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HUNTING DRAGONS

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PREVIEW (WIP DRAFT)

0.1 (PROLOGUE)

She held her hand out to Imari again, with a patient smile.

For a moment, the bitter, sore loser in her wanted to stand on her own, and fight her again. Yet, she was also still a ten-year-old Moarian child who adored her elder sibling.

She could feel the frown on her own face. Frustration would not let her admit being bested so easily. Her sister, ever the observant sibling, quickly noticed, still holding out a hand.

“You’re getting better, Imari.” She always said that, never realizing how patronizing it sounded, especially with such a bright grin on her face. “You may have much to learn, but to be this far at such a young age is extraordinary.”

“You’re ignoring the thirty losses I have sparring against you, Ember.” Imari bemoaned her sister’s praise. She grasped the hand of the brown-skinned teenager, and Ember yanked her from the ground as if she were as light as a pillow. Imari was a lithe little child, half Ember’s weight at best. Once she was on her feet again, she did her best to show only appreciation for her sister’s time and energy. She didn’t have to spar with her, after all. This was purely Ember doting on her, at least in her mind.

“Keeping track of that is unwise, little one,” she remarked, wagging a finger at Imari.

Imari let out an exasperated sigh between breaths of exhaustion. “You’re only saying that because you haven’t lost.”

“Those losses are what have made you stronger, just as my losses did for me when I was learning. That said,” she paused, thinking on her next words before tapping Imari’s nose with her index finger, “I do think using something that,

um, *unwieldy* is holding you back.” She pointed to the large, wooden scythe that lay on the ground an arm’s length away.

Imari was given the choice to use any number of weapons to learn, mostly as a hobby, and she picked one of the more difficult weapons. For her, practicality was not important. She’d seen so few of the other soldiers in the royal guard utilizing that sort of weapon, and she was enthralled with how they handled it. It was also similar to what their mother used in the few exhibitions she’d watched, many years before when she could barely comprehend what a battle was.

Imari’s ten-year-old mind thought that using it would make her stand out, especially if she could master it. It was her way of showing she could be good at something, of her own unique ability.

Ember did not argue her choice further, though she didn’t try to understand it, either. “Well, it’s fine that you’ve chosen it. You’ll best me with it, someday.” She patted Imari’s head. Ember had a habit of poking at her as though she were still a baby, and part of her still thought it was her subtle way of teasing her.

“You’re still not taking me seriously,” Imari mumbled.

“Of course I am!” She said that with a sudden boost of excitement. “As the next in line for the throne, I have to take my little sister’s defense training very seriously. After all, we might need to protect Moara with our own hands someday.”

Imari nodded, despite the thought of that petrifying her. *An actual battle? Against who? What could I really do if someone attacked Moara, our home world? What would they even look like?*

She pushed those thoughts aside as they stepped out of the elevated garden. They walked onward through the pearl-tinted hallways, until they were

standing at the edge of the castle's balcony. The enormous metallic tower was showered with the orange light of the planet's ever radiant sun, as its light covered the citadels surrounding the castle, only a few feet below the royal courtyards filled with a rainbow of gorgeous blooms.

Planet Moara, home of the Moarian people, and the seat of the Moarian throne, was where they lived, and quite comfortably at that. In many ways, it felt like a utopia for those living within the walls of the various linked citadels. The seat of Moara's power was held by their parents, the monarchical rulers of the central Moara City. The lands around the castle were not lacking, but there was certainly a clear difference between the world outside the citadels and the world within.

Outside the walls, the buildings were humble, built of the most common stone and metals that often were rusted by the extreme weather of the late seasons. No building stood nearly as tall as those surrounding the citadel itself.

And yet, inside the citadel, the buildings were far grander, some reaching high into the indigo skies and nearly touching the bubbly, silver clouds themselves. The tower they stood in at that moment was at the very center of the kingdom, and by far the most magnificent building. It spiraled into the skies so high, that one might think they could touch the heavens themselves if they stood at its peak and reached outward.

Many days, as Imari peered from the window of her room and outside that tower, she wondered how long she'd have to stay hidden away in that majestic building.

Unlike her, Ember loved every moment she spent in the kingdom. As the eldest child of their bloodline and six years Imari's senior, she would inherit the throne from their mother, and their world would follow her lead. She was beloved

by the people, as well as those in the castle that watched such a beautiful princess grow into a potentially strong and wise leader.

But what really enamored them all, was her intelligence in combat.

She could outsmart even the best of the generals in any game of wits. The few times the kingdom needed to do battle with outsiders from other worlds, she somehow seemed to know just what to suggest to win the battle. At sixteen, she was far ahead of her years.

And then, there was... Imari.

She was the "reserve successor," and was made well aware of that by many of those serving the royal family. She impressed no one. Her existence was considered unnecessary, unless something befell their beloved crown princess. Until then, she was training to be her guardian, if even that.

They shared the same shade of deep brown skin, and coily, long black hair, similar full lips, slightly pointed Moarian ears, and were both considered small and thin for their ages. But where Ember had finesse and intelligence far beyond her years, Imari was stuck with a complete lack of confidence to even speak properly to the elders, basic combat skills at best, and certainly not someone to be depended on to make decisions in battle.

Even at the young age of ten, the envy in her heart was being molded by those around her, and she could feel it daily.

She was Imari Flare Mo'arania. Her sister was Ember Ra Mo'arania.

She was always just called "Imari." Ember was "the Lightning Princess."

And yet, she still loved Ember, dearly. She held no ill will towards her. Quite the opposite: she hoped, begged and even prayed before bed every night to awaken one day and be just like her. And while those outsiders of their lineage

held contempt for her existence, their immediate family showered them both with love, even on her most miserable days.

After they'd taken a while to watch the sunlight dancing over the city and talk about things other than Imari's losses to Ember, the sisters returned to their rooms to properly dress for that evening's special occasion. Both chose matching, draping dresses of a sapphire shade, their shoulders bare to show off the array of rainbow jewels around their necks.

