

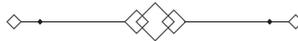
THE
FIRST
SISTER

To Pablo, the Rapier to my Dagger

CHAPTER 1

[14] The men came unto Sister Marian and demanded of her the truth that belonged to her Captain. [15] But Sister Marian was a woman of the Goddess and refused them. [16] She said unto them, “By betraying my Captain, I betray myself.” [17] And she took the knife with which she prepared the supper for her Captain and cut out her tongue, so that no man might compel her to speak.

The Canon, Works 3:14–17



The new fool captain arrives in two hours, so I sort my belongings and pack them into a small bag. Even with all of them together, I have plenty of room. Ringer offered me one of the military trunks that all Gean soldiers keep locked at the ends of their cots, but I refused him because there is nothing I can take that does not technically belong to the battleship ACS *Juno*, my gray uniforms included. My shoulder bag carries only three sets of underclothes and one pair of boots, but I hold tight to it regardless; just because these items are nothing important does not mean I will leave them behind for the next person who claims my title. What’s mine is mine, even if the room no longer will be. Today I am leaving this ship, and I refuse to come back.

Will I miss it? It's not the bed, wide enough for two, or the immense size of the suite, nearly three times larger than the rooms the other Sisters share, that will carve this space into my mind; it's the presence of memories here, haunting me like ghosts. I remember lying sprawled beneath the livecam screen, watching the stars streak past. The way the sheets brushed against my cheek, soft as silk, when I pressed my face into the pillows. How I would wake in the night and feel steady, recognizing even the shadows in the corners, instead of lost in an unfamiliar land.

I shouldn't miss it, though. Soon I will have a whole house full of beautiful rooms like this one.

To think, I will own a *house*. Me, who has never owned anything substantial in her entire life. I shouldn't care that Second Sister will move into this room when I leave, this place as close to a home as I have ever had; I will have so much more than her that I won't even think of her again when I settle on Mars with Captain Deluca. *With Arturo*, I correct myself.

I wave my hand at the room as if to erase it from my mind, and let my eyes blur to take in the shapes instead of the actual furnishings. The spherical screen like a port window with its live view of the stars, the dresser and its three drawers, the sturdy square bed—all become vague hazes of colors instead of solid objects. I step into the hallway with my head held high and let the door slide closed behind me. I do not look back.

Since the *Juno* is an *Athena*-class warship of Icarii make, seized a year ago in battle, the hallways are wide enough for two men to pass by without breaking stride. The oblong ship, black as space, is both stealthy and comfortable. My first ship assignment had been a small Gean pleasure liner, cylinder-shaped and constantly spinning to create gravity, and even as thin as I was, I had to shift sideways to walk down certain corridors. I never understood how the broad-shouldered soldiers made do, men like Ringer, who stands solid in his navy-blue Gean uniform at end of the hallway, waiting to see me off.

“First Sister.” Ringer bows his head to me, ever the faithful parishioner. His piousness is eclipsed only by the kindness in his silver eyes. If we were alone, he might pull me against his wide, muscular chest and hold me tightly, but that would be all he would do. His hands would not wander, his eyes would not burn with lust, unlike so many of his fellow soldiers’. “Are you ready?”

I put on the mask of happiness tinged with concern, a slight furrow of the brows mixed with a tentative smile. As a Little Sister at the Temple of Mars atop the glorious heights of Olympus Mons, I always pleased my Aunt Delilah with my animated expressions, with the way I imparted a mix of feelings with a simple adjustment of eye and mouth. She impressed what an exceedingly important skill communicating in subtle glances was for Sisters to learn. A necessity, once your voice has been taken.

“I know you’ll miss us here—and we’ll miss you—but you’ll adjust to your new life.” Ringer’s thin lips pull taut in a smile, but the rest of his expression remains static. His face is that of Mars stone, sharp and deeply pitted, an unfinished sculpture of a warrior at rest. “You deserve what happiness Captain Deluca can give you.”

My smile fades. I offer a solemn nod. I will soon be free of the Sisterhood’s politics—no more jealous Sisters, no more controlling Aunties—but I must not look too eager.

