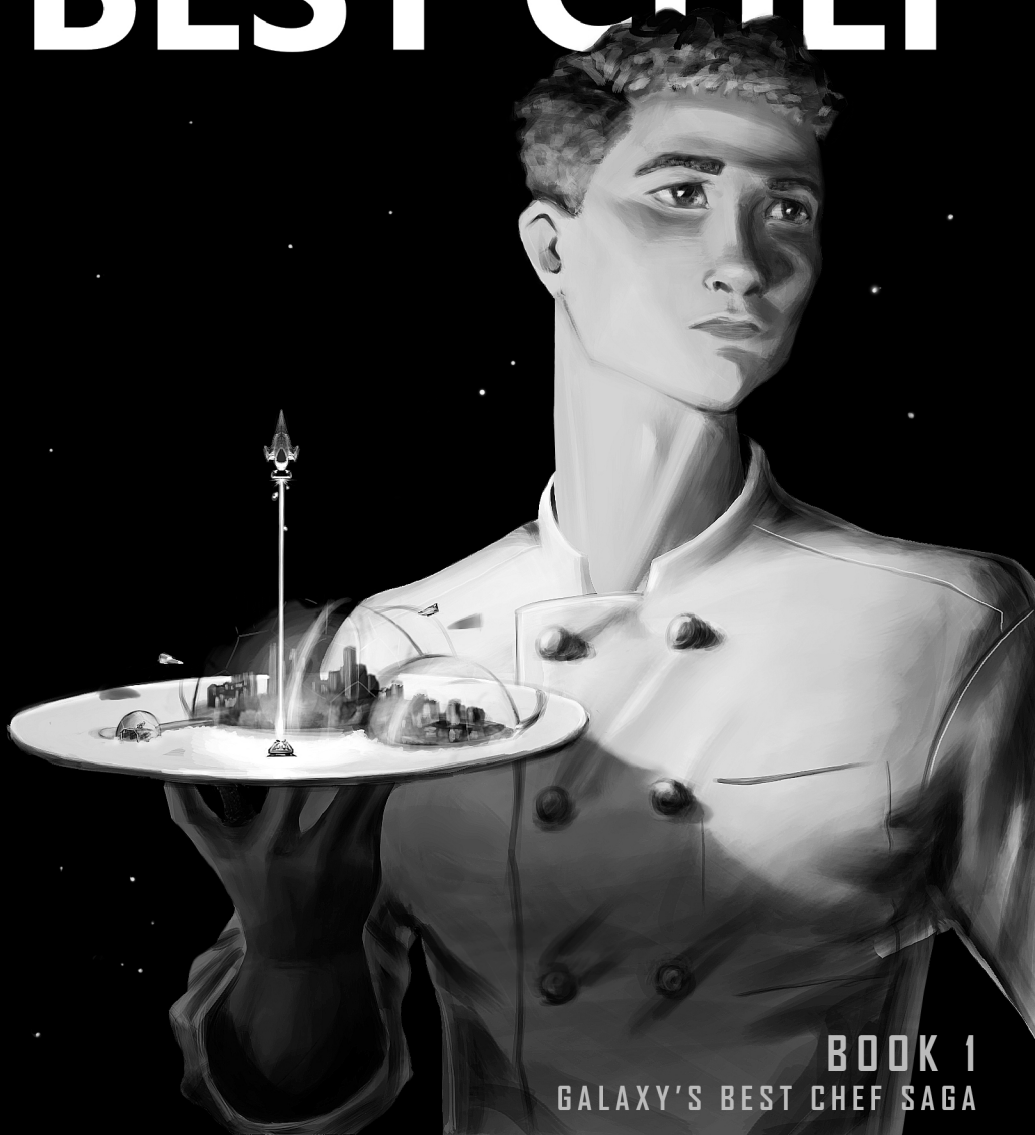


R Y A N · D U V A L

GALAXY'S BEST CHEF



BOOK 1
GALAXY'S BEST CHEF SAGA

CHAPTER ONE

“A space station, my ass,” Clara whispers, studying the obsidian architecture around her, reminiscent of ancient cathedrals from old Earth. *Of all the materials to build such a delicate structure with, why stone? Why so dark?* She gazes at towering columns supporting vaulted ceilings as hundreds of biographers, including herself, pour into the station’s docking bay. *But something’s off.* Clara closes her eyes and listens to their chatter. Despite the stone surfaces, their voices remain insulated, dampened. *There’s no echo...*

“It’s Jupiter marble!” Clara blurts and cups her mouth.

Memories from when she wrote architect Kandara Sagan’s biography, founder of the marble two centuries ago in Io’s core, come rushing back. Clara groans, remembering the old architect droning on about the marble’s acoustic properties only achievable with a billion years of compression and release as Io orbits Jupiter. *Thank Sol for coffee,* Clara reflects, knowing she had the undue privilege of analyzing the marble then and will never forget its texture.

She gently runs her fingers along the space station’s stone column. *Soft, rough, yet impervious. Yes, this is it.* Clara imagines the entire history of System Sol rests within the marble’s veins, yet her colleagues continue gossiping, ignoring the engineering marvel.

