

**Gods of Atlantis:
Boiling Point**

A Grace of Gods novel

by August Niehaus

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To my teachers,
whose most impactful lessons
taught me when to go my own way.

Author's note: A brief word on time

For the miiquils, a people from another planet, our concepts of time are only somewhat meaningful. Miiquils set their internal and external clocks by their own measurement of passing time, and while they did their best to account for the cycles of Kihata (their name for Earth), they have no formal measure that would be sensical to Earthlings.

Thus, for ease of reading, I have translated miiquil time units into those we use as modern humans.

Prologue

A strange miracle it was, to be alive.

The old miiq-deer flared his nostrils into the wind, sorting through the salt-encrusted scents of the shore. Even after decades of human years, this place still didn't smell familiar.

Any day now, you will sail home, his blood whispered. But home was gone. He could stare out at the sea forever, and he would never see Naushena again. The breeze ran through his fur like slender fingers, fingers he missed with his whole being.

He took the serrated blade off his belt and absently flipped it, caught it, and flipped it again. He let his tired mind wander to where it always wanted to go: to the sweet company of the loves of his life.

The knife fumbled out of his fingers, landing point-first in the sand.

His skin crawled with the invasion of a stare. He turned slowly, ready to give everything left in his creaky bones. If it was a fight they wanted...

"Mister, are you s'posed to be with us?"

It was just a cub. Out here, on the deserted shore, this one had slipped back into his pure miiquil form: four wide, insectoid eyes blinked out of sync, a twin-sawblade mouth twitched, and both of his upper-body appendages flailed. On the end of one claw, a small reed basket rattled with a sad number of cowrie shells.

The old miiquil grinned at the cub, bending with a grunt to retrieve the knife. "At my age, there is exactly nothing required of me, so I doubt it. Truly a blessing."

Now he could hear a whole gaggle of cubs, just over the dunes—probably a school trip to the shore.

The present cub tipped his head at the old miiquil and frowned. "You're weird."

"So I've been told," the old one chuckled.

A second cub appeared at the top of the dune, panting. When she spotted the old miiquil, her urgency doubled and she danced in place. "Come on! Teller B'Andai's gonna tell about Naushena! Come on!"

At the sight of his classmate, the first cub flung his limbs in the air. His basket of shells went tumbling, and he scurried off, the cowries forgotten.

"Woah, kid! Your—ah, well." The old miiquil sighed and once again bent over to retrieve the basket.

His back creaked in anguish. Decades of Kihatan gravity were finally weighing on him, quite literally. He was very tired.

But if the cubs' teacher was indeed the young Teller B'Andai, the old miiq very much wanted to hear what she was telling her class about his old home.

He hauled himself up the sand dune and crested it to a comical sight: fifteen unruly cubs swarming around one exasperated rat-aspect miiquil adult. They were all gathered at the base of a tower built from shore-scavenged wood and sea-smoothed stones. The rat-aspect's hands were on her hips and her whiskers rose high in distress; she swiveled around, squawking the names of the cubs without effect.

Finally, the same cub who had summoned her friend shrieked an unholy note. The pack clapped claws to heads and sat down hard in the sand. Staggering with visible relief, the teacher—who was, indeed, the young B'Andai, Joica—started her story.

"In the middle of the sea, where humans do not dare go, there once was a great island."

Joica was attempting a lilting drawl, an affected storytelling voice, but to the old miiquil's ear it was amateur and clumsy.

No wonder she's practicing on the cubs, he thought with a smile.

He sat down on top of the dune, gazing out at the sea while he listened.

"It was the center of all miiquil culture here on Kihata—"

"ATLANTIS!" screeched the cub who had fetched her friend.

The others bubbled with excitement at the name.

"Yes, that's what the Greeks call it now, but my mother and the others who lived there called it Naushena. It was where our ancestors hid after they crash-landed the mothership, the *Sanisaro*."

Folding his arms, the first cub side-eyed Joica and muttered, "I wouldn'ta crashed it."

The old miiquil couldn't help snorting with laughter. The cheeky cub reminded him sharply of someone he loved very much.

At the sound of his laugh, Joica whirled on the old miiquil, hand to her heart. She stared at him with hooded eyes, then her expression flattened with recognition. "Ah. B'Inia. Would you care to join us properly?"

The cubs all scooted around in their spots to peer at him. The first cub lit up and patted the sand beside him. "Yeah, sit with me!" he called.

The old miiquil scrambled down the dune to join the circle, handing the first cub the basket of cowries as he did. "As you wish," he said, trying to swallow his groan as he sat down cross-legged.

Joica gave him a sideways look, then folded her arms and went on huffily, "Now. Where was I. So. There were three factions—"

This time, the cub who interrupted was a serious, curious youth. "What's a faction, Teller B'Andai?"

The cub reminded the old miiquil of himself at that age. He leaned forward and said, "It's a group that believes something together."

"Like what?" the cub pressed.

"If you'd let me tell you..." Joica said pointedly.

The cub looked down at his claws in his lap. "Sorry."

Joica ticked her facts off on her fingers. "There were the Kleriks, who believed the best chance for miiquil survival was to take on human forms and fully integrate with humanity. There were the Vodamiiqs, who saw the path to survival in hiding until humanity could be taught to see us as gods from the stars. Finally, there was Shago B'Laeli-Jubea, who wanted to escape Kihata."

It was such a watered-down version of the truth that the old miiquil couldn't help but snort. "That's one way of putting it."

Joica gave him a sharp look as the cubs giggled. "Shago built a lab beneath Naushena, which was powered by the *Sanisaro*'s old gravity field generator—one half of a giant sphere at a time. He dug down below the island, into the planet itself, and made it very angry. It began to spit out lava and make the ground shake!"

The female cub gasped, and the first cub grumbled, "I wouldn'ta been scared."

Joica shushed him, and then went on, "Shago made his final move and brought something old and dangerous up from the bottom of the sea—and it ripped the island right in half, almost down the middle!"

