

The Angriest Angel

Prologue

"Iratius."

Landcaster exhaled the word, as if calling out to that which he feared would somehow give him strength.

It had the opposite effect.

He swallowed hard and tossed another pebble into the river from the bench where he sat, trying to calm himself. He had thought that shining a light on the monster would dispel it, that its illumination would lead to understanding. But instead, the reality of this nightmare only became clearer.

He rose from the bench, too shaken to sit still. They would be here soon, and he needed to get his head straight. How long had he been here? Fifteen minutes? He didn't want to leave—not yet. The serenity of the river seemed to calm his anxiety. There was a sense of peace here—peace that he had not felt in a long time.

Landcaster loosened his tie and removed his suit coat, laying it carefully on the worn wooden bench. The scent of the muddy earth by the river's edge beckoned him, like a return to innocence, or perhaps some distant childhood memory. There were places like this back home, but they were not as common as they were here. Certainly not so close to civilization.

He rolled up his blood-spattered shirt sleeves and grabbed a fistful of rocks, moving a bit closer to the water.

I should have seen this coming.

He launched a rock high and far, as if aiming for the invoked memory. There was still enough light in the purpling sky to make out the spot where the water swallowed it. He studied his mark with exaggerated significance, doing his best to take his mind off what he had just seen.

Shaking a stone from his left hand to his right, he tried to hit the same spot—unsuccessfully.

"Anger," he mumbled.

It seemed as if centuries of its mastery had been rendered irrelevant, and the reasons remained as cryptic as ever. If anger were simply a state of mind—a choice—then why was there such failure?

Perhaps his people had lived without anger for so long that the formula for its treatment was forgotten. Or perhaps there was a negative energy about this place which fostered such emotion.

Regardless, there was no excuse for what he had just witnessed. That level of fury was unacceptable.

"What if I hit a fish?" he wondered, forcibly willing his thoughts back to the present. He doubted that he could, even if he tried. The marine life was certainly aware that some fool was throwing rocks into the water, thus taking necessary measures to avoid the area.

He smiled ironically and said, "If only people were that smart."

Landcaster knew that he understood anger better than most of his people. He had firsthand experience with the strange emotion—the day Connie died. It was an odd sensation, one that he would never forget. It had been almost a month since her death, and he still felt the burning desire to blame someone.

But today he witnessed anger secondhand. The horrifying display of violence was disturbing for many reasons.

Not the least of which was the fact that it came from his people—verifying the rumors that it was spreading among them, like some kind of sickness.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard the bark of a dog nearby. Feigning the need to scrape up stones from around his feet, he risked a better look.

A dog and its owner were heading in his direction. It looked to be innocent indigena—the animal was golden brown, medium sized, and friendly. The owner was a male, probably close to his own age.

"Definitely not Lafaye," he mumbled sarcastically.

He kept his attention on the water, choosing to ignore the indigena—and hoping they did the same. He reflexively glanced up at the empty sky behind him though, just to reassure himself.

"Hey," the man said. "Is that blood?"

"*Condemno*," Landcaster muttered under his breath.

"Are you alright?" the stranger asked, his eyes jerking toward the darkened blood stains on Landcaster's shirt.

"The blood is not mine," Landcaster replied casually, hurling another rock. "I was in a car accident. But don't worry, everybody is fine."

The blood was Elliot's, of course. He had been sitting next to Landcaster, and took the brunt of the collision. Had it not been for their technology, Elliot would probably be dead.

"Are you sure?" the man asked with a frown. "You need a ride or a phone or anything?"

"No, thank you. My um—boss is on his way to pick me up."

It was close enough to the truth. He didn't want to lie to the man. He just wanted him to leave—for his own good.

"Route 14?"

"Yes," Landcaster answered.

"What happened?"

Landcaster threw another rock and said, "Ah—my friend and I were on our way to the Fullerton Valley art show. Someone jumped our lane and smashed into us, head on. The police said he was texting and driving."

The man grunted in disgust, "I hope they lock him up."