“Clueless,” she mutters.

A man in white Council dress, a speck beneath massive arches, raises a

hand in greeting. “The Council of Colonies welcomes you all to Parliament Station. I shall be your coordinator during your stay here. Please, follow me to Reception for processing and refreshments,” the coordinator’s voice effortlessly spans the docking bay’s expanse.

The marble is granting his voice amplification, Clara realizes. But how, then, is everyone else insulated?

Ushers corral them into Reception. The coordinator takes a pedestal atop a set of stairs overlooking the crowd of biographers as receptionists perform retinal scans and assign numbers.

“Clara Ocol, Investigative Biographer, Number 736,” hovers above a holotile in Clara’s palm, tracking her facial features and adjusting its holographic projection so only she can read the information. She frowns. *The anticipation is going to kill me.* A familiar face crosses beyond the holotile’s projection. Clara snaps her head in the woman’s direction, analyzing her muscular back and short-cropped hair. *Is that Kereen?* Clara pockets her holotile and pushes through the sea of biographers to find out.

“Kereen!” Clara calls.

The woman stops in her tracks and turns around. Her eyes widen. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” Kereen says, smiling brightly and spreading her arms.

Clara rushes in for a hug, grinning from ear to ear. “What on Titan are you doing here!?”

“Biographies, *duh*. We gotta compete for these assignments, you know,” Kereen says, releases their embrace, and runs fingers through her hair.

Clara catches the glint of a Titan Infantry ring. *Kereen still wears it?* She studies the ring’s sniper division bullseye engraving, remembering their nights spent atop ridge lines, Clara with her scopes to acquire targets, estimate range, give scope corrections, and read the wind. She would then say, “Send it,” and Kereen would take the shot. *“Best Sniper Team of Class 3392,”* reads the plaque on Clara’s apartment wall.

A lifetime ago, she thinks. “Didn’t you inherit your father’s recycling center after graduation?”

“Oh, I did.” Kereen’s smile dwindles. “But Dad passed a few months ago and nobody writes biographies for small-time recyclers. So I wrote one myself. The Council requested I attend this interview shortly after its publication.”

“I’m so sorry about David. What happened?”

Kereen sighs. “He crashed his hoverbike in Conkers Canyon. He was in

the lead too, but that wasn't glorious enough, apparently. The idiot was trying to set a new course record."

"Number one, Angelo Devon, please report to Identification," the coordinator calls from his pedestal.

A man, Clara assumes is Angelo, timidly climbs the stairs to meet the coordinator, then descends an entry portal to Parliament Floor. Clara returns her attention to Kereen.

"I'm glad David went out with his boots on," she says. *But will Kereen know the reference? It's from ancient English, after all.* Clara had learned the phrase from her husband, Jonathan, who currently leads the archaeological dig of London on old Earth.

Kereen tilts her head. "He *was* wearing boots, I guess."

Lost in translation. Damn. "I mean, I'm glad he was able to follow his passion to the fullest, to the very end," Clara says.

"Still charming as ever," Kereen jabs.

"Number two, Chester Atkins, please report to Identification," the coordinator calls.

As Chester enters Parliament Floor, Angelo emerges from the exit portal. Clara expects utter disappointment upon his face. Instead, Angelo smiles with genuine glee. *Please no! Not the first one!* She squints, watching as the next biographers enter in anxiety and exit with smiles.

"They're all happy," Clara states, deadpan, emotionless.

"Haven't lost that *Spotter* voice, I see," Kereen says, focusing on the biographers. "I think everyone's winning, interesting."

"Who do you think will get Zion Wright's biography?" Clara asks.

Kereen shrugs and motions to the coffee bar. "Come, drink."

From one biographer to the next, Clara and Kereen move with synthesized coffee in hand, bouncing conversation back and forth and gathering information. Before long, it's clear that Zion Wright's biography is still available.

After lunch, the coffee bar begins serving synthetic cocktails and wine.

Kereen grins. "This space station is more like a castle," she says, swirling a glass of red.

Finally, someone who gets it, Clara thinks.

"Number five-forty-six, Kereen Mandel, please report to Identification," the coordinator calls.

Kereen drains her wine and winks. "Wish me luck."

"Luck," Clara says, watching her friend ascend the staircase.

Kereen emerges from the exit portal nearly twenty minutes later, wearing a mischievous grin.

Clara purses her lips. “Did you get Zion’s?”

“Nope,” Kereen says, maintaining her grin. “I got Cillian Gundar’s.”

“The old chef from Venus? That’s an incredible assignment!” Clara says.

Afternoon slips into the evening, and a dinner of synthesized asparagus risotto is served. Clara grimaces, thinking about the dishes her son, Aizen, makes from scratch. *The synths just can’t make it right*, she reflects.

“Number seven-thirty-six, Clara Ocol, please report to Identification,” the coordinator calls.

Clara stands from her seat and wades through a handful of biographers still awaiting their turn or remaining as support.

Kereen mouths, *good luck*.

Clara ascends the stairs to the coordinator’s pedestal. *Be calm*, she tells herself and takes a deep Ergonos breath, one learned in her military training.