Another reason I maintain a steady friendship with Ringer: he intuits what I want to express. I wish to look like I will miss the *Juno*, like Arturo is taking me away from duty and home, instead of appearing excited and ready to abandon my post, and that is what Ringer sees. He may be one of the few from this ship I will think of fondly on Mars.

“Do you need an escort?”

I shake my head and clutch my bag to my chest. Ringer has been good to me on the *Juno*. In thanks, I hold out my hand, and Ringer, a head taller than me, kneels. I press my palm to his forehead between his blond hair and thick dark brows and close my eyes as if praying,

offering him one last blessing. But the words running through my head are those that Arturo whispered to me, a description of my new house. *A home in the gravity-controlled dunes with a little patio in the sun where you can grow pansies and honeysuckle . . .*

“Thank you, First Sister,” he whispers.

My fingertips slide from his forehead to his cheek and trail down his stubbled chin. He watches my hand retreat to join the other gripping my bag. When Ringer stands, he offers me a traditional Gean salute, his right fist clenched over his chest, his arm parallel to the ground. The salute is meant for those higher ranking, usually officers, and while the Sisterhood is exempt from military hierarchy, his gesture is an honor. I am unaccustomed to being saluted, and pride swells within me.

I make sure to keep my smile bright as I part from Ringer and back into the elevator. Just as the door is closing, an arm snakes into the gap, and the door reopens fully lest it crush the slender limb. Second Sister steps inside, and Third Sister trails close behind, both dressed in the same gray as me, only without the white captain’s armband pinned about their right biceps. They smile like I do, but I can see through their expressions; the rest of the cosmos might be blind to our true meanings, but we Sisters know each other well.

Aunt Marshae comes floating after, prim face pinched into a smile that does not quite reach her eyes. I do my best not to let my frustration show; I had hoped to escape the *Juno* without facing her, cowardly as it might be. Our Aunties are charged with the task of speaking on behalf of the Sisterhood, and while Aunt Marshae has trained Little Sisters to hone their expressions, she rarely masters her own. But another reason for her sour look flowers in my mind.

She wants me to see her displeasure.

“You look lovely today, First Sister.” My Auntie sniffs pointedly. The door closes after her, trapping me in the circular elevator with the three of them. I am deeply aware of each sharp pair of eyes turned in my direction.

I tuck my bag beneath my arm and tangle my fingers in my skirt, purposefully keeping my hands still. Aunt Marshae straightens her uniform, the same gray as mine but more covering, with a scarf about her neck and a hemline that falls to the floor. “Perhaps leaving the *Juno* and its believers thrills you?”

I quickly put on the mask of hurt. Furrowed brows and a trembling lip. I’d cry if I could. *Of course not*, my face says. *I would never want to leave my Sisters*. At least, I hope it does, but my Auntie laughs.

“Your face does credit to your training,” she mutters, but she finally looks away from me. “If you girls have anything to say to First Sister, now is the time.”

Second Sister’s milky white fingers tuck inky black hair behind her ears in order to give her hands something to do while she considers what to say. I expect her to rebuke me or express her thankfulness at my leaving; Second Sister was Captain Deluca’s favorite companion on their previous ship, but as soon as we all moved to the *Juno*, Arturo promoted me over her. I suspect I will never be forgiven for that. But instead of the expected hatred, her hands move with grace and poise. Her smile is genuine, reflected in her amber eyes. *Much luck in your future*, she signs in the hand language reserved for the Sisterhood by law.

I’m so surprised by her gesture it takes me a moment to respond. *Thank you*, I sign at last.

This is our sole method of communication, we Sisters, for we are not allowed to write and we cannot speak.

Third Sister shoulders the smaller Second Sister aside on her way to me. If Second Sister has held a grudge against me, Third Sister outright hates me. She glares at me, her lip curled, fury radiating out of her green eyes. Her vibrant red hair looks like fire as she whips it over her shoulder. Her hands flash at me. *Get out and good riddance*, she says, ending with an offensive gesture that even the soldiers would understand. She flattens her hand like a blade and slaps it on her sternum, as if cutting her heart in two.

