" patient could be treated each year, due to dwindling supplies. The queens decided who that patient would be. A criminal and his wife were not high on their list.

Mackiel's parents were dead by the time he returned home.

The only change to Delore Imports and Exports in the three years since his father's death was the menacing gleam behind Mackiel's eyes and the growth in his security team. His henchmen were out tonight, doing his bidding. More monsters than men—I hoped they'd forget their way home.

"Thank you, Kera," Mackiel said suddenly.

I glanced up. "You're welcome?" It came out much more like a question than I'd meant it to, unsure how to take his shifting mood. We'd had been friends for seven years. Our thieving had begun as a thrill to chase and a game to play, which also happened to fill our pockets with cash. He'd been a lively, charismatic boy of twelve, promising wealth, excitement and fantasy. A world far from the one I'd known.

While a young Mackiel had boasted about playing with the latest Eonist technologies and eating fluffy Ludist pastries, I'd shivered in my parents' narrow, dim cottage and had eaten my mother's stew made from week-old fish scraps. My father had inherited his shipping business from his parents, but the boat had been leaky and could barely weather the storms between Archia and Toria. We'd lived week-to-week, my parents always hoping for a brighter horizon.

Mackiel's offer to join the dippers had been a ticket to a new life. I'd taken it without a second thought.

But over the past year, something increasingly tarnished Mackiel's thoughts like the sea air tarnished the dock. Where was the boy whose smile lit his face as easily as the sun lit the sky? Was it his parents' death that continued to haunt him, as my father's accident haunted me?

Six months ago, I'd moved into Mackiel's auction house—to my own room, of course. I thought moving in would've brought us closer, back to our childish years when we did everything together. But he still disappeared for days, never telling me why.

"You did well," he said with a smile.

I rolled my new locket between my fingers before attaching it to my dipper bracelet. He'd started giving me lockets for increasingly dangerous thefts about a year ago. The coin hung among my other conquests. "Thanks for this," I said.

"I have something else for you." He held out an envelope. Fear racked my insides.

I tore the letter open without further preamble. My mother's latest letter was short, but struck me between the ribs like a blow.

Dear Keralie,

Please come to the Eonist Research Facility at once. Your father is dying. The doctors believe he has weeks remaining, maybe less, if he isn't allowed access to HIDRA. Please come and say good-bye.

I love you, Keralie. We miss you. We need you.

Love,

Mom

I clutched the paper in my hands, my breath leaving in gasps.

Although it was six months ago, I could still hear my father screaming my name. It was the last word he uttered, almost like a curse, before he was thrown from his boat and hit his head on a nearby rock. I would never forget my mother's tearstained face as she sobbed over his unconscious body before he was carted away to receive medical attention.

My mother had stayed by his bedside for two weeks. By the time she returned home, I was gone. She sent numerous letters to the auction house begging me to join her at the hospital's accommodation, knowing exactly where I'd fled to.

But she was wrong. She didn't need me. My father was on the brink of the next world because of what I'd done. They were better off without me.

Meeting Mackiel had set me on a path for a different life, and my father's accident was the final act to sever me from my parents and their oppressive expectations. I couldn't return to them now. Much as I might want to.

"Everything all right?" Mackiel's voice was soft.

I shook my head. "My father's dying."

"No HIDRA?" he asked, expression darkening.

"Doesn't look like it." My father was one of thousands on the waiting list. For years, Eonist scientists had tried, but failed, to replicate the treatment. Whispers had begun to spread that there were no doses remaining.

"Curse those queens," Mackiel said, slamming his hand on the table. "I'm sorry, Kera."

I took a deep, steadying breath. I'd used up all the tears for

my father in the days following the accident. He was gone to me the moment he was thrown from the boat.

A vibration rattled the building as the weight shifted on the floor beneath us. The audience had arrived.

“If you’re not up for tonight,” Mackiel said, “I’ll understand.”

“And miss out on seeing who buys my comm case?” I forced a smile. “I don’t think so.”

He gave me a sly grin, his somber mood disappearing. “Come then. Let’s not keep our audience waiting.”

THE AUCTION HOUSE was located on the dock at the far, and seedier, end of the Torian harbor. As a child, the old trading hall had seemed like a majestic palace with its high-arched ceiling and wide columns. Now I saw the truth. The building should be condemned. The salty air had rotted the pylons, slanting the right side of the building toward the sea and the decay of wood infected every room, including the drafty lodgings I rented behind the stage. I was sure the smell of decay followed me like a shadow. How fitting.

The audience shuffled in from the slightly more stable section of the dock, which housed other Torian attractions: the stuffy gambling houses, courtly pleasure palaces, and the dingy, damp pubs that rose in between like fungus in marshes, forming Toria’s notorious Jetée district. Our neighbors’ hands as dirty as our own.

The auction floor became increasingly crowded until there wasn’t enough room to breathe without warming the back of someone’s neck. If one more body crammed inside, we’d sink to the ocean floor beneath us. While there was no ignoring the

cacophony bleeding out of the walls and onto the dock, Torian authorities left Mackiel to his sordid business.

The Torian queen had been intent on shutting the Jetée down for decades. She'd recently revealed her plans to demolish the dock for "safety reasons", but we knew the truth. She was desperate to erase the blight on "proper" Torian society. Could that be what tarnished Mackiel's thoughts?

Mackiel wasn't alone in his concern. During the day, when most of the Jetée establishments were shut and everyone should be home in their beds, loud voices could be heard from behind closed doors. Angry voices. Voices from the business owners, demanding to take vengeance on their meddling queen. They vowed to run all Torian businesses into the ground if she succeeded. Despite what the queen wanted to believe, the seedy underbelly was the heart of the quadrant. Cut that out, and Toria would perish.

I didn't involve myself in palace politics.

I watched from behind the stage curtain as the audience forgot their manners—or rather the manners they pretended to keep while in public as hardworking and enterprising explorers and traders. It wasn't long until the true, darker desires were exposed. Wide skirts pushed in among one another, hands groped for exposed flesh, while children weaved in and out among legs like rats navigating the sewers, hoping to get a nibble of the action. A perfect training ground for new dippers—any kids who managed to steal from the audience without getting caught were worth talking to.

