

First Mataras: Irene

Chapter One

Applause washed over Irene Jonson, a warm tide she basked in. She dipped a curtsy and bowed her head, then joined the ensemble cast at the rear of the stage. She clapped as Fausto and Valentina, the show's leads, swept in from opposite sides to accept their well-earned accolades.

Fausto Casello, known to his ardent fans merely as Fausto, beamed at the various aliens who stood to cheer him. An accomplished tenor, he was known even in the far reaches of the galaxy. His fame and his insistence he be allowed to tour had sent the opera company throughout the territories of the Galactic Council of Planets' membership despite Earth's tendency toward isolationism. Fausto was on a mission to spread human opera. He claimed it was a gesture of goodwill to the myriad species Earth courted as allies. The government and Church had bent to his arguments, desperate to be allowed to colonize planets to house Earth's ever-growing population.

At his side, Valentina De León accepted praise, hers the regal benevolence of a queen. She was an hourglass in red next to Fausto's barrel torso, a haughty beauty with black hair and flashing eyes. She'd been in top form for their performance, and Irene joined in giving her due applause. When Valentina was on form, no better soprano could be found anywhere.

Irene and the rest of the company were taking their final bows, readying to leave the spotlight to its stars to be celebrated alone, when a complement of the group's security and chaperones spilled onto the stage. James Donald, head of the tour's security, barked, "Clear the stage immediately! For your safety, the cast must move to the backstage area now."

The applause died. The audience looked at each other and muttered. Many looked fairly alarmed. Irene caught a glimpse of Fausto's face, blistered red, before her chaperone appeared at her side and grabbed her upper arm. Dolores pulled...she nearly yanked...Irene to the wings. "Come quickly. Kalquorians are present, and I want you out of sight."

Irene snorted, but softly. She had intentions to wander the clubs later that night. She needed to keep Dolores, a former nun and current emissary of the Church, from keeping too close an eye on her. They joined the crush of cast, chaperones, and security leaving the stage.

Behind Irene, Fausto's voice boomed. "Do not fear, esteemed patrons! We will be onstage again tomorrow night without fail, ready to thrill you with another performance. Thank you, and goodnight!"

Backstage, his hearty warmth became fiery rage as he shouted at Donald, spittle dotting his dark beard like gems. "How dare you desecrate the boards with your foolishness!"

"A group of Kalquorians—"

"Kalquorians, bah! They are nothing in the hallowed halls of opera. Have you no respect for the genius of Regio's work? For the hours we rehearsed to perfect this singular piece of art? For the effort *I* put into this successful performance? No one disrespects Fausto! Allow me to change into clothes in which I can swing my fists, and I'll teach you better manners, sir."

Few paid the pair any mind. Fausto's tantrums, though boisterous, were rarely of any consequence. He was obeyed and coddled because of his millions of rabid fans, rather than his temper. His popularity was such, even the Church was careful about crossing him.

Dolores was among the minority who watched Fausto pitch a fit, her thin lips compressed in disapproval. "The man has no shame. I hope Mr. Donald puts him in his place for once."

Irene managed to keep her eyes from rolling. Fausto was Fausto. He had his fair share of ego and wasn't afraid to use his fame and charm to get what he wanted...and plenty of it. He was also sensitive under the bluster, a big gooey marshmallow who wept easily at another's pain.

Valentina took no notice of her costar's histrionics. She strutted past the gesticulating Fausto and patient Donald to march up to Irene, her chaperone Rosalie a couple of paces behind. "What do you think, girl? If I'd been allowed to take my bows, I would have been called back three times. Do you doubt I was born to play Esther?"

"Not at all. You were brilliant. The audience love you."

Valentina swelled with pride. She gazed up at Irene's superior six feet as if she'd scored a major triumph. "They did. For aliens, they know talent. You did well too," she added as a grudging afterthought.

"Thank you."

"But you are no Queen Esther! Someday, perhaps, but not yet. Probably not for some time." Valentina's eyes glittered as she dared Irene to refute her.

Irene quelled the urge to point out the role of Queen Esther called for a woman much older than her twenty-seven years, but it would have been cruel to do so. On the cusp of forty, Valentina was hardly old, but she wasn't taking her upcoming birthday well. It didn't help that her performances were inconsistent, her singing and acting only as good as her mood. Fausto had included her in the touring company out of loyalty...they'd performed together for nearly two decades. Why he'd promised her two-thirds of the leading lady roles, Irene couldn't quite understand. When they'd performed exclusively in New York in another company, Irene had been tapped to play lead more often than the talented but tempestuous Valentina.