“Please, present any devices,” the coordinator instructs.

She places her holotile on the coordinator’s pedestal.

“Any implants we should be aware of?”

They have that information, a formality. Clara shakes her head.

“You may retrieve your holotile after the interview.”

“Thank you,” she says, barely above a whisper.

The coordinator extends his arm to the entry portal.

Clara descends, brushing her fingertips along its marble walls. All sound from Reception ceases, and Parliament Floor ahead remains silent.

Whoa, she attempts to say but cannot hear her voice.

“Clara Ocol, you may enter,” cuts through the silence, yet no person is present.

Parliament Floor opens as she rounds a bend. *At least triple the size of Reception*, Clara gauges. Thousands of representatives from every planet, dwarf planet, moon, comet, and asteroid in System Sol, and more from every other star system, sit upon tiers of amphitheater seating, silently watching her. A wooden chair stands lonesome at Parliament Floor’s center, its white oak vivid against the chamber’s black surfaces. Clara wills her legs to move with confidence and grace, but she arrives several seconds later than she likes.

She does not sit.

“The chair is quite comfortable I assure you. Please sit,” says the voice.

Clara searches the many faces, studying each species’ equivalent of a

mouth, but cannot pinpoint who spoke.

She sits.

Like selecting *Play*, the representatives come alive, turning their gazes away and having thousands of conversations at once. All the while, Clara cannot hear a thing. She studies their silent words. *They're talking to the walls and ceiling instead of each other. Why?* Clara shifts in her chair, not nearly as comfortable as promised. When she leans to the right, another voice, deep and husky, breaks the silence.

"...She cannot possibly be the author of Kandara Sagan's biography. She's only forty-seven..."

Clara sits up straight, and the voice disappears. She leans to the left to hear a third, nasally voice.

"...Look at those pants. Titan fashion is atrocious..."

Clara narrows her eyes, analyzing the direction one representative speaks and drawing a mental line to the marble slab they face. Each appears slightly angled, no two the same. *That's right, Jupiter marble absorbs all reverberations except for one*, Clara remembers Kandara Sagan saying. The old architect had even demonstrated the phenomenon using blocks of marble on turnstiles, changing dead silence into perfect sound transmission when correctly aligned.

Clara estimates how the representative's voice might reflect off a particular slab and draws another mental line to another official.

As one speaks, the other listens.

A communication system, Clara realizes, reaching for her holotile in her pocket. *Shit, I left it with the coordinator*. She remembers how his voice also projected across Reception. *So... a completely analog communication system... producing no electrical signatures... thus, invisible to scanners...*

"...Stealth technology," she whispers.

Clara leans to the right, intercepting the voice that critiqued her age, and traces the speech to a slab left of the chamber's entry. Its reflection tracks to a group of representatives dead-center. She searches for a face to match. It takes a moment, but Clara finds a human hosting a condescending expression whose mouth follows the words she hears.

"*Representative Marcey – Venus,*" is engraved in front of his seat.

Clara squares up to the marble slab, inhales deeply, and says, "My honorable Representative Marcey, pardon the intrusion, but I most certainly *did* write the biography on Kandara Sagan and fully understand the properties of the marble she discovered. The fact that I can use this

communication system is proof enough.”

The representative freezes, then looks about in a frenzy.

“Down front, Your Honor. It’s me, Clara Ocol. The woman who’s *only* forty-seven.”

His gaze settles upon her, exuding shock and wonder. “This system is classified on levels you cannot possibly comprehend.”

“I am certain that it is, Your Honor. Perhaps you might help me with something.”

He hesitates. “What would you ask of me?”

“Is there a marble slab that can distribute sound to all?”

“I would never disclose such information!” The representative abruptly turns, speaking behind his hand.

The Council silences and faces Clara.

She draws a mental line, but whatever slab Representative Marcey accessed is out of view. She rises to her feet for a better perspective. *Nothing*. She steps on the seat of her chair and glimpses the top of a multifaceted slab in the back.

“What is she doing?” Clara hears another representative say.

Come on, Clara, acquire target. She places her feet on the chair’s creaky arms, wobbles, balances, and slowly stands tall. The multifaceted slab reveals. Hundreds of previously hidden conversations engulf her like an avalanche. *Forty-seven meters away*, she judges and corrects her footing. Clarity cuts through the cacophony of voices. *There it is.* Clara takes another Ergonos breath, rests her hands on her hips, and lifts her chin high.

Send it.

“My esteemed representatives,” she calls, “grant me your ears for a moment and I shall prove my worth.”

CHAPTER TWO

Saturn fades from Titan's hazy night sky as the sun rises on Tempest City. *The eight-day-long night is finally over*, Clara thinks, relieved to be free of darkness, but she will miss Saturn's glow. *The one downside of living on Titan's tidally locked inner surface*. Tempest City's inverted dome canopy, holding Titan's crushing air pressure at bay, becomes visible, with thick clouds beyond, swirling like cream in coffee.

Clara opens her apartment door to dull sunlight trickling through the windows. She removes her shoes, sets her holotile on the coffee table, and enters the open kitchen to find a plate of cookies wrapped in rice paper on the counter. A card lays on its top with "*For Mom*" written on its front.

