

The day her sister died, Saraya spent the morning cleaning the interior of the cities maglevitation train.

Law breakers on Dacwen had a two part program. First they were assigned to the **department of public works** to fill in jobs around the city that were short on people. They were often the menial jobs that few people wanted to do but needed to be done nonetheless. She was dressed in simple gray overalls, the material light and functional, a cleaning belt around her waist. She cleaned in silence, using her speed and flexibility to her advantage and because she didn't want to be too behind on her training. She polished handle bars, and climbed up the length of them instead of using a ladder to get the tops. She stood on one hand between rows and used her other to wipe down the seat cushion. She timed herself when cleaning the windows and made sure to move her arms in fluid circles over the glass, as if going through a warm up before a combat session. She did similar while she cleaned the floor, this time focusing on her foot work.

“Hey, Saraya.”

She spun around, the mop handle held in an defensive combat position in front of her. She'd been so into her meditation the movement had come natural.

Benji smirked. “Woah feisty. Just need your help with the solar panels.”

Saraya smirked back at him but released her stance. “Good timing, Just got done.”

“Wouldn't have cared if you weren't done. I say I need the help, you help.” Benji backed out of the door, and climbed the ladder against the side of the train to reach the roof.

Saraya felt her temper momentarily rise, forced herself to exhale a calming breath. She rolled the mop bucket out of the train, making sure it was out of the way of the other [name of prisoners]. She climbed up the same ladder Benji had. Each train car was outfitted with a square solar panel field that provided basic power to each car, like temperature control and **[alien wifi]**. Benji had one of the panels raised and was kneeling in front of it, a tool back next to him.

“Hand me things as I say I need them,” he said without looking up from his work. “You can follow that order right?”

Saraya sighed feeling less anger and more annoyance at her tone. “What's your issue?”

“Bullshit\* that’s my issue. Hand me a [tool name].”

Saraya fished around in the bag and then handed him the tool. “That’s not an answer.”

“You shouldn’t get to be the Narozen. The law should change. You can’t be a ruler if you can’t follow your own law. That makes Dacwen just like every other bullshit planet that’s got a corrupt Government.”

Saraya’s entire body tensed. “I made a mistake it’s why I’m here, serving my time like everyone else who breaks the law.”

“Yeah, but rumor is this isn’t first time for you. People don’t repeat offend on Dacwen unless they’re made wrong. Sounds like you’re made wrong, and I don’t want someone like that as Narozen.”

“You weren’t there,” Saraya’s tone rose. “Either time. It’s Bullshit\*\* you’re sitting there judging me on a situation you don’t have any knowledge on.”

Benji snorted. “Whatever. I don’t need that knowledge.” he finally looked at her, not bothering to hide his disapproval. “You want to know why? Because it’s your job to make the hard calls inside of the law. If you can’t do your job, you shouldn’t get to have it.”

Saraya cheeks felt hot with her mounting anger. Though she reflected, it wasn’t entirely at judgmental Benji. It was because he wasn’t wrong. He should expect the future Narozen of Dacwen to follow the laws, especially laws that were set forth on how to interact with other planets. Even more so when those planets had an inferior race on the surface. She shouldn’t have done it, she knew that. She still didn’t know why and that wasn’t helping her temper or her frustration.

Following her gut instinct, wouldn’t bring understanding or help connect her with her people, she realized as she studied the rigid, almost angry line to Benji’s back as he worked. Her mother was so much better at connecting with people and speaking in a way they could understand and relate too. Saraya sighed. “You’re right,” she said quietly. “I shouldn’t have done it, either time. I don’t...” she paused and then shook her head. “No excuses. I just... it wasn’t out of spite. Or rebellion, or any other dumb reason. I wish I could explain more but...”

“Whatever. Don’t care. I really don’t. Actions have consequences, period.” Benji finished twisting a bolt. “Far as I’m concerned, we ought to bring back the Patriarchy before you get **coronated.**”

Saraya gritted her teeth, then forced her expression to even out. She didn’t say anything else after that. She just stood there, handing him various tools when he said he needed it. Thankfully he didn’t spend the entire time berating her. She’d lost his support and Saraya just wondered how many others felt that way. A wave of guilt crashed into her as she wondered how bad things were for her mother right now because of her actions. Actions she didn’t even fully understand.