Irene felt no need to play upon her castmate's fragile esteem. Especially tonight. She smiled. "You didn't play Esther. You *were* Esther."

Valentina deflated a little. High on a flawless performance, she was eager to remind her young up-and-coming competition how good she was. Irene had denied her the opportunity. She was forced to nod graciously and mutter, "Thank you." An awkward beat later, she swept to the clustered males of the chorus to receive their accolades.

"As the Book says, pride goeth before a fall," Dolores muttered. "Mark my words, Valentina will fall far when God is done with her."

Irene was tempted to correct the former nun's quotation, which actually read "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall." Knowing it would open a different can of worms kept her silent.

"I'll check the dressing room and see how crowded it is," she told her chaperone.

"Judging from how few of the women are here, it's probably bursting at the seams." Dolores cast a sour eye at the half dozen young actresses remaining in the main area, vastly outnumbered by men. Judgment was etched on every line of her pudgy face despite the fact each woman was accompanied by either a husband or a chaperone.

Irene nodded toward Meg, a diminutive member of the chorus. The lucky girl's mother was an assistant seamstress to the wardrobe department and functioned as her chaperone. The pair shared quarters near Irene's. "It may be a while before I can change, and you've had a long day. Why don't I walk to my room with Meg and Mrs. Hoffman, and you can turn in early?"

The relief in Dolores' gaze was unmistakable. Irene was no more than an assignment to her. The cheerless chaperone was untouched by opera, thinking it a den of sin despite the fact only biblical subject matter was performed. She disapproved of those who performed it, and outright despised the flirtatious Fausto and temperamental Valentina.

Irene had been careful to give Dolores no reason to suspect her of indecorous activity during the year the company had been off Earth. Her sporadic illicit forays, which had begun six months after leaving their home planet, had been meticulously planned and rarely indulged.

The complacency she'd infused in her chaperone was evident as Dolores hesitated a mere beat before heading to the door at the back of the room. "I'll com you in half an hour to verify you made it to your quarters."

"Goodnight, Dolores." Irene was granted a lazy wave. Her chaperone might have thought her the least troublesome of the opera company, but she remained disdainful.

No matter. Irene had cleared the first hurdle to what she hoped would be a fun night out on the town...or rather, the Beonid space station.

She retreated to the corner to sit and wait, making herself as invisible as possible as she perched on a chair. It wasn't an easy feat. Not quite six-feet-one, she towered over many, including her male castmates. In her early years of performing, she'd often been passed over for leading roles because a number of male stars disliked being cast with a taller woman.

Then Fausto had joined the company in New York City. Over six feet tall himself and possessing a presence that tended to render even Valentina invisible at times, he'd been delighted to have Irene cast opposite him. Thanks to his approval, Irene had finally come into her own. A critic had called her the perfect balance to Fausto's sensational bombast. She had the stature to command attention when they shared a stage. His gorgeous vocals and her ringing angelic soprano complimented perfectly, never competing but melding in what another critic had called, "the very music of heaven itself."

Irene was no shrinking flower. She knew many considered her appearance arresting at the least, beautiful to some. She'd been described as an Amazon; "veering too close to manly for comfort" according to one detractor. Fortunately, the larger-than-life personalities of Fausto and Valentina allowed her to escape some notice when she wished.

As a dozen lucky fans who'd attended the show filtered to the backstage area to meet and chat with the performers, she thought she might be fortunate enough to slip in the women's dressing room in the next few minutes. At least half the female members of the company had emerged in their street clothes, and the rest would follow soon.

Cries suddenly rang out. Everyone's attention swung toward the door leading to the stage, and Irene stood to see what the excitement was about. Security was trying to push their way through the cast to reach the area, and a number of chaperones were pulling their wide-eyed female charges in the opposite direction.

"No Kalquorians!" Donald shouted over the excited hubbub.

Irene looked over the heads of the crowd to spy three men taller than herself standing just in the doorway. She gaped at the sight.

The brown-skinned alien race similar to Earthers weren't merely towering. They were also solid walls of muscle. Their shoulders, which were visible above those between them and Irene, were wide and bulging in black sleeveless uniforms.

They weren't bad looking, she decided. They were a long way from the somewhat sexless beauty of male models and actors sporting the current trending look on Earth, what with their strong jaws and pronounced bone structures. Unfashionably masculine would have probably been the verdict of most humans, but Irene appreciated their size and appearance of strength. Their shoulder-length black hair, which would have garnered horror on Earth, did nothing to feminize their powerful looks.

They stared down at Donald in confusion as he ordered them out. Irene wondered if they understood English. Even if they didn't, his expression declared they weren't welcome.

