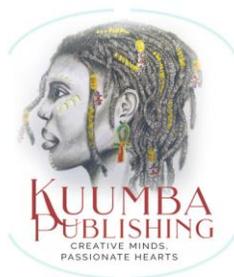


FATED *Path*

N. D. JONES



Baltimore, Maryland

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Dedication

Baba Kweku Kemraha

Father
Husband
Friend
Author

*Power and Grace . . . A Love Supreme and the Majesty of
Blackness*

Rest in Power

Special Thanks

To the winners of my name a planet and race competition

Scott Schieber for naming the Grul planet of Tsondelar

Germaine Harrison for naming the Malcareon race

Glossary of Key Asiyian Terms

Ab'ba:	Father
A'bra:	Mother
Affiq Band:	Knowledge
Anull:	Year
Dekull:	Decade
Devdas Band:	Faith
Dole:	Day
Einar:	High Star full-body armor
Euridice Band:	Law
Hern:	Hour
Iceril:	Winter
Ibor:	A twenty-five-foot, six-legged ancient Asiyian beast with wings, gills, and lungs
Ibor Armor:	Paladin bird-face war armor modeled after the Ibor predator
Marnil:	Mile
Mern:	Minute
Mor'up:	A natural resource found only in the northern mountainous region of Asiya; it is used in creating weapons, such as strong knives, as well as shields for all types of transporters
Paladin Band:	Guardian
Tolur:	Migratory bird
Seal of Eternal Breath:	Signet ring of the Regent of Asiya; it is designed to represent the Realm of Thuraya—the birthplace of all living beings
Verity Band:	Truth
Welk:	Week

Zot:

Electronic tablet that comes in many sizes.
Its functions are similar to an iPad and cell
phone

Glossary of Key Races

AMAKAN



ASIYAN



GRUL



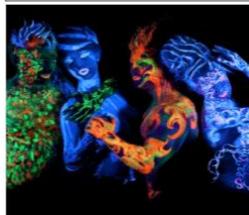
HUMAN



LUMERIAN



MALCAREON



UNBALK



YEGOTH



1. First Love

2252

Northeast Asiya

Regent Center of Khatra

Hall of Concord



“Lela is young and inexperienced,” Yusef declared, a statement Ammon tired of hearing. “Certainly too much of both to be the next Chief Magistrate of the Verity Band.”

“Yes, Lela is both young and inexperienced,” Regent Etemaad agreed.

Ammon stood behind his seated father, Yusef, in the Council of Magistrates’ Ruling Chamber. No one else was in the sun-heated room with them, including the regent’s High Stars. Ammon shouldn’t be in there either, listening to the two most powerful people on the planet discuss the political future of the woman he loved.

Regent Etemaad’s dark gaze shifted from Yusef to Ammon, piercing him where he stood at attention, sweaty hands held behind his rigid back. The way the regent watched him, intense but with an unreadable expression, he desired nothing more than to disappear into the wall like the retracted solar panels.

“But Lela is no longer a girl,” the regent continued. “She is an ulla out of Sagacity. Only the finest of Verity scholars complete the rigorous training required to serve the people of this great planet. Need I remind you of her academic record?”

“Verity is the only band that comes close to rivaling Affiq as scholars. But even Verity does not share Affiq’s thirst for knowledge. Verity seeks the truth in all things, be it knowledge for the sake of knowing or knowledge for a greater truth.” Yusef leaned forward, his elbows going to the table. “No, I do not need a lesson on Lela’s intelligence. No more than I need to explain why intellect is an insufficient antecedent of effective leadership.”

As he spoke, Regent Etemaad divided his attention between father and son. “Insufficient, yes, but not unimportant. Lela has also served me well since I brought her here to live.”

“Agreed. She’s made an excellent disciple. I wouldn’t dare deny what I’ve seen with my own eyes.”

“You’ve seen only that which you’ve allowed your mind to accept as truth. You and members of the Council think of Lela as a child, perhaps even a pet I’ve spoiled and kept too close. She is neither.”