Once they'd met in the hallway outside their rooms and fixed each other's appearance, the siblings quickly shuffled their way to the central dining hall, where they were to meet their parents and their esteemed guests for the night. They walked through the dimmed, off-white halls littered with statues of our honored elders and descendants they'd never met.

Or, at least, Imari had not.

Ember was well-known amongst all the living elders. They'd been training her just as much as the combat instructors had been, something that seemed to worry their mother and especially their father. Her combat training was fine and applauded, but what she was learning from some of the elders was not simply how the ground vehicles could maneuver in battle.

The large silver table that greeted them in the dining hall was covered in full dishes of fresh-picked vegetation and cooked fruits, all sitting upon gold-embroidered table mats. The varied palette before them was actually quite a rare sight, as many of those sweet fruits were rare finds, and at the time, not even in season. Of all the fruit laid before them, even Imari herself was astonished to see Kumatrice there – it was by far one of the more difficult fruits on all of Moara to bring back properly ripe. Its texture was a bit coarse, but the small, orange globe was sought out all over the planet. For them to be present this day meant this was a spectacular occasion.

Their parents, as well as a few of their consultants and confidants, stood at the center of the long table. Imari stood to them, smiling at the guests as they entered the room. Ember had stepped away for a moment, and Imari lost track of her while she'd been staring at the food earlier.

Their guests were a bigger surprise than she'd expected: they were the royal family of the Xauranos territories, their rival territory on the opposite side of planet Moara.

They were the Xauran royal family.

For centuries, Moara's "hunters" tracked them down as prey, all of Moarian society seemingly unaware of the truth behind their existence. And yet, looking upon them in that moment, they appeared no different than Imari and her kin, not even in the most minute ways. They had the same varied brown tones of skin, the same short and pointed ears, the same eyes... they all looked like slightly different alterations of what was known across the universe as "humans."

Yet, she also knew of their other forms, as beasts. Or, more commonly, they were called *Dragons*.

The Moarian royal family's army was, many decades before, all known as *Dragonslayers*.

Those days seemed long behind them. Imari herself spent the previous year as a part of an "exchange program," living in the Xauran household as one of their own. And while their clothing was more muted, much of their culture resembled Moara's own.

A younger boy managed to sneak to Imari's side, then flicked the tip of her ear. And as she winced in pain, he stood there, his toothy grin missing a few spots.

Completely on childish instinct, Imari flicked his left ear in retaliation. Her attack was caught by her parents' sharp eyes. Her father gave her a sigh, then her mother shook her head, smirking at her in that way that forced her to smile back in embarrassment.

Imari was still in awe of them both. They were so elegant! The Queen and King were far more royal than Imari could ever dream to be. All she wanted, in that moment, was to look as beautiful as they did when she became of age. Her mother's draping violet dress and matching shoulder scarf seemed almost alive as it flowed behind her, shimmering even in the dimmed lights of the dining hall. Her father, with her hand in his, was equally regal, as a similar scarf rested upon his shoulders and draped off his back, while his gold-colored tunic and flowing, gold-tinged pants complemented her mother perfectly. The two of them looked as though they'd been brought to life from an ancient fairy tale, and they were the lucky people that got to see them that day.

The Xauran royal couple that was meeting with her parents were impressive in their own right. Though less bold in colors, the Xauran Royals' green and gold accents competed with their own. Their scarves and gowns, while not draped as long as her parents, were just as extravagant, covered in embroideries of intricate, ornate patterns of gold and green.

They shared warm embraces, and smiles and laughs between them all before Imari's father drew their attention to the banquet before them, and requested they all be seated. To her left was a spot for the younger boy that had been annoying her since his arrival.

He was essentially her younger adoptive brother. The nine-year-old somehow managed to act more like a toddler at times, and yet could just as easily act as though he were older than her by many years in an instant.

As they ate, Imari could feel her grin soften. As much as they teased and generally annoyed each other, he was the closest she had to a friend her age for most of her life. Even with her sister there, she was often too busy to just play. Their time together was always some sort of lesson, a sparring session or just brief enough to remind each other that they loved each other, by barely saying the words.

Unconsciously, as she thought of her time in that castle, feeling so smothered and hated by anyone who wasn't Ember or the king and queen, she thought of the Xauran home. It wasn't that different from her own, though their side of the planet was far darker as the sun did not visit their continents as often. But the time she spent there was... nice.

"Can... I go back to your place again, Kenta?" she'd muttered that to him, thinking no one would hear her ask, maybe not even him.

Both couples overheard her request and all erupted with laughter. "Our children really have shown us what our future should look like," her father proudly boasted.

"You won't have to worry about that, Imari," her mother added. "Part of why we're having dinner today, after all, is to celebrate the joining of our two families."

"Joining?" She had no idea what her mother meant.

"Our families will be moving in together," Kenta's father replied with a grin. "We've reached a deal, a treaty, if you will, and our families can finally stop warring against each other. And you two are actually brother and sister from here on."

They looked to each other, and Kenta almost immediately teared up. "She's really my big sister now?"

A glass shattered.

All of them looked to the doorway of the hall, and there she stood. The Lightning Princess.

But her face, her eyes... there was something very wrong there. It wasn't joy that Imari saw in her eyes. It wasn't happiness, gratitude, pride...

Maids had already rushed to clean up the mess. Ember shook herself, as if trying to awaken from a trance.

"I'm sorry. The news just caught me unaware." She walked around the two maids, then took the seat on Imari's left. She grasped her little sister's hand, trying her best to smile. "Well, now I'll have two siblings to look after?"

Her eyes glanced at Kenta, and she gave him the same smile. But Imari could tell something was different. The warmth in her smile was gone. She looked as though even giving him a glance was an obligation.

