

Paladin

by

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INT. PRAAK - JUNTA PALACE - DAY

Gryym Salavo (39) stands at the window of his suite, watching the traffic of traveling ships between the rising buildings of the Kuran capital. The skyscrapers are tree-like, spreading out in size over their upper floors.

Gryym looks older than his age, with hard features to match. He looks tense, as if he's just received bad news.

The door to the room opens behind him, and he turns to it immediately but relaxes when Ivan (35) enters, sweaty and looking just as concerned.

IVAN

Sir, Oscars team is back.

GRYYM

(surprised)

All of them?

IVAN

Yes, but...They were attacked.

That doesn't surprise him at all.

GRYYM

On the way back?

IVAN

(nodding)

They were on the main route, close to the first checkpoint towards the palace. They're sure the attackers were Kuran.

GRYYM

Of course. And the elements used?

IVAN

Earth, they said. Most of them were too injured to give a proper account, including Oscar himself. So we're not sure if they found something at the Eastern Generals' palace or not.

GRYYM

I doubt they did. Make sure only our own doctors see them before moving them to the ship. We're leaving. I'll handle the farewells to our host. There's nothing to be found here.

IVAN
 (at attention)
 Sir.

He quickly leaves the room thereafter. Gryym watches the door after it closes for a long moment before he turns to his window again.

He sighs, raising a hand to the glass.

GRYYM
 (whispering)
 I'm sorry Val.

INT. MILITARY HANGER - CORVETTE - DAY

There's the buzz of advanced computers within the ship, with a dozen men and women stationing them. Majorie (37) walks between the working cadets, frowning. The door into the bridge opens, and Ivan enters.

IVAN
 Gryym said to move Oscar and his team here for further medical. I recommend we give them an escort.

MAJORIE
 Good, you were smart enough to come to me directly. The comms were just cut. We have no way of reaching the Center.

Ivan grows visibly tense.

IVAN
 Now?

MAJORIE
 A few moments before you arrived.

IVAN
 Send Black Guardsmen to Gryym, right now.

MAJORIE
 I already have. I'll put together a squad for Oscar.

INT. JUNTA PALACE - DAY

Six troopers jog through the corridor, all in dark armor, exo-suits and helmets with grey visors that enveloped their heads. They carried no weapons save the pistols on their thighs.

INT. JUNTA PALACE - GREAT HALL

Gryym enters through the large doors of the hall, the doors closing behind him quietly. The room is large, rich, with a white decorated table in its center.

Formes (23) sits at its head. Of a humanoid, bird-like species called the Tytons, he's grey-feathered and has large owl-like eyes.

They stare each other down for all but a moment.

FORMES

Do you recall the general of our Western District, Korvin?

GRYYM

I do. He was the first of your leaders I questioned.

FORMES

Quite. A year ago, some months before you arrived, he was accused of stealing arms from an arms depot here in Ike by our commissioner.

GRYYM

I imagine he did.

FORMES

Doubtless. And yet, the commissioner accused him with little evidence, publically, to the people. Korvin felt disrespected. As any would, in his position. The commissioner resolved to find more evidence, and it seemed she did, because before she could find her way to deliver it to me, she was killed. Politically motivated assassination it was, but we could not say to who, because she had many enemies.

GRYYM

You would not have given me the context if you believed it was anyone but Korvin.

FORMES

It was. He was offended by her actions, he saw her as a problem and dispatched with her in the most effective way possible.

GRYYM

I wonder how one could be so offended at being accused of something they did.

FORMES

The truth in the accusations were far too severe to warrant any other response.

GRYYM

Yet he made them true, by his own will and conscience. Was the commissioner to ignore her duty?

FORMES

(smiling)

Right or wrong, her duties got her killed. She mishandled the matter.

GRYYM

By attending to it?

FORMES

No, by accusing him with no contingencies in place. It's what got her killed.

GRYYM

Hearing that, I'm certain the next commissioner will.

FORMES

There's the trick, though. There were no contingencies. No failsafe available. The oddity in her reporting it was that she knew it would have amounted to nothing, given the position of who she was accusing. Yet she still pursued the issue for no cause.

GRYYM

Did it change nothing?

Formes blinks, before leaning back into his seat.

FORMES

The other generals aligned, out of fear of Korvin moving aggressively. If he had plans, he was forced to alter them from then.

GRYYM

Then who is to say that was not her intent?

FORMES

Her life for peace. A noble
sacrifice, then?

GRYYM

Or one to further a particular
interest, even in death. Who can
say?

A silence filled the room then, with both men watching
each other warily.

FORMES

I'm told you're here to bid our
nation farewell. That your little
Inquisition has reached its end.

GRYYM

I am, and it has.

FORMES

To no result.

GRYYM

To no result.

FORMES

As I told you when you arrived.

GRYYM

You will recall I agreed with the
sentiment.

FORMES

I recall you insisting on this
fallacy, despite my obvious
displeasure.

GRYYM

We all have our duties. I had to
do mine.

FORMES

I don't recall the Centers
mandate involving the violation
of another's sovereignty.

GRYYM

The Kuran Commonality signed the
Accords. We've violated nothing.

FORMES

Some of my generals feel
otherwise. You questioned Korvin
first. He especially felt
wronged.

There's another tense silence then.

GRYYM

He should have come to the table to address our differences. He's lost his opportunity now.

FORMES

He failed to, indeed. Yet who's to say he won't try to still, if you give him the opportunity?

GRYYM

I have urgent duties elsewhere. He'll have to speak to next Center representatives if I truly angered him.

FORMES

Then we can finally get to the interesting part?

GRYYM

I was under the impression you started instigating for that weeks ago.