Finally, Regent Etemaad released Ammon from what felt like an inescapable force field. A rush of breath slipped from him in

a harsh sound that seemed to echo in the still room. The regent couldn't possibly know about Ammon and Lela. They'd been careful, hiding their growing feelings for each other in public while spending private time together when they could. Yet the way Regent Etemaad had stared at Ammon left him feeling cold and exposed.

"Lela is the leader Asiya will require in the future. I've seen it in my dreams."

At the five-letter word, Yusef leaned even closer to Etemaad. "In your dreams?"

Tone still serious but no longer with respectful challenge, Yusef's sudden shift didn't surprise Ammon. Most Asiyans did not dream. Of those who did, like Regent Etemaad, their dreams were often prophetic. Neither Ammon nor Yusef were among the rare Asiyans dreamers. In fact, the Paladin Band had the fewest dreamers of the five bands. Since dreams were connected to the Three Fates of Asiya—Purpose, Faith, and Truth—it was unsurprising that the Devdas Band, the spiritual foundation of Asiyans society, boasted the largest number of dreamers.

He wondered if Lela had dreams. If she did, what did she dream? Of him? Of them? Of ruling the largest planet of sentient beings in the Bazlorian Solar System?

"Yes," the regent confirmed.

"Are you saying the Fates have come to you in your dreams and have spoken to you of Lela?"

Ammon's fear of a future without Lela exceeded his bone-deep desire to hear the answer to Yusef's question. Regent Etemaad's spiritual connection to the Fates through his dreams had elevated him to a godlike status among their people no prior regent had known. Not even Devdas dreamers claimed the Fates entered their dreams, speaking to them and revealing their secrets.

For the briefest moment, Etemaad's eyes found Ammon's again. This time, they were soft, perhaps a little sad. For Ammon or for Etemaad, he couldn't discern. Ammon stepped backward,

a soft retreat he hoped his father wouldn't notice until he'd exited.

Of course, being the leader of a band of warriors, Ammon was disappointed but not shaken when his father, back to him, said, "I did not grant you permission to leave. I requested your attendance in the chamber so you could listen and learn, not run away when you fail to comprehend the magnitude of the choices that lay before you."

Chief Magistrate Yusef didn't extend requests but issued orders, even to his family. Ammon wouldn't dare disagree with his father in front of the regent, so he swallowed his pride and moved back to the spot he'd vacated.

"The Fates do not speak to me in the way we are conversing now. I do not always understand the tri-voice they speak in or the images they show me."

"Then how do you know their messages?"

Etemaad turned his face away from Yusef and toward a beam of light that bisected the rectangular conference table. Lifting a hand, he stretched it toward the beam, as if, by mental will alone, he could compel it closer and into the palm of his hand. Nothing happened, of course, except Ammon sensed he'd witnessed something important in the regent's eyes when he shifted back to Yusef. Anulls later, he would reflect on the regent's expression with a worldly wisdom he didn't yet possess.

Instead of expounding on his dream, Etemaad squeezed Yusef's shoulder, a gesture of friendship and faith. "My dreams aside, the Verity Band has decided. The regent does not dictate the chosen leader of the bands."

True, but the regent had the right to refuse a band's nominee for chief magistrate. Thus, a band would do well to recommend a member who would pass favor with the regent. To do otherwise would humiliate the nominee's house if rejected.

"Is it not our role as mentors, Yusef, to teach and guide the youngest among us? Is it not our responsibility to lead by example? Were we not once disciples as innocent in the ways of Mother Cosmos as Lela?" Regent Etemaad nodded toward

Ammon. “The Fates have a plan for us all. The question we must ask ourselves is whether we are ready and willing to go down the path they’ve laid out for us, unaware where it will lead. Is our faith strong enough? Is our purpose clear? Do we lie to ourselves instead of facing the truth of our mortality and imperfections?”

Like a jacala burying nuts for a cold iceril season, Ammon stored the regent’s questions away for later contemplation. Yusef, on the other hand, launched into a grand speech about “developing transformational leaders,” “building cross-cultural relationships,” and “honing communication skills.” Except for using superior Asiyan technology and honorable warriors to maintain peace at home and abroad, this could’ve been the same speech Yusef gave Paladin High Star recruits their first day at Shielder, the Paladin Band’s school for military training.