Saraya mentally cursed. She’d find out. Her sentence was for a year, she’d spend the time not just becoming the **Queen** her mother needed her to be, her planet needed her to be, but she’d understand herself too.

The watch over top the fingerless metal gloves that went up to her forearms, a special kind of metal that disconnected her from her tanarull, beeped four times. Benji’s went off as well. The first half of their day was spent working, the second half involved a rehabilitation program that was tailored for each of them. They were given a forty-five minute break in between work and rehabilitation session. Each **prisoner** was encouraged to spend it in some form of meditation, or quiet reflection, even to take a nap to help prepare them mentally and emotionally for their rehabilitation work.

Without another word to him, Saraya turned round and climbed back down the ladder. She took her cleaning tools to the maintenance closet, marked off which trains had been cleaned so they could be inspected by **QA** and walked out.

[ **World / City / Area description goes here** ]

After her meditation session she was sent to the library, where a private instructor awaited her in one of the conference rooms. The library of (name) in honor of the Goddess, was in truth one of Saraya’s favorite places because it combined so many things. Technology new and old. Rows up rows of books lined one section. Glass cases holding some parchment that was so old it couldn’t be touched. In another section, holographic screens were moved, pages turned with the flick of a finger. The shelves filled with small data cubes whose information

could be accessed directly, a hologram appearing above it, or pyramid and diamond shaped crystals that could be inserted in slots on the desktop computers.

Her instructor was there to give her lessons on the laws of Dacwen. On duty and morality and to openly discuss and counsel her on her decisions to break those laws.

She was attempting to concentrate, especially after her words with Benji re-enforced her decision to be fully present during this, to listen and take it seriously to really understand the repercussions of her inexplicable actions.

But a few minutes into the lesson she could no longer concentrate because something was wrong. She could feel it. Saraya frowned, squirming in her seat. Her stomach was knotted, she was starting to sweat, and a feeling of just... wrongness wrapped around her.

“I need to talk to my family,” Saraya said abruptly, interrupting her instructor.

The woman arched a stern brow. “Saraya, now is not the time-”

“Please, I’m not trying to be disrespectful. I’m just...” Saraya frowned, and didn’t bother to hide the depth of worry she was feeling. “Something’s wrong with my family.”

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The General Assembly chamber was chaos and the session had not been called yet. Ladanya stood in a back chamber, a small office of sorts inside the building, and she could hear the raised voices on the other side of the wall. She was behind a screen, changing, her previous **gown** soaked with her youngest daughters blood.

Ladanya drew the garment to her, staring down at the stains. She touched the dark splotches with trembling fingers, unable to choke back her sob. No parent should out live their children. Despite what she knew to be true about the nature of the universe, of souls and the beauty that was death, it did not take away from the pain of their departure for those left behind. She clutched the ruined **dress** to her chest, her opposite hand covering her face and silently mourned her daughter. She didn’t hear the door open, she was too enveloped in her grief. She did not resist though, when she felt the familiar energy, and then circle of Jochlan’s arms around her. They held her tightly, wrapping their energy around hers; it was strength and sorrow, understanding and affection. Ladanya sunk into her friend, burying her

face against their shoulder and in those seconds was nothing but a mother who had lost a child.

Jochlan said nothing, simply held her. Minutes past and they were loathe to remind her but, there was no choice. “The Assembly awaits you.”

The words reminded her she was not just a mother. And that she would have to make matters worse, before they could be better.

Drawing in a watery breath she drew back from them. “Thank you, Jochlan,” she said sincerely. “And now I must put you in a horrible position.” Her voice grew stronger as she spoke. Setting aside the ruined dress, she pulled the fresh one that had been brought for her off the hook.

Jochlan stepped back around the screen respectfully, giving the Narozen their back and staying close so they could hear her without her having to speak too loudly. “What do you require, Narozen?”

“The truth of this situation will not be found on Dacwen. You must break Saraya out of <prison> and take her to Earth. Whatever the reason for what Savil has done, she will find it there. She must uncover his treachery. Here, her hands will be tied.”

Jochlan didn’t flinch at the seriousness of the order or it’s implications. They had always felt their duty was to the people of this family, less than the office they represented. “As you command. I will fetch the Narosel and we will leave at once.”