EXT. SPACE OVER PRAAK

The 1st Star Flock of the Kuran Commonality hovers over Praak, Battleships, cruisers and destroyers sitting ready to defend the planet at a moment's notice, smaller Corvettes and fighters flying between them.

Then towards the moon of the planet, a worm-hole materializes, and from the white, cloud like void, a different sort of fleet emerges, the 1st Fleet of The Center. At it's head, the Flagship 'Reliance'.

INT. JUNTA PALACE - CORRIDOR - DAY

The six troopers now stand outside the doors to the Hall, lined in silence, opposite its door, where four Tyton guards stand post.

INT. GREAT HALL

FORMES

Me? I've done nothing.

GRYYM

Quite.

Formes watches him, before he begins laughing. It's an odd, hooting sound.

Gryym sighs. Almost in relief.

EXT. SPACE OVER IKE

We see the Inquisitions Corvette flying between the ships of the 1st Star Flock, before making it's approach to the 1st Fleet across them, closing in on the 'Reliance'.

INT. FLAGSHIP 'RELIANCE' - HANGER BAY

The shuttle flies into the hanger, between lines of Fighters, and groups of soldiers and pilots. It lands on a designated spot, where a robed man waits for it.

The ramp of their ship drops, revealing Gryym and Ivan at the head of other investigators, but behind them, there are others, the chameleon-like Priests of Morgos, all in the same grey robes.

INT. FLAGSHIP 'RELIANCE' - COUNCIL ROOM

Etsibeth Serek (42) sits at the head of the of a long metallic table, deep in thought. When the door to the room slides open, he raises his head to it.

Gryym walks in with a pad in his hand and a frown. He puts it on the table as the door closes behind him.

GRYYM

You're here with a fleet.

ETSIBETH

That I am.

GRYYM

Our only fleet.

ETSIBETH

Hardly a choice I would've made on my own.

GRYYM

Who's watching The Center with it here?

ETSIBETH

The Interim doesn't think it needs watching for now.

Gryym gives him a frustrated look, and Etsibeth can only shrug it off.

ETSIBETH(CONT'D)

He was sure that the Kurans were going to kill you and the rest of the Inquisition.

GRYYM

So he cools the tension by bringing in the Search a month earlier?

ETSIBETH

With a fleet and a viable excuse for all the arms. We're perfectly safe with the First here. How is this the first time you hear of all this? He said he sent you a communication.

GRYYM

Likely intercepted, I got no such message. They must've been jamming our comms longer than we realized. What excuse could possibly make the Kurans accept a foreign fleet in their space?

ETSIBETH

With them still being at war with the Ebsig Foundation, we cited the need to protect the screening tech we have to find the heirs with us.

GRYYM

How long ago did you reach an agreement with them?

ETSIBETH

A week ago.

GRYYM

They tried to kill our lead investigators' group this morning.

Surprise.

ETSIBETH

Joseph will be sad to hear his preventatives failed.

GRYYM

They wouldn't have, if it was any other states. Power down there is so decentralized that it's a wonder they're winning their war.

ETSIBETH

You'll have to write a report for me. Did anyone die?

GRYYM

Luckily, no. There are some

injuries.

ETSIBETH

If we were any other state, this would've been an incident.

GRYYM

(tiredly)

What I'd give for us to have a Paladin again.

ETSIBETH

We'd need a special sort of Paladin for that to even matter.

A hologram appears over the table, projecting the form of Joseph (56) suddenly, Interim President of The Center.

JOSEPH

Gryym. I'm told one of your investigating detachments was attacked this morning. What are their conditions and how was it done?

GRYYM

I was not present. It happened too quickly for me to ascertain their condition or the scenario of the attack. Senior Investigator Ivan said they were too injured to give a proper account, and I wanted to get us out as quickly as I could.

JOSEPH

Did they have any security detachment with them?

GRYYM

(shaking his head)

The Kurans were aggressive enough to passive questioning. I felt the presence of any fighters in any capacity would have escalated tensions.

Etsibeth frowns.

JOSEPH

(perturbed)

I see. They were stationed on the transport then, I imagine?

GRYYM

For the Inquisitions duration, yes.

ETSIBETH

You set an odd precedent by that Gryym.

GRYYM

No other empire we've been to has been in a state of war. A foreign security force roaming your streets during a war would be a queer enough idea for any state. I set no precedent at all by respecting the sensitivity of the situation.

Elisabeth watched him in quiet unsurity, as did Joseph.

JOSEPH

Do we have any reason to send the summons?

GRYYM

No. There's nothing to report on here outside the breaking of a plethora of galactic laws. But I told you that would be our conclusion before I even began.

Joseph gave him a sympathetic look.

JOSEPH

That's unfortunate, Gryym.

GRYYM

Nothing to be done with it now, except moving in the right direction from here.

JOSEPH

All in good time, my friend. I expect a report upon your arrival.

(turning to Etsibeth)

You're cleared for the Search. You have an army for safety but don't get complacent.

ETSIBETH

I never am.

Josephs hologram disappeared, Gryym still staring at the space it occupied.

GRYYM

All in good time. Where has the logic gone?

ETSIBETH

There are reasons, Gryym.

With an angry swing from Gryym, the chairs on the other end of the room flew to the wall as a wind picked up in the room. He turned from the table and walked to the door, Etsibeth's eyes following him even as he left the room.

INT. HARMONY - IMPERIAL PALACE - NIGHT

Outside the richly carved door, we hear moans, even a little laughter. Inside, the room is richly furnished with silks and gold ornaments.

On the bed, Andromeda and a Guardsmen, engage in carnal pleasure. The guard is focused on her, with a pleased grin, but Andromeda's (21) eyes are to the ceiling, more focused on her own pleasure.

