

The Auction

“Slow down, Henry!” Victor’s voice strained, lacking its usual strength as he limped along the cracked concrete road. The uneven terrain sent jolts of pain up his leg, but he gritted his teeth and pressed on, doing his best to ignore the burnt-out buildings around them. The ruins loomed like ghosts of a better time, their charred walls whispering stories of rebellion and loss. Figures huddled in the shadows, undesirables who muttered half-hearted pleas for handouts. Victor kept his eyes forward. “The boats aren’t going anywhere!”

The forced enthusiasm didn’t go unnoticed. He caught Elias rolling his eyes, the gesture subtle but pointed. Still, Victor soldiered on. Henry didn’t need to be burdened by the realities of the world just yet. He deserved a few more years of innocence—four, maybe five—before this fragile illusion was shattered. Perhaps sooner if the medicine didn’t take. The thought gnawed at him, but he pushed it aside. This day wasn’t about his fears.

Henry didn’t slow down. The boy’s focus was on the spaceship in his hand, guiding it through the crisp July air with a childlike intensity. His straw-blond hair gleamed in the sunlight, and his bright, innocent eyes seemed immune to the decay and despair around them. Victor couldn’t help but admire the purity in his son, even as he worried that it would inevitably fade.

As they moved through the streets, Victor felt the beady eyes of the undesirables tracking them. Their gazes were sharp, hungry, and uncomfortably close. Instinctively, his hand drifted to the pistol tucked into his waistband. The weight of it was reassuring, even as it earned him an amused glance from Elias. The slightly younger man’s smirk said everything: *Paranoid old man*. Victor didn’t care. He had no intention of being caught off guard, not here.

The trio continued their journey, the soles of their boots scuffing against the dusty remains of Midtown’s long-abandoned outskirts. The once-grand brownstones, symbols of a bygone era, stood in eerie silence. Ivy crept over their shattered windows like nature reclaiming its due. Rebellion’s legacy lingered everywhere, etched in graffiti that clung defiantly to crumbling walls, a reminder of the chaos that had reshaped their world.

As they neared Baltimore Harbor, the scene transformed. The broken remnants of Midtown gave way to the Emperor’s vision of grandeur. Gleaming spires and bustling markets stretched along the harborfront, their polished facades starkly contrasting the ruin behind them. The air grew heavier with the scent of salt and industry, mingling with the cacophony of merchants hawking wares and the distant, mournful cries of ship horns. Elias glanced at the disparity with a wry smirk, his expression unreadable, while Victor marched forward with quiet determination. His eyes were fixed on the harbor ahead, where destiny awaited.

“Dad—” Henry’s voice snapped him back to the present. Victor turned to his son, catching the eager look on his face.

In every way, Victor Langston was too old to be father to a nine-year-old. He'd never wanted children, preferring a life of solitude and occasional adventure over the rigid demands of responsibility. Fatherhood had been Nathaniel's destiny, not his. The second son always had the freedom to explore, while the first bore the weight of continuing the bloodline. "*An heir and a spare*," the old saying went. It had regained popularity after the "Last Great War" 65 years prior, and the sentiment had only grown stronger in the years since, especially after the rebellion's devastating toll on humanity.

Victor felt the familiar pang of guilt as his thoughts strayed to his father, his brother, and the rebellion. They were the original victims of Emperor Delacroix's war of obedience. Victor still remembered the quiet uncertainty in his father's voice whenever the Hawthornes were mentioned. The Langstons and Hawthornes had been tethered together for generations—first as allies, then as rivals, then as allies again.

"—Did you know that the astronauts left a mirror on the Moon so scientists on Earth could bounce lasers off it to measure the distance?" Henry asked, his voice full of wonder. Not for the first time Victor wondered how his son was able to say so much in a single breath.

Victor smiled ruefully. Henry reminded him so much of Nathaniel - uncomfortably so. Ignoring the flicker of pain in Elias's eyes, he forced himself to focus on the moment.

"I sure did!" he replied, his tone bright but strained, everything seemed strained. His mind was elsewhere, tangled in the weight of memories and unspoken fears. But that wasn't Henry's burden. Not today. This day was for Henry, for the Langstons—if they could survive.

Pausing at the corner, Victor gathered his small party together. Despite his limp and modest stature, there was an air of command about him. He wasn't an imposing man, lacking the towering height or broad shoulders of a stereotypical leader. Yet appearances could be deceiving, especially to those who thought he was at his weakest.

"Do you think they'll be there today?" Elias asked quietly, his voice steady but laced with something Victor couldn't quite place. There was an edge to it—part curiosity, part wariness.

Victor didn't need to ask who *they* were. The Caulfields had a way of appearing when least expected, their motives always too clear. The rebellion and its bloody consequences had seen to that. "If they are," Victor said, his voice low and deliberate, "we'll deal with it. Same as always."

Elias didn't respond immediately. His gaze remained fixed on the path ahead, his brow furrowed in thought. "One of these days, you're going to have to tell him," he said finally, tilting his head toward Henry.

Victor's jaw tightened. "Not yet."

He caught the sharp glance Elias shot at him, filled with a mixture of skepticism and something Victor couldn't quite name—resentment, perhaps, or regret. The unspoken tension between them lingered in the humid air.

The Caulfields weren't just rivals; they were shadows in the Langston family's history, woven through every generation like a recurring curse. Once, they had been friends, allies even, their fortunes intertwined during the rise of Langsoft. But during the rebellion, the veneer of friendship had shattered. The Caulfields' refusal to back the uprising—and Jeremiah Hawthorne's cowardice (he had told the Caulfields the lie that led to the bombings in Vancouver), in particular—had cost Victor's father and brother their lives.

Victor shivered involuntarily, the memory dragging him back to that day, to the wreckage and smoke, to the endless search for signs of life in the rubble. *"They're gone, dear..."* Her voice echoed faintly in his mind, a ghostly reminder of what had been lost.

"Are we really moving to the moon?" Henry's voice pulled him back to the present. The boy looked up, his wide, innocent eyes filled with wonder.