It wasn't difficult to see why my parents had warned me to stay away from this place. But with their cottage located near the harbor, the auction house had never been far from view.

Growing up by the sea, I loved to swim, but I had always hated sailing. Being short made it difficult to reach the mast and my small fingers were inept at tying knots. While my parents could walk the deck as though they were on dry land, I'd always been off balance. I couldn't understand why they loved the seafaring life: the early rises, the bitter cold, and the tiring, relentless work for little return.

After a voyage, my parents would huddle by a fire—on the days we could afford it—and reminisce about the journey, while I would pray to the queens above for a storm to strike down the boat moored in the harbor. As I got older, I'd beg them to travel without me and would throw a tantrum if they insisted I come along.

For years, I didn't know there was another way of life, a life I would enjoy, a life I'd thrive in. Then I met Mackiel.

I don't remember much of my first visit to the auction house except the feeling. A tangible thrill ignited my body and senses. I didn't steal anything, merely swept my hands across ladies' bags and dipped into men's pockets. But I could have stolen something, and that was illuminating.

Mackiel found me later that night, sitting on the dock with my legs dangling below, my cheeks flushed with excitement despite the cold night. He introduced himself, offering his hand and a job.

I pushed back thoughts of my parents, that letter and the aching absence they'd left in my life. An absence I'd created the day I decided to follow Mackiel down a darker road. There was no turning back now.

Searching the auction house crowd now, I wondered who would be the owner of my comm case and the chips inside, and what my cut would be. I imagined the flurry of bids it would ignite

from those desperate for a glimpse into Eonist life and the technology it could offer. Like the other quadrants, Torians weren't allowed to use most technologies from Eonia, for fear that it would alter our society. But that didn't stop us from wanting a taste.

And that was exactly what the chips would allow. All you had to do was place the comm chip on your tongue and your senses would be transported to another time and place. A memory, which would feel like your own. A message from another life.

"Move," Kyrin said, elbowing me out of the way. "My wares are up first."

I happily stepped aside; his breath preceded him by at least ten feet. His sandy blond hair was stuck up in odd directions, as though he'd been trying to imitate the current trend in Ludia. It looked ridiculous on him. We dippers traditionally wore conservative clothes and attire, allowing us to blend into our surroundings.

"Still stealing watches?" I asked. Unfortunately for Kyrin, his tall stature made him stand out, no matter what he tried. Although, I hated to admit, his deft long fingers could unclasp fasteners on watches in seconds, the owner none the wiser. "How long does that make it now? Five years?"

"Shut it, Keralie," he bit back.

I shrugged, tucking a stray lock behind my ear. "It's all right. Give it a few more years, and you'll get there. You see this?" I held out my wrist and jingled my new locket at him, a sign of moving up the ranks in Mackiel's crew. Stealing from a messenger had been enough of a challenge to warrant the gift. "Want a closer look? It might give you some inspiration." Kyrin's leather cuff had only two charms to keep each other company, while I had struggled to find room for my latest success. My parents used to argue that

sailing was in my blood, but they'd never seen how I could steal a woman's bag from her shoulder, or steal the glasses right off a man's nose. Thieving was in my blood.

"I don't need your kind of inspiration." Kyrin pushed my arm out of the way. "Not all of us are willing to wet Mackiel's whistle as you do."

"I do nothing but my job!" I'd raised my clenched fist before I'd thought about my next move.

Kyrin didn't flinch. "Right. You think we're blind?" He gestured to the dippers watching with interest behind him. "You get all the best jobs."

"Because I am the best."

"The best at sucking his—"

I lurched forward, my fist about to slam into his face, but I was jerked back at the last second by a hand covered in rings from nail to knuckle.

"What's going on here?" Mackiel asked, his eyes flashing between us, his full mouth pulled up at one side.

"Nothing," I replied, swallowing down my anger. I didn't want to discuss the rumors spreading about Mackiel and me. I wouldn't have been surprised if Mackiel had started them himself, as a bit of fun. "I was just hearing about the gorgeous Ludist watch Kyrin acquired today." I gave Kyrin a sweet smile.

Mackiel grinned at me. "Is that so?" He tapped my dimpled cheek. "Sweet." Tap. "Little." Tap. "Kera." Tap.

I pulled my wrist out of Mackiel's grasp and stepped away, hating the way Kyrin's eyes lingered on the contact. Sure, there were the late nights in Mackiel's quarters, discussing the future of the auction house. But nothing had happened, although I felt us

teetering on the precipice of more. Or at least, I was teetering. In the last year, he didn't seem to care as much about me anymore.

"What is it that I always tell you?" Mackiel's voice was melodic, but still authoritative. His deep-set eyes flicked among us all.

"Never detract from the wares," we replied in unison.

I kicked Kyrin's shin for good measure. He grunted in reply and took a step away.

"Very good," Mackiel said, fiddling with his bowler hat. "And we have a generous collection tonight. Let's stay on track, shall we?"

Generous? I caught Mackiel's eye. He hadn't answered my question about the comm case's worth and the chips inside. He avoided my probing gaze and scratched briefly at his neck, his eyes landing on me, then darting away again. Mackiel was never nervous, not when it came to an auction. This was what he lived for now that his father was gone.

"Places, dippers," he said. "Let's begin!" He swept onto the stage, his long coat flapping behind him.

"Mackiel seems distracted tonight." Kyrin's breath wafted over me as he whispered in my ear. "Didn't put out last night?"

This time I went for Kyrin's toes with the spiked heels of my boots. I reveled in the squelch as the spikes pierced through the leather and into his skin.

"You bitch!" He yelped, hopping up and down on one foot. "One day you're going to get yours!"

I shoved past him and the rest of the gawking dippers.

"Maybe," I called back over my shoulder, "but you won't be the one to deliver." Not while Mackiel had my back.

I pushed my way to the entrance of the auction house to watch the proceedings from behind the crowd. Perspiration dotted my brow from the crammed bodies heating the cavernous room and the salty breeze, wafting in through cracks in the timber floor.

A groan shuddered the building. The bidders quickly shuffled a little more to the left to balance out the weight.

