

Chapter 1

MELELA

It was overcast, the sky dark with a cold drizzle, melancholic clouds hanging low over the city. I stood looking out the window of my flat, caught up in my thoughts as I rested from my fencing workout. The view was monochromatic and depressing for several reasons. First, it was sorely cold. The winter storm that had swept down from the north had brought an icy chill to Corin, peppering my window with a mixture of rain and slush. Its bleakness made me shiver and yearn for warmer days and the bright, gay lights that normally winked on at this hour. It was odd not to see my home's usual collage of color—the rainbow hues that painted the evening skyline. The lack of their sight was disheartening, depressing me further, for I realized the lights were dim for good reason—that my home was withering under a cold, failed sun, and there was nothing I could do about it.

I edged closer to the glass, searching the streets below for normalcy. They were empty. There was no movement from anything or anyone—no cabs, no PMs, no ATs hovering overhead. It was unusually still; it had been like this for days. Most everyone was gone—Corin evacuated. Everyone had fled, taking their families and belongings to the forests and mountains, or off-world, if one could afford it. Only soldiers like me remained; we had our orders.

We were the last bastions of order left behind to protect the Imperial core. Some found



irony in that. What were we protecting? Thirty-two planets had already been crushed under the boot of this enemy—Melela was just the icing on the cake.

Angrily, I whipped my sword blade, wishing I could somehow cut the head off the dragon that was coming to devour us all, but there was nothing I or anyone could do. That thought festered in me, souring my disposition like the bitter taste of rask. I rested my blade, resigned to the fact that all I had left was my duty, my orders to ensure the safety of the Relcor during the transition. The liaisons for the new leadership were already here, and things were tense. By tomorrow, their entire fleet would be here, filling our skies—giving formality to our surrender.

I moved to my bedroom and looked over my dress uniform. Everything was laid across my bed, my dress boots on the floor polished to a high shine, and the buckles and decorations on my uniform shone brightly under the room's austere lighting. Sadly, this was the sum of my life; twenty-three years of military service laid flat across a bed. That sudden realization gave me a pang of regret. I was barely thirty-six, and my efforts now seemed shallow and pathetic. Where had the time gone? So much of it seemed wasted. Undoubtedly, that's what my father would say. He had risen through the ranks to become a Lieutenant Major by age thirty-five. And yet, why did I care? It was hard to say.

Things might have been different if I had pressed harder, pushed for an off-world commission, or been given a chance to fight the Relcor. A battle commendation would have allowed me to make Major first class instead of Captain—as if it mattered at this point. The truth was, I was lucky to be alive, safe, and sound on Melela. Too many had already died in our strange, bizarre war with the Relcor—nine hundred thousand in the Qui quadrant alone. No, on Melela, I was secure with my commission and rank; the royal family had been good to me. Because of them, my tenure had always been assured, my assignments fulfilling, and the reality was, before the war, I'd seen more than enough adventure and travel to keep me from being bored.

The question I faced now was what I would do after our surrender—for tomorrow would be my last day in uniform. With the Emperor's final decree, all remaining remnants of the Imperial government were to be dismantled, our military put asunder, and our weapons destroyed. This was the end of our Empire, the very heart of our sovereign civilization and culture put under the knife. Already, many of our sister planets were dark and desecrated, disemboweled by the Relcor's feudal dictatorship. Planets, which had once been free, were being laid to waste by an alien species of which we had little comprehension or understanding. The very nature of it was cruel.

I began to undress and prepare for my shower, pouring myself a glass of toka. The amber-colored liquid held a sweet, minty taste and would help me get to sleep quickly. I needed to be up early to oversee the security details for the Princess. Her care would be my last official duty until the signing, after which she and her parents were to be sent into exile. I took a sip, allowing the liqueur to roll across my tongue—its bite seemed tart, my taste soured by the realization that I would miss my young charge. After seeing to her safety for twelve years, the fledgling Queen had wormed her way into my heart, and the thoughts of her banishment only darkened my mood. I started to take another sip to deaden my discontent but was cut off by a knock upon my door. I opened it, finding a junior cadet awaiting me. He carried a sealed note in his hand.

"Sir..." he said, with a quick salute. "A message from General Spires."