Victor forced a grin. "New Eden," he said, the words tasting bitter. Hell of a name for what was little more than a glorified penal colony. New Eden would provide humanity with no comfort, but it would ensure its survival—if the rumors were true.

"That's the plan!" he said brightly, masking his unease. The reality was far more complex. Two hundred attendees. One hundred lots. Each included a stake on New Eden—a foothold in what was being sold as humanity's future. The Empire's collapse might be inevitable, but Victor would be damned if his family was buried with it. Even if it cost him his last Solari.

The currency still felt alien to him, the transition from the Global Reserve Unit (GRU) abrupt and unnerving. Solari was sleek and new, its name almost mocking the desperation of those who used it.

"Run me through it again, Elias," he said, tearing his attention away from the dark-skinned couple lingering near Ambrose Caulfield's towering figure. He turned to Elias, who stood at his side, ever composed, his brown hair neatly parted as always.

Elias's voice was steady, but Victor could hear the weight behind it. "Lot 67B," he said resolutely. "A quartet of asteroids currently about sixty years from being in range. Most will dismiss it as a middle-of-the-pack lot. There are faster returns elsewhere."

As Elias spoke, a sharp voice rose from somewhere nearby, cutting through the hum of conversation. "Traitor," it hissed, barely above a whisper but loud enough to reach Victor's ears. The word hung in the air like a dagger poised to strike. He stiffened slightly, his gaze flickering to Henry. The boy hadn't flinched, but the way his hands tightened around the spaceship told Victor he'd heard it too.

Victor clenched his jaw, his attention drifting inward as the world around him dimmed. Henry didn't know the full truth of his past—how could he? The boy had grown up within the Empire's fold, taught to respect its structure, its order, its ideals. Victor had carefully shielded him from the shadow of rebellion that still haunted his name.

Raising Henry alone had been a quiet battle, one Victor fought without complaint. The boy deserved a future untarnished by the weight of his father's sins. But no shield could last forever. The cracks were already forming, and Victor knew it was only a matter of time before the whispers reached his son's ears. He hated the thought of that moment—the disappointment, the questions—but he also understood the futility of trying to protect Henry forever.

He exhaled slowly, grounding himself, and made a silent vow: for tonight, for as long as he could, he would keep the boy's world intact.

Victor nodded absently. His attention flicked to Henry, who had stopped talking and was now staring at his shoes. *Good*, Victor thought. They didn't need any more attention than they were already attracting. He could practically hear the whispers from the bar's marble perch: *"It's bad enough he's alive, but thriving?"*

A pang of guilt tore through him as the memory resurfaced: the Emperor's cold voice, each word cutting deeper than the last. *"I'm going to execute one hundred of your men. One for each member of my guard you've killed. And you're going to watch."*

Victor's survival had been the worst punishment of all. To walk free, unshackled yet haunted, was a torment no prison could rival. His duty to Henry and the Langston legacy had been the only thing keeping him from crumbling under the weight of it.

"Not 67A?" he quipped, forcing a weak smile, but his joke fell flat. Not even Henry glanced his way.

He sighed. "Waiting sixty years for a fifty-fifty shot at helium and water seems... fiscally irresponsible."

Elias's gaze turned condescending, the look Victor had come to expect when his intelligence was underestimated.

"Ice," Elias began, his tone measured, "contains hydrogen and oxygen. Besides a strong source of water, it means—"

Victor drowned him out. His focus shifted back to Ambrose Caulfield, his former friend. At the turn of the century, the Caulfields had provided the seed money that propelled Harold Langston to found Langsoft. During the Last Great War, they had supported independence but grew wealthy under the Empire's banner. To the Caulfields, Victor's role in the rebellion wasn't just a disgrace; it was a blemish on their family name.

“Asteroid three likely has helium,” Elias continued, oblivious to Victor’s wandering mind. “Setting Henry and his children up for exceptional wealth, right in time for...” He trailed off, lowering his voice. “What’s that station called again? The one they deny exists? The Celestial Arc?”

Victor nodded absently, catching Henry’s brief glance before the boy looked away again.

“Asteroid four has the structural integrity needed for physical infrastructure,” Elias pressed. “Henry will control his entire operation. And I’ll—”

Victor’s mind drifted again. Not for the first time, he wondered if entrusting Henry to Elias after his death was the right choice. Without Victor there to keep Elias in check, would he truly put Henry first—or would the man’s own ambitions get in the way?

The whispers of the past hung heavy over them. The Caulfields. New Eden. The rebellion’s cost. Everything was converging now, and Victor could only hope he had enough left to protect his family from it all.

“I’m going for a drink,” Victor stated abruptly, cutting Elias off mid-sentence, much to the man’s chagrin.

Elias opened his mouth to protest but stopped himself, his frustration evident in the way his jaw tightened. Victor, however, was on his way, his steps purposeful and deliberate. He wasn’t much of a drinker—military command had left him with ironclad self-discipline—but he did enjoy a bourbon now and then, especially as the weight of his years pressed heavier on his shoulders and the sickness took root. These days, he found himself indulging more often. Approaching salvation, as he often thought of it, seemed to make the burn of bourbon feel less like indulgence and more like solace.

“Watch Henry for me?” he added over his shoulder, his tone casual but firm, leaving no room for argument.

By the time Elias could reply, Victor was already halfway to the bar. His focus shifted, locking onto a figure seated at the far end, exuding an aura of calm amidst the chaos around him. To the untrained eye, the elderly curmudgeon appeared uninterested in the bustling energy of the auction. But Victor knew better.

“Theron,” Victor said as he approached, his voice low but steady. He was close enough now to catch the subtle twitch of the man’s hand as it rested on his pamphlet. Victor hoped time had eroded some of Theron’s respect for him. After all, old alliances often left room for dangerous debts.

“Lot 42D,” Theron replied without looking up, his thick spectacles still trained on the pamphlet in his hands.

Victor allowed himself a thin smile, but his tone remained sharp. “67B.” He didn’t bother with pleasantries. There was no need, not with Theron, it would only frustrate the man.

The older man finally looked up, his movements slow and deliberate, as if testing Victor's resolve. One solitary eyebrow arched in what might have been surprise, curiosity, or a touch of both.