As the Teller spoke, the old miiquil's mind slid away into the place between his eyes and his memories.

Spirits. I remember... The screams... The last moments of closeness...

He saw it all again: Naushena, swaying, as if joining the miiquils in dancing; the ground, opening like a great mouth; the two halves of the island, tearing open like a seam...

He returned to the present as Joica told the tale exactly wrong.

"The whole island began to sink, each half tipping over until it fell away with one final earthquake. The undertow almost pulled all of miiq-kind into the sea, but they were able to row the boats away fast enough."

The old miiquil couldn't hold back his correction. "Aw, spirits, that's not how it happened. You weren't there, Teller."

"Yeah, *he* wouldn'ta told a fish story like that!" the first cub piped up.

The old miiquil reached over and gently put a hand over the cub's mandibles. "I don't need your help."

"Oh, and you *were* there?" Joica said, drawing herself up and putting her hands on her hips, the image of a teacher. "Well, if you think you know what happened, then you should just tell us."

The cubs joined in: "Yeah, tell us!"

"Please?!"

"I wanna hear the real story!"

Suddenly self-conscious, the old miiquil rubbed the back of his head. "Oh, uh... well, I didn't mean to, ah... well."

This was not a story he had ever told before, not in full. He had only reminisced with the other survivors, picking apart fragments of time over empty goblets and sputtering candles. But the eager faces looking up at him reminded him that the heroes he'd known needed to live on in the hearts of these cubs.

"There's a brave miiq you should know about. She was barely more than a cub, but more courageous than any three grown-ups you know, put together."

"She wouldn'ta been scared," the first cub said.

The old miiquil smiled. "Oh, she was scared. But she was still brave."

"This is supposed to be a history lesson, B'Inia," Joica grumbled.

"I'll give you facts, Joica, you calm your whiskers." The old miiq-deer closed his eyes and smiled.

"Listen, cubs. Let me tell you how I fell in love as Naushena fell into the sea."

Chapter 1

Every musical group in the city of Abban knew how to play “The Ones Who Chose More,” but rarely with as much passion and speed as the trio on stage strummed and drummed and belted it out now. The beat made all the dancers move faster across the courtyard. The paving stones were slick with midsummer rain.

Bursting with nervous energy, Charra danced quickly across the floor to where her parents and siblings stood. Other dancers slid out of her way, and she plowed past them, pulling Minnor with her.

Once she was close enough, Charra noticed the shifty-eyed miiq-camel Lanii hunched over her mother Hano’s shoulder. At Lanii’s side, her only son Almonis shot glances Charra’s way; clearly, the gangly miiq-otter thought he was being surreptitious.

Unfortunately, Charra couldn’t avoid seeing the likes of Lanii and Almonis here, try as she might most days. This midsummer party, thrown by Official Shago B’Laeli-Jubea himself, was open to every miiquil, from the lowest Klerik of the Steel Kleritage to the other officials themselves.

A spike of irritation rushed through Charra. *Of course Lanii would hunt Mama down and crowd in on her time all night, she thought. And Almonis is probably hating Minnor’s guts right now.*

Charra looked at Minnor sideways—the way she’d been looking at him all night, wondering for the first time if she was being fair to him. The white chiton he wore offset the red-brown of his deer aspect like a sunrise on the clouds. The collar showed a tasteful amount of the seam where his red deer pelt met human skin on his shoulders; the folds of the fabric flattered his lithe humanoid body. Even the leather pouch always hanging on his belt gleamed, freshly oiled.

Minnor’s looking especially shiny tonight, Charra mused. Full of potential. But he’s always looked like this, hasn’t he?

Their gazes met. Minnor’s liquid black eyes glowed with a steady confidence from which Charra could hardly escape. For a moment, she forgot that she usually met with Minnor to piss off her parents. With reluctance and effort, Charra bared her big front teeth and tore her eyes away. She had to keep her wits about her.

Tonight she was going to make her parents take her seriously.

She shivered, though the rain was warm. *It isn’t a snap judgment, she told herself firmly. She had considered her path in life for years, and especially for the last few weeks. She was ready to declare her independence.*

She would kiss Minnor, here, in front of everyone. Right where her whole family could see.

Charra’s wrists tingled with nervousness. She stumbled, suddenly clumsy. Her foot stamped down hard on Minnor’s. The air left him in a wheeze and he squeezed one eye shut.

“O-oh!” Charra squeaked. “Sorry, Minn.”

She reached out to touch him, but halfway through the motion she realized what she was doing. Her shoulders warmed under her chiton and her hand stopped moving.

Minnor froze too, and he forced a chuckle. “I’ve got a whole other foot,” he said easily. “Besides, you’ve been more than forgiving of my clumsy legs.” He gestured to said legs.

Charra’s eyes followed the lines of his body downward, and the heat on her shoulders grew unbearable. She turned away, her voice perhaps a bit too light. “I do think you should’ve let that miiq-seal at the market teach you how to dance.”

He leaned towards her. "I wasn't sure you'd like that much."

Smiling wider than she intended, Charra tipped her head so that her mouse ears and whiskers sank attractively. She patted Minnor's velvety cheek. "Oh, I wouldn't have minded."

He leaned into her touch, and she smelled the thyme oil on his coat and skin. She almost closed the distance between them. But then, over his shoulder, Charra saw Hano and her father, Tamar, ushering rat-faced Vinni and chitinous Rikki towards an unmistakable black and gold adder's head, swaying above the crowd. It was the city architect, Master Ragma.

Charra was sure her family wanted to thank him for bearing the burden of her apprenticeship these past few years. At any rate, they weren't paying attention to her anymore; her chance to make a statement on the dance floor had passed.

Guess I need to be a little more verbal, Charra thought. Before she could talk herself out of it, she breathed out hard through her nostrils and took Minnor's hand.

"Come with me?" she asked.

