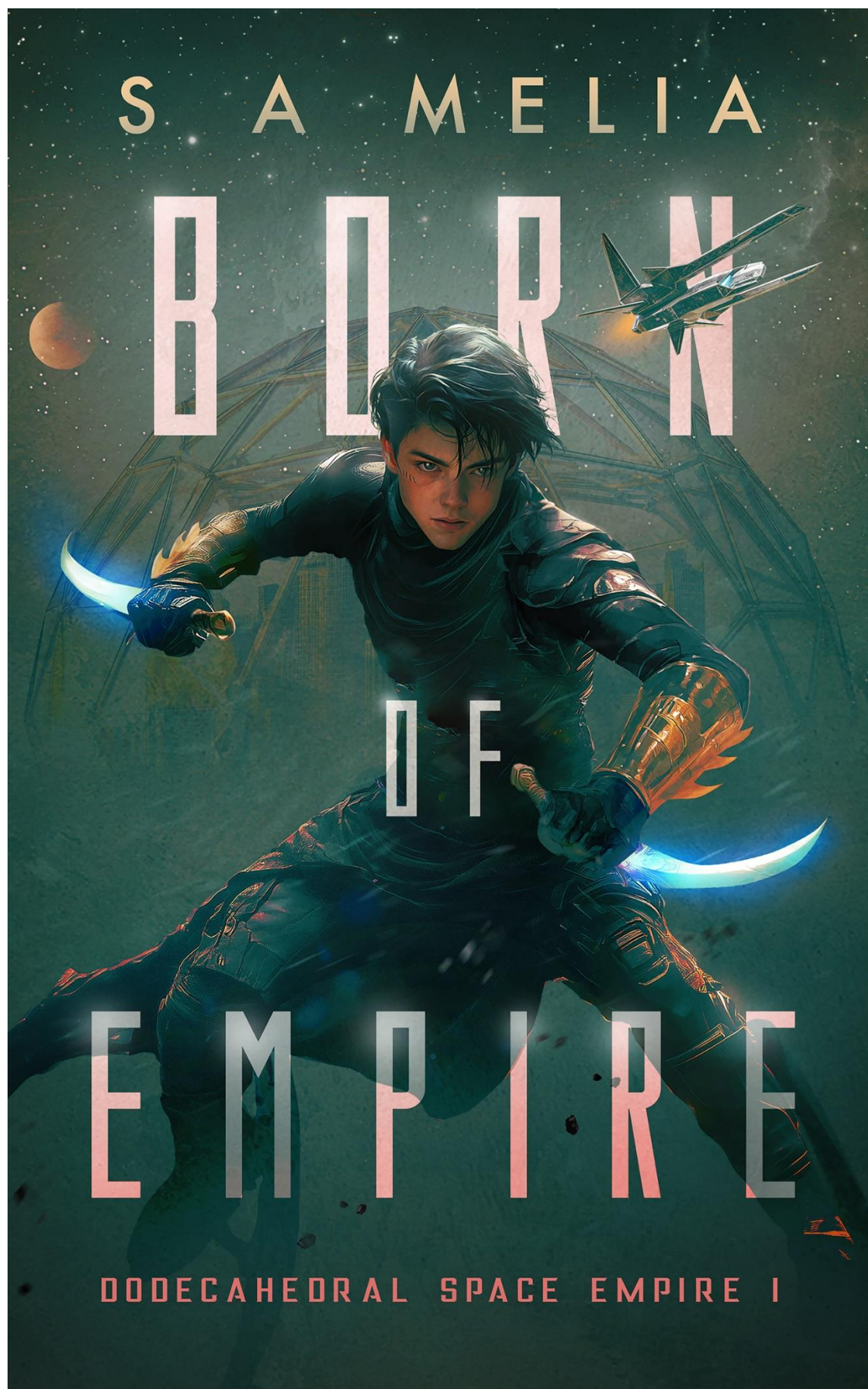




S A M E L I A

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E M P I R E

DODECAHEDRAL SPACE EMPIRE I

Born of Empire

Sally Ann Melia

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A Dickson House Paperback

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Dedication

For David, Rose & Hazel.

At the end of the game, the king and the pawn are returned to the same box. Italian proverb



In the Light and Shadows of the Dome

With a whispered prayer, Guy Erma kissed his Dome medallion, slid it inside his shirt and stepped up to the edge of the mat. In truth, he knew he needed no divine help today. No, all he needed to win this fight was to be ruthless and to be quick.

The bell had rung. To delay would mean disqualification.

Guy gripped the short fighting blades and somersaulted forward. He landed within easy reach of his opponent.

He twisted into a spinning high kick that caught and whacked the other's shoulder pad. He found his feet while the other was still off-balance, crouched and sliced his other leg in a circle close to the floor. In so doing, he swept his opponent's feet from under him. The other fighter fell. Guy was quick to leap on top of him, riding astride his adversary's chest with two blades pressed to his neck.

"Yield?" Guy roared into his face. As he crouched over his opponent, Guy was imagining it was a great Scavengii pirate that he nailed to the floor. But when he blinked, he realised the boy was a Dome Militant Junior – aged sixteen like himself. *At least his opponent was Dome Militant*, Guy thought.

"I yield... I yield!" The other was so fearful he almost wept, and to see this sent a thrill through Guy – stronger than any other emotion. His heart beat fast. He rose panting, exhilarated and joyful. He had won!

No-one was watching. Why would they? Across the vast competition space, there were over two dozen blades mats. Almost all played host to a fighting duo. As always, his gaze was drawn to where the gym opened onto the vast panes and verticals of the Dome. The light was bright, yet dark geometric shadows fell across the space.

Guy loved this gym. He always fought better here, in the light and shadows of the Dome.

In the light and the shadows of the Dome, so help me God.

I learnt my skill; I learnt my craft.

For my life will be among the stars.

I will shield my homelands, the protector of its mothers and children.

I gift my life to this, so help me God.

So, help me God.

It was a prayer of the Dome Militant.

One day, I will say those words, thought Guy. *And wear that uniform.*

Across the gym, juniors trained in close combat, their blades clashing with a metallic rhythm. Only one in ten would be deemed worthy of joining the Dome Militant proper. *Was he good enough?* The question stabbed at his heart.

Yes, the answer came, unbidden and fierce.

No matter how hard their tests, I will be Dome Militant.

Guy heard a sharp ping and tapped his wrist communicator. Overnight, a quad of Scavengii pirates had slipped through the Star Gate and barreled down the orbital accelerator, positioning themselves over the 14th north latitude—possibly scoping Nigeria's oil fields. But the Dome Militant had been ready. The first combat footage had just been uploaded, and Guy selected the captain's visor cam to follow the action.

The captain moved with lethal grace, his sharp blade flashing under the visor's night-vision overlay. Despite their alien ferocity, the Scavengii pirates fell swiftly to the Dome Militant's blades and long swords, their dark blood staining the cruiser's deck. Guy nodded in approval. The lead ship, a S-class jet cruiser, was still intact. Another victory for the Dome Militant, and soon another asset for Earth's defense forces.

He could almost smell the blood of the fallen Scavengii, feel the solid grip of the blade in his hand. He drew his practice sword and mimed a fierce thrust. *Straight to the heart. And twist. One day, very soon, alien invaders would meet the sharp edge of his blade. This was more than a dream—it was a premonition.* Guy thought with a sigh. *So, help me God.*

"Well done, Guy." Tilson, senior blades instructor and Commander of the Dome Militant bent to help him up.

"Sir! Thank you, sir."

"You do us all proud, you do." The man drew him over and patted the space on the bench beside him. Guy sat down. Together, they unbuckled his forearm braces – each with a line of three curved blades. Off came the calf

greaves and the three blades along the back of his lower legs. They released the latches of the springing blades he wore beneath his feet. Soon, Guy had set aside all his fighting equipment, together with the two fighting daggers.

"I will be sixteen in time for the next intake, sir."

"You submitted your forms in time for the deadline?"

Guy nodded but winced. Meeting the deadline had been the least of his worries. His application to join the Dome Militant was flawed in another, more fundamental, way.

"You're not registered, are you?" Both Tilson and Guy knew that without his birth having been registered, Guy's application wouldn't be accepted. "Do you know who your parents are?"

Guy hesitated, his home in the attics of Old Fleet Street was not often discussed. While he was not alone to come from such a background, his situation was made worse by the fact that no-one, neither mother nor father had claimed him as their son. He had been left with the name Erma. "Well, one of the models in my house always says I'm her son," he whispered—something he knew but could not prove. It felt like a betrayal to say it aloud, but Guy needed it to be true. "Loulou says I am her son."

Tilson stroked his chin. "Loulou, huh? I know Loulou. She's beautiful, but she has to think of her career – and if she were to register you. Well, the press—" He stopped, they both knew if it was revealed Loulou had a secret child, both she and said child would be hounded by the news reporters speculating on who Guy's father might be.

"Yes, I know it's a secret." Guy fidgeted, what could he do about his lack of parents?

"And you don't know your father." Guy knew Tilson wasn't expecting an answer, so he shook his head. Tilson sighed. "Thing is, Guy. I have lads who are registered – both mother and father – both of whom are pleading with me to take their sons. So, you see."

"But I am the blades champion for my year group, and I was due to fight the prince."

"They said he had an injury."

Guy made a clucking sound. "Chicken, more like. My maths average is 97.4. Maths and blades. And I was born on Old Fleet Street." Guy stood so his face was opposite Tilson. "You need the best people for the Dome Militant! And I am the best!" Too late, Guy bit his tongue. One never spoke to a senior officer in this way. However, Tilson was more amused than angry.

"Calm, Guy. Control." The man took his hand and patted it. "Calm, Guy. Control. You never know, maybe the fight with the prince will be reinstated."

Guy leapt to his feet and span his fighting blades across the palms of his hands. "Any place, any time, I'll be ready."

A communicator beeped a reminder. Tilson rose and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Keep training. Ask one of the older Militants to prep you. If you were to beat the prince, you'd be pretty much guaranteed a place in the Black and Gold." Tilson stood up – but, before he left, said. "Be ready, Guy. Be ready."

Be ready for what? Be ready to beat Prince Teodor at blades when the fight had been cancelled?

Practice over, Guy left the Dome and walked down the elegant tree-lined Old Fleet Street. House Jewel was the first and the most ancient of the seven-story townhouses, with a spacious fashion boutique on the ground floor and an imposing, colonnaded entrance leading up to the VIP salons, for private clients, on the floor above. House Jewel was the oldest of the Earth fashion houses and it was Guy's home, but he never used the front entrance, instead he turned up a narrow alley to the back of the house.

Guy threaded his way through the crowds of factory workers who were heading into the tall, dark manufacturing units. The shifts changed at this time of day. The weariest of workers were those coming off the night shift, with dark shadows under their eyes, but these day workers were also pale and gaunt – even after a full night's sleep. Reaching the back door, Guy headed up the narrow, dark steps, and looked through the open doors. On the lower floors, the cleaners were in action. He tiptoed through the third and fourth floors, where the models still slept, and into the bright workshops; perfect natural light being deemed essential to fine fashion.

This was where the true craftsmen worked. Embroiderers, finishers and designers, had been working through the night and were calling for fresh coffee and breakfast rolls. Guy smiled to see them, then ducked through the small cupboard door to a vertical ladder up to the highest loft in the house.

Guy crept up to where he had been born. Where he had lived his entire life, an unregistered Domeside orphan living in the attics of the fashion house, House Jewel, on Old Fleet Street.

He wasn't the only one. He counted forty-three half-brothers and sisters. Whether he was related to any of these children, he couldn't know. They were, however, the closest thing to family he had. They all shared one giant attic, fitted with a rudimentary communal bathroom – but only thirty bunks. So, a variety of cushions and mattresses were also strewn across the floor. Most of these children would end up working in the factory across the back alley, but not all of them. Old Fleet Street offered some opportunities for them as designers, artists, models – but for Guy one future beckoned: the black and gold uniform of the Dome Militant.

As Guy reached the top rung of the ladder, he expected to find the children sleeping. Instead, he found pandemonium. The orphans of Old Fleet Street were up and getting dressed, there were some tussles as they shared out the best clothes, and Guy parted two girls who were fighting over a hair-brush, pushing them to where thirteen-year-old Sara, the eldest girl, and designated mother of the attic, was swiftly combing tangled hair straight and expertly weaving plaits and tying ponytails.

“Sara, what’s happening?” Guy said pulling out his comb, to tidy up some of the boys.

“All the kids have to go to the cathedral, and we have to wear the new coats – lots of photographers are outside.”

The orphans of Old Fleet Street were famous for their beautiful coats and the neat lines they formed to and from school, headed up by an exquisite model or handsome designer. Though excited, the children were well-drilled. As they marched down the main stairs, some were singing. Guy hung back watching.

“Sara?” Guy asked. He never trod the plush carpets of the main house.

“It’s all right. We have permission. We’ll see the new salon, too.”

Guy peered down at the redesigned lounge. It was a minimalist, black and white combination – with one perfect, black Goran fur in front of a white geometric fireplace. “What happened to the old fireplace?” Guy asked.

“They moved it.”

“They moved the fireplace?” The main salon in House Jewel dated back three hundred years. It had been famous for a massive antique fireplace.

“Yes. The design team said it had to go, so they moved it to the Pink Salon on the second floor. But that new chimney is causing problems. Marline told me the fireplace was smoking last night. Let’s hope they fix it. Oh, and happy birthday by the way.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“And say happy birthday to Marline too – tell her we have a surprise planned for later, after practice.”

Guy nodded.

“For both of you. It’s your birthday too.”

From below, a designer called out. “Guy, if you’re going out the front door, you need to wear a coat. If not, we’ll throw you to the borgs.”

Guy shook his head. He snapped his running blades to his feet.

“No thanks. I’ll take the back stairs. It’s quicker. I’m already late. I’ll see you later.”

