Chapter 3 ~ Threshold of a Dream

"Check-Mate-King to White-Rook, over."

Static crackles over the airwaves.

"Check-Mate-King to White-Rook, over," Father repeats.

"White-Rook to Check-Mate-King, over," a deep bass voice responds.

"Check-Mate-King approaching from the southeast, altitude eleven-one-nineteen-niner. ETA four metric minutes, over," reports Father.

"Check-Mate-King, you're cleared to land on my mark."

"Copy that White-Rook, making final approach, over, out," Father confirms and closes the commlink.

We enter the VSQ, Visitings Students Quarters' cavernous, airtight garage. Father pulls up, hovers to a stop, and awaits docking instructions. A two-man security squad directs us to Loading Dock One and stands by ready to man the side.

"There's my friend, Sara," Eleni exclaims and points to a skinny red-headed wisp waiting inside the security gate.

"It's her!" I echo with heartfelt joy. "I knew we would meet again someday."

"Do you know her?" Eleni asks.

"We met in a dream. The flower lady introduced us."

"Dear Goddess, Eleni, please don't get him started on dreams," Father advises.

"My dreams are real," I huff. "So is the flower lady."

"Who's the flower lady?" Eleni asks.

"His imaginary interdimensional friend. I asked you not to get him started," Father retorts.

I know the look in Father's eyes and the tone of his voice. He's avoiding the subject of dreams. It makes him sad.

"Daddy, don't you believe in dreams?" Eleni says.

"My dreams were shattered." Father bemoans the fact that Zumans brutally murdered my beautiful mothers.

I understand where Father is coming from. I close my eyes. ***I hear their tortured screams. I see fire leap and dance. I shake the awful vision from my mind.***

"Daddy, don't be a poo. You can dream again. Do you believe in dreams, Magnus?"

"I dream of Justice. I carry the dream with me every day."

I like the way Magnus thinks. He thinks like me. He wants to open a can of Exterminate™ on the vermin infesting the universe.

Father retracts the canopy. The hermetic seals pop open, and thick, warm air whooshes into the cabin. Father drops his blast goggles. The security squad snaps to attention and salutes. "At ease," he says.

They immediately comply. The squad is not Spettro or Sybaris Station Security. They are Thaumium Marines. They are huge, heavily armed, and sporting the trademark purple-thaumium ballistic battle armor, impervious to all but the heaviest handheld weapons. I'm guessing these two men are human and look

part Atlantian mixed with some big, mean man breed. Physically fit and unmistakably battle-hardened, they're exceedingly handsome, albeit large, and ferocious-looking if I had to describe them in just a few brief words.

"Permission to come aboard," Father releases his restraining straps.

"Permission granted," the senior master sergeant says.

Father gracefully scissors out of the T-pod, steps onto the dock, and stands toe to toe with the sergeants. Father is six-five and weighs two-forty hundred. The thaumium twins are a head taller than my father and easily weigh five hundred pounds each. I'm six feet tall and weigh a scant one-hundred-seventy-five pounds soaking wet. I'm just a little guy.

"Security Status." Whack, Father slaps his palm with his Woody™ Sybarinian Sunray Short-Spike swagger stick. A swagger stick is a handsome yet practical gentleman's riding accessory in various makes and models. Father's swagger stick made from fine Sybarinian Sunray leather braided over a two-inch diameter titanate machine tube. Practical and utilitarian, designed to carry retracting Crafty T-Pod Tools™ and activation keys. A swagger stick serves another purpose. The keychain is an ancient Atlantian weapon, and it is deadly in the hands of a Fling-Chee Grand Master, such as my father.

"First squad: attack alert," rumbles Master Sergeant Maktu.

"Second squad: battle standby," roars Master Sergeant Ajax.

"Excellent. At ease, men." Father thoughtfully paces, inspecting the two highest-ranking combat marine sergeants under his command. He stops, jingles his keys, and says, "Do you boys have something you want to say to me?"

Maktu hesitates a moment, "I was thinking about Caesuria. The Zumans have had years to prepare. They'll be expecting us. It won't be as easy this time."

"I was thinking about Caesuria too," adds Ajax, sounding down and out. "We have reports Zumans have mutated."