"Interesting," Theron murmured, his voice carrying an edge of intrigue that Victor knew was never casual.

That had his attention. Since the Empire had killed his family, Theron had buried his grief beneath layers of meticulous investment. His obsessive focus had paid off, turning him into one of the wealthiest men alive. Grief, it seemed, had forged him into something cold, sharp, and entirely dangerous.

Theron's eyes returned to his pamphlet, but Victor could see his thoughts racing behind the lenses of his spectacles. After a moment, Theron spoke again, his words quieter, almost conspiratorial. "Do you know why he's here?"

Theron didn't need to point or name names. Victor's instincts, honed from years of command, immediately picked up on the presence of Dorian Vex. Somewhere in the room, that shadow was lurking—always watching, always scheming.

Victor's gaze flicked across the room, catching a glimmer of movement in the periphery. Vex. He'd always been a cockroach, slinking out of the wreckage of the rebellion to profit in ways most men would never dare. A quiet advisor to wealthy families on both sides of every conflict, Vex thrived on chaos, wielding his influence without moral compass or allegiance.

"What's he advising this time?" Victor muttered, his voice low enough that only Theron could hear.

Theron's lips curved into a faint, humorless smile. The expression held no warmth, only the sharp edge of cynicism. "I imagine whatever makes him the most money," he replied, his voice a low murmur that carried the weight of understanding honed from years of observing men like Dorian Vex. His eyes flicked up from the pamphlet, meeting Victor's with a brief but intense gaze. "Or the most enemies."

Victor's jaw tightened, a muscle feathering beneath his skin as his gaze shifted back to the bustling room. Whatever Dorian Vex was doing here, it would undoubtedly be layered in deceit and ambition. Vex thrived in complexity; his schemes were labyrinths designed to confuse and conquer. And neither, Victor knew, would this auction be straightforward. There would be power plays, alliances forged and shattered in the span of moments, and traps hidden behind smiles and polite handshakes.

Theron leaned closer, his voice dropping an octave, laced with quiet warning. "Be careful today. I imagine he's not the only one who wants to see you fail."

Victor nodded sharply, his eyes narrowing as he absorbed the gravity of Theron's words. "I will," he said, his tone resolute. There was no room for failure—not here, not today. The stakes were too high, and too many eyes were watching, eager to witness his misstep.

As he turned and walked away, his steps deliberate and measured, Theron's warning about Ambrose lingered like a shadow in his mind. It was the kind of warning that nestled under the skin, gnawing at his instincts and amplifying his wariness. The grandeur of the auction hall loomed ahead, its air thick with tension and the barely-contained whispers of competing ambitions.

At the registration desk, Victor approached the bored-looking attendant who barely glanced up from her station. Without preamble, he handed over his invitation. "14C," he said, his tone clipped, signaling his authorization to bid.

The attendant stamped his pass with mechanical indifference. Victor leaned slightly closer, his voice firm but smooth as he continued to rattle off his chosen lots. "82, 62B, 67B, and 19A." He spoke with the confidence of someone who had rehearsed this moment a dozen times, each word calculated, each choice deliberate.

The rules of the auction were as rigid as they were ruthless. One hundred lots, two hundred families. No family could win more than one lot, and no bidder could register for more than five. These restrictions were designed to level the playing field, or so the organizers claimed. But Victor knew better. Power was rarely equitable, and rules were simply tools for the cunning. 67B was his true objective, the lynchpin to his strategy, though he would let no one glimpse the weight it carried.

"Henry!" he called out, his attention turning back to family.

His son turned toward him, the toy spaceship in his hand spinning idly between his fingers. The boy's smile came easily enough, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. It was something Victor had noticed more often these days—a quiet reserve that hadn't been there before, as though a shadow had settled over him. Victor buried it, masking his concern. He reminded him so much of his mother. Her strength, her quiet resolve, reflected in the boy's every movement, every unspoken thought.

There was a kind of stillness, an untouched quality that seemed to shield Henry in ways Victor couldn't fully understand. The boy's presence was steady, calm in a way that felt almost unnatural in the chaos of their lives.

The faintest scent reached him before the voice, a delicate mix of lavender and rosemary. It teased him, summoning a cascade of memories that struck like an ambush. His body stiffened instinctively, a deep unease prickling at the edge of his consciousness. Then came the voice, sultry and unmistakable, its tone edged with teasing familiarity that still sent chills down his spine.

“General Langston,” she purred, her voice weaving through the din of the hall like silk through stone. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Seraphina let out a bored sigh, her lips pressed into a thin line as she tuned out the younger woman’s prattling. She was a nervous thing, all fidgeting hands and over-eager grins, clearly desperate for her attention. She’d miscalculated. There was nothing special about Margaret Posey, just another dead-end on a road paved with half-truths and speculation. Her fingers tapped absently on the balustrade as her frown deepened in annoyance. Poor information. Again. Her eyes narrowed in disgust, she hated incompetence

"Little Maisie, you were wrong," she murmured under her breath, her tone laced with quiet disappointment. She'd trusted the child's instincts before, and they had never failed her—not until now. The girl would need to be punished for wasting her time.

Margaret's timeline didn't line up. Her version of events surrounding the Ecliptic Concord was riddled with contradictions. The switch to the *Solaria* from the GRU, the discrepancies in her testimony, the hesitations in her voice—they all painted Margaret as a fraud. If the girl had been there, Seraphina thought bitterly, she certainly wasn't telling the truth about it.

Perhaps she'd wanted to believe Margaret's story too much, clinging to the possibility of an alternate truth like a drowning man clutches driftwood. *The forest for the trees, Seraphina. Always the damned forest.* Using children as spies had its risks, and this time, the risk had burned her.

She hated herself for it. Seraphina *wanted* to believe Maisie. It would mean she was delusional, that things weren't changing. She shook off her concerns and refocused on the crowd.

From her vantage point on the balcony above the bar, Seraphina's sharp, birdlike eyes scanned the crowd. They narrowed with renewed intensity as they landed on a familiar figure near the entryway. *Victor*. The name clung to the edges of her thoughts like an old, unfinished song. He was standing with Elias, the two of them deep in conversation. Seraphina tilted her head, curiosity flickering across her face like the faintest of flames.