And yet, he didn't seem to notice. No one did.

Still, she reached a hand to him, and he grabbed it all the same. "You are my blood now too," she said.

"I have two big sisters now! And I gotta protect them!"

Everyone laughed again, her sister included. Kenta frowned a bit at the laughter, but seemed to brush it off.

"Well for now, you should all enjoy being children while these peaceful times are among us." The adults returned to the drinks and food, and Imari sat there, feeling an unease well up in her stomach.

She knew Ember far too well...

0.2 (PROLOGUE)

She could watch their world from her window all night long. Seeing the busy skyline of the citadel at night was mesmerizing. The sight of ships landing and taking off, air traffic buzzing about...

She wanted to be a part of that. Maybe that was why she wanted to revisit the Xauran continent. The sights she'd seen there opened her eyes to the sheltered life she was living in the citadel.

Her mother's soft knock on her bedroom door brought her back to the world inside the walls again, to her frustration.

"Come in," Imari responded, not even bothering to look back. She knew who it was. That soft knock was a common one she'd hear every night at least once.

The queen saw Imari staring out the window, then sat down on another chair beside her. Imari always felt it was strange to see her mother outside of her fancy garb. At that moment, she was wearing a simple pair of black trousers and long-sleeve gray shirt, with a bit of armor plating on her left shoulder and a photon-powered longsword on her waist. Her long, brown locs were twisted into a bundle, a few of them dangling to the sides of her round face.

She often went on patrol herself alongside her knights, and would meet with other members of the guard as well. In her own words: those that follow her lead, needed to see her doing the same work, even as the queen. Her husband did the same, often joining in the training exercises and assisting on patrols and distant away missions.

Imari was certain it was also an easy excuse for them both to check on their children before bed.

"Everything okay, young one?" She asked so softly, so kindly...

"Mhmm," Imari said with a nod.

"You've always had your eyes out there." She rubbed the top of Imari's head, messing up her hair a bit.

"Living with the Xaurans, going to a new place... I want to travel more, mother. I want to see more places."

"Well? What's stopping you?" She genuinely grinned at her, as if what she wanted to do was as simple as just saying it.

"I have duties here too, don't I? That's what Ember always talks about. And she'll be queen someday."

"So she shall," her mother answered.

"And I'm supposed to be her guardian. And a second heir. Or something."

"Or something?" She folded her arms, leaning back in her chair, smiling as if Imari had said something utterly silly. "Do tell."

"I'm just so... um..."

When her eyes met Imari's blank stare, she raised her brow. "You're just what, Imari? Take your time, say what's on your mind."

Little Imari sighed. "Useless. I'm not her. I'm not you and dad. And I just seem to be bad at everything I do."

She laughed a little, then placed her hands on her child's shoulders. "Imari. You're *ten*. Practically still a pup. You're finding your way. Trust me, I was a bit clumsy too when I was young."

"You were?"

She leaned back. "I didn't actually start making proper decisions until I was nearly twice your age. And even then, not all my decisions were right."

Imari let out another wistful sigh. "I guess that's okay."

“And if the world outside these walls calls to you? Then I know you’ll do just fine. You could be an ambassador for our people, or lead our diplomats, or become an explorer...”

That thought, that last title, got her excited. An explorer? Going to see more worlds was something she’d always wanted to do...

“Could I really?”

“Of course, my princess. For now, you are a little too young to worry about that. But there’s nothing wrong with dreaming about it. There is a lot you can do for your people here, and from afar.”

Imari nodded, her mother’s words bringing a smile to her face. “So... is... is Kenta really my little brother now?”

The queen laughed deep from her chest at that question. “Yes, of course! Even if our family lines had not agreed to join, I doubt I could convince you otherwise. And I wouldn’t. You three are all close.”

“All three? I dunno’. Ember... kinda...”

“Yes, well, Ember has been through a lot due to her responsibilities. She’ll warm up more to the idea, I’m certain.” She hugged the young princess, then left a small kiss on her forehead. “I’ve got to return to my turn on patrol. Don’t stay up too late, okay?”

Imari nodded. But before she could tell her “I love you,” another woman stood at her room’s open doorway.

Imari couldn’t see her well, but she was quite a bit older, and her appearance was unkempt. Her brown hair was frizzled all about, and her dark peach skin looked quite worn.

Even her uniform, which looked very much like that of most non-combat citizens, was wrinkled. Over that uniform, she was wearing a large, black overcoat.

Her eyes met Imari's curious glare, and the odd woman's slight grin gave Imari a shiver.

Her mother stood quickly, and walked to that woman. "Why are you here, Miss Hashra?"

"Ashel is fine," she replied. "There is something important we need to discuss, your highness."

She nodded, then looked back towards her daughter one last time. "Love you, little one."

"Love you too," Imari answered back. And as the door to her room closed, she began to look outside again, into the horizon, across the skyline, and into the clouds above.

For the moment, the world out there would need to wait. She could only stare into that world from that window, imagining what the rest of the galaxy must look like, considering all the variety of species she'd seen cross paths. From merchants to warrior classes, amphibious people to other humanoid races like her own...

Her eyes wandered about again, thinking of just what would await her on the other side of that window.

1.1

Beyond the mountain that stood in her path was nothing but a sewage-filled ocean and dreary, gray clouds. A sea of spiraling mists and carnivorous creatures whose appearance could paralyze one in fear awaited anyone that leapt beyond the shores she stood on. One such beast ripped apart the sea in front of her, its long, lavender body spiraling towards the skies as it engulfed a school of fish-like creatures into its massive maw. Its singular eye looked down to her and her partner, as if questioning if they were another meal awaiting its consumption. It unleashed a tremor-inducing roar before diving back into the seas, dragging its long, serpentine body with it.