"Boys, we're all thinking about Caesuria. I think about her night and day. I'm afraid the reports are true. The Zumans have mutated and multiplied, but I don't want you to worry. This time, we have three Sig squads, not one. We have a fresh double battery of next-generation Tsirkon Light Lance and two of the finest master sergeants in the quadrant. You and your men have my complete trust and confidence. Be strong for your men. They look up to you. I look up to you. Now come here, quit that silly worrying, and be happy," Father demands. He lovingly extends both arms, reaches up, firmly grips their ceramic shoulder plates, and pulls two fully loaded freight trains in for a group hug. The Thaumium giants gently and happily reciprocate.

"Thanks, Skipper," Ajax comes to life and beams brightly. "I feel better.

"Well, you look better." Father cheerfully remarks.

"Thank you, Captain," Maktu straightens his hulking body in a newfound pride.

"You're welcome, boys. I've got three more of the best with me tonight." Father looks over his shoulder at us. "You know, Magnus."

"Good evening, Corporal," Maktu greets with a friendly nod.

"Mag, sup?" asks Ajax.

Magnus unbuckles, stands, faces, and salutes the squad leaders with the Spettro Black-Shield Salute: right fist gathered courageously over the heart. "I am well, my brothers." Magnus flashes his rare trademark smile.

"Then, I assume you've met my little Eleni?" Father casts an adoring glance her way.

"Hi, guys!" Eleni waves at her big buddies and gives them an official smiley salute.

"We've had the honor of meeting Miss Eleni on several wonderful occasions. Good evening, Miss Eleni. We're delighted to see you again," Massive Maktu melodically greets and salutes my little big sister.

"Hi, Miss Eleni," Ajax smiles and wiggles his fat fingers hello. "She brings us cookies, Skipper. They're delicious."

"And nutritious," Eleni says. "Please don't be mad at me. I got excited when Daddy called and forgot your cookies. I'm sorry."

"I could never be mad at you, Miss Eleni," Ajax slowly shakes his head, swearing with a massive hand over his heart. "Miss Eleni, who is going to protect you?" Ajax questions with a note of concern.

"Robert," Eleni reaches around and twirls her finger in my hair.

"Don't worry, Miss Eleni. We've heard good things about your brother." Ajax reassures.

"I'm not worried," giggles Eleni.

"I'll miss you, Miss Eleni," Maktu sighs.

"I'll miss your cookies," Ajax laments.

"I'll bring some fresh ones after dinner," Eleni promises.

"Cookies," Ajax quietly claps in delight.

Eleni has befriended a cookie monster. How nice. "Ah-umm," I clear my throat.

"Boys," Father finally speaks on my behalf. "I want you to meet my favorite son. Robert, this is Master Sergeant Maktu and Master Sergeant Ajax. They served with me during the First

Caesurian Campaign. We fought side by side at the battle of White Stick Creek. Say hello, Robert."

"Hello," I squeak. "How much do you weigh?"

The armored giants bend over and peer into the T-pod.

"Good evening, young Master Wog," salutes Maktu.

"Robert," Ajax salutes, smiles, and then turns grim. "He's just a little guy, Skipper. He's going to protect Eleni?" Ajax stares at my Father in disbelief and then back at me, "No offense, Robert," he adds.

"He's half Atlantian, half Sybarinian. He sees and knows things; on top of that, he's got spunk. If anyone can do it, he can," Father guarantees with a wink and two thumbs up.

"Thank you, Father. Guarding Eleni isn't a problem," I guarantee. "But I prefer coming with you and fighting Zumans."

"Robert. We've been all over this. Up and down. You know my decision," says Father.

"Yes, Father."

"He wants to kill Zumans," Ajax chuckles. "Me too. I like this kid."

"The lad has spunk, Skipper," Maktu remarks. "He reminds me of you when you were his age."

"He's got plenty of spunk, but he's only fifteen. He has to grow some more," Father explains. "With the right diet and

exercise, he'll be as big as Magnus someday. Won't you, son?" Father encourages my growth.

I look over my shoulder and size up the Magnus, "Bigger," I grin.

"Corporal, what do you say? Speak to me in words," Father looks for a second opinion.

Magnus ponders momentarily, "Robert T. Wog is the one. He will be a Titan among men."

"Is that it?" Father asks.

"Security scan complete, perimeter clear," Magnus adds.

"Daddy, can I get out of the T-pod?" Eleni says.

"It's may I get out of the T-pod, and yes, you may."