“How much later?” Sara said. “Guy, you mustn’t be late! They will throw you to the borgs!”

She was speaking to thin air. With his blades on his feet, Guy sped down the back stairs, through the fire exit and away.

Guy Erma left House Jewel and made his way across the Dome to the bistro. If House Jewel was the beating heart of Earth’s legendary tailoring industry, the bistro in the Dome was its showcase. The walls displayed the latest fashions. The waiting staff were young models. Established ‘faces’ within the fashion business would often be lingering over coffee and chatting with customers and fans.

He was crossing the square when the Battle Borgs charged out from the military gym. All around, alarmed voices shouted then fell silent, punctuated by a few squeals. Women drew scarves over their heads or grabbed their infants to them, concealing young faces against their bodies. Children leapt back as they approached. Teens sprinted away to hide behind street furniture or alongside other Dome Militants.

The Battle Borgs of the Dodecahedron Dome were cyborgs – half-human, half-robot – but they were old. Some had a head of hair like a wig stuck to a robotic face, others had no hair, but had faces where the skin was mottled grey and black, with large cracks revealing the robotic mechanisms below. They had been so frequently modified – so extensively improved – that they retained little of their humanity.

“Throw him to the borgs!”

Guy knew not to run; he crouched down into a ball and covered his face with his hands. “Throw him to the borgs!” It was a constant threat made by his blade’s instructors to lazy or distracted students. Guy had always thought it was a joke, although he had also heard rumours about youths being thrown into cages – given blunt blades to fight hardened Battle Borgs for their lives.

Fanning his fingers, Guy peered out as the last of the borgs passed. He steeled himself to look at their fearsome faces and forced himself to assess the strength of their metal hips and shoulders. *What moves would he use if he had to fight a Borg? Might he be one of the few who fought and survived?*

The Battle Borgs moved on, and the square returned to normal. A sigh of relief passed over the crowd. Guy straightened up, shook back his hair, and headed into Bistro Jewel. The place was crowded, he thought, and not with the usual crowd. These were off-planet visitors; strangers come from afar for Royal Ascot Weekend. He passed close to a table of Zaracans as they ordered a strawberry breakfast.

“Valvanski.” Guy muttered, using the common slang name. One of the aliens glanced up at him. Guy glared back, thought up some crude images. *Serves her right*, he thought, seeing the startled look on the visitor’s face. *Telepathic weirdo.*

Heading towards the back, Guy found them. Loulou and Marline were sitting together in a corner booth – one of the private ones, with curtains drawn back. Loulou was as beautiful as always, even this early, and with hardly any make-up. For over ten years, her slim, tall elegance –dark, geometric cut – pale skin, and eyes so brown they were black, had made her the undisputed face of House Jewel. She offered him a cheek as he arrived, and he kissed her.

“Mother,” he whispered.

“Sssh!” she replied. Nevertheless, she patted the chair next to her. Guy shrugged and sat down.

“Hi, Guy!”

Guy smiled at Marline. She had grown up as Guy had, in the attics of Old Fleet Street. Like him, she had no father and could only guess at her mother – but she had the jet-black curls, bright blue eyes and smooth creamy skin characteristic of the all-important Domeside look. So, she no longer slept on lumpy, overcrowded bunk beds. She was one of the lucky ones. She had been offered a chance to escape a future in the dismal clothes factories. At sixteen, she was the youngest and newest House Jewel model, and Guy could not believe the transformation. He reached over to kiss her on the cheek, but she turned – and with more enthusiasm than he expected, she kissed him on the lips.

Guy pulled back and frowned.

Marline reached behind her and produced two sugar rolls topped with chocolate dodecahedrons. “Happy Birthday to Us, Happy Birthday to Us. Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday Happy Birthday to us!”

The people on nearby tables glanced over, even though Marline sang in little more than a whisper.

Guy felt self-conscious, because he knew not who his parents were, he suspected everyone else was trying to guess his inheritance as well. He wondered what strangers saw when they looked at himself and Marline. Two Domeside teens, identical as peas in a pod, same black hair, blue eyes, cream skin. Marline already a Domeside beauty, himself a scruffy, skinny boy with legs that looked like they had shot up overnight – and feet and hands too big for the rest of his body. Many would surmise they were twins, or at the very least brother and sister. *The agony of not knowing*, Guy thought. The one fact he knew for sure was they had been born on the same day in the attics of the great fashion House Jewel. Their births were unexpected, unwanted, and ultimately unregistered. By law, neither Guy nor Marline existed.

He sighed. *What would the future hold?*

Marline pushed a hand-wrapped present towards Guy. “Happy Sixteenth?” She smiled, but her eyes were sad.

“Happy sixteenth to you,” then with a look at the present. “I got no present for you.”

“Well, you’re not working, are you? You know I can afford it.”

“Marline, the new face of House Jewel.” He lifted a glass of juice in a small toast.

Loulou cut in and corrected him. “No. She’s one of the Newcomers, not the face of House Jewel. She has a long way to go.” She paused, seeing the look of despondency on Marline’s face. “You were lucky to be selected Marline, but hurry and,” she nodded to the rolls, “don’t let any press catch you eating those.” Then to Guy.

“And hide that present, Guy. He’ll be here soon.”

Marline ripped a small section from the nearest sugar roll and popped it in her mouth, before anyone noticed. Guy hid the present under the table as he ripped open the paper. Inside were clothes – black socks and a fine t-shirt.

“I thought you could wear them under your uniform,” Marline whispered, and looked over to a group of Dome Militant striding across the Plaza in their black with gold trim uniform.

Guy’s mouth went dry and for a moment he could not even thank her. This small gift, it meant so much.

Someone else – at least one person – believed in his dream. “I will join the Dome Militant,” he told Marline – taking her hand and squeezing it.

“I know you will.” Marline replied. They laughed.

“I want to protect our people and our planet from off-world pirates and raiders. I want to fight the Valvanski on Sas Darona. I will be the greatest warrior the Dome Militant have ever known. And everyone will know my name.”

“Shush.” Loulou interrupted. “You still don’t have your place - so don’t brag.”

Guy looked crestfallen.

Loulou looked past him “Oh, where is he?”

Guy and Marline peered about as well, munching their rolls.

“Do you see the Valvanski?” Guy murmured. “When I passed their tables, I made sure I was thinking of my bum.”

“Oh, Guy, you shouldn’t. Loulou says we must always think of our favourite dress when we see a Valvanski – no not ski- Val-van-chi.” Marline gave him a superior look as she continued. “The little princess was shopping on Old Fleet Street yesterday.”

“Yeah, her father buys her whatever she wants,” Guy replied with a sneer.

“But not in House Jewel,” Marline said.

“Marline,” warned Loulou, spinning back to them both.

"It was Guy!" Marline protested. "I know we're not supposed to talk about clients, but it's Guy!" She held up her finger and thumb pressed together tight in a mime that meant 'keep your mouth shut!' He held up his hand, index and thumb pressed together and nodded to both Loulou and Marline. This time, the finger mime meant 'I can keep a secret.'

Loulou rolled her eyes then looked at Marline. "Oh, what are we going to do with you?" Loulou scolded him, but she was smiling as she said it. "You have been offered a good contract by House Jewel - but still you want to join the Dome Militant."

"I won the championship. I'm good at maths. The Militant – it's meant for Domeside boys, like me. I don't wanna strut about in fancy clothes!"

"Being a model isn't about fancy clothes, and doing the catwalk is not about strutting," Marline interrupted.

"You have to become someone's dream, as you walk, and pause, and yes pose. You have to evoke passion and desire. And then off the catwalk, you have to know how to answer the press, how to make conversation with important people, how to behave when you're not working, how every day from the minute you wake is actually a workday. As a model everyone is constantly watching you. So, I don't know how you can think it's easy..." She paused as Guy took her hand.

"Marline, I know it ain't easy, but I have to join the Dome Militant."

Loulou opened her bag, "You need this." She nodded for Guy to look. He peered into the bag, then up at Loulou.

"Is that a blood test?" Guy whispered. "For me?"

Marline gasped; she had also seen. "That's illegal," she said.

"Sssh!" Loulou hushed her. She took a dual tipped white wand. Holding it under the table, she removed a cap off one end to reveal a sharp edge. This she pressed into the pad of her fourth finger, until her blood was soaked up a quarter of its length. Then she pushed the cap back in place and passed it to Guy. He glanced right and left, before repeating the process. Once his blood had soaked into the wand, he replaced the cap and handed it back to Loulou.

"Ok," Loulou said and concealed the wand in a side pocket. "I'll speak to Chartsie. I am sure that he will let you into the Dome Militant."

"Thank you, Loulou. I will run all your errands for a year." Guy replied, if Chart Segat, often shortened to Chartsie, took an interest, Guy was sure to get his place.

"Not if you're in the Militant you won't!" Loulou replied and she laughed.

Marline pinched him on the arm hard and hissed. "You'll be on Sas Darona living in tents like the tribes – boiling your water to drink it, hunting for food, fighting Valvanski."

"Ow!" Guy looked at her in surprise. *Why had she pinched him?* And why was she glaring at him, and was she joking or was she being mean about his future life in the Dome Militant? Guy dreamt of seeing the tribes of Sas Darona one day, even if it meant digging his own latrines and boiling his own water.

"Marline, Guy's too young for that." Loulou ran her hand through his black hair and kissed him on his forehead, sighing. "So handsome."

For a moment, Guy thought she was speaking of someone else, and he felt a pang, because maybe she was thinking of his father. *Did she know? Should he ask? He checked her face for some clue as to whether she might at last tell him, but she was looking beyond him.*

"Oh, here he comes," She said, then added. "Stand up straight, Marline. And smile!"

Sure enough, Guy had turned to see Chart Segat arrive with the press in tow. He was the Administrator of the Dome, and Mayor of Domeside. He had once been a military commander, and while in recent years, he had gained a lot of bulk, Guy knew he was fit. *Didn't he train with his Militant every morning?* Guy liked how he wore his thick black hair worn in shaggy curls - not afraid to be a proper Domesider - he was both the face of Dodecahedron dome and the leader of the Dome Militant.

"Segat! Segat! Segat!" The crowd chanted in unison, their clapping and stamping creating a syncopated rhythm that reverberated through the atrium. A half step on the *Seg*, a stamp on the *Gat*, and a sharp double clap that cracked like thunder. *Step Segat, stamp Segat, double clap.* The sound swelled, a pulsing wave of energy that echoed off the high ceilings and sent vibrations through the very floor beneath their feet.

Under a large banner reading *Five More Years*, Chart Segat paused, raising his hands to quiet the crowd. The noise subsided to a murmur, then fell into a reverent silence as he took a deep breath, surveying the sea of expectant faces.

"This night," he began, his voice clear and resonant, "the Dome Militant—our valiant Space Defense—protected Earth from pillage and murder." The crowd erupted in cheers, but Segat lifted his hand, and they quieted once more. "In a textbook attack, we also acquired four new spacecraft, including an S-Class jet cruiser."

Segat straightened, drawing himself up to his full height. His eyes shone with pride and determination as he proclaimed, "All hail the conquering Dome Militant, protectors of Earth and heroes of Empire!"

The atrium exploded with applause and chanting once more, the crowd's fervor matching the passion in Segat's voice. They were his people, and he was their leader, bound together by a shared vision of a powerful, unassailable Earth. He pointed up once more at the sign.

The Dome Debate YES Five More Years.

He stood and pointed, grinned and postured, groaned and laughed – all the time the photographers and their flying droids were taking pictures. Until, with an almost comic about-face, Chart Segat noticed Loulou. He shambled across the café towards her. The sheer size of the man made his progress through the crush of tables into a series of collisions and squeezes.

Chart Segat laughed this off with his usual loud bonhomie and self-ridiculing charm. Journalists loved him and kept sending in small camera droids to capture his every grin and grimace.

When Chart kissed Loulou, it was a photo frenzy. With the shouted encouragement of the newsmen, Chart kissed Loulou three times before the Dome Militant closed in. Chart Segat laughed to see one journalist struggling for one last photo while being blocked by a Dome guard twice his size.

"The only story this weekend is the Dome Debate."

Segat roared at the young man. "Five more years! Five more years of investment and progress. I don't care what Regent Sayginn says. Investment. That's what the Dome needs."

After the photographers had their shots, Chart Segat stepped up to the table. He took great care closing the curtains and batting any last camera droids away. Finally, the guards, the press, and everyone else were outside. Guy, Marline and Loulou were all alone with Chart Segat. A tray overflowing with fresh food and drinks arrived.

"Give us a hot cup, Loulou darling. I'm parched. I am."

Loulou gave a small smile, picked up the pot to pour and murmured. "Chart, I need to talk to you."

Chart Segat gave a theatrical groan. "Please!"

Loulou handed him a full cup with a smile.

Chart Segat first sipped, then gulped the hot drink. "So, talk about what?"

"You remember Guy Erma, Chart. Well, he's sixteen today."

Guy looked gratefully at Loulou. However, Chartsie's reply was unexpected.

"Already! Sixteen already!" Chart Segat looked like he was about to say a lot more, except Loulou gave him a warning glance, so he concluded. "Funny to think he is the only one."

Guy had seen the looks passing between Chart Segat and Loulou. *So the grown-ups had secrets, so what? But what did Chart mean when he said, 'the only one'.*

"We can't throw this one to the borgs," Chart added with a laugh.

Loulou continued. "He wishes to join the Dome Militant."

Chart Segat turned to stare at her. "Do you not have a place for him at House Jewel?"

"Chart, well, of course, we're all working this weekend."

Guy sighed. Why had Loulou said that? She knew he hated all the fuss around the clothes, the sheer boredom of the modelling. *No wonder Marline only ever talked about the money.*

"I'm not interested in fashion," Guy shouted – louder than Loulou would ever have wanted him to. "I want to join the Dome Militant."

