

## PROLOGUE: DIPLOMACY

PMF 7

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*“Perhaps none have suffered more from Amara’s cruelty than the Runners. The Minoans wiped out their peaceful, Stone Age tech society on Voltaire and kept only the thousands of survivors on the Preserve as future slaves. Humanity believed the Runners extinct when we terraformed their world. They return to a home they do not know at the mercy of strangers.*

*“Apart from the obvious duty of compassion, we must also remember the strategic importance of the Runners. The Nyuyinaro, Krokinthians, and Yanra are watching. If we are to ally with our strongest alien neighbors, we must be kind to the most vulnerable.”*

*—Union Assembly Chairwoman Irawati Limanto*

*Diplomatic Service Communique, June 2281*

Reporters turned when the doors opened, but their attention held for mere seconds. Sharply-dressed men and women to either side of the entrance looked over Rebecca and her companions—*Well, not me*, Rebecca conceded readily. They murmured commentary for cameras and mics worn as thread-thin headsets and lapels, or the occasional showy handsets. Then, almost as a wave, their attention returned to the center of the conference hall.

*Really? Hello?* Rebecca wanted to say. *Five seconds is all you’ve got for actual aliens?*

“Look, these are times of great change,” said an amplified voice from the stage at the center of the hall. “The Union faced instability even before our new neighbors appeared. I think the whole Destiny corporate family has performed marvelously, but we should all prioritize the welfare of humanity over raw profits.”

A quiet rumble like a high-pitched purr drew Rebecca’s eyes down and right. Stray’s golden-brown furry shoulders came to Rebecca’s hip at a four-limbed gait slowed to keep pace with the humans. A necklace of stones on a vine and a leather satchel at her left side served as Stray’s only clothes. Her odd trill didn’t translate on Rebecca’s earpiece.

“Something to say?” she asked quietly.

Stray answered with the *chp-chppl* of the Runners' "friendly but out-group" vocal case. "Too much," said the translator in Rebecca's ear. "Can't here. Not my time to speak."

"I know the feeling." At twenty-eight and fresh out of Diplomatic Corps training and grad school before it, Rebecca had scored a major coup with this assignment—though she was very much entry-level, and never forgot it. She chose her blue-on-white suit and tied-back style for her black hair with that in mind: *I'm only the assistant here. Practically an intern. Don't mind me.* She had plenty to say, but like Stray, that wasn't her role. Not yet.

Two more Runners ambled on all fours behind Rebecca, another at her left, and Clearwater ahead with Ambassador Kwahu. They all had their long ears back, dark eyes narrowed against the interior lights, and rounded heads high with their noses constantly sniffing. Like Stray, they wore only accessories like simple, natural jewelry of their own make and satchels gifted to them by humans.

"Mr. Michel, Mr. Michel," called out the gaggle of journalists at the front of the audience. They hadn't seen the new arrivals yet. One voice rose above the others, presumably having been chosen by the CEO on the stage. "Given the situation with Minos and the state of Union defenses, will Destiny shift more of its shipbuilding arm to military orders?"

"Military and defense projects usually come with confidentiality agreements," replied the amplified voice. "As a rule, we don't comment on those matters. I will say we had three frigates in production during the Minoan attack on Assembly Station, so we're already doing our part. I think the engagements with the Minoans point to the rising value of smaller, lighter vessels over larger targets like battleships and cruisers."

*That sounds an awful lot like commentary,* thought Rebecca. *And marketing.* She caught another skeptical trill from Stray, too.

The back and upper tiers of seats seemed full both to their left and right, as did the descending tiers ahead of them. The stage held five executives behind a table, with Destiny CEO Jean Michel at a thin podium in his black-on-black sans-necktie suit. He was fit, light of complexion, and artificially kept in his mid-thirties. His short brown hair swept to the left with simple dignity. The slight shine to his implanted right eye made the real style statement. She sometimes thought Michel might be good looking if she didn't know too much about him as a person.

That thought dropped from her mind as Ambassador Kwahu stopped shy of the intersection of seating tiers. Following his cue, the Runners stopped with him. “Rebecca,” he asked quietly, “do you notice what I’m seeing?”

She scanned quickly again, wondering if she’d missed something, but her first thought seemed important enough: “They didn’t hold any seating for us.”

“No. They did not,” Kwahu agreed.

“Mr. Michel, any truth to the rumors of a personal feud between yourself and Christina Walters? Any bad blood there?” asked another journalist.