He's the best, Clara thinks, smiles, and plucks the card.

"Dear Mom. Whether you are selected or not, I am proud of you. Enjoy the cookies. Love, Aizen," reads within.

She gently sets the card aside and unwraps the rice paper layers. A waft of heaven envelops her. Her mouth salivates. Clara takes a cookie from the stack, opens her mouth, and sinks her teeth. Tastes unfold like layers of a mystery novel. The dark chunks zing with sweetness.

"My Sol!" Clara shouts, devouring two in a row. *How does Aizen do this!?* She nibbles another and moans in ecstasy.

A beeping comes from her holotile. "*Jonathan Zaid,*" hangs in its hologram. *That time already?* Clara thinks. She sets the plate of cookies on

the coffee table, sits on the sofa, and waves her hand over her holotile.

A hologram of Jonathan materializes. Glass dust from London's dig powders his curly, brown hair in pastel green and collects in his forehead creases and crow's feet. A smear of darker sediment dashes across his cheek. She cannot imagine him looking any cuter until he smiles.

"Kip!" Jonathan says.

"Kip!" Clara replies, remembering the first time they *kip'ed* seventeen years ago.

They were strolling along Tempest City's reservoir boardwalk and had settled on a bench overlooking the water. They entwined their fingers and kissed. But after a moment, Jonathan pulled away, looking into her eyes, words on his lips that he did not want to say.

"What is it?" Clara asked as her anxiety rose.

"My first assignment came in," he said and paused.

"Jon, you can't stop there. I need details." Clara forced a smile but her stomach sank.

"Dr. Cho selected me for the dig of Prometheus on Luna," he said.

"Sasha Cho? The historian? That's amazing!" Clara's stomach grew even heavier. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow."

"For how long?"

"It's scheduled for six months, but it'll likely be longer."

"How *much* longer?"

"I don't really know."

Clara never thought people actually gulped until she felt herself do it. "What about us?"

"I can holocall everyday."

"The delays make it weird," she argued.

"But I'm certain we can make it work," he said.

Clara had met Dr. Cho during Jonathan's graduation ball and did not miss the eyes she gave him throughout the evening, making Clara feel like nothing more than a plus one. Sasha was stunning, brilliant, and, of course, *single*. And she and Jonathan would be sharing close quarters for over six months. *How can I possibly compete with that?*

"Just go," Clara muttered, letting her fingers slip through his.

Jonathan's eyes widened. He scrambled for words. "Did you know that every language, both ancient and modern, requires two or three words to tell someone you love them? You'd think at least one of these languages would

create something singular. I mean. We have a word for *the fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth*, but not this.”

Clara had never seen him so rattled. “What should this word be?”

“It should be simple and light, something you can say in public without anyone realizing. Something like, *kip*.”

They walked in silence alongside the reservoir. Jonathan gazed across the water, and a light breeze ruffled his curly hair. *He sure was a good one*, Clara thought, trying to figure out how to control the situation. *But Jonathan is not a target to acquire. What can I do?*

A little voice from within piped up. *Fight, you idiot!*

How? she thought.

How? He just told you how!

Clara took a deep breath, summoned her courage, and said the only thing she could muster, barely a whisper.

“Kip...”

It was so faint Clara was not sure if Jonathan heard. Six agonizing seconds dragged on. Then, a word passed his lips, barely a whisper.

“...Kip.”

Jonathan declined Dr. Cho’s offer the following day.

Clara grins at her dust-covered husband on hologram. “How’s London today?” she says.

Several seconds pass for her words to reach Earth and his response to return. *That always puts a damper on things*, Clara thinks, but she knows the quantum relays are continually improving, reducing communication delay year by year. She munches on another cookie in the meantime.

“We commenced drilling of the city’s glass dome!” Jonathan finally says. “It’s incredible how intense The Fall was. They say a lightning bolt on Earth is a thousand times hotter than the surface of the sun, turning the sand it strikes into glass! Now imagine that, but a billion times more intense, encasing an entire metropolis!”

“Dat amazin’ ‘on,” Clara mumbles, mid-chew.

Jonathan squints. “Are those what I think they are?”

She nods. “Aizen may ‘ookies.”



“Cuisine? What’s that?”

“It’s the art of creating delicious and beautiful food, reflecting a specific culture,” Aizen says.

“Don’t the synthesizers do that already?” Lucius snickers.

“Uh, no. They might understand the chemicals in food, but not the processes to combine them, and nothing about who that food represents.”

“That’s stupid,” Lucius says. “Chemicals are chemicals. Just put them together and you get food.”

Aizen scrunches his brow. “Have you ever heard of corn on the cob?”

“*Cob*? What language is that from?”

“Ancient English. It’s the stalk that holds the kernels.”

Lucius humphs. “What are kernels?”

“That’s the corn!” Aizen says.

Lucius gives him a look. “Corn is a *liquid*. Don’t you know that!?”

The kids on the LightTram laugh. Aizen turns red in frustration.

“Look! Aizen’s about to cry!” Lucius says, making a pouty face.

“Imbeciles,” Aizen mutters in ancient English.