Loulou looked shocked, but Chart Segat cackled in a way that was anything but a laugh.

Loulou cut in. "Chartsie, House Jewel would love to have Guy Erma; of course, we would. But you need him more. He won the Dome blades competition, and he's good at maths. He is perfect for the Dome Militant."

"Sixteen already!" Chart Segat repeated then changing tack. "Good at blades, you say? Yes, that makes sense. How good?"

"My blades. Any day. Any time. Any place," Guy roared.

Chart Segat drew back in mock fear, but his eyes were calculating.

"He won the Apprentice Blades," Loulou insisted. "He was going to beat Prince Teodor." She paused and reached inside her bag. "And there's this."

She passed something to Chart Segat, palm to palm – and he glanced down but then looked away even as he slipped it into his pocket.

But Guy saw. Loulou had handed his blood sample to Chart Segat. *That's it, he thought – she is giving him the proof that she is my mother. That means I will be registered, and Tilson will have the proof he needs to accept me.*

"Please don't use it unless you have to," Loulou said. "We both know Guy is good enough."

"Thank you," Chart Segat said and smiled at Loulou. "We sometimes make exceptions, even if there is no mother or father."

Why had he said that? Guy glanced at Loulou. She shook her head. He looked at Chart Segat who shared a look with Loulou. *They both know, he thought. Both Loulou and Chart Segat know who his mother was. Even without the blood test, so why were they persisting with this 'no mother, no father' line?* He needed to be registered at birth to enter the Dome Militant. With one word, Loulou could change his future. *Why? Why had Loulou not*

claimed him? Why had she given Chart Segat the blood sample, but ask him not to use it? She must know he needed a mother, and not just any mother, Guy wanted Loulou.

The irony was, if he had been born to a factory worker, his birth would have been registered – and his place in the Dome Militant apprentices almost certainly guaranteed. Instead, Guy was the son of a fashion model, his father unknown, his birth a secret. This put the Dome Militant beyond his grasp - unless Chart Segat made an exception.

Chart had helped other unregistered orphans enter the Dome Militant. Guy looked straight at Chart Segat. *Would he help him?*

Their eyes met and Chart Segat reached to stroke his cheek. “Guy Erma, Domeside unregistered orphan; I have a job for you.”

Guy leapt to his feet. “My blades are sharp, and yours to command, sir.”

Chart nodded but said nothing more. Instead, he reached into his pocket to pull out a huge roll of money. He peeled off a large number of notes and gave them to Loulou – who checked them with a glance and relaxed a fraction.

“Have you everything you need?” Chart asked. Loulou nodded, and they kissed once more.

Guy had never seen so much money in his life. He tried not to stare but too late he realised Chart Segat had seen him. He rocked the hand with the money roll.

“Ah-ha! This interests you, don’t it?” Chart Segat said, as he grinned and hid the money away. “What is it you really want Guy Erma, money or power or something else?”

“I want to join the Dome Militant, sir.”

“I thought so. Be good and you’ll soon wear the black and gold.” Chart Segat lay a hand on Guy’s shoulder. “Be bad and I’ll throw you to my borgs.” He paused as if remembering, before adding. “No, I won’t throw you to my borgs. Not you.” He laughed, but his eyes drifted to some thought unseen.

Guy started to laugh. *Of course, they wouldn’t throw him to the borgs; it was a Domeside joke. Wasn’t it?* He stopped when he saw Loulou was not laughing. Nor was Chart Segat, but as he left, he repeated. “You’re a good boy, Guy Erma.”

Guy stood a moment – stunned. He turned to see Loulou. She gave no clue as to what she was thinking. Was she smiling, or was she sad? He couldn’t tell. Still, he could not be late, so he said.

“I have to go. They are expecting me at the cathedral.”

The King of Earth

Teodor gazed out over London from a high turret where widows had once watched for lost ships.

Reckless, his mother would say, and she meant exposed.

"I don't care," Teodor said, but he knew he should, for his would-be assassins were many, and most were related to him by blood. "A few minutes more," he muttered.

The rising sun warmed the city, one district at a time. Greenwich, Isle of Dogs, Surrey Quays. Sunlight glittered across the wavelets of the Thames before reaching the city dome. When the light touched the first glass pentagon, so it bloomed. Reflected across its twelve panes, the dodecahedron shimmered gold. It was as if the sun itself had landed at the heart of the city. "Magnificent," he murmured and watched as with a groan and a creak the panels of the dome shifted, and the light dissipated. London shrunk back into dawn grey.

So quick, Teodor thought.

Too long, he heard his mother's rebuke. Because of her, Teodor was a direct descendant of the one-time Kings and Queens of England – declared Kings and Queens of Earth during the Great Reunification. And in two days' time, he would be sixteen – old enough to sit on the throne. But if he survived to eighteen, then he would come into his father's inheritance, Prince Teodor of Earth would be old enough to be the next emperor of the twelve planets of the Dodecahedral.

But only if he survived.

"I don't want to go," Teodor spoke his fear aloud. Some instinct was gnawing at him. *What? Am I afraid? Afraid of the Dome?* The nightmare flashed before his eyes. It had been cold. It had been dark. He had been alone and afraid. *It had all felt so real. Why?* "Why do I have to go?"

He gripped hard onto the metal rail – so hard his knuckles shone white through his skin. Teodor had been at the opening of the Dome; not that he remembered it, but he had seen the recording. Just four years old, he had worn his uniform of Prince of Empire – alongside his father, King Serge of Earth. The first thousand Dome Militant had marched out, and his father had whispered. "Salute them, Teo; you must salute them."

How many times had the news channels shown the footage? Every time Teodor winced to see how, aged four, he had screwed up his face and pulled himself up to his short, pudgy height. Clumsily, he had aligned his plump fingers to the brim of his cap. When his father saluted, the soldiers had responded as one – fists crossing their bodies to tap their hearts.

"Loyal to Empire!" they had cried. "Fear only God."

The sight and sound of it had been too much for his four-year-old self. Unexpectedly, he had fallen onto his backside. To Teodor's eternal shame, instead of letting him jump back to his feet, his father had bent down laughing to hoist him up onto his shoulder. The Dome Militant had cheered. "Forever Prince Teodor! Forever King Serge!"

Only, his father hadn't – hadn't lived forever. Just nine years later, he had been murdered. *Two years, one month, twelve days and* – Teodor sighed as he made the calculation – *twenty hours ago, the king had died. The Dome Militant should have protected their king that day. They should have, but they had failed.* In two days, Teodor would become King, for he alone had survived. And last night in his dream, he'd been terrified. *I'm not afraid of shadows of the night*, Teodor squared his shoulders – but unwittingly, he had a second thought. *I wish father was here.*

He heard footsteps on the spiral stairs and sighed. They would be sending him extra protection. And yet, whoever was coming was fleet of foot. He turned to look. A slim girl, in a white riding suit edged in turquoise, materialized on the small platform.

"Who sent you?" Teodor asked – then, before she could answer. "Tell them I will be there soon." And he turned his back on her.

But the girl remained. She came to stand alongside him, placing her hands on the rails, alongside his. "It's a wonderful view of the Dome, isn't it?"

Ok, so not a servant, Teodor thought, and he looked where she looked. Along the river, where the Strand became Fleet Street, the vast dome dipped one rim into the river Thames, then rose above the irregular roofs to its capped peak.

"Dodecahedron," he pronounced the syllables with relish.

The girl went onto tiptoe and leant over the railings and pointed: "Is that Blackfriars Bridge?"

Without thinking Teodor reached to pull her back, only to have her stare at where his hand clasped her forearm. At once, he knew this was wrong, but he did not let go, just let his gaze drift to the long drop below.

"Yes, you're right," the girl replied and shivered.

Teodor nodded in approval, released her then continued as if nothing had happened. "That's Tower Bridge. Blackfriars is near the entrance."

Ok, so she's a visitor. Teodor thought, they were expecting quite a crowd this weekend.

“Tell me the names? My tutor told me, they were pretty names, but I’ve forgotten them. How many of the old districts are under the Dome?” She hesitated. “I mean the Dodecahedron.”

Tutor? He noted. *She must be someone of quality. They had told him the names of the guests and showed him photos, so who was she?*

“Well, from Blackfriars Bridge, it goes through Clerkenwell, past Old Street then south around Spitalfields and through Whitechapel. The City of London is inside, as are the Barbican and St Paul’s. Much of the old city was destroyed during the Chaos. The alien Zaracans built the dodecahedron, you know?”

Teodor paused, remembering a Zaracan princess on the list. *What else had they told him about her?* He carried on talking as he tried to remember.

“My father planned the development inside. The skyscrapers, the sports stadiums, and there’s a space shuttle port as well.

“Yes, all to hide his Dome Military,” the girl replied.

Odd remark, but not if she was Zaracan. An alien might not know the names of London districts, but they would know of Earth’s black and gold uniformed defenders. Why could he not remember her photo?

His communicator pinged, and Teodor glanced at a few moments of news footage. It was remarkable—three squads of the Dome Militant had taken down a quad of Sas Darona pirates, capturing an S-Class Jet Carrier in the process.

“Only two injured,” he muttered, scanning through the details.

“How many Scavengii survived?” The girl leaned in, her eyes fixed on the screen.

“None.” Teodor shrugged. “But the Dome Militant only fight with short hand blades and long swords, not guns or explosives.”

“They wanted the Scavengii ship intact,” she guessed, her voice edged with curiosity.

“Yes. And Chart Segat... well, he runs a tight ship.”

“No prisoners. No quarter. Segat gave that order, didn’t he?”

Teodor hesitated, then nodded. “I guess, but we have the right to defend Earth. The last time the Scavengii made landfall, they took a hundred women and girls prisoner. By the time the Dome Militant caught up with them, they’d already feasted on a third, and cut another thirty into meat. Of those who were rescued, so many didn’t make it...” His voice trailed off, the memory clearly unsettling him. “Segat’s methods might be brutal, but they work.”

She studied him for a moment, her gaze unwavering. “Still...”

“I know what my mother says,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck, “but all those rumors around his reputation—they’re just that. Rumors. No one knows for sure.” He looked back at the screen, where Chart Segat stood in the atrium of the Dome Militant, surrounded by chanting, stamping crowds. “It’s going to be tough to find someone who can replace him.”

“You have the protection of the Zaracan Democratic Union.” As the girl spoke, she placed her slim hand on his arm. Her touch was reassuring, she could only be one person, Teodor reflected. The reason they had not given him a photo of the Zaracan princess was that no human had ever seen her.

“Princess Nuria Valvanchi, I presume?” He bowed his head in greeting, then added. “You should not be up here, Princess. It’s not safe.”

“Yes, but you’re here.”

“At least stand behind me, so that a bullet has to pass through my body before it hits you.”

“Which way?” she laughed. “Which direction will the bullets come from?”

“The street outside the palace,” Teodor replied, as he tried to spread himself across the railing. How could she be so blind to the risk?

“And you would take a bullet for me?”

“Princess, your family, your father – they have control over all of Known Space.”

“Not all.”

“But at least one thousand planets.”

Nuria said, she peered at him, as if searching for some lie written across his face, “You know, no one has ever said that to me before.”

“What?” Teodor glanced left and right – this high tower was extremely exposed and so stupidly dangerous. Why had he lingered so long?

“No one has ever said they would give their life so I might live.”

“Princess, your family’s protection extends to all twelve planets of the Dodecahedral. So, if it’s for my people, for my planets, of course, I would give my life for yours.”

She stood still and solemn. “I believe you, Teodor,” she replied. “Look, if you hold my hand, I can make us both invisible.”

“You can do that?”

“It’s one of the first powers. All Zaracan children want to learn it. Useful, you know? Until you realise all the adults connected with you can see right through it. But up here, there are no adults, so we’ll be safe.”

She held out her hand.

“Safer,” Teodor cautioned her – then, with a shrug, he reached out and clasped her hand in his. His world shimmered grey and then returned to exactly as it was before. But when he moved, it was like his arms and legs were transparent – and you could see the balcony and the city through him.

“What other powers do you have?” Teodor hesitated, “Are you allowed to tell me, Princess?”

She gave a brief shake of her head but then added with an apologetic smile, “Please call me Nuria – almost everyone does.”

“Then you must call me Teo, though nearly everyone else calls me Prince Teodor.”

Her smile faltered, and Teodor wondered why he had said that. Except, of course, it was true. Few people called him Teo these days.

“Prince Teodor! It’s not safe!” A loud voice called from below.

Teodor recognised the voice. “We should go down,” he said.

Hand in hand, they raced down the spiral stairs to the stables below. Patrice Macey, Prime Minister of Earth was waiting.

“That tower is too exposed. How can any of us protect you if you take such foolish risks?” Then he saw the girl.

“Princess Nuria!” The minister bowed but before she could reply, he caught Teodor by the elbow and dragged him aside. “Teodor, a word.”

“Our guest?” protested Teodor.

“Princess excuse us a moment.” His prime minister bowed as he dragged Teodor aside. “Remember, the Zaracans are shape-shifters,” he hissed. “They choose their appearance to please people.”

“Really? I didn’t know,” Teodor replied, his voice thick with sarcasm.

“Sometimes they want to please just one person.” The man nodded back to Nuria.

Teodor took another look. *Slim, blond and slight*, Teodor thought. *Riding clothes*. Slowly, it dawned on him.

Her long hair was straw-like and untidy, like Lucy’s. He scowled, so the princess had read the gossip about him and the stable girl. “Good luck, my prince. Be careful.”

Teodor didn’t hesitate. “Princess Nuria, welcome. I am honoured to host a guest who has travelled so far.”

“Well, I’m sixteen this year as well,” she replied, curtsying one more time – even more awkwardly than the first time. “I have nearly finished my junior education, but they give you a big project.”

“You’re doing a project?” Teodor asked.