"Wherever, Char," Minnor responded. He was so earnest, as if he was making a lifelong promise, not tagging along to the spread at a midsummer feast.

Chills danced up Charra's spine, which straightened as his fingers twined around hers. She walked off the dance floor and into the crowd.

Ragma caught sight of them first, seeming to slump with relief. At his reaction, Hano and Tamar turned around, registering surprise.

Charra wound up a convincing smile. "Master Ragma," she said, dropping Minnor's hand and taking Ragma's proffered one.

"Charra," he said, flicking his tongue. "A pleasure."

Charra took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "Likewise. I wanted to thank you for the opportunity to learn from you and work with you all these years. You gave me so many skills and ways of thinking, I don't know where to begin."

It wasn't difficult for Charra to show Ragma genuine gratitude. He was someone steady, reliable, and trustworthy. She would miss his tower office and the nest constantly full of bukissa kittens in the corner.

She was keenly aware of everyone crowded around her: Hano and Tamar, hovering on either side; Minnor two paces behind, unmoving; and Lanii and Almonis, doing a horrible job of pretending not to eavesdrop.

"Charra, what are you—" Hano started, grabbing Charra's elbow.

But Charra didn't take her eyes off Master Ragma's serpentine head. "Really, I couldn't replace the experience I've had training with you. And I wanted to tell you first."

Hano pushed between Charra and Ragma. "Tell him what, Charra?" she demanded, her nostril-like nares flaring.

Charra maintained eye contact with Ragma, determined not to stop until she had said her piece. "I won't be studying to become an architect anymore, Master Ragma. I'm joining the Cult of the Sea."

Everyone around Charra gasped as if sharing a breath. Beyond Ragma, a broad-shouldered ram aspect turned his friendly, fluffy face, one brow raised. He threw Charra a broad wink.

Charra swallowed hard. It was her good friend Udaru, the owner and barkeep of the Rattlin' Bone. That meant *everyone* would know. She blinked furiously and focused on Master Ragma again.

The miiq-adder didn't drop his brazen stare.

Tamar touched Charra's wrist. "Char, are you sure about this?"

She drew away from her father, afraid his touch would be the end of her resolve. “As sure as I’ve ever been of anything, Babo.”

At long last, Ragha nodded. “Let the youngster do what she wants. There is no teaching an apprentice whose mind wanders. Charra, may you find what you are looking for.”

It seemed he had given everyone else permission to breathe again.

Tamar leaned in, wringing his hands. “Ragha, I’m sure we can work out a payment for—”

Ragha waved him off. “Oh, do not worry about that. I will only miss her company at mealtimes.” He caught Charra’s eye and flicked his tongue. “She always knew how to keep the kittens calm.”

A lump formed in Charra’s throat. It was hitting her, a bag of rocks in her stomach. *I did it. I broke my apprenticeship.* She was free to become an acolyte of the Divine of the Sea. The Divine was somewhere at the feast tonight; everyone was. She wondered if the Divine would hear and approve, or even care at all.

Suddenly, Lanii’s shrill, horn-like voice cut into Charra’s thoughts. “I declare. Hano... I hope we don’t plan to go back on any *other* commitments...” Lanii’s every word dripped with implied meaning. One layer of her lids dropped so her camel eyes grew milky and dead.

Almonis stood stiffly by her side, looking everywhere but at Charra or his mother.

Charra couldn’t help it. She rolled her eyes. Hoping Lanii and Almonis were watching, she took a step back and leaned into Minnor, brushing her nose against the thyme-scented line of his jaw.

He turned into a stiff pillar at her touch. His oiled fur was so sleek. He smelled *amazing*. She had noticed all of these things about Minnor before, but... never all at once.

“*CHARRA*,” Hano shouted.

Charra startled and jumped. Minnor let go of her as if her chiton had caught fire.

Hano turned hard on her heel to Lanii, the lines of her whole body apologetic. “Lanii, let me talk to my daughter.” She grabbed Charra’s wrist and steered her towards the well-laden tables under the courtyard roof. Charra was grateful, at least, that Hano was walking them to the food.

“Stop it,” Hano hissed under her breath when they were out of range of the curious listeners.

Charra spat her response. “Stop *what*? I’m an adult, Mama.” It was laced with more poison than she intended—but it felt good to say what she meant, for once. “These aren’t your choices to make for me, and they’re definitely not Lanii’s. I don’t owe her anything.”

Hano’s slack beak told Charra just how surprised she was that her eldest was speaking to her in this way. “This is uncalled for, Charra. At the midsummer’s feast? In front of everyone?”

Charra wrenched her wrist out of Hano’s grip and picked over the food aggressively. “Oh, would you rather I did it at home, in secret? I’m not pairing with Almonis, and you *know* that.” She slammed dolmas and barley bread onto a plate.

Hano flexed her long neck sharply. “It’s not just that. It’s this nonsense with Ragha, too.”

Her choice of words made Charra bristle. “It’s not *nonsense*, Mama. I want to live a *meaningful* life. Designing a three-street expansion for a city that’s geographically limited, hoping I can get it done in my lifetime? That’s not meaningful. That’s everlasting torture.”

Hano’s beady black eye pinned Charra in place. Then it closed as she sighed, her whole demeanor softening. “My sweetness.” It was a nickname she only used when she knew she couldn’t reach Charra any other way. “Don’t you want safety, stability? The Cult of the Sea and a wall guard can’t offer you that. I only want what’s best for you.”

“Oh, great. This again.” Charra stuffed her mouth with barley bread and spoke around it. “You really think being a city planner paired with a tailor is so much better than what I decide for myself?”

“Yes. I do. I’m a scribe paired with a homemaker, and it’s pretty wonderful.”

The pressure in Charra’s chest was too great to ignore. The nearness of so many expected inevitabilities stifled her. She had to say it now—she *had* to. If she didn’t, was she really being true to herself, the way the Divine taught their acolytes to be?

“Well, *I’d* like to have a real purpose,” Charra said loudly, in a rush of breath.