Michel smiled with one side of his face. “Oh, is the engagement off? That was last week’s rumor, right? I can’t keep up.” The line got a few laughs... and another low trill from Stray. Michel couldn’t have heard it, but he glanced up at Kwahu and the Runners. “If we’re down to the tabloid nonsense, I should turn to our guests. Thank you, everyone.”

After-the-cutoff questions rang out from the crowd, but the media generally took their cue. According to schedule, the press conference had been on for a good half hour already—though Rebecca had her suspicions about the published schedule and its related plans.

Someone in a suit approached Ambassador Kwahu. Rebecca couldn’t make out the words, but context and gestures made it all easy enough to guess. “I think they’re bringing us down to the stage to meet with Michel,” Rebecca told Stray.

“Yes,” said Stray. Her ears were bigger and better, after all. The Runners struggled to form human words with their mouths, and thus relied on translators, but they understood English and other human languages within only weeks of immersive exposure. They wanted to learn. “Is that a stage? I thought stages were for performance.”

“Stages serve lots of different purposes. There are many kinds of performance, too.”

Stray looked up at her. The Runners had big, wide-set eyes with great peripheral vision, and didn’t always need to turn their heads. Attention like this usually made a statement. “You mean several things with that.”

“I guess I do.” Rebecca smiled. Though novices with human language and culture, the Runners showed incredible intuition. “It’s not a helpful topic right now.”

“My friends, Rebecca, this way.” Kwahu smiled, too, but his dark eyes set in a copper-toned face paused at hers with a subtle warning. *Brace yourself*, he seemed to say, or perhaps a grim *here we go*.

They descended the steps to the foot of the stage, where Michel waited with his entourage. No small portion of the media lingered nearby, too. There were plenty of staffers and plainclothes security types to usher them out if Michel wanted. It was a deliberate choice. *One more choice*, Rebecca suspected in silence.

“Ambassador Kwahu, it’s nice to meet you in person.” Michel offered a firm, polite handshake. “Naturally, I’ve taken a strong interest in your work here on Voltaire.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m grateful for it, though of course I’m mostly here to facilitate for our new friends. Mr. Michel, this is Clearwater, Sunrise, Stray, Longvine, and Watcher. Thank you very much for taking this time to meet us.”

“Of course. Such time as we have remaining,” Michel clarified. “It’s unfortunate you couldn’t be here sooner. We had hoped for a fuller dialogue than I can afford now.”

“Yes. We were delayed by security concerns downstairs,” said Kwahu.

“That’s what I had heard. I’m sorry for any misunderstandings, but we can’t be too careful,” said Michel—with more than simple conversational volume. Rebecca’s eyes flicked to the nearby reporters.

Clearwater sat upright on his haunches, bringing his head higher, and spoke in a patter of soft growls. Translators relayed, “They wanted to take our claws.”

“Not take, as I understood,” said Michel. “Trim. Blunt. Your claws are potentially lethal, and there are five of you. One or two would have been no concern. With this many, my security people have concerns.”

“Runner society and culture are based on the herd, Mr. Michel,” said Kwahu. “Five is a very small number for just about anything.”

“Your people have guns. We have only our feet,” said Clearwater.

“Yes, well, I instructed my people to drop the matter.” Again, Michel seemed to speak for more than his immediate audience. He smiled deliberately, too. “We can be reasonable and hospitable. That said, my schedule is now a bit tight for a public discussion. Might we speak in private?” Michel gestured to a nearby door.

Kwahu and Clearwater agreed without question, though Rebecca wondered why it mattered. Jean Michel could make his own schedule in his corporate headquarters, even on a day of shareholder presentations and media availability. The latter point clicked for her once they reached

a corner doorway, with only her group, Michel, and his entourage passing through. The media stayed behind.

The dread she'd felt since their arrival seemed all but confirmed. She heard Stray's soft trilling noise again, too. This time, she also felt a bump at her hip, drawing her attention downward.

Stray clenched one paw to turn the volume down on her holocom so only Rebecca would hear. "No one feared our claws. They wanted to delay us. Michel thinks he looks good, and we look bad. To whom? Why?"

Rebecca's lips tightened, but she couldn't ignore Stray's question. Quietly, she answered, "He wants to show compromise." She didn't add that he did so by inventing the premise. Hopefully they could talk that part out later, away from the microphones and cameras.

Stray trilled again. Rebecca sympathized.