Regent Etemaad pushed to his feet, retrieved his hooded, lavender cloak from the chair, and slipped it on. “Understand this, Yusef, one doesn’t acquire experience by being kept in a hall, even a hall as grand as this one. Birds have wings for a reason. We do not keep our winged friends in cages the way some races do. The entire sky is their home.”

Yusef also stood, black boots silent on the polished floor.

Regent Etemaad nodded in Ammon’s direction again but didn’t seek to catch his gaze. No, his eyes were firmly on Yusef. “Birds come in all shapes and sizes. The worst crime we can commit against them is to clip their wings, thus denying them the ability to learn, grow, and experience life to its fullest. That also includes the freedom to fly in the wrong direction, at times. But as we know from the beautiful tolurs, they eventually turn themselves around and find their way home.”

With a flick of his wrists, Etemaad pulled the hood of his cloak over his knee-length gray coils—purple liberally mixed throughout.

Despite decades of friendship, as well as the regent’s approachable demeanor, Yusef understood a directive when he heard one, as did Ammon. The chief magistrates were to do a

better job training their disciples—less lecturing and more modeling.

Ammon and Yusef bowed to Regent Etemaad, with Ammon's bow deeper than his high-ranking father's.

"There are many firsts in a male's life," the regent said to Ammon. "Some change us for the better. Some bring us heartache. Some stay forever in our hearts and minds." In the same way the regent had placed a hand on Yusef's shoulder, he touched Ammon's, firm yet comforting, and squeezed. "Then there are those firsts that improve and hurt us. Yet in the end, leave us feeling blessed for having had the experience. Be well, Ammon of the House of Eetu. I look forward to seeing you at the Luna of Analisia ceremony."

With that personal invitation, Regent Etemaad turned on his booted heels and left.

Ammon released another deep breath. For all that he'd seen the regent walk the halls of the planetary governance building, his lavender and black cloak heralding his entrances and exits, the male had never spoken so personally or cryptically to him before. He didn't like it, neither his forced attendance at the meeting nor the uncharacteristic attention the regent had paid him.

Angry and confused, Ammon turned to his father. "What are you not telling me? Why am I here? It isn't as if I'm your disciple. You've made it quite clear Gurion will be your successor."

Ammon didn't doubt, with Yusef's unyielding support, when the time came for his father to relinquish reins of the Paladin Band, the band would rally behind his older brother, propelling him into the position of chief magistrate. Ammon didn't covet the power and privilege that came with being a chief magistrate. But he took great offense when his father looked at and treated him as a second-class Paladin—devoid of a sharp edge and an unbendable spine. The greatest Paladins in history, according to his father, possessed both.

Yusef returned to his chair at the table. In brooding silence, Ammon joined him, claiming what would soon be Lela's chair.

Yusef's gaze held the too-familiar stare of disappointment, so Ammon braced himself for yet another lecture on what it meant to be a "Paladin of Valor."

"Your eyes conceal nothing. All of your emotions are harbored there, beacons of weakness for any enemy that would cross your path."

Out of spite, Ammon widened his eyes, allowing the full weight of his anger and hurt to flood into them. "Tell me, Ab'ba, what do you see now?"

Unperturbed by Ammon's passive aggressiveness, Yusef answered with a flat, "The same as always." He propped an ankle on a knee and considered him. "I see annoyance and anger. A tedious sight, I must admit, but your mother assures me your behavior and attitude are by-products of your age and gender. I'm certain there was an insult to males somewhere in her sweetly voiced statement, but I far more enjoy sleeping beside my mate in our bed than winning a pointless argument. Once you find your soulmate, you'll discover the truth of my words. Speaking of mates," Yusef said and pointed a finger at Ammon, "when you look at Lela, your eyes reveal your soul's deepest desires."

Despite Yusef's assertion of Ammon's inability to mask his emotions, he didn't flinch when he mentioned Lela. He may be unable to conceal his feelings for her from his father, but he was capable of not confessing to their unsupervised meetings.

Yusef smiled then nodded, his approval more grating than his words of, "Much better, but far too late. Did you hear what the regent said to you?"

"Of course."