Fausto's booming voice rang over the security head's chant of "Leave! Out! Leave! Out!" The crowd separating him from the Kalquorians parted to let him through.

"For shame, Mr. Donald. Our performances are for all as Earth's goodwill gesture to our fellow members of the Galactic Council," Fausto proclaimed. "These are the exact people we wish to build bridges with. Welcome, honored guests, and you are greatly welcome if you enjoy the only music worth hearing, opera."

As he reached the aliens, they bowed to him. Fausto's round face beamed in delight, and he grasped the hand of the closest of them, whose uniform was trimmed in blue. He shook the Kalquorian's hand heartily, who eyed their joined palms in fascination.

"A delight to make your acquaintance, sirs. How did you find our show? Was it enjoyable?"

A resonant voice Irene swore she could feel in her bones filled the silent and expectant air. "We were impressed. A very good story. Excellent singing. I am sorry I can't say better, but I have too little of your language."

"Ah, but you have more of mine than I do of yours, and what you have, you speak splendidly. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"Dramok Nil. I am captain of ship taking leave of our patrol." The Kalquorian's smile was pleasant. "My shipmates and clanmates, Nobek Amig and Imdiko Ginef." The men in red and green-trimmed uniforms offered second bows.

"A delight, gentlemen. Please, do come in and meet our cast." Ignoring the dismayed expressions of security and chaperones, as well as Donald's outright anger, Fausto slung an arm around Captain Nil and urged him further in the room. "Here we have Mark, who played Cyrus. This is John, in the role of Lucas."

The chaperones were pushing the remaining women to the door to leave the theater. Irene wondered if they actually expected the Kalquorians to turn into the lust-crazed monsters Earth insisted they were and start grabbing every female in sight to rut. She noted Meg and her mother were rooted to their spots, gawking in fascination.

The aliens' smiles were relentlessly polite. The one in the green-trimmed uniform appeared a little sad to note frightened women fleeing, as if it upset him to be an object of terror. The most brutish of the trio, sporting a scar on his jaw and wearing red-trimmed black, eyed everyone as if they might suddenly spring on him.

"Fausto—" Donald darted glances at his security team, as if searching for support.

Fausto reached Meg and Mrs. Hoffman. "Ah, a lovely member of our dance corp. This is Meg, the sweetest of our girls. You know what I mean?" He laughed and winked and hugged the pink-cheeked dancer.

"What you mean? Do tell us what you mean, Fausto." Valentina's voice rose to a near screech as she stormed toward him, halting the Kalquorians in polite mid-bow. Mrs. Hoffman wisely grabbed Meg as Fausto released her and hustled her to the back door...but she fluttered her fingers and dared a slight smile at the Kalquorians before disappearing.

"Ah, right on cue! My adored leading lady, Valentina." Fausto's smile was dazzling, as if Valentina didn't look on the verge of clawing his eyes out.

Another source of Valentina's frequent outbursts of temper: her unrequited and phenomenally jealous love for Fausto. She unleashed a string of hectic Spanish, her arms flailing as she read the chuckling Fausto the riot act.

Irene abruptly realized the drama of the Kalquorians in their midst was the perfect cover for her to make her escape. She slipped along the edges of the crowd to reach the dressing room, watching for anyone to note her exit. The sole gazes that swung her way were those of the blue- and red-trim-wearing Kalquorians. She ignored the nervous bubbling of her stomach at those sharp stares set in rather ruthless faces and hurried to the dressing area.

She nearly bumped into Emma Jones, who was in charge of wardrobe. Emma was well within the confines of the dressing room, but positioned so she could peer through the doorway and watch the backstage goings-on. Middle-aged, with her own flare for fashion and the dramatic, she grabbed Irene's arm as if to steady herself.

"Look at the size of them. Such big, big men. Have you ever seen so many muscles? Oh, Fausto will hear it from the Church now, welcoming them here in the presence of all these women."

"Most have run out. Besides, you know Fausto is nearly untouchable."

"Meg isn't, but she was able to get so close. Lucky girl...but unlucky to have Mr. Donald witness it."

"She did nothing wrong. Fausto will protect her, as he protects all of us." Although Irene often worried he'd eventually put the whole troupe in danger with his flirtations. Fausto, who despite his rumored illegal sexual affairs, maintained a close relationship to the head bishop in New York. Even so, maybe introducing Meg to the Kalquorians *was* a step too far.