“He’s making up words!” Lucius cracks. “*In-bicycles* means awesome. Don’t you know that!?”

Aizen leans his forehead against the tram’s cushioned seat, trying to ignore their mocking faces. He cannot believe they will spend the upcoming class trip to Mars together. *They’ve already ruined the sixth grade. They’ll ruin this too*, he thinks, turning away to watch Titan’s farmland crops blur past his window, silos and barns scrolling slower in the distance.

“Look at me, I’m corn on the crab!” Lucius says, opening and closing his hands like claws to another round of laughter.

“Cob,” Aizen whispers in protest.

The LightTram slows. “*We are now approaching Cobble Hill Station. Please depart in an orderly fashion. Thank You for riding LightLine, the safest and most efficient way to travel.*”

Aizen beelines off the tram.

“Watch out, Zion, you have competition!” Lucius calls as the door seals shut with a hiss.

The LightTram silently speeds off, its sections of white polymer enveloping in magenta light and blurring into one glowing line.

Aizen stands alone on the open-air platform, letting the gentle rustling of artificial wind replace Lucius’s condescending voice. *Thank Sol for the silence*, Aizen thinks and peers up Cobble Hill. Buildings line both sides of the street, each elevating a meter or two to match the steep slope, creating a sawtooth roofline. His apartment is the highest unit of the very top building. He often wants to ask his parents why they had insisted on living there. But he knows why. Mom loves the view, and Dad loves bombing down the hill

on his longboard, believing Aizen loves it too. But Aizen hates longboarding and has accumulated enough scuffs and bruises over the years to validate that. Still, Dad always insists that if Aizen tries *one more time*, he will discover its greatness. *No matter how many times I tell him otherwise.*

Aizen sighs and starts up the hill, cursing his burning thighs. He manually reduces the artificial gravity of his magsuit beneath his clothing to aid his ascent. Neighbors peek from windows. Some come into the street.

“Hi, Aizen. How was school?” says Mr. Petra.

Aizen ignores him.

“Aizen, I love your shirt, is it new?” asks Miss Jiang.

It is new, but he ignores her, too.

“Hey, my man, I smelled them cookies. Can I have one?” says Nigel.

At least Nigel is upfront, Aizen thinks. “Sorry. Made them for Mom.”

“Oh. Well, maybe another time then.”

“Maybe.” Aizen reaches his building’s entry as more neighbors appear on the street. He quickly waves his holotile and enters. *It’s all because of that stupid block party last year!* One he baked cookies for. *Will they ever stop hassling me for more?*

Aizen thrusts his apartment door open in frustration, kicks off his shoes, and tosses his holotile on the coffee table. It slides across the surface and bumps into another holotile, one hosting a Titan Infantry engraving on its front. He smiles wide.

“Mom!” Aizen calls with hands cupped around his mouth.

Silence.

He enters the open kitchen to find crumpled rice paper on an empty plate. *She ate them all.* A sudden thumping comes from the ceiling above him. *What on Titan?* He navigates the hallway and opens the closet door to see the attic ladder pulled down. He climbs to find Mom rummaging through Dad’s old books and maps.

“Hey, Mom,” he says.

She flinches, almost dropping a book. “You scared me half to death. How was school?” she says.

“Stupid, everyone thinks corn is a liquid.” He sees Mom freeze and her brow scrunch. “It’s *not* a liquid, Mom.”

“I’ve never seen a solid version before,” she skeptically says.

Aizen sighs. “The liquidation occurs because synthesizers interpret corn chemically, not structurally.”

Mom nods, accepting his answer as fact, and returns to rummaging.

“What are you looking for?” Aizen asks.

“Your father began drilling the glass layer of London, but it’s proving too thick to penetrate. He asked me to find one of his old books chronicling Earth’s WorldRing tunnel system, which might provide a better solution for entry. He said it’s up here.”

“By the way, Mom. How’d it go? Up there?” Aizen points to where he imagines Parliament Station is still orbiting Titan.

She stops rummaging and mischievously grins.

“You actually got it!?” Aizen says. *She’ll be famous for sure!* But his excitement dwindles remembering her previous assignment. “How long will you be gone for?”

She smiles brightly. “Zion Wright is here! In Tempest City!”

The Great Zion Wright has been here all this time!? Aizen ponders that.

“So you’ll stay?”

She again nods.

“Good.” Aizen weighs his next question carefully. “Do you think I can meet Zion?”

Mom zeroes on him like a hunter. “So you can interrogate him for the trade secrets of cuisine? I’ll see what I can do, but don’t expect anything. Zion’s the most protected person in the universe, after all.”

Aizen smiles wide. “Kip!”

“Kip!” Mom replies.



Clara dons a hand-me-down mining uniform, stained and worn from years of use. *The Council must have searched far and wide to find someone with the exact body proportions*, she thinks, studying the worn spots at the knees and elbows. An encrypted message meets her, specifying her hair must be tight and not to wear makeup or jewelry. She descends Cobble Hill to its LightLine station at the base.