Landcaster smirked, thinking of the man in the other car, no doubt having the worst day of his life at the hands of Lafaye. Getting locked up would be a walk in the park by comparison.

"You're not from around here are you?"

This time, Landcaster froze. He slowly turned from the water and said, "Pardon me?"

"Your accent—you don't sound like you're from around here."

"Oh, right," Landcaster said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Sorry, ah, no I'm not."

"Where are you from?" he asked politely.

Landcaster looked around, wondering when Lafaye would get here.

This man has no idea what danger he is in.

"You should probably leave," Landcaster said.

"Why?"

"Just leave," Landcaster repeated. "Go. *Brevi tempore!*"

"Huh?"

He didn't want to force the indigena to leave, but he was given little choice. The man had lingered too long, and Lafaye would be here at any moment.

Using it only as a last resort, Landcaster furrowed his brow in concentration and channeled his psy. He focused waves of *mollire* and directed it at the unknowing indigena, washing over him long enough to make him susceptible to suggestion.

"Please leave," Landcaster said.

"Should I go back the way I came, or should I head downstream?"

"Go back the way you came," Landcaster instructed. "With all haste. And stay inside your home tonight."

Without hesitation, he scruffed his dog playfully and said, "Let's go boy!" And then jogged back the way he came, not looking back.

Landcaster watched him for a moment, and then turned toward the river and let out an exasperated sigh.

Secrecy is one thing, but this is absurd.

He couldn't remember a time when the indigena had any reason to fear them. He felt shameful that it got to this point—and dreaded what it said about the future.

Decades ago, when they discovered this planet, they had taken all possible precautions for every form of disease and danger. They outlined each and every risk, taking steps to ensure everyone's safety. Nobody anticipated that an outbreak of negative emotion would have become their greatest problem.

Sudden movement from the wooded bike path drew Landcaster's attention as the two men finally appeared. Despite knowing that they were coming, his heart pounded hard in his chest as he watched them approach.

Regulus Lafaye was in front, of course. Even from this distance, Landcaster would've known that it was Lafaye. The man's presence was like a gravity well. Behind him was Volk—Lafaye's brawny right hand man.

"Mind if we join you?" Lafaye called out.

Landcaster didn't respond, turning his attention back to the waters. He tried to relax, but found himself unable to focus on anything other than Lafaye's advancing presence.

Lafaye unbuttoned his suit coat and removed it, laying it on top of Landcaster's. He took a seat on the bench,

spreading his arms off to either side in a feigned posture of leisure.

"Truth be told, I love this planet. Not many unoccupied nature preserves like this on Caelus, eh Volk?"

"No, Regulus," Volk responded, using Lafaye's title.

"*Tranquillitas animi, Regulus,*" Landcaster said, addressing Lafaye.

"Peace, all," Lafaye responded. His dark hair, thick eyebrows, and deeply inset eyes made him look hawkish in the setting sun. His hands had cuts and abrasions over the knuckles—a stark reminder of the violence that just took place.

Then Volk spoke up, moving toward the muddy embankment. "Regulus, there are tracks here. It's hard to tell, but they look fresh—one, maybe two people were here recently."

Lafaye's eyes darted around the area, eventually settling back onto Landcaster, boring into him.

"Did you speak to anyone?"

"Of course not," he answered. It wasn't a complete lie; he hadn't told the passerby anything important.

It was unclear whether Lafaye believed him or not, causing Landcaster to swallow uncomfortably.

He can just psy it out of me—if he wanted to.

Feeling the need to change the subject, he asked, "How is Elliot?"

"Oh, Elliot is fine," Lafaye waved him off. "It was his first emaculo drum, but he is as good as new. Resting now."

Landcaster nodded. He figured as much, but was glad to hear it.

"Of course, you would've known that had you not left the scene so abruptly," Lafaye noted. "So perhaps the real question is, how do *you* feel, Landcaster?"

Landcaster stroked his trimmed beard thoughtfully, and replied, "A little shaken up, but I'll be alright."