“Welcome to my house!” Mackiel boomed, his voice filling the theater. “For tonight, you and I are family. And my family deserves the best!” It was his father’s line, but the crowd still lapped it up as if hearing it for the first time.

His father had built this black market business from nothing. As a young man, not much older than Mackiel was now, he saw the opportunity to capitalize on the curious nature of his fellow Torians who couldn’t afford to own a boat or purchase interquadrant approved goods. Instead, he provided the goods at a much lower price. He provided the opportunity to acquire goods that should’ve been contained within the quadrant that made them. And of course, the only way to acquire such items was through a skillful hand.

“You’re in luck tonight,” Mackiel continued, “for we have our best selection.” He said this at each and every auction, but tonight it was true. Second only to the thrill of acquiring the wares was the clamor during an auction. I grinned in anticipation. The auction was the perfect distraction from my mother’s letter.

“Before we begin, we must cover the auction guidelines.” The crowd spread a groan like fleas on a stray dog. “Now, now,” Mackiel tsked. “First business, then pleasure. That’s what I always say.” He grinned, and the crowd was back in the palm of his hand. Mackiel’s proclivity for spectacle had increased the bidders

by dozens, ensuring they didn't stray to his competitors after his father's death. In fact, some of his competitors were here for the show, keeping their quarters warm in their pockets.

"Right then, as you know, we don't trade in full payments here, it's too tempting for those with sticky fingers." Laughter circulated through the crowd, the audience knowing full well how Mackiel "procured" the auction items, and the hypocrisy of it all. "That said, a ten percent down payment will be required to secure the bid. At the end of the auction, my darling dippers will follow the highest bidder home to collect the rest. If you can't find the funds, the dipper will return with the wares, and the rest of you will have the chance to bid for it tomorrow night. But I don't give second chances to those who play games."

What Mackiel withheld from the audience was that his dippers had one hour to return with the payment then we were given a five percent cut for our troubles. New dippers often tried to pocket more than their cut or keep the stolen valuables for themselves. Mackiel used to banish any disloyal dippers, leaving no quarters to their name, but now he used his henchmen to enforce his law.

A shiver ran down my back at the thought of their skin on mine, or worse, their whiteless black eyes upon my face. It had been two years since Mackiel had hired them and I was still not used to their presence. And I couldn't deny the impact they'd had on Mackiel. As a boy, he used to rescue rats from the Jetée sewers, now that was where he dumped the bodies of those who betrayed him.

"The henchmen got a little carried away," he'd say. But the darkness behind his eyes made me question who had in fact done the deed. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the truth.

Mackiel continued with the rules. "There will be no further

negotiations after the auction is complete. If I see the ware appear at another house, well, let's say you'll never set foot in here again." He smiled widely, though the message was clear: the day you cheated him would be your last as a dipper.

"Finally, my business and my service"—he grinned at the audience, his eyes glimmering—"and my presence, is a luxury only Torians can enjoy, and should not be taken for granted. Remember, my name and my dippers are never to be spoken outside of my house. This is of the utmost importance."

The bidders grew restless as his speech wore on. They'd heard it before. They wanted to see what was up for auction. What relic or prize from other quadrants could they get their grubby hands on? Something to improve their life? Medicine, perhaps? Something trivial to sit upon their mantelpiece, which they could brag about to friends?

Or comm chips—allowing them a glimpse into life in another quadrant—the perfect prize for any Torian.

My undergarments clung to my sticky skin. Come on, Mackiel. Get on with it.

"All right, then," he said, finally. "Enough business. On with the show!"

The crowd burst into applause as Mackiel yanked back the curtain to reveal the first item for auction. The early wares moved slowly: woven Archian blankets, handkerchiefs and scarves, and Ludist paintings, jewelry and hair tints. Hands rose in reluctance. No one wanted to spend their money too early. There weren't many bids for Kyrin's watch—the most common of pickpocket items. I chuckled under my breath. Kyrin wouldn't earn much tonight.

Frustration darkened Mackiel's expression, his brow low over his eyes. He wanted the best. But that was why he had me.

The bidders grew restless. They wanted more. Something they'd never seen before. Something from Eonia, the most different of all the quadrants. I shuffled my feet side to side to see between hats. I had no doubt Mackiel would leave my comm case—his top prize—till last.

The audience shifted like a disturbed sea as Mackiel unveiled the next item. A torn sleeve of a dermasuit. Not very useful, but at least more interesting than a watch. The crowd leaned forward for a better look, before raising their hands in earnest. I ducked to the side as the man beside me lifted his dank armpit in my face.

That was when I saw him.

He stood still in the middle of the crowd, as everyone moved around him. A scuffed top hat was pulled low over his black hair, and he wore a blue vest over a crumpled white shirt. But I knew who he was—his dermasuit was peeking beneath his collar.

The messenger.

He was here for the comm chips.

CHAPTER FOUR

Corra Queen of Eonia

Rule two: Emotions and relationships cloud judgment. Eonists must concentrate solely on technological advancements, medicine and the community as a whole.

The news of Iris's death was whispered in Corra's ear the moment she twisted in her bed, her eyes flicking open. She sat up in shock, her dreams fading into the dark bedroom. She'd retired to her room for an afternoon nap once court had concluded; the pretenses often exhausted her.

"What?" she asked, facing her fleshy advisor. He loomed over her, his hands stiff by his sides. "What did you say, Ketor?"

"Queen Iris is dead, my queen," he repeated, his eyes darting away from her bare brown shoulder. Sleep was the one time Eonists didn't wear their dermasuits, and it was a freedom Corra enjoyed, if not reveled in. She knew it wasn't very Eonist of her—she should be coy and conservative—but she didn't care. Especially not now.

"No," she said. "That's not possible."

"I'm afraid it's true, my queen. She was found in her garden a few hours ago."

"The doctors couldn't save her?" Corra asked.

“They were too late,” he said, eyes downcast. “She was already dead.” Even Eonist doctors could not resolve the finality of death, although they had tried. Once.

