

CHAPTER ONE

Dementus

The Mizu-Dyne ripped hot, then dumped its off-heat through vents that flared like an unbroken mustang's nostrils. I patted its liquid-cooled skin and felt the heat sink shift from a rage to a calmness that told me the Ki was ready.

"Goin' under," I murmured, just protocol. I taped my eyes shut, nothing flashy, but a necessity if you ever wanna see again in the event of something nasty like a flare overdrive. I know a few koozos who aren't opposed to those kinds of things. And if they knew I was coming, they would use them. I don't blame them, though.

I slipped the mouth guard in, my Mizu-Dyne wrapping around my face and temples like steel armor, a new age samurai. My body slipped back into that worthless state while my brain stepped into the office.

The Kami. It was colloquial. Territorial. You can't just call the entire damn thing something like the 'grid' or the 'matrix', that's like calling all of North America 'Atlanta'.

I liked being in the Kami. I think it might be a bad thing that I feel more comfortable here than I do in the real world. I'm not a runt by any means, but I'm not physically competitive, either.

Here, I'm the Apex. The Alpha and the Omega. I've broken men twice my size and tenfold my influence with a simple deconstruction of their reality that rendered their brains mush. Frankly, I enjoy my job. I just hate my boss.

I wish I could say I don't know why my family has so many enemies, inside and out, but the truth is plain as day. My brother Merrick Dementus is the head of the entire Moto by way of murdering our father. All told, seven guilds make up the Moto in New'Yo, (New Tokyo, not that shit hole New York) and every single one wants my oldest brothers head on a spike.

That's why he has me.

I dipped into the Kami, the Mizu-Dyne keeping my presence completely undetectable. To this day, I can't believe how many lug heads slip into the Kami with their Kono-Hama and Nano-Ai's. They're a Ki for the generalist, the grunts, the cannon fodder. Only a real operator could make a weapon out of one of those. Even then, none of them stood a chance when I was plugged into my Mizu-Dyne—one of two. The second was an unfortunate fact for me.

I had a mark this time, but not always. Some koozo from the Knight's Dale guild had been tripping our tethers and skimming product. He looked young and seemed foolish enough to take on the mission. He was probably tempted by eternal glory if he hit quota. He didn't know he was being used, on a calculated timer. He isn't *supposed* to hit quota. Poor kid, they probably didn't even tell him over there at Knight's Dale that ex-Pat on ex-Pat crime was treated with extreme prejudice in New'Yo.

And there he was, exactly where they said he'd be.

"Koozo." My voice was as calm as if I were talking to a pretty thing at the bar. "You got business here?"

He didn't freeze at the sight of me. Instead, he tried to kill me on the spot. And, obviously, it didn't work. What he thought he saw of me wasn't where I was in the slightest. My signatures, visual and quantum, were all false—a Trojan Horse.

"Listen," I said, my voice surrounded him like he were in an arena. I watched his eyes dance frantically, not understanding why his mediocre attack from a Nano-Ai (I told you) didn't work. "You don't know who I am, which tells me you're new to this."

He didn't answer, but I watched as his teeth loosened slightly.

"I'm giving you a chance."

"Fuck you!" The rage set into his eyes just as quickly as it had left.

I rearranged his reality, in the briefest of moments, where I hadn't even time to think about what I was doing, he had been in the Kami

for an entire month.

Alone and in the dark.

He stared at me, forgetting who I even was. It took several moments before he put it together. He screamed, not from rage or anger, but pure joy that he wasn't actually in an eternal hell. And, if he were smart, he wouldn't need to be.

"Do you understand?" I placed all the empathy I could in my voice.

He shuddered. "I do," His eyes darted every which way, checking if I brought anyone back with me from his perceived month-long absence. "But you know they'll kill me if—"

"Would you rather take a chance at *real* death, or..." My eyes widened with a smirk. He knew what I meant.

"What the fuck are you?" His voice shook. I saw the memories of his empty hell burn gaping holes in his eyes.

I took a deep breath, it's not fun when it's like this. "The reason you shouldn't be here, koozo."

Something hit him then, a tick, a signal. I measured an outside interference. They were watching him. Which meant they watched me put him in the unreal. They knew he was a dead man either way, by any set of hands, it didn't matter.

He lanced at me again, the me he thought I was. He wasn't in control anymore, he was the walking dead at this point. A brain puppet inside the Kami. Maybe it was a truce, Knight's Dale knows we're onto them and they're giving up soldier-boy as a peace offering. Fucking sickening if so.

The attacks kept coming, and I just watched, sad. It'd be too cruel to put him in the unreal, to neither live nor die for an eternity as a quantum manifestation of what his mind once was. So I killed him instead. The Mizu-Dyne isn't great for that, the aftermath being a hellish mess of quant-sig all over the Dementus Kami. Not good for business. I'm no janitor, though, so I left him there in his own mess.