A rush of wind brushes her bare cheeks as a LightTram slows to a stop. Its magenta light dissipates, and its hatch opens. Clara boards and grasps the overhead bar. Several miners make small talk in acronyms she does not understand and glance in her direction. Their voices quiet and become more acronym-laden as the LightTram pulls from the station.

More miners are collected at stops around the reservoir. Then they dive straight into the side of the basin, coming out on Titan’s methane ice surface outside Tempest City’s dome, racing through yellow tholin-rich atmosphere.

The tram slows to its final stop an hour later. “*We are now approaching*

Albert Methane Mine Station. Please depart in an orderly fashion. Thank you for riding LightLine, the safest and most efficient way to travel."

Polymer sleeves seal around the tram doors before they open.

Clara disembarks first, strutting across the underground platform as if she belongs there, finding that if she moves with speed and purpose, she is never questioned, *usually*.

One of the miners meets her stride and smiles insidiously.

"You're new," he says.

"Transferred," Clara responds without hesitation.

"Really? Which mine? I've worked most on Titan and never seen you."

"Gregarian," she says. Having written an article highlighting Gregarian miners ages ago, Clara knows the legendary mine holds clout, and its workers are held in the highest regard. The only reason one transfers is because of serious injury.

The miner's smile drops. He looks her up and down.

Clara points to her chest. "Artificial lungs are not like the real thing."

He nods, opens the entry door, and motions her to enter first. The others get the hint and *protect her* as they descend the long, dark tunnel. Clara increases her pace, annoyed, staying ahead of the miners and light sensors, walking blindly into the darkness, recalling the schematics she memorized a week beforehand, and navigating the twists and turns by the paces.

"My Sol! How can she see!?" one of them whispers.

They come to a fork with two vault-like doors. The miner flashes his holotile on the left. Mechanical bolts screech and the meter-thick door groans open. He again motions for Clara to enter first.

She shakes her head. "This is where we go our separate ways, gentlemen." Clara waves her holotile across the right door with "*SENIOR OPERATORS ONLY*" engraved on its front.

Their jaws drop as she melts into blackness.

The vault closes behind her, and another door groans open in front, unveiling a sterile white room beyond. The contrast stings Clara's eyes, but she discerns people hustling in blue scrubs and long, white coats.

A woman approaches, eyes hardened by years of stress. She lifts a holotile to Clara's eye level to confirm her identity. "You're on time. That's a nice change," she says and abruptly turns, marching down a hall.

Clara takes that as her cue to follow. "Sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Dr. Sharon, head of HR at this facility."

"What exactly *is* this facility?"

“*That*, I cannot tell you.” Dr. Sharon stops at a changing room and motions for Clara to enter.

A set of scrubs and a white coat lay folded on a chair, and in a flash, Clara goes from *The Gregarian Miner* to *The Doctor*.

A knock raps at the door.

“Come in,” Clara says.

Dr. Sharon enters with purpose, locks the door, and sits on an adjacent chair. “I must inform you that everything in this facility is classified. If you disclose information to anyone outside you will be tried for *treason*. Do you understand?”

Clara tilts her head. “Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of my assignment? If I cannot write my discussions with Zion, then what’s the point?”

Dr. Sharon nods. “His room is deemed civilian soil. However, once you leave *that* room, everything else is classified.”

“I understand.”

“Can you say that into my holotile with more specificity please?” She lifts the tile to Clara’s eye level.

“I understand that everything in this facility, save the room of Zion Wright, is classified, and disclosing information outside is an act of treason.”

“Thank you,” Dr. Sharon says, and Clara’s holotile beeps, “Aside from Zion’s chamber, you are cleared for the restroom, break room, kitchen, changing, and study, where you can connect to the outside for research. Everywhere else is specifically designed to disrupt signals.”

“Can I not work outside then?” Clara asks.

“Legally you can. So long as it’s on a separate holotile that never enters this facility.”

“Looks like I’m buying a new one,” Clara quips.

Dr. Sharon frowns. “Don’t screw this up. I *will* turn you in if I must.”

“I’ll do it all within the bounds of legality,” Clara assures.

Dr. Sharon squints. “All right, let’s meet Zion’s physician.”



“In theory, he’s exhibiting symptoms of gene degradation,” Dr. Lee says, simultaneously worried and excited.

“What exactly does that mean?” Clara asks, her eyes locked onto him, her holotile recording.

“It’s a condition where, over time, the proteins of a person’s DNA slowly unravel. We believe it’s an adverse side effect to the barbaric modifications made in the twenty-third century, just over a millennium ago. There has not

been a single case since, until now. Somehow, those adverse effects were passed on to Zion. Unfortunately, all documentation of the modifications that might cause this was lost in The Fall.”

“Does this mean Zion’s DNA is different?”

Dr. Lee shakes his head. “No different than the natural variances found from one individual to another. But *that’s* the problem. Without proper gene documentation, we cannot differentiate a defective modification from a normal variance. We’re flying blind.”

Clara thinks about that. “How far along is Zion?”

“It’s early. We think. He can still use Interspeak, though his vocabulary is dwindling and substituted with gibberish. More concerning is he can no longer discern true and false and tells ludicrous stories. That’s why there was such urgency to remove him from the public eye and is why we’re calling on you to write his biography, before it’s too late.”