“My science tutor said I could choose any subject I wanted. I found these images, and I fell in love. I mean, it’s impossible not to fall in love with the cats, isn’t it?”

Teodor looked a little startled. *Cats? Who called the giant, racing gorans ‘cats’?*

“I have already been to Sas Darona to see giant cats in the wild,” Nuria continued. “My uncle, Karl Valvanchi, took me to see a night camp. The male had such a fine mane. Savage, you know? When I heard that – on Earth – humans had tamed and raced them, I had to come and see for myself.”

Teodor reviewed what she had just said. She had travelled from Zarac 1 to Sas Darona and on to Earth. The journey Nuria described was one only a handful of his people might complete in their lifetimes. She spoke as if this were a holiday. Why did the Valvanchi allow this girl so much freedom, not to think of the expense, to complete what was little more than school homework?

Don’t be stupid, Teo! Whatever, she might say, she’s the heiress and hope of the Valvanchi and their one thousand planets, just as I am the last prince of Dodecahedral. Still the planet Zarac 1 was many star gates away.

“Did you traverse the seven gates to reach here?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her voice trembled as she spoke.

What was wrong? Was she lying? About what? Teodor listened carefully.

“My father said I could, and my uncle invited me to stay for Royal Ascot. Don’t you think it’s cruel to race wild animals?”

Her smile was fake. She was definitely lying but about what? He wanted to go back and ask, but she had changed the subject. Teodor sighed; he knew all the arguments against racing wild gorans. He also knew the best response; with another bow of the head, he led her into the stable courtyard.

“Princess, welcome to the royal stables.” Nuria looked around and her mouth fell open in wonder. The Royal Guards in their silver and red uniforms, patrolling – on the lookout for security breaches; the jockeys in their silk shirts and woollen leggings; the stable girls, each one eye-catching in her choice of coloured shirt and slim-fitting leggings; and being led out from their stalls into the dawn sunlight, the great two-metre-high racing gorans of Earth. Golden, tiger-striped, dark oak, black and snow-white; created in every hue of nature.

If there was one place in the empire Teodor loved above all others, it was right here, standing in the stables with his gorans.

“We try not to be cruel. Gorans are semi-nocturnal. They favour hunting at dawn. So, we train them at first light – or did you think we were joking when we asked you to be here at this hour?”

“But it’s not natural,” Nuria persisted. “These cats no longer hunt.”

“Oh, they would if they were hungry enough,” Teodor replied with a laugh. “And they do not mind a bit of mauling if you upset them.” He remembered a nasty injury he had witnessed just a month before. An arm ripped from the body of an unwary guard. He turned to see the princess had stopped in her tracks. She looked like she has seen a ghost.

Not a ghost, she's reading my mind, thought Teodor. She saw his memory.

“It was only a cyborg,” he clarified. “We try to program them to be careful, but they have no sense around gorans. Now look.”

From within a stable, a giant goran was being led out. So tall she appeared as a wall of fur – so close Nuria only had to stretch out her arm to touch her.

“This is Blue Barbarina,” Teodor murmured, reaching up to scratch the white and blue grey goran above the elbow.

Nuria was talking again. This time, Teodor felt sure she was trying to hide her fear because she was talking fast, reciting even.

“Her mother was an ice cat from Sas Darona. Yes, I know they are the largest of the goran cats. They live around the ice floes of the Southern Poles. They breed once every four years, and three cubs survive. A mother can bear five – but the two weakest are slaughtered.” Her speech finished with an emotional sob.

“We all live in a harsh world, Nuria. Don't feel sorry for baby snow cats who are killed by their mother out of kindness – when the alternative is to starve, then freeze.”

Teodor smiled sympathetically as she pulled herself together.

“Why Blue? I mean.”

“Obviously, she's not blue. Mostly white and grey, with flecks of blue. It acts as camouflage on the ice, but she is beautiful.” Teodor said and smiled. “And Nuria, you must never approach a goran in the wild. But here, come. Stroke her like this.”

“They explained about telepathic connection; how, if I connect with you, then I can ride as you ride.”

“Well.” Teodor hesitated. He didn't think a simple connection of minds could give the girl the physical aptitude to ride a goran.

“I dance,” Nuria protested.

“They told me that ... to connect ... I will have to touch you.”

An envoy from the Zaracan embassy had spent close on two hours explaining the etiquette to be followed around the Zaracan Princess. Teodor knew he had to follow all the protocols they had laboured to instil into him. Also, his people were watching. From the shadows and the sideline, the Royal Guards were on hand and attentive. From the stable offices, Prime Minister Macey watched. There was nothing for it. They all knew what he must do. There was no one else with the status to touch her. He reached around her shoulders and, winding his arm up her arm, he pressed the palm of his hand to the palm of her hand. He lifted her arm and reached out to speak to the goran with his mind.

Teodor waited. Nuria trembled against his shoulder. He wondered if this experiment was bound to fail. His father would have known how to do this. After all his father had taught him to connect telepathically to the gorans. “A line of light,” he had said. “Along which you can direct your thoughts and commands.”

“Yes,” Nuria agreed, and Teodor started – for he felt sure her mouth had not moved. The alien girl was speaking to him with her mind. “Show me the light, Teo.”

Teodor closed his eyes and stretched his thoughts to merge with those of Blue Barbarina. Now, he saw what the goran saw, sensed what the creature smelt. Nuria's hair was perfumed with lavender and spices.

She's warm, soft and smells good, Teodor thought.

“Now you're making me blush.”

“Don't read my mind!” Teodor snapped back.

They fell apart.

“Maybe this isn't a good idea,” Teodor muttered, even though he knew, without the telepathic connection, the princess would not be able to ride the snow goran.

‘We cannot refuse the Valvanchis!’ His mother had said. His ministers, his tutors, all echoed similar sentiments. He looked at the princess again. Had she changed her hair? Her hair was no longer frizzy and blond, but long, smooth and silver. Her blond, freckled skin had faded to a white shade of blue that shimmered like starlight.

“We already have a connection,” Nuria sent with a smile. “Now, you see me as I really am. I can no longer conceal myself now that our minds are connected. Even when I am invisible, you will be able to see me.”

So that's what the alien Valvanchi looked like. There had been one or two photographs from when they had first landed on Earth over a hundred and fifty years before. Since those early days, they had been shape-shifting – taking on an appearance that was more acceptable to humans.

Teodor realised Nuria was listening - no, watching, all his thoughts. “I'm sorry. I didn't realise. This is an honour. I_”

“Well, if you are going to allow me to completely invade your mind, it has to be a two-way street. Now we are connected. I have lost the ability to conceal my true self. I too have given up my privacy.”

"No-one told me that."

"They probably don't know. Only a handful of humans have ever been connected to us. It's a rare thing – even amongst the Zaracan. Oh, everyone is connected to family and a few close friends – but little beyond that. That's why we call a telepathic connection a gift. And normally it's a gift of love."

"Yes, but you don't love me. All you want is to ride the gorans? Was that rude?"

Nuria was blushing. "Well," she said. "At least we are honest with each other."

"It's for the best. Ok, so listen to me." Teodor reached to stroke Blue Barbarina. "I am a friend – you are majestic and brave. You are beautiful and unique."

He turned to Nuria. "Now you try."

"You are beautiful," Nuria murmured. Blue Barbarina turned and bent down to Teodor and Nuria. She sniffed Teodor, then nuzzled Nuria's belly and chest. Without warning, the giant cat licked her face. Teodor laughed and rubbed the cat behind the ears. Nuria looked momentarily stunned – then did the same. Teodor left Nuria to enjoy the goran for a moment. He went to take the reins from the stable girl, who was waiting and watching.

"She's not even a real princess, you know."

"Lucy, sssh," Teodor scolded her with good humour. Frizzy, untidy hair – he decided – looked better on Lucy. She looked like she had worked to achieve the look. And he knew she had been up at five prepping his riding gear. "She's our guest. Help her mount."

Lucy scrambled up onto the great snow cat and reached down to help Nuria up. She showed her how to take the front of two joined saddles.

"It's a training saddle."

"I know," Nuria replied.

"Thanks Lu," Teodor called. "I'll mount now."

The girl jumped clear, and Teodor climbed a fine rope ladder – until he was high enough to put his foot into the stirrup and swing up and over, into the saddle set across the goran's shoulders. He took his position behind Nuria.

"You need to rise in the saddle," he told her.

"Like this?" Nuria crouched atop the goran's shoulders; her body angled forward, head down, chin centred on the back of the goran's skull, eyes looking out along the line of the goran's muzzle to the path ahead.

Teodor shook his head in disbelief. Nuria was riding the goran as if she were him. He leant in beside her, checking how she was holding the reins. But her hands were perfectly placed.

"Ok these are double reins, I'll let you take control for now," Teodor said. "You can ride her as fast as you wish, just shout if you want me to take over."

"It's just I thought."

"This is how I learnt to ride with my father," Teodor interrupted her. "I know you want to ride your own goran, and maybe we can try that tomorrow. This is safer. Do you agree?"

Nuria smiled at him.

"Yes, safer is good. Only it does not look."

"Huh!" Teodor snorted. "Who cares how it looks - this is goran riding – the sport of princes, the death of mortal men. Come, let's go!"

The goran was already moving at a trot, heading to the courtyard exit. Teodor looked back once. Through the central archway entrance to the stables, he saw the vast geometric shape of the dodecahedron dome. From this angle, it was a black outline in front of the sun – once again magnified in the bright dawn light, and undeniably menacing.

Not for the first time today, Teodor experienced a wave of fear – as if the Dome was some enormous beast he could not control.

"What!" Nuria exclaimed.

Teodor realised too late that he had transferred his fear to Nuria, and his goran felt it too.

Roar. The goran stood on her hind legs, her front claws raking the air in a show of defiance. While Teodor panicked and tried to regain his composure, to his amazement, Nuria clung effortlessly to the goran's shoulders and neck with her knees – sitting straight up and looking straight ahead.

As they watched the pentagons of the Dodecahedron adjust and the light dispelled, the dome seemingly shrank before their eyes, as it once more became transparent.

"Do not fear the Dome, Teodor King," Nuria said. "You are master here and all those men owe you, their obedience."

"Yes, they do," Teodor added. "You're riding beautifully, Princess. I didn't think this would work. But you were right, and you're also right when you say I shouldn't fear the Dome!"

Even as he said this, he was at once assailed with fleeting images of his nightmare.

"What is that?" Nuria asked.

"Oh, never mind – it's just a bad dream."

"But are you going into the Dome today?"

“Yes, I have a charity event to help the orphan children of Old Fleet Street.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” Teodor nodded, and he flicked the reins. “Shall we do this?”

Starting off at a fast trot, Nuria directed the goran across the garden and around the palace building. She rode as Teo, finishing the last ascent at a fast gallop before slowing, then pausing ahead of the long promenade of ancient trees. The straight avenue ran a full two kilometres back to the palace, designed for speed. “Designed to test your nerve, my boy,” his father had said. “How fast dare you let your goran go before you rein her in? How fast, hey?”

“Shall I take this?” Teodor asked, taking the reins from her hands.

“Let’s do it. You race her as fast as you can.”

Teodor nodded as he focused. He needed speed. More than anything, he wanted to be fast. He pulled the princess to him as he lowered them both into the racing posture, where her chin brushed against the brows of the goran – and the cat’s whiskers flecked his eyes. He called aloud to Blue Barbarina and off they raced to the finish line. Two kilometres, it was short and fast, and finished with a brutal leaping hairpin turn. Inside his helmet, statistics flashed up across his visor. All the numbers were green. It was a new personal best.

Oh, if only his father could see this! But was it fast enough – if his father had been alive to coach him, would his goran riding be faster and fiercer? Was he good? Or did they just say he was good? Would he make a good king? Or was he the only choice? If only his father were alive? If only Erederon... Stop it. Stop it. They were dead. He was alive. He was the one. The only one. He sighed.

“Teodor, you are the finest prince of your generation.” Teodor looked around. It was Nuria who was speaking to him. “And in two days you will be King.”

“Well, not exactly the King,” Teodor corrected her, he was allowing the goran to choose her own pace as they headed back to the stables. “My mother rules. My mother is regent.”

“That’s good, isn’t it, King Teodor? The title but not the responsibility” Nuria used her telepathy to tease him.

“What is the point of a title without power?” Came his immediate thought reply.

“Power?” Nuria asked. “What? Absolute power, like your uncle?”

“I want to reopen parliament, but my mother is too afraid. We still don’t know who killed my father.”

They had reached the stable block now, and Teodor kicked off from the high saddle and leapt clear to the ground. He ran to help the stable girls with a set of steps. He soothed and spoke to Blue Barbarina even as he helped Nuria to the ground.

“I could have jumped,” Nuria complained.

“But you must be safe, Princess,” Teodor replied. “A magnificent first ride.” He stepped back and started to applaud her.

“Well done Princess, it was a great honour to teach you.”

Around them all the staff were applauding. A small blue and white pod arrived. Teodor led Nuria towards it and opened the door.

“Thank you, Teo. So will we ride again tomorrow?”

“I ride every day. And you would be most welcome.” But he also knew it was unlikely to happen if it was not already scheduled.

“We’ll meet at the Ascot Spring Ball,” the princess replied.

“Ah yes, parties! All the fun of Ascot Weekend,” he replied with a dismissive roll of his eyes.

“Well, I look forward to dancing with King Teodor.” Nuria replied.

“As I said, not exactly the King,” Teodor corrected her before adding using his thought voice: “In any case, as I said to you, call me Teo.”

Teodor saw his footman looking meaningfully at a clock, so as the pod moved off, Teodor climbed back up onto Blue Barbarina. He was not going to miss this, his last short ride of the morning. Across the park, through the Buckingham Palace courtyard and around to the rear palace gardens and a small lawn where they had set up the blades mat under the balcony of his mother’s bedroom suite. Teodor could not see her, and perhaps she was still inside – but whatever her state of dress or make-up, she would step out to watch him fight.