Miiquils nearby stopped dancing, eating, talking. Charra’s voice carried to at least three hundred curious listeners.

Hano was very still. Her stare hardened. “Don’t choose the wrong life, Charra,” she said. “You can never go back from some choices.”

A tall miiq-rabbit, holding a distant audience captive with her words, tipped one long ear towards the commotion. Charra recognized the current Teller, Andai B’Vennu-Torrein, and flushed deeply. Her voice started to shake, but she pushed on. It was too late to stop.

“Yeah, I know you can’t. Like wasting my life doing something that doesn’t do anyone any real good. Maybe a wrong life for you isn’t a wrong life for me, Mama.”

For some reason, the models and drawings she’d done under Ragha’s watchful eye rose into Charra’s mind: sketches from her imagination of soaring towers to keep the southern coast safe; accurate technical renderings for a dock observatory, to watch the stars while the sound of the water kept you dreaming; those models she could hold in both hands, of trading posts and libraries and artists’ retreats, built from scavenged shore sticks and stones.

That wasn’t a purpose. It was a chain on her ankle, chosen by her family.

“I don’t want to be bored,” Charra almost shouted. “You know what I am after walking around this same spirits-damned island every day for twenty years, just walking towards an inevitability? I’m *bored*. Abban bores me. My *life* bores me.”

Hano shrank into herself. “I—I just want you to be able to look back and be proud of yourself.”

Charra recoiled. She was fragmented. Bits of her wanted to float to her mother and throw herself into Hano’s arms with an apology. Parts of her were screaming with every fiber to *keep going, keep going, keep pushing away, keeping swimming away*. And most of Charra was frozen, unsure of what to do next.

All the way up to the pool overlook three stories above, attendees of the midsummer’s feast strained to hear what Charra would say. The rain whispered soft speculation.

Her mouth moved of its own accord. “Yeah? Or are you worried about *you* being proud of me? Well, I don’t need you to be proud of me. Not for the Cult, not for Minnor, not for anything that’s mine. It’s *my* life, Mama.”

Over Hano’s shoulder, Charra caught sight of her youngest sister Rikki. Still free from the burden of holding herself to a foreign shape, Rikki’s insectoid eyes stared at her older sister, an unspoken accusation written there.

Hano blinked furiously at Charra, swallowed hard. Then she walked away without another word.

Charra’s heart pounded in her ears.

Hano reached Tamar and the younger sisters and spoke in a low voice. They all looked past Hano at Charra and then, one by one, turned away.

Chapter 2

“Which side do we sacrifice?”

Even with her osprey feathers ruffled, Dosha managed a dignified tilt of her neck as she asked the question Shago B’Laeli-Jubea had been dreading.

Shago’s nerves jangled in his belly. His whole body tingled with the impending greatness of the moment. He had been lost in thought, re-imagining every detail, checking lists thrice.

He tipped his head, careful not to dislodge the safety goggles he’d pushed up to his forehead, and let his thoughts flow freely.

What is right? What will be the perfect touch?

Shago couldn’t recall every detail of the laboratory shift schedule. Was Varoo on the left, or had she called in sick? What about Korzi and Iskann, those brilliant young minds?

Who will we lose?

Shago ran his hands over the series of buttons and dials on the control panel before him. The four indicator lights he’d laid into the panel himself pulsed in low blue.

In the end, he told himself, it wouldn’t matter. *Couldn’t* matter. Whomever was left, he would turn them to his cause. He would show them the way. Eventually, they would understand.

But this was the final touch. It had to be perfect.

All for the glory of miiq-kind.

Dosha was still staring expectantly at Shago when familiar footsteps thudded up the stairway to the command room. The sound set Shago’s teeth on edge. He quickly closed the door to the lower observation point and straightened his chiton. He plunged his hand into his pocket, locating the heavy metal sphere and swirling it in his palm like a whirlpool.

Another variable, another stressor, approached him.

Belario’s young, dark head was high as he entered the room. “I heard something disturbing from one of the techs. You’ve been drilling into Naushena’s heart?” His accusation boomed from his broad chest and his labored breath filled the air.

Essi’s scent hit Shago like a headache.

He smells just like her...

Shago’s nostrils and mind were filled with rosemary oil and an unmistakable musk of *life*. He was transported to some-when else: just him and her and the sand under their feet as they strolled the northwest beach. Sunset before them, starlight behind them.

There was a massive hole in his chest where his mate used to be.

Why is Belario the one who lived?

Shago’s body burned hot as the flames of anger filled the void.

Dosha brushed his wrist with her long fingers. “Shago. It is urgent. Which side?”

Shago startled and stared at her. He still had no answer. *What will be the perfect touch?* Not Dosha’s, though it would do.

“Which side what?” When neither Dosha nor Shago answered, Belario pressed, “Father, which side *what?*”

Shago kept his gaze on Dosha. “I—let me think.”

She nodded, but the tap of her foot gave away her urgency.

“Father! You’re turning off the magnets?!” Belario’s voice cracked and rose an octave with his outrage. “It’s three hours off shift change! They won’t have any idea it’s coming, they won’t be prepared!”

The fire inside of Shago caught, rushing down his arm until the heat tingled in his extremities. “Let me think!” he barked.

“Everyone will fall into the lava and die!” Belario howled.

Shago could not stop himself. He would not allow Belario, of all miiqs, to ruin his triumphant day. His hand moved of its own accord, cuffing Belario’s jaw so hard his wrist immediately ached. The sound echoed in the command room.

Belario staggered, clutching his face. “Aaa-ahhh... Father...” His eyes flicked up to Shago’s face—a cub’s eyes.

There were no paternal instincts in Shago’s soul to stir.

The veins in Shago’s temples throbbed as he struggled to rein in his temper. He put his hands on the intricate control panel spread before him, concentrating on the well-worn materials, on the sensation of victory beneath his palms.

“I paid their families,” Shago said.

“You—*paid*...?!”

