

CHAPTER ONE – THE END OF THE CYCLE

The Ice Wars were due.

He had been in complete control for such a long time now that leading from the front came naturally to him, indeed he could not remember a time when he had been ever really challenged. Now with the cycle ending, he felt more concern within him than he could ever outwardly show. A new one would begin again soon, as it always had done. A contest of blood and power would await him, and a test of strength and survival to get through. For fifty years, he had shaped the world that he lived in, and he had bent it according to his will.

Now, for the first time in a long time, he felt a sense of vulnerability in his position, and the way to combat all this would be to show strength and to wield the power he had.

He slowly lifted his hands, watching as the faint light reflected off his cybernetic fingers. They were strong, precise, unnatural and unchanging. The rest of him was not.

Veylan had ruled longer than any before him. He had crushed rebellions and outlasted conspiracies; according to his mind, he had made Pluto his own. But time had a way of creeping in and affecting things; even through the seemingly impenetrable walls of iron, ice and genetics that protected him, even via power itself. But this time it was different. Yes, he would fight to hold what was his, but for the first time in a long time, doubts had crept into his mind.

A sharp chime shattered the quiet. The council was waiting for him; he had to attend. Veylan stood up, rolling his shoulders, and willing his body into action. Weakness could not be shown to them. Any hesitation must be buried and hidden. He was Supreme Chancellor. He was power itself.

With a final glance at the frigid world beyond the glass, he turned, his black cloak whispering across the metal floor as he strode toward the chamber doors.

Outside the building, the ice winds howled, their cries like tortured ghosts scraping against the reinforced plasteel barriers. Beyond them, Pluto extended out into an endless graveyard of ice. Its terrain had been sculpted into irregularly shaped ridges and weird-looking snow dunes created by centuries of merciless storms. The planet's distant sun cast no warmth at all, providing only a pale, indifferent light that barely touched the methane-laced atmosphere.

Inside the dome, the Council Chamber was filled with the great and the good on the planet, waiting... waiting for him. The massive hall made of a black steel alloy and reinforced glass was heated with embedded energy conduits, casting an artificial amber glow that made the room appear warmer than it actually was. The air in here was thin, sterile and recycled too many times through Pluto's struggling life-support systems. The echoes of voices past seemed to be embedded in the chamber walls, what discussions had been had here in years past? The whispers of leaders who had risen to prominence and then fallen, and then swallowed by the merciless cycle of power that came around every one hundred years.

At the heart of the chamber, sat the obsidian council table, its surface polished to a mirror sheen. Eleven figures sat in silence around it, awaiting the arrival of the current leader. At the head of the table, his seat was elevated above the rest as a mark of respect. As he entered, Supreme Chancellor Veylan observed the gathering with a look as frigid as the brutal world outside. He walked slowly with authority towards his throne-like chair, the others stood, heads bowed until he was in place, and then they sat in unison.

Veylan took his time to look around the assembled council members before he cleared his throat.

"Welcome everyone," he said, "Let's get down to business."

The collective there nodded in agreement, and then he continued.

We stand at the edge of a moment of reckoning," he said, his voice smooth but laced with authority. "The factions are growing restless, and I feel the heat of insurrection may be rising beneath the ice."

Across from him, General Kallos, leader of the Independent's faction, stirred himself. His scarred face was alive, and sensing an opportunity that this could be a day to initiate a change in the way that the planet was run.

"That's because they know the Cycle is upon us, and your time is up," he said, goading Veylan. "You can stall all you like, but you cannot escape tradition."

Murmured discussion rippled across the table, at the boldness of Kallos' approach.

Veylan's synthetic fingers drummed against the table with slight indignation towards him. "Tradition?" he echoed, his voice filled with much disdain. "I thought we evolved past all that when I took this seat?" he said questioning the others.

"Did we?" a female voice rang out. That voice came from the far end of the chamber, one which was excitable and defiant. Nyx Orban, the leader of the Outlanders, met Veylan's gaze without hesitation. Her silver eyes gleamed back at him; they were mischievous and alive. She looked every inch a woman of combat. She had short dark, almost black hair and she was dressed in dark grey fatigues; her stature was lean, and she was physically fit.

"Then why is the Council still bound by it Veylan?" she said firmly, "Because it's our way, and it's the way it should always be," she went on, "The people respect strength, and they expect us to prove ourselves."

She paused, her eyes gleaming.

"Anyway, you're an outsider, so why should we listen to you?" she mercilessly teased him. He knew on this point she was technically correct.

"Very well," he said looking back at her, "We will do as the people expect, and on behalf of the Corporatists, I can confirm that we will compete for victory," he said.