"No, Ammon, did you listen with true understanding?" When Ammon remained silent, his father sighed, as if burdened with the worst Paladin son in Asiya's long history. "The regent and Lela's father only suspect what I know to be true. They may even believe the fondness you feel for Lela to be one sided. But they are not your father. Etemaad and Hasani do not know the boy I

raised into the young man who sits before me now, protecting a female's honor with his stony silence."

That was the closest Yusef had ever come to likening Ammon's actions to that of a "true Paladin." Still, he would grant his father nothing. Ammon would always shield Lela from harm, even if that meant placing himself in front of her and taking the full force of whatever threatened his love. Not first love, as Regent Etemaad had implied. There would be no second love for Ammon, just as there would be none for Lela. Once she became chief magistrate, no one, not even the regent or her father, would dare stand in their way. They could, once and for all, announce their intention to begin the courting rituals.

"I know you think me unfair, harsh even. Believe it or not, there are times, Ammon, I wish I could be the gentle, patient father a young man of your sensitive bearing requires. But you've lived a sheltered existence, as has Lela. Even with your short travels to other planets, you have yet to see and experience the ruthlessness of life. We Asiyans know what it means to form ourselves from barbarians into civilized beings. Five bands formed from the endless wars we fought and the savages we once were. Five bands but no more blood and violence between us. Peace, Ammon, we grew to know and love peace. But that doesn't mean we've forgotten the beasts we once were."

Too much. Too. Much. Ammon needed to meditate. Needed time to reflect on everything he'd heard from the regent and his father. He stood. No, what Ammon needed was to see Lela. Being with her always had the miraculous effect of dulling the uncertainties that plagued him. When not in her presence, however, the sharp ache of them returned, especially when he spent extended time with his father.

Yusef neither rose nor tried to stop Ammon from leaving. But when he reached the doors, his foot a half step from sensors that would trigger the doors to open, he turned back to his father. "Speak your mind."

With a weariness only Ammon seemed capable of bringing out of Yusef, his father ran a hand over his forehead and up into

the thick coils of hair piled atop his head. The effect was one of amateurish empathy. "Even if Lela loves you, you cannot clip her wings by asking her to stay here with you as your mate. And I cannot clip your wings by keeping you in the Hall of Concord, hoping to change a nature that is more Verity than Paladin. The regent will send her away from here. Not away from you, as you may think, but toward her destiny. For Lela to grow, she must spread her wings and fly away from home. Etemaad will send her on her first serious mission of peace and reconciliation soon after her induction into the Council of Magistrates."

"How long will she be gone?"

"One never knows with peace negotiations. Not that it matters. As chief magistrates, it is our duty to offer aid and comfort where we can." Yusef ran a hand over his forehead again, and then let his foot drop from his knee to the floor. "Lela is Verity. Ask her, when she envisions her future, if she sees you standing beside her, her mate and father of her children. She is too honorable to lie." With the palm of one hand on the table, Yusef pushed to his feet. "Are you brave enough to ask?"

Dark clouds had dimmed the impact of the sun's rays coming through the windows, cooling the chamber but not stilling his movements. Ammon made his leave, a belated retreat that left his head pounding forcefully and his legs moving hurriedly.

Running down corridors, one blurred into the next. He scaled stairs instead of taking a lift to the Northgard Residential Wing of the hall. When he reached his destination, sweat and desperation clung to him.

Ammon buzzed for entry.

The door slid open, revealing the person he'd run a quarter marnil to see.

"Ammon, what are you doing her—"

He stepped inside the suite, his arms going around her waist and pulling her to him. Then he was kissing her, and his secret fear of losing her slipped away with her return kiss.

"Lela," he whispered against her warm lips. "Lela," he repeated, unable to say more and afraid to let her go lest she and

their love evaporate like water molecules from the heat of the sun.

Ammon kissed Lela again, and kept kissing her until the thought of him being her first but not her only love slinked away—forgotten but not gone.

2. Making Plans

Lela gazed up into eyes a swirl of cornelian maple. Ammon's gray and black coils hung down his shoulders and back, a glorious tide of hair he wore with pride.

"Thanks to you," he said, kissing the tip of her nose, "I must rewrap my coils before exiting your chamber."