Shago filled his nostrils with the putrid smell of burning rock. It always smelled like the four hells in the laboratory, even when the reinforced doors of the command room were sealed.

Fire was king in the lab. Water did not rule.

“Though you never had to contemplate such a concept, Belario, a life traded to secure basic necessities for one’s family is considered fair by many.” Shago did not look at his heir as he spoke.

“You really think you can replace a family with gold.”

“I do not presume anything,” Shago spat over his shoulder. “This is about ignorance and knowledge. I have knowledge, and you and they act in ignorance.” He gestured to the hallways of party guests above them. “I will burn away the ignorance today.”

Belario spluttered. “Spirits, always with these grand stories you tell yourself. Besides, I’m *not* ignorant. I know what you’re doing here, in the dark.”

“Oh? Do you know? Have you figured it out, Belario?”

Belario backed his sharply-pointed ears. “It’s some wildly selfish experiment. You’re going to turn off the magnets!”

Shago’s chest hitched with self-righteous jubilee. Belario knew *nothing*. For all of Shago’s efforts, for everything he had done for his heir, Belario had retained so little of it.

Shago pocketed the metal sphere. “Ah. Yes. You have *certainly* figured it out. Dosha, take down the right side.”

Dosha’s sleek head slid into the feeble light. She blinked one big, beady golden eye at each miiq-wolf in turn. “Yes, Official.”

Her fingers flicked deftly across the control panel buttons. The indicator lights brightened to a pale purple.

Two wolf automatons rested on either side of the lab door. At the sounds of the magnetic gravity field spooling up, they flicked their metal ears.

Belario’s panicked words pitched up sharply as one of the four lights went green. “No, Father! Stop! Please! I can’t be a part of this! I’m not like you. Gold *isn’t* a fair trade for lives. You can’t just choose *for* them! For Korzi and Iskann? Old Piquim? Taran? She’s barely more than a cub!”

Belario’s wave of words crashed ineffectively against Shago’s internal shield. Shago’s mother had tried this with him as soon as he had hatched aboard the mothership. She’d flung criticisms at him, constantly rejected his intelligence and potential.

Everyone on Kihata already hated Shago. Even his own mate, when she was still alive. And what none of them could understand was that it was all worth it.

We miiquils have every right to rise up, seize the resources on this planet, and return to the stars.

Our legacy will be my legacy.

The goggles sat heavy on Shago's head, like a crown. "Miiq-kind is squandering its second chance at survival, and I will not allow that."

"You could talk to them! Tell them—"

Belario's protests were as irritating as a mosquito. "I have tried that, Belario, and you know it," Shago said in his most patronizing tone. "This is a cold universe, a universe that rewards stupidity and ignorance *far* too often. If the Vengeful find us, they will not be kind. We cannot be defenseless. I will ensure we are ready."

"But we shouldn't *be* the Vengeful," Belario protested, wincing as the force of his words wrenched his swollen jaw. "You would murder your own people for—"

Dosha's sibilant voice lashed out like living vines. "The Vengeful would not bother with charges such as murder. The Vengeful would lay eyes on you and rip your flesh from your bones." She illustrated her point with a sharp clack of her beak and a low hiss.

Shago smirked at the glowing signal crystals. *Ah, Dosha. I should reward her well when I rule the stars.*

Belario's voice shook with whatever shook his soul. "So, it's blood on your hands, then, Father? You'll sacrifice your scientists for your... *show?*"

Belario was too loud. The techs in the lab—or worse, the guests—would hear him. Shago spun around, baring his fangs. "Keep your voice down."

"Or what?" Belario asked, his smirk wobbling between crazed and determined as he swayed on his feet. "You'll hit me again?"

He believes I will not kill him.

The thought struck Shago like a fist to the gut, and his whole body tensed up. So much of him wanted to show Belario, right now, in this moment, exactly how wrong he was.

But Shago's hands trembled at the thought of the last traces of Essi leaving the planet.

I know my hand will stay, even if I try. Because of her. Someday, I will overcome this weakness. For now...

"Adir, Dura, heed," Shago said aloud.

The mechanical wolves raised their heads, locking their red crystal eyes on Shago. The power level indicators along their throats glowed bright green.

Shago pointed. "Adir, Dura, target."

The wolves swiveled, staring at Belario. They tapped their blade-like claws on the metal floor.

Belario's throat bobbed, but he didn't flinch.

"Adir, Dura... if the target's voice rises above seventy-five decibels, restrain him." It was a risky, complex command. Shago hadn't tried such verbal coding when it counted.

The automatons rose to their feet, dropped their heads between their shoulders, and showed Belario their metal fangs.

"Dosha," Shago said, "the right side."

Belario's smile faded. "I—Father, *please*," he said in a much softer voice. "The structural danger... If you deactivate the magnets for too long, the whole lab might swing off kilter. And if it does... if it hits the continental slope... it's going to collapse." An appeal to facts, to science.

Shago shook his head. Of course. He had tried to teach Belario for so many years, and he only listened at this late hour.

When it didn't matter.

The second indicator light went green.

Shago tapped the buttons beneath each signal crystal to override the off-shift power diversion safeguards. Halfway ready.

There was a soft thud as Belario went down on his knees, heedless of his fine chiton. "Aren't you afraid of what happens if Naushena falls?"

Shago's heart quickened. The words stayed his hand.

Deep in the system that kept the laboratory's lava-powered machinery cool, the water gurgled. It was a deep, coughing, swallowing gurgle, promising a slide into darkness from which there was no return. Shago's body squirmed as if crawling with electric worms. Water filled his ears, his head, his consciousness. It pressed in, weighed him down. He thought of drowning: of spaceships sinking, of mothers flailing in the waves with burdened arms, of islands slipping into the sea.

I do not want to drown...

Shago backed his ears to snap himself back to the present.

"It is not a matter of 'if,'" he said, certainty flattening his voice even as the flames licked at his insides. "Naushena will stand until it no longer needs to stand. Go. Enjoy the party. Shed your ignorance with the rest of them."