The guard pulls on her dark hair to get her to look to him as he shudders, enticing a frown from Andromeda as she turns to him.

ANDROMEDA

Already?

He stands, and takes a breath, admiring her form for a moment.

GUARD

I'm not risking my life to not enjoy this.

ANDROMEDA

And I brought myself down to sleeping with likes of you so I wouldn't?

GUARD

You seemed to be enjoying it plenty moments ago.

ANDROMEDA

I'd hoped you'd last long enough for me to realize it.

The man blinks at her for a beat, and she closes her eyes, releasing a quiet sigh just as her door opens. Prince Japra (25), Andromedas' brother, stands at the doorway.

He glances to the naked, who is gripped by surprise, then to the exposed Andromeda, who is annoyed.

JAPRA

Past the point of trying to hide it?

ANDROMEDA

(annoyed)

A locked door would tell you anyway, but I hoped at least you'd have learned to knock by now.

JAPRA

Suppose I'm the slowest of us for a reason, though I think I'm far from being in the wrong for my impatience this time. Mother sent me. We leave for Baal tomorrow.

ANDROMEDA

(sitting up)

Baal? What's the rush to see the Leos on such short notice?

Japra doesn't respond, his gaze amusedly set on the near-petrified guard. A beat.

JAPRA

We missed the late duchess's funeral all those years ago, but they're to bid her a final farewell in three days. Mother wants to feign some semblance of concern before the duke has any new treasonous thoughts, or find out if he's acted on any old ones. Why, you didn't have any plans did you?

Andromeda stands, and begins to make for a door at one end of it. Drawing both of the mens gazes

ANDROMEDA

None. I'm actually happy to be rid of the drawl of the council meetings, if only for a few days.

She disappears into another room, and Japras eyes find the guards again. He smiles at the man, who seems to relax.

JAPRA

(to Andromeda)

I'll send a squad to take and replace him at your door.

Japra turns from the room, just as the guard falls to his knees, breath hitching.

EXT. BAAL - PLANTATION - DAY

Rows of green plants contrasted the white sand dunes in the distance. The sweltering sun created a mirage, even over the plumes of smoke rising from a single line of trees, which we descend now to see are engulfed in flames.

A humanoid form flies across the flame, over the burning trees, with douses of water descending onto them.

The SIZZLES into the fire as we cut to the face of Alec (16), the burning trees ahead of him barely reflected in his eyes. He is one amongst a line of slaves that face the burning trees, all in tattered clothing, dirty, serious, standing atop a slim metal beam.

Before them stands a Sand Walker, Barca, whose body was covered by a loose Parka, who watches ahead much like them, facing the burning trees between two other Sand Walkers.

BARCA

It must bring you some semblance of joy, this.

There's another SWOSH, and some more SIZZLING. More water onto the fires.

BARCA (CONT'D)

To see the source of so much of your suffering burn as it does.

No one says anything, all their eyes on the floor. Barca watches them for a beat.

BARCA (CONT'D)

I'm sure each of you are aware of what my job is here?

More silence.

BARCA (CONT'D)

I know your group has a man that speaks for it.

A slave, aged but not grey, raises his head and visibly steels himself.

SLAVE

Y...Yes sir.

Barca's head turns to him.

BARCA

Excellent. Then you are aware of what must happen here today. But I have to inquire, every slave group must have a watcher for

their responsible crop. How could such a fire start without us being alerted quickly? It seems like an impossible thing.

SLAVE

Sir, I'm not sure. I think -

BARCA

Oh, I enjoy the thoughts of your sort. They're usually very revealing to the facts you try to hide. Tell me what you were thinking.

The Slave blinks and seems to rethink his words.

BARCA (CONT'D)

Speak it as it comes.

SLAVE

We had a watcher here, sir, but he fell unconscious during his watch.

BARCA

Unconscious?

SLAVE

Y-yes, sir.

Barca stares at him. Still smiling.

BARCA

And which of them was it?

He turns down the lines of the slaves expectantly. Alec's quick to raise his head, fearful. That draws Barcas attention.

BARCA (CONT'D)

Tell me then, how is it he *fell* unconscious?

SLAVE

He's not sure, sir.

Barce glances to the slave, but still faces Alec.

BARCA

You're not sure?

SLAVE

Yes sir.

BARCA

Then...You have your suspicions?

SLAVE
(Confused)
Sir?

Barcas tone continues to be unchanging.

BARCA
Being unsure implies that you
have your suspicions as to why he
fell unconscious. Tell me.

SLAVE
H-hunger.

There's a silence, filled by the burning plant life.

BARCA
That is unfortunate. You all have
my sympathies. Working underneath
these temperatures is difficult
on its own, but doing so hungry
must make it truly difficult. Yet
we all have our jobs to do, and
they can not be laid vacant
because of circumstances. Quotas
must be met, by any means, and
your negligence has cost a
substantial amount of the
harvest.

Barca turns his gaze from Alec, walking down the rows
of slaves in a tense silence.

BARCA (CONT'D)
I hope you understand why you
must be punished all the same.
Turn.

The slaves turned atop the beam, so their backs were
towards Barca and the other Walkers. Their hands are
suddenly hoisted up over their heads.

Barca admired their new position for a moment, before
opening his palm. With the sound of burning paper, a
whip made of fire escapes his palms, long and lose.

He walks closer to the slaves again, raises it to the
whimpers of a slave in front of him, before he rethinks
something.

Barca then walks towards Alec.

BARCA
You must understand boy. It's
only right.

He swings the fire whip once moments after, to the
sounds of Alecs' agonized SCREAM as his back is broken

and scorched.

Another swing, Alec only screams louder.

Another swing, Alec eyes look to go heavy, despite his yowling.

Another swing, his voice breaks.