Nyx smirked. "More like survival," she replied with a hint of irony. "For you..."

Kallos nodded toward Nyx. "She's right. The people won't follow a ruler who cowers behind bureaucracy and red tape," he said. "We both know what happened the last time a Chancellor tried to prevent the contest?"

"I agree," said Uri Ressler, an elder statesman, representing the Northern region of Erebus Prime.

"So do I," rang out a plethora of other voices from around the table.

Veylan felt extremely uncomfortable at this dissent. He knew the tide of opinion was against him at this moment, and he remembered too that Chancellor Rhyne had tried to reform the system, declaring the Wars illegitimate, so that he could cling to power. The rebellion that followed had drowned the colony in casualties, including his own. And now, Veylan sat in the same chair, facing the same choice as Rhyne had faced before. He wanted to avoid this scenario repeating at all costs.

Prophet Hext, the green-robed and bearded leader of the Terraformers, was one of the last to speak, his voice a whisper yet incredibly assured. "These Ice Wars are archaic and are no way to choose a ruler," he urged. "It's about time we grew up and found another way."

"Enough." snapped back Veylan as he stood up; his imposing figure dominating the table, "I do not wish them to go ahead, and I and see that I do have support in this," he said looking at Hext.

"If we are not in full agreement, then we will have to vote." he proposed.

"Who wishes them to occur?" he asked, and one by one, ten hands were raised.

"Against," he said knowing he had already been defeated; he and Hext raised theirs.

Inside Veylan was disappointed, but not surprised. Seeing that the decision to proceed had been carried, he decided wisely to back down.

"This is the way we have always chosen governance." he said, hiding his own reticence that these wars we even needed, "I have ruled for half a century, and we have prospered. Despite that I see you want to instigate potential change, so in accordance with the vote, the Ice Wars will go ahead," he said.

"We'll be there," said Nyx exuding confidence and some bravado, "Just imagine if you were unable to beat our faction? Imagine if you ended up losing to Kallos? Oh, the embarrassment!" she said looking at him directly into his eyes.

Veylan knew that the Outlanders would never stand any hint of a chance in a military confrontation with his forces, but secretly he admired her fighting spirit.

Veylan glanced at each faction leader in turn. He saw the hunger and opportunity in Kallos' bright blue eyes, the quiet certainty and bravery in Nyx's, the masked enigma of Hext who knew he might have to adhere to the rules despite his obvious reservations. They had all made their choices.

"We will take on all-comers," Veylan said sharply. "Come... and take us on. And I will remind you all why I have ruled for so long."

A mean and confident expression took over him, while Nyx shifted, looking at him trying to read what he was thinking.

"Then it is decided," she declared to them all, "The battles will begin after First Light, as is the tradition."

Everyone around the table banged it in approval, and thus the decision had been made. The Ice Wars tradition helped Pluto find strong, stable and long-term leadership, and they were triggered by the exact alignment of Pluto's six Moons, once every hundred years or so. They had been Pluto's brutal method of governance for generations, a contest of blood and dominance, where factions battled for rule of the planet.

They had rules, with specified use of armaments, no fighting near populated areas was permitted, and they were overseen by a panel of neutrally appointed judges, the Silent Watchers, who made sure all sides abided by the laws put down. If after conflict had taken place there were no victors, then the Silent Watchers would force negotiations to settle the search for a new Chancellor. The defeated leaders, if still alive, were either exiled, imprisoned, or forced into servitude. The people expected them to take place, and to deny the Wars was to invite chaos within the population, and that might invite others outside of Pluto who might want to take advantage of it.

And now the time for them had arrived.

Veylan rose from his seat, turned, and left the Council gathering, his long coat billowing as he strode toward the chamber doors. The remaining leaders watched him in silence, their faces content that this time they had got their way over him. As the heavy doors slid open, a final gust of chilly air from the ventilation systems brushed against his skin. He did not look back, nor did he acknowledge the fervent discussion from within the chamber that followed in his wake.

With measured steps, he exited the council chamber, his polished boots clicking against the metal grating. His mind was already calculating the next move he would make. Significant risk and danger lay ahead for him, so he would have to be incredibly careful. He would have to be adaptable, *or even ruthless*, to shape the outcome of the coming days, to his advantage. With a whoosh that echoed behind him, the chamber doors sealed shut, with the thought of the council's verdict still ringing in his ears.

Beyond the glass tunnel encasing the walkway, the vista of Pluto spread out before him like a desolate world of endless ice and boulders. The wind blew strongly with a violent ice storm whipping across the endless eternally frosted land. Ice crystals, suspended in the near-vacuum

atmosphere, refracted what little light reached the planet, painting mottled spectrums across the perpetual twilight. This was a normal day on this planet at the far end of the Solar System. The landscape was brutal and unyielding here, much like the people who had lived and survived for generations.