Belario's mouth moved like that of a water-starved fish. The automatons lowered their heads by way of warning, and Belario swallowed whatever he might have said and looked at the ground. His shoulders slumped.

Triumph rose with the fire inside of Shago. He rested one hand on the button he would press when everything was finally ready. It would change the flow of electricity, and therefore the gravity fields within his laboratory—the final preparation for his greatest act.

As soon as the other two lights turned green...

The button was smooth and cold. Shago had salvaged the material from the miiquil mothership at the bottom of the sea, risking his life several times for this scrap of metal. It meant everything, to know that the restoration of miiquil glory would happen at the touch of Miiquan material.

It was fitting. It was perfect.

"All of this, a whole little world we've made for ourselves..." Belario's voice was so tiny and soft, it was barely there. "You'd throw it away for everyone so you can have the glory for yourself. I can't believe we share blood, old man." His volume rose on the final two words. The automatons raised their heads, their hollow chests rumbling.

But Belario's whole body was slumped. He got up, his head bowed, and left the command room. His footsteps, so much heavier than when he was a cub, retreated up the staircase outside.

Relief rushed through Shago's veins, and he released a breath he hadn't registered holding.

"You are certain he will not cause a scene." In Dosha's flat tone, nothing was a question.

"Certain? Never. But I know that boy. That was the softness of defeat in his step. Any fuss he would raise now would hardly be enough to distract from what we will put into motion."

Dosha lowered her head until her beak brushed against her chest. She pulled her blue cape tightly around her lithe body. "Mmm."

Shago frowned. "You doubt this?"

Dosha looked past Shago to the door to the command room. “I will go and watch him later. After we begin.”

Only Dosha could speak to Shago as she did without it ringing of insolence. He trusted her judgment. After all, she had come to his side because she, too, believed there was nothing more important than miiq-kind’s return to the stars.

His hand found the sphere in his pocket, and he squeezed his palm around it until the intricate marks in the metal left peaks and valleys in his skin. “Of course,” he said with a nod. “After we begin.”

Tonight, Shago would seal his legacy. And his failed excuse for an heir would have to watch.

Chapter 3

Charra's heart fluttered furiously in her ears as she stormed out of the courtyard, into the depths of Official B'Laeli-Jubea's home. The adrenaline of facing down her mother, of declaring her plans after weeks of sitting on them, garbled her thoughts. She wasn't sure if she was furious or terrified.

Her tingling shoulders told her that every-miiq had stopped to watch her go. She tightened her shawl over her shoulders but made sure to muster a spring in her step, to show how little their opinions bothered her. Casting off the weight of their judgment meant she could make her own way in the world, convention be damned.

Her foot hit an uneven spot in the stone floor, and she pitched forward. The blood roared in her ears, and she remained on all fours for a long moment, trying to regain her sense of reality.

Someone touched her arm, and Charra jumped.

Minnor wore a concerned smile. "You alright?"

Over his shoulder, a pair of miiqs in heavy blue cloaks swept into view out of a hallway, muttering to each other and looking around with intent. The official's guards were on the lookout for scene-makers like Charra. She grabbed Minnor's chiton and pulled him against her so their muzzles almost touched, watching over his shoulder as the guards rolled their eyes at the couple and moved on.

Minnor's heart thudded so loudly Charra could hear it.

She let go of his chiton and sniffed. "That was close. We should find somewhere to hide out for a while. Doesn't look like they thought much of what I said back there."

"Aren't you worried they'll see us running off together?"

"If you hadn't noticed, I don't give a damn," she murmured.

Minnor frowned. "That's kind of a bad idea."

Oh, she liked bad ideas. Bad ideas were how heroes were made. Bad ideas made her fingers curl.

She brought her whiskers very close to Minnor's ear and whispered, "*You're* kind of a bad idea."

Minnor seemed tongue-tied, so she took his hand and pulled him into the closest staircase. They were on a landing and could either go up, following strategically-placed lamps, or down towards a deep orange glow.

Voices floated up from below—one sharp and commanding, one reedy and servile. Charra pricked up her ears and strained to listen, but she could only catch a couple of words: "...ready... party... lot of power..."

Something about the way the voice had said the word *power*... It sounded like reality tearing, not to be so easily repaired.

Charra nudged Minnor and flipped him a careless grin. "Onwards and upwards?"

"The pool's up there," he said, not looking her in the eye.

"So?"

"It might be crowded. You saw how many miiqs are back there." Minnor shuffled his feet. "They let *Kleriks* here tonight, Char. So many of us wall guards have seen this pool from the wall..." He trailed off, but the hunger in his voice said the rest.

Charra wanted more than anything to let him experience luxury, if just for a night. “Well, we can sneak up and see if it’s worth it. Please?” She caught both his wrists in her hands and lowered her voice, stepping closer to him. “For me?” *For you*, she thought.

Minnor looked at the wall, the ceiling, the floor and, finally, at Charra. His nostrils flared. “Okay.”

“Okay,” she echoed, delighted. *My partner in crime.*

Tonight, her crime was seizing what she wanted out of life.

Minnor fell into place so easily behind Charra. They took the stairs two at a time, Charra sometimes dropping to all fours to go faster. The height stole her breath, and so did reckless laughter.

She swung open a heavy door, and the almost-night opened unexpectedly above them. The lamps hissed as rain teased them, the same rain that had driven away all other potential swimmers. Everything dampened by the storm smelled like high tide and clammy shoes.

The infinity pool stretched out into the night, disappearing into the sunset and then into the northern half of Naushena itself. The land stretched out like a massive hand towards the sea, the view obstructed only by Abban’s formidable outer wall.

Charra shaded her eyes against the rain. The island had never seemed very big to her, and the older she got, the more constrained she felt by its familiar boundaries.

“I hope you didn’t ruin your life for me, Char.” Minnor said the words so softly she almost asked him to say them again. He reached out and ruffled her head. “I wouldn’t like that.”