Another swing.

EXT. SPACE OVER BAAL

Panning from the mostly desert planet, we turn into the vastness of space just as the Fifth Fleet of the Imperium warp into the system in a flash of white light. An Imperial Titan leads the path as the flagship, by far dwarfing the other ships of the fleet in size.

The ships come over the surface of Baal, before the hangers doors of the Titan open, just as six IS Fighters left the hanger, between them a shuttle.

EXT. BAAL - LANDING PLATFORM - DAY

The orange sun atop a black field that is the Leos banner flaps to the wind, and at a higher standard, the golden phoenix on a red field of the Angelekos flaps next to them.

Dozens of soldiers in brown ceremonial uniform from the Leos household guard arrayed in a path adorned by a purple ceremonial carpet, towards the Leos family from the landing spot.

Jovian Leos (53), the Duke of Baals holds his head high at the end of the path, streaks of grey in his blond-hair.

His son, Valentinian (22), heir to the dukedom of Baal flanks to his right.

His daughter, Theodora (16), stands to his left, looking nearly as proud as her father.

The Royal Shuttle comes down to rest as the IS Fighters pass behind it. When the shuttle ramps lower, the wind itself seems to pause, the flags fall on their poles.

The Empress(48) appears, with a straight form and a critical eye, her eyes first glance to the standing soldiers, who bend their knees.

When she begins her trudge to the Leos, Andromeda and Japra come down the ramp too, behind them armed guards

in red armor.

The Leos only bow when the Empress is near.

JOVIAN
(head lowered)
Baal remains yours, majesty.

The Empress gives him a pleased smile.

INT. BAAL - LEOS MOUNTAIN PALACE - GREAT HALL - LATER

A welcome feast is held. The halls tables are filled with people, dignitaries and ambassadors from the others planets within the system.

At the highest table at the head of the hall, sits the Leos and the Angelekos family. The Empress and Jovian are engaged in conversation, as is Andromeda and Valentinian.

ANDROMEDA
Baal is a lot warmer than Pladen.

VALENTINIAN
I remember being against it, but he insisted on trading worlds

ANDROMEDA
What were his reasons?

VALENTINIAN
The slave-liberators in the outer worlds, or so they call themselves. Depending on the group, they either killed or freed our slaves, and that just ran up the costs of them.

ANDROMEDA
Why didn't he send a request to the Lords Defense for increased security?

Valentinian shifted at that. She notices.

VALENTINIAN
The liberators would only go underground, until any added security vacated and we would still be enduring the same issue.

ANDROMEDA
I'm sure a permanent fleet presence could've been negotiated.

VALENTINIAN

Possibly, but beyond that, the Inquisition in the Kirk Dominion had just finished, and we did not want the Imperium's resources diverted from that danger if it came here.

Andromeda gives him a long, quiet look.

VALENTINIAN

(almost nervous)

More besides, Orca fruit farming is more bountiful.

ANDROMEDA

You were lucky with that, weren't you? My mothers usually not so open with planet shifting.

VALENTINIAN

I was too young to remember it properly, but I'm sure my father felt a bit of luck was deserved, considering the year.

Andromeda nodded, turning to the room as more trays of food were brought in by lavishly dressed slaves.

ANDROMEDA

I wish I had come Valen.

VALENTINIAN

You were as young as I was. You can't be blamed.

Andromeda glanced to him with a small smirk.

ANDROMEDA

Who is to blame then? My mother?

That visibly makes him nervous, and he looks to the Empress, as if she had somehow heard. That makes her smile wholely.

VALENTINIAN

No one's to blame. Just an unfortunate happenence of the time.

Andromeda puts a hand to his arm.

ANDROMEDA

Relax. It was only a joke.

Valentinian looks down to her hand, before turning back to room, still visibly tense. With a sigh, Andromeda retracts.

EXT. SPACE OVER BAAL

Two IS Fighters make a pass between of the Imperial Titan and a Custodian Class Battleship, small next to the two large ships.

INT. IMPERIAL TITAN - ROYAL QUARTERS

The room is furnished richly. Japra stands by a window, looking out to the other ships of the fleet. Andromeda and The Empress are seated on their respective sofas.

THE EMPRESS

Jovian holds a grudge. He hides it well, but I can see it. Likely because it's taken so long for us to come pay our respects.

ANDROMEDA

Valentinian acted like he understood why we would've been occupied at the time.

The Empress watches her expectantly.

ANDROMEDA (CONT'D)

We were speaking about their move to Baal, and why Duke Jovian requested it. They had issues with slave-liberators, but they didn't impress that upon you because they assumed that you would be too busy managing the aftermath of the Paladins' death, and would need every resource..

Japra snorts. The Empress looks thoughtful.

JAPRA

They think it prudent to decide for you what measures are appropriate or not?

THE EMPRESS

Our revenue hasn't been affected. It makes no matter to me.

ANDROMEDA

A report should have been given, at the very least.

THE EMPRESS

To what end? They're correct, with the Paladins' death, I needed every fleet at hand. Nothing would have changed.

Neither Andromeda or Japra say anything to that.

THE EMPRESS (CONT'D)

All the same, I think at present, we have more pressing matters. The Lord Intelligence's informed me of the end of the Inquisition in the Kuran Comminality.

Japra turns from the window abruptly, but is quietened by the Empress's raised hand.

THE EMPRESS

I don't know if the Imperium is their next destination, but I've told Duke Jovian that we'll be here for no longer than a month. The only single system states remaining are the Lor Technocracy and the Suramo Coalition, and I believe they're getting the smaller states out of the way before they proceed to the major powers. We have time, but not long.

There's a tense silence in the room at that, but it's broken by Japra.

JAPRA

What's left to be done, after sixteen years?

