

REBIRTH BOOK ONE

# THE GOD QUEEN



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Edited by Tiffany White at Writers Untapped

# **PART ONE**

# **THE WOMAN**

# CHAPTER ONE

The screams drew Rei's attention. She stood at the steps of the boarded-up temple when the first one pierced the quiet of their small town. It came from the restaurant on the other side of the square.

She dashed down the stairs and onto the street, jumping inadvertently in front of a hover car whose driver honked and yelled. She didn't listen as she rushed past the long-dead fountain, now filled with sand and earth. Gravel crunched beneath her feet as she approached the ever-growing crowd. Not a cloud dotted the clear blue sky, the sun beat down on them mercilessly, and the smell of sweat and dirt filled Rei's nose. She pushed her small frame to the front to get a clear view, heart hammering in her chest. He had been threatening this for months, yet Rei prayed he wouldn't actually go through with it, but disappointment pooled in her belly as her fear was confirmed.

"Drops of Jupiter," someone muttered. "Why couldn't the cleric give him a quick death? That poison takes too long."

The boy lay writhing on the ground, blood running from his nose and ears, sand caking his dark hair. Rei turned to leave, blood pounding in her ears, but the crowd was now too thick around her and she couldn't move.

"He prayed to false gods," her neighbor, an elderly woman, said under her breath. "The cleric said this would be the fate of those who won't worship the One True God."

Ever since Earth voted to remain a part of the Dominion, the other gods were outlawed, despite the fact the holy city lay only a few hundred kilometers away from where Rei stood.

She fought to breathe as her heart raced. She never intended to convert, and the threat of not doing so had become too real.

The victim's scream brought Rei's eyes back to him. Folks said the poison fried the nerves, giving the victim the sensation of being electrocuted as the poison opened all the blood vessels in the head and caused blood to leak out of the nose and ears.

The cleric overseeing the execution sat in one of the outdoor tables of the restaurant, his dark eyes hard. His full lips turned down in a sneer at the poor soul in agony before him. It was a contrast to the cheerful, blue- and white-checkered umbrellas and table covers.

Rei's stomach turned in knots. "Drops of Jupiter is a horrible way to die," she whispered.

Eventually his writhing stopped, and the boy's eyes stared at the heavens while his mouth opened in a silent scream.

"Let this be a lesson for those who still follow that blasphemous religion," the cleric said. "The rest of you have until the end of the week to join the correct religion, or else." He combed his fingers through sleek blonde hair before leaving. The crowd parted as he walked past, until he caught Rei watching him. She averted her gaze, kicking herself for attracting his attention.

She peered at her watch, trying to appear bored as the cleric approached her. The holographic hands reminded her she was running late, but she never ran from a fight. She pulled her dark hair up in a knot as she began to perspire. Her lips pressed together until there was nothing more than a line after the crowd dispersed and left the boy's body on the ground.

"I hope you're satisfied," the cleric said. "His death is on your hands."

Rei's nails bit into her palm at the accusation. She wasn't the one who decided which religion was the correct one and who should die for it. "Mine?" she growled.

"Yes, you and the others who so heinously turn your backs on the One True God."

"Why are you so threatened by a boy who believes in many gods instead of one?" she asked, finally meeting his gaze.

“I am not threatened. The One True God wills it. The Dominion wills it.”

Rei’s legs grew weak, but she refused to back down as they locked eyes.

“And what of the will of the god queen?” she asked, standing a little straighter.

The cleric cackled. “She doesn’t exist and neither do those other false idols.”

“I believe she does.”

“You believe wrong.”

She rolled her eyes. They had been going back and forth like this for months. At first, Rei wanted to leave him be. She may not have agreed with his religion, but she respected his right to worship as he saw fit. But once he started trying to force his religion by boarding up the temple, bringing in Dominion soldiers to rough up locals who were caught worshipping during holy days, smashing the ceramic statues of the gods around town—including the one her brother bought for her—it became personal.

“I know you’re one of the reasons why many won’t follow the One True God.” His voice was dangerously low. “The people see you not converting, and they think they don’t have to either.”

“They shouldn’t have to.”

He crept closer to her, the smell of his cologne choking Rei. “You will convert. Even if I have to tie you down and perform the rite myself.”

Rei chuckled. “Tie me down? Kinky. Your threats don’t scare me. Try harder.” She spun on her heels and walked away, gritting her teeth. It took all of her willpower to not punch him in the throat.

“Remember you have a week,” he called. “A week until I make you the next example.”

She continued through the alley that opened to the two main roads intersecting at the center of town. She walked along the wall of the basilica of the One True God, where someone had decorated the outside with graffiti. The bright greens and blues contrasted against the pale earth-colored bricks.

Once she was sure the cleric hadn't followed her, the adrenaline rushed from her legs and she leaned against the wall for support. Her heart pounded in her chest. She shouldn't have allowed him to get so close.

"I wish someone would tie him down," she muttered as she cut across the intersection, and one of the hover cars honked as she passed. She needed to get to the bar. It didn't matter what the cleric threatened; he would never set foot in her place of business. She was safe there.

The cleric came into town shortly after the most recent elections and constantly flexed his powers, knowing he had the full weight of Dominion support behind him. She never bothered learning his name—that would have required humanizing him, and she wanted to do no such thing. Both religions had lived peacefully in the town of Ballarat for years. Rei didn't understand why that had to change now. That wasn't true. She knew it was a question of control. It was what the Dominion did best.

Rei wondered if she should go ahead and convert. The action would be hollow since she knew the gods existed. She knew they would return to save the star cluster—one had already been reborn.

She shook her head. If she gave into that monster's demands, her influence would turn away more people from the gods. The idea fueled her anger and drove her to want to take action. No one should choose a religion based on what she did, anyway. People should believe what they wished.

## CHAPTER TWO

Rei meandered down the sidewalk, passing between the parked cars along the sidewalk and the low adobe buildings with curved aluminum roofs until she arrived at the business she owned with her mother, Coronta Bar, with its flickering neon sign of a blooming flower. They couldn't afford a holographic sign, but Rei liked the way the flower shone at night. She pulled aside the deep green cloth that served as the door, feeling its rough texture in her hand, and entered.

Rei took a moment to let the events of the last few minutes settle around her. She didn't hate living in Ballarat, right at the edge of the Great Basin—the one on Earth, not the famous one on Proxima Centauri II. Yet ever since the last election, Rei grew more and more anxious to leave. She didn't mind living on a Dominion planet before, but her religious freedom wasn't impeded on before either. Unfortunately, she didn't know where she could go.

She pushed down those feelings and continued down the steps into the bar. The main body dove deep underground where it was naturally cooler.

It was a slow day, but there was plenty of laughter and talk that echoed off the walls and rang in her ears. It was a welcoming sound. The place boasted enough chairs and tables to fit most of the village, and to her left was the bar, a curved structure already filled with a few customers on stools. Her mother, Hotara, stood on the other side, filling orders with a speed and skill that bordered on magic while laughing at some joke.

Eyes shifted to Rei as she entered. Not all of them, but some. She was used to it. Most of the town inhabitants were capable of tracing their family lineage back several generations. With a population of no more than five hundred, their gene pool wasn't large



or varied. Almost everyone shared the same Ballaratan dark eyes and black hair, making Rei's pale green eyes and brown hair an oddity. Of course, that wasn't the only thing that drew stares, judging from the way their gazes looked her up and down, lingering a little longer than they needed, but it was one of them. It made her "exotic," or at least that's the way she put it.

