

CENTAURIUS

THE ASHEN THRONE

By SJ McGarry

Chapter 1:

The Fractured Return



The PHOENIX tore through the velvet VOID of the Andromeda Galaxy, its hull shimmering with a pale iridescent glow that mirrored the swirling nebulae of Centaurius.

Inside the bridge, the air smelled of sterilized oxygen and the sharp tang of ozone. Nella felt it before she could name it. That sharp, electric bite at the back of the throat. Ozone. Heavy and thick and wrong in a way that settled into the chest like a warning she couldn't shake.

She'd been gone seven months. Seven months of bleeding through the IPERM mission on Earth in the Milky Way Galaxy, watching soldiers fall beside her in battles

against their enemies of the VOID from the Whirlpool and Fireworks galaxies, which was supposed to end everything. And they had ended.

The council said so.

The victory broadcasts said so.

The war was over.

But that smell.

It didn't care about victory broadcasts.

Nella was relieved to return home to her country of Utropia, on planet Centaurius in the Andromeda Galaxy. Violet-tinted clouds, golden spires reflected a civilization built on the light of something ancient and sacred called the First Star. Her people have protected that light for centuries. The royal bloodline carries it in their bones, literally woven into the marrow of every heir born to the throne.

The Centaurian prophecies spoke of a time when that light would be tested, when the barriers between their galaxy and the void would thin, when a princess would have to choose between surviving and burning bright enough to save everything.

That time is now.

She understood that the dynamics of cosmic stakes weren't announced with fanfare. They arrived quietly, through a crack that nobody noticed until it was already too late to seal it from the outside. A whisper of a gap. A needle's width of instability. That was all that was needed.

Nella leaned against a cold titanium bulkhead, her armor scratched and stained with Earth's red dust. She watched the violet horizon of Centaurius, her home planet, swell to fill the viewscreen.

Konan stepped beside her, his boots clicking rhythmically on the metallic floor. He adjusted the gold trim of his uniform, his eyes scanning the sensor readouts.

"The descent coordinates are locked, Princess. We hit the atmosphere in three minutes."

Nella shifted weight, feeling the ache in her shoulders.

"Did the Earth samples stabilize in the cryo-chamber, Konan?"

"They did. Though your Earth warrior, Allen, seems to have left a lasting impression on the crew. Half the engineering deck is trying to mimic that strange human laughter."

Nella snorted fondly. "Allen can be a bit of a wild card." She smiled and let out a brief, amused breath. "He is ...spirited and keeps things interesting. Still, he fought well."

Her vision of eliminating the vast chasm between Earth and Centaurius by creating a transcontinental bridge-gateway portal was nearly complete. It would no longer be an obstacle, allowing the two distant worlds to connect into a single, seamless stream of existence across the galaxies. She would always welcome Allen, the Earth warrior, and his family to her world.

A soft whirring sound announced Tessie's arrival. The humanoid robot glided toward them, its joints emitting a faint, melodic chime with every movement. Her skin was a polished, pearlescent composite that reflected the bridge lights, and her eyes were glowing apertures of soft cyan.

“Princess Nella, your heart rate is elevated by twelve percent. I suggest a calming inhalation of lavender-scented vapor.”

Nella looked at the humanoid, a small smile tugging at her lips. “I am fine, Tessie. Just eager to see my father.”

“Anxiety is a biological inefficiency,” Tessie replied, her voice a crisp, modulated soprano. “However, I have prepared your royal attire for the welcoming ceremony. It is currently being steamed to remove the creases from your Earthbound travels.”

“I want to keep the armor on, Tessie,” Nella said, her voice hardening. “I have a feeling I will need it.”

The ship shuddered as it hit the thermosphere. The vibration rattled the deck plates and sent a tremor through Nella’s boots.

As the PHOENIX descended, the sprawling spires of Dackara’s space terminal, in the capital city of Atrore, came into view, piercing the amethyst clouds like jagged needles. The landing bay doors hissed open with a violent burst of steam.