THE EMPRESS

(thoughtful)

What indeed.

INT. RION - OFFICE OVERLOOKING THE FROZEN WASTELAND - MORNING

Grrym sits a table with a pad in front of him. On the chairs flanking him are Ivan and Oscar (37), the latter one-armed.

Across him are three leaders of the Lor Technocracy, an alien, reptilian people with long heads and piercing blue eyes, headed by the Chief Scientist, SK.Mon(78)

SK.MON

It's a fair contract, Overseer. We receive the testing technology only for the benefit of the Center. If we can produce it at scale, and distribute to the other states, you might find your future leaders exponentially faster, and we might a Paladin

again that much sooner.

The Chief speaks as if with a lisp. Gryym glances up from the pad.

GRYYM

You would have a monopoly on the production of the Syncs.

SK.MON

Naturally.

Gryym looks to be battling to keep a straight from amusement.

GRYYM

The Inquistions yet to find those responsible for killing the Paladin.

SK.MON

Your mission will doubtless succeed.

GRYYM

With this, we might as well give the perpetrators of the assassination the heads of her heirs on a silver platter.

SK.Mon looks taken aback for a beat.

SK.MON

Something could then be arranged for the rights to production post-Inquistion.

GRYYM

The Search would have likely found all of them at such a point.

SK.MON

They will expire too, Overseer, and then the Center will have to begin searching anew.

Gryym watches the Chief with a curious expression.

GRYYM

You'll have to excuse me. For all my objections, I've neglected to inform you that I haven't the right to give you this permission. Only the Paladin can, or barring them, the Legislative Parliament of the Center. Seeing as we have yet to identify the

Paladin, it falls to the parliament. You're welcome to submit this to the committee, but I have to inform you now that it will never be allowed to pass.

SK.Mon looks disappointed, but not entirely surprised.

SK.MON

We'll submit it to your committee all the same, hopefully, they'll see reason.

GRYYM

Of course.

SK.MON

Then with this, your time on our world has concluded.

GRYYM

It has.

SK.MON

Might I inquire about your next destination? I've been very interested your targeting pattern. It seems near...Erratic.

GRYYM

I only go where the president bids me. I haven't been privy to his designs on that.

SK.MON

I see. I trust we've been cleared of any potential accusation.

That gets a smile off of Gryym.

GRYYM

Yes.

EXT. BAAL - MOUNTAIN PALACE CRYPTS BASE - DAWN

The procession is in black, even the guardsmen, who flank the Angelekos and the Leos as they walk towards the base of the mountain, the orange sun standing bright over them

There are onlookers, people held back by soldiers in red exo-suits holding poles, quiet in front of their stores and occupations.

They disappear when the procession enters...

INT. CRYPTS

...the base of the mountain, through an open steel gate. The path is lit by torches on the walls. The guards stopped at the entrance.

JAPRA
(muttering)
How gothic.

Andromeda gives him a look, one he shrugs off.

They continue down the corridor, before going down a flight of stairs, before they reach the burials.

There was only one bury chamber, with a large stone statue carved in the likeness of the deceased duchess. That's where the head of their party, Jovian and The Empress stop.

With a slide of Jovian's hand, the statue shifted to reveal an entrance, where him and the Empress enter.

Theodora stood behind them, alone and ahead from her brother Valentinian.

Andromeda leave Japra to stand next to him.

VALENTINIAN
My father had to pay quite a ransom to get me back after my mother was ambushed over Thrus-Sagnar.

He spoke whilst looking to his sisters back.

VALENTINIAN (CONT'D)
I wanted to go all the way to Raze and sack it, my father did too. But The Empress signed the peace with the Elysian before we ever got the chance, and somehow she's found a way to hate me more than she hates the Elysians for our mother's death.

Unsure, Andromeda says nothing.

VALENTINIAN (CONT'D)
Does the pain ever go away?

ANDROMEDA
(a beat, she's almost looks sad herself)
No, but you learn to live with it.

The Empress and Jovian are out, and the leave the room

as a pair. Theodora follows behind them without entering the chamber.

Valen sighs, but both he and Andromeda go through the entrance.

The coffin is elevated and made of stone, with the duchess's form protruding from it. Yet, on her forehead, is a line of blood, and it gives Andromeda pause.

VALENTINIAN

(noticing)

It's part of the ceremony.

He pulls out two knives from their sheathes, and stretches one to her. Andromeda's still transfixed by the spot of blood on the duchess's forehead.

SFX: Distant child screaming, and the muffled shouting of others.

VALENTINIAN

Princess?

That pulls her from her stupor, and she grabs the knife, standing on one end of the coffin, across Valen.

VALENTINIAN

A cut will do, and have the blood over her hand there.

Reluctantly, she looks down to her hand and the unsheathed knife.

It's at the point, we can only hear her breathing as her vision tunnels. Blurry, Valen makes the cut over his hand across her.

She's fighting to keep herself calm, but slowly she raises the knife to her hand. It lays there for a long beat.

Then, there's darkness and the sound of sliced flesh.

EXT. ALBION - BALCONY OVERLOOKING COURTYARD - DAY

Gryym watches the heirs train from the balcony rails.

Timap Vhakk (18) launches a wave of flames that sear towards Bamon Serek (17) like a wave, who covers himself in a ball of stone by raising his hands. Slabs of stone raise themselves on either of Timaps sides, and close in to flatten her just as suddenly. Forced to stop her torrent of fire, she launches herself up into the air as the stones collide.

On the edge, Lisim Lothar (18) watches excitedly, next to the training instructor Porta Teren (61).

Joseph approaches from behind Gryym.

GRYYM

All of them are human, but none of them are from any of the human empires?

JOSEPH

It's all a bit funny, really.