Hotara, on the other hand, was considered more alluring with her porcelain skin, despite years under the harsh sun, and raven hair, which she always kept in a practical braid. Rei could count on one hand the number of times she had seen her mother's hair loose. It cascaded like the shiny silks Rei saw in the market. Her mother's face also had an ageless quality that made patrons always try to guess how old she was. At first glance, Rei and Hotara appeared to be the same age, but it was Hotara's eyes that gave away her years. Rei couldn't help but be jealous, especially of her mother's lilac irises—an even rarer attribute to all the known planets of the star cluster.

Rei approached the bar where her mother poured several shots of Coronta—a deep violet liqueur Hotara personally distilled—on a tray sticky with the remnants of other drinks. Rei snatched two of the shots, quickly tossed back the first one, and gasped. The temporary burning gave way to warmth that started in her belly and flowed through the rest of her body. She sipped the second one slowly. All the while, her mother didn't comment, simply pouring two more shots. She picked up the tray and handed it to Rei. "Table four, and I am taking those shots out of your pay."

Rei took another sip. "You don't even pay me."

Her mother gave Rei an impish grin. "Oh damn, you're right. Just take that tray, and there will be another one waiting for you when you get back to me."

She did as she was told and returned to find Hotara holding another shot. Rei took it gratefully.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Rei let the burning liqueur warm her tongue before she swallowed and spoke. "There was an execution. The baker's son who refused to convert."

Hotara was silent for several seconds, staring at the far back wall. “Gods. What is happening to this town?”

“Apparently, I am to blame since I won’t fall in line. If I don’t convert and convince the others to do so, I will be the next sacrifice.” Rei leaned in closer to her mother. “It’s not safe for us to stay here anymore. We should leave, but I don’t want to leave Ballarat at the mercy of that asshole.”

“We’re not leaving.” Hotara took the used glasses and ran them through the motorized brush, the soapy suds covered her hand. “It’s safer for you here. We can deal with the cleric together.”

Rei’s face fell. “Safer? Are you serious? He singled me out.”

“There are more dangerous monsters out in the star cluster than a cleric who has to pick on small women to feel strong.”

Rei leaned against the bar and crossed her arms. Her mother was referring to the stranger who’d been hunting Rei her entire life, who killed her parents.

Rei set down her unfinished shot and took the cleaned glasses from her foster mother to dry them before putting them back on the shelf. “You have yet to tell me who this monster is. An invisible threat was scary when I was a child, but I’m twenty-two.”

“I never told you who it was because I wanted you to have a normal childhood. I didn’t want you consumed by pursuing someone who will never find you here.” Hotara jammed a glass vigorously onto the brush.

“You told my brother.”

Hotara stopped and let out a loud breath. “And look where that got Niklaryn. He was so consumed with revenge that it killed him.”

The hair on the back of Rei’s neck prickled. “Technically he was murdered by his best friend—”

“Don’t get smart with me; you know what I mean. You are safer here. End of discussion.”

Rei sighed, reached for her unfinished shot, and kicked back the rest of it. There were few things that scared her mother and whoever hunted Rei did. That alone gave Rei

pause. Without this unknown threat hanging above her head, she would have left to avenge Niklaryn years ago. Instead, she had to stay because her brother died to keep her safe. Perhaps Hotara was right, there was no need to run. They would handle the cleric—he was just one man. She continued drying the rest of the glasses while Hotara drifted between tables for more orders.

Rei's gaze wandered around their little bar. Since the main room sat so low underground, the only lights came from old lamps stained from years of patrons smoking. The walls boasted a few old posters of bands who used to perform as they passed through. Other posters displayed advertisements, including one for the Ettowa Star Line—her family's most well-known business endeavor: luxury starships. But they were relatives she'd never met. No one in her family was aware she hid out here. She didn't dare even speak the name *Ettowa* out loud without Hotara worrying whose attention they would attract.

Rei used to daydream one of her relatives would find her and bring her back into the family, but the likelihood grew slimmer as she grew older. If an Ettowa were ever to come to Ballarat, now would be the best time. With their money and connections, Rei would use them to avenge her brother, or at least get away from the cleric. Yet, she knew she would never leave Hotara behind, and the stubborn woman refused to leave.

Across the bar sat one of their regulars, Sagitan Bronto, a retired Daer Knight, who wore his white hair short, which contrasted against his dark brown skin. His clothes fit his body well, accentuating that he was still in shape despite his age. For someone who spent a good part of the day at Coronta Bar, he rarely drank. He claimed he “simply enjoyed the company.”

He watched one of the popular video logs on his touch screen, his back to her so she had the perfect view.

Even though Rei didn't hear what the reporter said, the flash of bombs in another nameless city gave her a hint of what Sagitan was watching.

“More news on the civil war?” she asked.

Sagitan turned and put the screen down on the bar. “Yes. Trappist V wants to become Federation, but there is a strong Dominion base. They have elections coming up, but the violent ones can’t wait. I’m interested in seeing how that plays out.”

Another image of dark figures in red robes appeared on the screen, along with the byline about Infiernen Jessar and his Infinity Dogs almost making an appearance on Trappist V.

“Hasn’t that man done enough damage? People should vote as they want, not because of fear,” muttered Sagitan.

Rei’s hatred for Infiernen ran deeper than his love of violence, and watching him use the same fear tactics as the cleric set her teeth on edge.

“Apparently not,” she muttered. Her hand reached for the ring she wore on a cord around her neck. It belonged to her brother and was all that was left of him. “I wish the god queen would hurry up and return. She could rid us of the Dominion, and we can get some peace and quiet. He can die first.” She pointed to the image of Infiernen on the screen.

“Who says it has to be the god queen?” asked Sagitan. “Or any of the gods? People can also move mountains, even if it is one stone at a time. You simply need to put yourself into a position where you can govern the change you want to see.”

“Me? I am pretty sure you heard Hotara. Putting myself in such a position would require I leave Ballarat, and I am not going anywhere.”

“Like I said, dear, one stone at a time. There’s good you can do here and still defy the Dominion.”

He was right. She hated the Dominion’s current war on religion, among other things, and they needed someone to teach them a lesson. She may not reach the likes of Infiernen, but the cleric was close enough. An idea formed her in mind. It was simple, but it would be a start.

“Hotara,” Rei called across the room. Her mother had been chatting with customers and her head jerked up at the mention of her name. “I hope you don’t mind getting less sleep tonight. I have a stone I want to move.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Rei yawned as she surveyed her handy work. She, Hotara, and Sagitan stayed up most of the night ripping up boards from around the temple windows and doors before piling them in front of the basilica of the One True God on the other side of the square. Rei continued on her own later, sweeping the temple, lighting the incense, and laying flowers at each of the twelve statues inside.

The temple matched the buildings around it with its low walls and aluminum roof, but the stained-glass windows made it unique. Its large weathered wooden doors were open. One image portrayed the God King Manden with a war hammer held high, while the other portrayed the God Queen Mica with her bladed staff. The soft smoke of incense spilled out down the steps and around several locals already gathered around the entrance. Most of them fervently wiped their faces of the dirt that permeated every inch of the town before entering. It didn't help.

Ballarat was cradled at the base of the Panamint Mountains, just at the outskirts of Death Valley. There were a few plants that managed to thrive in the heat, but they all had a perpetual layer of dust that allowed the vegetation to blend in with the dry earth around it—just like Ballarat's residents.