He handed me the envelope, then crisply turned and left, barely giving me time to return the formality. I closed the door and tore open the note. Inside were orders to meet the General in thirty minutes. I crumpled the paper and threw it into the trash in aggravation. Of all times to be called on the carpet, the security detail was set. Was the blustering old buffoon going to change everything now? In exasperation, I returned to the bedroom and grabbed a fresh shirt from the closet. I threw on a light jacket, strapped my saber to my hip, and tucked my pants into my boots. If the old goat wanted me there in thirty minutes, he'd have to accept me as I was. I

would not satisfy him by showering and appearing in full dress. Such short notice did not warrant full protocol, even if it was our last day of military service.

Leaving my resiplex, I walked toward the Palace, and the senior officer's complex, my hair soaking up the rain—my boots sloshing through the puddles. It was dark and damn cold. I was shivering when I reached the outer security perimeter, where my face and hand were scanned before admittance. Inside the officer's atrium, I shook off the effects of the rain. Then, grabbing a lift, I headed to the third floor and General Spires' office. The ride up was short, and when the lift doors opened, I rushed out, only to be stopped by two hooded guards—Relcor.

Instinctively, I drew out my blade, warding off any further move from the two. In quiet response, they held up their hands, showing me their empty silver metallic palms.

“Brother,” said one. “We stand in peace. You have no need for your weapon.”

I stared at the two aliens, both dressed alike in their ornate, blood-red robes. They were Lodans, mid-level custodians of the Rodan order—foot soldiers. I wondered if they were armed. Unsure, I challenged their presence by keeping my saber high.

“My sword will always stand ready against you, Relcor. Now, get out of my way. I'm here at General Spires's request.”

The two said nothing. They followed my movement, staring at me with cold, cat-like eyes—dull, yellow oculars that sent shivers up my spine. Both reminded me of zombies, stinking corpses that were long dead. Finally, one responded, waving his hand toward the General's office.



“Go,” he said, “your superior is awaiting you.”

Given a reprieve, I backed away from the two while keeping my eye on them. Fortunately, my steps were unimpeded. There was no movement by them, and I made my way down the hall toward the General's office, unmolested, though I was angry with myself for not bringing a blaster. As good a weapon as my sword was, it was no match for an auto-lock.

I reached the General's door and knocked. There was movement from within, a shuffling of footsteps. I then heard a voice bellow.

"Enter!"

I opened the door and found General Spires at his desk; he was not alone. Another robed sentinel stood to one side.

"I might have expected you'd be late," said Spires, looking up from his chair.

I bit my tongue, wanting to respond to his remark, but not with the Relcor creature looking on. Instead, I stood my ground and saluted.

"My apologies, Sir."

Spires rose from his desk and approached me.

"Look at you..." he sneered in disdain; his face reddened from drink. "... out of uniform, body unwashed, hair unkempt. I can't for the life of me understand why the Emperor keeps you on staff."

He jabbed his finger into my chest for emphasis.

"Yes, Sir," I answered. "Again, my apologies. I came immediately upon your request."

Spires turned from me and looked at the Relcor standing nearby watching.

"You see what you're going to have to put up with? A bunch of lazy ploths like this one."

The sentinel nodded as Spires backhanded my chest. The impact was sharp, and I felt my anger rise. He had no right to strike me, even as a General. I clenched my sword hilt, fighting the desire to strike back. His actions were inexcusable. Without warning, Spires suddenly turned toward me with a look that surprised me. The gaze upon his face was forlorn, his eyes moist. Was this a look of despair? I was caught off guard. This was out of character, and I was taken aback; Spires was a belligerent pricworm. What was going on? Before I could react, he turned and returned to his desk while feeding me his instructions.

"I called you here, Captain, as details require my attention before tomorrow's signing. Our honored guest wishes to tour the Palace and the Senate Hall, where the signing will occur. In the interim, I need someone to hold the fort down. Do you think you can manage this simple task?"

"Yes, Sir," I answered, more than curious about his request.

Nothing more was said, and I waited at attention while the General gathered his paperwork from atop the desk. He stuffed everything into a briefcase and left the room with the Relcor following. I watched as the door closed behind them.