I straighten to my full height and look down on her. She is almost as tall as I am, but I have long been favored for my slender legs and golden hair, and I remain defiant even in the face of her anger. Second Sister seizes Third Sister's biceps and digs her fingers into the soft flesh there, stopping the red-haired girl from doing anything more than signing. Aunt Marshae says nothing.

Long ago, when I was not a ranked Sister, just a girl first assigned to the small pleasure liner, Third Sister might have cornered me in the bunks where there were no cameras. She could have had others hold my limbs so that she could pull my hair or strike my body with the flat of her hand, avoiding my face and trying not to leave bruises.

But that is the way of being a Sister, and all of us have both endured these attacks and led them.

For now, I am lucky, and I have been so for a long time. With my excellent physical features, I became a ranked Sister quickly, and the Mother herself rewarded me with my posting on the *Juno*. From the moment I met Arturo, I received his favor, and he rewarded me with private quarters and the captain's armband, allowing only him to call on me for anything more than confession. Third Sister has never been able to lay a hand on me. She is as powerless now as she has been since I was promoted above her.

"Walk with the Goddess in this new season of your life." Aunt Marshae's words are but an empty platitude from the Canon, the book that guides the Sisterhood. She also favored me until Arturo asked for me as a lifelong companion in his retirement. Since his request, she has made it clear that she had higher hopes for me. *Your success is my success, niece*, she used to say. Now she says little other than to shame me.

I will bloom in Her Garden as She commands, I sign in answer to Aunt Marshae, but my Auntie simply scoffs, clearly believing I am not blooming as I should be. *Farewell*, I sign to the others.

As soon as the elevator reaches the docking bay, we trail out—me first, as befits my rank, followed by amber-eyed Second Sister and

red-haired Third Sister, whose bitterness somehow hasn't put her at a disadvantage in life. Aunt Marshae comes last, herding the other two girls in the opposite direction from me.

I shouldn't have expected heartfelt goodbyes from anyone on this ship, particularly when a large part of my reason for accepting Arturo's offer was to escape people like them. On Mars, I'll only have to care for and impress Arturo; how much easier it will be when I don't have to worry after my fellow Sisters and Auntie too. My stomach unclenches as I enter the docking bay and cast my eyes about the various ships moored there. Which one will I be taking away from the *Juno*?

The side of the hangar gapes, openmouthed, and beyond it the swallowing black of space and the light of a thousand burning stars. It looks like a window to the cosmos, a thick pane of faintly glowing glass between the outer vastness and the *Juno's* interior, but it's actually advanced Icarii tech that allows ships to launch and dock at will while keeping oxygen inside. The shield is created by the hermium engine, technology built with a substance specific to Mercury. Hermium is so influential to Icarii designs that it's also the basis for the *Juno's* gravity generators and power system. Most Geans will never experience technology like this in their lifetimes.

If only the Icarii would share their hermium. Doing so could save all of our planets. But the Icarii have forgotten their origins now that they live lavishly on Mercury and Venus, abandoning their humanity just as they abandoned Earth and Mars. We Geans remember; we have a long memory, and the Sisterhood's is longer than that. We have been here since the beginning of it all.

We were the ones who worked on Earth against the pollution that tore apart the planet. We were the advisers to captains from the very first mission to colonize Mars. We preached against the excess of machinery, rightly predicting the Synthetic rebellion against humanity. And now we watch over both Earth and Mars as half of the Gean government, providing homes for the homeless, jobs for the jobless,

and health centers for the sick. We exist to ensure no one repeats the mistakes of our past. As a species, we simply cannot afford another Dead Century War.

The ships moored in the docking bay vary in size from small cruisers, two-man craft used for errands, to military carriers that drop infantry planetside, a mix of Gean-made and those seized from the Icarii. I don't see Arturo anywhere, but the bay is full of workers, as usual, men and women in jumpsuits unloading crates of rations, mechanics working under metal panels or on the humped backs of various craft. A group is gathered on the far side of the bay. Since Arturo was the *Juno's* captain for its first year of service under the navy-and-gold Gean flag, he is sure to be in the middle of that crowd, receiving praise and saying his goodbyes. He's had a home here on the *Juno*, one that I've helped to provide with my loyalty and love.