Lafaye smiled, but the smile never touched his eyes. "That's not what I meant. I am aware that you were not hurt in the accident. How do I put this? There are those of us who wonder if we can count on your discretion about what happened *afterward*."

Landcaster shifted uncomfortably as he recalled the scene.

"Know that you did the right thing," Lafaye assured him. "After the accident, you followed protocol and called it in. Thanks to you, we arrived in time to save Elliot."

"But, you were spotted."

"Yes, we were."

"And—and you argued," Landcaster stammered. "You and Regulus Nayyar—about what to do next."

Lafaye nodded, "We did."

"And then you—" Landcaster trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

Lafaye looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

"You showed anger."

"Yes," Lafaye admitted.

Landcaster shook his head, unable to contain his feelings any longer, "But Regulus, without anger control, the foundation of what we believe will crumble around us. We stand for peace, we stand for honor and virtue, we look out for each other, but—but you attacked him. You attacked Regulus Nayyar in a fit of rage. You showed anger! You showed *iratus!*"

Volk snarled, "And what is wrong with that?"

Landcaster looked at Volk in horror, "*Malam iniuriam!* We are Caelan—we have mastered anger!"

Regulus Lafaye had been nodding patiently at the ground. He looked up and said, "Try not to be too judgmental, Landcaster. Protocol postrema cannot be taken lightly. Nayyar would not listen to reason, so I had to make him listen.

Physical violence is always regrettable, but let's all be honest shall we? If I had not...made my point, then we would be evacuating right now, all 939 of us, simply because someone saw our technology."

Landcaster wrinkled his forehead, "But Regulus Nayyar only wanted to have a discussion about that. And you attacked him!"

"That's a bit of an exaggeration," Lafaye said loftily. "After the indigena took those pictures, we did discuss it. We disagreed on what to do—evacuate, or contain the situation. We had a quarrel. Afterward, Nayyar took a carina home. Rather pouty, if you ask me."

A quarrel. That is certainly one way to put it.

Landcaster would never forget the image of Lafaye beating Nayyar. Nayyar simply raised a differing opinion, and Lafaye lashed out, knocking him to the ground and pounding him mercilessly—nearly beating him to death. Lafaye looked as a monster would, deranged and furious. His powerful mental energy coupled with the physical outburst was horrifying.

"It is regrettable," Lafaye admitted. "But indigena technology has made it increasingly difficult for us to maintain our secrecy." He turned back to Landcaster and smiled, "And now, as you can see, the situation is under control. No need to evacuate, no need for panic."

He patted the bench next to him, motioning Landcaster to join him.

Landcaster hesitated, and then sat down beside Lafaye, wondering why he felt such empathy for that explanation.

"What about the indigena?" Landcaster asked. "The man who caused the accident?"

Volk chuckled darkly at the question.

Landcaster glanced at him, and added, "He uploaded pictures and video from his phone before we could stop him."

"He is in no danger, Landcaster, if that's what worries you," Lafaye said. "We've psyed the police and had him arrested—which was not difficult, since he was to blame for the crash anyway. We've convinced the authorities that he's crazy and discredited his entire story."

That made sense to Landcaster. Psying indigena was a simple task for any Caelan—even more so for a Regulus. Every Regulus had superior mental abilities, which is why they were appointed Regulus in the first place. Their mind was so strong that they could even psy other Caelans. Thus, it was easy to believe that Lafaye could contain almost any situation.

But Nayyar had protested that course for good reason. Discrediting someone on such a grand scale had fallout which would affect the man's entire life. It was unethical and unprincipled—something that was just not done.

"Isn't that wrong, though?" Landcaster asked. "If we portray the man as insane, he may lose his job—or worse. And it would be our fault."

Lafaye's features sank with disappointment, causing Landcaster to feel horrible. He immediately wished that he could take it back. The last thing he wanted to do was disappoint Regulus Lafaye. But before he could question why he had such strange feeling of regret, Lafaye asked a most unexpected question.