Alone in the room, I pondered what was going on. Something was amiss. Spires was not prone to intrigue, nor would he treat me like a junior cadet simply out of bad blood. No, there was more to this. I looked about the room and saw nothing that gave a hint. The desktop was barren, the room stark—three of the four walls were covered by heavy curtains. This office was a reflection of Spires—stifling. I moved to the desk and pulled open a drawer. It held only office supplies. I went to the one below it. Unexpectedly, there was a noise behind me, a muffled voice.

"Lock the door and draw the curtains," it whispered. I whirled around, looking to see who had spoken. "And dim the lights..."

The voice was feminine—and familiar.

Without further thought, I moved to the office door and locked it. I pulled the drapes covering the large crystalline windows facing the hallway and turned down the lights. As the lights dimmed, a woman appeared from behind the curtains. She was dressed in a night robe, her dark yet graying hair pulled back. I recognized her instantly. It was Lady Tasha, the Empress of Melela; I immediately started to kneel. She waved at me emphatically.

“We have no time for that nonsense,” she snapped hoarsely. “Come to my side—now!” I obeyed instantly, moving forward to face her.

“My Queen, what is it?”

I lowered my eyes in respect; her sudden appearance had me at a loss. I had never seen her dressed so informally, with her face unpainted. She looked older this way, and though the light in the room was dim, I could tell she’d been crying. Her face was fraught with fear, and her eyes filled with emotion. I listened as she spoke in quick, hushed tones.

“The peace signing tomorrow is a ruse,” she breathed heavily. “The Relcor have no desire to leave any part of our monarchy alive. We are under a death sentence.”

“You must flee then,” I responded.

“No, we are trapped. There are spies everywhere, including the palace. They hold us prisoner, and the Emperor—he’s been drugged.”

“My lady, what can I do?”

She grabbed my arm, squeezing it firmly. “I need you to get Leanna out of there.”

Stunned by her request, I sputtered weakly. “B-b-but how? I’m Shadow Guard—I.M. would never allow me in—I don’t have the clearance.”

“That’s precisely why I’m coming to you, Captain. I.M.’s been compromised, and I’ve nowhere else to turn. I need you—you’re the adjunct officer in charge of her care. She knows you, and I need you to get her out of the palace and off Melela. You must—I want her to live! General Spires says if anyone can do it, it’s you.”

I was speechless. My Queen was speaking to me as a mother begging for her child’s life, and I had no idea what was transpiring. I needed more information. I started to ask, but there was rustling out in the hallway. One of the sentinels was at the door; he spoke through it.

“Brother, why have you locked the door and drawn the curtains?”

I felt the Empress’ hand press against my chest—she pushed on me hard—near the place where Spires had struck me. I felt the micro pin stuck to my jacket, pricking my skin. The Empress moved back and away.

“I must go before they find me gone.” She headed toward the curtains, but not without one final plea. “Save my daughter, Rez. Please!”

I watched her disappear, slipping into a hidden alcove behind the draperies. I was alone again, bewildered and off-guard. The Relcor were rattling the doorknob; I sprang into action.

“What!” I yelled angrily, rushing to the door. I jerked it open and glared at the two sentinels. “Can’t a man get a lick of sleep? Fucking priceworms!”

The two aliens looked at me blankly; their human side understood my meaning, but the alien infecting them was confused. This was my opportunity. I brushed past the two, pushing them aside.

“I gotta get some sleep,” I snapped. “Tell the General I couldn’t wait.”

I didn’t look back. I didn’t dare—not if my gamble was to succeed. I moved to the lift and hit the access button. By the hands of fate, it was there, waiting. The doors opened, and I entered.

Outside in the rain, on the safety of the streets, I mulled over what had just transpired. The Empress’ words rang in my ear, *spies everywhere, watching—waiting*. The news of this was inconceivable—the *Interior Ministry had been compromised*—but how? Security for the palace was layered precisely for this reason: to prevent outside forces from penetrating the inner circle. And yet, if the Relcor were in control of I.M., there was no one I could trust. What was I going to do?