Lela knew better than to untwine a Paladin's meticulous warrior's bun. She hadn't yet earned the right to see him thus. No more than Ammon had earned the right to recline beside Lela on the floor of her chamber, hands massaging sides and hips, and lips kissing cheeks and neck.

Yet there they were, a closed door all that hid their unsanctioned relationship from disapproving eyes. Still, from the first day Lela had met Ammon, a Paladin but not quite, she was drawn to him. Lela had never felt this way about any other male of her acquaintance. Love and desire, as she'd come to learn, encouraged the most reckless of actions.

"We weren't to meet again until after the Luna of Analisia ceremony." Her hand rose to his cheek, caressed with a gentle thumb before lifting to touch her lips to his. "What has you so upset?"

Just as Lela knew not to displace his hair, Ammon knew not to arrive at her chamber unannounced. Anyone could've been inside with her when he'd arrived. As it was, the door had barely closed behind him before he'd pulled her in for a delicious but

ill-advised kiss. They could perhaps explain away his presence outside her chamber, but not inside, and definitely not their heated embrace.

Ammon pepped Lela's face with more sweet kisses before twisting onto his back, lacing their fingers and squeezing. "It's been an annul and a half since we began spending time together—talking and getting to know each other. If we were any other couple, we would've begun the courting rituals long ago."

"Quite true, but we can't ignore the expectations of others."

They'd had this discussion many times. Each one ended with Ammon reluctantly agreeing not to declare his intentions to Lela's parents. Her mother would welcome his declaration, while her father would encourage her to delay the union. If Hasani knew of their improper behavior, however, her father wouldn't be pleased. Worse, his disappointment in her would hurt them both.

"We are of age. Technically, we need not seek anyone's permission to court."

"Also true." Lela shifted onto her side to better see Ammon. Eyes that normally revealed much were hooded. Leaning over him, she pressed her lips to his—a languid kiss she hoped would remove the clouds from his eyes. "I made you a promise. After I'm sworn in as chief magistrate, we can sit down with our parents. They may disapprove, which is their right, just as we can proceed with the courting rituals without their support. I would like their approval, though."

"So would I. There are days, Lela, that I feel as if Mother Cosmos will conspire against our joining, that even the Fates do not wish us to become mates."

Lela wondered if Ammon would ask if she shared his foreboding. She waited, heart pounding with a truth she did not wish to utter beyond the boundaries of her conflicted mind. But when he only watched her, a hand going to her hip and rubbing in small, unsure circles, she knew he would not.

"I want us to be together."

“As do I.”

“Are you a dreamer?” Ammon’s fingers were strong yet sensual, and he kept them in constant caressing movement on her hip. “I’ve never before asked. Is it impolite for me to do so now?”

“The way I’ve permitted you to touch me—with your hands and mouth—such barriers no longer exist between us. I do not mind answering your question, although I am curious as to why you’ve chosen today to inquire.”

“I asked if you were a dreamer. That was poor phrasing. I know you are a dreamer. It’s one of the main reasons you were chosen by your band. You dream of a better and brighter future for all—not only Asiyans but all beings, no matter the planet or solar system. But you interpreted my question correctly. Are you like Regent Etemaad? Do you have dreams?”

Lela reclined on her back. She and Ammon spoke on a myriad of topics. The male was well learned, quick witted, and possessed a dry humor common in most Paladins. Yet there were days, like today, when Ammon would guide them to a river’s edge, consider its depths from the safety of the bank but retreat before taking that fateful step forward. Simply put, Ammon did not want to know what existed below the surface of what he could see, feel, and control. In that regard, Ammon wasn’t so different from most people, including Lela. All too soon, however, she would no longer have the luxury of walking away from the river. The plunge into the murky depths would be the biggest step of her young life.

She would answer his posed questions, but not the deeper query that hovered between them.

“Yes, I do dream.”

Lela didn’t turn her head to see his reaction. Beyond her family, no one knew she was a dreamer, not even her band. She suspected her father had shared her ability with Etemaad, although the regent had never inquired about her dreams or whether the Fates came to her in them. From the day Regent Etemaad had begun to treat his best friend’s daughter as the daughter he and

his mate never had, the trajectory of Lela's life had altered. With the Asheema family status in Asiyan society, Lela would've still traveled a path of leadership and service, but not on the scale as that of chief magistrate.