GRYYM

It won't be, when the last two happen to also be human.

JOSEPH

Maybe not, but I think the galaxy needs another human Paladin. I'm sorry to say, Gryym, but Valentina left a mess.

GRYYM

(serious)

We failed her, Joseph, not the other way around.

JOSEPH

(placating)

Well, the last two might be human too, and maybe that would be the universe telling us to set things right.

GRYYM

As if the universe gets to decide.

JOSEPH

It would be the right choice for whatever decides it.

Joseph stands next to Gryym on the rail, and for a moment, watches them train.

JOSEPH (CONT'D)

All the same, I have no desire to be a part of governance when the Paladin is found. The struggle to set things right will be nearly insurmountable.

GRYYM

You best prepare them well.

JOSEPH

Even that might not be enough.

Half the galaxies at war, Gryym. The Kurans are trying to move beyond being a one-system state at the detriment of the Ebsig Foundation. The Fygars and Lothaks are raiding each others systems. Those primitive Razzians are going after minor states with impunity. The Pazanids are bombing Amor again, and I can't do anything but watch our people suffer. The only reason the Imperiums not fighting the Elysian is because they're still watching what we'll do after they killed Valentina.

GRYYM

(surprised)

You've never openly admitted that it was them.

JOSEPH

(frustrated)

I'm trying to hold off all the fighting. At least until we have a Paladin to function as a deterrent on some level. Or to get our Parliament to do *something*.

GRYYM

We've been lucky with these three.

(nodding towards the still fighting heirs)

The last two can only be in one of the major powers, and we've nearly finished investigating all the minor ones.

JOSEPH

You'll go to the Suramo Coalition next Gryym.

GRYYM

And then?

GRYYM

Then you'll get what you want, and take your Inquisition to the Imperium.

EXT. WARP SPACE

The Imperial Titan is surrounded by a near-blinding white light, warping through space.

INT. IMPERIAL TITAN - ROYAL QUARTERS

It's a meeting, much like the last, but they're seated. Andromeda lays down on the sofa with her eyes closed.

THE EMPRESS

I've done my best to calm the duke, but I think he still retained some anger at our departure.

JAPRA

He'll have to get over it then, won't he?

THE EMPRESS

Proud men never do. I'd even go as far as to say that he expects an apology, foolishly.

She shakes her head.

THE EMPRESS (CONT'D)

He knows he would never get one, formally, but I believe he wants one diplomatically.

ANDROMEDA

(muttering)

Marriage?

THE EMPRESS

Quite. What did you think of his children?

JAPRA

The girl's pretty enough, but I don't think so. She's courteous, but I think she harbors a sort of fear for me.

ANDROMEDA

Of course she would, you brute.

THE EMPRESS

(scoldingly)

Andromeda.

With a sigh, she sits up, and becomes more attentive.

ANDROMEDA

I did not mean it, Japra. I half grew up with Valentinian, and while he's handsome, he carries too much grief with him, and there are familial issues there. I have no desire to have to mediate at some point. No mother,

I don't see a future with him.

THE EMPRESS

You never see a future with anyone.

JAPRA

(smiling)

Unless it's for a night.

THE EMPRESS

Your own habits are not admirable, Japra.

JAPRA

I keep mine to high-blood, at the very least. And they're far less frequent.

THE EMPRESS

(getting annoyed)

An even more dangerous venture. Say nothing more and leave.

Japra stands, smile falling and stalks out of the room. There's a tense silence as The Empress stares at Andromeda, who returns her eyes, almost in challenge. After a beat, Andromeda's eyes fall.

THE EMPRESS (CONT'D)

He's right. I've told you many times about your habits.

ANDROMEDA

Mother...

THE EMPRESS

(interrupting,
intimidatingly calm)

...Even now, you don't have a protector. You've slept with all six of the ones that came before.

ANDROMEDA

Mother...

THE EMPRESS

(interrupting)

...Some of them were from noble families, so I could not simply dispatch of them as I would. Stories spread, and you look like less of a promising prospect with each tale.

ANDROMEDA

They should consider themselves fortunate to even be a prospect

for me.

THE EMPRESS

They are, but the electors think of these things when it's time to choose, and this could ruin you. It should never become a question if you're carrying your husbands' child in your womb or not when the time comes. His family would not take it lightly. No courtiers from now, Andromeda. No guards. No whores.

ANDROMEDA

I'm to become celibate, then?

THE EMPRESS

Yes.

ANDROMEDA

Wonderful. I wonder, do women count? Such a thing could never cast doubts as to who the father of my child would be.

Andromeda receives nothing but a cold, unamused stare in return.

INT. IMPERIAL TITAN - ANDROMEDAS QUARTERS - LATER

Andromeda sits atop her bed, focused on the hand she cut during the ceremony. It's just a pink line now, but the memory distracts her.

She falls to her bed then, and cries.

EXT. IMPERIUM OF MAN - HARMONY - IMPERIAL PALACE - DAY

A less grand transport carries The Empress, Andromeda and Japra towards the palace this time. The Empress looks impatient, and Andromeda is annoyed.

JAPRA

(amused)

It was a near month-long holiday, sister. Appreciate that much at least.

Andromeda doesn't grace him with a response.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - COUNCIL CHAMBERS

The council chambers are grand, and richly furnished, with a marble-topped table and portraits of past

monarchs. Each chair in the room is occupied. The Empress sits at the head of it, and Andromeda to her right.

The Lord Justice (61), grey and serious, occupies one chair.

The Lord Defense (53), handsome but aging, another.

The Lady Administrator (61), observant and open.

The Lord Intelligence (33), with wandering eyes and tight lips, another.

LORD INTELLIGENCE

I apologize, majesty, for the rushed call.