It is an odd sensation when no one looks at me as I approach; I am accustomed to attracting attention as if I were shouting aloud. But then, all at once, faces turn to me and blanch.

I keep my expression neutral. Unease ripples through the crowd as more people turn to me, as their voices quiet to murmurs, as someone points at me but says something only to their companion.

A fist tightens in my chest, holding my heart captive. Why is everyone acting like this? Where is Arturo?

The crowd steps back from me at my approach, creating a bubble around me, a liminal space they cannot—or will not—touch. The jovial chatter dims and dies, and only whispers remain. Eyes look anywhere but at me: at their formal uniforms, at the surrounding shuttles, at the glasses of sparkling water filled with strawberries as red as my lips from the hydroponic gardens.

But where is Arturo?

I look at the clock: 0900 hours, the time of his disembarkation. Yet I don't see him or any members of his family come to retrieve him.

"You must be the First Sister," a smoky voice says. Some girl in Gean uniform steps forward; it's hard to tell her age, but I doubt she's

even a handful of years older than my twenty. As soon as she speaks, the crowd takes it as encouragement to resume their celebrations, chatter picking up as if, thank the Mother, someone put an end to the First Sister's hysteria.

I clutch my bag tightly to keep my hands from shaking. I have eyes only for this soldier, her hair shaved on the sides but long on top, fluffed up like some greenboy's. If I look anywhere other than her, I may wither, so I harden my face.

"Captain Deluca wanted me to personally offer his thanks for your year of service on the *Juno*," she says, her voice low and heady. She places a hand on my shoulder and guides me to her side, turning my back to the crowd. She doesn't want anyone else to hear what she has to say. Or, more likely, she doesn't want anyone to see my naked reaction to her words.

She leads me deeper into the docking bay, back toward the elevator, ushering me away from where I should be. Where I *need* to be.

Where is Arturo?!

I cannot ignore my panic any longer. I ground myself and stop walking. She halts as well when she realizes I no longer intend to follow. "Do you know who I am?" she asks.

I shake my head. Perhaps because she was part of the celebration, her uniform is disheveled, her jacket unbuttoned, revealing a white tank top beneath. I cannot see her command rank. Besides, I don't care. I shouldn't be answering to anyone other than Arturo.

He *promised* me.

"I'm Saito Ren." As soon as she says her name, I realize that I *do* know who she is. She's the new captain of the *Juno*.

She's Arturo's replacement.

And if she's already here, if she's part of his farewell party, then he really is—

I spin back to the docking bay and look for his ship through the crowd of people. Where is it? Where is he? How could he—

He *promised* me.

Captain Saito seizes my shoulder and turns me toward her, quick and effortless. “I’m sorry you missed him. He wanted to say his farewells, but he didn’t want to miss his flight.”

But it was supposed to be at 0900 hours! That’s the time now! That’s the time he told me, and yet he’s already gone . . .

He left me.

The truth sinks bone-deep and leaves me shaking. The fist holding my heart squeezes until it pops. All of his promises whispered between white sheets meant nothing. The house he described is gone, the two bedrooms and the patio I could fill with flowers and the latest gadgets, the home he would visit twice a month when he could get away from his wife and children.

Did that house even exist? Why would he promise to take me with him and then abandon me as he left? Why would he promise me my freedom from the intricacies of the Sisterhood only to leave me in their clutches?

Certainly this is a mistake. He didn’t mean to leave me. Surely he’ll send for me when he gets settled, and this Captain Saito just hasn’t given me that part of his message yet.

I look at her, but . . .

“Should I call a medic?” Captain Saito’s voice is stern, almost disapproving. I realize how unsteady I must seem, and I quickly school my face into blankness. I press a hand to my stomach and count my breaths. Even if my heart races, I cannot outwardly show how utterly destroyed I am. How terrified I am.

Because if Arturo really left me—*And he did*, a little voice whispers—then I am stuck here as First Sister with a new captain who may promote someone more favored to my position. I am not free, and I am not safe. And if I cannot keep my position as First Sister?