Corra drew herself from her four-poster bed, not caring her naked body was on display as she reached for her gold dermasuit, which lay across her dressing chair. It wasn’t like the suit covered much more. She pushed her arms and legs through the tight-fitting material, the suit fluttering against her skin as it adjusted to her curves. She realized her handmaiden was also present, a young Archian woman with red blotches on her cheeks and glassy eyes, no doubt from crying over the news of Iris’s death. Most of the palace staff were Archian, for they were no-nonsense, hardworking people.

Corra picked up her small gold watch—a coronation gift—from her bedside table, slipped the chain over her head and tucked it under the material. She turned to allow her handmaiden to knot her thick black hair into a bun and secure her heavy crown with pins. While her face was hidden, she squeezed her eyes shut, willing her emotions away.

“How did it happen?” Corra asked, turning around when she was composed.

Iris was still a young woman and her health was as strong as her resolve. Corra had never even seen Iris sick, even with her Archian upbringing, which had sheltered her from all mainland viruses.

Surely this is a nightmare. Simply a vivid dream, she thought.

She wanted to climb back into her bed. Iris could not be dead. She was as permanent as the gilded walls surrounding her—protecting her—or they should’ve been.

Ketor was silent for a moment, drawing her eyes to his.

His ruddy cheeks were absent of tears. “She was murdered, my queen,” he said.

“Murdered?” Corra’s hand flew to her mouth. No queen had ever been murdered within the palace. Attempts had been made hundreds of years ago, when the Quadarian monarchs were free to roam their quadrants and the Quadrant Wars savaged society, but that was before Queenly Law had been established. Now to leave the palace was to forfeit the throne—ensuring the queens followed this crucial law. It was not only for their safety but to guarantee they were not influenced by the voices of the people. For the unhappy always spoke the loudest.

“I’m sorry to say it’s true,” Ketor continued. He remained distant, seemingly uncaring. Like Corra, he was Eonist. Queenly Law dictated a queen’s advisor share her quadrant of origin, protecting the quadrant’s integrity.

“Queens above,” Corra said, leaning slightly against a bedpost to stay upright. Surely shock was allowed? “How did this happen?”

He cleared the discomfort from his throat. “It’s grisly, my queen.”

When he didn’t elaborate, she said, “Tell me.” This was Iris. She had to know.

“Her throat was cut, my queen.”

A gasp ripped through Corra’s body before she could stop it. She allowed herself to shut her eyes briefly once more to center herself and stabilize her emotions. Her chest felt unusually tight.

“Don’t be vulgar, Ketor!” Corra’s handmaiden admonished.

Corra shook her head, knowing her advisor was simply being honest. Eonist. “That’s all right. I wanted to know. What’s the protocol?” She needed to play along until her advisor left her side. Then her real emotions could show.

Grief. She'd never felt the weight of it before. It was rare for someone to pass unexpectedly in Eonia. Due to Eonist advancements, their lives were long, not cut short by illness or old age. Some had shorter lifespans due to genetic abnormalities, but their deaths were still not unexpected. Little was unexpected in Eonia. Corra's own death date was set for her ninetieth year, although she was allowed to abdicate, if she so desired.

"All queens have been called to court before the nightly meal to discuss who will inherit the Archian throne," Ketor said.

Corra wouldn't have time to grieve.

"She has no direct heir," Corra said. Iris had claimed she couldn't find an appropriate suitor, no matter how many men had been paraded in front of her.

Ketor nodded. "What will happen in the absence of an heir?" she asked.

"I don't know, my queen." His expression was frustratingly calm. "We must attend court at once."

While Corra's heart was splintered by the news of Iris's murder, she would not allow her stoic mask to crumble. To grieve was not Eonist. It implied feelings beyond general associations. Eonist were a unified people, but distant. It provided an environment where logic and knowledge reigned.

"Lead the way," she said.

MARGUERITE WAS ALREADY upon her throne when Corra entered the throne room. She wore a traditional black Torian dress for mourning with a veil attached to her crown that covered most of her face. Corra wanted to run to the eldest queen, but she forced

her footsteps to steady. Stessa had yet to arrive, no doubt ensuring her death mask was painted on in perfect detail, the Ludist custom of showing respect for those who had passed. The girl was always late to meetings, but for once, it didn't aggravate Corra. Sixteen was far too young to deal with such monstrosities.

When Corra neared the dais, Marguerite lifted her veil. Corra startled. The Torian queen's usually clear alabaster skin was blotchy, and her sharp features softened from puffiness. She looked older than her forty years.

Marguerite stood and embraced her. Corra didn't register the contact until she was surrounded by her floral perfume.

"Are you all right?" Marguerite asked. "Do you need something to eat? You look unsteady on your feet." She pulled back, searching Corra's face. Corra willed herself to be calm, then nodded. The tightness around her chest had moved to her throat. Marguerite gave her arms a squeeze. Corra wished she could feel the warmth of the older woman's hands through her dermasuit.

"We must take care of ourselves, and each other, now more than ever," Marguerite said. "We are all we have." Sadness pulled at her brow and mouth.

"Yes," Corra replied, her gaze steadying on Marguerite's as she ignored the swirl of sorrow inside her.

The advisors had arranged three thrones close together on the dais to face one direction—Iris's quadrant. Corra had only seen the thrones encircling the Quadarian dial. She hesitated, unsure which throne to take. They all looked the same, and yet foreign, in that moment.

"Next to me, dear," Marguerite said, nodding beside her. Corra stared blankly. Iris should have been between them.

Marguerite took hold of Corra's gloved hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. Corra pressed her lips together—not quite a smile, not a frown. She could sense Marguerite's disappointment; she wanted someone to grieve with.

She wouldn't get that from an Eonist. Emotion clouded thoughts, muddying logic and intellect, and that got in the way of progress.

Corra took a deep breath and sat down. Immediately, she was affronted by the view. Every day, Corra sat facing north and the beginning of her quadrant. Although there were no walls inside the throne room to segregate what was and wasn't Eonist, she believed she could sense where her quadrant began and ended. She loved Eonia, and it didn't feel right facing toward the south of the room—toward Archia and neighboring Toria. She could see the Torian crest painted on the floor, depicting a boat crossing an ocean. Framing the boat was one large fishhook, and on the other side, a spyglass—symbolizing the quadrant's focus on trade and exploration. Next was the Ludist section of court, denoted by a painted crest of ribbons, garlands and gems encircling the sun and moon—the picture of frivolity.