Little belonged exclusively to Lela. Her house, her band, the Council; she was an extension of each, part of and defined by them all. The truth of the constriction sometimes chafed, so she felt neither guilt nor shame for keeping small parts of herself for herself.

Ammon reached for her again, lacing their fingers once more. "My father suspects."

Of course the Paladin did. The only surprise was how long it had taken Yusef to discover their secret.

"Are you upset?"

"From the sound of your voice, it is you who is upset. I would rather him not know, but what is done cannot be altered. It must be faced with a matching truth."

"What is our matching truth?"

With a smile borne of belated purpose, Lela held on to Ammon's hand, tugging him to his feet as she drew upward. Shaking wrinkles from her white dress, the color worn by every disciple, her smile didn't waver despite the utter impropriety of what she was about to do.

The Fates did indeed come to Lela in her dreams. They never spoke to her, but they had been her companions since Lela was old enough to recognize them for who they were. To her knowledge, no Asiyan dreamed daily, much less were visited every time they did by the Fates. She had no explanation, not even an educated guess. But their presence brought equal parts warmth and hope—one bolstered while the other mystified.

"After I help you rewrap your hair, will you escort me to the Cetta Topiary Gardens?"

Ammon glanced down at their joined hands then back to Lela, his eyebrow arched at an adorable angle. "Holding hands like the humans you've researched . . . and in public for all to see?"

“Humans do seem to be rather fond of their public displays of affection. I must admit, I do find the courting custom of hand holding quite endearing. Shall we try?”

“You offer me a challenge?”

“Not at all. I simply wish to bring a smile to your face.”

“And to spite my father. Perhaps even to spite those who seek to control the wind around your wings, pushing you in their preferred direction. You are an independent female, Lela, as I am an independent male.”

Lela refrained from asking Ammon to clarify his wind-wing analogy, for she feared she grasped his meaning, as well as the implications for their future. What she chose to focus on was the smile that played about the edges of his mouth.

A lovely sight to be cherished.

Hand in hand, they walked toward the door, Ammon’s warrior bun in place. With a long pause and two deep breaths, they exited her chamber. White floors and walls greeted them, non-judgmental in their two-dimensional simplicity. Asiyans of all bands walked the corridors, absorbed in their own musings and unaware of the leap of faith Lela and Ammon had taken.

They hadn’t jumped into a river of indeterminate depth, but they waded in neck-high waters—self-delusions all that kept them from slipping under.



Apion Solar System
Nikogeus Moonbase



“That won’t be enough.”

“You must not have the language translator programmed correctly. The down payment I wired to your account is half the price we agreed on.”

“You change the job, the price changes with it. That’s how it works. If you want my crew to add him to the count, that’s going to cost you.”

Quill slid his chair against the wall behind him. The bar in front of him was dark and the patrons oblivious to a lone Grul sitting by himself. This time of night there were more fists thrown and drinks poured than observations made. No one came to this bar and this part of Nikogeus without eyes in the back of their heads.

Better, armed with the best weapons on the underground market.

Making sure he hadn't been followed and no one was listening, Quill surveyed the bulging crowd. Music played, but not loud enough to drown out the grunts of pleasure and the screams of pain coming from the upper level of the bar—from sex or fighting, or sex while fighting, the way Quill liked it best, he didn't know. What he did know, however, was that no one had made him the object of their unwanted attention.

Satisfied, he let his gaze fall to the audiovisual device in his hand, a top-of-the-line zot he'd won from a one-eyed Demite. Well, Demites had three eyes, but when he'd come after Quill with a knife, cursing him for rigging the card game, two of the Demite's eyes had been the price for calling Quill a "hairless three ball sucking cheater." He had cheated, but that wasn't the point. That reminded Quill; he reached into his jacket pocket, found the two eyeballs, tossed them into his mouth and chewed with greedy satisfaction.

"So, about the price. You have my new number."

"I don't have the authority to renegotiate."

The old woman must've thought Quill a space rock. No one without negotiation powers would've gone through the trouble of hunting Quill down for his services.