“There’s an even more urgent matter,” Dr. Sharon interjects, and Dr. Lee looks wide-eyed. “We must tell her. She’s sworn to secrecy.”

He sighs deeply. “Zion single-handedly saved the galaxy after The Arkathy Empire dissolved. We all know this to be true. Yet, nobody knows exactly how he united the systems left in disarray. We believe it relates to his deep understanding of food and anatomy. However, since galactic unification, the art of cuisine has declined. Consequently, alliances are growing unstable, Clara. As we speak, the Arkathy are fighting with the Cindarians again. That’s also *classified*. We fear that if we cannot extract Zion’s knowledge of cuisine, then our unprecedented peace may collapse.”

Clara feels an anchor drop in her gut. “This is *not* what I agreed to.”

“For sure,” Dr. Sharon says. “But we need your help.”

“What makes you think *I* can do this?” Clara sharply says.

“Because of how you write your biographies, Clara. Your little stunt in front of the Council showed them what the other thirty-four million candidates could not—an ability to understand the intricacies of your subject’s accomplishments and then utilize them. Clara, it must be you.”

CHAPTER THREE

Clara gently knocks on Zion's door. *No answer.* She knocks again. It opens slightly. *Still, no answer.* She pushes the door open just enough to poke her head inside.

A floor-to-ceiling hologram projects Enceladus's ocean in spring on the opposing wall. Sunlight shines through cracks in its thick, icy surface above as schools of tuna and squid swim by. Large shadows appear in the distance, swaying side to side, as ambient music plays amid the swishing of their tails.

"Rest... Relax..." the hologram whispers.

Another hologram to the right displays Zion's cardiovascular, skeletal, and nervous systems, highlighting gaps in brain tissue where the degradation disease has taken its toll.

Clara quietly steps into the room and closes the door.

Zion lies asleep in a bed to her left, extended to accommodate his height. She remembers him from years ago, giving speeches on the Council of Colonies' Capitol Building steps. He was once the epitome of health that everyone strived for but few achieved, still running triathlons until age 257. The Zion dissolving in bed before her is a mockery of his former self, breathing gently as if each breath may be his last. His skin is dark yet thin. Clara follows the veins from his neck to his face and around his hairless scalp. His eyes sit deep within their sockets, encompassed in violet.

She slowly sits on a stool next to his bed.

“What happened to you?” she whispers.

Zion inhales sharply and snorts, then coughs. Phlegm drools from the corner of his mouth. He raises a hand to wipe it away. “Allessandra? Where have you been?” he mumbles.

Clara sits motionless, silent, terrified.

Zion blinks hard and further wakes. “I apologize. I thought you were someone else.” He places his bony hands against the mattress and hoists himself to a seated position.

Words will not come to Clara.

“I see you’re quite the conversationalist,” he says. “I should thank them for sending such *lively* company.” A sly grin spreads on Zion’s gaunt face.

Did he make a joke? Clara forces herself to say, “Hi.”

“You speak!” he says, raising a hand. “Do you have a name?”

“Clara.”

“Clara...?”

“...Ocol.”

He nods deeply. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Clara Ocol. Now tell me, what brings you to my bedside?”

“I, uh, was chosen to write your biography.” Clara feels like a bumbling fool. *This is not like me! But this is also not like him...*

“Really? I get a biography?”

“You, of *all* people, get one,” Clara says, placing her holotile on a nightstand and dashing her finger across *Record*.

Zion eyes the holotile. “My dear, who do you think I am?”

“The Great Zion Wright, of course,” she says.

He sighs. “You’ve been misinformed. I’m not *great*.” He rubs a hand along his corded forearm. “Just another dying old man.”

“You’re still the most powerful person in the galaxy,” Clara says.

“Power?” he scoffs. “Power is fantasy, fiction. It does not exist.”

“No. Power is what makes you great,” she argues.

“My dear, allow me to show you what power *really* is.” He raises an index finger to his neck and pokes. Then he grins.

Clara stares at Zion, trying to decipher his behavior, when footsteps and shouting come from the hallway outside. Four doctors, plus Dr. Lee himself, burst through Zion’s door to the hologram displaying his vitals, and then they take positions around his bed, preparing defibrillators.

“What are you doing?” Zion calmly says.

The doctors freeze and turn to him, confused.

Dr. Lee checks Zion's vitals. "How do you feel?"

"Fluffy," Zion replies and motions to Clara. "My dearest Clara and I were having a *lovely* conversation when you so *rudely* interrupted. May I ask what the emergency is?"

"It's... nothing. I apologize, sir," Dr. Lee says.

"Learn some manners, *young* man! Apologize to my guest!"

Dr. Lee apologizes to Clara before leaving the room.

When the door closes, Zion bursts into wheezing laughter.

Clara cannot help laughing herself. She had imagined every possible first conversation, but nothing like this.

"Power is merely perception, Clara, nothing more," Zion says, composing himself and going into thought. "I'm in the mood for ice cream. How about you?" He again raises a finger to his neck.

After another round of emergency and apologizing, the ice cream arrives. Clara finds it magnificent, yet Zion grimaces with each lick.