Earth's Church-run government despised Kalquor with a vengeance. Fausto had said it was because Kalquor was in danger of going extinct. They'd approached Earth officials to ask for fertile women to test the possibility of crossbreeding and saving their society. The repressive Church had declared the notion an abomination. It had at once broken all diplomatic ties with Kalquor and forbidden its people to have any dealings with the alien race.

"Watch the door for me, Emma?" Irene eased from her clutches.

"A night out? Of course, though I can't imagine you finding more excitement than being visited by Kalquorians backstage. They are...not handsome, but very, very interesting." She licked her lips.

"Thanks." Irene hurried on to the wardrobe racks.

Her disguise was hidden among the costumes too far gone to be salvaged. Stained, ripped, or from recently banned productions, they awaited their fates to be repurposed. Only Emma and Mrs. Hoffman paid any mind to the damaged rack, and they could be trusted.

Irene slid between the damages and the rack of costumes to be cleaned, wrinkling her nose at the sweaty scents from performing under the bright lights. She was probably a bit ripe herself, but it would aid her purposes for the night. She'd shower when she returned to her quarters, as most the cast preferred to do. The water in the theater's showers often ran cold and had an unpleasant odor.

Irene located the brown cloak she'd found in a rummage shop on Dantovon. She'd discovered it shortly before they'd contracted for a year's run on the unnamed Beonid station, where they performed five out of the nine nights of the host species' week. The cloak was lengthy enough to be a tripping hazard. Had she not also found the thick-soled boots known to belong to the Odeerga race, she'd have had to hem it.

She hung her costume robes from the night's performance on the laundry rack. She swiftly donned her own knee-length dress, the concealing cloak that closed to mid-thigh, and the boots. Fabric had been stuffed in their toes to help them fit Irene. The last item she put on came from a nearby shelf: an Odeergin breathing headpiece, its mirrored visor concealing her brown eyes

from view. The mask was a clunky affair, extending from the bridge of her nose in an oblong snout, which sported a grated round end in which its previous owner would have inserted a filter. It hadn't been made for a human head and was slightly loose on her skull, but the cloak's hood disguised the ill fit.

Clutching her com in a gloved hand kept hidden in her roomy sleeve, Irene gave herself the once-over in the nearby mirror. She saw no sign of any human attributes, the voluminous cloak hiding her curvaceous figure. She was ready to roam free on the station minus a chaperone, able to visit any of its attractions without fear of reprisals.

She glanced in Emma's direction. Her friend was still watching whatever lay beyond the door, so Irene guessed the Kalquorians hadn't left yet. She was curious about them, but she was twice as eager for the sights and sounds beyond Earth's iron reach. Irene exited through the door at the rear of the dressing room and began her night of blessed liberty.

The dressing room's door opened to a service corridor, but it was a short walk to one of the station's major concourses. In less than a minute, she was in the midst of a breathtaking number of the galaxy's myriad species. Beings seethed in the popular station's metal-sheened environs. They walked, glided, flew, crawled, and hopped; a mass of impossibly varied life in all its expected and unlikely forms.

They gave Irene a wide berth as she walked among them. She'd adopted the hunch-shouldered, slithering gait of an Odeergin. The examples she'd studied on vids always appeared to be trying to sneak up on someone, but it was their normal way of walking. It was no doubt disconcerting to the majority of species, who were determined to avoid close contact with the typically shunned race.

The headpiece Irene wore, with its filtered breathing apparatus, hadn't been designed to protect its intended wearer. It was meant to protect others from it. Odeergins exuded poison at each exhale, and they'd been known to use it against those who'd offended them. Everyone was well aware how easily those headpieces could be whipped off by an irate Odeergin.

For an Earther female of tall stature who wanted to avoid close contact and explore unopposed and unrecognized, it was the perfect disguise. Irene had proven it so in the past six months.

She reveled in her liberty as she wandered the long concourse of shops, restaurants, and entertainments. She'd not indulged overmuch in her ability to disappear in plain sight, so she'd only been to a third of the music venues available to explore on the vast station. Hearing the varied expressions of musical arts from the various worlds was her secret pleasure and obsession. Beonid's station was famed for attracting acts from throughout the galaxy. Irene was determined to sample them all, whether they were performed by acclaimed professionals or barely-rehearsed amateurs.

Though she'd already visited the Plasian club Mellossin, she paused outside its doors as the soaring tones of a uferliss emerged. Goosebumps covered her hidden skin at the sweet trill that wove a hypnotic tune. Irene loved Plasian music, which often employed such gorgeous notes with an electronic edge. Unfortunately, the Church had deemed it too seductive. To be caught listening to it would launch an interrogation. Any Earther who hadn't hidden in a cave their entire life knew *interrogation* was a euphemism for *torture*.