THE EMPRESS

You'd only need apologies if our abandonment of ceremony wasn't prudent.

LORD INTELLIGENCE

Of course. The Inquisition has passed the Lor Technocracy, and now sits at the Suramo Coalition.

Surprised silence.

THE EMPRESS

I was assured it would only now be finished in the Lor Technocracy.

LORD INTELLIGENCE

It seems the Head Investigator had shortened the time of intermission, possibly by demand of the Interim President.

LORD JUSTICE

They can only mean to pursue us that much quicker now.

ANDROMEDA

One can only wonder why.

That gets a warning glance from her mother.

THE EMPRESS

Why have they taken so long to come here?

LORD INTELLIGENCE

They've established no clear reasoning still. They simply pursue the major powers after

clearing the minor states. All the same, I've no doubt that their investigation will be most critical when they investigate the Imperium.

LADY ADMINISTRATOR
What could they hope to find, after sixteen years?

THE EMPRESS
Nothing, because there never was anything to find.

Andromeda hides a smile from next to her.

THE EMPRESS (CONT'D)
All the same, we can only look to anything that can cause any potential misunderstandings.

LORD INTELLIGENCE
Yes, Empress.

THE EMPRESS
Japras birthday approaches, have all the necessary preparations been made for his games?

The uprpt change in subject surprises all but the Lord Intelligence and Andromeda.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - AFFEIS SOLAR - LATER

Affei Angelekos (20) watches the cities landscape and the Air Cars trafficking the sky from the balcony of her room. She's in her mind. There's a guard by the door to the balcony.

She turns when the door to her room opens, and smiles when she sees its Andromeda.

The sisters rush to embrace each other.

AFFEI
I was beginning to wonder if you were ever coming back.

ANDROMEDA
(smiling)
Why wouldn't I?

AFFEI
I thought you had finally had enough of those council meetings.
(to the guard)
Leave us.

He does so after a bow.

ANDROMEDA
I should've. Mother pulled me
into one as soon as I arrived.

AFFEI
Rather you than me.

Affei sits on a sofa, Andromeda wanders the room a bit.

ANDROMEDA
Where's Vaff?

AFFEI
Sparing with Japra.

ANDROMEDA
Already? We only just arrived.

AFFEI
Reading was becoming a bore
apparently.

ANDROMEDA
Not possible for him. He probably
just missed Japra.

AFFEI
He'd never admit it.

ANDROMEDA
Neither of them would.

They exchange smiles. A beat.

AFFEI
I heard they made you do their
ceremony.

ANDROMEDA
(dismissive)
It is their mourning tradition.

AFFEI
The Leos are barbaric for even
retaining one of that sort.
Worse, for being so
inconsiderate.

ANDROMEDA
There was nothing for them to
consider, and you should be
careful. The electors have spies
everywhere.

AFFEI
To Earth with the electors. I

have no interest in them or their votes. I only care about you.

ANDROMEDA

You have nothing to worry about.

Affei clearly doesn't believe her but does not press.

AFFEI

Mother hasn't impressed a watcher on you yet?

ANDROMEDA

There's no one for her to use to monitor me yet, no.

AFFEI

Maybe she'll be more thorough in her selection this time.

Receiving a side-eye, Affei laughs.

AFFEI (CONT'D)

Or she'll find you a husband for you to love.

ANDROMEDA

You know what *that* did to her.

AFFEI

Well, there'll be many opportunities for you to change your mind with Japra's birthday coming.

ANDROMEDA

And you?

AFFEI

My minds never needed changing. I know who I want.

Affei stands then.

AFFEI (CONT'D)

Now, let's go watch your brothers' practice.

EXT. HARMONY - IMPERIAL CENTER OF OPERATIONS - NIGHT

The military complex is huge, windowless and has a massive landing pad next to its main structure, where IS Fighters and Bombers are parked, the Angelekos insignia at its center.

Behind the main building, was a Valerian-class storm ship, with its side ramp down, where several of

Angelekos legions boarded into the troop carrier.

A shuttle with two IS Fighters as escorts hovered around.

INT. SHUTTLE

The Lord Defense and Japra have an open view of the scene.

LORD DEFENSE

At the Empresses command, we've nearly doubled shipyard production. A single cruiser has been output thus far, with another nearly complete...

JAPRA

(interrupting)
For this year?

LORD DEFENSE

This month, Japra. Since your departure.

Surprised. Japra frowns.

JAPRA

Is this to do with that Inquisition business?

LORD DEFENSE

I didn't deign to ask.

JAPRA

The Center hasn't a military to speak of.

LORD DEFENSE

Then surely she doesn't fear the Center then, eh?

JAPRA

If not The Center, then who?

LORD DEFENSE

If even you don't know, I'm afraid this is council she wants to keep to herself. You'll have the same habits, whether as Emperor or as Lord Defense.

JAPRA

Is that the lesson I'm to learn today?

LORD DEFENSE

No, today isn't a day of duty.
 You're going to pick some of the
 soldiers you'd like to you fight
 during your celebrations. They
 can't all be of nobility.

That pleases Japra.

EXT. IMPERIAL PALACE - CEREMONIAL LANDING PAD - DAY

Andromeda stands impatient on the small landing pad,
 next to her is her brother Vaffei (20), and his guard
 over his shoulder. Near the entrance stands Rese (45),
 Captain of their household guard.

ANDROMEDA

You swear that you know nothing?

VAFFEI

I wouldn't be here if I wasn't
 nearly as curious as you were.

ANDROMEDA

With Rese here, it only really
 makes sense that she's found
 someone for me.

VAFFEI

Or maybe it's a gift.

A joke, that earns him a small smile.