Veylan now strode forward, nervous energy surrounding him, and he looked slightly agitated. His mind raced through countless possibilities of how he would get the better of his rival faction leaders in the days to come. With the decision just made, his position was much less secure, and despite him having a significant military advantage, the others could be threatened to undo him completely. He had to back down, for now at least, and accept their challenge, because the lunar convergences were soon to arrive. Come the time of the conflicts, he trusted he would hold enough power in his hand to confirm the outcome, but should that not be the case, he would resort to doing whatever was necessary to prevail. The private office of the Commander came into view ahead of him within the dark angular fortress; it was embedded within the colony's Central Spire. The guards on either side of the entrance, elite Technocrat enforcers clad in navy blue thermoplas armour, snapped to attention as he approached them. Without a word, the biometric scanner read his palm, and the doors slid open.

Inside, the atmosphere was stark and clinical. This space was sparsely furnished, with a couple of portraits of former Supreme Commanders on the walls, and in the middle was a desk with communications devices and a holoscreen that could bring up any maps or information that the Chancellor so desired.

He sat down for a second. He had wanted to stall the council or prevent them from even triggering the Ice Wars, but Kallos and Orban were itching for a fight; he could tell. "Well," he thought, "I'll show them who's boss."

Just as he thought he might return back to his official apartment, there was a chime from the message console on the desk.

Who might this be?

He got up, approached the central console and placed a palm on the interface to check-in. The system responded instantly.

Incoming transmission – *Origin: Earth Command*

He looked surprised. A message from Earth? This was rare indeed. He initiated the connection, and a recognisable individual, one he had sparred with many times before, materialized before him. A tall, imposing figure in a dark military uniform appeared, the emblem of the Earth Dominion gleaming on his chest.

"Supreme Chancellor Veylan," the man said, his voice clipped and businesslike. "I trust you are aware of the... disturbances on Pluto?"

Veylan scoffed back with irritation towards him "You waste time with obvious statements to me, Admiral Devlin. Speak your purpose." he said.

Devlin's remained impassive, as he knew Veylan of old. "The Dominion is concerned," he said, "Your colony remains a vital outpost on the edge of the Solar System. We cannot allow instability to threaten our interests Veylan. If you cannot maintain control, Earth may be forced to intervene..."

Veylan was unsettled by this threat from Devlin, but he composed himself again. "Pluto is secure under my rule," he replied, "Your interference would only complicate matters,"

Devlin twitched slightly, his eyes inquisitive as he looked intently back. "Do not forget, Veylan, that it was our resources and technology that allowed you to rise to power. Without our support, your rule would have crumbled long ago," he said showing him who was the boss in this conversation.

Veylan synthetic fingers flexed again, a reminder of the enhancements that had kept him in power for so long. "I have maintained order on your behalf Pluto for five decades," he said stating the obvious. "I know what I'm doing Devlin, and you know that very well too," he said, irritated that his rule had been questioned.

Devlin's tone grew colder. "Your longevity treatments and cybernetic enhancements were gifts from the Dominion, Veylan." he said with a mild threat in his voice, "Do not mistake them for entitlements. We expect results..."

The irritation between them was very real, a reflection of their long and complicated history. Veylan had once been a promising officer in Earth's military, handpicked by Admiral James, Devlin's predecessor for a special mission to establish control over Pluto.

The partnership had been mutually beneficial: Veylan's ambition and ruthlessness had secured the colony, and he had taken over at the passing of Chancellor Yellin 50 years ago. Devlin's backing for him came when he took over from James, as he had ensured that Earth's interests were protected. But over the years, their relationship had soured, with Veylan's increasing autonomy, and Devlin's growing distrust in him.

"Then ensure your position remains secure," Devlin continued. "We are transmitting an intelligence package now. It will contain information on your opposition, including their weaknesses, and secrets that we have recently intercepted. Use it well. Earth will have no patience for incompetence."

Veylan took a long breath forcing his mind into a deeper focus. The message had been clear. His rule was not only threatened from within, but it was now under scrutiny from beyond Pluto's icy borders. He had no choice but to act swiftly, and decisively.

Turning toward the console, he activated the data file that Devlin had sent to him. Streams of classified intelligence scrolled before his eyes. Within it were information on Kallos' forces and where they were stationed, potential weaknesses within the Terraformers, and the Outlanders' hidden supply routes. Every piece of data was a weapon waiting to be wielded.

Confidence flowed through him on receiving this information, it would be extremely valuable in the days ahead.

The Ice Wars would begin at First Light, but he did not intend to fight fairly.