

I



RAELYNN

She wasn't going to miss the view from her apartment. That was Raelynn's main thought as she prepared her graduation robe, placing her medals in their proper positions. Despite having gone through the process a dozen times with her tutor, Raelynn still didn't have it memorized. She kept glancing at the sheet in front of her, reminding herself that once she made it through today, she wouldn't have to worry about this ever again.

At twenty-three years old, Raelynn was poised to graduate from the Satias Academy. Though she didn't yet know where she'd end up, she longed to live in New Caelus, the greatest city in Imperium. Satias was a decent city, with a lively enough nightlife, but New Caelus was where Imperium's true power players resided.

In Imperial society, becoming a Keeper was the highest honor. Although under no obligation to do so, parents could freely surrender a child to the Keeper system. There were ten Keeper academies across Imperium, located in each of the Big Ten cities. Keeper children were randomly assigned to a school, where they studied until they were at least thirteen years old. Once they became adolescents, the potential Keepers took their aptitude test to discover in which of the seven divisions they would specialize: War and Defense, Intelligence and Espionage, Diplomacy, Finance and Business, Science and Medicine, Media and Technology, or Logistics and Transportation. Many of the divisions, however, worked in close partnership, and in recent years, it'd become more commonplace for Keepers to work across two or three of the divisions over the course of their career.

Keepers served as Imperium's top politicians, in control of the seven divisions of its government. Some parents decided to sever ties with their child, contenting themselves by knowing their child would—if successful—become one of the most influential

members of Imperial society. Understandably, many parents saw the cost of losing one or more of their children far too great a sacrifice to bear. Others—perhaps those less inclined toward parental affection—were keen to induct their child into the Keeper system. Keepers, however, were prohibited from yielding any of their children to the Keeper system. Imperium frowned upon family dynasties. Its founders had assumed that, over time, a handful of families would dominate Keeperdom and, by extension, Imperial government. To prevent such an occurrence, the first Cooperative—Imperium’s primary legislature—passed a law forbidding Keepers’ offspring from ever becoming Keepers.

Donning the black robe with a red sash worn by all Diplomacy students, Raelynn joined the rest of her peers in Darmello Field. Each of the divisions graduated individually within the academy, ensuring that the ceremony did not run for an unbearably long time. The keynote speaker for Diplomacy students this year was Lord Dynast Nisha Corinth, the second-most politically powerful Keeper in Diplomacy, inferior only to the Lord Regent, Levin Liston. She was an impressive choice but also fitting, seeing as she was an alum of the Satias Academy.

“Good morning, graduates,” Nisha began. “I want to start off by congratulating you all on reaching this point. Since you were young, you’ve been studying within the walls of the Satias Academy. As Diplomacy students, you are gifted with the ability to negotiate, empathize, and understand. I strongly believe—and I’m not just saying this because I was a Diplomacy student myself—I strongly believe that Diplomacy students are the best Imperium has to offer.”

Nisha paused, nervously adjusting her tassel. Raelynn could not help but think that public speaking did not come naturally to her.

With a smile, Nisha continued, “I have had the distinct pleasure of serving as our division’s Lord Dynast for the past six years. In that time, Diplomacy has been at the front and center of major conflicts across the universe, tasked with dealing with stubborn leaders in the Civitan, Terraria, and the Core, as well as Neutral Space. We have never cowered from a challenge. Our Lord Regent is exceptionally bright. He is also a man of principle who refuses to allow War and Defense to force Diplomacy into a permanently submissive stance. Our Lord Regent was the keynote speaker here three years ago, even though he attended the New Caelus Academy. But we shan’t hold that against him.”

Friendly rivalries existed among the Keeper academies. The New Caelus Academy, which was regarded as the most prestigious, naturally bragged about its high caliber students. And perhaps that was, to an extent, true. But the other nine academies were

also impressive; each had its own specialty and strength.

“In his speech,” Nisha went on, “our Lord Regent said, ‘In a culture that seems to worship war as the only solution, diplomats are more crucial than ever. You all, as some of the most recent Diplomacy Keepers, will soon bear this burden and find yourselves working in an, at times, openly hostile environment. You alone are the harbingers of a new age—one that might, perhaps, see coexistence as a more cost-effective answer to the universe’s most pressing concerns.’”