There's a shuttle that approaches then, old and rusted.
 It lands on the pad, the ramp dropping as it did.

A Slave Watcher stands at its top, and slightly behind
 him, is Alec. They climb down the ramp, and the Slave
 Watcher is the first to bend the knee, then Alec.

SLAVE WATCHER

My sincerest apologies for making
 you wait, princess. I've brought
 you your personal guard, at the
 Empress's request.

ANDROMEDA

A *slave*?

Vaffei frowns next to her.

The Slave Watcher is unsure.

SLAVE WATCHER

Yes, princess.

There's nothing but the wind for a beat.

ANDROMEDA

Rise. Let me look at him.

They both do, and Andromeda takes a step to Alec, inspecting him critically.

ANDROMEDA (CONT'D)

You look rather unremarkable to be a good enough protector.

Alec only matches her gaze. Rese draws close.

RESE

I'll list him as a member of the household then.

ANDROMEDA

Did my mother leave room for me to refuse?

RESE

She did not.

ANDROMEDA

Do your duty then.

She turns from the landing pad, and to the entrance of the palace, Alec already shadowing her.

INT. ANDROMEDAS SOLAR - NIGHT

Andromedas with someone again, a woman between her legs. A courtier, or one of the guards, even she's not sure.

INT. CORRIDOR

Alec stands outside her door, the sounds she makes quiet from out there, but he can hear them.

He remains stoic, purposefully.

EXT. HARMONY - GLADIATOR ARENA - DAY

The oval-shaped arena is filled with spectators, and Japra's in the grounds themselves, having the time of his life. He fighting another noblewoman, both of them wearing exo-suits.

He strikes quickly, launching himself to her, jets of air from the suit sending him forward at speed, where he's parried over her by a seemingly invisible force. She used her air power.

In the air still, he launches a torrent of fire towards

the ground, which is whipped away to the side by a gust of wind.

Landing, and slow this time, he decides to use his sword - blunted.

They fence, sparks of steel ringing over the shouting, until Japra turns to his side to avoid a thrust, grabs her wrist and slaps her face down with the blunt of his blade.

To more thunderous shouting.

INT. ROYAL VIEWING BOX

The Andromeda, Affei, and Vaffei sits in the viewing box which is considerably more quiet. Their respective guards behind them.

AFFEI

It's the same thing every year.

VAFFEI

It's his birthday. Let him enjoy it how he likes.

AFFEI

I'm not complaining. But would be nice if things were different.

ANDROMEDA

Why aren't you out socializing?

Seeming surprised by the question, Affei stands.

AFFEI

Why not?

She leaves the room.

ANDROMEDA

I would've thought you would be fighting him now Vaff.

VAFFEI

Practicing with him until this points been enough for me.

(shaking his head)

It's ridiculous how powerful he is.

ANDROMEDA

Do I hear jealousy?

VAFFEI

No, only wonder. If he's as good as this, imagine the monster the

Paladin must be.

ANDROMEDA
That didn't save Valentina.

VAFFEI
Killed in her sleep, it hardly counts.

ANDROMEDA
Counts to what?

VAFFEI
To the context of the conversation. If the assassin had caught her awake, he would have hardly been much of a match.

ANDROMEDA
(frowning)
He?

Vaffei rolls his eyes.

VAFFEI
I won't be the recipient of your foul mood.
(he looks to Alec)
If you have an issue with him, fuck him and be done with it.

ANDROMEDA
A slave? She knows I would never sink so low.

VAFFEI
Decide on something, because you've been poor company for weeks.

He leaves too then, his guard following.

Japra's fighting a blond-haired nobleman at that point. Japra launches a boulder at the man, but it's too big and too fast, he doesn't stop it like he's expected, instead being swept up by it.

Andromeda looks away.

He's dead before it crushes his body onto the wall behind him, before the medical personnel rush to him, before Japra looks to even realize what's happened.

ANDROMEDA
Well there's that business done with.

She seems to relax if only just a little.

ANDROMEDA (CONT'D)

Was death common in your slave
gladiator fights?

Lost in his own thoughts, Alec wonders if she's speaking to him, but realizes they're the only ones in the room.

ALEC

Wh...Princess?

ANDROMEDA

(lips thinning)

Was death common in your slave
gladiator fights?

ALEC

Our fights only ever ended when
someone died.

ANDROMEDA

(standing to leave)

You must have enjoyed this then.

EXT. IMPERIAL PALACE - CEREMONIAL LANDING PAD - DAY

The sky is dark, with the occasional line of lightning.

The royal family stands near the end of the pad, all in formal ceremonial garb. On either sides of the path towards them are the councilors, courtiers and guards. The atmosphere was tense.

The Seeker-class Corvette emerged from the clouds just as the rain started, but the landing pad was protected by shields so the rain did not strike them.

It touches down, and a red carpet rolled out before the ramp did.

The first to walk out were the Black Guards, all in dark exo-suits, the blue lights emitted from their visors, making them seem menacing. Twelve of them flanked the carpet at attention.

Then it was Gryym, with Ivan and Oscar at either of his side, other investigators behind them. They walked to the royal family and did a courteous bow.

GRYYM

We thank you, Empress, for
opening your world and empire to
us. I am Gryym Salvo, the Head
Investigator and Overseer

THE EMPRESS

Empress Saffei Angelekos. We

thank you for your efforts at justice. It seemed an impossible thing when we heard what transpired. I offer you our hand in finding any who were complicit in such a gratuitous crime.

Welcoming protocol is broken, but Gryym smiles.

GRYYM

Compliance would be appreciated.

Tense, both know of his meaning. When The Empress glances behind him, she almost looks concerned at something she sees. She hides it well, but Andromeda sees.

Just as she suddenly see her own breath in the air.