Corra pressed her fingers to the crest stitched on the shoulder of her suit: a strand of DNA twisting together to form a loop—symbolizing community—and willed stillness to settle upon her skin.

Beyond the painted crests stood the advisors. They were all talking at once, their faces drawn in concern. There had always been an heir to inherit the throne before the passing of a queen—part of Queenly Law. A queen must give birth to a girl before she turned forty-five. Even Corra's future daughter would be

required to have her own baby girl before this milestone, ensuring the royal line.

Without a queen per quadrant, the borders that had safeguarded Quadara for decades would fracture and blur. No one wished to see the nation return to its combative past, and it was believed the quadrants, and their respective queens, maintained the peace. If Quadara grew weak, they risked other nations turning their attention to the wealthiest continent. The palace, and the governing advisors, could not risk Quadara's future.

The advisors hushed as Queen Stessa made her entrance. Her short black hair was twisted and curled around her gem laden crown, reminding Corra of a bird's nest. Dark red lines were painted in intricate patterns across her copper skin, leading down to her neck where a ribbon was tied to symbolize the injury that had taken Iris's life. The rest of her outfit was subdued—for a Ludist—a simple brown dress to represent the earth to which Iris would be returned, although metaphorically in this instance. The queens were laid to rest within the Queenly Tombs, hidden in the labyrinthine tunnels beneath the palace.

Stessa bowed to her sister queens, shutting her brown eyes briefly to reveal red-stained lids. The death mask complete. A shudder ran down Corra's spine. She was glad Eonists didn't have such strange and opulent customs. To draw attention to yourself was disrespectful; you should be staying quiet and contemplative when faced with loss.

"Apologies for my tardiness," Stessa said, taking her throne. And though her face was an image of grief, Corra could see no lines pulling down the corners of her lips. The youngest queen appeared to be the least affected of them all. Perhaps it was because

Stessa had known Iris for only a year? Or perhaps it was because Ludists took pleasure in the strangest of things. Everything a game, a reason to celebrate, flaunt an elaborate outfit and eat a wasteful amount of food.

Would Stessa fear her own death? Or would that be considered part of the game of life? Corra wondered. As an Eonist, Corra shouldn't believe in the Queens above or life after death, and yet she did, hoping she would one day be reunited with her mother.

"Let's begin," Marguerite said in her commanding voice. It felt wrong to begin without Iris here, as though they were sullyng her memory. The advisors took their seats. While Marguerite's presence was reassuring, it was clear no one knew what to do or say.

"Well?" Stessa asked after a moment of silence. "What do we do now?"

Iris's advisor, a tall and stern-looking woman with a wisp of white hair, stood from the line of advisors. "I will speak for my queen and for Archia."

The sister queens glanced at one another before nodding.

"Go ahead, Alissa," Marguerite said, her shrewd eyes prepared to analyze.

"Thank you, Queen Marguerite," she said. "As you all know, Queen Iris did not have a female heir. She was trying for children, but she had yet to have a fruitful match."

A lie. The truth was that Iris never tried to even find a match.

Corra glanced at Marguerite. Marguerite also hadn't produced an heir after years of trying. She'd been unable to carry to full term—even with assistance from Eonist medicines. Whispers had spread through the palace that she never would.

There hadn't been fewer than four queens for over two

hundred years—not since the tenth king of Quadara had taken a wife from each region of his nation. To taste all that Quadara has to offer, he'd famously said. When he had died unexpectedly and his four young wives had yet to produce any heirs, the queens decided they would rule in his place—one for each land of their origin. It had been the simplest solution.

Marguerite spoke, her shoulders inclined toward the advisors in front of her, her probing expression unchanged. "Surely we have prepared for such an event?" She glanced to her advisor, a tall man with a round and pleasant face named Jenri.

Jenri nodded. "Yes, that's correct, my queen. Queenly Law states that a female relative is allowed to take the throne in the absence of a female offspring."

Corra knew in these circumstances it wouldn't matter who this woman was, as long as they continued what the king's four wives—the original queens of Quadara—had started.

She could feel the tension; the palace needed an Archian heir, before the Quadarian people learned of Iris's passing. Only queens could uphold Queenly Law; without the laws, the nation would fall to disarray and give voice to those who questioned the relevance of the four queens and the walls in today's peaceful age. And it would further fuel the uprising stirring down on the Jetée in Toria; they wanted increased access to Ludia and Eonia, unhappy with their place within the nation's hierarchy.

Marguerite tried to keep her people appeased, allowing them to continue to run trade for Quadara, but she knew they wanted more.

Alissa nodded to Jenri. "We will begin our search to replace the departed queen at once."

“Departed?” Stessa snorted. “Iris was murdered! Her throat cut! You speak as if she chose to leave us.”

“I apologize for my wording,” Alissa replied, lowering her eyes.

Marguerite turned to the young queen. “Stessa, this is a tough time for us all. Do not take it out on the advisors. They grieve as we do.”

Stessa huffed. “Just because you’re the oldest doesn’t mean you can speak down to me. You don’t rule me, or Ludia.”

Marguerite held her hand out across Corra’s lap to reach for Stessa. “That was not my intention,” she said.

Stessa merely stared at Marguerite’s fingers. “Well, try harder, then.” Marguerite retracted her hand as though she’d been stung. “With one queen gone, you’re already taking the opportunity to steer this toward your interests.”

“My interests?” Marguerite sat back in her throne in irritation. “My interests are my quadrant, my sister queens and Quadara. That is all.”

“Unlikely!” Stessa replied. “You see this as an opportunity to have more of a voice in court! You’re Torian—of course you want to stick your nose into everyone’s business. Why can’t you leave us be?”

“Stop.” Corra rose from her throne. “We can’t turn on one another.” Iris was the strongest of them all; without her, they were already falling apart. “Why has no one spoken of what happened to her?”

Marguerite turned from Stessa with a small shake of her head. The two had been close when Stessa had first entered the palace, needing a motherly figure, but now the youngest queen seemed to take offense whenever Marguerite spoke.