“I am inclined to agree with our Lord Regent’s vision. Diplomacy is a growing division—the fastest growing for two years straight. Of course, Satias is renowned for its strong Diplomacy program, but still, your class is larger than those of your fellow Satiates by almost one hundred. What does that mean for you? It means we are becoming a force to be reckoned with. It means we have a real shot at defining Imperium’s agenda instead of being victimized by it. It means we are instating more embassies, more sanctuary cities, more human rights organizations. We are poised to usher in Imperium’s greatest age. And standing here, looking out at your faces, I know that you will all make a difference. So, here’s to you, graduates! And your future!”

The audience applauded. In alphabetical order, the students took to the stage to accept their diplomas. When Raelynn received her diploma, she felt a strange sense of invincibility. Now that she had her diploma in hand, anything was possible. Her life would officially begin.

It was customary that, after receiving their diplomas, graduates—now officially called Audillas—took the months of Astrum and Sidum off. Most used that time to travel and familiarize themselves with the world of Imperium, to have one last celebration before becoming part of the daily grind. Raelynn aimed to follow their lead.

As a planet, Imperium was unique. It consisted of one major landmass. Four oceans framed Imperium—Frija Ocean to the north, Desmona Ocean to the west, Auster Ocean to the south, and Taeras Ocean to the east. Imperium’s vast ice shelf, Frija, dominated the planet’s southern pole. Imperium was divided into five separate regions—Boreal (the northern region), Marellus (the southern region), Umbium (the central region), Exora (the eastern region), and Vesper (the western region). While most Imperials lived in urban settings, those in the lowly populated regions of Exora and Boreal, for example, favored rural, small-town life. Imperium boasted advanced train systems, which operated up and down the mainland, in and out of every major city and town. If one had a few months to spare, one could travel from New Caelus in the south to Doctro in the north

by train. The scenic voyage was particularly popular among retirees.

Before Raelynn knew it, though, Sidum was over. After returning from their months of leisure, Audillas revisited their alma mater to learn which Keeper they would be shadowing for the next four to six months. It was customary for two or three Audillas to work as interns for a given Keeper. From what Raelynn understood, the academy graduates' transcripts became accessible to all Keepers. There was, of course, a pecking order among Keepers; senior Keepers had first pick and therefore ended up with the allegedly superior students. But Raelynn—unlike most of her peers—wasn't nervous. She was ready to move on from her academy days.

Hundreds of students stood alongside her, their eyes glued to the door. Keepers started to file in. The process was mercifully quick, as the Keepers arrived knowing whom they were looking for. Yet, while most of her peers left with their new mentors, Raelynn remained. She didn't think much of it . . . at first. There were many possible explanations. As time wore on, however—and the room emptied—Raelynn's optimism faded.

Alarmed, the Satias Academy's overseer, Lord Trevelyan, disappeared to converse with some of the tutors. It was unusual for an Audilla to be left unchosen—highly unusual, even. There were more than enough Keepers to act as advisers to the recent graduates. After half an hour, Trevelyan returned. Raelynn knew something was wrong, just by looking at him. His eyebrows were furrowed.

"Here's the story." Raelynn already didn't like where this was going. "Lord Regent Liston wants to take you on as his Audilla."

Raelynn's heart lodged in her throat. Lord Regent Liston wanted her to be his Audilla? She could hardly believe it.

"But . . ." Trevelyan sighed, and all of Raelynn's hopes dissipated. "High Justice Caine has decided to step in, claiming that Lord Regents cannot mentor Audillas."

"What?" Raelynn tried to collect herself. "But what does that . . . what does that mean?"

"It means you are now in the hands of the High Court. They're going to decide what happens to you."

"What happens to me?" Raelynn instinctively tugged on her collar.

"They're not going to kill you or anything," Trevelyan assured her, chuckling. Raelynn didn't think the situation merited a chuckle; her whole future was in jeopardy. "They're going to determine whether or not Lord Regent Liston can, in fact, take you

on as his Audilla.” Trevelyan placed his hand on Raelynn’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I don’t see High Justice Caine’s argument having any legal basis.”

“But if it does?”

“It won’t.” Trevelyan smiled. “Try not to stress about it too much. I’m sure you’ll love New Caelus. It’s quite the place.”