Twelve years. It had been twelve long, fractious years since she'd last seen Victor Langston. Time, it seemed, had not been kind. His limp was more pronounced now, his gait uneven and laborious. His skin hung looser from his face, and the healthy flush she remembered had drained from his cheeks. *He's dying*. The realization struck her with the force of a slap, though her expression remained cool and unmoving. She swallowed back the unrecognizable emotion rising in her chest. Regret? Pity? No, it was neither of those. Whatever it was, it unsettled her, and she didn't like it.

“You look like hell,” she muttered under her breath, though her voice lacked its usual venom. Despite herself she couldn't find amusement in her Generals Predicament. Instead, she rested her forearms against the railing, watching Victor with an intensity that bordered on predatory.

And then, her gaze shifted to the boy standing beside him—a child, no older than ten, his blond hair tousled and his small hands clutching a toy spaceship nervously. The boy's presence was unexpected, almost jarring, in this sea of politics and subterfuge. Seraphina's lips curled into a faint, humorless smile. *Victor's dying, and yet here he is, dragging some poor child into this mess. Typical.* The concern surprised her.

But there was something about the boy—something in the way he stood so close to Victor, like he belonged there. Seraphina's mind raced, piecing together fragments of thought, half-formed theories, and the gut feeling she'd learned never to ignore. *Who are you, little one?* she thought, her gaze lingering on the boy as he fiddled absentmindedly with his toy, never looking up for more than a few seconds at a time.

The scene below had become far more interesting than she'd anticipated. Victor's presence alone was a surprise, but the boy... the boy was an enigma wrapped in an unsolved riddle. Seraphina's lips quirked into a faint smirk as she straightened and turned away from the balcony. She'd been chasing shadows for weeks, looking for truth buried beneath layers of deception. Maybe, just maybe, the answers she sought were closer than she'd realized.

"I suppose I should go say hello," she murmured to herself, her voice as cool and calculated as the smile playing on her lips. *After all, fate rarely delivers gifts this intriguing without expecting something in return.*

Her heels echoed off the marble floor, the crowd parting like the Red Sea as she approached. Nobody wanted to get in the way of one of the Emperor's favorites. The distinction made her smile ruthlessly.

Victor. Victor. Victor. The name repeated itself in her mind like a curse. Seraphina was one of the few who knew him before he became "The Butcher of Blackthorn". The man who could burn a city to the ground and sleep soundly that night. And yet here he stands, reduced to a shadow of what he once was.

Gone was the confident smirk, the infuriatingly self-assured curl of his lips that once made everyone around him feel two steps behind. Gone was the puffed-out chest, the proud, commanding posture of a man who had led armies and shaped the tides of war with a single word. Gone, too, was the disdainful gaze—the one that could cut down opponents without him ever lifting a hand, brimming with the arrogance of someone who believed they would always come out on top.

In its place was something far less imposing: the look of a cautious man who was painfully aware of his own vulnerability. His shoulders sagged ever so slightly, his stance guarded but unsure, like someone who wasn't convinced they could fend off even the smallest threat. His eyes—once blazing with conviction, with purpose—now darted across the room, searching for danger that might never come but always felt imminent. It was the look of a man who had spent too long in the shadow of his own regrets, haunted by decisions that had once seemed so clear.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. The thought slipped into Seraphina's mind unbidden, sharp with a bitterness she couldn't quite swallow. This was General Victor Langston, *The Butcher of Blackthorn*, a man who had once loomed larger than life, striking fear into the heart of the Empire. He'd been a force of nature, unstoppable and unrelenting, a man whose name alone could inspire loyalty—or fear. And now? Now he looked like a man who had been broken in ways that time alone could never repair.

Seraphina's sharp, birdlike eyes lingered on him, taking in every detail with the precision of someone trained to observe weakness. She could almost hear the echo of his voice from years ago, barking orders in the field, his tone sharp and cutting, always demanding more—more from her, more from everyone, in the end his demands - his unwavering self-confidence - had broke her. And now? Now she smirked. Victor once stood at the pinnacle, a man who seemed untouchable, invincible. And here he was, a shadow of that man, his limp more pronounced, his hands trembling faintly when he thought no one was watching.

You deserve this, she repeated to herself half-heartedly. For all the bitterness she harbored, for all the scars—both literal and metaphorical—that she bore because of him, there was little satisfaction in seeing him reduced to this. She'd once admired him, even when she'd hated him. He'd been her mentor, her general, the one who had turned her into what she was today. Ruthless. Efficient. Dangerous.

And expendable, a small voice whispered in her mind. That had been his final lesson: everyone, even her, was expendable when the mission demanded it. The irony, she was sure, wasn't lost on him. How many of his friends did he watch get executed? She smirked. He deserved it, reversing her previous position. Even after all these years she couldn't settle her thoughts on the man who had both taken, yet given so much to her. *'Fuck it all.'* She thought to herself, her left foot tapping restlessly - a tick of hers Victor had pointed out.

Her gaze shifted momentarily to the boy by his side, clutching his toy spaceship like a lifeline. The sight of the child felt incongruous, almost absurd. Victor Langston, with a child in tow? The Victor she'd known would never have spared a second glance for a child. The Victor she'd known had cared only for strategy, for power, for the next victory. *'For revenge.'* She added silently to herself. What changed? What had softened him—or broken him—enough to allow this? The boy looked familiar - the high cheekbones, green eyes and sand blond hair - they reminded her of a long lost *someone*. Someone who had been dead for longer than the child had been alive.

Seraphina straightened her back, her lips curling into a faint, humorless smile. She would find out soon enough. There was no room for sentiment here, no room for old loyalties or lingering questions. Whatever answers Victor Langston held, whatever secrets he might still possess, she would uncover them. The mighty may have fallen, but they could still serve a purpose—so long as they were breathing.