Waiting for them on the platform was King Johann Reiner of Utropia. He stood tall, draped in heavy robes of midnight blue that flowed like a liquid shadow around his feet. His face, usually a mask of imperial composure, looked drawn. The deep lines around his eyes seemed carved by a sudden, heavy burden.

Nella stepped off the ramp, her cape snapping in the wind. “Father,” she said, stepping forward to embrace him.

Johann embraced and held her; his grip was tight, almost desperate. He pulled back quickly, his eyes searching for hers. “You returned safely. Thank the stars for that.”

“The mission was a success. Earth is secure with a protective dome, and the transcontinental bridge-gateway portal restoration is in process, under the command of Allen, the Earth warrior, and the artifacts are aboard the PHOENIX,” Nella replied.

Johann didn’t smile. He gestured for her to follow him toward the inner sanctum of the palace, away from the cheering crowds and the fanfare of the trumpets. As they entered the obsidian halls, the silence became oppressive.

“What is it?” Nella asked, her hand instinctively drifting to the hilt of her blade. “You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

Johann stopped abruptly in front of a massive holographic map of the galaxy. He tapped a sequence into the console, and a section of the Fireworks Galaxy pulsed with a violent, erratic red light.

“King Montrobios contacted me, sending classified information. We have detected anomalies, Nella. Portal fluctuations that should not exist. The barriers between our realm and the void are thinning.”

Nella stepped closer to the map, her brow furrowing. “Fluctuations? The seals were reinforced after the last Great War. Centaurius is secure. Who could breach them with the Protective Centaurian Dome in place?”

“Something slipped through on your watch, Princess,” Johann said, his voice dropping to a gravelly whisper.

“While you were on Earth, the sensors picked up a breach in the third quadrant. A signature we haven’t seen in a millennium.”

The blood drained from Nella's face. The air in the room suddenly felt ice cold, smelling of sulfur and rotting meat. A memory flickered in her mind—an ancient text from the archives, a warning written in blood. “No,” she whispered.

“You know the signature,” Johann stated.

The name escaped her lips before she could stop it, a word that felt like a curse. “Jazzach.”

Johann closed his eyes. “He is the Fireworks Galaxy's most wicked and dangerous demon—the right hand of Abigor.”

“We thought we had eliminated him in the ending battle we fought on Earth, but he completely disappeared. If Jazzach is here, he isn't looking for territory,” Nella said, her voice trembling. “He is a hunter. He serves the Duke of Demons with a singular cruelty.”

“He is not here for the throne, Nella,” the King replied, looking at his daughter with profound sorrow. “He is here for you. According to Grizelle's visions, Abigor wants the blood of Centaurius royalty to unlock the final gate. Jazzach intends to kidnap you and drag you back to the pits of the Fireworks Galaxy.”

Nella looked back toward the landing bay where her ship sat. The victory of the Earth mission now felt hollow, a mere distraction from the nightmare that had followed her home. “He won't take me without a fight,” she vowed.

“I fear a fight is exactly what he wants,” her father replied, “And he has already sown the seeds of chaos in the borderlands of Wethersfield.”

Nella's eyes burned as she fought back the flood rising behind them.

Placing his hand under her chin, Johann whispered, “We will revisit this later, Nella, but for now, we must attend the celebration and ball being held in your honor. King Montrobius will address the crowds with his yearly speech, which we all have memorized by now, and then award the honors you deserve for completing this difficult mission.”

Nella drew a slow breath, already sensing the lie in everything around her—smiles, applause, chandeliers, and songs, all meant to hide the void’s shadow creeping through the crack in the portal. And as she steadied herself to walk into the celebration, she knew the truth: they were not returning home to triumph.

Nella had won a war. She’d come home to a city full of joy.

And something ancient, patient, and hungry was already here.

They were returning home to war.