The entire time, her hand was on the hilt of her bladed weapon, just in case. Had it made even the slightest mistake, its body would have fallen to the bottom of a watery grave in many different, even-cut sections.

Even in the skies, creatures that looked as if they were born ten millennia too late hovered about on their long, shimmering silver wings, scouring the area for any living being that might be on their last breath.

Imari and her partner were staring upward into the smog-filled abyss, at a mountain hideout swirling with all sorts of chimneys, factories, and even hangar bays for space pirates to comfortably fly into. The scavengers circling above seemed perfectly content to wait for whatever waste — likely humanoid bodies — the space pirate clan would toss out.

As she stared at the scene before them, knowing that their job was to go in there and fish someone out unharmed, she tried to think of all the steps that led her to that moment, and exactly where she'd gone wrong.

Regardless of her regrets, she had a job to do.

The fact they could get so close meant that security was lacking, at least outside the mountain-based hideout. And it also meant that they felt no threat from anyone on that godforsaken planet. Not that it was even remotely surprising, considering just how much of the other surrounding cities had been ravaged. The crew of monsters pillaged the natives until even the local authorities were unwilling to budge.

And yet, there they were, preparing to assault it and capture their leader.

Her brown hands had remained mostly dry as she held them quietly under her hooded cape. The rain from the storms above drenched the silk cloth and the tips of her thick, ice-blue locs, and left a rancid scent in the smog-filled air. Underneath her black rain cape, her body was protected by a very durable blue form-fitting compression suit, and a layer of standard indigo body armor above even that. As corrosive as the acidic rain might've been, her gear would keep her unharmed.

Her partner raised a hand to the brim of her own dark gray hood, clearing a path for her eyes as she scanned the earthen tower. The way her eyes glowed with a crimson light was unsettling, even after they'd been working together for months. It reminded her that even dating her for the better part of those months, she was still partly a machine.

Thinking that over, it was a bit unfair. It was mainly her eyes, arms, and part of her torso that had been "enhanced." There was no need for her to worry about her somehow being compromised as if she were some old-world android.

That, of course, was according to her partner herself. There was still very much Imari didn't know about her.

The woman's eyes returned to their beautiful, far less intimidating dark brown luster, obscured by her hood once more. "Okay. So, the good news is, there's not as many of them as we thought based on the mole's reports."

Her eyes met her partner's, and she frowned. "And the bad news?"

"They are very well armed, Imari. They've got enough firepower in there to take out several armies."

"Of course they do." Imari let out a hefty breath. *Why can't just one of these criminal organizations be under-manned and harmless? Just once?*

"I do think we can take them, Imari. But it will require some... tact."

Imari's eyebrows raised at that jab. "You have something you want to say to me, Minerva?"

"Yes." And then, she did it. She let out that smug little smirk she always gave her when she was telling Imari what-for in such a direct way that retaliation wasn't even possible.

"Well?" her hands were quickly resting on her hips, and her lips immediately pursed.

"Let's not simply walk in and blow things up this time. Perhaps try having a plan, dear?"

Imari's eyes could not roll any harder if she tried. "You say that as if walking in and blowing things up is my pla—"

Minerva's evil little smirk got more confident as Imari spoke.

"Okay, that last one wasn't my fault! That guy had like, four-hundred henchmen all ready to—"

Minerva just nodded "Uh-huh."

Imari cleared her throat before starting again. "Alright. Fine. Sure. Let's *plan.*"

“Glad you’re on board. Now it appears there’s a security weakness there.” Minerva pointed to the far right side of the mountain, almost halfway up its eastern side. “We’d need to find a viable way to that point, where we could easily get in, and make our way to their leader.”

Imari held up a hand. “Wait. How do you know where the Dragon is hiding?”

Minerva held out her right palm, and in the center of her hand, a bright blue light pulsed outward, and a solid blue holographic figure was projected, as if it sat on her palm like a figurine. It was of two large doors with enormous armored guards standing on either side.

“Ceres sent another bounty hunter to survey the situation a while ago. This was his best guess before he had to bail out of the gig. And considering the placement of that room, I’d be inclined to agree.” She slid her finger across the hologram, and it slid further down, showing the underground areas. “The parts in red are where power goes through to get to the other necessary areas of the compound.”

“Guessing there’s no safe way to get to that place and cause some real havoc, huh?”

“Well, if I can find one line in the area we’re headed to, I can cause a chain reaction, easily.”

Imari could finally return that smirk. “Oh. So we’re gonna blow things up.”

“There is a stark difference between my way of blowing things up and your way of blowing things up,” Minerva retorted.

“Yes. Your way is slower.”

Taking so long to plan was apparently a mistake on their part. As they stood there mulling over their approach, an explosion pierced the right side of the mountain base, right where they’d considered making their own entrance. All

manner of alarms screamed through the air within seconds, blaring throughout the skies as if the entire planet were under attack instead of just one mountain hideaway.

The two partners looked at each other, as if each thought the other somehow caused the explosion, and could also somehow magically fix it. They weren't sure what the next move should be. Did they just rush in, ignoring any possible danger that could be waiting for them? Or did they wait to see just what could've caused the explosion, and risk the bounty escaping, or meeting a worse fate before they could bring him in alive?

The both seemed to come to the same conclusion rather quickly, without a word being exchanged.

Someone else was definitely after their bounty. And for them, it was becoming a very irritating, repeating sequence of events. It was exactly how their last bounty had gone, and it ended with their target, who absolutely had to be brought in alive, being left very much *not* alive.

In fact, that bounty was left nearly unrecognizable.

Minerva brought back the holographic display of the compound. Those lovely red spots that once showed where power traversed through the compound were now flashing a "critical failure" alert. Someone else had taken the "blow things up" plan usually reserved for Imari, and done it much more efficiently.

Both women flicked the switch on the metallic backpacks under their capes.