Rei picked the petals off a Golden Evening Primrose from her perch at the dead fountain as she continued to observe. The crowd had grown steadily since she arrived after breakfast. A few were even the recent “converts” to the One True God. She smiled. One stone at a time. Niklaryn would have been proud. Even from this distance, the smell of Princesplums and incense from the temple tickled her nose.

“Rei, darling.” Virga, Sagitan’s wife, appeared at her side. She planted a soft kiss on Rei’s cheek. She wore a bright scarf with pink and purple flowers, and her light blue eyes twinkled when she smiled. She had a round face made more prominent by the scarf.

“How are you?”

Rei stifled another yawn. “Tired from doing the gods’ work, but good. Yourself?”

“I’m well, thank you.” Virga gave her a knowing smile.

Rei glimpsed another familiar face towering over the older woman. His attention fixated on the touch screen in his hands.

“Hello, Arram.”

Virga’s grandson was a head taller than she was, yet a few years younger. He slouched as though he didn’t want to draw attention to himself. Like a shadow, he always kept to his grandmother’s side. He met Rei’s gaze and blinked at her with violet eyes. However, he didn’t respond.

“Arram,” Virga muttered.

“Hi,” he said, although it sounded more like a grunt.

“I don’t know what to do with this boy.” Virga linked arms with the younger woman, pulling her off the fountain. “Shall we?”

Rei hesitated. She knew she probably shouldn’t linger at the scene of the crime, so to speak. It was enough to reopen the temple for Ballarat, but she wasn’t sure how much she should push her luck. The cleric didn’t look pleased when he found the pile of wood at his doorstep this morning. It would only be a matter of time before he retaliated, and she would have to watch her drinks for poison from now on. For now, she would rather remind him these people belonged to her gods, not his.

“It’s not a good idea. I’m supposed to be converting.”

Virga laughed and released Rei’s arm. “Sagitan told me. Next time you plan a stunt like that again, let me know. I love to rebel.”

Rei covered her mouth in an attempt at feigned shock. “Stunt? Virga, I don’t know what you’re talking about. The temple was open when I arrived here this morning. Maybe our darling cleric finally realized we can all live in harmony?”

Both women glanced at the cleric, who scowled from his post at the entrance to the basilica, its hideous structure towering high above the buildings around it. Its golden roof reflected a sun beam into Rei's face.

Virga chuckled softly. "Of course. You are a model citizen and incapable of doing anything illegal." She cupped Rei's cheek. "Then run along before the cleric decides he wants a word with you. Your mother invited us over for dinner tonight, so we'll see you later. All right?"

Rei nodded and Virga turned to leave. "Come along, Arram," she called to her grandson.

"I'll be right there." His head tilted to the side as he edged closer to Rei.

She never liked the way he studied at her, the same way the cleric would look at a bug before squashing it under his shoe. She didn't know where Arram and his grandparents lived before they came to Ballarat, but she smelled privilege and it reeked.

"Why does it matter who worships many gods or one god?" he asked.

Rei blinked. "That's a question for the cleric. He's the one who believes we should choose one over the other. I don't care who people worship."

"You do, you little hypocrite. The two of you have been butting heads since before my grandparents and I arrived in this one-horse town. Why does it matter to you that people worship many gods?"

"Because they're real, Arram!" she growled, her face growing hot. "The Volocio are real. One of them has already been reincarnated, and it's only a matter of time before the god queen returns."

Arram raised an eyebrow. "You mean Kazimir Ettowa, claiming to be the god of illusion?" He snorted. "If that Ettowa is the real thing, I'm the son of the death god."

Rei's heart stopped at the mention of the name. Her name. "What does being an Ettowa have to do with it?"

He leaned against the side of the fountain and ran a hand through his hair, the same shade of brown as hers. "That family is rich, disgustingly rich, and I wouldn't be surprised if they paid the holy father to give him the title."

Rei pursed her lips. She knew the brotherhood who raised Kazimir was humble and lived a life with little to no earthly possessions. She didn't think these monks were so easily bought by her family's money. She liked to think they were men who took the religion seriously, unlike other monasteries with their jewel-encrusted walls who used their religion solely to make a profit. She never told anyone her relation to Kazimir.

"Well, my brother saw Kazimir's powers work," she said. "I believe him."

He chuckled. "Of course, the brother you bring up all the time and yet I've never met. He's probably some other illiterate yokel from this backwoods town," he sneered and barked a laugh. "You've convinced me, Rei. But please, satiate my curiosity: what's your brother's name?"

Rei felt the name Niklaryn Ettowa on the tip of her tongue. She wanted so much to say it, to boast about it. He was legendary; he was the best of the Daer Knights. She was so proud to be his sister. But unfortunately, everyone knew who he was, and revealing her relation to him would also reveal who she really was.

He smiled. "That's right. You never say. Makes me wonder if he exists, or he's some lie you use when you know you're losing an argument."

Rei shook and her muscles quivered. Her hand itched to slap his face, but she knew she had to take the higher ground. It's what her brother would have wanted. She breathed in loudly through her nose, trying to compose herself.

"This conversation is over." She pointed toward the temple, where Virga had long disappeared. "You should catch up to your grandmother. She appears to be missing her shadow." Now it was her turn to flash her teeth at Arram. "Now fuck off."

"Duly noted." He pulled away from the fountain and sauntered over to the temple. "See you at dinner later."

Rei rubbed her face and held back a yell. Any euphoria she had left was gone. She hated how much he got under her skin.

She crossed the square with the intent of heading back to the bar, replaying their conversation over and over in her head. She didn't stop until she reached the other side of the square, next to the pantheon of the One True God. Its hideous gold-painted roof left



her angrier. It only reminded her how much this religion and Arram were monumental thorns in her side, and she was not looking forward to dealing with more of the young man's colorful remarks over dinner. The day had started out so well.

Rei turned the corner and collided with a figure.

"Ope, careful, little lady," said a light accented voice.

"Sorry." She stared at the stranger, her jaw dropping. His hood had fallen off, revealing a head of deep-red hair. He was older than she was; there were lines around his bright green eyes that smiled as he met her gaze. But the feature that drew her attention most was that every inch of visible skin was covered in freckles.

She had experienced this before. Her eyes relaxed as her vision multiplied, as though she were in two places at once. Swords clanged in the distance, crashing together, and her nose filled with the metallic scent of blood. The man stood in full battle gear, covered in blood that was not his; some had even splattered onto his face. He raised his war hammer, Nature's Wrath, as he yelled. His green eyes locked with Rei's as she held her own bladed staff high in the sky and she screamed in response. Lightning flashed above her, dancing across the clouds while the thunder clapped. Around her periphery, she could see long vines writhe and thrash.

She knew him. The gods had sent her this vision. They used to send more when she was a child, but their silence the last few years had caused her to doubt their faith in her. They wanted her to meet this man and her heart raced at the thought of it. She shook her head, the vision disappearing. She gave the stranger a shaky grin.

"I'm sorry." Her voice cracked. "This may sound odd, but I feel like I've met you before."

He let out a huge breath and a slow smile crept across his lips.

"I have the same feeling too," he said.

A lightness bloomed in her chest like she waited years for this moment. She was unaware of what the moment was, but she knew she had to trust the gods. She extended a trembling hand.

