

PROLOGUE

Hamil glanced around the corner of the structure, holding his back to the stone wall. His one-meter stature gave him a different perspective than the other beings that walked the streets of Bustera, a thriving colony outpost on Rondian, a newly discovered planet on the fringe of the Apollo Galaxy. *The city has grown quickly in the years since its founding*, Hamil thought as his wide-set eyes darted from building to building. He had enjoyed his brief stay in Bustera, and felt a moment of regret that such a beautiful city would be lost, its inhabitants meeting a terrible fate. But the feeling was fleeting as he thought about the credits in his account, and the bonus he would receive once the task was completed. Everyone needed credits, and this was Hamil's way of earning his.

As the mass transit moved away from the walkway across the cobbled street, Hamil noticed the wooden bench. His lips peeled back in a smile, lifting the whisker-like skin on each side of his mouth. *Perfect*, he thought, shifting his eyes both ways before darting through a group of shoppers and across the wide roadway. Alarms from a few transpos and shouts in various languages followed him to the walkway and the object that would offer an obscure hiding place.

From beneath his plain, brown cloak, Hamil extracted a silver box. He was the only one at this stop for mass transit, so he seated himself on the bench and leaned forward. Reaching underneath the bench, he carefully set the silver box on the paved walkway and pushed it away from the front and up against the solid side. Something on the walkway moved, and caught his eye as he began to sit up. To buy himself some time in order to have it appear as if he was doing something benign, he fiddled with the laces of his boots. Glancing up, he saw an elderly human female with a package in her hand.

Hamil smiled, which had the female gripping her package tighter and moving a step away. He slid off the bench and gestured for her to take his place. She eyed him suspiciously, and would only move closer when Hamil took a step back. The woman sat uneasily on the edge of the bench, then shifted until she was, unbeknownst to her, directly over the silver box. A moment later, a dark-skinned human male sat down on the bench next to the female, who continued to scowl at Hamil.

Turning on his heel he moved down the walkway, amused that the unhappy female would be deceased in a few days, as would most of the residents of this colony. Hamil clasped his small, pudgy hands behind his back as he strolled away from the silver box and its contents. His pointed ears perked up when he heard music coming from an open doorway. This would be as good a place as any to await the arrival of the Vancurelians.

The next mass transit halted in front of the bench. The older human female stepped on and sat behind the operator. Feeling a bit dizzy, she wiped her forehead, coughed into her hand, then placed it on the bar in front of her to steady herself as the transpo moved away from the bench. At the next stop, three young boys climbed on, each using the bar as they mounted the steps onto the mass transit. Several stops later, the old woman disembarked from the transpo and made her way up two flights of stairs to her small rented room, not knowing it to be her last time climbing the steps.

By the end of the week, what the virus hadn't killed, others did in their panic to escape a self-imposed, quarantined planet, as there was no opportunity to contact the Alliance in order to receive aide. Another three days, and the Vancurelians arrived with ships full of mining equipment. Rondian now belonged to them, being the only beings

immune to the disease that had struck four planets in the Alliance. Six Vancurelians met with Hamil in a small structure that used to serve food.

“Credits have been transferred Hamil. We appreciate the ease with which you have completed this task for us. If you approach my Second in Command, he has your bonus.”

Nodding, his head filled with all he could buy with the credits in his account, Hamil stood in front of the Vancurelian that Banff had indicated.

“And, Hamil,” Banff called, waiting for the Fostling to look at him, then saying, “I know you’ll not say a word about our arrangement.”

Hamil smiled, then felt a prick at the back of his neck.

“Because deceased Fostlings keep their word.”

He felt his knees buckle and the room spin. Landing face up on the floor, Hamil stared, his body paralyzed, at the Vancurelian standing over him. There was a tremendous pain in his chest, then his heart ceased to beat. A last thought floated through Hamil’s brain, *The Vancurelians are worse than the Tamplians, and the Alliance’s chances at stopping them grow smaller each day.*

“Burn it,” Banff instructed.

