

CHAPTER ONE

“Good morning, lieutenant. Come in.”

I enter as the door closes behind me.

“I’m the royal arbiter, Rehoboth.” The woman motions to the older man beside her. “I assume you know General Uriah.”

I tilt from habit as the general nods.

Rehoboth indicates a nearby chair. “Please, sit.”

I glance at the chair. It seems comfortable and inviting, a simple chair in a cozy room, and the other aesthetics around me complete the illusion. Warm tapestries depict lazy, rural life. A plush carpet cushions the stone floor. An intricately carved door shields us from interruption.

But it’s a thin veneer. I know there are unyielding granite walls behind the tapestries and two sentries posted outside the heavy door. I wonder what treachery lurks behind Rehoboth’s relentless smile and immaculate attire, and I stay standing.

“As you wish,” Rehoboth concedes. With perfect poise, she sits beside Uriah behind the cedar desk that separates her bench from the judgment seat. “Can we fetch you anything?”

I don’t answer.

“Tea, perhaps?”

“This isn’t going to take that long,” I finally say.

Her smile widens. “I’m sorry. You *do* know why you’re here?”

“I read the summons.”

“Then—”

“You’ve made a mistake, your grace,” I cut in. “You think I’ll incriminate him. But I won’t.”

Peter Michael Diamantopoulos

“Lieutenant, please.” She speaks soothingly, like she’s trying to convince me there are no dragons under my bed. “You’re only here to fill in the gaps.”

“You have the wrong man. You should question Abner.”

“We already did.” She lifts a neat stack of parchment sheets. Her notes, I’m guessing. “Captain Abner left most of the gaps.”

“Interview Damascus, then.”

“He has refused to defend himself.”

I don’t believe that, not for a moment, but I just shrug and ask, “Can’t you force his compliance?”

The arbiter chuckles. “Even if we could, I doubt he’d provide straight answers.”

“And you expect something different from me?”

Rehoboth’s smile cracks. She glances at Uriah.

Like a trained dog, the general growls. “You’re an experienced soldier, Mordecai. A Vanguard agent. Surely you’re capable of some professional objectivity.”

I approach the desk. “You want my report, the story of my redemption. My life is forever changed, and you expect objectivity?”

“We expect the truth,” Rehoboth tries again.

“The truth?” It’s my turn to laugh. “Then why are we behind closed doors?”

Rehoboth raises an eyebrow. “Would you rather we open an official investigation? Start a trial? Call witnesses?”

“That would not end well,” Uriah assures me. “You instigated a war. There are many angry people who need someone to blame.”

“If you think I’m responsible, just execute me. Don’t waste my time.”

Rehoboth leans closer. She asks something I didn’t expect: “Are you responsible?”

Good question.

But I don’t reply. Instead I scan the room again. My eyes settle on the long desk that separates me from my interrogators. I notice

the objects lying there, Rehoboth's collection of evidence. Her research has produced impressive results thus far. She's already gathered samples of the strange alkali powder. She's confiscated the cursed obsidian armor, white shards from the porcelain horse and those delicate lace gloves. There's something else too—a small object wrapped in a folded scrap of velvet.

No! Rehoboth, you fool!

My pulse throbs. My hands tremble and sweat. I bite my tongue to stem curses that demand release, but Uriah notices my mania.

“Lieutenant?”

I inhale deeply, and when I look up to his earnest eyes, I find an anchor against the inner storm that threatens to drag me away. He's playing his part well—I'll give him that. For the briefest moment, I actually believe the general cares about my fate, and maybe he does. Perhaps if he hears the story—the whole story—he'll understand why my actions were necessary. Maybe he'll even absolve me. I was acting partially under his orders, after all.

Rehoboth will be harder to convince. I could probably rearrange the stars sooner than change the condemnation behind that smile, but I don't have a choice. I can't remain quiet, not if the stone is here. No, she must be warned. Otherwise she may try it herself, and I can't allow that.

I sink into the comfortable chair. I swallow the spines in my throat and gather my thoughts. There can be no mistakes. I must be absolutely precise. I must say the right things in the right sequence for the right reasons, or they might draw the wrong conclusion.

Soon I'm ready. “Very well, I'll speak.”

“Thank you,” Rehoboth chimes.

“But I won't just fill the gaps,” I add. “If you want the truth, then you must hear it. All of it.”