"I'm Rei."

## CHAPTER FOUR

The redhead took Rei's hand, and his calloused fingers gave hers a gentle squeeze.

"I'm Manden."

"Manden? Like the god king?"

He shrugged. "My parents had an odd sense of humor."

Rei beamed. "Apparently."

His grin remained and his eyes roved all over her face as though trying to remember every detail. Eventually his gaze drifted to something behind her and his face fell. "Is he giving you trouble?"

Rei turned to see whom he referred to. The cleric stood in the shadow of the pantheon. His gaze never wavered from her face, and his mouth turned to a sneer.

"Nothing I can't handle." She turned back to Manden. "Then again, I do have the god king by my side."

"Good one," he said with a snort, running a hand through his hair, leaving it mildly disheveled. "Do you want to get out of here?"

"Here?" she squeaked.

"The square. I'm meeting up with a friend at a local bar. Would you like to join us?"

She still couldn't place where she had met him before. "Sure. I know the best bar in town."

"Coronta Bar, right?"

"Ah, so you know it."

"I have history with Hotara." He winked.

Rei grew cold. She had never seen Hotara with a man her entire life and puzzled over what made him different. If he was so important, Hotara would have mentioned him.

“Uh, well... okay.”

“Shall we?” He took one of the less-crowded side streets that opened to the big intersection and Rei followed. His companion waited close by. Her wild golden hair moved in the breeze as she leaned against the wall of a kiosk. With her back turned, she didn’t see them as they approached.

“Hey!” Manden yelled as he stood just behind her.

“Shit the bed!” she exclaimed, spinning around. Her hazel eyes sparkled as she playfully punched Manden in the arm. “You scared me.”

“You should pay more attention.”

“Oh trust me, I was.” She turned back and gestured to something across the street.

Rei followed their gazes. There was nothing except a couple of local women standing near the open doorway of the local brothel with holographic butterflies hovering delicately around the entrance. The women had the typical dark features of the locals of the town. Their amber skin was visible as their long robes opened to reveal the curves of their breasts.

“Well, I see your tastes have improved, Bernie,” Manden said.

“I have always appreciated beauty. It’s not my fault you can’t see it.” Bernie giggled. “Do we have time to say hi? All work and no play makes me a dull girl.”

“I would really like to get to the bar sometime this year,” Manden said, wrapping an arm around the woman’s shoulders and pulling her away.

“Killjoy.” She blew a kiss at the women and finally faced Rei. The blonde raised an eyebrow. “Well, hello, beautiful.”

“Hey, now,” jumped in Manden. “This one you can’t flirt with.”

“Must you block me at every turn?” Bernie pouted. “What’s your name, beautiful?”

“It’s Rei.”

“Hello, Rei. Bernie.” She pointed to herself before extending a hand. “Well, introductions have been made, so let’s go to this bar you wouldn’t stop talking about.” Bernie grabbed Manden by the arm and pulled him between her and Rei.

They passed the basilica and the cleric who had yet to leave his post. “You should smile more,” Bernie said to him. “I’m sure you look prettier when you do.” The cleric’s scowl only deepened as his face turned a dark shade of red.

Rei held back a laugh. She stared in awe of this woman.

They walked along the main street in the shade of the colored tarp that protected them from the noonday sun. They passed a small stand with fabric hanging on a line.

Once they reached the intersection, Manden led the way with a confidence that boasted he had been here before. Perhaps he didn’t lie about his history with Hotara, yet Rei worried about why her mother never mentioned a redhead. She wondered what sort of history they shared and prayed it wasn’t grim. She dismissed the concern. Her instincts told her Manden wouldn’t harm her mother.

Rei caught him watching at her. “You okay?” he asked.

She nodded. “I’m just surprised at how well you know your way to the bar.”

“I’ve been here before.”

They arrived at Coronta Bar within minutes. Rei followed Bernie, though when she was halfway down the steps, she realized Manden remained outside. She returned to the entrance to find him staring at the cloth door that hung limply in the ever-brightening sun.

“I guess it’s my turn to ask if you’re okay?” she asked.

Manden blinked. “Sorry. It has been a long time since I’ve seen her, and I’m nervous.”

“Who is Hotara to you?”

His face fell. “Did she not tell you about me?”

Rei shook her head.

He pressed his lips together until all that remained was a line. Then he shrugged and patted Rei on the shoulder. “Well, then you’re in for a surprise.” He disappeared behind the curtain.

Rei furrowed her eyebrows. “Weirdo.”

She pulled back the curtain, sweat and alcohol filling her nostrils. It was never the loveliest of odors, but it was familiar and it was home.

Several unfamiliar faces filled the bar. They stood out in their clean desert garb. Rei assumed they were passing through, but she’d never seen so many at one time.

She took note that many of them watched Manden tromp down the stairs. A hush calm came over the clientele—a redhead was a rarity.

Hotara’s hair was in its usual braid, but a strand had come loose and hung in front of her face. She concentrated on mixing a drink, not noticing the most recent visitors right away. Bernie was the first to reach the bar and drew Hotara’s attention. She looked up to take Bernie’s order and saw Manden approaching. Hotara’s eyes widened and her mouth hung open. The drink fell from her hands, and the clink of glassware hit the ground.

The palpable tension radiating between the two stopped Rei in her tracks. Hotara’s cheeks grew red as she fidgeted with her braid over her shoulder. Her orchid eyes shone as they beheld Manden. Whatever they were to each other, the bond was strong.

Hotara turned around and pulled back the curtain to an entryway that connected their home to the bar, disappearing behind it. To Rei’s surprise, it didn’t take long for Manden to follow her.

Rei bound down the steps two at a time and passed through the curtain, but stopped. At the end of the hall, the couple embraced, murmuring in each other’s ears. They pulled away and Manden ran a hand over Hotara’s hair, then wiped away a tear that rolled down her cheek. Rei’s mother pressed her lips against Manden’s and pulled him close like he was her lifeline. They fit together like they were one being, and Rei felt she intruded on a moment she shouldn’t, but her curiosity quelled any awkwardness.

“I missed you, Tara,” Manden whispered.

The feeling of déjà vu returned. Rei never expected to see her mother so intimate, and yet everything about the scene unfolding in front of her felt right. She had seen this all before.

As Hotara and Manden broke the kiss, he held her hands in his. They both noticed Rei standing at the opposite end of the hallway. The rose color returned to Hotara's cheeks when she refused meet her daughter's eyes.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know what I was expecting," Rei said. "I am just very confused what this"—she gestured to the couple—"is. What is happening?"

"Rei," began Hotara but faltered.

"Who is he?" Rei's heart beat unnaturally fast.

"You never told her about me—" Manden began.

"You!" Rei cut him off. "You don't talk. I am asking Hotara because I don't understand what is happening." She looked at her mother, who still appeared unable to respond. "Mom?" Rei hadn't called Hotara by that name since she was a small child.

Hotara glanced at Manden, who stared at Rei as if not sure what to do with her. "Manden, can you take care of the bar? Rei and I need a minute"

Manden nodded, shuffling sideways as he walked past Rei. He gave her one last look and a smile as he lifted the curtain and left.

The curtain didn't completely block out the noise of the rowdy patrons on the other side, but it muffled the sound. Rei and Hotara peered at each other for several minutes while she waited for her mother to give a response.

"Manden is my husband," Hotara finally confessed.