The Vancurelians stepped around Banff to take the body. Their tall forms, covered in a gray uniform over their gray, leathery skin, with black boots and a laser on their belts, picked up the Fostling and carried him outside to the deserted cobbled path. One withdrew his weapon, powered it on, and touched it to the cloak of the body. Bright orange flames licked the fabric and the Vancurelians reentered the structure. A short time

later, a breeze blew ashes down the path, dispersing the remnants of a traitor to the Alliance, and the one who set free the virus that claimed the lives of half a million beings.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Ignoring the sweat that dripped into his eyes, he put up his left forearm to block the punch from the Tamplian. That left his ribs exposed, which caused a grunt as the leg of the Tamplian connected with his side. He stepped over with his right foot, then swept his left under the feet of his opponent. The hologram of the Tamplian flickered and then disappeared. Aiden scowled at the early termination of the computer program, then spun around at the sound of applause.

“Very impressive, brother mine,” was the comment that belonged to the man that walked out of the shadows.

He was tall, even by human standards, dressed in the jumpsuit he usually wore, with a dark blue cloak that signified he was a member of the Royal Family of Dulsar. His dark hair was cut short around his head, which served to set off his high, sharp cheekbones, wide forehead, strong chin, and a nose slightly larger than it should be. Eyes dark enough to make less confident people shrink away, took in the flushed, sweaty face and rapid breathing of his brother.

“Had you not interrupted the program, I would have finished him off,” Aiden complained.

“And add another kill to your computer login? These holograms aren’t the actual being.”

“I know.”

“Then why do you insist on spending hours here every day fighting what isn’t real?”

Aiden took a step towards his brother. “So I’ll be prepared should I ever encounter one that seems less than friendly.” The beginning of a scowl on Aiden’s face was cut short as his brother took the towel from his shoulder and tossed it at Aiden.

“That attitude, and the hours you’ve logged here, might assist you in remaining alive until help arrives,” Marcus teased and closed the distance between them so he could tousle Aiden’s hair.

Aiden ducked, stepped to the side, and flicked the towel to snap at the part of his brother that spent too many hours in a chair, as he attended meeting after meeting. Dancing out of reach as Marcus turned to grab the towel away from him, Aiden wiped his face, then looked steadily at the man before him.

Marcus was his half-brother, their father marrying Aiden’s mother after Viona, Marcus’s mother, died in a hovercraft accident. Ceily was raised a Princess on Maseve, married Levon Tranlish, King of Dulsar, and gave birth to Aiden. Though Marcus was older, Aiden would inherit the throne should anything happen to Levon or Ceily, since he was the product of their union. Heirs could only inherit if both parents were alive. This ensured that offspring didn’t murder their parents in an effort to gain control of the throne. Instead of being bitter, Marcus supported Aiden and was relieved that he would

not be the one to make the final decisions for Dulsar when the time came for his father and stepmother to retire.

“Are you not the least curious as to why I’ve interrupted your practice?” Marcus asked.

Aiden’s smile slipped away, as he became serious. “You have news?”

“Yes. Actually, today is a good day for news. I just wish the news was good.”

Aiden’s dark brows drew together. “Cease speaking in riddles and tell me what you know.”

Marcus clasped his hands behind his back and paced three steps in each direction in front of Aiden. Pursing his lips and staring at the floor in front of him, he sifted through what was most important.

“There’s word that Bustera, the city on Rondian, has contracted the virus.” Marcus paused while Aiden expressed his anger with a few creative explicatives. “It’s been reported that Vancurelian ships were seen in Rondian’s orbit.”

“How did they arrive there so quickly?”

“Perhaps they were in that sector,” Marcus offered and shrugged his shoulders.

“Is there any way to verify their proximity to Rondian, where they were traveling to before their appearance?”

“They’ve refused membership in the Alliance so the only reports we have are those that are broadcasted from pilots who were denied access to the planet’s surface. Perhaps I can turn over a few rocks and see if any Vancurelians come crawling out,” Marcus offered.

“Thank you. What else?”

“There are several business ventures awaiting your audience.”

Aiden waved that away and swiped again at the sweat on his face. “There are always business contracts wanting my approval.” He narrowed his eyes at Marcus. “Is that all?”

Marcus turned and faced Aiden, then crossed his arms over his chest. Aiden, Prince of Dulsar, didn't cover his look of expectancy very well. He wore his hair long, and instead of being straight, like their father's, it had a wave, like Ceily's. The warm brown eyes and softer features also came from Aiden's mother. Where Marcus's face was hard angles and lines, Aiden, who had the same strong jaw and wide forehead, had a nose more proportionate and softer lines. For all Aiden's airs about not caring that the date of his union was drawing closer, Marcus believed he was looking forward to the ceremony, and what occurs after.