Irene listened until the song ended. She was tempted to go in and spend the precious couple of hours she'd allotted basking in more, but there was so much to explore. Feeling real regret, she moved on.

She'd just reached a stretch of venues she hadn't visited before when her com went off. Irene immediately veered to an entrance to the service corridor. When the doors shut behind her and she'd verified she had the quiet hall to herself, she shoved the headpiece off her face. Affecting a tired tone, she answered, "Yes?"

Dolores' voice was slightly slurred. She'd started in on the brandy early, which afforded Irene relief. "Just checking in, Miss Jonson."

"Thank you. I've returned to my quarters and was waiting for your com before showering." Irene debated and added, "You missed some excitement."

"Oh?" There was no interest. Irene could practically hear her thinking, *say goodnight and let me get back to my bottle.*

"The Kalquorians came backstage."

"What? What happened? Did they harm anyone?"

"No. I believe Fausto had them well in hand when Mrs. Hoffman, Meg, and I rushed out, but we didn't linger to learn more."

"Fausto? Where was Mr. Donald?"

"Yelling at them to leave. I can't tell you anything beyond that since I left so quickly."

"Thank heavens you did." She paused, possibly wondering if she should hear the story in greater detail. She must have been well in her cups, because she finally added, "I suppose we'll hear the details tomorrow."

"No doubt. Well, I'm off to shower if that's all?"

"I suppose. What did they look like? Did they really have horns?"

Irene bit her lips together to keep from braying laughter. When she had control over the burst of humor, she said, "I didn't notice horns, but I felt it best to get out quickly, so I can't say they weren't there. All I saw were huge men with brown skin and long black hair."

And muscles for days. Irene had appreciated those muscles, but she wasn't about to share such information with Dolores.

"Huge? They sound terrifying. Very well...I trust we won't make a big deal of me leaving early? You were with Mrs. Hoffman and came to no harm..."

Irene smirked at the sudden nervous turn. "Oh, I believe I was perfectly safe. If no one else volunteers information, I certainly won't."

Especially when it came to the inappropriate notice Fausto had drawn toward Meg, who'd pay a higher price than he would if the Church decided to correct them. Irene's humor was doused in icy concern. She hoped the fact the Kalquorians had gained access to backstage on Donald's watch would keep everyone quiet where Meg was concerned, chaperones and security most especially.

Fausto had confided to Irene he had a head full of secrets on each member of the company's entourage, specifically for the purpose of keeping them from reporting to Earth authorities any ill-advised "mistakes" committed by the cast and crew. He was adamant he'd protect those he'd handpicked to leave Earth in his company.

Her stomach began to unknot as Dolores returned to her usual cold tone. "If it's kept quiet, we can forget the entire matter. Goodnight, Miss Jonson."

"Goodnight."

Check-in done, Irene dropped her com in the cloak's pocket. She drew a breath, reminded herself Fausto was damned near untouchable, and pulled the headgear in place. She returned to the concourse and its swirl of late-night denizens.

She wandered. Her attention sharpened as she approached each club offering musical acts. Beonid, Alneusian, Adraf, Joshadan, Salenxa, Tratsod, Bi'isil, Kitleg; melodious, cacophonous, soft. Single instruments, a cappella singers, ensembles the size of symphonies...each society proved music was the great link of civilizations, no matter how disparate they might be.

She'd heard much of what swirled to the concourse before, and she entered those venues featuring songs appealing to her, enjoyed a few minutes, and moved on. It was a soundscape of beauty and wonder. Even the discordant noises claiming to be music were granted a fair hearing if the performers appeared to be in earnest. Irene envisioned taking the best of what she heard and somehow combining it in a harmonious whole. She knew a single piece of music pleasing everyone was an impossibility and she welcomed the individuality of expression, but it was still fun to wonder what the perfect species-spanning tune might sound like.

It was closing in on time for her to retreat to her quarters when she spotted a knot of big, black-uniformed Kalquorians congregating in front of a club. Dressed as the captain and his clan, they were no doubt part of the ship's crew. For a moment, Irene considered heading to her temporary home and avoiding them altogether. Curiosity about what appealed to the species that had earned Earth's wrath called insistently, however. She detected a bass-heavy throb coming from the club, and inquisitiveness won out.

Like most, Kalquorians made room for her approach. They noted her without disgust or disdain, merely wariness. For her part, Irene did her best to saunter casually for an Odeergin. She pretended not to notice the men who really did resemble humans, impressive size and muscles notwithstanding.

She drifted beyond the massive men, entered the club, and was instantly walloped.