The earth shifted beneath Rei's feet. She rubbed her temples, a habit at times she felt overwhelmed.

"Why didn't you tell me you were married?"

Hotara didn't respond at first. That's what hurt. Rei didn't have many friends, and she expected more from Hotara. Her mother was her best friend, and yet she had kept such a vital piece of personal information from Rei.

"It was hard," Hotara whispered.

"What was?"

"Being far from him for years."

Rei bit her lip and frowned. "But you could have contacted him, right?"

Hotara shook her head. “Manden has a high rank within the Federation, and he didn’t want them to know his background. He’s been playing the bachelor all these years because if we messaged, anyone in the Dominion or the Federation might come sniffing around to find out who I am. And if they found me...”

Rei took a shaky breath. “They would find me.”

“Exactly.”

The truth weighed heavily on Rei’s chest. Hotara’s hands returned to her braid and fidgeted with the end. Her mother was taller than Rei, and yet in this moment, she looked so small, so vulnerable. Her eyes didn’t have the same fiery glow, and her lips trembled as she held back tears, making Rei regret being so harsh. “But that doesn’t explain why you couldn’t tell me.”

“Because if I even mentioned him, then I would think about him.” Hotara’s voice shook. “I missed him. It was easier just to focus on you and our life here. I needed to not speak of him to help ease the pain.”

Rei couldn’t imagine loving someone so deeply that being away from him hurt that profoundly. The only time she felt anything close to that kind of loss was when her brother had died, but that was different. He was all she had as blood family.

Rei leaned against the wall and stared at the curtain, open just enough to reveal Manden on the other side. He chatted with Bernie, who stood near the large music player. The green light reflected off her face as she pushed a few buttons, and the twang of a guitar erupted from the speakers. The blonde must’ve said something funny because he threw his head back and laughed.

When Rei glanced back at Hotara, tears filled her mother’s eyes.

“I am sorry I didn’t tell you before. I know there are a lot of things I haven’t told you concerning my past, but there will be a time when everything will be made clear to you. Manden’s coming here is the beginning of that.”

The feeling of betrayal reduced to a dull pain in her chest. Rei kept her mouth shut, knowing that if she spoke, she would say something hurtful. She loved her mother so much. This woman who let her husband leave to “play his part” so she could live on the

edge of the star cluster to raise a child who was not her own. Rei knew not talking about Niklaryn helped her deal with the pain at times. She understood Hotara's motives.

"How long will he be here?" Rei asked, never taking her eyes off him.

"He's passing through to do some recruiting. They leave tomorrow night."

Rei nodded. "Well, that doesn't leave you much time." She pulled the curtain aside and entered the bar.

"Wait, Rei." But she didn't stop to listen. She approached Manden, who leaned against the other side of the bar. His back was to her, and it was Bernie who pointed her out from where she stood near the music player, eyeing the Ettowa Starline advertisement.

"Yes, little lady?" Manden asked, turning to face her.

"You should go to her." She looked him in the eyes. "She needs to be with you."

Manden didn't hesitate. He dashed through the curtain, gone in moments. Rei closed her eyes and let everything wash over her, the sound of the crowd, the clink of glass as guests cheered, patrons arguing—but not loudly enough to discern over what—and the smell of beer, salt, and citrus.

"A little overeager, no?" asked Bernie, taking a swig of a Coronta Sour from a dainty blue glass. She approached the bar and swung a leg over an empty stool.

Rei looked for her tray to start filling orders when she noticed Sagitan had already taken over helping serve their patrons for the night. This was not the first time he had done this, but tonight she couldn't be more grateful.

Rei took a glass and poured some Coronta. She added a splash of water before taking a sip. "Apparently, they haven't seen each other for years."

"I know. Manden wouldn't shut up about her the whole flight here." Bernie stared at her glass. "I mean, I'm glad that he is reunited with his lady love, but I wish he would have talked someone else's ear off."

Rei grinned. She felt seconds away from being overwhelmed, but years of working at a bar taught her to keep her personal problems hidden from the customers. She pushed down the feeling.



“So what kind of a name is Bernie?” Rei took another sip, the burn from the drink filled her tongue, making her gasp.

“What kind of name is Rei?”

“It’s short for Reina.”

“Pretty.” She pointed to herself. “Bernadette.”

“Got a last name, Bernadette?” Rei took another sip.

“Boyard.”

It turned out that the day was not finished in serving Rei surprises. Rei almost choked on her drink. That was not a name she expected out here in the backwaters of the star cluster. Boyard was practically royalty among the Federation, considering their patriarch.

“Are you related to Urius Boyard?”

“He’s my uncle.”

Rei’s eyes grew wide as she took in a new appreciation of the blonde in front of her. No wonder she wasn’t afraid of the cleric. He knew who she was and what it would mean for him to harm Federation military royalty.

She looked back at the curtain where Manden had disappeared moments before.

“Manden must be very important to the Federation if he is working with a close relative to Urius Boyard.”

Bernie finished the rest of her drink. She reached over the bar to take the bottle of Coronta and poured herself some more. “I wouldn’t know. We only just met.”

Rei smelled the lie. The two appeared too at ease with each other to be casual acquaintances. Hotara had just told her Manden lived publicly as a bachelor so he had to trust Bernie enough to bring her out here. They were planning something, two high ranking officers wouldn’t come to the backwaters of the star cluster for mere recruiting, but their timing couldn’t be more perfect. Perhaps they could help her with the cleric or at least keep her out of harm’s way in case the cleric decided she needed a dose of Drops of Jupiter. Then the realization dawned on her: maybe she could help the Federation track down Niklaryn’s killer. Her brother was their shining star, after all.

Rei took another sip of her drink. “I hear you’re recruiting.”

“We are. Do you recommend someone?”

Rei leaned in with both hands on the bar. “Yeah. Me.”

Bernie raised her eyebrows and leaned back, crossing her arms. “Did not expect that. I like your moxie.”

Rei smirked. Bernie was easy enough and Hotara was going to hate this idea. Manden was the wild card. She needed him on her side to convince her mother. Her little war with the cleric was nothing compared to what she really wanted: Infiernen’s head on a plate. It was safe to assume Bernie and Manden would also be joining them for dinner, and she could work on them then. She raised her glass. “To the Federation?”

The officer raised hers. “To the Federation.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

“What is wrong with you?” asked Hotara as she and Rei pushed together tables in the bar, enough to fit their guests. “Weren’t you listening when I told you that it’s safer here in Ballarat?”

Rei lugged a pile of plates from behind the bar. “Yes, but that was before I discovered you have a husband who’s a high-ranking officer working alongside Urius Boyard. I mean, it’s the Federation! Whoever killed my parents is in the Dominion because Niko fought alongside the likes of Bernie against whoever they are. I am sure Manden can keep me safe.”

“Yes, but then this person will know where you are.” Hotara aggressively folded a napkin before handing it to Rei to place. “At the moment, he thinks you are simply hidden somewhere in the Tyre Star Cluster. That’s anywhere on fourteen planets. The minute you align yourself with the Federation, he’ll know you’re with them. Only three planets have voted for the Federation in the last decade, Rei. Three!”

Rei’s skin tingled. This was the most they had talked about her parents’ killer, and the threat felt like more than a dark shadow hanging over her head. “So my hunter is a man?”

Hotara’s face grew red. She flopped down into the nearest chair and put her head in her hands. “I swear, you’re not listening to what I’m saying.”