Adjusting her coat, she began her descent from the balcony, her footsteps measured, deliberate. This would be no warm reunion. There was too much history between them, too

much blood and betrayal. But it would be something far more interesting. The game was afoot, and for once, Seraphina Calder felt ahead of her pray

Her descent from the balcony was slow, calculated, each step a statement of intent. The soft echo of her heels against the marble floor punctuated the low murmur of the crowd, which instinctively parted as she approached. Heads turned, whispers flickered like moths around her as people recoiled just enough to clear her path. *The Emperor's favorite*. The title danced in their eyes, carrying weight and fear. Seraphina carried it with ease, though the distinction meant little to her. Power was not in titles but in what she could make people do.

Her gaze flicked briefly to Victor again as she crossed the room, his posture stiffening slightly, as if he could sense her approach even without seeing her. *Good. Stay on edge. It's where you belong, Victor*. But her eyes lingered longer on the boy. He stood closer to Victor than before, as if unconsciously seeking shelter. His grip on the toy spaceship tightened, knuckles whitening, though his face betrayed nothing but quiet, childlike distraction.

Except... it wasn't entirely childlike. The way he occasionally glanced at Victor, studying the man's movements, spoke of an awareness far too sharp for his age. Seraphina's lips twitched into the faintest smile. *Interesting*. There was something deliberate in the boy's quietness, something rehearsed. And those features—those damned features—continued to haunt her. *Who are you, little one? Who is your mother?*

The resemblance was too striking, too specific to dismiss. It clawed at the edges of her memory, a face she hadn't seen in years, a person who no longer existed. But the dead did not return, not even for Victor Langston.

Her smile hardened, humorless and cold. Whatever game Victor was playing, it had cost him. She could see it in the hollow of his cheeks, the nervous flicker of his eyes. This wasn't the man she had once followed into fire. This was a man who had been burned by it, who now carried the scars in every step, every breath. The boy, whoever he was, was part of that story, and she would learn it all before the day was through.

Seraphina came to a stop a few paces away, just far enough to command Victor's attention without yet acknowledging him. The tension in the air between them was electric, a thousand unspoken words charging the space. She tilted her head slightly, her sharp, birdlike eyes locking onto the boy for a fraction of a second longer than necessary before flicking back to Victor. Her expression was unreadable, her smile polished and inscrutable, a mask perfected over years of practice.

"General Langston," she said at last, her voice smooth diatribe carrying the faintest edge of mockery. "What a pleasant surprise."

The words hung in the air, deceptively cordial, but her tone made the lie clear. This was no pleasure, and the only thing unexpected about this meeting was the boy standing beside him.

Her eyes drifted again, just briefly, to the child, her curiosity enrapturing her. She would find out what he was. Answers weren't just useful—they were leverage. And Seraphina Calder always made sure she had leverage.

“General Langston, what a pleasant surprise.”

Victor sighed, shutting his eyes momentarily. He could feel Elias tense beside him, and Henry's curious gaze flit between the two adults. He ignored them both, his mind already racing.

“Seraphina Moreau.” The name escaped his lips before he had time to process. He cursed himself silently, already feeling the weight of falling behind in whatever game she had come to play.

“*Calder* these days,” she corrected smoothly, her tone light and teasing, though her eyes betrayed something sharper. They flicked over him, assessing, dissecting, lingering just a second too long. “It's been a long time, hasn't it?”

“Not long enough,” Victor muttered under his breath, his tone clipped.

Her lips curled into a faint smirk, and she tilted her head, as if considering him from a new angle. “Still the same brusque wit. I always liked that about you, Victor. Your... efficiency.” Her voice lingered on the last word, dripping with dangerous familiarity.

“Hello, Elias,” she added, her tone shifting into something more casual, though her attention never left Victor entirely.

Elias gave her a crooked half-smile, his discomfort evident in the tension in his shoulders. Victor nearly missed the subtle triumphant smirk that danced across Seraphina's face, a silent declaration: *she's in control*.

“Your companion?” she asked, finally shifting her gaze to Henry. Her tone was almost polite, but the edge remained, as if she were testing the boy without him realizing it.

“My son,” Victor replied, the answer curt, a shield to deflect further questions.

Her eyes glinted, curiosity barely veiled. “Your son,” she repeated, as if tasting the words, letting them settle. “How... unexpected.” She turned back to Victor, her voice dropping into a softer register, almost conspiratorial. “I always thought you preferred your legacy carved into history, not carried on your arm.”

“Seraphina,” Victor growled, his patience thinning, “if you've come to dredge up the past, spare me. I don't have time for games.”

“Games?” she repeated with mock offense, her lips curling into a sly smile. “Oh, Victor, I never play games. Everything I do has a purpose.” She leaned in slightly, lowering her voice. “Speaking of purpose, I imagine your interest in 67B is just as specific as mine.”

Victor stiffened but kept his expression neutral. “If you know that much, you know to stay out of my way.”

Seraphina laughed softly, the sound like velvet against steel. “You’re still so direct. It’s charming. But you may want to keep your focus sharp, General. There are others here who might demand your attention before the night is through.”

Her voice turned almost casual, her words laced with a subtle, cutting edge. “I couldn’t help but notice Marion Lockwood in the crowd. Did you know she’s here? Quite the surprise, isn’t it?”

Victor’s jaw tightened, his gaze snapping to hers, but her expression remained perfectly composed. She took a step back, her smile widening as she turned on her heel.

“Enjoy the auction, Victor,” she said, her tone light and airy, though the weight of her words lingered in the air long after she disappeared into the crowd.

The auctioneer’s voice boomed through the hall, each word slicing through Victor’s unease like a blade.

“A few quick changes to the rules,” the man announced with a theatrical flourish. The crowd leaned in, their attention palpable.

Victor’s stomach twisted as Theron’s warning rang in his ears. “*Be careful today. I imagine he’s not the only one who wants to see you fail.*”

“Elias!” he hissed, his tone sharp, demanding. The other man barely turned his head, giving Victor a lazy, unimpressed look.

“What the fuck is this?” Victor pressed, his voice low but tight with tension.

Elias pursed his lips, the faintest hint of amusement in his expression. “I assume we’re about to find out.”

Victor clenched his fists, swallowing the retort that burned on his tongue. He didn’t have time for barbs, not now. His eyes darted around the room, searching for answers, searching for threats.