Bright, natural light filled the spacious hallway, with one wall made of nearly floor-to-ceiling windows. Outside were rolling green hills decorated by suburban luxury developments, with snow-capped mountains in the background. "Lovely view, isn't it?" asked Michel. "I always enjoy being up here."

"Elevation can be useful," said Clearwater. "Life is better lived near the ground. It keeps one connected with their herd, and with the herds of others. For most, rising high is isolating."

"And you have not had the best experiences with people from the stars," said Michel. He kept walking until they were halfway down the hall.

"The Nyuyinaro rose to the stars together. Perhaps that is why they remain peaceful. Others rose with similar bonds. The Minoans are in many ways separated from one another. Some have power. Most do not." Clearwater rose on his haunches to look out the window. "Do many of your people see this same view?"

Michel smiled tightly. "Not this one, but they can find others like it. Again, I regret the shorter nature of our visit. It wasn't my intent. What can I do for you, Clearwater?"

"These skies were once greener," said Clearwater. "A lighter and brighter green than these grasses... which are also new to us. Our return is difficult and heavy with sorrow. We come to ask for your help in repairing our home. We do not need all the lands we once roamed, but those we have been given are still not like our own. We wish to begin again in the south, and roam New Languedoc."

“New...? The continent?” Michel raised his eyebrows. “The territory you have across Loire is not enough for your people?”

“It is more than enough for now. It is not enough for new herds, which will grow with time. New Languedoc is the smallest continent and much less than we once had. Only the north coast is developed, as you call it. This would have the least impact on your people.”

Michel snorted. “That development is mostly resorts and vacation homes. I own only a few small properties there. I’m not sure the other owners would call this option the least impactful.”

“Nor would the many who work for them,” said Clearwater. “Most could remain. We do not need the coastal stretch they occupy. The rest of the continent could be restored with the environmental samples saved from before Voltaire was terraformed. We have considered ways to compensate the humans who would be affected. We understand what we ask.”

“I’m not sure you do.” Michel glanced to Kwahu, but stayed engaged with Clearwater. “I have advocated on your behalf, believe me,” said Michel. “I am sympathetic to your plight. Destiny was the first entity on Voltaire to cede undeveloped territory to your people and we’ve donated significant finances to the resettlement project. Some of these decisions are out of our hands. I’m the leader of our corporation, but I’m not in the planetary government. You understand the difference, yes?”

“They do. Quite well, in fact,” said Kwahu.

“Then why aren’t you speaking to the Prime Minister?”

“Destiny controls much of Voltaire’s communications and infrastructure, and are strong in finance, consumer goods, and security,” said Clearwater. “Voltaire is governed by the Assembly and Prime Minister, but they answer to several conglomerate corporations, and Destiny is the strongest of them. You control Destiny. I am speaking to the most influential leader of Voltaire’s corporate oligarchy.”

“Oligarchy?” Michel adjusted his collar with another curious glance at the ambassador, along with the other human among his visitors. “I’m not sure the voters of Voltaire would appreciate that characterization.”

Stray trilled again—not loudly, but this time others noticed, including Michel and Kwahu. That brought both men’s eyes toward her and her other escort. Kwahu seemed off-balance. Rebecca spoke up: “The Runners, ah, picked up that term before they got here.”

“With respect, it’s an understandable view,” said Kwahu. “Regardless, Destiny’s influence in Voltaire is a fact of life. Your support would be decisive.”

“I’m afraid these things are all more complicated than they appear on the surface,” said Michel.

Rebecca put a hand on Stray’s shoulder. The Runner didn’t trill again, but Rebecca felt it coming.

“And your plans,” Michel continued, his brow furrowing curiously. “You say this would involve the relocation of the people within the interior of New Languedoc?”

“We wish to heal the land as we knew it,” said Clearwater. “A full restoration is impossible. The air and sky are changed for human comfort. We accept this. Yet much of the life we knew can still survive and grow under human conditions. Many samples were preserved before humans altered this planet. Destiny claimed much from the fall of CDC, including their terraforming businesses. Your company could restore much of the home we lost.”

“Ah. Hrm. I wasn’t aware your people had taken such an interest in technology or business.”

“We share this world with your people. We must learn from one another.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Michel flashed another tight smile. “I’m no expert, but as I understand it, environmental restoration runs a high risk of cross-contamination, and even a chance of the original biome overtaking our terraforming. Yours would have the home ground advantage.”

“That’s another reason we’re proposing New Languedoc, sir,” Rebecca spoke up again. “I can share an analysis of wind and ocean currents. The patterns work to our advantage. Terraforming tech can mitigate the rest on an ongoing basis.”