“I am.” Rei sat down next to Hotara and pulled the woman’s hands from her face. “I am. Look, you don’t have to tell me who it is. I have no intention of going after him.”

“But you have every intention of going after Infiernen, right? You always lose your head where your brother is concerned. Killing him is not going to bring Niko back.”

Rei sighed and picked at folded napkin in front of her. “Nothing will bring him back. I just feel useless out here.”

Hotara cupped Rei’s cheek. “You are destined for great things, darling. But the timing isn’t right. Until then, I want—no, I need you safe.”

Rei pulled away. “Timing?”

“You’re not ready yet.”

“How am I not ready? You’ve made sure I know how to handle a bladed staff. Niklaryn drilled me on whatever knowledge of guns and weapons he learned from his years at the Daer Academy. You both wanted me to know how to defend myself and I can. What more do I need?”

They were interrupted by someone clearing their throat. “Bad time?” asked Manden from the top of the stairs. Bernie stood next to him, a bottle of wine in hand.

“No,” Rei said, leaving her chair to continue setting the table.

“Tara, can I speak with you a moment?” he asked, gesturing to the back of the bar.

Hotara nodded and followed. The two disappeared behind the curtain

Bernie placed the bottle at the center of the table. “Do you need help?”

“Sure,” Rei replied. “Just fold some napkins and I’ll grab some silverware.” They were conveniently behind the bar, not too far from where Hotara and her husband were likely arguing about Rei’s future. She hovered close to the curtain.

“She’s still vulnerable, Manden,” Hotara snapped. “The time isn’t right.”

“I know. But Urius is adamant about having her join. I was already sent to pick up Arram and his grandparents. He sent Bernie along with me to make sure I picked her up as well.”

“*Aun no he semanifestao.*”

Rei gasped at the last sentence. When she was a child, Hotara taught her a secret language. It was their code. Rei thought it was all made up but now wondered if Manden knew as well. *They haven’t manifested yet*, her mother said. She never realized something was supposed to manifest. She rubbed her temples as a headache pierced the area between her eyes.

“We can keep her safe until then,” Manden answered in the same language.

“Like you kept Niklaryn safe?”

Rei inched closer to the gap between the curtain to better see. Manden leaned against the wall. “There was nothing to be done for Niklaryn. Can—can we just get through dinner? It’s our last night together, and I don’t want to waste it on anger.”

Hotara sighed. “I know. I think she needs more time. I don’t want to send her out until she’s ready.”

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Like I said, Urius is adamant. Unless you want to fight him for her.”

She laughed. “That wouldn’t be fair to him. You know I’d win.”

Manden chuckled. “I know, love.”

Rei hurried to the bar to grab the silverware and scurried back to the table before the couple returned.

“Hear anything interesting?” Bernie raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps a little too interesting.”

Hotara and Manden returned to the bar and the four continued setting the table. Rei’s thoughts wandered back to the secret conversation. She didn’t understand why Urius wanted her to join the Federation. It was likely because she was Niklaryn’s sister and a guaranteed ally. They only had three planets in the star cluster and needed as many people on their side as possible.

Her thoughts returned to the talk of something manifesting. Rei’s heart pounded as she considered what was supposed to appear. Nothing she came up with would signify her being “ready” to join the Federation. The headache remained, like a pick shooting between her eyes. This was all too much. She just wanted to get off the planet. It shouldn’t be complicated.

“We hope we’re not too late.” Virga’s voice popped into Rei’s head. She and Sagitan descended from the entrance above, their grandson not far behind and toting a large bowl of cream. Though Rei knew Virga’s famed dessert had layers of fruit swimming underneath.

“Not at all.” Hotara took the bowl from Arram. “You’re just in time.”

Everyone helped to place the food on the table, and Rei settled between Bernie and Virga while Arram sat across from her. The young man reached out to grab a rosemary chicken leg, but Virga lightly slapped his hand away. “We need to pray, dear,” she said. “Rei, child, would you do us the honor of saying grace?”

They bowed their heads in prayer and she said a short one. Afterward, Virga began to pile Rei’s plate for her, spoonfuls of rice, covered in sauces and herbs.

Rei raised a hand. “Ma’am, you don’t need to make my plate.”

“Don’t bother trying to stop her,” Sagitan said with a wink. “Virga will do as she pleases.”

“That’s right,” Virga said. “I enjoy doing it, and besides, Rei, you’re so skinny and could use some more food. I worry that if I don’t feed you, you won’t put enough on your plate.” She piled on more rice and sauce before proceeding to Sagitan’s plate. As she did, she leaned in and gave her husband a soft peck on the lips.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said with a grin.

The meal was marvelous, but Rei found the company better. Virga was so vivacious with an infectious laugh. After dinner, Sagitan and Virga argued over how they met, each of them butting in to tell the entertaining story. Manden and Bernie frequently refilled glasses with wine until Hotara had to run to the bar for more. Rei’s cheeks grew warm with each sip.

Rei raised an eyebrow as she looked over at Arram, who leaned back in his chair and took a long swig of his wine.

“Are they always like this?” She gestured to his grandparents.

He nodded. “Yup. They are really that sweet. I never get tired of it, though.”

Rei gave him an incredulous stare. “And here I thought you didn’t have a heart.”

“Don’t tell anyone.” He gave her just a hint of a smile. His eyes shone from the light above the dining table and, from a certain angle, he reminded her of Niklaryn. He had the same eye shape and nose. Or maybe it was her own mind playing tricks on her. The moment was gone when his scowl returned. She recalled Manden saying he was there to

pick up Arram and his grandparents and wondered why Urius wanted someone like him. She gritted her teeth at the unfairness of it all.

“Why do you get to join the Federation?” she asked and the table grew quiet.

Arram’s eyes widened when he realized the question was directed at him, but it was Bernie who responded. “Um... why do you think Arram is joining the Federation?”

Rei threw her fork on her plate with a loud clatter and turned to Hotara and Manden. “I heard them arguing about it.”

No one spoke, but a few shifted in their seats. Arram ran his hand through his hair until it was a disheveled mess. His eyes darted to his grandparents as though they held the answers, yet Rei’s gaze never left his face, waiting for him to respond.

“Why—why not?” he stuttered. “Anyone can join the Federation.”

“Not everyone gets a personal escort from Urius Boyard’s own niece. What makes you so special?” Rei rubbed her temples again as the pain in her head grew more intense.

“I’m not special.”

“I know you’re not,” she growled. “So why?”

Virga put her hand on Rei’s shoulder. “Rei, sweetheart, are you all right?”

“No. I want someone to answer me!” she cried. “Why is it important that he goes, and I have to wait until it’s the ‘right time’?” She breathed hard.

“Infiernen’s hunting me!” answered Arram with a tremble in his voice.

The air rushed from Rei’s lungs at the mention of her brother’s murderer. “What?” she whispered.

Arram pulled back the collar of his shirt with a shaking hand, revealing a puckered scar—he was branded with an infinity mark. It was the symbol of Infiernen and his Infinity Dogs.

“I thought the brands were just a rumor,” Rei said.

“Wrong place at the wrong time.” Arram straightened his collar.

“Don’t they do that to mark homosexuals?” Those who didn’t follow the Dominion’s preferred religion weren’t the only ones suffering persecution.

“They do.”

Rei stared at Arram, his violet eyes dimmed as he stared at his hands. What kind of monsters would mark someone like him?"