The auctioneer’s grin widened as he continued. “In light of recent interest and, shall we say, *motivations*, we’ve added a slight twist to today’s event. The auctioneer’s grin was infuriating as he continued. “In light of recent interest and, shall we say, *motivation*, we’ve introduced a small adjustment to keep things exciting. Effective immediately: bidders will now have the option to pool resources with other registered families, provided all involved agree to the arrangement.

Additionally, bidding increments will no longer be restricted to the standard minimum. Feel free to let your ambition set the pace.”

A murmur rippled through the room, some voices tinged with excitement, others with anger. Victor’s blood ran cold. *Pooling resources. No increments.* The wealthiest families now had a mechanism to combine their influence and obliterate any meaningful competition. It wouldn’t just shut others out; it would create alliances too dangerous to counter.

From the corner of his eye, he spotted Seraphina Calder. Her smirk was sharp enough to cut glass, and when her gaze met his, a tantalizing moment stretched between them. The glint in her eyes confirmed what he feared most: **she knew**. She’d known all along.

Victor’s mind raced. His family’s wealth was already on the lower end of those in attendance. They could fight for a lot, but 67B was no ordinary lot—it was his bet on the future, and these new rules had likely thrown it out of reach.

The first lots rolled by with dizzying speed. Prices skyrocketed as bidders teamed up, outpacing all expectations. The energy in the room was suffocating. Victor watched as one family after another dropped out, their resources obliterated by alliances they couldn’t counter.

His turn was fast approaching. *Lot 67B was approaching.*

Victor’s hands gripped the edge of his seat, his knuckles white with tension. He could feel Henry’s quick glances toward him, though the boy said nothing. His quiet was unsettling, a stark contrast to the roaring pulse in Victor’s ears, and an unsettling difference to the boy’s normal demeanor.

Ambrose Caulfield hadn’t placed a single bid, and if he had pooled with others Victor did not know - that, unfortunately, violated the new confidentiality rules. The attractive younger man sat back, arms relaxed, his focus fixed solely on Victor, cigar hanging loosely from his fingertips. That unwavering stare was worse than anything he could have said aloud.

“Elias,” Victor whispered through gritted teeth, his voice barely audible over the noise in the room. “He hasn’t stopped looking at me.”

Elias followed Victor’s gaze toward Caulfield, his expression unreadable. “That’s because he’s waiting for you to make a move.”

Victor swallowed hard, his mind whirring. *Why wait? What was Caulfield planning?* The question ate away at Victor’s mind, relentless and unanswerable. His gaze flicked back to the man, still seated, still watching him with that unsettling calm. *Was it just intimidation? Or something more?* Victor couldn’t tell, and not knowing was worse than certainty.

The room felt heavier now, every glance from the crowd sharper, every whisper carrying a hint of accusation. *Were they all watching him?* No, that was ridiculous. But what if they were? His

name had been a curse in these circles for years, his survival a bitter reminder of sins most preferred to forget.

Victor's eyes darted briefly to Henry. The boy sat quietly, his hands wrapped around the toy spaceship, but there was a stiffness to his posture that hadn't been there before. *He feels it*, Victor realized, his stomach sinking. The weight of the whispers, the tension in the room—it was seeping into Henry, shaping him in ways Victor couldn't control. *Is this his future? A life shadowed by my past?* The thought hit harder than expected. He'd worked so hard to keep the boy's world intact, to shield him from the ghosts that haunted his own. But ghosts had a way of finding their way in, no matter how thick the walls.

And Elias—Victor stole a glance at him, his lazy composure as infuriating as ever. Was he truly unbothered, or was he playing his own game? Victor couldn't shake the feeling that Elias wasn't telling him everything. *How much does he know? How much does he care?* Trust had always been a luxury Victor couldn't afford, but tonight, it felt like even the smallest misstep could shatter everything.

How many of them are working together? How many want me to fall? The auction was chaos, and the alliances forming and dissolving around him only fueled his suspicion. He shook his head, forcing himself to breathe.

He told himself he wasn't paranoid. *This was just strategy, caution. Rational concern.* But the edge of his unease remained, tightening around his thoughts like a vice. Whether the threats were real or imagined, the uncertainty alone was enough to threaten his focus. And in this room, focus was the only weapon he had left.

The auctioneer's voice rang out over the crowd, announcing the next lot: *67B*. Victor's world narrowed to the words, his breath catching as the bidding war unfolded. The first numbers came in aggressively, faster and higher than he'd anticipated.

Each bid felt like a hammer strike against his resolve. His heart pounded in his chest, his vision narrowing as his mind screamed against the rising tide. *I have failed. I have failed at everything I have ever done.* The words echoed relentlessly in his head, their weight crushing.

He felt sick—the kind of sickness that clawed at his throat, a suffocating weight that wrapped around his chest like a vise. It was worse than fear, worse than pain. It was failure, raw and undeniable, coursing through him with every beat of his heart. All the battles he'd fought, the bloodshed that stained his hands, the lives he'd ended in the name of duty—they all paled in comparison to this moment. This wasn't just about losing a bid. This was *everything*.

The strategy he'd built so carefully, the endless calculations, the sacrifices he'd made—it had all been for this. For Henry. For a chance to secure a future untainted by his past. The humiliation he'd endured, the compromises he'd made to walk this path—it was all unraveling, slipping

through his fingers like grains of sand. This wasn't a battle he could fight with force or a victory he could seize with cunning. It was out of his control, and that realization hollowed him.

His breath hitched, and for the briefest of moments, he felt the weight of everything pressing down, threatening to break him. If he failed here, if -

And then the auctioneer raised his hand, the sharp gesture cutting through the din like a blade.

"Ladies and gentlemen, a brief pause is in order to address a few pressing matters. Please remain seated."

The room stilled, the murmurs fading into an uneasy silence. Victor's breath came shallow and fast, his thoughts teetering between panic and dread. He gripped the edge of the table in front of him, trying to ground himself.

Why now? What are they doing? The pause felt deliberate, orchestrated. Victor's instincts screamed that this was no coincidence, but he couldn't decide which was worse—the waiting or the knowledge that this game was rigged from the start.