"We're going with your approach now," Minerva yelled to Imari over the hum of the Anti-Grav Packs. They'd worn them with the intention of sneaking about the high altitude undetected, since they allowed them to leap about in full defiance of gravity. Their power was very limited however, and to make just that one jump to the hangar door entrance would most likely drain them considerably.

The two of them would have enough to make one giant leap there, and maybe, with luck and a bit of time to recharge a little, leap safely back down.

Even knowing that, they wasted little time activating them. “Should’ve just done this from the start,” Imari mumbled under her breath.

Imari drew the long metal pole from its holster on her left hip. On its end was a mechanical piece that flipped outward, attached to its own generator at the base of the large staff. With a twist of the hilt, the generator emitted a powerful, controlled energy blade that curved, turning the staff into a photon-powered scythe.

With their weapons drawn and the gravity packs activated, they leapt from the ground and soared into the clouded skies. They needed to be exact in their leap, as this would be the only one they’d get up there. If they were slightly off, they’d be wasting the rest of their time climbing up to the doorway, and likely getting sniped right back into the sea of death below. And if they weren’t already dead, they would be once they hit those waters. That one-eyed serpent was surely still lurking about.

1.2

They just barely landed on the edge of the door opening, and if not for Minerva quickly grabbing Imari's left arm and yanking her forward, she might've fallen back down the mountain, her head bouncing off every rock possible along the way. Once they were sure of their footing and Imari was done hyperventilating, the two of them turned off the Anti-Grav packs to let them recharge.

In various other chambers around them, they could hear the sounds of war. Explosions and gunfire, battle cries and agony all echoed behind the walls. Yet in that hangar itself was a pair of giant red doors at the rear, a few inactive ships parked here and there, and the relaxed, gentle glow of blue-tinted lighting. At the far right of the bay was a line of stools along an actual bar.

Imari was stunned at the sight of it, the sheer audacity of it. They had an actual bar in their hangar bay. A small, alcohol-starved part of her was impressed.

The entire hangar bay felt more like a jazzy little dive than a place where a gang of space pirates docked their transports. Imari couldn't imagine how the bar stood so stoic when so many ships would be coming and going, blasting all sorts of wind into the bay with each movement. Even as she and Minerva walked forward, the three thugs and the bartender there didn't even bother to look up. The thugs looked pretty lost in their own drinks.

They had a similar reaction to the obvious battle going on in their own walls, as if someone assaulting their hideout was just another average day. Their eyes were baggy, and each one of them sat hunched over a tall mug of their favorite poison.

"These guys are clearly done with this gig," Minerva whispered to Imari as they walked forward, keeping an eye on them all.

“Probably not getting paid enough to give a damn,” she whispered back.

Minerva’s left hand still remained firmly on the hilt of her blade. “Guess not.”

One of the thugs there was an ugly little winged humanoid, who perked up a bit when his eyes caught Imari’s wandering gaze. The creepy little smile he cut her did not do him any favors. Still, she tried to hold no expression on her face that could sway his judgment either way. All she needed was for some random, drunk, alien gun-for-hire to feel slighted by a woman he could barely see.

Imari and Minerva continued forward, making their way to the enormous red doors, with Imari taking the lead. Somehow, neither of them noticed the red, armor-clad giants standing on either side of the doors until they were rather close. If anything, it was because the duo stood so stiff and were so gargantuan that they just assumed the giants were statues.

Each held a halberd three times Imari’s height, and Imari was an average height herself. Both guards were *Derhaut*, a race of giants native to the planet, known to grow as tall as a small building, and raised from birth to be reliable soldiers and mercenaries. Long, rust-colored horns protruded from either side of their heads, and in place of a humanoid nose, they had a small, flat snout.

Being relegated to “door guards for space pirates” was absolutely beneath them, and yet, there they were.

As soon as Imari and Minerva stepped in range of the doors, they aimed the business ends of their enormous halberds at both girls’ necks. Even as the lights flickered on and off around them, the two guards were rather committed to keeping everyone out.

They’re a bit too committed to their role, Imari thought.

“No one is allowed into the central chamber without permission,” bellowed the Derhaut Guard on the right. A plume of dust and smoke exploded from his snout as he exhaled, and he puffed his massive chest out even further.

Minerva looked at Imari, as if she was suddenly the mastermind of this assault. Imari realized rather quickly why she did that: Minerva was a horrible liar.

She didn't like what that said about her, but took on the role of con-artist for the moment regardless.

Imari cleared her throat, and slowly pushed the halberd away from it. “Ah, my apologies. My partner and I were hired to check the security protocols of this elevator and the inner sanctum. Apparently there was some sort of mishap?”

The guard on the left looked to his partner on the right. “Hey... there was some sort of security breach that the boss was worried about, right? Might be what's causing all the ruckus back there.” Both seemed to lose their swelled stance, relaxing as they assumed the people before them were honest working stiffs like themselves.

“Sorry for the attitude there, bud,” the Derhaut on the left said, then followed with a sigh. “Been rough going around here lately, what with all the security breaches. Actually, in the middle of one right now. It's amazing this place is still standing, if I'm honest.”

“Is that right?” Imari smiled as bright as she could muster, fighting the nervousness that shot through her body. “Well, at the very least we should—“

“Hold on,” the other giant interrupted. He'd put his halberd back on his side. He folded his arms as he eyed her over. Somehow, with barely any effort at all, she'd lowered their guard.

Imari was shocked they actually were giving this idiotic lie the time of day.

“Hey, hold on there,” the bald one of the duo spoke. “Why’re you holding that giant scythe out if you’re here as security inspectors? That’s pretty suspicious if you ask me.”

That was an easy question for her to rebuff. “Are you kidding? Have you seen all the crazies wandering this planet? Last time I stopped here, I got mugged by a whole gang, took every tool I had and the radio from my ship. Which is amazing in its own right, but I digress.”