Ladanya stepped out from behind the screen, lifting her hands to wipe any lingering tears from her cheeks. She looked Jochlan squarely in the eye, knowing the ability her friend possessed. Despite her heartbreak, she remembered the words she’d spoken to her eldest. While true, they weren’t the only thing she wanted her daughter to remember. “Tell her I love her, Jochlan,” her voice wavered with the force of emotion those words brought. She cleared her throat before she continued. “Tell her to be strong. And tell her she cannot fail. It is the only way she can honor Atomeia, and save her planet, now.”

“I will tell her. And I will bring her home. You make sure we have a Dacwen to come home too.” Jochlan saluted her strongly, their palm striking their chest, touching their lips, a closed fist, against their forehead, that opened a moment later, palm out. The motion was

held a touch longer than necessary, a silent good-bye. Jochlan left, striding determinedly out of the chamber.

Ladanya watched Jochlan go in silence. She took a few more moments alone, to wash her face, fix her hair, ensure there was no blood on her hands. When she could delay no longer, she drew herself up and walked out of the chamber, ready to embrace her fate and the horrible things she must do next.

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“Saraya, I will be happy to connect you to your family once your lesson is com-” The Instructor’s words were cut off as the quiet of the library died to an collective of shocked murmurs and chatter.

Dread tightened the muscles in her stomach. Made every muscle in her warrior’s body tighten. She ignored her instructor, rising from the table and move across the room to the nearest Dacweian, watching the news report over their shoulder.

“Narosel Atomeia is dead. She was killed by her brother, Justicar Savil. We have confirmed that Justicar Savil was forced to kill the Narosel in attempt to stop her from using the <weapon>...”

“No.” It couldn’t be. Not Atomeia. Not her sister. Saraya backed up a step. Another. In some distant part of her brain she could hear her instructor murmuring condolences to her. The others in the library were staring at her now, some in sympathy, some in accusation. Atomeia was dead. Her sister was... Savil had... Saraya lifted her hands, burying them in her hair, her world crumbling around her piece by piece...

Jochlan was suddenly there, embracing her before she lost it. And she did loose it, her fists colliding into their chest, hard, one right after the other. She screamed into the fabric of their uniform, the sound ending in her choked cries of agony. Jochlan didn’t try to calm her, they let her release her pain against them, holding her upright when she sunk into them under the weight of grief.

With her pain came anger, she wanted answers. Had to have them. “I want to talk to Savil. I demand to see him! I want to know how he could do-”

“We must go, Saraya.” Jochlan put their arm around her shoulders, speaking low their words only for her. “Your mother has commanded it. You are to go to Earth, to learn what happened.”

“Why the <fuck word> are we going to earth? If the <weapon> went off they’re all dead, Jochlan. There’s no one alive to give us answers.” Her words brought to the forefront another thought - the two humans she had saved. They were dead too. And for reasons she did not understand, she felt grief.

“I will explain. We must go.”

“No!” Saraya ripped her arm from Jochlan’s embrace. “I will have words with my brother Savil, I demand-”

“Saraya stop. Focus. Ground yourself. Breathe.” Jochlan’s tone was commanding yet calm <resonated. This is a special ability they have to bring Dacwian’s into focus when their passions rise>.

The familiar mantra made her pause, realizing several things with each breath she exhaled. She was making a scene, for the first. It wasn’t that Dacwens or members in authority couldn’t show emotion, but considering the state of affairs her family found themselves her, screaming and being belligerent wasn’t the best look. If her mother sent Jochlan to take her to earth before her sentence was over... they were in escape mode. Her mother was deliberately breaking the law, Putting her position at risk. Things were bad. Really bad. And her sister was... dead. Gone from his plane.

It was that thought, that brought tears to Saraya’s eyes and she couldn’t stop them from running down her cheeks even as she tried to steady her breathing and plant her feet more firmly into the floor.

Jochlan looked at her with empathy in their eyes and pressed their strong hand gently against her cheek. “I will remove the binding of your tanarull when we reach the <spaceport>. We run, we do not stop and we must try not to hurt any of the Kalturo or Horan’s on the way. Understand?”

Saraya pressed her cheek into their palm, and on the next breath nodded against it. She lifted her hands, wiping the tears from her cheeks, sniffing. “Yes. I’m ready.”

“Run.”