"It's how a lot of dictators manage to get their foothold when they want power," Sagitan said. "They create an enemy for the people to rally behind. In this case, Sovereign Praymer chose a minority of successful people who already had a long history of persecution and literally gave the people permission to treat them like second-class citizens." He sighed and took a sip of wine. "Desperate people believe the lie because they want it to be true, and it distracts them from their own problems."

"I was outed by a concerned neighbor." Arram spat the last word. "It was Infiernen who did the deed. We managed to escape, and since then we have been on the run."

She didn't know if she should pity Arram or remain jealous that he was able to leave. Perhaps both. Rei wrung her hands as she stood, adrenaline pumping through her legs. The ground lurched beneath her feet and colors formed along the edge of her vision. The pain in her head spiked.

"Rei, are you all right?" asked Hotara.

"I have this horrendous pain." A pressure formed behind her eyes. She must've had too much to drink. Perhaps she should rest. Her eyes fluttered closed and the rush of adrenaline fled from her body; she felt like she was in a free fall. Someone distantly called her name.

Her eyes snapped open, and she no longer sat in the bar.

She stood on a balcony overlooking a brightly lit city sitting on the edge of a vast lake. Two moons hung like lanterns in the sky. The bigger one was silver, and its light revealed a land of rolling hills and forests beyond the city walls. The smaller one had a violet hue that reminded Rei of her mother's eyes.

What a strange dream.

The sharp stroke of a fiddle and the raucous laughter of people cut through the silent night as Rei saw people dancing and drinking below, but it felt far away. She was too focused on the fact that she wasn't alone. A lock of his dark hair fell into his darker eyes. He brushed the strand away. The sword peeking out from the strap on his back and the



pistol resting on his hip outed him a Daer Knight. The simple sight of him was enough to make her pulse race, and her heart almost broke with every moment he wasn't hers.

Somehow, Rei knew this secret meeting of theirs was forbidden.

She didn't care.

All that mattered was the stranger with the deep, dark eyes. Her hands moved of their own accord to remove a satin glove that ran up to her elbow. The fabric felt expensive, but her interest in the man washed away any desire to inspect them. The simple act of taking off these garments felt taboo; the gloves marked her as another's, but she was no one's property.

"Micaela," he breathed.

A vague memory played in the back of her mind. Her parents would also call her Micaela. But it was always when they were alone at home and in hushed tones—almost as if it were a secret, very much like this meeting.

"Shh," she whispered, placing a naked hand over his lips. *By the gods, they are soft.* Her hand moved to his chest, feeling his heartbeat steadily under her touch.

"What about..." he began.

"It doesn't matter," she whispered. She moved closer to him until they were only inches apart. His mouth parted only slightly, and he breathed hard from the hunger she saw in his eyes.

"It does," the handsome man said. "If your husband finds out."

"He won't find out, and frankly I don't care if he does. I love you, Atrius."

Rei didn't know who this husband was, but he might as well not exist. She wanted to see where this fantasy would lead. The way this Atrius looked at her made wave after wave of emotion crash against the shore of her mind, each one more devastating than the next. The fire in his eyes threatened to consume her and she welcomed it.

He leaned in and softly pressed his lips against hers. Her pulse raced as she took her ungloved hand and placed it behind his neck, grasping his soft hair. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her closer. Passion coursed like a boiling river through her veins as he pulled her other glove off.

Atrius's protests had been a gauzy veil of propriety, and the heat of his need for her burned it all away.

His kiss grew deeper, leaving her wanting more. She arched against him, pressing against his strong body as his hands ran down her back, tugging at the thin fabric separating his fingers from her skin.

Rain splattered on her skin, falling hard enough to plaster her curled hair to her head. Rei no longer felt Atrius's arms. Angry, plump clouds crowded the sky above. She stood in a courtyard as it showered around her.

Atrius lay in her arms, wincing as each drop fell on his face. Blood ran from his nose and ears, and he shuddered. Poison. Drops of Jupiter. It was a horrible way to die.

"I'm sorry. I tried to kill him," Atrius said between labored breaths. He clenched his teeth as the poison slowly destroyed his nerves.

Rei said nothing. Her vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. Anguish ripped through her as she watched her love's life fade before her. She held him tighter, wishing to take his pain for her own.

"You will get through this," she whispered. "There has to be an antidote. I already lost Max and the others. I can't lose you too."

His eyes filled with words unspoken, and his pain tore Rei's heart anew.

The light faded in Atrius's eyes, and his body relaxed in her arms.

"Atrius?" she asked. "Atrius!" This time she yelled louder.

Rei's eyes snapped open from where she lay on the sticky wet floor. Atrius's name was still on her lips as she brought a hand to her face, wet with tears. Her heart ached at the memory of him. Her vision grew more focused and six pairs of eyes stared down at her.

"Atrius?" asked Manden.

Rei's face burned at the memory. He and Sagitan helped her to stand and Virga handed her a damp napkin to wipe her face. She briefly locked eyes with Arram, and he gave her sad smile. The headache had evaporated, but an ache in her chest took its place.

"Did you hear what she said?" Manden whispered to Hotara. "I think it's time."

Bernie put a finger to her lips. “And the timing is bad.” No one moved as they listened. A deep roar dotted with a piercing scream and the pop of gunshots rattled Rei to her core.

She scrambled up the steps to the entrance above, and the screams grew louder as she drew nearer to the curtain, the noise outside competing with the thunderous beat of her heart in her ears. She drew back the cloth and discovered a large hooded figure with a sword raised high racing toward her.

## CHAPTER SIX

Rei screamed and backed away from the curtain. An explosion rocked the earth, and Rei lost her footing and tumbled down the stairs. Arram rushed to her side, helping her stand and drawing her back as dark figures entered the bar. Only Negander dressed in that shade of blood red. Sagitan approached the fighters, a pistol and gladius having magically materialized in his hands.

“That’s him!” One pointed at Arram. “Infiernen wants him.”

One of the newcomers aimed his gun at Sagitan. A shower of bullets rained on the master, but he twirled the blade in front of him, and the shots bounced off with little spectacular sparks. Sagitan’s movements were a blur, like he merely swatted away flies. Niklaryn used to tell her that Daer could deflect bullets, but she always assumed he lied.

“Run!” yelled Bernie, coming to their side, a large rifle in hand. “We’ll hold them off! Sagitan and Virga will get you out.” Rei almost ran but saw Arram hesitate out of the corner of her eye.

“Arram, come!” bellowed Virga, pulling him toward Rei.

Manden, Hotara, and Bernie approached the Negander as Rei, Arram, Sagitan, and Virga bolted for the hall behind the bar.

They raced through the kitchen. The bullets Sagitan’s blade didn’t deflect whistled by them, chips of plaster flying from the wall next to them. The room filled with dust from the broken bits of clay, and the smell of gunpowder filled Rei’s nose. Bile rose in her throat, but she pushed it down. She kept her arms on Arram’s shoulder, pushing him forward as they fled out the back door.

Outside was no safer. People screamed and ran, followed by more figures in red cloaks who cut down any local they caught. A huge explosion rocked the ground beneath them, and the whole town erupted in pandemonium: buildings caught on fire, cries echoed, and the smell of smoke hung in the air. Rei stood in shock as she watched the flames devour her town.

Sunrise wouldn't arrive for hours, the only light dancing from the flames of nearby buildings. Rei took Arram's hand and pulled him away from the house and down the street.