“There is a communication from Suma. The bride's parent continues to plan the ceremony and festivities, but the progress is slow.”

“Why? I would think the bride-to-be would be consumed with preparations.”

“She probably would be, if she were on-planet more.”

“What do you mean?” Aiden asked and took a step towards Marcus.

“Apparently she has her own starship and departs from her home planet for weeks at a time. If she continues this pattern, you won't have to be concerned about being nagged ceaselessly.”

“Off-planet? Why does a Princess leave her home, and when such an important time draws near?”

Marcus shrugged. “Perhaps she has a few men concealed in various places and is attempting to solidify details for visiting privileges after the ceremony.”

He was quick, but not quick enough. Aiden lowered his shoulder and tackled Marcus around the waist. They both tumbled to the floor. Aiden maneuvered himself on top of Marcus, who was belly down, pulling his brother’s arm up behind his back as Marcus turned his face to one side so he could breathe.

“Trust me, brother mine, my bride will have no reason, or opportunity, to take her favors elsewhere. I plan to keep her more than satisfied. Now, take it back.” Aiden dug his knee a bit more into his brother’s kidney.

“Give,” Marcus mumbled.

Aiden released him and stood up. Marcus rolled onto his back and stared at his brother.

“Either you’ve been logging more hours than I thought, or your love for this woman has quickened your reflexes.”

Aiden stretched out his hand in an offer to help Marcus to his feet. Marcus eyed it suspiciously.

“How can I love a woman I’ve never met? Perhaps my archaic belief in fidelity took offense to your suggestion.”

Marcus gripped the offered hand and was hauled upright. They stood, facing each other, centimeters apart. He tipped up the corner of his mouth. “Ah, you’ve been using the Media Room to research what occurs after the ceremony, and are anxious to experiment with certain techniques.”

Aiden chuckled and shook his head.

“Using the Holograph Room for the purpose of sexual fantasies, though not unheard of, is a fair introduction to the wonders of the female form,” Marcus continued.

Aiden threw his head back and laughed, the sound bouncing off the metal walls increased the volume. “The wonders of the female form are many, indeed. The sights, sounds, smells. The tastes. One wonders if the exploration and discovery will ever become boring,” Aiden slapped his stunned brother companionably on the back as he made his way to the exit.

Marcus blinked rapidly to bring himself out of his stupor. “Wait a minute. How would you know about ‘exploration and discovery’? Have you been holding out on me?” Marcus turned to see his brother pass through the doorway and down the corridor, a chuckle echoing in his wake. “Aiden!”

CHAPTER 2

The palace that the Royal Family of Dulsar called home was sizeable. Though there were only four of them, the wing that housed the living quarters had enough private chambers to accommodate a family of twenty. During celebrations or important summits, dignitaries often stayed in the now-vacant rooms. Some rooms were self-contained, having their own lavatories, sitting areas, and a Quick-Kitch, automated vending machines for meals not enjoyed in the Dining Hall.

In the opposite direction were offices, the Command Room, and Conference Center. In between were common areas that included the Holograph Room, an auditorium, a large atrium, and the Game Room. This area of the palace is where the domestic staff and Royal Guards had their own quarters.

Aiden, on his way back to his private chambers, paused outside the doorway of the Communications Room. This is where much of the communication between Dulsar and other planets, or spacecraft, took place. It wasn't unusual for his mother to be here, but what was on the monitor caused Aiden to step into the room.

"I'm sure all will be well," Ceily said calmly, but her wringing hands indicated her agitation.

"Yes, well, I think we should continue with the planning. Joining two Royal Families, on two different planets will require time and considerable resources."

The face on the monitor had long red hair that hung in a thick braid over her shoulder. The gown was long-sleeved and off-white with some type of flower in pale blue. There were dark blue threads throughout the fabric that winked in the light as she moved. Her green eyes were set in a classically beautiful face, and held concern. There were three earrings in her left ear, one in her right, a faint dusting of freckles across her small nose, and shimmering pink dye on her full lips.

"I quite agree. We each have our responsibilities. Shall we speak again in, say, a week's time?" Ceily asked.

"That would be fine. Until then," said the woman on the screen as she tipped her head to Ceily.

Aiden's mother responded with a small smile a moment before the screen went black, then switched to a scene that Aiden recognized as a field over the hill from the palace, and one of his mother's favorite locations. As he moved further into the room, he caught Ceily's eye.