“I’m sorry, Queen Corra,” Alissa began. “I didn’t know you hadn’t heard. It’s terrible, but her throat was—”

Corra stopped her with a wave of her hand. “No. No one has said who did it. Why are we bickering like children when there was a murderer in the palace? Who still might be in the palace?” Was she the only one focused on the actual issue?

Stessa sank further into her chair, curling into herself like a wounded animal. “A murderer?”

“One does not get murdered without a murderer,” Corra said bluntly. “Don’t be foolish.” She had wanted to say childish, but that was an easy shot. And Corra was not hot-blooded. She was calm. Still.

Steady hand. Steady heart, Corra reminded herself of her mother’s famous words.

“Of course we must find an heir for Archia,” Corra said to the advisors, her hand on a small lump where her watch was concealed beneath her dermasuit, “but we can’t forget what brought us here. We have to uncover who killed Iris and why.”

“She wasn’t very kind,” Stessa replied quietly, studying her black-painted nails.

Perhaps she wasn’t to Stessa, Corra thought. Iris had issues with the Ludist queen and her wavering temperament. She’d often said that Stessa was too young to take her position seriously.

“And she wanted too much from this.” Stessa glanced to the words engraved on the walls surrounding them. “More than was allowed.”

Corra snapped her attention to the Ludist queen. “What are you talking about?”

Stessa glanced away. “You know how she was.” But she left

something unsaid, her black brows knitting together, her death mask cracking.

No one spoke in Iris's defense. Something inside Corra's stomach twisted and burned.

"Queen Iris was a good queen," Marguerite said finally, her voice steady as though she dared anyone argue with her. She addressed Alissa. "And Queen Corra is correct. We need to uncover how someone made it into the palace undetected and killed Queen Iris. How was this person not spotted? And how were they allowed to carry out such a ghastly act unnoticed?"

"I will investigate, Queen Marguerite," Alissa replied.

"No," Corra said. All eyes were on her. She lowered her hand from her chest. "We need someone from outside the palace, outside of Queen Iris's staff. Someone on the outside of influence." And suspicion.

The sister queens nodded.

"I will call an inspector immediately," Corra said. "We will uncover the truth."

CHAPTER FIVE

Keralie

I stared at the back of the messenger's worn top hat. What was his plan? Ask Mackiel for the comm case? Steal it back?

Unless he planned to win the comm case in the auction . . .

There was no way he'd be able to afford it. The comm case was sure to ignite a bidding frenzy. People would fight for the chance to use unique technology from Eonia and witness the quadrant for themselves. While I'd never had the pleasure of the experience myself, I knew comm chips allowed Eonists to share memories.

The messenger was a fool to come here. Mackiel's henchmen wouldn't be far—the mere sight of them was sure to send the boy running back to his perfect, polished quadrant before they even laid a hand on him.

No one appeared to notice the messenger wasn't one of their own. But even if I hadn't seen the black dermasuit tucked beneath his collar, his movements gave him away. Calm and controlled. Not fidgety like Torians. We didn't have time to be still. We didn't have the luxury. And he was too clean cut. His sharp cheekbones, defined jaw and perfect skin stood out amongst the grimy faces in the crowd; the seafarers who hadn't had time to bathe before the

auction began, bringing their sea-tarnished quarters and the stink of fish along with them.

I waited for the messenger to reveal his plan, while he waited for his comm case to be unveiled.

Mackiel's musical voice filled the room. "And that, my fair Torians, is the last item up for auction this evening." Everyone groaned in response. He fluttered his hands at them. "Don't fret! Don't fret! For my dippers will have a mountain of goods from all quadrants for tomorrow night." He tilted his bowler hat, his lips pursed. "No one misses out here!"

What? I tore my eyes from the messenger to glare at Mackiel. Where was my comm case? Mackiel never held on to a ware for another night, always sold it as soon as he claimed it, ensuring the owner didn't come to collect.

Like the messenger.

The audience began shuffling out the front door and back to their lives. The fleeting moment when they'd glimpsed another quadrant gone. I stepped to the side to let them pass. When I looked back to the messenger, he'd disappeared.

What was Mackiel thinking? Had he received an early offer? High-profile clients, those who claimed to be above all that the Jetée had to offer, were allowed to bid early so as not to be spotted in the crowd. Someone like Governor Tyne.

"You," a voice said from behind me. A breath tickled my neck. I spun.

It was the messenger. His dark curls were tucked under his hat, his moon-like eyes gleaming like a cat's in the dark.

Before I could reply, he pulled me into a side corridor by my

sleeve and pressed the edge of a long cylinder to the base of my neck. And although such a device had never been against my skin, I knew the shape. An Eonist destabilizer. “Where is my comm case?” he asked.

I stood still, not wanting the current to spark my skin and travel to my brain, rendering me unconscious, or worse. Destabilizers were used by wall guards when someone tried to illegally enter another quadrant. On the lowest setting, it resulted in you losing consciousness, and the contents of your bowels. At the highest setting, it liquefied your brain and interior organs.

“I don’t have it.” I barely moved my lips, let alone anything else. I wanted to keep my insides where they belonged.

Where were Mackiel’s henchmen when I needed them?

The messenger kept the destabilizer against my neck. “You played me. You stole from me. Tell me where the comm case is, and I won’t be forced to press this button.”

“Press the button, and you’re shit out of luck.” He flinched at my curse. Cursing wasn’t allowed in Eonia, it betrayed emotion. But it would be the least of his worries when Mackiel’s henchmen arrived. “You’ll never find out where the comm case is.”

He pressed the destabilizer harder into my neck. The current tingled my exposed skin.

“I need that comm case and the chips inside,” he said.

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“You have ten seconds.”

“I told you, I don’t have it.”

He spun me around to face him. “Where is it, then? Why wasn’t it up for auction?”

“Drop the destabilizer, and I’ll find out.”

He studied my face for a moment before loosening his grip. “Okay, agreed.” He jerked his chin backstage. “Take me to it.”

“Stay here, and I’ll find out when it’s going to be sold.”