The other Derhaut nodded, almost furiously so, in agreement. “She’s got a point, Marve. This place ain’t really the kind to be nice to two women travelin’ by themselves.”

Minerva leaned over to Imari’s ear. “Marve?” she whispered. “This giant beastman, this *Derhaut*, is named *Marve*?”

“What’s wrong with the name Marve? I like that name,” Imari whispered back.

Marve, who was absolutely within earshot, cleared his throat. “Hey, thanks. I’m always tellin this one,” he pointed back to the other giant, “m’name’s a great, dignified name.”

“Is that really important right now?” his partner asked.

Marve sighed, realizing his partner was correct, and he’d have to accept that for the moment. The disappointed frown and rolling eyes made it clear this was an argument these two had often. “Alright,” he continued. “Show me and my buddy here your credentials, and we’ll let ya through,” the other giant replied.

Imari looked at her partner, trying to hide the panicked look in her eyes. When Minerva replied with an unusually nervous smile of her own, Imari realized rather quickly that neither of them expected this story to actually work. At best, they thought it’d be a long distraction for them to attack the giant guards and force their way in. But now that it did, they were surprised to find they could potentially get through those doors without lifting a finger.

Imari wanted to shoot back to the ship and come up with anything that could resemble a worker's ID. With Minerva's help, it'd be extremely easy to do, within minutes even. But then, who was to say they'd even get the chance?

Before either of them could make up another tall tale, the red doors shot open, allowing a gigantic-winged creature to slide right towards them all, on its backside, as if it'd been casually tossed aside like a lump of meat. The giants quickly moved out of the way, while Imari just barely avoided its legs as it shot through.

"Is that what I think it is?" She mumbled to Minerva.

"Our target," she answered with a frustrated grimace.

What they were now staring at was indeed a *dragon*. And that dragon was indeed the bounty they'd traveled to the desolate sphere of death called Faynor-3 for from the start. He wasn't quite dead yet, but there was certainly a significant pool of dark-red blood draining from multiple wounds.

As if on instinct, Minerva ran to his aide. She kneeled at his side, examining his wounds. "Try not to exert any more energy," she spoke softly. She reached into the satchel on her hip and started pulling out medicinal adhesives and bandages. "I will try to slow the bleeding and patch your wounds."

"Aren't... Aren't you with her? Aren't you a bounty hunter too?" If he hadn't been so severely injured, Imari imagined the dragon would have been adamant about burying them in the ground with his bare hands.

Imari felt the annoyance welling up in her mind at that thought. *Funny how circumstance can change that sentiment.*

Two beams of emerald light erupted from the shadows of the opened doorways, and each one flung a Derhaut guard into the air. The powerful blasts

crashed into their chests with frightening precision, and produced a maelstrom of bright-green energy that nearly knocked Imari and Minerva off their feet.

The giants now lay on the ground to either side of them, clearly dead from having a large hole blasted right through their chests. The person responsible marched out of the inner sanctum, their form covered from head to toe in cloaks and dirtied rags.

Her raven hair danced in the wind as she stared at Imari. Those bright, white-glowing eyes of hers were unwavering. Her eyes aside, the rest of her face was covered by scarves just as ragged as the rest of her armor, and whatever remained of her cloak.

It dawned on Imari then, as she observed her and tried to determine just what she would do next, that she did not have a weapon in hand.

No laser pistol, no energy rifle, no rocket launcher... nothing that Imari could think of that would be able to shoot a hole through another creature with such ease. And yet, she raised her palm towards them all, as if she were going to manifest beams of death from her very fingers!

“Are you trying to kill him?” Imari yelled, trying to bolster that little bit of strength. “This guy clearly can’t put up a fight now!”

“That didn’t stop them from killing the last two,” Minerva answered quietly.

“We are Dragonslayers. Do not interfere.” Those were the only words to leave the woman’s mouth.

“Well technically, we’re here to protect them, even if they’re space pirate scum.” Minerva looked back to the injured man as he still clutched at his wound. “Not that you’ll get away clean, Maraki.”

He coughed as he tried to breathe, eventually managing to speak with a wheezing voice. “You’re gonna kill me...”

“Not what we do, Maraki.” Imari’s glare returned to the woman in front of them. She killed two Derhaut, and nearly felled a space pirate who could transform into a flying beast, with no effort. And there she stood, glaring right through them, her silver eyes tightly focused on her new targets.

They were interrupted by the rest of the space pirate’s cronies, all surrounding them to line up their shots. Dozens of light beams dotted Minerva, Imari, and the Dragonslayer, all the perceived enemies of every criminal in the hangar bay.

Their leader, still suffering from his own wounds, realized quite quickly that his subordinates weren’t exactly concerned about hitting him, either. They were space pirates, after all, while Minerva and Imari were bounty hunters. There was bound to be more than a few of these fools that Imari could turn in for money. For their part, the pirates probably just assumed they were law enforcement of some sort — which they definitely were not — and decided killing them now would be the safest bet.

The sheer variety of alien thugs that had been following Maraki was absurdly high... There were humanoids among them, but there were far more beastmen, from fish-headed cretins armed with laser rifles, to women of varying hues of skin colors, to hulking bodies carrying rocket launchers that might have actually been ripped off the side of a starfighter. The sheer variety of guns they had trained on them all was petrifying.

Maraki’s hiring practices were diverse, at least, Imari joked to herself.

When her eyes returned to where the “Dragonslayer” had once stood, she was gone, leaving barely more than a puff of dust in her wake. That left her and Minerva there with likely every gun available on Faynor-3 trained on them, and ready to fire.

Imari held her powered scythe at the ready. “So um, this went well.”

“Hug me tight,” Minerva whispered to her.

“Do what?”

The dull clicks of hundreds of guns rang throughout the hangar bay, reverberating into her ears. Imari immediately hugged her waist, and Minerva tossed a small, spherical device high above them that could just barely be seen. A column of emerald light erupted from below the hovering metal disc, illuminating them both, as well as the injured Maraki.