She turned to face him, a smile turning up the corners of her mouth. “Aiden. Had I known you were here, I would have introduced you to Charlotte, the Empress of Suma, and the mother of your bride-to-be.”

Aiden crossed the room to stand before her, ignoring the other screens. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “That’s alright. I don’t exactly look my best,” he said and held his arms out as he looked down at his sweat-soaked tunic, loose trousers, cloth belt tied at his waist, and boots. He took the towel and pushed his long hair away from his face, then rested the towel around the back of his neck.

“You always look dashing,” Ceily said and placed her hand on his cheek. “Anyway, we’ve decided to continue with the plans,” she dropped her hand and resumed her wringing.

“Why wouldn’t the plans be continued?”

“Apparently the Princess has taken an unexpected trek. But Charlotte remains certain her daughter will return well before the ceremony.”

She turned away and moved to a console where she collected her tablet. Most people owned one that fit in their palm. Ceily had one the size of a text. Between her committees, obligations concerning the ruling of Dulsar, and now the upcoming Royal Wedding, she always had it with her. She tapped the screen and scrolled down her various lists, then scowled as she realized the time.

Aiden’s face mirrored his mother’s, but for a different reason. ““Unexpected trek’? Where?”

“Charlotte never mentioned the destination,” Ceily replied, distracted by her next appointment. “Excuse me, Aiden, I’m late for an Arts Committee meeting.” She stepped around her son and out the doorway.

Aiden stared up at the screen where the Empress of Suma had disappeared minutes before. It was four weeks before the arranged marriage between the Princess of Suma, for whom Aiden didn’t even have a name, and the Prince of Dulsar. Both planets, and their ruling families, were controlling members of the High Council which directed other members of the Alliance. The Council had thirteen seats, each one representing the head of the government of the thirteen original planets that formed the Alliance. Membership in the Alliance brought peace, increased trade, military protection, safe travel, and shared scientific, medical, and technological knowledge. There were over a hundred planets from various galaxies that now claimed membership, and several that were adjunct members. Alliance members often banded together to protect each other outside of Alliance space, but where a majority of ruling planets inhabited the charted universe, there was the Colonial Air Force. Usually, ruling families sent their descendents to the Academy, and most ended up spending at least two years in that service, seeing first hand many of the races that are members of the Alliance, as well as observing and charting any new civilizations, offering assistance to recently established colonies, and attempting to squelch any uprising of adjunct races or conflicts within Alliance space.

Aiden had served in the Force, completed his university studies in politics, business, and languages, had accepted the responsibility of several aspects of ruling Dulsar, and the one event that created the most anxiety was his arranged marriage. He wasn’t informed about it until he started his advanced studies at the age of fourteen. His

parents explained to him the importance of this merger for their families, and for the Alliance. Any time Aiden had begun to show interest in a female, he was reminded of the arrangement. It wasn't with resentment that he viewed this marriage, but with a sense of duty. His parents had performed their task well. He was prepared for the ruling of Dulsar and the obligations that accompanied his station in regards to the Alliance High Council.

Suma's ruling family are descendants from Earth, a small blue planet in a galaxy far from the Jax Sector, which contains both Dulsar and Suma. The humans that inhabited Earth were forced off-planet in order to survive. They had mined the soil and polluted the air and water. What habitat they hadn't destroyed with their structures and machines, they accomplished with weapons. The civilization had nearly made itself as extinct as most of its flora and fauna on more than one occasion. The last time they had warred with themselves, a small percentage of that world's population managed to escape off-planet. Some settled on Suma, some on other planets.

The Royal Line on Dulsar has on record a settlement date, including those who were aboard the starship that landed and colonized the planet. It was unclear as to where they originated, but most believed they colonists were the last survivors of Earth. Through the centuries, Dulsar had progressed in technology and military strength. Suma had advanced in medicine, communication, and the arts. The marriage between the Royal Houses would include a greater sharing of both planets' strengths.

And in four weeks time, the Princess of Suma, who appears to be temporarily missing, will be his wife, in every facet, including Queen of Dulsar and co-chair of the Alliance High Council. For obvious reasons, pictures of the Princess were not to be found in any database. Should she be identified and abducted before the wedding, any number

of races opposing the Alliance would immediately have control of that vital planet. Aiden sighed and hoped she was well guarded on her unexpected trip.