“No. That wasn’t our agreement.”

Ha, of course! Eonist morality meant their words were like a blood promise—a binding agreement. I could use this to my advantage.

I tucked a curl behind my ear. “You don’t want to meet Mackiel, trust me. He’ll gut you for coming here. I’ll find out when the comm case is up for auction, and you can return to bid for it then.”

He stared at me, his Eonist face still. “You want me to bid for an item you stole?”

I shrugged. “That’s how it works.”

“That’s not how it works in Eonia.”

I batted my eyes at him. “You’re not in Eonia.”

“That comm case and the chips inside belong to me. To my employer.” He fiddled with a small device hooked around his ear, a comm line, allowing him to communicate with someone long distance—an Eonist technology.

“Now they belong to mine.” I smiled sweetly.

“You don’t seem to be understanding me.”

No. This messenger didn’t get it. Mackiel didn’t take well to betrayal. I’d seen dippers kicked out on their ass for a lot less. I wouldn’t—couldn’t—go home. I’d take my chances with this messenger boy. And yet behind his calm Eonist appearance was a hint of desperation.

“I’m sorry,” I said, though I wasn’t. Not really. “You were my target, and the comm case is Mackiel’s now. The only way to get it back is to win it at auction.”

He must have realized I wasn't lying, as he released me.

"If I don't deliver that comm case," he said quietly, studying the moldy floorboards, "my job will be forfeited." He raised his eyes, rimmed with black lashes; a shiver ran along my back from the intensity of his expression. "Without work, they'll move up my death date."

Death date?

He noticed my confusion and clarified. "I'm as good as dead. Please, I'll give you anything you want in return."

I glanced around the auction house; the floor was a mess of food wrappers and globs of tobacco spittle. Stray dogs were sniffing out anything edible and pissing and shitting wherever they pleased. Without any wares on display and Mackiel's smoke and mirrors, the auction house's true form was exposed. And though it stank of unwashed bodies, dog shit and rot, it was home.

"I'm sorry." I meant it this time. "What's on the comm chips?" Coming from the House of Concord, the one place where Eonists, Torians, Ludists and Archians did business together, the memory had to be of high importance. Perhaps it had come from the palace itself?

"It's not my job to know, and it doesn't matter," he said. "I just need them back."

"Okay." I looked around for the other dippers, but they'd all left to follow the auction winners back to their homes for the payment exchange. I was the only one left behind. "Okay," I repeated. "Wait here and I'll go get it for you."

"No, I'll come with you." He pressed a button on the side of his comm line. "I'll have it soon," he said to the person on the other end. While Eonists don't get angry, the muffled voice on the

other end sounded pretty irate. The messenger's eyes flashed to mine. "Yes, I'll deliver it tomorrow, first thing." The messenger pressed the button again, and the other voice went quiet.

That wasn't going to work. I wasn't really going to steal it back for him; I needed to get away and find Mackiel. He'd know what to do. "I told you, that's not a good idea. You stay here, and I'll get your comm case back." I gave him my sweetest Torian smile. "Promise."

"I don't believe you," he said.

I didn't blame him. "If Mackiel sees you with me, he'll know what's going on." I gestured to his clothing. "You may have the crowd fooled, but you won't fool him."

He stared at me for a moment before saying, "Be quick."

I was getting tired of people telling me that.

MACKIEL'S OFFICE WAS empty, but I knew he wouldn't be far.

Stolen wares were locked in a vault hidden behind a Ludist landscape—a maze of canals and bridges—a painting his father had stolen back when he was a fledgling dipper. We all knew what lay behind it, although we would never have dared open it.

I sat down in Mackiel's chair to await his return. The harbor looked different from here. Beautiful, even. If you ignored the smell, you could imagine overlooking a vast constellation, the boats' lanterns on the black sea like stars in the night sky. And Mackiel was king of this nocturnal kingdom. Until the Torian queen tore this place down.

"What are you doing?" a voice asked from behind me. I spun in the chair, a hand to my chest.

The messenger stood in the doorway.

“I told you to stay put!” I gasped for air. I wasn’t used to being snuck up on.

“Did you get the comm case?”

“I got tired. Needed to rest first.” I placed my feet up on the desk.

He stepped toward me, the destabilizer raised. “Stop wasting my time.”

That was exactly what I was going to do until Mackiel and his henchmen returned. Instead, I accidentally glanced at the painting.

He noticed my mistake and approached the wall. He ran his fingers along the brushstrokes before removing the landscape.

“Oh, well,” I said, looking at the bare brick wall behind the artwork. “I guess I really don’t know where it is.” I tried not to sound too smug.

“It’s an Eonist safe,” he said. He pressed his hand to the wall. For a moment, the bricks shimmered, as if something reflective lay behind them.

When had Mackiel upgraded to an Eonist safe? And why? It had to have something to do with the comm case and the chips inside. What memory did they hold that required this kind of security?

“Open it,” the messenger said with a jerk of his head.

I pressed my hand to the wall and it shimmered again. “Does this look like something I can open?”

He let out an exasperated breath. “Open the vault, and I won’t hurt you.”

I held up my hands. “I’m not lying to you. I can’t open this.”

“You’re a thief,” he said, disgust dripping from his words.

“The best,” I added with a grin.

“Then open it.” He moved forward, the destabilizer pointed toward my head.

I took a step back. “Let’s not be too hasty here. This is Eonist tech.” I’d heard about Jetée businesses acquiring Eonist security to ward off other Torians. “I don’t even know how it works.”

“The vault is keyed to the thoughts of its owner. It opens only when the owner wants it to be opened.”

“Mackiel will never open it for you.” Where was Mackiel?

He continued, ignoring me. “The vault is built from micro-organisms, like the technology embedded into the material of our dermasuits. At the core, they’re sentient.”

“This is all very interesting”—I waved my hand at the wall—“but none of this is going to help. I’m a thief, as you said, not a therapist. I can’t help unscramble, or scramble, a mind—whatever the case may be.”

Hang on. I blinked. I couldn’t scramble a mind, but I knew what could. “Give me your destabilizer.”

The messenger looked at me as though I were mad. “No.”