I press my hand to the white captain’s band on my arm and remember Third Sister’s hateful gesture in the elevator. Back to the bunks, back to the beatings.

I need to leave—I need to return to my room and reassess before someone sees me so undone—

Aunt Marshae appears at our sides before I can extract myself from the conversation with Captain Saito. Goddess wither it, now I must deal with her as well.

“I just heard the news,” she says, and this time her smile radiates through her entirety—her lips, her eyes, even the roots of her sculpted auburn hair, hard as an Ironskin helmet. “What a blessing that you will continue to work alongside us, First Sister.” I clench my fists to hide their trembling as her deft hands strip the white band from my arm. “Though this belongs to you, Captain Saito, until you see fit to distribute it.”

“I suppose so.” Captain Saito takes the armband and rubs her thumb over the coarse fabric.

I look at my bare arm, and . . . I am as good as naked now.

I am again property of the soldiers. My *body* is their property.

“Aunt Marshae, I’d like to see all the highly ranked Sisters, and even some of your best unranked girls, in my quarters later. First Sister, will you come by?” Captain Saito calls my attention back to the docking bay. She makes it sound like a suggestion.

But it’s an order. With a captain, it’s always an order.

My Auntie nods encouragement, and I mimic her though my eyes burn. I want to retreat to a hidden room and cry—wordlessly.

“Then I will see you soon,” Captain Saito says. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a schedule I must keep.” She marches away without a second glance. I try to swallow, but my throat is too dry.

“May you bloom in Her Garden as She commands,” Aunt Marshae says in a sick parody of my earlier words. Second Sister and Third Sister start across the docking bay to join us, and I break away at their approach. I do not want them to see how shattered I am. I do not want to read their gloating words on their hands.

I start my long walk back to my quarters, my few belongings in the small bag clutched tightly to my chest. This is not the way a First

Sister should act, but for the life of me, I cannot do anything other than run away like a fool.

At least I reach the elevator before the tears come. I try to blink them away, but then the intercom overhead clicks on in warning and Captain Saito's voice fills the small space with me. Haunting me, even here.

"As of 0900 hours this morning, you are no longer under the command of Captain Arturo Deluca."

The tears roll down my cheeks in thick tracks.

"I am Captain Saito Ren, and I am honored to be taking this journey alongside such a brave and diverse crew on the most advanced battleship in the Gean fleet. You are the pride of Earth and Mars, and together, we will more than fulfill our duty to protect Ceres and keep our newly claimed territory clear of Icarii ships."

My nose runs. I do what Aunt Delilah told me never to do and rub my face; in this moment, it does not matter that I'm breaking the sensitive capillaries in my skin.

"I have one simple goal: to serve the Gean worlds."

The elevator doors open, and I thank the Goddess that the hallway is empty except for a single Cousin with a broom. She turns her wrinkled face from me. The hard laborers of the Sisterhood and the only sect that accepts men, the Cousins are nothing more than servants—and a reminder of what happens to a Sister when she is no longer beautiful or wanted.

Is that what will become of me now that Arturo has left me behind?

"I will fight without mercy to keep the Gean people from perishing as our planets wither."

Finally, *finally*, I come to my quarters and open the door with shaking hands.

"I will not allow for any distractions that interfere with our future."

My knees give out beneath me before I can even reach the bed.

"This is no longer Captain Deluca's ship. This is my ship. And you will find it a different place than before. A changed place."

There is nowhere I can go that Captain Saito cannot follow. There is nowhere to hide that she might not snatch from me and award to someone else. I had thought I was safe with Arturo, but now I know: I am not safe anywhere.

“I expect absolute dedication and hard work. There will be no handouts here, no special treatment for anyone on board.”

I reach for my armband—only to remember Aunt Marshae has already taken it away. *No special treatment*, Captain Saito says. Not like Arturo and his playful eyes and wandering hands. At least I knew what he wanted. I could protect myself with that knowledge.

“Now all of you get to your stations,” she says over the intercom, and I think of my little chapel and its accompanying bed.

“Earth endures,” Captain Saito begins, and I hear other voices lift to join her in response, “Mars conquers.”

I drop my face into my hands and let the silent sobs break me apart at last.