“My assistant, Rebecca Dayton,” said Kwahu. “She’s better at the science than I am.”

“Sorry. Yes. Hello,” said Rebecca. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise. You’re an environmentalist?” asked Michel.

“No, sir. I’m another diplomat. Like Clearwater says, we all have to learn new things.”

“Well. I’ll take a look at your proposal,” said Michel. “No harm in that. But at first thought, I’m sorry to say I’m pessimistic. Again, the matter is very complicated. We have sixty million people with plans of their own here.”

“Sixty million across an entire world,” said Kwahu.

“Yes. Well. Complicated. I have other complications to attend. Clearwater, Ambassador, everyone, it was an honor to meet you. Thank you, and I wish you well.” Michel faded into his entourage of deputies, staffers, and security. They emptied out of the hall within seconds, leaving

Kwahu, Rebecca, and the Runners with their breathtaking view and a couple of quiet but visible corporate minders off to their sides.

“We knew this would be tough to sell,” said Kwahu.

“Yes. I understand your idiom.” Clearwater looked from the closing door to the other Runners. Neither Kwahu nor Rebecca had learned all of their facial expressions and tics, but they clearly had many.

“We might also discuss our approach,” Kwahu suggested. “I’m not sure Mr. Michel expected us to be so frank. He may have felt challenged.”

“Yes, but not threatened,” said Clearwater. “We intended no threat, and he assumed none.”

“Not threats, no. Still... we might be more effective with another approach.”

“Jean Michel holds many secrets,” said Stray.

“That’s common for humans, and especially for people in positions like his,” said Rebecca.

“You are being diplomatic again.” Stray looked up to her directly. “You know what I mean. You agree with me.”

“That’s, ah, maybe a topic for later.” Rebecca looked to Kwahu for his next move, though that seemed obvious.

“We should probably move on and discuss several related things,” said Kwahu.

“This space is not private. Michel’s people will hear us,” said Clearwater.

“That, too.” Kwahu threw another diplomatic smile to their minders. “It’s their building, after all. Let’s move on.”

Together, they all moved to the exit. Rebecca caught more subtle looks and gestures between the Runners. “It might be best to keep this meeting to ourselves for now,” Kwahu suggested. “The media and others out there might be curious. It’s good to be open and honest, but I think we could earn some gratitude from Mr. Michel if we are... discreet. For now.”

“We understand,” said Clearwater. They hadn’t reached the door and the reporters just yet. “He does not want to help us. I do not think we will change his feelings.”

“Mr. Michel is not the only influential person on Voltaire. We may find other friends who might help.”

“Yes. We need other friends.” Clearwater looked back over his shoulder to Stray with a pronounced twitch of his nose.



Stray answered with two quiet snorts. Rebecca had learned that one: it was a note of agreement with instructions, like a “yes, sir” with more sympathy than mere acknowledgment.

Perhaps a third of the journalists from the press conference still lingered in the audience hall, either finishing up their work or possibly waiting for the Runners’ return. Heads turned and faces looked up with interest. Several journalists approached with the usual questions, directed first to the ambassador: *Do you have time to talk, what did you and Jean Michel discuss, could we get an interview.*

“Every journalist is a set of microphones and cameras,” Rebecca quietly reminded Stray and the others near her. “Talking to one means talking to a whole herd, over and over.”

“Yes,” said Stray. The others heard, too.

With a glance to assure minor functionaries like herself and Stray were being properly ignored by the media, Rebecca leaned closer and said, “I’m curious what Clearwater asked you to do, if it’s safe to tell me?”

“It was not a request. I suggested we ask for a friend. He now agrees.”

“Another friend? Who?” asked Rebecca. The resettlement project involved dozens of Union diplomats, scientists, and even Fleet officers. Despite Voltaire’s corporate oligarchy and structure, the planet wasn’t shy of activists and ordinary people who wanted to help the Runners, too.

Stray sat on her haunches and fished the simple tablet from the satchel along her hip. Though the Runners lacked true opposable thumbs, their front paws were articulate enough to manage basic tool use. The tablet had all the functionality of a holocom, but the Runners didn’t like working with projected holographic icons—or much high technology in general. They adapted mainly for the comfort of their human allies and hosts. In the moment, Stray didn’t need anything more complicated than a simple screen. She dragged one digit of her paws across the screen to write out a single human name and held it up for Rebecca’s eyes only.

Rebecca swallowed a gasp, a curse, and a groan all at once.