I placed my hand on my hips. “I can unlock the vault.” Although I wasn’t planning on it. Once the destabilizer was in my hands, I could use it on the messenger.

He looked between the wall and his weapon, then aahed in understanding. Too bad he wasn’t as dumb as his stony expression suggested. He removed his hat and ran a hand through his black curls. “Please move aside.”

“Only because you asked nicely.”

He held the destabilizer to the wall and pressed the small button at the base. A bright blue streak flashed on the wall before the bricks disappeared altogether, the microorganisms now unconscious.

And although I should've been concerned about Mackiel finding us breaking into his vault, I couldn't help but enjoy the buzz. For a moment, caught up in the game, I forgot where I was.

The vault yawned back into the darkness. I squinted. It hadn't been this large the last time I'd been in here. Mackiel must have extended into the room next door—his quarters. Why hadn't he told me? And what else was he hiding?

The messenger flipped a switch on his destabilizer, and light bled out in a circle, illuminating the alcove in an instant. The closest shelves were mostly empty, making the silver comm case easy to locate.

I darted forward and slid the comm case into my palm before the messenger could reach for it.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Ensuring my safety.” I stepped back out of the vault, my eyes fixed on the destabilizer. “We'll do a swap. You give me your destabilizer, and I'll give you the comm case.” Come on, come on.

The messenger stepped forward but then stopped, his gaze trained on the office doorway. I turned reluctantly.

“Hello, darlin'.” Mackiel was blocking the exit, a pistol in his hand.

The messenger held the destabilizer up, but it was useless against Mackiel at a distance. I'd seen more powerful destabilizers that shot darts of voltage, but it was clear this smaller destabilizer was meant for hand-to-hand combat.

“Mackiel!” I said in relief. “Thank the queens above you’re here. This messenger said he’d destabilize me if I didn’t return his comm case.”

Mackiel moved to stand behind his desk, his pistol unwavering. “Is that so?”

I frowned at him, confused by his cold reaction. I knew how it looked, but I would never betray Mackiel.

“Yes.” Now was not the time to be playing games.

The messenger shot me an angry look, an expression I wouldn’t have believed he was capable of making.

“Kera, darlin’,” Mackiel mused. “My most daring, my most talented . . . my best dipper.” He didn’t say friend. I stayed quiet, unsure where he was going with this and scared by the deadly look in his eye. “And my best liar.” He smirked. “I’ve trained you well.”

Only then did I realize the pistol was aimed at me.

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “You know me. I would never—”

“Oh, be quiet!” he snapped. “I know exactly what you would and wouldn’t do. Hand over the comm case. Now.”

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked. “You know I wouldn’t betray you.”

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying you’d never leave me for dead?” He scratched at his neck.

“That was years ago! You know that was an accident!” And what did that have to do with the comm case? What was so important about the memories the chips held?

“An accident?” He pursed his lips. “Like your father’s? Many people seem to have accidents around you.”

I flinched as though I’d been slapped. He’d never spoken to

me that way. He'd grown cold, yes, but never cruel. This wasn't my friend. The boy I knew would never have thrown that in my face. He had comforted me after my father had been gravely injured. He'd given me a place to live when I couldn't face my mother. Why was he turning on me now?

"Give me the comm case before my finger slips," Mackiel said with a sly grin, "accidentally."

Was I about to become another body to dump in the sewer? Was it really the henchmen or Mackiel who'd been getting "carried away"?

"Please, Mackiel." I held my hands out, my dipper bracelet dangling from my wrist. "Don't do this!"

He pointed the pistol at the messenger. "Move." He gestured to me with the barrel. "Stand beside her."

I knew what he was planning. He always wanted to prove he was tougher than he looked. Would he kill me to do it?

"Quickly!" he said.

Mackiel had selected the messenger for me to steal from, somehow he'd known what was on the chips and how vital they were. Vital to the survival of the auction house, which was all he had left of his father. Was it a memory from his father? Surely not. But he obviously cared more about this comm case than our friendship. I would have to use that against him.

I shoved the window behind me open. "Come any closer, and I'll throw the comm case into the sea." I placed my hand out in the frigid air. "Then you'll have to take a swim to the bottom of the ocean to retrieve it." Both of us could use that day. The day he almost drowned.

“You wouldn’t.” Mackiel stopped dead, the pistol drooping a little in his hand.

“I thought you knew what I would and wouldn’t do?” I glanced to the messenger. His face showed a flicker of fear. I was going to have to be brave for the both of us.

“Now, now,” Mackiel said. Was that sweat beading across his forehead? “Don’t do anything foolish.” The sea would erode the chips; he wouldn’t allow me to send these memories and his father’s business to the ocean floor.

“Let us go,” I said, “and we’ll give you the comm case, and the destabilizer as a bonus, because we’re such good friends.” I showed my teeth, not quite a smile. “It will sell well tomorrow night. It will make your patrons happy. No one else has to know what happened here.” That was why he wanted to get rid of us, right? His reputation. He would have his comm case back and whatever memories were on the chips.

Mackiel gave me a wolfish grin. “Give me the comm case, and I won’t send two bullets to make a home in your belly.”

He wouldn’t.

Or rather, the old Mackiel wouldn’t. He’d spent too many years pretending to be ruthless, too many years trying to impress his father with darker and darker deeds, desperate to earn his attention, his love. And since hiring the henchmen, he’d crossed a line that couldn’t be uncrossed.

The metal case was cool in my palm, soothing. All I had now was the comm case and the chips within it. I needed Mackiel to care about me as much as he seemed to care about these chips. There was only one option left.

My eyes flashed to the messenger before I pressed the button on the top of the comm case. A hiss echoed as the lid lifted. Both Mackiel and the messenger froze.

“Careful, darlin’,” Mackiel said, his voice low, his gaze darting to the open window and the water below. “Let’s step away from the window . . .”

Before he could lunge for me, I picked up the four round translucent chips from inside the case and shoved them in my mouth. As the chips dissolved on my tongue, the embedded video links traveled to my brain, tapping into my synapses and taking hold of my senses. They transported me to another time and place. I was no longer in Mackiel’s office.

I was in the palace.

And I was covered in blood.