Charra ducked away from his hand, annoyed, then tipped her head back and let the warm rain bead on her whiskers. She laughed. “Oh, Minn. I don’t do anything for anyone but me, you know. If I ruined my life, I ruined it for myself.”

He swung his antlers, rolling his eyes. “Great. That’s so reassuring.”

Charra grinned and grabbed Minnor’s arm, squeezing his bicep with admiration she kept to herself. “As long as life stays interesting... I don’t really care what other miiqs think of me.”

His breathing quickened, and Charra keenly felt how her chiton exposed her shoulder. She wasn’t quite ready to face the strength of his desire.

She let go of Minnor’s arm and danced towards the water, letting her shawl drop off her. “This gorgeous pool is calling my name. Let’s have a good night, huh?”

Before she did anything too daring, Charra needed a swim. She threw her arms over her head, feet slapping the wet clay floor before she launched into the water.

The pool was deep and accepted her hungrily. Pointing her hands out in front of her, Charra shot down to the bottom, skimming it before she let her body rise and corkscrew.

As she cut through the water, Charra’s body slipped away from its human form, her clothing and accessories absorbing into her body. With great effort, her arms pressed to her sides and became long, flat fins. Her head flattened and her eyes floated to the top of her skull. Her legs fused together, forming a tight, whip-like tail.

She was the skate. She was not Charra anymore.

The transformation prickled her body as if with a hundred thousand tiny needles. Shifting between forms, especially since she’d only been doing it for a few months now, came at a massive physical cost. The skate slipped, and her pure miiquil form surfaced.

Charra forced her body to fully return to its mouse-human combination, her chiton dripping. This transformation was so fast that her nerves ached. Even if she was prepared to be rejected by most of miiq-kind, she wasn’t sure she could handle Minnor’s rejection. Not tonight. Tonight, she simply wanted to *be* with him. To enjoy herself, and him.

She surfaced, shaking water out of her ears.

Minnor sat on the side of the pool, his feet in the water. He'd taken his chiton off, and his bare chest gleamed with oil above his loincloth. His leather pouch lay carelessly on the stone beside him. A heavy, pungent scent hung on the air, sour desert flowers meeting the salty crust of the sea.

Minnor threw his head back, his face slackening blissfully, and then he snorted. Tendrils of smoke curled out of his nostrils, like seaweed taken by the rainy tide. "Ahhh, that's the stuff."

Before today, Minnor had taken care to hit his pipe only when he thought Charra wasn't looking. Pushing her concern away, she slid through the water softly and caught the pool wall.

"Have you tried quitting?" she asked.

Minnor swung a hurt look on her, some of the ecstasy fading from his eyes.

"I'm not judging you," Charra said quickly, pawing water off her whiskers. "I just like to know what I'm working with."

Minnor's shoulders slumped. "It's a trick question," he said, turning one hand over in front of his face, blocking Charra's view of his cryptic expression. "And I'm not proud of it, or of my answer: no, I haven't tried, because there's no reason to."

"No reason to try? You don't think life will get better for you?"

"I'm going to be what I am forever." Minnor smiled sadly. "Until I die. I can't escape it. That's not easier to swallow without the pipe. Especially not... with what I really am." His gaze slid away, avoiding her.

Charra turned that idea over—being what she was forever. The thought of not seizing her life in her own two hands made her sink back down into the water up to her nostrils. Impulsively, she reached out to find Minnor's ankle.

He startled at her touch, pulling away.

Charra grinned, then splashed water at him. "I think you've got plenty of potential," she said. "I bet you're more than a wall guard someday."

That made him smile sadly. "Ha, yeah. Maybe."

His helplessness and his hopelessness trickled along Charra's exposed skin along with the rain. A rift she hadn't realized lay between them widened. She let go of Minnor and ducked into the pool, splashing playfully when she surfaced again.

"Hano—my mother—she says I'm addicted to the water." Charra twitched her nose, bobbing in place. "I do swim as much as I can, so... maybe I am. But I'm *free* in the water. Carefree, free from obligation. Free from the weight and shape of... this." She gestured to her body. "I need that freedom. Crave it."

Minnor spoke so softly Charra had to strain to hear it over the hiss of the rain.

"I... crave you."

Fire danced up Charra's spine from below her belly. Faced with the force, the truth, of his desire, she couldn't move. She swallowed hard.

"I want you, Charra," Minnor said, and he slipped silently into the water.

He crossed the short distance between them with one kick and cupped her jaw.

The air left Charra's lungs, crushed out of them as if she'd descended suddenly to the ocean's depths. She pulled him towards her, sealing the gap between their bodies. She pushed her muzzle against his.

Minnor always presented his hard edges to the world, but tonight he was soft, so soft.

Charra sank into his gentle embrace. This was the last of his barriers, the physical one. Charra hadn't really known she wanted to cross that barrier until he touched her face that way.

Or perhaps it was when he'd brushed against her as they ran up the stairs. Or maybe it was the way he'd leaned into her and held her waist as they danced.

It didn't matter. She was lost now. The kiss was the sea and she drowned in it.

They broke apart, but barely. Minnor's fingers ran across Charra's shoulders. She shivered and nudged against his neck, nibbling at the seam where his coarse fur met his human skin. He let out a shuddering sigh and wrapped his arms around her. Charra wanted to crawl further inside that embrace—*no*. She stopped herself.

The door's metal handle clanged against the stone.

Charra ducked down into the water, pulling her ears down under beside her head. *Spirits be merciful*, she thought, *and let Official B'Laeli-Jubea be merciful too...*

Minnor spun around, putting himself between her and whoever might come through the door. His hand tightened on her shoulder, no longer conveying desire, just concern.

Heavy feet slapped the wet stone, punctuated by heaving sobs. Charra shrugged Minnor off and cut through the water silently to peer over the edge.