Imari’s first guess was that the column of light was some sort of shield. But if that was the case, how good would its protection be against that much firepower?

She got her answer when the fools dared to unload all their guns, without thinking about what they’d just seen Minerva do.

Their spot in the glow of Minerva’s “shield” was protected from every single shot. They watched as bullets crumbled into dust, and laser-rifle rounds volleyed back towards the very guns that fired them. Even their bounty was impressed by the sight.

He also seemed completely despondent as he realized his own pirates didn’t care about killing him either.

The three of them were all waiting for the hail of gunfire to stop, assuming that they would have to reload and recharge to fire another volley of that magnitude.

Once the firing stopped, Imari didn’t need to confirm her next move. In one swift motion, she yanked a handful of small silver discs from her own satchel and tossed them all about. Imari and Minerva both hastily activated their armored masks attached to their body armor, complete with breathing apparatus and some very handy visual enhancements.

Meanwhile, each disc Imari had thrown soon clasped themselves to the ground, their tops shooting open. They all spewed a dark, foul-smelling smoke that surged throughout the hangar like a malevolent storm cloud. Every soul that was engulfed by it found themselves in a coughing fit, their eyes burning.

Minerva pointed to their left, and Imari immediately dashed into the dark gray plume. Even in that dense cover, Minerva and Imari could easily see thanks to the tech within those masks. The body heat of every individual present appeared before her in a mass of indigo light. Combined with the flashing shots from the muzzles of their own guns, they became obvious, easy targets.

The laser-like blade of Imari's scythe cleaved through limbs and weaponry without hesitation. Five more fell to the ground, and she moved on to the next group of three that dared to aim their weapons in her general direction. She did her best to avoid fatalities, considering that unnecessary deaths could easily take money out of their paychecks.

Minerva was attempting to do the same, though her attacks were far less discriminatory. It was something she continued to struggle with: her mindset in battle was cold and calculating, focused on survival first and foremost. Avoiding the deaths of the people trying to maim her was a challenge.

Her swordplay was brutal. The long, electricity-shrouded blade in her grasp was barely visible as she slashed through her side of the crowd. All across the far side of the hangar, Imari could hear the screams of many space pirates, screaming for someone to stop her. She could hear them panic as their rounds seemed to "bounce" off her body, none of them catching on to the shield technology kitted into her cybernetic arms.

"It's her," one of the pirates exclaimed, his voice trembling and cracked. "It's her! Minerva the Invincible!"

This was Imari's second time hearing her called that by the very people trying quite seriously to kill them. Many just assumed the rumors surrounding her inability to take a hit were actually true, and proof that the bounty hunter guilds across the known galaxies were hiring specially-made androids.

One definite perk of dating her – as well as being her partner on the job – was learning the truth behind that mystery. She was not “invincible” in the slightest. She was, in actuality, quite well armed, mostly with devices she built with her own advanced hands. Watching her take down pirate after pirate, weaving through their hail of bullets and repelling any stray rounds with her powerful shield tech, cutting through every enemy with such ease, often left Imari staring in awe.

Thinking that they'd decimated most of the pirates, Imari let her guard down, and failed to see a pair of thugs on her right, with their rifles aimed right at her skull. Just as she turned to meet their lines of sight, Minerva swiftly leapt in front of her, blocking their shots off with her shielded arms. Undeterred, they doubled back, leaping into the air to assault the two women.

Minerva stretched out her arm, as if she were going to grab them both out of the air. Instead, she opened her clenched fist. From the center of her palm, a blue light erupted. It made a piercing whine as it flew into the duo, halting them in mid-air before sending them hurtling into the rear wall of the hangar.

Imari couldn't see them to confirm it, but the loud “thud” and moans of intense pain after colliding with that wall gave her enough confirmation that they were no longer a threat, and yet, somehow, not dead.

Eventually, the smoke gave way to the grim aftermath of their battle, with very few pirates left standing on their side. The few who were still able to even stand either surrendered immediately, or took off running. Capturing them in that moment would've been a colossal waste of time, considering they were mostly

random hired guns with bounties hardly crawling above a minimum wage paycheck. That aside, Imari and Minerva had already captured the most valuable dragon bounty, and Imari was more than ready to extract some much needed information from the shapeshifting criminal.

As soon as she looked back to the spot they'd left their bounty in however, her blood started boiling. In the confusion of the smoke-filled shootout, he'd been snatched from them, with only a trail of blood leading to the edge of the hangar bay.

How in the name of the six moons of Beryl did she manage to sneak that dragon off without even a sound, right from under us? Of course, Imari realized that her smokescreen clearly worked to the Dragonslayer's advantage as well.

Before Imari could even make a move, Minerva was running to the exit of the hangar bay. She switched on her anti-grav pack and leapt out of the open gateway without a pause.

"Hey! What the hell Minerva, wait up!" As she glided down towards the surface, Imari turned on her own Anti-Grav Pack, and followed her partner's lead.

1.3

It wasn't long before they found their bounty.

Unfortunately, he now had a rather inconvenient hole right through the center of his chest. This wasn't just a stray bullet, or a misaligned stab wound that just happened to make it through, either. No, that "wound" was the size of a large dinner plate. His chest was literally disintegrated. Even better, the Dragonslayer left his corpse sitting right in front of their transport ship.

"Think they're trying to send us a message?" Minerva sighed as she looked over the dragon's half-transformed body. "He couldn't even transform in time."

"So she ducked out of sight, waited until the firing started, then snuck him out while we were busy holding off his forces." Imari held back her frustration as best she could, because she knew if she didn't, she'd put a dent in the side of her own ship. Eventually, Imari was able to release it in a heavy breath, as she tried to assess the situation in her mind.

