

## CHAPTER I

### "Ashes of Gaia"

The streets of the dome city were in chaos, a cacophony of alarms, shouting enforcers, and the hum of patrol drones buzzing through the air like mechanical wasps. Jade sprinted down a narrow alley, her breath ragged and her lungs burning. The cold, metallic scent of the dome's recycled air mixed with acrid smoke from the explosion she'd just set. Behind her, boots hammered the ground in pursuit.

"Stop, insurgent!" barked one of the enforcers, his voice amplified by the harsh static of his helmet's speakers. A blinding beam of light swept over Jade's shoulder as a drone locked onto her.

"Dem, now!" she shouted, skidding to a halt.

Her flying companion, a sleek, bat-like creature with shimmering, translucent wings, shot out from the shadows above. Dem darted toward the drone with a shrill screech, weaving erratically to evade its targeting sensors. The drone fired bursts of plasma, narrowly missing him, as he slashed at its exposed wiring with his razor-sharp talons. Sparks flew, and the drone crashed with a metallic whine.

Jade didn't wait to see the outcome. She threw herself through the jagged remnants of a shattered storefront window, landing in a heap of broken glass and

overturned furniture. Behind her, the deafening boom of another explosion rocked the street, shaking the walls of the narrow shop.

"They're getting too close," she muttered, brushing a strand of matted black hair from her eyes. Dem swooped in through the broken window, chirping frantically. His wing was singed, but he'd disabled the drone.

"Good job, buddy," she whispered, stroking his head for a brief moment before an armored vehicle roared down the street outside. She flattened herself against the wall, clutching the small data crystal she'd stolen from the Laia enforcers' central hub. The information on it was worth dying for, or so Derald had said.

Her pulse pounded in her ears as the sound of boots entered the shop. "Sweep it. She's here somewhere."

Jade clutched the data crystal tighter, her knuckles whitening. Her mind raced as the enforcers approached. Their heavy boots crushed broken glass underfoot, the sound grating like nails on steel. She had one trick left.

Her eyes darted to the ceiling. High above, a loosely hanging ventilation pipe swayed gently with the vibrations of the explosions outside. It was close to bursting. If she could just...

The enforcer rounded the corner, his visor glowing faintly in the dim light. Before he could raise his weapon, Jade fired a shot at the base of the pipe. With a deafening hiss, the pressurized steam inside erupted, scalding the enforcer and filling the room with a dense cloud. He screamed, stumbling blindly, and Jade used the distraction to slip out the back.

She staggered down a narrow passageway, her legs

trembling. The adrenaline that had carried her this far was wearing thin, and her vision blurred with exhaustion. Dem perched nervously on her shoulder, chirping encouragement, but even he sounded strained.

The last thing Jade saw was the dull glow of the moon through the dome's translucent ceiling before her knees buckled. The stolen data crystal slipped from her hand as she collapsed, the world fading into black.

The air was warm and alive, buzzing with the hum of insects and the distant calls of Favians. Jade opened her eyes to a vibrant, endless jungle. Mammoth trees towered above her, their luminous leaves casting a soft, green glow that bathed the forest in light. Vines dangled like curtains, swaying gently in the breeze, and the air was thick with the earthy scent of moss and blooming flowers.

Gaia. She was home.

Jade was young again, running barefoot through the dense jungle. The moss beneath her feet was soft and springy, and her laughter echoed through the trees as she chased after flickering, bioluminescent insects. Life here was pure and simple, untainted by the Laia's machines. She felt alive, truly alive.

A sudden shadow passed overhead, and Jade looked up to see a Favian gliding silently between the trees. The creature's eight legs stretched wide, its feathered, owl-like body rippling with hues of green and gold to match the canopy. Its round eyes glowed softly, unblinking as it perched on a branch, its spiderlike legs curling delicately around the bark.

"Careful, Jade!" Elder Marek called, his voice rich with