Teodor leapt clear of Blue Barbarina, to land lightly where two servants and another stable hand were waiting.

His communicator beeped. He looked down impatiently. What now?

Oh! He was late. Three minutes late.

His mother would be furious.

Mezzatorra

“Mezzatorra to Control. We are under attack, large attack. Please assist.”

Karl took a sharp breath in, but his reply was steady. “This is Captain Karl Valvanchi calling Mezzatorra.”

“Karl. It’s the SDLA. They’re at full strength.”

“We’ll be there. Lock yourselves away.”

Thirty-one years old, Karl Valvanchi was a Zaracan warrior. His skin chalk-white, he stood just under two meters tall, with a slim military build. With his ice-white mane cropped to stubble, he appeared almost human; something he was not. He joined his men, and they pulled on their flying suits. As one, they leapt skywards and circled up. Karl glanced back. With its high perimeter wall and watchtowers, the centre was easy enough to secure. It was the remote units that faced the worst attacks.

Mezzatorra should be ok, Karl thought. The scientists had a secure vault. The so-called ‘Sas Darona Liberation Army’ were young hotheads and misguided malcontents from the local tribes. Some looting, some vandalism, after which the tribesmen and women would turn and run. If it came to it, they had no weapons of any real threat. Unless the Dome Militant reinforced them – unless they had help from the Dodecahedral.

Karl and his men soared towards their destination, arching over the wide grasslands of Sas Darona.

Sas Darona, Sas Darona; Pearl of the galactic sea Sas Darona, Sas Darona, where
forever my heart will be.

undefined

Sas Darona was a giant planet on the disputed border of the Zaracan Democratic Union and the expanding Dodecahedral Empire. The humans had tried to claim Sas Darona due to its vast reserves of monazite-9, a rare metal essential to the manufacture of space magnets. Too late. The Zaracans had filed exploration licenses with the United Races. Further disputes arose when the Zaracans discovered that Sas Darona was inhabited. Were the human tribes related to the humans of Earth?

Did it matter? The tribes discovered that Earth traders would pay real money for newly mined monazite-9. The attacks on their bases had multiplied.

“Captain, I can see a firewall,” said his second, flying at Karl’s right shoulder.

Karl stretched his sight to look. On the horizon, a white line of fire shot up from the ground. It was coming from the direction of Mezzatorra.

“Is that a shield test?” Karl asked, but the question was rhetorical. Something’s not right, Karl thought, as he shouted. “Karl Valvanchi to Mezzatorra. Report please?”

No reply.

“Captain Karl Valvanchi to Mezzatorra. You requested assistance? Please respond.”

One of the oldest bases on Sas Darona, Mezzatorra was a crashed shuttle wedged on a rocky outcrop. Too valuable to be abandoned, too remote to be useful – it was perfect for entomological studies.

“Karl Valvanchi to Mezzatorra, requesting clearance to land in one minute eighteen seconds.”

Still no reply.

What was going on in Mezzatorra? All at once, there was a loud telepathic response.

“Negative, Captain Valvanchi, negative.” It was a young female voice. “We have a grade one Cy-sect alert. We have initiated the protection shield.”

“Cy-sect alert?” repeated Karl. His heart was in his throat. His next words were a strangled whisper. “Is it plague?”

“For God’s sake, Karl, flee, fly, save yourself”.

Karl and his six men were circling down to the base, the team matching Karl’s every move as he led them down to land.

All at once, Karl shouted. “Abandon formation, fly high, fly fast. Regroup further south. Retreat. Retreat.”

As the squad split – twisting up and away – Karl looked down in horror. The lines of white fire surrounded the base in its entirety. They reached up, then arched over. At their peak, the lines of light joined and started to spread like a vast spider’s web. The branches and arms multiplied, until all Mezzatorra was encased in a dome of yellow light. On all sides, Karl’s men dove and dipped between the lines of fire – before accelerating fast, up into the blue sky above. Karl rolled around a shining beam of fire, banked hard right to avoid another laser-fast connection, and then he was free and flying fast. He sent the new rendezvous coordinates to his men as he went. What was going on? Questions filled Karl’s thoughts.

The shield had gone up! The final act of desperation of a community faced with Sas Darona plague. With a chill, Karl recalled the briefing by a white-coated entomologist. The plagues on Sas Darona were unparalleled in their ferocity. All animal species on Sas Darona were susceptible – and, once bitten, sixty per cent died. It was speculated that the peoples of Sas Darona remained primitive because the tribes were repeatedly destroyed by

plague. So, the Zaracans set themselves to studying the insects. Because of the dangers involved, the research was undertaken at the remote site of Mezzatorra.

What had the SDLA done?

Landing on the edge of the savannah, Karl and his men ducked into the forest. They stripped off their flight suits and shape-shifted their appearance as they ran. They started their run as slim, pale aliens. They regrouped around a vast evergreen, as a small troop of Sas Darona tribesmen. Wearing flat, supple leather lace-up boots, knee-length kilts of roughly woven linen, leather water bottles and meal packs strapped across their chests, they had as many as three pairs of matching fighting blades at their waists.

Karl split his men – sending two to Mezzatorra – while he headed off with the rest, following the heat signature of their fast-retreating enemy. Speeding through the woodland, the DNA traces of their enemies appeared before Karl's eyes like fading luminescent clues.

"They have a start on us," one of his men said.

"Not all of them," Karl replied. One set of traces shone bright. "They have a laggard!"

It was not one tribesman, but two. Two young men, one bled copiously from a deep gash to his thigh – the other struggled to carry him through the forest. The Zaracans sprinted up behind them and leapt out on them from all sides. The two hesitated, fooled by their attackers' outward appearance; their fighting blades stayed at their belts. Their hesitation turned to fear, and even as Karl recognised the medallion, the stronger of the two shoved the metal disc into his mouth.

A Dome Militant medallion, just a glimpse was enough.

"Get them!"

Two of Karl's men took hold of the injured tribal warrior. From what looked like food pouches, they produced bandages – a small hand-held x-ray, and morphine capsules.

Karl himself grabbed the Dome Militant, disguised as a tribal boy of course, and unceremoniously pulled the metal disc from between his teeth. Too late! The young soldier had bitten hard into the dome-shaped poison crystal capsule at the heart of the medallion, and the poison was quick.

From a pocket at his belt, Karl pulled a syringe and speared it into the broken crystal, taking a sample of the poison. Within the syringe's chamber, intelligent chemicals turned dark red, as they worked to find an antidote.

Karl had his arm around the young soldier's shoulder. His index and third finger were pressed to his jugular feeling for a pulse. It was fading fast. Inside the syringe, the liquid changed from red to orange to green.

The Dome Militant soldier was no more than twenty years old; his skin was paler than those of the Sas Darona tribesmen. His body was heavier, with muscles toned from a gym, and not outdoor living. Karl saw that they had tried to straighten his hair, and, at his temples, he could clearly see how the skin tint had been hastily applied. As the liquid in the syringe changed colour to green, Karl injected the contents into the soldier's neck and waited – pressing his fingers deeper. The pulse was still fading. Karl started on a second syringe.

Alongside him, Karl saw that his men had tended the other's wound. Karl could tell at a glance he was an actual tribes boy, and under the effect of morphine, the injured youth was weeping and reaching to stroke his companion's hands, pleading with him to live.

Prayers would not save the Dome Militant soldier Karl thought, as he glanced at the syringe in his hand. Still red, just a hint of orange. He waved to his men.

"You two, follow the trail – but do not engage."

They raced off along the forest path.

The antidote was ready; the syringe had changed from orange to green in his hand. Again, Karl stabbed into the jugular. Again, he probed with his fingers around the soldier's neck and the base of his skull. Nothing. He reached for a third syringe. His second placed a hand on his shoulder.

"He's dead, Karl."

Karl said nothing. He stretched the body out on the path, pulled the limbs straight into a pose of calm, closed the soldier's eyes and removed the Dome medallion and its chain from his neck. It fitted snugly into the palm of his hand – a ring of hard golden metal around a synthetic, purple-tinted crystal, shattered now, but previously it would have been shaped like a dodecahedron dome. Not just any dome. The large geodesic dome at the centre of London, the Dodecahedron-capped Dome, was the training base and military headquarters for the Dome Militant on Earth. The crystal had been filled to the brim with poison.

So, thought Karl, the Dome Militant had finally devised a poison that worked faster than the best antidote. If experience were anything to go by, the poison would mutate to acid. He could bag up the body and take it back to camp but, within an hour, it would dissolve into dust. Karl shuddered. How many times had he seen this? A dozen, maybe twenty, fighters – some had been wounded, most had not. On capture, all had chosen suicide. No body, no evidence, no proof.

He had one live prisoner, but the injured man was a tribesman. That was different. The United Races paid no heed to primitive tribesmen 'pointing bows and arrows' at Zaracan military units. He would be healed under the United Races charter and returned to his tribe. Again and again, the United Races had demanded proof of Dome

Militant involvement. Karl looked again, as if to check the medallion clasped in his hand. This time, they had made a mistake. Or had they? As he watched, the poison ate into the metal.

“Ow!” Karl dropped the medallion as the acid burnt his palm. It fell from his hand down on top of the corpse. In a matter of moments, like paper on a flame, it had burned to ash and crumbled to dust. No proof.

And yet, something was not right. The tribesman’s leg looked as if it had been ripped open by gunfire.

Karl spoke with sudden fear. “Can you manage him? I must go on to Mezzatorra.”

Karl sped back through the forest, part sprinting, part flying. Within minutes, he was walking along the perimeter of the firewall. Mezzatorra itself was fifty meters away. The firewall was millimetres’ thick. It shimmered in the sunlight but was primarily an invisible yet deadly wall of heat. The same young admin assistant, who had radioed the warning, came towards him. Her name was Sonia, nineteen, newly arrived and lovely. At first glance, she appeared unharmed.

“They had explosives, Karl. They blew a hole through the vault walls. And then, they were inside. Oh, Karl, it was horrible. The lock-up is three rooms. We only had blunted blades. Well, we never thought. Three of us survived.”

“So, they were armed? Guns? Lasers? Grenades?”

“No, just blades – hand blades. But they were fast. So fast, Karl. I knew the Dome Militant were the best blades fighters in Known Space, but.” She started sobbing.

“You saw they were Dome Militant?”

“Yes, I mean no.” She was panicky. Even in these circumstances, she hesitated to blame the Dome Militant.

Karl knew why. Relations with the nearby Dodecahedral Empire were bad enough without accusing them of terrorism.

“I don’t know, Karl.”

The firewall rippled like a veil on a breeze. In the distance, it disappeared into a haze. Bushes had been incinerated to ash along its perimeter. This black scar down the centre of the vegetation was the only visible sign of its presence. But it was there, if Sonia tried to walk towards him, she would be consumed by the flames.

“How many died?” Karl asked.

“Five of us, and we have found three of theirs too.”

“What about the twins?” Karl asked but wished he hadn’t. Gove and Jon were identical twins, brilliant geneticists and fun-loving party-boys, who enjoyed their notoriety in the tight circles of entomological research. Sonia released a sob. “Gove was badly injured and bitten. Jon ended his brother’s suffering,” she choked, “and then took his own life.”

Karl could not think of anything to say as he tried to imagine the laughing brothers reduced to fratricide followed by suicide.

“Oh Sonia, I’m sorry. Did you say bitten?”

“We’ve all been bitten. Look!”

She pushed her sleeve up high above her elbow and showed Karl the many bites down the white flesh of her inner arm. Already they were turning into giant pus-filled cocoons.

“Are those plague bites? Sonia!”

“We had to fight, Karl. They were stealing poison pills. That’s how the main tank was smashed. It contained a swarm of over a hundred insects. We’ve all been bitten.” She nodded to her colleagues who were lining up the bodies in the shade of a tall tree. “But we had to fight. You do understand?”

“They took poison pills?” Karl repeated, aghast.

“We think the tribesmen stole eight poison pills. If they had just wanted to take the monazite-9 or smash our equipment, we would have let them. But when they entered the vault, they only wanted one thing.”

“And you are sure the tribes stole eight poison pills? Or was it Dome Militant?”

Sonia shrugged. “I saved one.” It was a brick made of industrial glass and, within it, was a mini world of plants, soil, water and five or six insects. It might look like a miniature paradise, but there was also a small explosive mounted on the side.

The insects inside the poison pill were the jewel in the crown of the research undertaken at Mezzatorra. They were not Sas Darona plague insects; they were Cy-sects, cybernetic insects. Someone somewhere had decided Sas Darona plague could be used as a weapon. Karl mused. Someone else had speculated that instead of real flies, a weapon needed cybernetically and genetically enhanced insects. So Mezzatorra had delivered. Cy-sects (cybernetic genetically enhanced insects) possessed all the attributes of Sas Darona plague, but none of the drawbacks. Cy-sects did not require water to spawn. Their bites were one hundred per cent lethal, one hundred per cent of the time. They achieved crystallescence in four hours or less, and they always spawned a further hundred thousand Cy-sects.

It was not that the Cy-sects were un-killable, fire destroyed them, but rather they were unstoppable, spawning a hundred thousand offspring every four hours. Such fast exponential growth meant these poison pills went beyond being deadly, they were planet-killers.

“Karl Valvanchi to control. They have eight poison pills. We have to lock it down. Nothing takes off. Nothing comes in. They have poison pills; they must not leave this planet.”

He turned to speak to Sonia, only to see her crumble. At her back, the two others who had been carrying the dead now lay amongst them. Sonia was still alive, though. She moved her arms weakly, swimming against the ground and grass to find a more comfortable position.

The full horror of the attack threatened to overwhelm Karl, as he found himself counting, again and again, the number of the fallen. Eight of his people had died today, more than in all of the previous twelve months. Not only that, but the dead were not soldiers. They were eight leading specialists in a little-known field.

Karl had a choice: head off to chase and find the poison pills or stay here providing what comfort he could to this beautiful girl as she died. *Was it a choice?* Karl sank in the grass across from Sonia. She was within his reach, except the firewall was between them.

“It’s not painful,” she whispered, and closed her eyes.

As the Sas Darona plague made its progress through the flesh and bones of her body, her face remained recognisable – but she was the shape of Sonia, not Sonia herself. In the setting sun, her body shone – reflecting the light from a thousand different facets of the Cy-sect cocoons. the crystallescence. A sight, Karl realised, which was hauntingly beautiful, but also...

Deadly. As the sun set, the cocoons split. For one moment, she was a quivering mass. Her body dissolved into a cloud of plague flies. They rose up from her corpse in a cyclone. Nothing was left. The Cy-sects seemed to smell Karl, and a large group swerved, spun and charged at the shield. Karl Valvanchi leapt back.

Unnecessarily, the Cy-sect swarm fried and burned on the wall of fire.

Sonia had said one last thing to Karl. He felt sure it was the last thing she said when she was still truly human.

“Karl, Karl. Wait. I am starting to forget things. But this is important. We found this, Karl. We found this, and you need to have it.”

She threw the metal disc and chain through the firewall.

Karl caught it one-handed. He did not have to look twice to know what it was. He stroked the medallion, polishing its surface with the oils of his palm. It was unmistakable. The large circular military ID tags moulded to resemble the Dodecahedron Dome were only worn by the Dome Militant military force who trained in London on Earth at the heart of the Dodecahedron Empire. On one side, there was the fighter’s name, rank and serial number and, on the other, the motto of the Dome Militant. Karl ran his thumb over the circle of letters.

Loyal to Empire, Fear only God.
undefined

It’s intact, thought Karl, the proof he needed. Proof, that the Dome Militant were at Mezzatorra. He relaxed a fraction, enjoying this small moment of success. Another thought occurred to him.

What did the Dome Militant of the Dodecahedron Empire want with poison pills?

Mother of Empire

"You're late," Regent Sayginn said, her voice clipped, but not without a flicker of tension as it travelled through the wrist communicator. She stood at the high window, morning light warming her shoulders, gazing out over dew-wet gardens that stretched toward the distant stables. A delicate porcelain cup rested between her hands, untouched.

"Sorry, Mother," Teodor replied.

He didn't sound sorry. He never did.

Sayginn, Regent of Earth, might have appeared delicate—slim arms, narrow waist, small feet in velvet slippers—but her presence could still silence generals and senators alike.

She took a measured breath. "You have the best blades instructor in the city. And you're still late."

Below, the training mat gleamed—a pristine, cream-colored circle, ten meters wide, edged in thick black.

Teodor's butler, who had once served his father, stood nearby. He was tall and silver-haired, with the composed stillness of someone who had seen too much to be surprised by anything.

The men from the Dome Militant stood at attention. Black and gold shimmered in the sun, their obsidian blades slung across their backs. Their expressions were carved from stone. Sayginn had once preferred gentler tutors for Teodor—men who bowed and murmured—but Serge had insisted.

The people of Earth sleep soundly in their beds because of the skill and bravery of the Dome Militant, Serge used to say. One day Teodor will fight beside them. God willing, he will lead them.

As usual, Serge had been right. These days, any ship that crossed into Dodecahedral space unannounced vanished—or returned repainted in black and gold, crew replaced, its flag torn down. Sayginn still found it ironic: in the age of interstellar travel, warfare had returned to steel and blood—blades and flying daggers.

"Teo," she said more gently. "You know better than to keep them waiting."

"Okay, okay," he muttered. He strapped on the leaping blades and reached for the leather gauntlets, their three curved knives catching the morning light.

His butler held out a tunic—an iridescent vest that shimmered like ice.

"What's that?" Teodor asked sharply.

"A diamond protection vest," Sayginn said. "A gift from the Emperor."

He hesitated, lips tight, the refusal almost forming. Sayginn stepped onto the balcony, silhouetted against the sun, her silence saying more than any rebuke. Teodor looked up. She nodded—first at the vest, then toward the press drones hovering nearby, their lenses blinking red.

"Go on, Teo. You must wear it."

He scowled but tugged it over his head.

"It's as light as silk," she said. "But no blade can pierce it. The ultimate protection."

"And it'll look good on the news," Teodor said dryly.

Sayginn flushed. He was right, of course. The vest would gleam on the morning feeds.

Now he was ready—leaping blades at his feet, curved knives along his limbs, the diamond shirt aglow, a dagger in each hand. He stepped onto the mat, a blur of polished steel and quiet defiance.

He twirled the daggers so they flashed in the light. "Let's begin," he said, voice flat but eyes burning.

Sayginn frowned. *Since when did he learn that trick?*

Teodor noticed his mother watching but refused to let it distract him. Across from him, Dome Militant Commander Tilson stepped onto the blades mat with practiced calm.

"On guard."

The senior instructor spun toward Teodor. The prince blocked and deflected with ease—too much ease.

"You were late," Tilson snapped, launching a second attack. His blades spun in sharp, unpredictable arcs.

Teodor parried, more annoyed than threatened. "Blades isn't my only sport."

"There are a thousand boys down the river," Tilson replied, pressing in. "Not one ever keeps me waiting."

A pang of guilt hit Teodor, and his foot slipped slightly. Tilson surged forward, exploiting the opening.

Forced into a clumsy countermove, Teodor lashed out. "Goran riding is the sport of emperors," he said—and with sudden fire, launched into an aggressive counterattack, matching each blow to his words. He spun, struck, kicked. Momentum and anger carried him forward.

But then he disengaged, retreating to the edge of the mat, flushed and uncertain.

Was there ever a chance I could beat him?

"Ready," Tilson called.

This time, the commander didn't hold back. Teodor stumbled, struggling to find a rhythm.

"Calm, Teodor. Control."

He tried. For a few moments, he found it—until the final burst. The Dome medallion at Tilson's neck swung loose, spinning up toward Teodor's face. Reflexively, he flinched—and his heel crossed the black line.

The match ended.

"To step outside the blades ring is to die, my prince. Instant disqualification."

Teodor's shoulders slumped. "Your medallion—" he began, then stopped himself. A weak excuse. Everyone knew the rule.

"Unfair," he muttered, ripping off his gauntlets. The greaves followed, thudding to the mat. "This is only practice! Enough to beat some Domesider, anyway."

His eyes drifted to the golden gorans across the yard. He lifted a hand, summoning them with a focused thought. The creatures galloped toward him, curving their graceful bodies around his sides. Cameras clicked from the shadows. Let them see this: Teodor, flanked by gorans, every inch the prince. Even if he hadn't impressed his trainer.

"The Dome fight was cancelled."

"What?"

"I met with your mother over a week ago. The match was called off. Did she not tell you?"

Teodor stared at him. Anger bubbled to the surface.

"Why?" he spat.

"They thought you might lose."

"The point was the fight!" Teodor snapped. "I was going to show I could—"

"Fight and lose? What's the point in that?"

"I don't have to win!" Teodor's voice cracked. "In two days, I'll be king."

Tilson arched a brow. "Really?"

"And I'll be Commander in Chief of the Dome Militant."

"And you'll lead them into battle?"

Teodor hesitated. *Would he charge a Scavengii raider with blades drawn? Could he?*

Tilson stepped closer. "Do you think they'd follow you—if they saw you lose here?"

"Yes, but—"

"But nothing. What is it you want, Prince Teodor?"

Teodor blinked. The question hit deeper than he'd expected. What *did* he want?

He wanted to ride gorans. Eat breakfast with Princess Nuria. Get lost in maps of Known Space with his tutors.

"Well, what should I want?" he asked, waving at the palace around them—the wealth, the gardens, the watchful servants.

Tilson's disappointment was quiet but visible.

Teodor looked down, confused. *What was the question again?* Did he want to be King? Was that it?

"I have one thousand boys down the river," Tilson said. "And they all want the same thing."

Teodor shifted uneasily. The Domeside boys were fearless—deadly, loyal, relentless.

"If you don't know what you want," Tilson said, "that's your problem. Until you do, you'll keep losing. And no one follows a loser."

Teodor drew himself up, face flushed. "I will be a great King, like my father. And you will kneel before me."

Tilson gave a single nod.

Maybe he would kneel, Teodor thought. *Maybe they all would. But would that make him a leader?*

"Until next time," Tilson said. "Remember: calm, Teodor. Control."

He always said that. Calm. Control.

Yes. Teodor would be calm. And he would be in control—especially this morning. He turned and walked toward the palace, leaping blades still strapped to his feet. The golden gorans followed, flanking him like royal sentries.

Teodor bounded up the stairs three at a time and burst into his mother's suite, not bothering to knock. The gorans trotted behind him, their hooves clicking softly against the marble. Teodor made straight for the breakfast table and served himself without a glance.

It was only eight. He'd already had a full morning—and he was starving.

There she was. Regent Sayginn, ruler of Earth.

"My blades. Any day. Any time. Any place," Teodor cried. "Will you yield?"

"Don't say that!"

Teodor sighed. "It's what the Dome Militant blades fighters say."

"Yes, but you're not in the Dodecahedron."

"I like it, and they are our people too." He spun his blades across the palms of his hands.

"And stop that silly trick with the blades. It's dangerous. Now, say good morning properly."

"Good morning, Mother."

"That was a careless mistake this morning, Teo."

Teodor ignored her criticism and, instead, asked. "Why, Mother? Why did you cancel the Domeside fight?"

"The reason I cancelled the fight is because the Domesider they chose to fight you will beat you."

"I don't believe you."

"I didn't believe it either. But I have spoken to everyone. They all said the same – the security team here, your blades instructor. I've seen the tapes of this young man. The others have been to watch him in training. They all agree he would beat you, Teodor."

Typical. Another thing he was not good enough at. His father had been marvelous, Erederon had been amazing, he – Teodor – could not beat another boy (a Domeside boy!) at blades. "He's probably sixteen and a full member of the Dome Militant," he snapped – rebuking himself aloud as much as he was shouting at his mother. "He's fifteen. He's a skinny thing. But he was fast, and he was smart. You would have lost."

"Oh, and suddenly I'm not clever enough?" Teodor shouted. "Do I not work hard enough, long enough?"

"Teodor!" Sayginn snapped.

"No, Domesider will ever beat me. Do you hear me? I won't allow it. And didn't the Emperor want to see me fight at blades?"

"Yes, yes, he did. But you can present your exam display, and he'll be impressed by the way you handle gorans."

"Tsk! You know they'll call me a chicken inside the Dome if I don't fight."

"Yes, well, the people can say what they want. At least they will not have seen their fighter knock you onto your backside."

"Mother!" Teodor was outraged; he knew she was referencing his four-year-old self. He picked another sugar roll from the breakfast table and bit into it. His mother was frowning. How many rolls had he eaten? Was it two or three? He sought to distract her. "May I come with you to the spaceport this morning to see Uncle Freddie?"

"You mean to come and greet Emperor Frederon?"

"My Uncle Freddie, yes," Teodor repeated the words with emphasis. *Let's remember who I am.*

For an instant, his mother looked confused. She might even have said yes, but then she checked her communicator.

"You mean," she cleared her throat – never a good sign – before continuing. "We have to re-organise a rehearsal which involves one hundred children, all in costume, twenty adults – including the full crew of technicians – and all the security, the police escort and the drivers? Oh, I am sure everyone would be delighted with any change of plan." She paused. "Teo? That's almost two hundred people waiting for your arrival in the Dodecahedron Dome."

"Mum, I don't want to go." *Did he have to explain to his mother what he felt about the Dome?* The Dome, where his father had been going the day, he died. The Dome Militant, who should have protected him. The Dome that overshadowed their everyday lives and would never go away. Of course, he did not have to explain. His mother nodded. "You will have your security." She checked her communicator. "Twelve cyborgs, six cy-wolves and, of course, your bodyguard."

Both looked out to where a cyborg and wolf patrolled the balcony. This one was Aengus. Well, he had once *been* Aengus. After the explosion, his family signed the papers for him to become a cyborg. A robotic processor had been wired into his human body.

"Aengus's skin is starting to peel," Teodor muttered.

"It's over two years since he lost his legs," Sayginn replied. "But he is one of those who tried to save your father that day."

"But one of the skin cracks across his face is so deep, you can see the bone, and last week I saw him pick up this big piece of skin which had fallen off his arm."

"Remember he's still human, and his heart is so loyal Teodor. No, I think we'll keep him, but I will ask the surgeons to look at his skin if it bothers you so much."

Teodor felt wretched then and forced himself to smile at Aengus. He knew it was not Aengus who was troubling him.

"Do I have to go into the Dome?"

"Teodor, what's this about? I thought you wanted to—"

"I had a bad dream," Teodor interrupted, and ignored his mother's surprise. "I was in the dark. I was trying to find my way out. It looked a bit like the catacombs we visited last year. A voice kept telling me it wasn't the catacombs – it was the Dome. I didn't know where I was. It was so dark. I was all alone. I was trying to find my way out. I kept trying to find a way out, only – I woke up."

Sayginn sighed and shook her head. "A dream, Teo. It was a dream. You have to go. It's an important weekend. I need to win the Dome Debate. You know that. Chart Segat has his supporters too – but we have to win them over. Your singing with a choir of Domeside children will be – already is – very popular."

She reached to run her hand through his hair, but Teodor backed away from her caress, scowling.

"It will look good on the news," his mother concluded.

"It will look good on the news! Mum! It was dark. I was cold. I couldn't find my way out."

"In two days, you will be old enough to be their king."

Teodor sighed. "Maybe. But you are the Regent."

“Only to make your life easier. Once you are sixteen, you may claim your crown at any time. Do you remember the words?”

Teodor felt his heart sink. *Not this again.* “I want to be a great King like my father, mother. I want to protect our people and our planets but_”

Behind his back, his mother recited. “I, Teodor, son of Serge.” His mother tapped him on the shoulder.

“Remember when you are eighteen, you will be Emperor. Emperor of all the Dodecahedral.”

“If I survive.” Teodor muttered.

“Of course, you’ll survive,” his mother snapped. “Just remember the words. I, Teodor, son of Serge.”

Turning to face her Teodor recited the oath. “_do claim this planet and its dependencies. To rule as is my right, For the benefit of my people, As guided by our democratic institutions, And prescribed by our laws. So, help me God.” An eerie silence followed – as if a crowd somewhere was supposed to applaud but had forgotten. “I do know the words, Mother. I do want to rule this planet. Only_”

“You’re a good boy, Teodor. Your heart will tell you when the time is right.” She kissed him one last time, checked her communicator before heading off. She was gone.

Teodor looked at his communicator. *Time to be going.*

They are expecting me at the cathedral.

Interlude. Diplomatic Exchange

From. Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi II, Earth

To. Captain Karl Valvanchi, Sas Darona

My dear Karl,

Just dropping you a line. I am experiencing a few difficulties organising a display of tribal dancing for an important forthcoming event here on Earth. Any intervention on your part would be much appreciated.

Your dear brother,

Nikki

From. Captain Karl Valvanchi, Sas Darona

To. Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi II, Earth

Dear Nikki,

No can do. Sas Darona is in lockdown following Mezzatorra.

Sincerely,

Karl

From. Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi II, Earth

To. Captain Karl Valvanchi, Sas Darona

My dear Karl,

My dearest brother, I do not think I explained myself fully in my last communiqué. I am organising what you might call an elegant evening at the embassy, as part of the Festival of Fashion and Sport – often referred to as Royal Ascot Weekend.

Unwisely, you may think, we settled on a Sas Darona theme many months ago – and we had already put in place all the necessary arrangements to have some specialty foods – Sas Darona Sand Lizards no less – and displays of tribal dancing.

The council has decreed. It would be preferable if the Dome were closed, as a precursor to Dome Militant activity being ended on Sas Darona. This entertainment is an important part of our plan to influence the humans. Regent Sayginn has promised to attend; even the emperor himself ...

From. Captain Karl Valvanchi, Sas Darona

To. Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi II, Earth

Dear Nikki,

Please do not ‘my dear brother’ me. You and I were never that close. You know that as well as I do.

As for your entertainment, are you suggesting we break quarantine – so your guests can eat chili lizards?

Perhaps, for a truly authentic Sas Darona experience, we should send you a nest of Cy-sects as well? How about Sas Darona plague as a life-or-death experience? Would your guests find that amusing, I wonder?

Of course, I agree. The Dome must close. However, under the circumstances, I recommend you make alternative plans.

Cordially, Karl

From. Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi II, Earth

To. Captain Karl Valvanchi, Sas Darona

Cc. Ex-Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi I, Zarac 1

Dear Karl,

I don’t know what you are suggesting. Sas Darona plague on Earth? All I am asking for is a consignment of Sand Lizards.

Are you threatening me?

Nikki

From. Ex-Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi I, Zarac 1

To. Captain Karl Valvanchi, Sas Darona

Karl,

Your brother copied me your last communications. I am appalled that you threatened him with plague and certain death. Your brother, as you well know, is doing an excellent job in difficult circumstances.

As your father and head of the Valvanchi house, I command you to do everything in your power to help him. It is a Council Decree. The Dodecahedron Dome must close.

I have written to your commanding officer and made things abundantly clear. Your brother’s requests are supported at the highest levels from within the Zaracan Council.

Your family expects,
Your father.

From. Captain Karl Valvanchi, Sas Darona
To. Ambassador Nikato Valvanchi II, Earth

Dear Nikki,

The Dome must close.

I am on my way, together with the tribal dancers and Sand Lizards. We expect to arrive Friday. Please make all necessary arrangements.

Karl

A Roar of Fire and Light

So, it comes to it, the moment I have been dreading all week. Now there is no turning back.

Prince Teodor travelled within an eight-vehicle convoy from Buckingham Palace along the river, and into Domeside. Drones had been deployed to stop side traffic, and their vehicles sped on unimpeded – coming to a stop on the circular plaza under the cathedral. One of the oldest buildings in the entire city and said to be the beating heart of the Dome.

From the vehicles emerged a dozen fully armed Royal Guards in Red and Silver, and six huge cy-wolves; considered to be the bare minimum to escort and defend the Prince. Teodor was the last to emerge. He acknowledged, with a nod of thanks, his escort; then turned to look up the wide staircase leading to a massive door, where a bishop – and crowd of others he could not identify – waited.

I am well protected, Teodor told himself. *Also, there was no cathedral in my nightmare. Tunnels yes, cathedral no.* ‘Pull yourself together’, that’s what his mother would say. ‘You must do this for your people; after all, they only expect you to sing.’ All at once, he remembered the alternative. *Oh, why had his mother cancelled the blades fight? How would it feel to be making his way to fight in the Dome Militant gyms? Would he be afraid if he had a blade in each hand? Still, that was no longer an option.*

Teodor had been inside the cathedral many times, but still he found the towering columns vast and beautiful. He was glad they had built the Dome around this sacred place. It was said to have been a church for over three thousand years. As with all truly ancient cathedrals, the altar was shielded from view by a single, large tapestry – which, it was said, had taken three hundred embroiderers three hundred days to create. On Sunday, the curtain would be drawn. The population would lean in to glimpse the priests and their rituals; instead, they would see Prince Teodor leading a choir of Domeside children.

“It will be spectacular,” the art director had assured Teodor’s mother. “It will also be emotional. You will see. They will call it genius.”

Teodor was unconvinced. It was a trick which involved drawing a curtain – a vast curtain for sure – but still a curtain. Nevertheless, the artistic team had their way. What had started as a small performance of a children’s choir had grown into a no-expense-spared production; complete with lights, special effects, abstract art installation as a set – costumes created by a top designer from Old Fleet Street, and high-definition surround sound.

A trick involving the curtain, Teodor repeated to himself with weary impatience. *Let’s finish this show and be done with it.*

“Your highness, we have a costume prepared for you,” one of his hosts said.

Teodor nodded. All the children of the choir were wearing costumes, so he had no choice.

After all the rushing, Guy Erma found himself standing on the side of the altar in the Cathedral – waiting. *Waiting, and what for? How long did it take for a prince to get dressed?*

All the other kids had their costumes on – admittedly, they had arrived in the Cathedral over an hour before the prince – but there was a buzz of excitement that the teachers were finding hard to contain. Guy was not in the choir of Domeside children. Guy was the prince’s understudy and stand-in. Over the past month, he had taken part in a dozen singing rehearsals, where the prince himself had not been present. He had enjoyed being the stand-in prince. He had even enjoyed the performance - maybe not exactly singing - but he liked the praise and attention he received from being centre stage.

Supposedly, all this made up for not having to fight the prince at blades. It didn’t. Guy only had to close his eyes to feel the weight of his fighting blades in the palms of his hands and imagine stepping up across a fighting mat from the prince. Still, it was not to be.

At least as understudy, he did not have to dress up. The understudy had no costume. In fact, his role today was ‘to be introduced’. Guy was due to meet Prince Teodor, before handing over the role to him. This was considered a great honour. Right now, he had been waiting twenty minutes for this so-called ‘great honour’.

If only they would let me fight the prince, Guy thought. *That would have been great – to meet him with a blade in each hand.* Guy kicked the skirting board.

Gold shorts, a shimmering chiffon shirt and the wings of an angel. Teodor looked at the proffered clothes with dismay. Before him, the head designer of the fashion house Riffault was talking him through the intricate details of the outfit.

“Here you see an earlier design.”

Teodor froze, because the youth who stepped forth - while maybe two inches taller than him - was otherwise identical to him in face, in stature, in hair and in manner. Teodor had heard of such models, young men - for there was no doubt this youth was older than him - who earned a living imitating him. Until today, he had never met one. He swallowed hard, but forced himself to smile and say, “Aren’t those shorts - ahem - a bit short?”

"They are based on the fighting gear of a Dome Militant competition combatant," the designer said. "You are supposed to be a warrior angel."

Teodor nodded and stifled a sigh. It was years since he had given up trying to have a say on his clothes. He was forever told how hundreds, if not thousands, of jobs depended on his wearing Old Fleet Street Fashion. He had to live his life as a walking talking advert for the craftsmen and women of Domeside. "We have a changing room prepared for you," the look-a-like youth cut-in. "I can help you dress."

Teodor wanted to shout: I can dress myself! Except he could see the clothes had some complex buckles and fastenings, and the wings appeared to be stuck on by magic. "Thank you, that would be kind," he replied, forcing himself to look at the face that was so much a mirror image of his own.

"Afterwards, the Press will want photos," the designer said.

This time, Teodor could not help himself, involuntarily he took a step back: *Did they expect to photograph me in that?*

"I can do the Press, if you like?" the look-alike said, waving him to the next room.

Teodor hesitated, he wanted to say yes. He hated posing for photographs – detested how it was never one photograph, but multiple shots with photographers shouting at him to smile or turn or some such thing.

The look-a-like was watching him. "I don't mind," he added.

Teodor sensed there was genuine kindness behind this offer. This confused Teodor, because he felt himself liking the youth even though he knew all his advisors would hate this look-a-like model on sight. He was a forbidden friend, and Teodor knew he should mistrust him – but his instincts told him something different.

"Someone might notice," Teodor replied.

The boy smiled, exactly the diffident smile Teodor allowed himself in public. *So, like me*, Teodor thought in wonder – *maybe no-one would notice?* "Can you sing?" he joked.

"Yes," the other replied, before finishing in a burst of song. "Just not like that, not like that..."

Teodor thought he recognised a popular song, and he laughed. Obviously, a young man working as a model for one of the Old Fleet Street fashion houses would have good singing voice. "Ok, ok, just help me with this costume - if needed, do you have these shorts in a bigger size?"

"You'll be fine," the other replied.

"And the changing area has been checked for cameras?" Teodor heard himself ask, and wished he hadn't because even to himself, he sounded fearful.

"Checked and checked again. We would never leave something like that to chance. We only want photos of the finished costume to be published, not anything else. What do you take The Riffaut for?" the youth said.

"I see," Teodor said. "I had to check."

"Quite so."

"Have you been my understudy? They said I would have a chance to meet him?"

"Understudy, no. That's Guy. Guy Erma. You'll like him - you sing better than him." The look-a-like winked, and pulled the door closed on the changing room.

Out of boredom, Guy moved closer to where he knew the prince was changing. One of the Royal Guards held up a hand to stop him.

Chocolate box soldiers, Guy thought, eyeing the red trim along the seams of the silver trousers. *What good would they be in a fight?* They were purely ceremonial soldiers, brought here to look impressive, not protect their prince.

Through the half-open door, Guy saw the prince dressed as an angel in tunic, shorts and sandals. The designers had said it was supposed to look like a blade fighting outfit, but Guy could not see it. *Not golden shorts like that - what fighter would wear those?* Also, Guy would have liked to see some evidence of the so-called injury that had precluded the prince from entering the blades fight. He expected to see a bandage on one of his knees at the very least. But no, nothing. The prince's legs were bare. Guy checked to be sure. The prince had cream, plump legs, and the designers had twisted the long laces of the golden sandals from his ankles to his knees. *Was that top-grain leather painted in real gold*, he wondered. *Complicated and impractical*. And no sign of a bandage, bruising, redness or any sign of injury – none at all. *Maybe the prince was chicken after all*. Guy kicked the skirting board again. *And I'm going to be late for maths*.

Behind Guy, there was a commotion amongst the crowd of waiting children; this distracted the Guard, so Guy moved closer to where he could examine a neat pile of clothes on a chair inside the door. Those were the prince's clothes – the ones he had worn before putting on the angel costume. Guy found himself looking at the labels. The prince had been wearing a handmade designer shirt and suit, the best Old Fleet Street had to offer. His shoes were handmade too. As Guy peered down, he saw the prince's name carefully painted inside the heel. He felt a little sick. He knew how much handmade shoes cost, and he could not imagine spending so much on his feet. And it looked like he and the prince might be the same size. He moved his own boot-clad foot a little closer. Yes, he and the prince wore the same shoe size. *What must it be like to own – indeed to wear – shoes like that?*

He peeped through the door again. Photos – they were taking photos. Guy looked at the time and made a decision. Calmly bending down, he picked up the shoes and put them in his bag. As he went to swing the bag over his shoulder, he felt – rather than saw – someone watching. Instinctively, he turned and met the blue eyes of Teodor. The prince had seen what he had done.

Guy froze. At his feet, the prince's shoes were gone. He knew they were in the misshapen gym bag over his shoulder, but who else knew? Across from him, the prince said nothing just watched. Guy returned his gaze. What should he do? To put the shoes back was to risk detection. Was the prince going to tell on him?

Guy scrutinised the boy standing across from him. The prince had golden blond hair – but otherwise, they were the same age; give or take a few days. Apart from that, what else did they have in common? The prince had the plump flesh of someone who never went hungry – probably had more clothes than anyone rightly needed, and he was surrounded with fashion designers, staff and press reporters – all of whom agreed to his every request.

All this, Guy saw, in less than the second it took him to rise and look up. Did the prince even need these shoes? Did Guy himself need patent leather, high-polish brown shoes? Whether the prince needed them or not, Guy did not think of himself as a thief. Should he? Then he saw something in the prince's eyes. Teodor had not moved a muscle. He had not even smiled, but Guy thought his eyes said. "It's ok, take them."

Someone was calling the prince's name. Guy briefly saw the concealed resignation before the prince looked away. Guy took his chance and bolted. Only the choirmaster called to him.

"Guy, Guy." Guy froze. Had he been caught? "Guy, we want to do the solo one more time, while we wait?"