Imari kneeled down to the body, examining him across from Minerva as she continued to run her various scans. "This is the third one they've beaten us to," Imari muttered as she glared at his wound. "And this woman in particular has done this twice to us now."

"Yes. It is extremely worrying. Not that they weren't already far out of hand by killing without cause, but this one is..." Minerva's eyes averted away from the opened chest, seemingly nauseated by the very sight of it.

Imari couldn't blame her; she felt similarly nauseous. "Are you gonna be okay, hon?"

Whenever Imari showed concern or worry for Minerva's well-being, she responded the same: she'd put on a pained little smile and try to force herself through it.

As much as Imari loved her smile, she hated it equally in those moments.

"I'm fine," Minerva forced herself to say. "Honestly. This is part of my job. No worry at all."

That didn't sound convincing to Imari, at all. "Y'sure?"

She stood up, looking back at the device embedded in her left arm. "Well, as far as Xauran Dragons go, he seems fairly normal. Nothing I scanned stood out, the body's healthy, chemical balance looked normal aside from an overabundance of various forbidden drinks."

"So he was drunk when this Dragonslayer went after him."

Minerva nodded. "She caught him at the perfect time. He would've been barely able to fight back."

"I wonder about that." This wasn't the first dragon they'd run into whose toxicology indicated he was inebriated beyond repair. The numbers Minerva showed Imari on a previous case were so high that it was a wonder the man could even breathe, let alone stand.

"We're probably thinking the same thing."

Imari scowled as she looked back to Maraki's mangle body. "So they're working their way into their circles, catching them off-guard, and then murdering them the next chance they get."

"I don't get what this gives them though." Minerva huffed as she found nothing else of note on his bodily remains. "*Why* are they hunting down the Xaurans? They're already one of the rarest species in the entire galaxy, let alone the [Galactic Alliance]."

“They’re Dragonslayers. Their whole existence is wiping out the Xauran race. To do so at this level of aggression though...” Imari’s eyes found their way back to Maraki’s body.

“So you’ve seen them before all of this.”

Imari nodded. “Yeah. A long time ago.”

It wasn’t long before the “recovery team” arrived. They were not affiliated with the bounty hunters or local law enforcement on the planet, but were instead the employees of the Razon [Galactic Alliance], often sent to sites of mass conflict to “clean up” the messes left behind.

Usually, that meant dead bodies.

They descended through the toxic clouds in a perfectly square formation, four ships that looked more like basic, rectangular transport barges than any sort of space-faring cruiser-class ship. They were all a dull white color, and upon landing, the medical staff and procurement teams emerged in similarly dull-white, uniform suits of body armor.

“Mother of Serves,” one of the male, humanoid medics exclaimed once Maraki’s body caught his eye. “What in the hell happened to this man?”

“Our guess is a very poor encounter with a Dragonslayer,” Minerva replied.

“Third one in the sector this month,” another humanoid medic added, her voice muffled by the tinted gold glass of her suit’s helmet. “Way more in the general district.”

Minerva took a small cartridge out of the compartment on her cybernetic arm, and handed it to another of the medics, this one a full-on android. “This is a copy of the footage from our battle. Feel free to examine that for any clues as to just what these Dragonslayers are capable of.”

“Of course. We’ll return our findings to Ceres,” the android replied, nodding its thin, canister-shaped head. “I assume there’s casualties amongst the space pirates as well?”

Minerva looked to Imari for an answer, which frankly, caught her off guard. Imari cleared her throat to buy a moment to carefully craft a decent reply. “A few, yeah. Most of ‘em ended up shooting each other in the firefight.”

The medical android nodded, then turned to the flanks of retrieval officers standing a few feet away to dole out orders for their squad.

Another woman approached Imari and Minerva, giving Imari in particular a warm smile as she grasped her bruised left arm. Imari couldn’t see much of her since she was covered in a protective space suit like all the other medics, but through the glass of her helmet, she could see that she had violet-colored, scaly skin, and long, blue tendrils that looked like thick locs of hair at first glance. There was no denying she was pretty, in her own right.

That made her suddenly hitting on Imari right in front of her girlfriend that much more awkward.

“Are you in need of any assistance yourself?” the girl asked.

Imari was no idiot; the smile she gave her went from warmth to seductive almost immediately.

Minerva wrapped her arm around Imari’s free arm, and gave the girl a wicked smile right back. “Well, if you’re offering to help us mend some minor wounds and bruises, we could most certainly make use of you and your crew’s services.”

“Uh, yes, of course,” she stammered out. “I’ll get my supplies and treat you out here.”

“We’re quite thankful!” Minerva yelled after her as she ran off, embarrassed. Imari, meanwhile, stood there, holding in her own laugh as best she could.

“How adorably jealous of you,” Imari eventually managed to say aloud, between giggles.

“What? She was clearly coming on to you,” Minerva muttered as they walked back into their own craft.

Once they made it back to the bridge of their ship, Imari plopped into the pilot’s seat, finally taking a deep, relaxing breath and letting her body just *rest*. “Think the recovery and medic teams’ll be alright here without us?”

Minerva had settled into her usual co-pilot seat, letting her body lay completely loose as well. “We’ll have to wait until they give us the all-clear this time. No telling how many more of those pirates are hanging around on the planet. Might try to get the drop on ‘em and take the fleet hostage or rob them, or... something.”

Imari nodded, and answered with a weak “yup, figured as much.”

She found herself getting more frustrated the more everything sunk in. Even as far from the beaten path as Faynor-3 was, the Dragonslayers made their way out to that planet... just to take out one Xauran?

Her worries doubled when thinking about the impending call from their Guild. Their boss, Ceres, would definitely want to know what happened, and there wasn’t an eloquent way to explain their third consecutive failure, especially to the same group.

That wasn’t to say Imari wouldn’t try to come up with *something*. If nothing else, when it came to excuses, she could be surprisingly resourceful.