A wave of confusion rippled through the crowd as the auctioneer announced a ten-minute recess. Heads turned, voices whispered, and the tension in the air grew thick enough to cut with a knife. Victor stiffened in his seat, every instinct screaming. *This is no coincidence.* That much was clear. Nothing in this magnificent charade—this twisted display of wealth and power—was ever left to chance.

Another thought slithered into his mind, sharp and insistent: *How many families can still bid?* The ability to pool resources had upended the game, yet not the original restriction—*one lot per invitation*—that remained intact. On its own, that rule was a fragile barrier, easily dismantled by alliances forged in whispers and handshakes. Families aligning strategically could crush weaker competitors with ease, crushing his chances. *Who has already joined forces? Who else has been locked out entirely?*

The questions churned in his mind, each one a blade carving into his confidence. He felt outmatched, outmaneuvered at every turn, and an oppressive exhaustion weighed down on him. The sickness in his chest, the quiet dread gnawing at his resolve, tightened its grip. For a moment, it threatened to consume him entirely.

Victor's gaze flicked across the room, his thoughts racing. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Seraphina Calder, seated with the effortless grace of a queen among pawns. Unlike the others, she didn't appear confused or unsettled. Instead, she sat composed, her lips curving ever so slightly in what could only be described as confined amusement. Her sharp eyes swept the room, and for a fleeting moment, they locked with Victor's. Her smirk deepened, almost imperceptibly, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking—and found his growing paranoia thoroughly entertaining.

The sight of her reaction sent a chill down his spine. *She knows something.* Of course she does. Seraphina had always thrived in chaos, always found a way to weave it into her favor. She wasn't just a participant in this game; she was a force within it, untethered by rules or limitations.

Victor's jaw tightened. He couldn't let himself be distracted by her, by anyone. Not now. There was too much at stake, and every second of this so-called recess only deepened his unease. *Who is pulling the strings here? And what are they planning next?*

"General."

The word was soft, almost cordial, but it landed like a hammer blow. Victor turned sharply, his breath hitching as he came face to face with Dorian Vex. The man's expression was infuriatingly composed, his calm radiating an air of effortless control. A faint smile tugged at his lips, as though every step that had brought them to this moment was a thread he had woven with precision.

Instinctively, Victor's hand drifted toward the pistol concealed at his waist, his fingers brushing the grip. Vex's smile widened, a flicker of amusement dancing in his cold eyes.

"No need for that, General," he said smoothly, his voice dripping with unshakable confidence.

"What do you want, Vex?" Victor asked, his tone low and tight, barely concealing the edge in his nerves.

Vex ignored the question, his gaze drifting past Victor to the boy sitting silently at his side. That faint smile deepened as his eyes narrowed, studying Henry with a level of interest that made Victor's blood run cold.

"And who is this?" Vex asked, his tone deceptively casual. "Henry, isn't it?"

Victor froze, the name falling from Vex's lips like a trap snapping shut. *He shouldn't know.* The thought echoed in his mind, confusion and fear surging in equal measure.

"Such a fine boy," Vex continued, his voice soft yet laced with an edge that cut through Victor like a blade. "A credit to you, General... and to the boy's mother, of course."

The words hung in the air, pointed and deliberate, as though designed to provoke. Vex's smile sharpened into something predatory, his satisfaction barely hidden. Henry, already drawing far more attention than Victor was comfortable with, shifted slightly in his seat, spinning the toy spaceship absently in his hands. The boy's face was unreadable, but there was something in his posture—something almost deliberate—that made Victor's stomach turn. *He knows.* The thought struck like lightning. *He can't possibly.*

Victor felt his chest tighten, his world narrowing to the oppressive weight of Vex's presence and the boy beside him. How did Vex know about *her*? She had been nothing more than a fleeting piece of his life—a blip that gave life and disappeared. Henry didn't even have the faintest idea who she was. That was how Victor had planned it. Yet here was Vex, wielding that knowledge like a dagger.

Victor's breath caught, his mind racing. *How much does Vex know? How much has he planned?* He wanted to dismiss it as posturing, but the weight of Vex's words pressed down on him like a vice.

His hand hovered near the pistol again, a temptation that burned in the back of his mind. He couldn't use it, not here. Not with Henry. But the thought of walking away felt equally impossible.

"An equity stake in the Langston future," Vex said, his voice smooth, deliberate. "I believe that's fair, don't you?"

Victor glanced at Henry again, his chest tightening further. The boy clutched his toy tightly, his silence louder than any words. *He knows something, even if he doesn't understand.* It was in the way he held himself, in the fleeting looks he cast at Victor when he thought his father wasn't watching.

Victor turned back to Vex, his jaw clenching as he weighed his options. Agreement felt like betrayal, a compromise that stripped away what little pride he had left. But walking away meant losing everything. Lot 67B wasn't just a strategic bid—it was the future he had envisioned for Henry, a chance to give him a life unburdened by Victor's past.

Or was it Elias's vision? Did it matter? Without 67B, there was no future for the Langstons. There was nothing for Henry to grow into.

Victor straightened, his voice low and steady despite the storm raging within him. "Fine," he said finally, the words laced with venom. "An equity stake. In the Langston future."

Vex's smile widened, his satisfaction radiating off him like a predator that had cornered its prey. "A wise decision, General."

Victor forced his expression to remain impassive, though his insides churned. As Vex turned and walked away, Victor's gaze flicked instinctively to the far side of the room. *Seraphina.* She stood near the edge of the crowd, her sharp eyes fixed on him, a victorious smirk curling her lips.

Unlike Vex, her amusement wasn't cold or calculating—it was something far more dangerous. *She knows too.*

Victor's hand fell away from the pistol, trembling slightly. He had underestimated her, dismissed her as a player on the periphery. But now, he wasn't so sure. The thought clawed at the edges of his mind: *How much worse will it get before the night is over?*

He walked away from Vex feeling hollow, the weight of paranoia pressing down harder than ever—not about Vex, but about Seraphina. *She wasn't just watching the game; she was shaping it.* And Victor had no idea how.

The room was electric with tension as the bidding for *Lot 67B* reached its crescendo. Numbers flew fast and high, each bid an arrow aimed at Victor's resolve. His chest tightened with every passing second, the weight of Dorian Vex's presence across the room adding an unbearable pressure.