"Thank you, Daddy." Eleni lifts her padded restraining yoke but fumbles with unbuckling the lap and chest clasps on her body harness. "Magnus, help me, please."

Brave and stoic, Magnus immediately comes to helpless Miss Eleni's aid.

Father glares at Magnus, then at me, and then at Magnus again. Magnus is fiddling with Eleni's lap and chest buckles, and I'm fiddling with my Skypod. I'm looking for an excellent song to play for Eleni and Sara. Girls like music.

Magnus releases Eleni's restraints. "Thanks, Magnus. Come on, Robert, Sara's waiting."

"Go," I wave them on. "I'll catch up."

"We'll wait for you," Eleni says.

"Son, I don't have all day. I want to get home, take my boots off, eat supper, and sleep. Go get Sara," he points to the airlock exit at the end of the dock.

"I'm going. Give me a second. I just found my song." I add it to my playlist. "What are you going to do, supervise?"

"That is exactly what I'm doing. I need to talk to Ajax and Maktu about war stuff." Having supervised, Father pulls a slender silver cigarette case from his breast pocket, extracts a hand-rolled Sybarinian Sobranie, tamps it on the case, and sets flame to the end with his gold plazlectric lighter. He inhales a deep draught of vapor and exhales a billowing cloud of blue smoke in my direction. "Go."

"Father, a quick question."

"What?"

"You mentioned a battery of next-generation Tsirkon Light Lance. Would that be the MKIII's with cobalt boost by any chance?" I suspect the answer is yes.

"Go."

"Father, I've studied Caesuria. I've plotted the spread of Zumans from the inner ring through the outer ring. Their point of origin is Saturacon. We'll be overrun in less than a decade

at the rate they're spreading. May I offer some tactical advice?"

"You may not," Father takes a long drag off his smoke.

"Skipper, may I ask your son a question?" Giant Ajax questions with no small measure of incredulity.

"Go ahead." Father blows a smoke ring.

Ajax towers over me, "Tell me, young Master Wog, what should we be done?"

"Attack Saturacon while you still have time. Reduce their cities to glowing radioactive craters. Without Saturacon's support, the Zuman hives will wither and die."

"I think the lads are onto something, Skipper." Ajax nods in approval.

"Well spoken," Maktu agrees.

"It's more complicated than that." Father takes one last puff and flicks his smoldering cigarette butt over the dock, "I want to hear what you have to say. We'll talk after dinner. Meet Sara. Make her feel welcome."

"Aye, Skipper." I bolt from the T-pod and join Magnus and Eleni. "I found it."

"Found what?" Eleni asks."

"The song I want to play for you and Sara."

"I love music, so does Magnus. Don't you, Magnus?"

"Yep," Magnus replies.

"He plays and composes," Eleni brags. "Say something poetic, Magnus, talk," Eleni shakes his arm.

"Yep," Magnus says.

"Magnus," Eleni thumps him on the arm, "say something else."

"I'll sing after supper." He pulls up to the airlock hatch and blocks our progress. "Please stand behind me."

Eleni scooches up close behind Magnus and clutches his waist. I stand behind Eleni. There is no need to clutch anything or anyone. Opening a twenty-five metric ton low-pressure airlock is not that big a deal.

Magnus taps in the security code and stands at attention.

The heavy airlock slides open with an escaping whoosh of dense white mist that swirls around Sara's feet. She's walking through the cloud.

Summer follows in the footsteps of Spring. Dancing green eyes dart from flower to flower, and her fire-whip braid is bound in a blue ribbon. A freckled sunlace kisses her face. Sara, the picture of sunshine, bursts free from her crystal confinement. Blushing pink, she lights by the corporal's side and places a delicate hand on his strong arm. "Thank you, Magnus."

"You're welcome, Miss Sara," Magnus says.

Eleni snatches away her friend, and they warmly embrace.

"Sara, meet my little brother, Robert."

"Hi, do you remember me?" I ask in cheerful anticipation.

"I'm sorry, I don't," Sara shrugs.

"Do you remember the Flower Lady?" The thought of her makes me smile.

"I don't."

"But she introduced us," I sadly insist. "A blue bouquet, do you remember that? Looking away, I hang my head.

"Robert, I'm sorry, I don't remember. Please tell me. Where did we meet? I would have remembered a handsome young man like you."

Her bright sincerity lifts my spirit. I smile again. "Let's not worry about it now. "I'll tell you my dream after dinner."