"Keep going!" yelled Sagitan as more bullets sparked off his blade. Virga remained at his side, his pistol in her hand as she picked off some of the soldiers as they approached.

Rei pulled Arram and they dove between two buildings. The other side revealed a blazing intersection, the fire scorched Rei's cheeks as the smell of flesh reached her nose. Her heart reached her throat at the thought of her neighbors trapped in this inferno.

"There they are!" Another figure in red pointed at them.

Arram yanked Rei back to where they came, only to discover it engulfed in flames. The Negander had cut off another means of escape. They had no choice but to dash down the intersection toward the large basilica that remained untouched by the fire. Rei took Arram's hand and rushed toward the square. People were lined up and gunned down by more figures in red. The rage of unsatisfied revenge boiled her blood. Her stomach turned over and her eyes stung from unshed tears.

"Out of my way!" bellowed a man, shoving Rei against the wall as he passed them escaping the carnage at the square. His head exploded in a burst of red. Bits of his brain landed on Rei and she screamed. The man's headless body crumpled in a heap at Arram's feet, and ahead of them a Negander pointed a platinum pistol in their direction. The light of the fire behind Rei and Arram illuminated the knight's face. Her cloak fell back to reveal a heavy square jaw and a milky-white scar that ran from her right ear across her nose to her left eye.

The Negander turned to someone out of view. "I found them!" The woman then cocked her head to the side. "Who are you?"

A gun cracked. The Negander spun her sword and the bullet met her blade with a flash.

Rei watched in horror as vines grew around the woman's legs, and she was suddenly yanked out of sight with a scream. Rei turned to Arram, his cheek red from the blaze behind them. They readied their guns and inched toward the end of the alley.

"Rei?" It was Bernie.

They turned the corner to find Bernie, Hotara, and Manden with the unconscious Negander lying between them, wrapped in the mysterious vines.

"Thank the gods you are alive." Rei threw her arms around Hotara's neck.

"I wish we had more time," her mother whispered.

"It doesn't matter." She pulled back and met Hotara's gaze.

"Finish this later. We gotta go," Manden said, hand outstretched toward the unconscious Negander while holding a beautiful long staff with swirls carved into its body and a half-foot long blade on one end. "This is for you," he said handing it to her. "You'll need this."

Rei grabbed the staff, and her eyes shifted between it and the gun. While she knew her way around a staff, she didn't understand what Manden expected as gunfire popped around them. "Really?" she asked.

"Trust me," the redhead said with a smirk. Rei slung the staff over her shoulder.

"Did you see my grandparents?" breathed Arram.

"What?"

"At the bar, did you see my grandparents?"

"The bar is gone," Bernie said. "The Negander burned it."

Arram turned to Rei. "We have to go back. I think something happened."

Rei watched the world burn around them. Despite their feelings for each other, she and Arram were on the same side, and they had to stick together. She knew the distant look in his eyes. It wouldn't be long until Arram would try to return for his grandparents. Arram nodded as though reading her thoughts and the two bolted down the street to the return to where they last saw Sagitan and Virga.

“Goddamnit!” Manden yelled. “Wait!”

“There they are!” a Negander cried, running alongside them. One ran next to Arram—too close for Rei. She fired her gun at the figure, but the bullet ricocheted off the blade. Rei yelled as the bullet grazed her arm, knocking her to the ground. She scrambled to find the gun but lost it in the kicked-up dirt. With no choice, she grabbed her staff and kept running. Arram was already far ahead of her.

“Careful!” cried one of the figures. “She’s not to be harmed!”

“Faster!” Rei cried. “They’re going to cut us off!” The burning inside her roared. She wanted to kill them. She wanted to throw everything she had at them.

“Rei! Arram!” Hotara cried. Bernie and Manden weren’t too far behind. The ground shuddered beneath them from another explosion, and it threw Arram and Rei to the ground.

“Grab them!” someone yelled.

The Negander circled them like hawks, cutting off another direction to escape. Soon there would be nowhere to go.

“Bernie, be careful!” Manden yelled.

“Manden!” cried Hotara, swinging her staff toward the enemy, warning them to stay back.

The world slowed down, and everything crystallized in horrific detail. The smell of burned flesh filled her nostrils, and bodies lay strewn across the streets. Some were Negander, but most were people she had known since her childhood.

Spots littered Rei’s vision as she ran, but they didn’t shield her from the constant onslaught of images of the destruction of her home. Some of the Ballaratans helped Bernie and Manden fight the Negander, but the locals were getting in the way.

One Negander swung for Rei’s head with the hilt of his gladius. Rei ducked and thrust the staff blade into the man’s back.

“Manden, Hotara, I need help,” Bernie yelled as she took a shot.

Another Negander approached Bernie from behind. Rei ripped the blade from the dead man, changed her grip on her staff, and launched it. Her weapon landed with a loud thud against the man's chest, pinning him to the ground.

Hotara threw her hands toward the blonde, and the ground rumbled beneath them, opening and swallowing the Negander whole. Rei's head grew faint; her eyes were playing tricks on her or the smoke had grown too thick.

She lost track of Arram, only to find him turning the corner toward her house. She followed and found him standing over Virga and Sagitan. The older woman lay in a heap, the blood on the floor encircling her head like a halo, while Sagitan's eyes were closed, and his hand wound tightly around hers; a large hole in his stomach leaked vital fluid into the crimson pool of blood surrounding them.

Something inside her burned and she shook. Why did the Negander do this? Virga and Sagitan had done nothing. They were innocent. They didn't deserve it. No one deserved to die like this.

Her thoughts went to the Ballaratans, to the man whose blood stained her shirt, to those who burned in the fire. Anger from her brother's death resurfaced. These same monsters who took Niklaryn were not satisfied. Now they came for Arram's grandparents, and only the gods knew what they wanted with her and Arram.

The air filled with ash that fell like rain around her. Only Manden, Hotara, and Bernie stood between her and their captors. The redhead's eyes were vacant, and Bernie's shoulders hunched. Hotara's black hair whipped around her, sticking to her face, now wet with tears. They had failed. Everything Hotara did to protect Rei was all for nothing. And now they'd have Arram too. Her heart pounded in her chest, threatening to burst.

"I have him!" cried the cleric, grasping a fistful of Arram's hair. He held a large bloodied knife at the young man's throat, a thin line of red dripping down. "Infiernen told me he wanted the boy dead."

Something snapped inside Rei. Color filled her vision until all she saw was white light. White cleansing light. She clenched her fists, turned her head up to the heavens and yelled, letting loose all her sadness, anger, and frustration.



She screamed and screamed, her voice becoming unearthly and powerful, taking on a strange tone. The sound echoed from some unknown place, then multiplied, taking on the form of all the victims who had lost someone they loved to violence. She cried harder and harder, straining her lungs. She raised her staff in the air, calling on the heavens to aid her. She was their champion.

As she felt the end of her breath, she threw her hand up and shoved it through the air. In response, the air crackled as she surrounded herself in the white light. She wanted to cleanse the world in fire.

Then lightning struck her staff, filling her power. She threw her hands forward. Lightning came, flying toward the cleric, throwing him away from Arram. His body blackened until all that remained were ashes that scattered into the air. She swept her hand over the closed ranks of Negander savages. Their screams filled the air while their bodies slowly blackened to charred husks. She took a step forward—or tried to. Instead, her eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted.