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Storm of Arranon

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Chapter 1

## Chapter 1

*THE BEST PART WAS WATCHING the eyes. The moment life left them. Death was always such a fleeting climax. Pity.*

Major Birk sighed. A slight smile flitted across his lips. He removed the long needle from the back of Colonel Rennek's neck with a smooth fluid motion.

A tiny drop of blood oozed from the hole at the base of Rennek's skull. The red speck was barely visible under the blunt cut of gray hair. Rennek's blue eyes widened beneath raised bushy eyebrows. Black pupils dilated, eclipsing the colored irises. The slack O of his mouth twisted in a disfigured, right-sided grimace.

Birk's grip on the lapel of Rennek's uniform jacket loosened. "Thanks for the information, Colonel."

Rennek's knees buckled and he slid down the smooth wall of the dimly lighted parking garage.

Birk watched Rennek, savoring these final moments. He enjoyed his work when it was this intimate, this personal. His prey's terror rushed out, the scent of fear invigorating, driving an intense resolve. Panic fumbled with icy fingers, grasping at life, only to slip away.

Birk's smile widened and his stomach churned with an anticipation of pleasure. By tomorrow morning, General Cale Athru of Arranon would be dead and the invasion of this world, Korin, will have begun. The abundant resources of Korin and Arranon would soon be unprotected and accessible.

Rennek's body toppled to the left. His head struck the hard surface of the tarmac with a loud thud.

This little diversion was over.

A tall, heavily muscled man in black emerged from the shadows behind Birk and stared down at Rennek's body. "Major Birk, what about the girl?"

Birk glanced back at Captain Marris. "Rennek didn't have any information as to why Athru's requested to meet with her." He glared down at the body, taking one last look. "Starting tomorrow there'll be no need for disguises, for a tactful approach. If we have questions, we'll get answers." Birk searched the silent, empty space, his gaze focusing on the exit. "The pretense of being citizens of these worlds will end." He chuckled softly. "One step closer to the domination of Korin." Birk tipped his head and nodded. "And to some degree, the real prize—Arranon."

Birk retracted the needle and pulled off his dark gloves. He stuffed them into the pocket of his black jacket along with the thin cylinder of the injector. If searched, the murder weapon would appear to be a small light source common on this world. A smirk twisted Birk's lips and colored his voice. "I got what I needed." He turned from Rennek's body and hurried to the exit.

Marris followed.

Their footsteps echoed off the thick walls and low ceiling with a hollow, staccato cadence.

"Athru will be at security headquarters tomorrow morning. The girl too." Birk slowed, turned his attention to Marris, and frowned. "Could Athru's interest only be due to who her father is?"

Marris trotted to Birk's side. "Must be the reason, Major." They emerged onto a quiet street. Marris shrugged, his head swiveling, scanning the dark. "Why else would someone of Athru's position bother with her?" His tone conveyed contempt.

A balmy breeze stirred the open flaps of Birk's jacket. Stars shimmered high above in the early-morning sky. Different stars. It was always other worlds and different stars. His gaze drifted down from the twinkling points of light. Birk's scowl deepened. "I'm not so sure." He glanced left, down the street, and then swung to the right walking with a quick pace up the gentle slope. "There has to be a reason." An underlying urgency wound through his words. "Why her?"

A transport whirred past. Headlights arced through what remained of the night, reflecting off dark windows in the lower levels of the tall structures. Morning approached. The flow of vehicles would soon increase.

"A gesture of courtesy toward the girl's father?" Marris offered. "Protocol?"

Birk shook his head. "Athru's not the type. If he wants something he coerces, or just takes." They reached an intersection under pale yellow lights. "Athru's aggressive, powerful. That's what's made him a problem." He stepped back into the concealing shadows of a building's alcove.

Marris joined him.

"There's more to Athru's visit than he's revealed. His attraction to the girl is not just diplomatic *niceties*." Birk's lips turned in a sneer, his body tensed. He wanted Athru dead, to put an end to his meddling. "Tomorrow, Athru will die." Birk relaxed at the pleasant image that flashed in his mind.

"What about the girl?" Marris's gaze remained fixed down the street at an approaching transport. The whirring of the engine slowed. The sleek, dark vehicle lurched quietly to a stop at the curb in front of them.

"I'll take care of her. After Athru." Birk's smile returned.

"You'll kill her, too?"

"Not yet. I want to find out more about her. I'm curious why Athru's interested." Birk turned to Marris. The door to the transport slid open with a whoosh. "She's pretty, for an alien I mean." He pulled in a slow, deep breath. "Would you consider her attractive, Captain?"

Marris laughed. "I like her type—high ordnance in a small package." He stepped out of the shadows. "Still, she's willful, a handful. Those kind are always dangerous." Marris shook his head, grinning. Dark hair flitted across his broad brow, aided by a sudden gust of icy wind. His breath fogged out

between pursed lips. He hunched his shoulders and gazed up at the sky.

Birk shivered. A cold hand wrapped him in a momentary grip. He studied the night, searching for a cause in the sudden temperature drop. The breeze softened, warming, and his tremor passed. "I've never found any woman dangerous." Birk's lips stretched, exposing his teeth, more snarl than grin. He looked forward to the following morning.

...excerpt....

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