"Sir, I've got double maths."

"C'mon Guy, be a good lad. All the kids." It was true, the crowd of costumed children was becoming ever more boisterous – with hysterical laughter breaking out here and there. But Guy had a pair of stolen shoes in his bag – he needed to escape. Yet he saw how bored and restless the other kids were, how some were making pleading gestures for him to do something. Anything.

"Always singing," muttered Guy. "I thought the first time I met Prince Teodor I would have a blade in each hand."

"Life's not fair. Hey? Still, we've not thrown you to the borgs – not yet anyhow."

Guy looked up and saw his teacher laughing. "C'mon, one last time, then you can go."

Guy set aside his jacket and his bag and took his place centre stage, looking out over the innumerable rows of empty seating. He looked back once, but no one cared about his belongings. If it were not for the stolen shoes he knew – he would have felt elated. Instead, disappointment overwhelmed him.

I am a thief, he told himself – no one here knows it except one person. I have let myself and my prince down.

Why did I do that?

Teodor stood to one side of the altar watching the shoe thief sing. No one had noticed that his shoes were gone; undoubtedly, there would be a fuss when they found out. But given there was a whole street of shops a short distance away, he figured someone would be sent running. Or he could call the boy out. If he was his understudy, they were due to be 'introduced'. Maybe he could say something casual like "Oh, and I'd like my shoes back."

He imagined how amazed everyone would be that he had even noticed. The only problem was, if he did that, this boy would be in trouble. Why had he stolen the shoes? Did he want to wear them?

Teodor looked at him. The shoe thief was wearing battered, hand-me down boots, which might once have been part of a Dome Militant uniform. Similarly, he was clad in an old, washed-to-grey Dome Militant track suit – which appeared to be at least one size too big. And he was skinny. *Huh!* Teodor thought. His gaze followed where the boy shoved his sleeves up his arms to the elbow. His forearms were stick thin – bone and well-defined muscle. *Here was someone who trained for hours on end and was never once offered sugar buns for breakfast. Did he fight blades?*

Teodor looked for clues. If this boy trained with the Dome Militant, he would be wearing blades in a harness strapped across the small of his back. No, his clothes were too bulky for him to see. Still, he had the black hair and dark eyes of a Domeside boy – what was he doing here? Singing in the Cathedral?

He had a good voice, Teodor thought, though a little shaky on the top notes. Why would a Dome Militant boy be chosen to play his part? Unless he was too young to be Dome Militant. Teodor paused – maybe that was it. Maybe this boy was fifteen, not yet sixteen – the minimum age for joining the Dome Militant as an apprentice, and maybe he took the shoes because he needed to sell them for money. What did Domeside boys do if they didn't enter the Dome Militant? Teodor knew the statistics well. Almost half of all fifteen-year-old Domeside boys dropped out of school. Many would be taken into the Dome Militant, as his father had intended, but more disappeared from school than were places in the black and gold. What happened to the rest?

Maybe that is why he stole the shoes. *He must need the money.* Teodor thought. *I don't need those shoes. And I need to speak to him. I need to compare notes, because while I know the songs, I am not sure of the moves or the cues.*

"Thanks, Guy," the choirmaster said. "That was great." Simultaneously, he half-waved, half-bowed for Teodor to walk onto the stage.

"This is Guy Erma," he said to Teodor.

So that was his name. Guy. A common enough name, normally short for Guillaume – after Teodor's great grandfather; and Erma, the name given to all boys born without a father. So we are alike, Teodor thought. This boy Guy has no father; my father was murdered. But is that the same? Is it worse to never have known your father, or to have loved him dearly – only for him to be blast to pieces before his palace gates?

Without thinking, Teodor frowned and when he looked back, Guy Erma was moving. Fast. Guy grabbed his bag - the one with the stolen shoes and a jacket. He snapped his running blades to his feet and bounded off. He dodged the many adults who tried to stop him. And with the running blades on his feet, he covered the space to the exit in mere instants. At the great wooden door, he paused and looked back.

Teodor – who had been watching – caught and held his gaze. Astonished, he saw neither fear nor reverence in the other's eyes – as he clenched his hand into a fist, which he briefly pressed to his heart in a parting salute.

"Guy," the choirmaster called.

Too slow. That one moves like the wind.

"Double maths!" Guy shouted back.

"Guy, don't you want to meet..."

You're wasting your breath, thought Teodor. The boy was headed out the door at a trot.

"...the prince?" the choirmaster apologised with a shrug.

"Double maths," repeated Teodor. "Impressive, now I do want to meet him. What was his name again?"

"Guy Erma, my prince. Everyone knows Guy Erma."

"Guy Erma? Really? Everyone knows Guy Erma. Tell him I was sorry not to meet him."

"I will, my prince. Are we all set?" Then, he was distracted. "What is it?"

One of the men, who had been smirking a few minutes before, stepped forward to block Teodor returning to his place on the altar. "The prince's communicator is interfering with the sound system. He has a nice kit, but the equipment here isn't that sophisticated, and, well," The man was speaking fast, and if Teodor did not understand the detail, it was evident by the way he pointed and gestured what he meant. Still, to hand over his communicator - Teodor hesitated, and glanced round.

In addition to the eight Royal Guards, there were two cyborgs he could almost touch, on this side of the altar.

Another two were patrolling with cy-wolves inside the curtain. His bodyguard was sitting three meters away in the audience. The communicator did look strange with his costume. He went and placed it with his clothes. *Why did I let that boy take my shoes? Tsk. Now there will be a fuss, or I will go home barefoot. Why did I let him do that?*

"Prince Teodor, this way. Here, my prince!" Irritated, Teodor walked back and, in doing so, glanced down the tight spiral stair to the catacombs. He glimpsed a Royal Guard and a cy-wolf hiding out of sight. He took his place at the centre of the altar. Ignoring both the cheeky wink of one of the girls and an older boy cuffing a youngster, Teodor paused. From here the Cathedral was vast.

Why is my bodyguard so far away? Where are the Royal Guards? Where are the cy-wolves? Teodor moved uncomfortably. He was well-aware that the Royal Guards, in their designer red and silver uniform, was not a fighting force like the Dome Militant. It was a small security troop, which had been selected for their loyalty and family connections. No, the real muscle today was the giant cy-wolves – the largest and strongest of their kind. Taken from the wild and they were fitted with cyborg brains that made them easy to control; and metal fangs and teeth that made them impossible to withstand. Teodor wished for a moment that he had a cy-wolf at his side. Of course, they would never allow it: cy-wolves were dangerous.

He sighed. *Oh, I wish this was over.* He nodded to the organist, counted out his introduction in his head, and started to sing.

The sound was perfect. His voice, backed by soft organ chords ringing out across the Cathedral. Teodor stepped forward one step, moving with the song. His sandal caught on the trap door. *What was under there? No matter.*

He carried on. *Three steps. Stop.* The choir of children would gather around him. *Where were the children?*

They should be here by now. He took a moment to glance over his shoulder. The choir was still not moving.

Unless he was mistaken, the older boys were holding back the youngsters, but why? *Face forward,* he thought.

Never look back.

Five, Six, Seven, Eight. Teodor took a last breath, as he counted the intro in his head. *At least this was the third verse. It was nearly over.*

Not long now. Not long until they discover my shoes are gone.

His train of thought was broken. The lights had gone out. All the spotlights, all the high-hanging Cathedral lights, all the side lamps. For a moment, he felt blind. He heard a youngster gasp. From darkness, thin rays offered grey light from high roof windows,

OK, not bad. A power cut. I can still see.

He heard two sharp bangs – and a clatter of wood. The 300-hundred-year-old altar curtain fell closed in a rush of wind. Several children shouted out in alarm. With the curtain closed, Teodor could no longer see the great wooden door. To escape, he would have to run around – or push under the heavy drapes.

His bodyguard and most of the Royal Guards were also on the far side. Behind him, some of the children were sobbing. He should comfort them. He must act like a Prince. He turned. An explosion engulfed him in smoke and light – and sent him tumbling onto his backside.

An attack. His head rang, yet he could not hear anything. He tasted blood in his nose and throat.

Another bang and a flash. Now he was blind, dazed and disorientated. *Where's my bodyguard? Where's the door?* He tried to stand. He heard (or did he feel) heavy footsteps running in from several directions. Shots rang out above his head. He crouched to the floor, taking a sprinter's position, as he looked round for a chance to escape. *Who was shooting? Was it his guard? Who were they shooting at?*

Children ran and screamed looking for escape. Teodor watched a girl as a bullet hit her shoulder and span her round, so a second impact exploded above her heart, and she fell. He realised other children were also prone or injured on the stage.

The barrage of fire continued. A huge crash, and the altar shook. Teodor realised the giant tapestry curtain had been shot to pieces and fallen from its hooks to the ground. The resulting wind dispelled the smoke. He looked around, seeking safety. Instead, he saw men in black uniforms leaping towards him. Only they were not men; they were not even cyborgs. Teodor's attackers were the Battle Borgs of the Dome Militant.

Teodor kicked the first Borg's arm, as he reached to grab him. Even in the gloom, the Battle Borg's skin appeared grey. A deep black crack ran from the base of his thumb up his arm, gaping wide at the wrist – showing dead, rotten flesh; beneath, his robotic core. Another black mottled face loomed down on him. Teodor slapped the face in a spinning blade turn, satisfied to feel the paper-like cheek rip under the palm of his hand. A third Battle Borg grabbed him by the waist from behind and threw him over his shoulder. The stench of drying and decaying flesh filled Teodor's nostrils. A jolt, as he realised, they had jumped down through the trap door. *They are taking me.*

"I am your prince, let me go!" cried Teodor. He kicked and beat his captor with his hands and feet.

The Battle Borg paused, threw him to the wall – letting him fall to the ground. There, the Borg kicked Teodor in the legs and belly, and slapped him hard around the head.

The prince covered his head and cowered; yet still he looked up and tried again. "In the name of the king, I command you."

They pressed a cloth over his face. Dazed, breathless and with blood in his mouth, he recognised the smell and tried not to breathe. So, they slapped him again, and he gasped. "I am Prince Teodor." The fumes overwhelmed his senses.

When the Borg threw him over his shoulder once again, Teodor was limp. He could not move, could not hear, could not smell, but he could see, and he could feel. He knew they were running.

Guy laughed as he bounded down the stairs of the Cathedral and sprinted across the plaza to where – on the far side – the market was in full swing. Guy ran between the stalls, where he could easily disappear – all the while taking in the bustle, colours and movement of the early morning trading.

The market was different today. After all, it was Royal Ascot Friday – the first day of Royal Ascot Weekend.

The bakers were displaying special Ascot cakes, the florists hung bouquets of seasonal magnolia blooms, and the veg stalls had great bowls of the season's strawberries, red and plump, shining with juice. Guy felt a thrill to see them. Strawberries meant it was the end of winter. Everyone loved Royal Ascot Weekend.

"Hey, Guy! Over here, Guy!"

Guy stopped and turned back to see a small, plump market stallholder running after him. He had only run a few steps, but he was flushed and out of breath. Guy knew what he wanted. Delighted, he ran back. "Juke! Hi, Jukona!"

"You're still ready to help me tomorrow? At Royal Ascot. I'll pay you."

"Yes, yes of course." It was the highlight of the weekend for Guy – to see the greatest racing gorans of the empire, running in the Royal Ascot.

"Ok, you have to be ready at five. Five, you hear me?"

If Juke was still talking, Guy was no longer listening. He had heard something. A shout! He looked towards the Cathedral. A shot? The entire market fell silent, only for the silence to be rent by automatic gunfire. Around him all the traders and customers turned at the sound of screams – children's screams. Guy looked at Juke then back to the Cathedral.

"I'd better go back," Guy said.

A great creaking crash sent birds flying round the square, and a cloud of wind and dust billowed out from the Cathedral doors. Guy started to move past Juke – only the trader caught him by the elbow and held him. The bang of the explosion echoed around the square.

"No, Guy, no. Don't go there."

“But.”

The bang was echoing around inside his head.

“There’s nothing you can do.”

Guy and Juke watched them running. Dome Militant, soldiers, some stallholders – all running across the square towards the Cathedral. In the distance, sirens were sounding.

Guy still hesitated. “The kids,” he meant his half-brothers and sisters of House Jewel.

Juke held his arm in a vice-like grip. “Go to school, Guy. Go to school. There’s nothing else you can do here.”

About the Author

The best place to find out about me is **here**: www.sallyannmelia.com

And as I like writing, this is where you can **sign up to receive e-letters** about me, my writing, new books and promotions.

As the Dodecahedral series continued **I will also be releasing extras, add-ons and art-work, that you might also enjoy.**

You can also find me:

- on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/SallyAnnMelia/>
- on Twitter https://twitter.com/Sally_Ann_Melia

Thank you for taking the time to read Born of Empire. I'm thrilled to know that you made it to the end!

If you enjoyed the story, **I would greatly appreciate it if you could leave a review on Amazon.** Your honest feedback will not only help other readers discover my book, but also encourage me to continue the series. Son of Empire is already available, Soldier of Empire is coming soon, Captain of Empire is coming in 2024.

Thank you for being a part of this journey with me, and for your support in spreading the word about my work. I can't wait to share the next chapter of this adventure with you.

Sally

UK: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/review/create-review/?asin=B0BY7QBQJF>

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My books:

Dodecahedral Series by S.A Melia

- Orphan of Empire
- Born of Empire
- Son of Empire
- Soldier of Empire
- Captain of Empire
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- 2022 Farnham Flash Fiction Competition Winners
- 2021 Farnham Flash Fiction Competition Winners
- 2020 Farnham Flash Fiction Competition Winners
- 2019 Farnham Flash Fiction Competition Winners
- 2018 Farnham Flash Fiction Competition Winners
- 2017 Farnham Flash Fiction Competition Winners

[See Amazon Page: Sally Ann Melia](#)



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