"You have two choices, Lumi," he said, enjoying the glint of affront at his deliberate use of the racial slur. "One, pay my fee. Two, get someone else for the job." Not that the Lumi could see the crowded bar, but Quill pointed in the direction of the raucous group. "There are plenty who would take the job. They'd take it but get themselves either caught or killed. Before they do, though, you know what they'll do?" Quill brought the zot closer to his face. "They'll talk . . . about you and your plan." Quill's smile wasn't pleasant or even boastful. He didn't have time for either. When a lie was pointless, he served up the truth like a baked ferine—the thick fish nasty going down but filling. "My

crew is the best. We'll get the job done. Nice and clean." Quill laughed. "Bloody and quick, but it'll be nice and clean."

"No one can know we were behind it."

"No one will. That's part of what the extra payment is for. We'll disappear after it's done."

Showing his pointy teeth, Quill smiled again, confident in his skills. He didn't do complicated or messy. From his experience, the best jobs were the ones where the client kept it straightforward and easy. He left political machinations to people like the female Lumi frowning at him. If she were there with him, he would pour a drink down her throat and buy her a strapping Sinerus for the night. Between the alcohol and the unisexual Sinerus, the Lumi might just loosen up. Though, from the hard, imperial set of her chin, Quill retracted his previous thought. No wonder Lumis stayed embroiled in wars. They didn't know how to prop their feet up and relax.

For long breaths, the Lumi glared at Quill before doing something unexpected—she smiled. Lumis weren't the most attractive race of people, true, but that's not what had Quill moving the zot away from his face. Her ice-blue eyes matched the frigid lifting of lips at the corners, a silent, deadly gesture that explained, more than anything else, why her race couldn't maintain peace with their planetary neighbors.

"You're afraid."

A less experienced mercenary would've interpreted the Lumi's statement as a threat. While threats weren't above the still-smiling female, the Lumi hadn't given him one.

Her smile grew and her blue eyes all but glowed. "Your fear will ensure your success, as well as a speedy departure from my homeworld. Your fear is expensive. More expensive than I'd anticipated."

Finally, the Lumi had removed her mask. With the addition of the new target, the job's risk factor increased to a near-suicidal level. Quill salivated at the thought of a worthy challenge. The jobs, lately, were too easy, like removing that Demite's eyes.

Even the sweet taste of them hadn't felt as good going down as in times past. But this job would test him and his crew. Even better, the payday would set them for the rest of their lives.

A drunk human bumped into his table, knocking over a half-empty mug of haze ale.

"Shit, where did that table come from?"

Bloodshot red eyes met Quill's then lowered to the amber liquid running from the table onto the sticky floor. The human shrugged then walked away, as if that was the end of it. Quill had no idea why the human was so far away from home. He hoped the man got a good look at the blue planet when he left because he wouldn't be seeing it or anything else ever again.

"Are you sure he's going to be there?" More than one mission had gone wrong because of faulty information.

"You have no idea how difficult it was to convince him to join the negotiations. But yes, he will be here. He will accompany their new chief magistrate."

"A Paladin?" Quill asked, rising to his feet. Zot clutched in his hand, he shoved the table out of his way. He may not have consumed all of the ale, but the liquid threatened to come out the other end. Deeming the bathroom too far away and his need urgent, Quill found the closest unoccupied corner and took a piss.

"No, Verity. A woman."

Inconsequential, the Lumi meant. The female wasn't as intelligent as he'd given her credit for being. No matter. As long as the new chief magistrate wasn't from the Paladin Band, Quill and his crew wouldn't have to worry about resistance from that quarter. Still . . . "Send me everything you have on the targets, including the female Asiyan."

Even if the Lumi didn't want the woman dead, Quill didn't believe in leaving witnesses or potential enemies behind. Unlike Lumis, Quill didn't live for war. He'd killed plenty, sure, but he didn't want to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder while trying to stay one step ahead of the so-called "honorable warriors."

Asiyans weren't what went bump in the universe. They were the dark universe. Lucky for Quill and Lumis, he'd never been afraid of the dark. Yet he was a cautious Grul, so he reclaimed his chair and sat. "From start to finish, tell me what you have planned."