"Have you ever felt it, Landcaster?" Lafaye asked, running a fingertip over the cuts on his knuckles. "Anger?"

Landcaster swallowed uncomfortably.

"Come now, you can tell me," Lafaye said, slowly and deliberately.

Landcaster's eyes went wide at the tingling sensation he felt. Lafaye's words gently washed over him, making him feel euphoric.

He is psying me!

Landcaster wasn't sure how long Lafaye had been psying him—perhaps this entire time. It was too late to raise any mental defenses, and even if he did it wouldn't matter. The psy of a Regulus was too powerful for anyone to overcome.

He was surprised at how much free will he still had. He felt that he could run away if he chose to. But doing so would bring him shame. The desire to please Lafaye was simply too strong.

"Have you ever felt anger?" Lafaye repeated, his eyes narrowing.

"Yes," Landcaster said.

Lafaye's hawkish face grew intense, "*Transgressorum praevaricati?*"

"I lost someone," Landcaster admitted, unable to resist Lafaye's psy. "Someone close."

"And this—loss—it made you angry?"

Landcaster nodded.

"Do not fear such an admission," Lafaye assured him. "I too lost someone, not one year ago. In a car accident, nonetheless. Very similar to the one you were just in."

Landcaster knew the story—everyone did. Lafaye lost his wife to a drunk driver. He took the loss incredibly hard, understandably so.

He laid a hand on Landcaster's shoulder and said, "Despite what our teachings say, it is okay to embrace that feeling—the anger."

Alarms were sounding in Landcaster's mind. This was all wrong. Using psy in this way was unethical. And anger—anger was never to be embraced. It was to be understood, acknowledged, and cast aside, in favor of peace.

"Tell me about your loss," Lafaye asked curiously. "Who did you lose?"

Landcaster felt fear grip him. Lafaye's demeanor was not right. He considered making a plea, but under the

influence of psy the thought of being rejected was too difficult to bear.

"She died. I cared about her—a lot—and she died. The rest is not important Regulus."

Lafaye's dark stare locked onto him like a drill, "I'll decide if it's important."

Landcaster twisted his head in frustration, breathing heavily as he continued, "It was an indigena woman. I met her in my studies. We became close, and then—then she developed an illness."

"I see," Lafaye said, exchanging a knowing glance with Volk. "Well, isn't that interesting."

"He could help us, Regulus," Volk suggested.

"Perhaps," Lafaye said thoughtfully.

"Help with what?" Landcaster asked.

Lafaye looked at Lancaster and asked, "What was her name?"

Landcaster cleared his throat uncomfortably, unable to defy Lafaye's psy, and mumbled, "Connie."

"Connie," Lafaye repeated. "What a pretty name. Did you love this woman?"

Landcaster clenched his jaw in frustration, not wanting to share the details of his story.

"Landcaster," Lafaye said, looking at him sternly. "I said, did you love this *Connie*?"

Even though he knew that it was futile, Landcaster desperately tried to summon psy of his own, channeling *claustra*—the mental defense. He tried to stop the flow of Lafaye's psy and break his hold over him.

But Lafaye was a Regulus—his psy was stronger by more than double. He effortlessly tore down Landcaster's mental defense.

"Don't do that," Lafaye warned. "Now, answer my question. Did you love this woman?"

"Yes, Regulus."

Lafaye grinned, but it was a twisted grin. "Now I am intrigued!" he declared, exchanging a glance with Volk. "I want to know everything. Tell me about this illness. Tell me the story of how it took her life."

Despair took Landcaster. This abusive use of psy was wrong—it was strictly forbidden. His worst fears had come true. The anger disease among his people was much more than a rumor—it was very real. And worse, their leader—who was supposed to be a foundation of peace—was at the center of it.

He was powerless against Regulus Lafaye's psy. He had no choice but to stop struggling and tell him everything. As he shared personal, intimate details—things that only he knew—a small tear formed in the corner of his eye, swelling large enough to eventually streak down his face, silent and unnoticed, like a pebble sinking deep into forgotten waters.