A blur of dark fur and bronze skin rushed past, straight to the short wall on the east side of the roof. Instead of stopping, as Charra expected, the figure lunged onto the wall and stood on the edge, wavering.

Charra's human heart leaped into her throat.

Without thinking, she hauled herself out of the pool and onto all fours, as if she was on the starting block for a race. Something in her nerves told her not to get too close, not to lunge for the miiquil too quickly.

Screaming—someone below was screaming. Then more miiqs shouted, the cries rising from the inner courtyard four stories below. Someone might have said a name, but it was all a roar in Charra's ears.

She was fixated on the way the miiq's heels were the only thing preventing a fall. Her vision split and wavered. She wondered if she was about to see her first death.

Charra skidded to a stop a miiq-length away from the jumper. Her hands twitched at her sides.

The breeze picked up, tickling her nostrils with the sea mist and the faint scent of rosemary. She could see now that the jumper had a black-furred wolf aspect; his ears were two pointed hats against the night sky, his eyes golden gleams. He wore a look of despair and grief like Charra had never seen.

Fear filled her mouth with metal. She physically felt the miiq-wolf's radiating emotions, a wash of heat on her skin, and swayed backwards.

The motion brought her against Minnor's chest; he was right behind her. There was no fear in his stance. Drawing strength from Minnor's presence, Charra found her words. "Don't!" she called to the miiq-wolf. "Don't do it!"

The miiq-wolf's ears flattened. "Get back!" he shouted. "Don't come near me!"

She ignored him, reaching out a hand. "Take my hand. Minn, take my other one. We'll pull you in."

"No, don't!" The miiq-wolf leaned forward, wobbling precariously. "I'll go over!"

"Why?" The word wrenched from Charra's throat. "Please. At least tell me. There isn't a single miiq on whom I'd wish a fall like that."

He snorted softly and shook his head. But he took a tiny shuffle-step backwards.

"You'd wish worse on me if you knew the truth of who I am," he said. "Why should I even bother taking up air and food and space in this city?"

The rain whispered secrets on the wall.

“That seems harsh,” Minnor said into the prolonged silence.

“*I am harsh,*” the miiq-wolf spat, the tension returning to his shoulders. “You don’t know me. I’m cruel and I don’t even mean to be—I’m just stupid, and privileged, and ignorant. I didn’t see today coming. All those years of it happening right in front of my nose...”

Charra sensed an opening. “*What was happening?*”

But the miiq-wolf kept muttering to himself, “I was always helping him. Making it possible.” He turned his head towards them. His jaw swelled with a fresh, angry bruise.

Charra’s own jaw ached in sympathy. She wanted to reach out and touch his cheek, but the look in his eyes stayed her hand.

“Spirits,” she whispered. “Your face.”

Even without the swelling, the miiq-wolf’s smirk would have been ugly. “Yeah. You see now? See why? You understand why I’m doing this?”

“I don’t,” Charra said. Her tongue moved faster than her brain; she wasn’t sure what she would say. “I see a face that deserves to heal and hands that deserve the chance to serve justice for those wounds.”

“Justice, ha!” What passed for a raw laugh scraped out of the miiq-wolf. The rain streamed down his bowed head. “This *is* justice. This is what I deserve.”

“It can’t be.”

Below them, a miiq shouted, “Someone get Shago!”

The miiq-wolf’s ears flattened. “Would you want to live like this?” he asked softly. “Knowing you were responsible for so much pain, so many lives lost?”

He shuffled closer to the edge, lightly windmilling his bare arms.

“If you jump,” Minnor said, “I’m going to jump after you.”

Charra knew Minnor’s threat was a promise. Her heart thudded in her ears.

“*What?*” The miiq-wolf’s voice tightened. “Why?”

Minnor gestured calmly to Charra. “She and I, we’re involved now. We can’t let you do this by yourself.”

Charra could swear Minnor winked at her.

Licking dry lips, she picked up the thread. “Maybe it’s selfish of me...” She paused to calm the trembling in her voice. “I *really* don’t feel like jumping over the side of this building. I’d really rather hear your story, *why* you’re so terrible and all, over a cup of wine and a plate of figs and cheese.”

“Why?” the miiq-wolf repeated, with far less hostility.

Charra folded her arms across her chest, feigning nonchalance. “Because you’re already more interesting than most miiqs I know.”

“Second that,” Minnor said.

“Very funny.” But the miiq-wolf’s ears pricked up.

“I have a place in mind,” Charra pressed on. “The Rattlin’ Bone, in the North Merchants’—”

“I know where the Bone is,” the miiq-wolf said with a sniff.

He was so charmingly offended. Charra grinned out of the sheer relief that he was relenting. She let out some of the fire in her veins with a light laugh. “Sorry, sorry. Just... you seem like kind of a homebody. Well, come out with us, then. Maybe someday I’ll convince you to try the cumin wine, eh, Minn?”

She elbowed Minnor in the side.

“That sounds nasty,” the miiq-wolf said. He took another small step back.

Charra's gaze was glued to his feet. "It's not," she said.

"It is," Minnor said at the same time.

"It is *not*, Minn! It's an acquired taste; that's different." Charra harumphed and flicked rain off her ears.

"You're crazy," the miiq-wolf said, but his voice carried real amusement now.

"I'm not the one hanging off the edge of the official's pool," she retorted.

It hung in the air, a palpable challenge. The shouts below had softened to nervous muttering.

"Alright, you've convinced me," the miiq-wolf said at last. "Maybe someday I'll try cumin wine."

"Give me your hand," Minnor said, "and there could be so many things, someday."

They all hung by a thread. The tentative flower of connection bloomed between them. Charra held her breath.

"Alright," the miiq-wolf said again. His whole body relented, and he slid back.

All of the air left Charra in a rush. "I'm Charra, by the way."

Minnor extended his hand. "And I'm Minnor."

The miiq-wolf's golden eyes glowed as he pivoted. "Glad I met you, Charra and Minn—"
And he fell.