"Ronan."

The voice itself nearly ripped me out of my Ki. I couldn't bear to hear it without my mind caking it in cowardly indifference. Darian was inside the Kami with me, but only to pull me out.

"It's done, kid. Let's go."

"Not you're kid." I slipped out. The office was dark, and I was surprised to see it that way. Didn't realize how long it's been. I squeezed my fingers, the blood flowing back from my brain and into the white bone bags. Shitty design of the Mizu-Dyne, demanding so much blood-O to the brain. It made up for it in other ways.

"You could've done away with the theatrics." Darian's skin seemed to have peeled off his face as he jacked out from his Kono-Hama. It was a flashy Ki for a flashy guy—still, not as good at 'theatrics' as the Mizu-Dyne. The Kono-Hama is a classic, like a shiny revolver or pump-action shotgun. The Mizu-Dyne is the cloak and dagger that awaits in the dark halls of your own home. Some things never go out of style.

"Yeah?" I smirked, spit the shit out of my mouth that accumulated while I was under, right on his nice plush carpet. "You be the bag man, then." His face was blank, scared.

Darian was the third-oldest brother, with me being the second. He was only 24 when Merrick sent Dad to the Farm in front of the rest of the guilds, the entire fucking Moto.

Darian had no problem watching his big brother put a blade right into Dad's throat and slicing the jugular without even asking the man of such esteem if he had any final words. He didn't ask because he knew what they'd be. He knew Dad would've exposed him to the entire Moto. That's what the gag was for—to keep Merrick's secret. It was a cruel way to go for a man who was just such. Merrick wanted to send a message. The old days were gone. Unabashed violence and shamelessness would win out in the new world. What a fucking joke.

Merrick still used a gag, just not the leather kind stuffed into the mouth of the man who raised you. He gagged Darian with fear and money. I'm indifferent to Darian, 30 now. I'm 24, I know I'm not mature enough, developed enough to make those kinds of tough choices. Too old to die for some fake noble cause like family or guild blood, too young to be brave and stand up against evil for the pure sake of doing so.

I don't blame Darian. I don't hate him. I don't like him, either. I'm indifferent.

"Aye," A hand on my shoulder. "Ronan... you good?" I turned, a smile already on my face. Kylo, my little brother. Only 15, no parents.

Just me. He's the only person I've ever loved. I wanted to gouge Darian's eyes out for letting him in here. He did it on purpose, I know. He wanted Kylo to be exposed to it, the business. More so, he wanted Kylo to be exposed to me, the monster. Darian could kill me though, if he wanted to. Only out here, of course.

"Ah," I grabbed his hand, they were getting bigger each day. "That was just a sim, kooz."

He knew I was lying. He wasn't good at hiding those kinds of things from his face yet. "You seared that koozo pretty hot... just a sim? Hope so. He ain't going anywhere anytime soon after that."

Yup...

"Hey," I said. "Wanna grab chow?"

He looked embarrassed, he was 15 with no money of his own. So much independence in such a young man. It wasn't his place, not yet.

"I'm buying, kooz." I slapped him on the back and we made our way out. He told Darian he was heading out, bumped knuckles. I forgot he was even there.

"Ronan boy." The voice came from the hall. Deep and grated coarse, full of shame if you knew how it sounded before.

I heaved a breath. I hated being called boy, but he was the boss, he called me what he wanted. Merrick, my oldest brother. My father's killer. The most powerful man in New'Yo.

I fucking hate my brother.

"Sir." I put just enough respect on the word for him to brush away how mirthless it sounded.

"No debrief?"

"Was gonna get dinner with Kylo, didn't know you were here, Sir."

He smiled. His teeth were stained from too much smoke and not enough blood flow to the gums. He was a soldier back in his day, before he went from grunt to admiral. He spent enough days in older model Mizu-Dyne's that it was surprising he had any blood left in his body that his brain hadn't used up. That was another thing, he was a legend with the Mizu-Dyne, the two of two. I couldn't take him, not right now. And I could take anybody.

"I know you wouldn't avoid me." His words were a chain on my wrists and ankles. "Kylo, here's some yen. Take Ronan here for a nice

meal." He handed my little brother a wad too big for even his growing hands. It was an insult, but I don't care. I'll take an insult with a good meal on the prick's dime any day.

Kylo smiled, "Thanks Merrick." His voice would pitch between young and innocent to awkward and tangly.

"And Ronan," Merrick's eyes darkened at my name, "Be cleaner next time." He pointed to Darian, who was slipping back into the Kami, his Kono-Hama whizzing hot from overuse. He was cleaning up my mess. Good, someone else is doing some dirty work.

"Got it, Sir."