Plagued with a myriad of questions, I looked down at the micro pin sticking through the fabric of my jacket. It was more like a small nail, two centimeters in length, with a barbed tip on one end and a small green data crystal on the other. I left it in place. Undoubtedly, it held answers, but I needed to find a place to decode it—someplace out of the exchange loop. If there was information on how to save the Princess, I needed to keep it private.

Unfortunately, I was ill-prepared. I had no weapons or means to stage a rescue and lacked discretionary funds. Like most soldiers, I carried little currency, perhaps a few mercs and a little coin. Generally, I used the Imperial credit system to pay for everything, but using that system now would be a mistake. If spies were watching the Imperial elite, a credit track would follow my every footstep—and returning to my flat was out of the question. Still, I needed money. Rescuing the Princess wasn't going to be easy or cheap. There were bound to be bribes; just how much was the question? With few options available, I went to a CTM and withdrew an advance—enough to get me by for a few days. I left my card in the machine, hoping someone would find it. It wouldn't hurt to have a vag use my card and create a false trail, giving me time to disappear off the radar.

Credits in hand, I walked the dark streets of Corin, looking for a place where I could ensconce myself away from prying eyes. I wasn't having much luck. Everything was closed; the shops, the taverns—even the street vendors were gone. Everyone was scared pithless—and who could blame them? No one knew exactly what to expect tomorrow. The stories regarding the Relcor were chilling at best. Some considered them alien zealots whose mere touch could usurp a man's soul. And then there were the accounts of brutal sex rites, torture, and pagan sacrifices. Dark rumors flew about thousands being slaughtered for the pure pleasure of Juc T'Krola, the heathen ruler of Relcor Prime. These black horrors included stories of those who had vanished forever, including my father.

Before the war, he had been sent to negotiate with Juc T'Krola, but he was never heard from again. His disappearance had plagued my youth, and I often wondered if he had been killed or consumed by them. Was he now a Relcor hybrid? A concoction of human and alien genetics? A pagan religious cleric who lived and breathed the debauched, sadistic teachings of the Relcor? I would probably never know, but I wondered if he would be at tomorrow's signing. I also wondered how much of his knowledge had aided the downfall of the Empire; he had been privy too much. Perhaps he had been tortured or coerced, for it took only twelve short years for the Relcor to conquer everything—all thirty-three planets. To this day, it was a mystery that yielded no answer. It was simply a thorn in my heart, giving rise to the whispers behind my back. I kept walking—everyone had skeletons.

My journey soon took me toward the darker corners of Corin, where the seeds of corruption grew without help from the Relcor. It was the only place where the city still breathed, where the poor and the criminal merged, their faces lurking in the shadows, for they had nowhere to run. I looked up the street. I was in the brothel district. Things were slow, but the lights were still on. I moved along, searching for a hostel with a measure of cleanliness. Finding one, I ducked in.

The lobby was small and dark, befitting a place where no one wanted to be seen. A Lacta was sitting behind the front desk. He glanced up at me with disinterest, then returned to his business. I approached him.

“Yesss,” he said, not looking up from his work.

I looked at his bald, crusty head. He was an old snik, molting, his scales falling off.

“I need a room.”

“Yesss, twenty credits. You want someone, yesss?” His black tongue flickered through thin lips. “We have a good sselection—businesss is ssslow.”

He waved a bony finger toward the wall behind him. On it were pictures of men and women of varying ages—a slide show of entertainers—some were Melelan, others were from the outer planets. For a price, I could choose one or two or more.

“No,” I responded. “I just need a room and a comm—an older unit with memory pin access and a privacy DAAT filter.”

The Lacta looked up at me, curiously surprised by my request. “Those are illegal,” he slavered, saliva seeping from the sides of his mouth.

I threw a hundred on the desktop. “Make it legal then.” I unsheathed my sword and set it alongside the note, adding weight to my request.

“Yesss, I think sssomething can be arranged.” He handed me a key. “Room twenty-four, upssstairs on the right. I will have the comm delivered ssssoon.”

I picked up my sword. “Don’t disappoint me,” I said, the edge of my blade coming dangerously close to his saggy-skinned throat. His tongue flickered, and his black eyes widened.

“No, it will be there quite ssssoon.”



I left the lobby and headed to the room.