"You're disappointed," she states.

"I used to make wonderful ice cream," he says.

"Why did you stop?"

"I did not stop. The *galaxy* stopped. With synthesizers, skill is no longer required to achieve something a step above rubbish. And so, the art of cuisine is being forgotten. That's why the... the... you know, the... uh, the... zhuzubnther." Zion breathes deeply, his eyes shifting, searching.

"Why the galactic peace is destabilizing?" Clara suggests, hoping to get her first lead.

"No, it's the... you know, the... uh, zhuzub... the... the... Fuck!" Zion shouts and withdraws. "You can go now..."



Clara knocks on Zion's door the following morning.

"What is it?" he calls with kingly projection.

It's the voice Clara remembers from holograms of Zion talking to dignitaries. *Not yesterday's jester*. She enters to find him facing the opposite wall, arms behind his back, standing at parade rest, the top of his bald head skimming the ceiling. The hologram no longer displays Enceladus's ocean. It's the Capitol Building on Ceres, and Zion looks about to give a magnificent speech.

"You seem better today," Clara says.

He turns, giving her an icy glare. "What makes you think you're welcome here?"

“It’s me, Clara Ocol, from yesterday,” she says, studying his stance.

“I know who you are. I remember telling you to leave,” he sternly says.

Clara meets his penetrating stare. *He’s a different person.* But she knows how to deal with *this* Zion and matches his parade rest. “No. You said that I *could* leave, placing the choice of departure in my hands. You never specified the duration of my absence or that I could not return.”

He glares for a moment longer, then turns his back to her. “Let me make myself clear then. *Leave*, and *never* return.”



Clara gives Zion two days and takes slow Ergonos breaths, preparing to meet his wrath. She opens the door and struts in.

“You’re in the way!” Zion hollers, waving her to the side.

Dr. Lee is beside him. Both shake fists like mimes riding bicycles.

“*You are the victor!*” chimes the hologram.

“I won!?” Dr. Lee says, amazed.

“Not fair! You had help!” Zion points to Clara.

Again, Clara is befuddled and turns to find “*Hoverbike Grand Prix*” on hologram. Dr. Lee’s character stands on a podium receiving a bouquet and champagne, while Zion’s sits on a wrecked bike giving cut-eye.

“Thanks for letting me have another go,” Dr. Lee says.

“This is *not* over, I *will* reclaim my title!” Zion declares.

Dr. Lee approaches Clara. “It’s a good day,” he whispers before leaving.

Zion raises fists. “Clara, wanna have a go?”

“I uh, no, not right now.”

He waves the hologram away, pouting.

“Are you not furious with me?” Clara says, raising eyebrows.

“I might feel better if you played,” he grumbles.

Her eyebrows drop. “I’m talking about our last session. You told me to leave and never return.”

“That?” He shrugs. “I get dramatic sometimes.”

“Dramatic? I thought you were going to imprison me!”

Zion’s pout melts into a grin. “That would be an abuse of power.”

“You said power does not exist,” Clara snaps back.

“Then you should not fear something that does not exist.”

Focus, Clara, she tells yourself. “I have questions for you.”

“Is it about my recipes? Do you want to know the secret ingredient?”

“Do I... What? No,” she says but realizes this might be an opportunity. “I mean yes, I do.”

“It’s obviously for my signature dish.”

“...What’s your signature dish?”

“Really? You don’t know? It’s my grodote bisque soup of course!”

Clara has never heard of the words *grodote* or *bisque* before, but she knows what *soup* is. “Oh yes, my mistake, that’s the one.”

Zion stares hard. “The secret ingredient is... *fear*.”

“Is that a spice?” Clara says, sitting on the stool and dashing *Record*.

“You misunderstand. The secret ingredient is... *fear*.”

“Oh, you mean *Fearus*? The Arkathy flower?” Clara ventures.

“No, no, no. I mean *fear*. The *emotion*,” Zion says.

Clara narrows her eyes. “I’m sorry, what kind of joke is this?”

“No joke, my dear. You see, the grodote is a sensitive crustacean. Its body chemistry changes drastically from the emotions it feels. If the wrong emotion is felt while entering the pot, the dish is a complete ruin. However, a correct emotion can be absolutely divine. What you taste in my bisque is a chemical known as frestainician, which only releases when the creature experiences fear. It creates a euphoria calming it in times of stress. The meat is relaxed and tender. And to us humans, this tastes delicious.”

“Grodotes feel euphoria? How do you even know they feel fear?”

“Because, my dear, a very long time ago, they told me.” Zion raises his palms and shrugs.

“This is ridiculous!” Clara stuffs her holotile into her pocket and stands.

Zion reaches a bony hand. “Please, forgive me! I’m an old man and I like to jest. Please, my dear, can you hold my hand for a moment?”

Clara sighs deeply and reluctantly clasps his hand. *What on Titan did I get myself into?* she thinks.

“You’re so warm,” Zion says. “I have not felt this warmth in years. Please stay with me. Nobody stays anymore.”

Clara sits back down with a thump.

Zion innocently smiles. “Let me tell you a tale of a little crustacean who stumbles upon a much greater world...”