"Sixty-five million," came the latest bid, the voice clear and resolute. Victor's breath hitched. He was out of his depth, his own resources long eclipsed by the ceaseless escalation.

But hear Vex's words in his mind, his voice low and smooth, carrying the weight of control. *"Don't hesitate, General. Show them you're serious."*

Victor didn't look at him. He couldn't. Instead, he forced his voice to steady as he raised his hand. "Seventy million."

A murmur rippled through the crowd, astonishment and whispers buzzing like flies. The competing families exchanged glances, calculating whether to press further or fold.

The seconds stretched unbearably. Victor's pulse pounded in his ears, drowning out everything but the auctioneer's voice.

"Seventy million," the man repeated, his hammer poised in the air. "Going once. Going twice..."

Victor's breath caught, the pause between words feeling infinite.

"Sold! Lot 67B goes to Victor Langston and the Langston Family Trust!"

The gavel came down with a sharp crack, and the room erupted in scattered applause and murmurs of disdain.

Victor's shoulders sagged under the weight of the moment, but the words still rang in his ears: *Langston Family Trust.*

Victor had no recollection of creating such a trust. His relief faltered, his mind racing. *Was this Vex's doing?* The name carried an unsettling implication of permanence, of something beyond his control. It felt like a leash disguised as a lifeline, and the realization hit him harder than he expected.

His eyes flicked toward Vex, who stood with that same maddening calm, his faint smile speaking volumes. Victor clenched his jaw. The lot was his, but it came tethered to strings he hadn't agreed to—strings he knew would pull taut before long.

Victor let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Relief flooded his body, though it was quickly followed by a wave of exhaustion so heavy it nearly brought him to his knees. The tension that had gripped him for hours seemed to release all at once, leaving him physically and emotionally drained.

He leaned slightly against the table, his hand gripping its edge as he steadied himself. Henry, sitting quietly beside him, finally looked up. There was something in the boy's eyes—an understanding that shouldn't have been there, but was.

"New Eden," Victor murmured to himself, his voice barely audible, as though saying it aloud would make it real. Passage to a future for Henry. A life far away from the shadows of the past.

Henry tilted his head, his gaze steady and unblinking as he spoke, his voice soft but eerily certain. "You can't outrun the shadows, Dad. They'll follow us there too."

The words settled in the air like a curse, lingering long after they were spoken, carving themselves into Victor's memory with an almost cruel finality. He felt his breath catch, his chest tightening as the weight of what he'd done—and what he hadn't—pressed down on him all over again.

Dorian Vex clapped a hand lightly on Victor's shoulder, he hadn't even noticed his approach, the gesture far too familiar for Victor's liking. "A wise investment, General. One for the ages."

Victor didn't respond. He couldn't. The gavel had fallen, the lot was his, but the cost loomed. Vex had gained something intangible, something Victor couldn't quite name, but the faint smile lingering on the man's face made it clear he'd won more than a financial stake.

Victor glanced at Henry again, the boy clutching his toy spaceship with the same quiet intensity he had since shortly after they had arrived. This was for him. *It had to be worth it.* He repeated, more for himself than others.

Yet as Victor straightened, forcing himself to regain composure, his eyes swept the crowd—and found Seraphina watching from a distance, her expression unreadable, though her faint smirk remained.

The relief Victor had felt just moments ago soured. The gavel might have fallen in his favor, but the game wasn't over. Not yet.

The small crab shack sat at the edge of the pier, its weathered sign swinging gently in the salty breeze. Victor led the way inside, his steps slow and deliberate, as though each one carried a weight only he could feel. The smell of seasoning and freshly fried crab lingered in the air, mixing with the low murmur of patrons scattered across the faded wooden booths.

Victor gestured for Elias and Henry to sit, choosing one near the window overlooking the water. He glanced at the peeling paint on the walls and the old jukebox humming quietly in the corner, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips. *Thirty years ago*. That was how long it had been since he'd last sat here, a boy himself, with his father and Nathaniel. Back then, the world had felt smaller, simpler—his father laughing loudly over some joke Nate had told, the warmth of the sun cutting through the breeze.

He'd suggested the crab cakes because of that memory, he realized now, more for himself than for Henry. *A poor man's pilgrimage*. He wanted to believe the familiarity could tether him, remind him of something good.

"The right call," Victor said suddenly, breaking the silence as the plates arrived. The words came out forceful, as if spoken aloud they might carry more truth. He speared a bite of crab cake with his fork, his gaze flicking to Elias, whose expression remained unreadable.

Elias leaned back, his arms crossed. "It was the only call," he replied evenly, though his tone carried none of Victor's conviction.

Victor nodded quickly, eager to agree, to solidify the decision in his mind. "Exactly. We did what we had to. For Henry. For the future." He glanced at his son, his voice softening. "You'll see, Henry. New Eden—things will be different there. Better."

Henry sat silently across from him, his face pale, his hands resting on the edge of the table. He hadn't touched his food. His eyes, distant and glassy, stared out the window at the darkening horizon. Victor didn't notice—he was too busy searching Elias's face for validation, trying to ignore the echo of doubt clawing at the back of his mind.

"The Empire," Victor muttered, as if he were convincing himself now, "it's not the same. It's decaying. This was the only way forward. The right way."

Elias gave a slow nod, though his gaze drifted toward Henry. Victor still didn't see it—the empty space where the toy spaceship should have been, the subtle, hollow absence that sat heavy between the boy's small hands.

The dusk settled over the water, shadows creeping across the pier as the crab shack dimmed with the fading light. Henry's eyes never left the horizon, his expression blank, distant. For all of Victor's insistence, for all the words he piled on top of his guilt, the boy sat unmoved, a specter in a place that wasn't home.

And in that moment, as the laughter from another table echoed faintly in the background and the smell of crab lingered in the air, the weight of something unseen pressed down on the table. Victor's memory of thirty years ago flickered like a candle in the wind, too fragile to warm the cold space between them.

The only sound was the faint clink of Victor's fork against his plate as he murmured, almost to himself, "We did the right thing."

